

Primeval Drabbles
Louise Sellers

Chapter 1

Primeval Drabbles

1.1 Nanites for Helen

“The point is that the nanites calculate your optimal visual appearance and then adjust your physiognomy to suit.”

Helen studied herself thoughtfully in the gilded mirror.

“Take, that short hair for instance, much more practical for your lifestyle, I should have thought. Yet appropriately stylish for all social occasions. Your previous look, if you don’t mind my saying so, lacked a certain refinement.”

Helen’s smile could have been a simper. Nick Cutter, however, would have backed off cautiously had he seen it.

“And these?” Helen asked, casually thrusting the offending items forward.

“The nanites obviously anticipate they will prove useful.”

1.2 White Landscape

Connor stood in the snow and rubbed his hands together.

“What are we doing out here again?” he asked.

“Having fun.” Abby trudged up the slope behind him, dragging the plastic sledge.

“But its *dark* now.”

“Look at the stars though.”

Connor looked up into the sky. It was devastatingly clear and out here in countryside there was little background light to obscure the view.

Abby came up beside him and took his arm.

“Happy Christmas, Connor,” she whispered. Then she stood on tiptoe and her lips brushed against his.

Up above them a shooting star shot across the heavens.

1.3 Just Us

For “How many people can you kill in 100 words”. Technically I get 6.7 billion here. 14 people are name checked but there are only 4 confirmed kills, 3 if you want to be really picky.

“According to all records 4th January 2009 was the human race’s last day,” the aggressors helpfully announced over hijacked airwaves.

Jenny, Lorraine, Abby and Lacey were on their monthly, girls-only lunch break. Lester refused to wait before sealing the ARC. That was when Cutter took a pistol and shot him. Lyle gunned Nick down and ordered the shutters closed.

Ditzy and Finn died protecting Connor while he sought to jam the enemy weapons. Blade was AWOL somewhere, armed only with knives. Lyle didn’t expect to see him again.

“Just us,” he said to Kermit as they waited in the dark.

1.4 Food of the Fairies

(Set in the same world as *Head, Hand and Heart* (Chapter ??))

Nick coughed as smoke caught in his lungs and winced at the sight of blood in his palm. That couldn’t be good. He struggled to sit. He wouldn’t be going any further.

Amid the acrid smells there was a faint hint of Jasmine and Honeysuckle. He must be getting delirious. The sound of distant music hung in the air. The corridor shimmered and glowed as if an anomaly lay beyond the smoke.

Something rolled along the floor, stopping just by his hand. It was an apple. When he lifted it close, it smelled of oak moss, wisdom, compassion and Claudia.

1.5 The Listeners

(Set in the same world as *Head, Hand and Heart* (Chapter ??))

“Did you find them?” Stephen asked.

Ryan's cloak was made of a black velvet that seemed to absorb the light. It turned him into nothing more than a shadow, lurking in the centre of the forest path.

"Maybe," Ryan's head turned to stare back the way he had come.

"You came as soon as you could." Stephen could hear a certain shrillness in his insistence.

"It wasn't enough."

A flock of ravens suddenly rose up from the forest depths, the air echoing with their harsh cries.

"It's all you have to give," Stephen offered and wished he could offer more.

1.6 Primeval 100 Challenge Drabbles

Most of these drabbles were written for prompts from the primeval100 community on livejournal. In a lot of them I presume "fredbasset"s Primeval stories are canon. The details of her stories are not important but, in them, Stephen Hart and Tom Ryan are a couple, as are James Lester and Jon Lyle (a soldier character, invented by Fred, who looks like Daniel Craig).

You probably also need to know about Sanctuary where the denizens of the primeval.denial community put Stephen and Ryan after they died.

1.6.1 Challenge 1: Introductions

James Lester was stiff and formal.

The team were mad. Maitland was mad and intense and sharp, like light shining through crystal. Connor was mad and geeky. Cutter was mad and Scottish.

They didn't return in good order. It was a chaotic tumble.

Becker realised his HR paperwork was still incomplete.

He found an angel who took it from him, checked it over, explained the mysteries, corrected the mistakes, assured him she would handle it from here and then smiled the most beautiful smile.

"Who are you?" he blurted out.

"Silly of me. I should have introduced myself. I'm Lorraine."

1.6.2 Challenge 2: Lost

1988, at university, their first meeting The motion for debate was “This house believes there is no place for privately funded education in a fair society”. She had spoken against, he had been for. She won.

2003, choosing schools: He was a high flying Home Office official. She had just made partner. So the question was: which was more important, his principles or their children? She won, but something in him died.

Lunchtime: She can see him over the road: a working lunch with a blond man. Problem is she knows how James Lester looks when he is in love.

1.6.3 Challenge 5: Moonlight and Forgotten

Here, high up in the mountains, the air was cool and fresh. Abby stood on the balcony of their chalet. Moonlight picked out her features, in silver and deep blue, against the silver and deep blue of the snow and pine trees beyond.

She breathed deeply, her eyes closed. “It’s so strange,” she whispered. “It was horrible and hard and frightening but I’d forgotten it could also be like this.”

Connor nodded. The trees were a newer species and he could smell oil and grime on the air, but this was as close as they’d get to their virgin landscape.

1.6.4 Challenge 10: Claudia Who?

Claudia struggled back across the dry terrain. Every few steps the tears blurred her vision but the hot dry wind evaporated them from her face.

In her mind’s eye the terrible visions played over and over as first Ryan and then Nick fell to the savagery of the beast.

She stumbled through the anomaly and stopped short.

“Nick!” she cried and, temporarily abandoning all rational thought, threw herself into his arms. “Oh my God! I thought you were dead!”

He pushed her back gently and frowned. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Claudia! It’s me, Claudia.”

“I’m sorry, but Claudia who?”

1.6.5 Challenge 11: Surprise

“This is not *at all* what I expected from the afterlife,” said Sarah.

“What *did* you expect?” asked Claudia.
“Not listening to Nick, Stephen and Ryan having a threesome.”
They both gazed upwards. The noise left little to the imagination.
“I’m going to spend the afterlife being frustrated and horny.”
“You know,” said Claudia softly, after a pause, “sometimes a girl’s just gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.”
The open top of her blouse revealed the curve of a perfect breast.
“My thought exactly,” Sarah found herself saying, a little breathlessly.
Clearly sanctuary had even more surprises on offer.

1.6.6 Challenge 13: Camping

Danny tossed uncomfortably in Helen’s salvaged bed roll. “Bloody rocks!” he murmured and hoped there would be an anomaly home soon.

“Blood snow!” he muttered. He had no idea when he was. Hopefully it was winter and not an ice age.

“Bloody insects!” It was a swamp full of big trees. He’d never paid much attention to Connor’s lectures but the phrase Carboniferous hovered in his mind.

“Bloody heat!”

“Bloody wet socks and bloody giant psychotic birds forcing me to run through a stream.”

“Bloody politicians!” he couldn’t help muttering behind Burton’s back.

“Bloody family!” and he headed after Patrick.

1.6.7 Challenge 21: Devastation

The day Tom Ryan died, the first thing that happened when Stephen, feeling drained both emotionally and physically, opened the door of his flat was that it jammed against Ryan’s toolbox. Ryan was *supposed* to have taken it home weeks ago. The paint on the door was getting chipped it had banged against the bloody thing so many times. In the living room Ryan’s magazines were on the table, a stray army regulation sock was on the mantelpiece, his CDs in a pile by the stereo. Stephen fell to his knees in the middle of the floor, dropped his head in his hands and cried.

1.6.8 Challenge 29: Kindness

Katerina Dobrowski was twelve, cheerful and brave. She had enough english for Patrick to work with. He tried be her big brother in their scary world.

Then she fell and broke her leg. The wound went bad. She screamed with the pain for days and raged in feverish russian. Patrick whispered useless comfort. When she started coughing up blood in great hacking spasms that shook her body he could stand it no longer. It was simple to place his hand over her mouth and nose and hold it there until the pain was gone.

He never mentioned her to anyone.

1.6.9 Challenge 31: Diligence

Connor is fascinated by the way Ryan cleans his gun. He takes it apart on a table in the armoury. His motions are business-like, but Connor can tell that he's being careful and concentrating from the way a small wrinkle furrows up between his eyebrows. Once every part is laid out, Ryan examines and then cleans each one in turn. His eyes are sharp and focused. Then he reassembles the gun and returns it to the secure locker.

Finally he gives a little stretch, a roll back of the shoulders, turns, and smiles a radiant smile at the waiting Connor.

1.6.10 Challenge 40: Dialogue

“Good beer they serve here.”

“It's OK.”

“You know of a better place nearby?”

“No.”

...

“Jess seems like a nice girl. Very efficient.”

“If you say so.”

...

“Now it's your turn to say something.”

“Sorry?”

“Your turn to say something. It's called a dialogue. It's what people do in pubs. Or so I am reliably informed.”

“Nice weather we've been having.”

“Do I have to do this the hard way?”

“Shooting me with an EMD is the easy way?”

“You’d never have believed me otherwise.”

“What’s the hard way?”

“To stop you sulking? I imagine I’ll have to kiss you.”

1.6.11 Challenge 41: Romance

Connor and Abby tumbled out of the oppressive coniferous woodland into bright sunlight. They stood at the top of a steep slope that fell in terraces down to a bright ribbon of water. A meadow of flowers crowded the bank in waves of blues, reds and purples.

Connor’s eyes lit up in wonder. “Of course, the Cretaceous is when flowers really took off!”

The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow over his features. Abby stepped closer. His expression of wonder deepened as his arms went automatically around her and it was impossible to say who had started the kiss.

1.6.12 Challenge 45: The ARC

Nick Cutter had once mentioned the Anomaly Research Group. It had been, Abby gathered, a small room at the home office in which the mysterious Claudia Brown spent her hours.

The Anomaly Research Centre Abby had known, was a large glass and steel structure standing tall, proud and unafraid, full of light and confidence. This new ARC covered underground and felt full of secrets and mistrust.

Once she drove past the old ARC and found nothing but a building site. In the dead of night, curled up against Connor, together and yet alone, she wondered if it had ever existed.

1.6.13 Challenge 51: Stephen Hart

Helen schooled her emotions into dispassionate study. Even when feverish, Stephen was handsome. Those long eyelashes gave him a gentle, girlish look, while his lean frame and taut muscles spoke of steel beneath the fluff. It would be a shame if he were to die.

Rescuing him was out of the question though. She had no time nor patience for entanglements and explanations. In the grand scheme of things he was already dead, or not yet born.

Anyway, Nick was, no doubt, frantically searching for him. In fact, if Stephen were to survive, then maybe he could make himself useful.

1.6.14 Challenge 55: The Ladies of Primeval

Jenny Lewis took Lorraine and Abby out to lunch each week to escape the testosterone fuelled environment of the ARC.

Today she was frustrated. “We can’t keep any more creatures at the ARC?”

“No,” said Abby.

“Where am I going to find somewhere discrete for storing dinosaurs?”

“Leek managed,” said Lorraine

“He wasn’t discrete. I’ve spent weeks covering that lot up.”

“What about this?” asked Lorraine, tapping her paper. “Dilapidated country house, acres of grounds containing disused private zoo.”

“Give me that!” Jenny almost snatched the newspaper.

“Glad that’s settled,” said Abby, “cos those velociraptors we caught last week... Breeding pair.”

1.6.15 Challenge 59: Joy

It had been a long, slow descent into darkness. It had started with a moment of surprised and unadulterated joy. Who cared what Helen thought? or that Lester stood by disapproving. For that one brief moment, Nick thought only of Claudia and her lips on his and the promise of a future.

Then there was a long trek through death and disorientation. He had floundered in a morass of confusion and betrayal, more death and the reality of Helen’s descent into darkness.

Connor, ever faithful, was close at hand. Nick closed his eyes and allowed himself the memory of joy.

1.6.16 Challenge 61: Pollen

“What’s that lovely smell?” asked Claudia, breathing deep.

“Pollen?” hazarded Nick, staring at the anomaly.

Claudia placed a hand on his arm. She couldn’t resist stroking upwards, caressing the skin and muscles.

Then suddenly there were hot lips on her own, and a breathless need. Hands scrabbled at the buttons on her blouse. She was aware of his closeness, his smell,

his chest pressed against her own and then the blessed relief as he buried himself inside her.

Afterwards, Nick sat up, his hair dishevelled, surprised and upright. A slight smile quirked the corner of his mouth. “Aye, definitely pollen.”

1.6.17 Challenge 67: Picture Prompt (From the Summit of White Hause)

Helen sailed the Lapetus ocean in the bright noonday sun and imagined the silt, sandstone and mudstone building beneath her.

She sailed it again, millenia later. No lazy afternoon this, she dodged flying volcanic rock.

Mere tens of millions of years and she could walk the arid land. There were no eruptions that day.

Then it eroded into the Carboniferous seas where she snorkled among the brightly coloured fish.

The ice ages rolled over it, carving curves into the sediment and volcanic rock. Helen watched the Lake District change and knew she could never again remain shackled to one time.



1.6.18 Challenge 68: The Ocean

Stephen looked out of Sanctuary window. Rain was washing down the glass; typical British summer; typical British view; a suburban garden, houses, a few trees.

Stephen thought of the ocean, of towering waves and blustering gales. He remembered surfing the barrel of a double-overhead. He remembered sailing single-handed through an unexpected squall. He remembered the thrill and the adrenaline and simply feeling alive.

Ryan's arms snaked round his waist as he, too, gazed out of the window in silence. Ryan was the same. He'd lived a life defined by action and danger. Here they were safe, but they weren't alive.

1.6.19 Challenge 69: Comfort

The team went drinking but she's an outsider. Jenny's been allowed to know she isn't real, a poor copy.

If we had looked past the facade of her home would we have seen her take off her face, let down her hair and curl up on the sofa with chocolates, wine and a book?

Did she phone family or friends (no fiance now) and say “we buried a colleague today”? Getting support from those who know she is strong, loyal and resourceful, qualities “the team” barely see.

Did she hear her answer-phone message from Cutter?

“Thanks for being there. Appreciated.”

1.6.20 Challenge 70: Behind the Scenes

“Should we help?”

“We’ve not be asked.”

“But we’re porters. It’s from the French to carry. I learned that in school.”

“Are you trained in lifting?”

“No.”

“That cage looks heavy. It could contravene Health and Safety if we tried to lift it.”

“But Miss Maitland’s only a slip of a thing.”

“Tough though, and very independent. It probably contravenes Health and Safety to offer unwanted assistance. Chauvinism is a dangerous activity.”

“Urrgh! What was that!”

“Projectile vomit by the looks of it. Good thing we didn’t offer to help. There’s forms to fill in if our uniform gets soiled.”

1.6.21 Challenge 71: Family

“I never liked him much anyway,” said Jenny’s mother as she opened a fourth bottle of wine. Jenny was always amazed by her parent’s ability to out-drink her.

“Couldn’t stand the man,” agreed her father.

“Why on Earth didn’t you say?” demanded Jenny and laughed, shaking her head at them.

“Didn’t want you to stop talking to me,” he said, winked, and poured her another glass.

“Plenty more fish in the sea,” added her mother amiably.

Jenny thought of stubborn Scotsmen with wild hair and enthusiastic hands, not to mention a strong stomach for alcohol. They’d like him much better.

1.6.22 Challenge 72: Kisses

Nick Cutter walked in the Permian, his mind revolving around a Rabbie Burns song.

*Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, and then for ever!*

”Don’t go,” she had said.

Three kisses they had shared. The first a pretext, the second a sudden impulse followed by embarrassment and the last?

*Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met - or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.*

Nick Cutter shrugged off the words and the melody. He’d be seeing her again soon and then, he decided, there would definitely be more kisses.

1.6.23 Maisy and Daisy (Challenge 73: Lazy)

Lazy Maisy, feeling hazy,
Walking to her hall,
Spies a grand thing, six foot standing,
By the campus wall.

Nutter Cutter storms and splutters,
“A lion from a zoo.”
Pesters Lester who phones Chester,
“Say it is one too”.

Sexy soldiers with thigh holsters
(Maisy starts to flirt)
Find the grand thing needs some handling.
Maisy’s almost hurt.

Honour Connor, she’s near a gonner.
He hides her in a duct.

Spry man Ryan tames the lion.
Stephen looks well-... relieved everyone's OK.

Crazy Maisy, not so hazy,
Talks of what she's seen.
Dozy Daisy, feeling lazy,
Doesn't tell the Dean.

1.6.24 Challenge 74: Armed and Dangerous

The geek hindbrain has a way of cataloging information even when it is of little interest to the geek in question. Simply by hanging around Ryan, Connor knew there was a choice between armour piercing and stopping power. An armour piercing bullet could pass straight through a target doing comparatively little damage. Bullets that exploded or expanded within the target were banned by the Hague Convention.

"Fortunately," Ryan had said, grinning, "The Hague Convention doesn't hold in the Permian."

He'd gone through the anomaly fully armed and dangerous. Connor stared at it, blinking back tears. Armed and dangerous. Yeah! right!

1.6.25 All Irregularites will be Handled (Challenge 75: crossover)

NB. A longer version of this drabble appears in chapter ??.

Claudia pushed the barrier, ignoring the man and woman beside her.

"I wouldn't. That's a weak point in time," said Steel.

"I'm returning to my friends."

"You no longer belong there."

"If you break through," added Sapphire kindly, "things will follow."

Swirls of darkness radiated from where Claudia pressed against the strange surface.

"And if I don't come with you?"

"We take you anyway," said Steel harshly.

Sapphire pursed her lips and shot him a disapproving look but didn't contradict his words.

Claudia bowed her head and held out her hand. Together they walked into the light of the anomaly.

1.6.26 Nick Cutter and the Pirate Dinosaurs (Challenge 75: crossover)

“OK. You sailed through the ‘pretty sparkly thing’.”

“Arrr! That be so!” said Pirate Tyranosaurus Rex.

“Saw ‘Mr. Macall’s Seaside Park of Fun’ and stormed it.”

“Shiver me timbers,” agreed Pirate Triceratops.

“Giganatosaurus was scared by the spider,” Nick glanced up at the large balloon floating over the Ghost Train, “at which point class 3B overpowered you.”

The pirates cowered away from the children at his back.

“You promise to be good from now on in exchange for safe conduct back home.”

“Yo ho ho,” agreed Pirate Stegosaurus. “And a bottle of rum?” he added hopefully.

“No rum!” said Cutter.

1.6.27 Challenge 76: “It’s so... big”

Ryan liked gardening. He owned a ground floor flat which he’d bought for the garden.

At weekends he made things grow.

Arriving late, the bell unanswered, Connor went round the back and was unsurprised to find Ryan in baggy cords and an old shirt. His fingers were encased in earth from where he’d been splitting or lifting or planting or whatever it was he did.

“Thought you might come,” Ryan said. “Look at this!”

He tossed Connor a turnip. Connor boggled at it.

“Why Ryan!” he said, “It’s so... big.”

“I’ll show you big.”

Ryan advanced with a grin.

1.6.28 Challenge 77: Accomplished

Abby studied herself in the mirror. *I have a natural gift with reptiles* she told herself.

She hadn’t meant to overhear Lyle and Blade.

I do not need men for self-validation she added.

“So what about Maitland and Lewis?” Blade had asked.

“I don’t do women anymore,” Lyle replied.

“Yeah, but if you did?”

I’m the world expert on Coelurosauravus she said.

“Lewis has an evil eye,” Lyle had mused thoughtfully.

“True”

I have a green belt in Tae Kwon do.

“But she has better tits.”

Blade had nodded sagely.

But, Abby had to concede, Jenny does have better tits.

1.6.29 Challenge 78: Creepy Crawlies

Follows on from Head, Hand and Heart (chapter ??)

As her horse crested the rise, Claudia could see the anomaly. She spurred it to a gallop, Stephen and Ryan close behind her. Dark smoke billowed up, enveloping them. Claudia clutched Mab’s charm at her throat.

“Clouds of Hecate! yield!”

The darkness parted, allowing them a pathway.

Words floated out from beyond the gate.

*Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder’s fork, and blind-worm’s sting,
Lizard’s leg, and howlet’s wing,*

Claudia reigned up sharply.

“What is it?” asked Ryan.

“I think this is one intervention we should allow to run its course.”

1.6.30 Bonfire Night (Challenge 79: Anticipation)

Helen sat beside Nick on the flat roof.

“Congratulations.” He clinked her glass.

Helen thought of the future as the bubbly slipped down her throat. She needed to build a research group. Someone had mentioned a Stephen in third year, said he was good. There might be some money available for a PhD.

“You’ll get a job soon,” she said.

Further appointments were being discussed. She should get Nick into the group.

“My publication record’s not good enough.”

Helen kissed him fondly. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Helen?”

“Yes?”

“Will you marry me?”

Above her head, bright lights blossomed like flowers.

1.6.31 Not all those who Wander are Lost (Challenge 80: All That Glitters)

Sometimes, something that some person does completely changes the fabric of the universe. A quirk of fate places such power in their hands that it is not simply history that changes as they blunder through time but the natural laws themselves. The old reality is wiped away, leaving no trace, no myths, no echos, except, perhaps, in the dreams of eccentric young men.

It happens surprisingly often.

Worlds that were flat become round.

Groping in the silt of the riverbed where an anomaly had dumped her, Helen’s grasping fingers closed about something. It was small and round and surprisingly heavy.

1.6.32 Challenge 80: All That Glitters

McAllister and Wells are OCs created by thefakebook. Taylor Crane is the grown up little girl from episode 2.05

McAllister watched as Crane approached the anomaly. Crane *always* got to the anomaly first even when he ordered her to hang back. It was like moths and candle flames.

“What have we got?” he asked.

Crane stuck her head through. He hated it when she did that. “Drizzle. Swamp. Funny smell.”

Wells shot him a look but kept his mouth shut. He knew what was coming next.

“Can we go through and check it out?” asked Crane.

Drizzle. Swamp. Funny smell.

“How many times to I have to tell you.”

“All that glitters...” she gazed wistfully at the sparkling anomaly.

1.6.33 Challenge 81: The Gym

Ryan runs on the treadmill as sweat sticks his shirt to his back.

Nicholas Cutter is safe and there is a woman in custody.

His muscles strain as he thinks of the man he has lost. Lost in a deep, dark place with no air to breath.

The exercise is as repetitious as his thoughts lost in a deep, dark place with no air to breath.

He has lost a man.

His muscles strain as he thinks of the woman in custody.

But Nicholas Cutter is safe.

Sweat sticks his shirt to his back as Ryan runs on the treadmill.

1.6.34 Challenge 82 (Temptation): Office Party

Abby sank onto the sofa by Claudia.

“Cutter and Blade are an item?”

Claudia nodded. “Since Chile.”

Lester and Lyle were almost, but not quite, holding hands. Ryan’s arm was around Stephen’s waist. Connor and Ditzzy were actually snogging in the corner like teenagers.

“Ditzzy better check the water again.”

Claudia shook her head. “New theory.”

“Yes?”

“Everyone is hand-picked by Lester, right?”

“Right.”

“So Ditzzy reckons Lester has the most finely tuned gaydar this side of San Francisco.”

“Shame it doesn’t extend to women,” grumbled Abby.

Claudia leaned forward, displaying a surprisingly generous amount of cleavage.

“Want to bet?”

1.6.35 Challenge 83 (Winter Wonderland): One of our Santas is Missing

“There he is,” shouted Ryan.

The missing Santa was sat in a snow drift opposite some sort of caveman.

They pelted towards him, the soldiers’ guns at the ready. The caveman eyed them warily and then backed off, stuffing bits of fur and stone into a leather bag.

“Come on, mate,” said Ryan. “Time to get you home.”

Dumbly, the Santa allowed them to drag him towards the anomaly.

“Where’s his hat?” asked Connor when they got there.

Ryan looked back over the ice field. The caveman was disappearing into the distance, a splash of red perched jauntily on head.

1.6.36 Challenge 84: Deck the Halls

Fast away the old year passes.

Stephen was sure there hadn’t been a door here before.

He opened it. It was another bedroom; bed neatly made up; the room freshly aired.

Ryan appeared at his elbow. “Where did this come from?”

“Management! What’s this?” called Stephen.

“We’re expecting a new arrival.”

“What! Who?!”

“We don’t know,” Management said in a small quiet voice. “But we thought we should start getting things ready.”

Stephen and Ryan looked at the room in silence a moment. Then Stephen shut the door. They didn’t discuss it again.

Hail the new ye lads and lasses.

1.6.37 Ghosts at the Feast (Challenge 87: Office Party)

The team were having fun but Nick was watching the ghosts. Stephen was hovering behind Abby his face a mixture of anger and regret. But his mouth twitched slightly in acceptance every time her hand reached out to touch Connor. The soldiers were telling bawdy stories and laughing uproariously. Ryan was there, with the men he cared about. Nick didn’t see Claudia very often. Sometimes there was a slight lag as Jenny turned her head. Just once, as Jenny stepped swiftly aside to

dodge a drink's tray, Nick saw Claudia. She stood staring at him, smiled, faded and was gone.

1.6.38 Challenge 86: 'Tis the Season

Season of feasts and warmth and light,
Connor and Abby before the fire,
 Entwining their arms to hold back the night;
Jenny, in Church, harkens to the choir,
Nick in her thoughts and he with his Mam.
 Loaded with turkey, he sinks into sleep.
Grubbing in mud and laughing at fear,
 Lester and Lyle are in cave dark and deep.
In Sanctuary's walls there's candles and ham.
 They drink to their friends with many a dram
 And watch over them in the coming new year.

Dinosaurs too acknowledge the season,
To make up the word count, if no other reason.

1.6.39 Challenge 87: Resolutions

Department C19, Project 673, Minutes.

July 2000

Resolution: Project to continue, despite unexpected side effects

July 2007

Resolution: Reappearance of Cutter problem to be monitored but no action taken.

August 2007

Resolution: Proposal to create an Anomaly Research Centre to be supported. It could provide a convenient official unofficial response.

September 2007

Resolution: Political enemies of James Lester to be identified in case of trouble.

October 2007

Resolution: Oliver Leek to be assigned to the ARC.

January 2008

Resolution: Oliver Leek to recruit Helen Cutter, if possible.

April 2008

Observation: Well! That went well!

May 2009

Resolution: Project to continue.

1.6.40 Challenge 88: Hunger

There are great four dimensional leviathans weaving their way through the vortex. Their feelers spread out through time feeding on the great energy spikes the ships of the time aware powers trail in their wake. But every so often one gets entangled in the gravity well of some planet. Its tentacles encircle the world in an embrace. Trapped far from the temporal highways the creature wraps itself tighter and tighter about the world. The inhabitants, limited to three dimensions, see only a cross-section of the limbs as they pass by, pulsing and gripping and inviting, desperate to assuage the hunger.

1.6.41 Challenge 89: Fools Rush In

Stephen gaped at the man who had just landed. The blonde hair and blue eyes were familiar. He wore blue jeans but his feet and torso were bare, revealing toned muscles. Large, white, feathered wings sprung from his back.

“Who might you be?” asked Cutter, eyeing him with undisguised appreciation.

“Captain Telperion Ryan, Anomaly Unit. Who are you?”

“Nicholas Cutter and Stephen Hart, Scientists.”

“From the original anomaly team?”

They nodded, dumbly.

“Where’s your backup?” asked Telperion. “You didn’t just rush through did you?”

Stephen looked sideways at Cutter. “Don’t worry. Your great-grand daddy will be along in a minute.”

1.6.42 Challenge 90: Brave New World

They stopped on a high eyrie above a grassy plain and sat side by side, comparing notes. After a bit Claudia pulled out her wallet and showed Miranda the dog-eared photos of her family that she kept inside.

Miranda was fascinated by the glossy paper, the clothes and the furniture. The glimpses of Claudia's mother's tiny front room, with its faded floral curtains and brown floc wallpaper filled her with wonder. Her hands touched the faces.

"Your brother, and cousin Emily and Mrs Watkins from over the road," she repeated reverentially.

*Oh brave new world
That has such people in't*

1.6.43 Pooh Sticks (Challenge 91: Water, Water, Everywhere)

The grounds were full of follies. Tiny waterways ran between mock Greek temples until they emptied out into a lake.

With nothing coming through the anomaly, Connor and Abby played pooh sticks.

Cutter sat quietly, with a pen-knife and a small piece of wood. When it looked something like a boat, he stuck in a twig, attached a paper sail and wrote Stephen Hart on the prow.

Together, they chased it down the rivulets, watched anxiously as it nearly jammed on last year's leaves and cheered when it raced out into the open lake and sailed away to the west.

1.6.44 Say it to me, Say it for me (Challenge 92: The Good, The Bad and the Ugly)

Having lost everything, I became lost myself. Lost, to die, crawling on hands and knees through the Jurassic desert; a burnt husk; an ugly blot on the pristine landscape.

Struggling back to consciousness, I just made out a woman in rough, practical clothing. She crouched before a fire, by the carcass of an archaeopteryx. I closed my eyes against her. I had not called for Helen, my bad penny.

Broth was forced between my lips, causing eyes to open.

“Claudia,” my throat was hoarse with heat and thirst, my mind blank with disbelief, ”what are you doing here?”

“Saving you.”

1.6.45 Challenge 93: Valentine/Anti-Valentine

Stephen watched as Nick placed a box of chocolates on the back doorstep.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s Valentine’s day.”

Stephen boggled. “OK so, in this timeline, Ryan and I died and you went soft in the head.”

“Mebbe,” said Nick, “it seems churlish not to give something.”

“They’ll still be there in the morning. Helen’s probably in the Cretaceous. You don’t even like her anymore and she’s mad as all hell at you.”

“True, but I bet she takes them all the same.”

Stephen snorted and slammed the door with some force.

In the morning the chocolates were gone.

1.6.46 Feather (Challenge 94: Feathers)

The archaeopteryx feather drifted through the hot, humid air, over dark green ferns with wide fronded leaves. It tumbled up and over in a vortex and then plunged downwards, through the glittering shards of light to land in thick churned up clay. It was raining.

Some time later, trucks drove up.

“Well, wherever it led, it’s gone now.”

A calloused hand plucked at the end of the feather, pulling it from the mud and into the misty half light. Its colours were dulled to a brownish blue with hints of orange at the tips, just visible through the grime.

“What’s that?”

Sharp blue eyes and a Scottish accent: “A feather.”

1.6.47 Challenge 95: Something Wicked this way Comes

About half way through the grassy meadow, in unspoken agreement, they stopped. Connor picked wildflowers and Abby laughed as he tried to tuck them in her hair. Nick watched, the smallest of smiles lurking at the corners of his mouth. The

soldiers began an impromptu game of football. The pain of the cold dark winter and the betrayals and the death were washed away in the warm bright sunshine.

Gradually, one by one, they fell asleep.

Only Lyle remained awake, gripping his gun tightly and fighting the soporific, sweet-smelling air with one hard and brittle thought.

His thumbs were pricking.

1.6.48 Challenge 96: Tea

“Tea?” asked Jenny.

Nick made tea by pressing the bag impatiently against the side of the cup. He preferred Nescafe, at least it produced something drinkable, quickly.

On Jenny’s desk sat a bone china, willow pattern, tea set. Smoky aromatic fumes filled the room. Ancient conditioning stalled Nick’s incipient rant.

Jenny poured, catching large leaves in a wire strainer.

No milk, he observed, suspiciously. He picked up the delicate china and took a cautious sip. It tasted like the smell of woodsmoke intermingled with his grandmother’s potpurri. He felt his anger begin to recede.

“So?” said Jenny, “What’s the problem?”

1.6.49 Challenge 97: Extinction

”When the sea levels rose competition for land became fierce. I’m sure you are not surprised to hear that competition spilled over into war and, inevitably, that war went nuclear.

”You know what? You can’t make an air tight bunker in a week. Protect your family, my arse.

”The international space station kept monitoring and broadcasting. Forty-eight hours after the first bombs dropped, there wasn’t a square metre of dry land which wasn’t displaying ‘dangerously high’ levels of radiation. So when your sparkly anomaly thing appeared in the middle of my bunker, Mr. Lester, why wouldn’t I walk through it?”

1.6.50 Challenge 98: Fire

“Abby!” Abby turned back, and her mouth gaped.

Out of the anomaly poured a bright, orange liquid. A wave of heat hit her. She scrambled into the Hilux and gunned the engine. The... the lava spread out behind the truck as Connor and Ditzzy started to run towards it, liquid rock at their heels.

She drove.

They stopped on a small hill. They could see a large, red pool, darkening to black in the middle. It was still growing.

“What about Cutter and Jenny?” whispered Connor.

“Those two?” said Ditzzy. “A little bit of fire won’t even slow them down.”

1.6.51 Challenge 99: Exanimate

Cutter gazed down at the exanimate skull. He fingered the spikes and ridges thoughtfully.

“That’s what we’re up against is it?” asked Becker.

The Elginia shied away from the loud bangs and backed into the sparkling light.

Its leg hurt.

“I said don’t shoot!” The cry echoed through the anomaly.

The wound festered. Days later, the wretched creature lay down by the river where it was drinking, too tired and hot to move again.

The river rose. Silt washed over the body.

The fossil hunters came and the remains went to a museum.

Cutter gazed down at the exanimate skull.

1.6.52 Challenge 101: Memories

The English countryside of the early 21st century was, all things considered, a good place to die. Gideon sat in the sunshine, untroubled by immediate fears and worries. He could smell flowers and hear birds sing.

When he closed his eyes, however, he saw pale yellow skies. He was assailed by the smell of sweaty human bodies, fearfully cramped too close together. He heard the cries of hunting beasts and insects. For all he fully intended those memories to be of no time nor place, he felt deep pangs of nostalgia and home-sickness that the peaceful garden could not sooth.

1.6.53 Challenge 111: Pride

Although he wouldn't admit it, Lester had grown fond of his rag-tag team of lunatics. The past weeks had been hard. But the ARC was almost repaired. The new team members had integrated well. He was proud of them: proud of Connor for suppressing his grief and working on the artefact; proud of Abby for filling in the gaps left by Stephen; proud of Jenny for holding them all together; proud that no one was giving up despite the obvious danger.

There was a knock on the office door. It was Jenny. Lester saw her face and his heart sank.

1.6.54 Challenge 116: Tender Loving Care

In the depths of the night Jenny would toss and turn. She babbled and cried out but the words were unintelligible. Sarah was glad. In the depths of her soul she feared that Jenny would call out his name.

Sarah would shush quietly and push the damp red hairs from Jenny's brow, watching over her as the nightmare subsided once more into sleep. Then Jenny would lie, quiet and beautiful in her arms.

Once Jenny opened her eyes, smiled a tired but contented smile at Sarah and pulled her close, wordlessly, so that they fell asleep entangled, content and comforted.

1.6.55 Challenge 117: Girls, Girls, Girls

The horde of small pink creatures dashed in and around the dining room.

"Girls! Girls!" cried Mrs Wood. Twelve attentive and expectant faces looked her way.

Sarah, on the other hand, stood leaning against the wall, dressed as a pirate. She pouted.

"And.. err... pirate!" added Mrs Wood. "Time for hunt the slipper"

The small feathery creature dashed in and around the soldiers.

"Guys! Guys!" shouted Connor. Three attentive and expectant faces turned his way.

Sarah, on the other hand, stood leaning against a marble statue, eyebrows raised. She pouted. “And... err... woman!” added Connor. “Time for hunt the compognathus.”

1.6.56 Challenge 121: Want. Take. Have

Want. Take. Have. It was a simple mantra but, in the twisting corridors of Whitehall, an extremely powerful one, provided you were clear enough about what you wanted, subtle about how you took it, and wary once you had it.

James Lester gazed down upon his domain in the newly built ARC building and a quiet concern entered his thoughts. He’d wanted control of the government response to the anomalies, and he’d fought off several people and departments in order to take that control. But now he had it, he was clearly going to have to do something with it.

1.6.57 Challenge 131 (New Pairings): Bobble Hats and Corsets

Duncan looked uncertainly at Phillip, a shy sideways glance that set Burton’s heart beating fast and eagerly in his chest.

“I really never saw anything in Jenny,” Duncan murmured.

“I know you didn’t,” soothed Burton, stroking Duncan’s bobble hat gently. “She manipulated you and then cast you aside like you were worthless. But you’re not. To me you are everything.”

Burton could barely restrain himself. Duncan looked so perfect. But he held back, allowing Duncan to make the first move.

And, finally, Duncan placed his beautiful hands on the lacings of Burton’s corset and began to pull at the strings.

1.6.58 Challenge 132: The Games We Play

Sir James Lester rubbed his forehead as he read yet another briefing report from a sub-committee from deep within some government ministry or department or quango. The report itself wasn’t particularly tiresome, but the careful reading between the lines sapped his energy.

First Leek, and then Christine; James Lester had been in politics too long. There would be more such threats and he watched for signs. No one really knew what the anomalies were, nor how they might be exploited, but everyone knew

they were important. The ARC was going to prove an important game piece in the long run.

1.6.59 Just the One (Challenge 133: Doctors and Nurses)

Iman checked for life signs because it was protocol, but she could tell the man was dead. She had developed a sense for when there was life present. Noting that he, at least, had no immediate need of her services, she then checked the scene for people who could use her skills.

A suit appeared before her, with an air of displaced authority.

“Any other casualties sir?” she asked.

“Some minor cuts and bruises,” he said. “Just the one the death.”

Iman said nothing. Just the one was one too many. She saw her feelings mirrored on the suit’s face.

1.6.60 Challenge 134: Temple, Connor Temple

Zaroff was mad, certifiably so. But, as the explosion started, Abby dived through his artificial anomaly anyway.

She slid along a smooth floor. A strong arm grabbed her and hauled her up. She had a brief glimpse of tuxedo. A gun was firing. “Damn security guards. We’re going to have to jump,” said a familiar voice. “Hang on!”

With a gasp, Abby felt the man launch them out of the skyscraper window. A sudden tug made her look up, into the folds of a parachute and into Connor’s face.

“Wha..?” she started.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Temple, Connor Temple.”

1.6.61 Challenge 135: Wishful Thinking

“What could do with right now,” said Lyle conversationally. “Is a cigarette?”

“Not a hope for six million years,” said Ditzzy. “I’d settle for a decent pint. We can probably brew something round here.”

“Not something decent,” returned Lyle.

“Abigail Maitland. She’d make up for the Jurassic or whenever we are,” said Finn.

“She wouldn’t look at you twice, mate,” scoffed Blade.

“Bet she would. You can tell she’s a real goer.”

“Watch it Finn, ladies present,” muttered Lyle.

Four dubious pairs of eyes turned to look at Lacey.
She shrugged. “Finn can have Maitland if I can have Temple.”

1.6.62 Challenge 136: Secret Santa

“Ho! Ho! Ho!”

“I’m not fooled Cutter. I have paperwork. Get out of my office.”

“Have a little Christmas spirit. Ho? Ho? Ho?”

“Jenny, remove Professor Cutter from my office and put him back in the Christmas party.”

“Ho, ho, ho.” Cutter clearly waggled his eyebrows at Jenny as he went out. She smiled and rolled her eyes at him.

“What have you done to him?”

Jenny smiled smugly. “The secret santa delivered an excellent Ardbeg to the free bar. Sure I can’t tempt you sir?”

“Bah! Humbug!”

“Very good sir.”

“Just out of curiosity, how old is the Ardbeg?”

1.6.63 Challenge 137: Mistletoe and Wine

(Set in the same world as *Head, Hand and Heart* (Chapter ??))

“The cross was made out of mistletoe. That’s why the plant withered and became parasitic.” Claudia’s arms overflowed with green and white mistletoe. Ivy trailed around her hair and her dress was white.

“That’s not true in so many ways,” commented Nick.

“It’s true in all the ways that matter.”

“Why do we kiss under it?”

“It fruits in winter. Work it out, Nick.”

Nick actually blushed. “And this feast of Queen Mab’s tonight? Where wine will flow like a river?”

Claudia kissed him ever so gently and her eyes danced. “Well Yamin had to come from somewhere didn’t she?”

1.6.64 Challenge 138: Unwrapping the Presents

“Fingerless mittens! Thanks Jenny.” Connor ignored the sound of stifled giggling behind him.

“I’m glad you like them Connor. I wanted to get something you’d use.”
 “How many pairs of mittens is that?” asked Abby once she was gone.
 “Only three, Lester and Danny bought me scarves. Stop laughing, they’re all very thoughtful!”
 “Here’s mine.” Abby pushed a small package across the table.
 Connor opened it cautiously. “It’s a ring? with a heart?”
 “It’s a promise ring. Look it up on wikipedia.”
 “I know what a promise ring is,” Connor said quietly as he put it on. “Best present ever.”

1.6.65 Challenge 139: The End of an Era

Helen was beginning to regret her instinct to explore. The Permian landscape fascinated her and the other gateways to other times fascinated her more. But she was lost and could not get home. Nick would be missing her.

Then she saw the Dimetrodon skeleton, by the dried up shore of a prehistoric sea. The air was short of oxygen, making it hard to breathe. Something inside of her strained and broke. She did not regret her urge to explore. She did not really regret Nick. She was filled with the passion of discovery.

It was the end of an era.

1.6.66 Challenge 140: Trains, Planes and Automobiles

(Set in the same world as *Nazis and Dinosaurs and Airships! Oh My!* (Chapter ??))

Train: Taylor watched the guards loading up their luggage.
 “Where are we going?”
 “Scotland,” said Claudia. “There’s an alert in Glencoe.”
 “Flying would be quicker.”
 “Not in this weather.”
 “I should do something about that.”
Plane: “It’ll be fine, Connor!” Taylor pulled the goggles down over her face.
 “Honestly, the theory is sound. I’ve flown before.”
Automobile: “Just keep cranking the handle.”
 “This is worse than that airplane of yours!” complained Connor.
 “It’s a lot more practical! You can drive it to your honeymoon location.”
 “Who told you I was getting married?”
 “Abby’s just randomly wearing that ring, is she?”

1.6.67 Challenge 141: Ice Age

As the glaciers advanced we hit upon the idea of siphoning in heat from other eras. We built on temporal theory dating back to the early 21st century.

We didn't realise the irony in the name 'Anomaly Project'. Someone with access to classified files must have put two-and-two together and then suggested it as joke.

There wasn't much laughter as the dinosaurs thundered across the continents, but at least modern armaments meant they were controllable.

But no one expected the anomalies to reach forward. The *anomalies* shouldn't have reached forward.

No one was laughing at all as the predators arrived.

1.6.68 Challenge 142 (Nick Cutter): Nick Cutter Lies Alone

Nick Cutter lies alone. The slammed doors and raised voices are past. She won't be back tonight.

Nick Cutter lies alone, lacking the strength to finish the Missing Persons form.

Nick Cutter lies alone. The faint memory of a kiss lingers on his lips, the sharp image of a fiancé etched into his mind's eye.

Nick Cutter lies alone. Memories of shared tents soured by recrimination, distrust and finally death churn through his thoughts.

One stayed close. He did not die alone.

The last of the mourners have gone. The head stone stands, simple and cold. Nick Cutter lies alone.

1.6.69 Challenge 143: Winner Takes All

Evolution is incredibly simple for something so incredibly complex. Sooner or later something will out-compete you and that's it. Winner takes all.

Helen knew this. Helen had thought she understood this. It was the armour around her heart. She viewed people dispassionately, just another species muddling along until the evolutionary dice rolled against it.

The sight of a ravaged world with predators feasting in the ruins hit her like a vicious kick. This could not be allowed to happen. She could out-think and out-compete these creatures, single-handedly if need be.

She would win. They would not have any of it.

1.6.70 Challenge 144: I've got a Theory

"I've got a theory," writes Connor.

"Actually I've got lots of theories. I don't like one theory. I like all the other theories. The one's that don't work. They are better theories than the one that does work. Obviously they're not scientifically better but they're unscientifically better, if you see what I mean.

"There is a trial and error pattern. Anomalies cluster ever closer to some event until a desired change is achieved. Then someone or something moves on to a new experiment.

"I've got a theory that the anomalies are deliberate."

Things change.

Connor writes. "I have no theories."

1.6.71 Challenge 145: Romance

"Stairs are blocked!" shouted Sarah.

She leaned over the balcony and stared into the ornate hallway below. The Deinonychus were all on the stairway and the landing below them. "Hallway's clear."

"More behind us!" gasped Jenny.

Sarah risked a glance down the corridor. "Damn!"

"Chandelier!" said Jenny.

Sarah glanced at the heavy rope. "You have to be kidding me."

"I wish I was. Any better ideas?"

"No."

As they swung down to the marble floor Sarah felt Jenny's lips brush against her own. She stared at Jenny in surprise.

Jenny blushed. "Sorry! Caught up in the romance of the moment."

1.6.72 Challenge 146: There is no I in Team

Maturity suited Connor. Geekiness had become a gentle eccentricity. Manic enthusiasm had become an eagle-eyed curiosity and a refusal to be defeated by events. Social ineptness had combined with intelligence into a careful watchfulness for the feelings of other people.

“I am accepting this Nobel prize on behalf of the most amazing team of people a man could hope to work with. Some of them lost their lives trying to understand and contain the anomalies...”

In the audience Helen could only seeth to herself. *I* discovered the anomalies. *I* mapped them. *I* developed the first theories. *I* was there first.

1.6.73 Challenge 147: Victory

Helen was always victorious.

She had set out to show her theories were correct, and they had been proved right.

On the way she had been arrested without charge, injured and villified. She had been misunderstood. Her words had been twisted and her motives derided.

Still...

She had her own goals and intended to pursue them.

She followed a predator to the future.

She had learned how to manipulate the time lines. She had decided on the action to take. She had successfully infiltrated the ARC. She had removed Nick from the equation.

Victory, as Connor might have said, sucked.

1.6.74 Challenge 148: I’ve got Chills... They’re Multiplying

Lester had said it would be “good for morale”, which Nick assumed meant “if I have to go to the staff party, so do you.”

Even so, and considerably against his better judgement, he let Connor and Abby cajole him onto the floor for WMCA, and again for the Time Warp.

The excellent beer was probably to blame.

He lost track of which cheesy number from his youth was blaring out.

He turned, staggered, caught hold of the nearest person and sang “You’re the one that I want,” to a surprised looking Jenny.

Suddenly he realised that he meant it.

1.6.75 Challenge 149: Rock

Every summer, throughout her childhood, Abby and her family had spent a week at the seaside with her grandparents. They would build sandcastles, explore rock-pools and eat bright pink rock.

“Your granddad has the countryside running right through him,” her Nan used to say. “Bit like this stick of rock.”

Indeed her grandfather always had the air of a farmer about him. He had depths, but they weren’t really hidden ones.

Connor was like that. What you saw was what you got, without guile or polish. He had ‘Connor’ written all the way through him, like a stick of rock.

1.6.76 Challenge 150: Bedtime Stories

“Tell me a story.”

Connor’s no good at telling stories, not really. He breaks off to fill in back-story he’s forgotten to mention. He tends to digress into observations about science. He wants to explain and excuse the bits that don’t quite make sense.

However, Abby has asked.

He resists the temptation to reveal the excitement of Highlander or the intricacies of Iain M. Banks. He searches in his mind for a simple tale.

Abby falls asleep in his arms, under the bright stars of the Cretaceous, as his voice murmurs the story of two babes, lost in a wood.

1.6.77 Challenge 151: Trapped

I was going to change the world...

...but not until after university, not until I’d saved a bit...

Then...

Mortgage, boyfriend, people waiting for the engagement to be announced; lots of people who would be hurt and let down.

Then...

I was surrounded by people who were difficult. God! were they difficult. People who constantly hurt each other and let each other down, but they were brave and shining and determined.

I don’t want to let them down. But they’ve shown me I have to sieze my own dream, find my own way to change the world and fly free.

1.6.78 Challenge 152: Thunder and Lightning

The wild storm was raging but Mother Cutter did not care. She had the knife. She had the skull. She climbed to the top of Silbury Hill, and hadn’t it taken some effort to get that built, fit for purpose, four thousand years earlier.

She knelt atop the hill and plunged the knife into the skull. Lightening struck. Bolts of paradox curled around her, racing down the hill and out onto the plain. Anomalies danced in the thunder, powering the network, connecting to the labyrinth.

Mother Cutter stood at the heart of the storm and saw that it was good.

1.6.79 Challenge 153 (Gen): Short, Sharp, Click

Jennifer Lewis walks away. Her heels click, click, click on the floor. They sound irritated.

The team are intimidated by the stark suit and the red lips. Even James Lester, accustomed to forceful personalities, is uncertain. How do you tell someone so sharp and brittle about the dinosaurs? He fears the hard exterior will break into a bitter laugh and she'll resign. Cutter's already convinced her, in less than a sentence, that he's either a lunatic or making fun of her.

Lester leaves her to work it out and never apologises that in doing so he nearly got her killed.

1.6.80 Challenge 155: Dinosaurs

Connor was counting his blessings because everything ached, the router was bust and Abby was watching keep fit.

Steady job. Out of deference to his grandpa who thought it important. Grandpa was also awesome with lego and didn't mind buying TV tie-in novelisations as presents.

Co-workers. Abby was the best person to work with ever. And when you also worked with Cutter that was saying something. Abby was probably a blessing in her own right, number three.

Best thing about the job was the great people, especially Abby.

That and the dinosaurs, but he was saving them for blessing five...

1.6.81 Challenge 156: Claudia Brown

Late one night, long after the children had flown the nest. Jenny woke up alone and thirsty.

She was unsurprised to see that the light was on in Nick's study as she padded downstairs. He was inside, pouring over diagrams and equations, endlessly working because he couldn't sleep.

“Still trying to find a pattern in the anomalies?” she asked.

“Aye! I thought I had an idea about the time-line changes but it doesn’t work.”

“If you did figure it out, would you bring back Claudia?”

She saw him hesitate before he said “no”, and in that instant her heart broke.

1.6.82 Challenge 157: Cake

Every morning Claudia ate breakfast at Henry’s. She had coffee and a croissant and she looked at the cake; a moist and rich chocolate cake, encased in thick icing.

A slice only cost 50p. Resisting temptation was a part of Claudia’s morning routine. Maybe, some day, she’d succumb; on her fortieth birthday, perhaps, or when she finally got Cutter out of her hair - some event worthy of the capitulation.

One morning, as she ate her croissant and sipped her coffee, a voice said, “May I sit here?”

She looked up to see Helen, a slice of cake in each hand.

1.6.83 Challenge 158: Surrender

“Retreating from the field of battle? Not like you,” said Lyle.

Maybe not, but Ryan felt like an old soldier in this war. He’d fought his last campaign when Jeff walked out. He was done with relationships.

“What’s that about a battle?” With impeccable timing, Hart appeared in the doorway.

“Ryan’s hiding behind his defences. I recommend a full frontal assault.” Lyle grinned, slapped Hart’s chest and then wandered off.

Hart raised his eyebrows. “Fancy a pint?”

As an opening salvo it was simple, but effective. Ryan sighed inwardly, picked up his jacket and braced himself for one last campaign.

1.6.84 Challenge 159: Food, Glorious Food

All was dry and arid, parched and lifeless. The children mewled with hunger. The mother could provide little. They were running out of time.

They watched the elusive shadow watching them. It smelled strange and exotic, but mostly it smelled of meat. It wasn’t of this place any more than they were. They controlled their hunger, and watched until it vanished, suddenly, through the same bright light that had first led them to this place.

They broke through, into cool sunlight, light rain and a cornucopia of beasts. The family was saved. Food, glorious food, surrounded them in great abundance.

1.6.85 Challenge 160: Girl on Beach (Picture Prompt)

Connor surveyed the deserted beach, harpoon gun over one shoulder.

“Tranqs, backed up by M4s would be easier,” said Abby cautiously.

“You heard the eye-witness; one minute the girl was standing on the beach, then she was gone, nothing but a camera left. We know what’s there.”

“I don’t want to have to rescue you, *again*.”

Connor flashed her a devil-may-care smile. “We know this way works. It’ll be fine.”

He vaulted over the railings at the edge of the promenade.

Abby winced at the yelp of pain. Twenty years dead, and Connor was still trying to emulate Stephen Hart.

1.6.86 Challenge 161: The Permian

This was where it had started and this was where it would end. Timeline after timeline would fold back on itself. Claudia wondered where that would leave her. Was she real or only a ghost?

Dry earth blew around her feet. Ferns grew among the rocks and tall pines waved in the distance. Nothing was artificial save for an abandoned camera, next to dusty bones.

Her cheeks were wet with tears.

The body and camera were not the only things out of time. Mishapen, domed, sightless heads stared at her. Claudia stared back.

She turned and ran for the anomaly.

1.6.87 Challenge 162: Shadows

“You cast a long shadow, you know,” Jenny remarked.

Claudia laughed gently. “Oh come now, Jennifer Lewis. You’re not going to let yourself be scared of shadows are you?”

Jenny laughed too. “Not scared exactly, a little intimidated, perhaps.”

“You say that only Helen is left who remembers me. What do you even care what *she* thinks?”

Jenny shook her head. “You’re right. I don’t.”

“So go, with my blessing.” Claudia kissed Jenny and then gave her a little shove, sending her stumbling towards the anomaly.

Jenny looked back once and then stepped through, to emerge blinking into the light.

1.6.88 Challenge 163: Lies

Captain Ryan gave his life in Afghanistan, serving his country, fighting to protect the way of life and ideals that we all hold dear.

Mercifully, his death was swift and painless. He was protecting a civilian group, attacked in a roadside ambush. Captain Ryn received a bullet through the head. It is doubtful he even realised what was happening.

A full investigation has been conducted into the circumstances. It is the army’s belief that all those involved, both military and civilian, acted with the utmost professionalism and integrity. No blame can be assigned.

Dulce et decorum est pro Patria mori.

1.6.89 Challenge 164: Bones (3 Drabbles)

The bones stuck out of the dry sand, long picked clean by wind and predators. They formed a ridge on top of the dune; an arched colonnade which a traveller walked through, giant ribs curving over their heads and pointing up towards the sky. The skull lay some way distant, tumbled down the sandy slope to lie, facing backwards looking at the great architectural remains of its once vast body. The hollow eyes gazed back, blank and empty, while the sands of time blew and drifted, and ground the vast edifice into tiny grains which were dispersed on the wind.

Helen. Helen found it first and paused to marvel at a sight never seen by human eyes. The first time she passed she gazed upon it with a paleontologist’s eye. She measured and theorized and ran her hands over the smooth bone. She sighed when she turned her back and moved on her way.

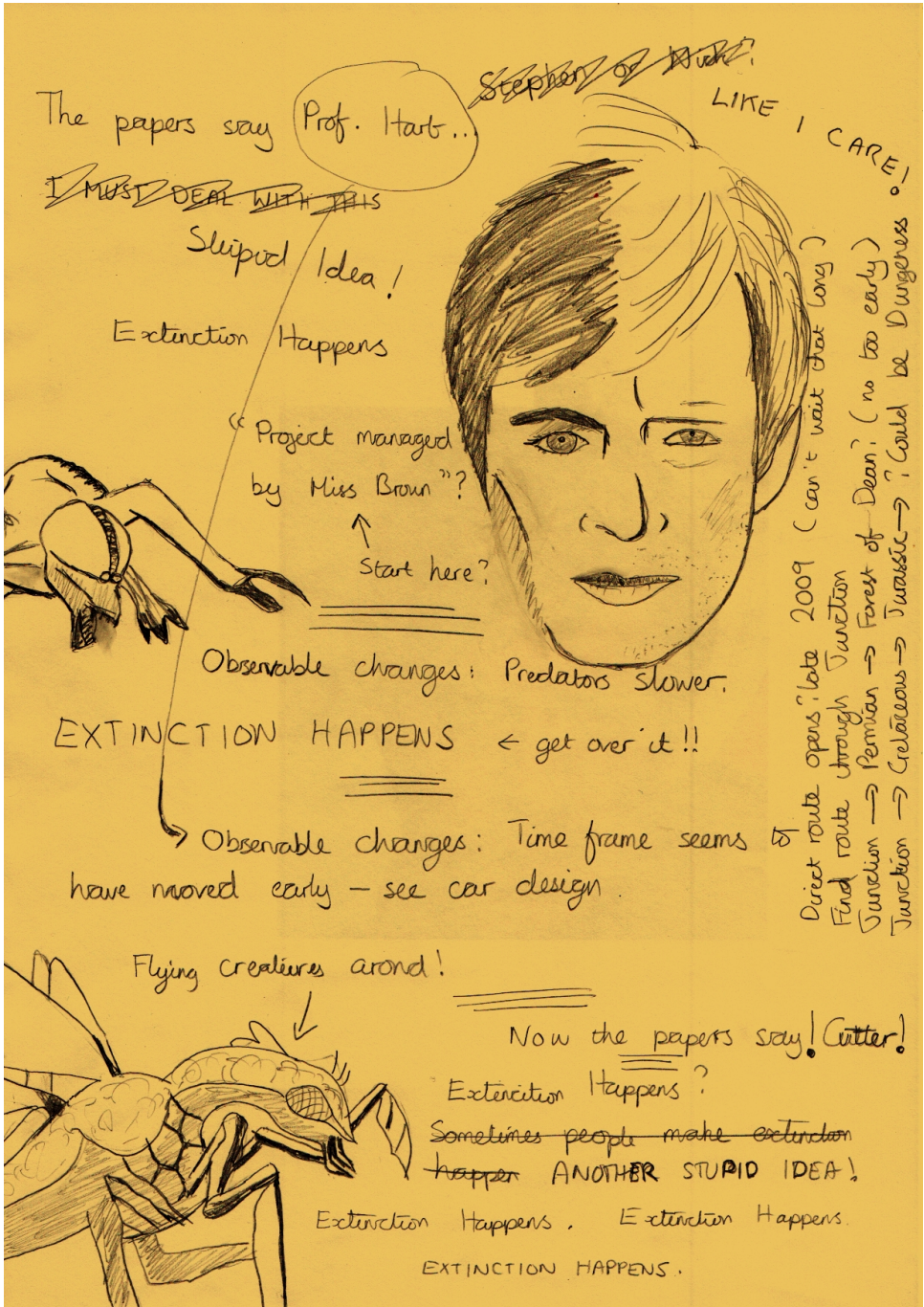
The next time her eyes and thoughts were elsewhere. Living animals were her concern. Survival was her priority. Ambition and desire for intangibles such as freedom and recognition drove her. These were just bones in the sand and had nothing to offer. She did not look back.

Nick. Wandering through time, Nick stumbled upon them. He had a goal and had no time but his eyes darted from side to side as he walked between the ribs.

He returned. Sometimes he brought others. Then the measuring was done, and the skull once more laid bare. Curiosity was in Nick's blood and the skeleton told him all it could. Once done, he moved on to new challenges and asked new questions.

Yet, paleontology was in Nick's bones. Time and again he walked this way and in each passage he looked upon the dead with the eyes of a child.

1.6.90 Challenge 165: If at first you don't Succeed



1.6.91 Challenge 166: Airborne

Telperion Ryan flew over the great plain rejoicing in the feel of the wind. Below him a large herd of Arcosaurs ambled along. He dived down, swooping between their necks and then darting in among the vast plodding legs, enjoying the skill of navigating among the obstacles as the wind urged him on. Then he climbed once more up into the clouds.

“One of these days a predator will stampede them and then you’ll only be so much pillow stuffing,” remarked Miranda disapprovingly.

Ryan laughed. “I’m better than that!” and even if he wasn’t, some things were worth the risk.

1.6.92 Challenge 167: Disappointment

The flat was strangely impersonal. In one cupboard there was a tangle of rock-climbing gear. A bookshelf groaned under the weight of textbooks and a handful of dog-eared thrillers.

The Spice Girls mug was an oddity, but the kitchen cupboards mostly contained IKEA starter kit.

There was nothing in the flat to tell her anything about Stephen that she couldn’t read on his one-page CV.

Jenny, boxing up everything for Oxfam, save for the textbooks which she’d send to the university, felt oddly disappointed. She had wanted the flat to reveal the man she had never really known in life.

1.6.93 Challenge 168: Head over Heels

Dara meant compassion and wisdom. The name was bestowed upon her both to reflect who she was and prescribe who she should be. Claudia worked to remain compassionate, kind, wise and insightful. That meant she worked to remain dignified and aloof. She watched Stephen and Ryan dash off to fight dragons or hippogriffs or whatever came through the anomalies and she smiled upon them when they returned.

But when Cutter dragged himself through the mists that separated the worlds, half-eaten apple in hand, she felt like a teenager. She laughed and she smiled and she danced and it was good.

1.6.94 Challenge 169: Fight

Ryan was mildly surprised when Professor Nicholas Cutter suddenly roughened up and took a swing at him. It had been a long day and too much had happened. Ryan needed a beer and some time to think, not a round of fisticuffs and some kind of leadership battle with a civilian. Ryan hoped the blow he landed in return would decisively put an end to matters.

To be honest, Ryan had rather hoped pistol whipping the man would firmly put an end to anything.

It was just his bad luck that it turned out to be the start of something.

1.6.95 Challenge 170: Flowers in the Night (picture prompt)

Oba and Zarina climbed onto the rooftop to watch the show. They owned a tiny cube on top of a Nairobi high-rise. Oba filled the roof with potted plants. The night scents of jasmine and bougainvillea floated in the air.

“They say there will be another water cut soon,” said Zarina sadly. Too much of their ration went on the flowers.

“It will all change tonight,” whispered Oba. “The project will solve all the shortages.”

They lay side by side on the roof top and above them, one after another, the great lights opened in the sky like golden flowers.

1.6.96 Challenge 171: The Road to Hell

Helen’s last memory was of a raptor coming out of nowhere. Stupid way to die.

She stood on a narrow road that stretched out in two directions. One way spiralled up a vast mountain. Even from this distance she could hear obsequious groans and the chant of smug and pious prayers.

In the other direction the road was covered in sharp rocks. It plunged down into a dark fissure in the ground, ash blew towards her on the wind.

Helen turned her back on the mountain. She had a feeling she would accomplish more if she headed into the pit.

1.6.97 Challenge 172: Revolution

Spring

Connor brought home half a dozen daffodils ‘for the flat’. Rex ate them. Connor didn’t ask for anything she wasn’t prepared to give. This was good.

Summer

It had been blisteringly hot; dust in her hair and sand in her mouth. Caroline provided a welcome breathing space to get her thoughts in order.

Autumn

Connor didn’t follow up on the kiss. He didn’t call. Why had she done it? Mates to lovers never worked.

Winter

They sheltered in a cave. Connor put his arm round her. Should she push for more?

Spring

“It’s about time I told you something?”

1.6.98 Challenge 173: Obsession

Nick had become fascinated by the patterns. If he stared at the model long enough and in the right way, links and connections would form like a stream of light crossing the space. Thinking in four dimensions, seeing the way things linked together, was the most incredible experience.

“You can’t hide in your work for ever, you know.” Lester said kindly one evening.

“What do you mean?” Nick shot back aggressively.

“You are going to have to face Stephen’s death sooner or later.”

Nick ignored him until he went away. Lester was wrong. He wasn’t in denial. He was obsessed.

1.6.99 Thinking in Four Dimensions

Follow-up to Obsession inspired by Ted Chiang’s short story Story of Your Life

Thinking in four dimensions; you started seeing every event as the moments and choices that led up to it. You build models of causality, like the letters of an alphabet. The words of this new language stretched into the future. Nick ceased to be surprised by events. He had the opportunity to weigh the outcomes of every choice. It wasn’t that he wanted to die, but he rejected each route that avoided death: Connor dead, body broken; Helen triumphant; Jenny’s face burned, her mind gone.

The greatest gift, the language of time, hidden in the artifact, he gave to Connor.

1.6.100 Challenge 174: You want me to put what, where?

The Uintatherium was large and, while not obviously vicious, had the look of a creature who would not worry about who was in her way or under her feet. Connor reminded himself she was a herbivore. Then again that just meant a lack of really sharp teeth but gave no guarantee of a friendly demeanour.

Connor eyed her very warily. "I'm not sure about this."

Abby stood next to the beast with her hands on her hips and smirked.

"Well Connor, you did say 'Are you sure she's pregnant' and I can only think of one way to check for certain."

1.6.101 Challenge 175: Death by Chocolate

Jenny sank into her bath as she enjoyed the feuilltine's contrast of praline and crispy flakes. Her aching muscles relaxed under the combined assault of warm water and the chocolatier's skill.

"I take it I'm surplus to requirements," said a slightly woebegone voice.

Becker stood in the doorway, stark naked, everything was standing to attention.

Jenny picked up another chocolate and bit into it slowly. The hazelnut gianduja centre melted together with the sharp and bitter dark chocolate that enrobed it. A small mewling sound escaped her throat and she closed her eyes.

Dejected and defeated, Becker left the room.

1.6.102 Challenge 176: Bad Romance (Warning Rape)

"Miss Maitland, I'd like to see you in my office."

The first time there was confusion and then disbelieving horror, as he locked the door. Moments later she was pressed to the desk, one hand clamped over her mouth and her knickers tangled around her ankles.

She knew what she could and should do. She'd taken the self-defence classes. But every time he spread her legs and took his pleasure, he dismissed her with the same simple threat. "Mention this and you are off the team."

She blamed Stephen and then Connor. If it weren't for them she could leave.

1.6.103 Challenge 177: Hospital

“Thanks for picking me up.” Stephen sounded morose.

“It was worth it for the gossip in reception. I gather Allison made quite an exit.”

Stephen grimaced at Nick. “Go on, say I told you so.”

“I don’t recall offering any specific advice on appropriate sexual behaviour while hospitalised.”

“I didn’t know Allison would be coming back so soon... or that the nurse would mention it.”

“Aye well, at least it wasn’t Abigail Maitland. I was a little worried.”

Stephen found something to stare at outside the car. He made a mental note not to mix women and hospitalisation in future.

1.6.104 Challenge 178: Happily Ever After

Ryan sat on the branch of the great tree and Claudia snuggled up next to him. They looked down on Connor and Abby seated, together, below them.

“At least we’re still alive and we have each other,” said Connor, shivering in the cold. “Not like...”

“I know. Stephen, Ryan, Nick, so many losses, even that Claudia. None of them will ever get to be happy now.”

Claudia giggled, free and girlish and Ryan laughed with her, pulling her close and rubbing his face in her hair.

Guardian spirits, in the dark nights of the Cretaceous, they watched over their charges.

1.6.105 Challenge 179: The Road Not Taken

They called it the Language of Time. Connor’s writing spiralled out, tracing paths he might take through the future.

Sarah’s hand squeezed his shoulder. “Bad luck,” she whispered.

There were lots of paths. Some led to peace and quiet, waking up each morning with the same head resting in his arms, even if the world outside went to pot.

But Sarah knew the road he would take. The hurried kiss and the promise to return. Beyond that he couldn’t see. He wasn’t fluent enough in the language. He just hoped that road would eventually wind its way back to Lester.

1.6.106 Challenge 180: Persistence

I weave and a grand design emerges. People meet and part, threads intertwining. People die, their motif abandoned, half complete. Sometimes they change beyond recognition, like birds turning into fish in a tessellated print.

Through the whole tapestry shoots a bright silver thread. It is confident, self-assured, and single-minded in its vision and purpose. It is the thread from which the whole work started and it is the thread with which it will end.

I watch it bring other patterns into the mix, abandoning them when it chooses.

I am Fate, but my weaving dances to the tune Helen plays.

1.6.107 Challenge 181: Goodbye

She *had* been right. Her deductions might have been off. But her deductions *had* been correct insofar as they were the best interpretation of the facts available and those facts had *demand*ed action.

So, she had been right. If she told herself that then she could carry on.

The grave was simple and plain. Tasteful. She detected the hand of James Lester.

She was damned if she was going to cry. She was damned if she was going to say sorry.

“Goodbye Nick,” she said firmly. Then she walked away because it was the only worthwhile thing she could do.

1.6.108 Challenge 182: Haunted

Ghosts thronged the ARC tonight. Winter’s icy grip had yet to freeze imagination into stillness. When James Lester looked out of his high window and watched the lights below, he could feel spirits at his back. The soldiers were a comfort and a protection. They continued to do their duty. Nick and Stephen urged him on, persistent, bickering and restless. Their deaths were testament to mistakes; their ghosts driven by sharp thoughts and abstract ideals. Claudia’s presence was faint. She was a whisper in the depths of the night. A warning that the stakes were higher than he could understand.

1.6.109 Challenge 183: Reservations

James Lester had a reserved parking space. When he went out, Lorraine managed the reservations for him. In meetings his seat was always reserved. He had a reserved manner. He surrounded himself with little boxes designed to keep people away and marked with the letters ‘reserved’. He told himself he liked it that way. Things might not be simple but at least they were neat, orderly and well contained.

It surprised him therefore how much happier he was, once one Connor Temple had trailed chaos through his neat, orderly, well contained little flat and his neat, orderly, well contained life.

1.6.110 Challenge 184: Special Forces

Lyle was the free spirit who never quite grew-up; always ready with a laugh and joke.

Finn was a good lad; though not the brightest card in the pack.

Kermit was the family man. His life revolved around Kara and the baby.

Ditzy was driven and competent, doing his sensible best for his friends.

Blade was the loner, a bit psychotic maybe, but he was a mate, so what could you do?

An ordinary bunch of blokes out for a night on the town. Ryan looked around his men as they laughed and joked and knew each one was special.

1.6.111 Challenge 185 (Children): For the Children

One morning, Abigail Maitland walked into Lester’s office and resigned.

That evening Connor moped and argued around her flat.

“I found something better,” she said.

Six months later he managed to catch up with her in the fens. She was knee-deep in mud and seemed to be surrounded by a horde of placard waving swamp people.

“Lunch?” he suggested hopefully.

He took Dame Abigail Maitland to Claridges for her fiftieth birthday.

Halfway through the stuffed mushrooms, a little girl asked for an autograph for ‘saving all those birds.’

“Why did you leave?” pressed Connor. “Why did you turn to campaigning?”

1.6.112 Challenge 186: Someone to Lean On

Lester told himself, when he sent them away to hide, that he was simply protecting an investment. When Becker turned on Christine, Lester told himself it was simply a shrewd maneuver.

Lester watched the team. He saw Connor shove Sarah away and send her home the day her grandmother died. He saw Danny help a laughing but limping Abby up the steps after a dangerous call. He noticed the way Sarah gave Danny a little thumbs up before he saw Lester to report.

It didn't really matter what Lester told himself, he knew why the team worked together so well.

1.6.113 Challenge 187: Anniversary

On the first anniversary of Helen's disappearance Nick went into work as usual, ignoring the surprised glance and tentative question of his inherited PhD student.

On the fifth anniversary, Stephen turned up on his doorstep with a bottle of Caol Isla and a determined look on his face. "Nicholas Cutter, you are going to damn well mourn, even if I have to let you drink me under the table to do it."

Nick didn't even realise the eighth anniversary had passed until the Connor Temple thrust a newspaper headline under his nose and the walls came crashing down around him.

1.6.114 Challenge 188: Frozen

Steel looked dispassionately at the time break. Contained now, frozen into the stillness that only absolute zero could bring.

"Pity," said Lead, his deep voice booming. "She's a pretty little thing."

Steel hadn't thought of the break as a she and didn't propose starting now. It had one arm upraised, its mouth open, a look of surprise and indignation on its face.

"I never had much patience with humans," Steel said.

He threw one, single, hard punch and watched the frozen figure shatter into pieces. The break was destroyed. His job done.

"So much for Claudia Brown." Sapphire sounded mournful.

1.6.115 Challenge 189: I thought you were Dead

It all started, Helen now knew, at an MoD research facility run by a mysterious Miss Smith. With the technology at her disposal, it was trivial to break in. She moved swiftly and silently, until she stood in Miss Smith's darkened office.

She placed a compact pistol at the back of the woman's head but paused, recognising the face that looked back at her from a mirror hung on the opposite wall.

"Christine Johnson! I thought you were dead!" she couldn't help saying.

"Oh please Helen, such a cliché! Besides I could say the same of you, twice in fact."

1.6.116 Challenge 190: Time Fall (Picture Prompt)

Frozen.

She is an errant cul-de-sac in time. Those that would keep the highways clear froze her and shattered her and, as far as they were concerned, that was the end of the matter.

But there is more to Claudia Brown than a footnote among the might-have-beens of history.

Each fragment of herself becomes a gateway. As she falls, she twists through the curves of time and arrives. Arrives at last and gives her blessing.

"Go with joy."

Silently she falls as white flakes around Nicholas Cutter and Jennifer Lewis who hold hands and gaze, laughing, into the night sky.

1.6.117 Challenge 191: Honey, I'm Home

"Honey, I'm home!"

Three simple words spoken in a tone of sarcasm intended more to annoy than to please. After six months of silence and uncertainty, they lifted Lester's heart.

A bag dropped, thumping heavily against a wall. Boots stamped and then clattered as their owner tossed them onto the laminated flooring.

Lester was in the hallway immediately.

"Eager!" grinned Lyle. He looked tired.

"Just protecting the paintwork." Lester pulled him close.

"Bloody paintwork," muttered Lyle, his head dropping to Lester's shoulder. "I don't know why I put up with you."

“The feeling’s mutual.” Lester smiled and held Lyle tight.

1.6.118 Challenge 192: Flesh and Blood

The CMU archeology department had boasted an expert on facial reconstruction. Nick had written the discipline off as showmanship with a touch of the charlatan about it. Even so he had, once or twice, watched in fascination as the man layered clay muscle and skin on top of a skull until a dead face emerged to stare sorrowfully into his eyes.

It was with similar fascination, laced with horror that he watched the process in reverse, as the future predators peeled away Stephen’s skin, and then muscles, layer by layer until the floor was strewn with flesh, blood and bone.

1.6.119 Challenge 193: Stargazing

“Can we find Orion?”

“Wha?”

“It’s a constellation. It was in my magazine.”

“Oh Aye! Weel! Did the fancy magazine say how to find yon?”

“No, but you can find it Dad!”

“I find your faith in ma abilities touching. I ken that there’s the North star.”

“I’m going to be an astronomer when I grow up. The magazine says how to do it.”

“I thought you were going to be a dinosaur hunter?”

“That was *ages* ago. I was little and didn’t know dinosaurs are extinct.”

“Ach well, Nicholas. I dinna doubt you’ll be whatever you want to be.”

1.6.120 Challenge 194: Naked

The fingers that drifted across the skin on his chest were worn. Toughened from clinging to rock, scrapping, and holding guns in harsh sun and blowing sand. Lester could feel each touch, followed by soft lips and the ghosting of breath.

Jon looked up. A lop-sided grin betrayed an imminent sarcastic remark.

Lester was amazed. The afternoon sun fell across Jon’s features. Gold flamed in his brown hair. Contrasts of light and shadow revealed the muscles that held him poised above Lester.

“I love you,” Lester whispered and Jon’s quip died unuttered.

James Lester lay revealed; naked body and soul.

1.6.121 Challenge 195: James Lester

He had been here too long. He was letting the facade slip. That frightened him. The subtle, beguiling, intoxicating sense that maybe people liked him, that maybe, just maybe, people appreciated him for what he had done was terribly, terribly dangerous.

If upfront, straightforward, people like Abby could tell he cared just a little then the dangerous sharks could tell that he cared a great deal. He had traded gentle glances and kind words for the security of good, hard-working people.

He must leave, but not yet. A crisis loomed. He told himself, again and again, he would leave afterwards.

1.6.122 Challenge 196: Phobia

“Hurrah! You show the Hoi Polloi!” Roger brayed with laughter.

Jenny felt humiliated, stricken and trembling.

“Are you OK?” The man she had decked was from the band. “He said just to tap you on the shoulder.”

Jenny stammered and apologised and explained. Michael, he was called Michael, found her somewhere to sit where nothing could creep up on her. When she decided she had to leave. He asked no questions, but found a taxi.

Jenny took one of the band’s flyers with her. She had a suspicion, even in her confused state, that she might have found a keeper.

1.6.123 Challenge 198: Cakes and Ale

The Inn at the World’s Edge clung desperately to a sheer cliff face and the ocean pounded rocks far below. Helen wasn’t sure where or when it was, but she welcomed the sight every time she tumbled out of an anomaly and found it before her.

“Who’s the new boy?” she asked Gaius, the barman.

“Name of Patrick Quinn. You interested?”

Helen liked what she saw. There was potential there. Then he looked up at her with a predator’s gaze.

She shivered and turned back to Gaius. “No, he’ll be dead weight.”

He shrugged. “Just cake and ale tonight then?”

1.6.124 Challenge 199: Anomaly

Such a gentle word that tripped off the tongue without harsh gutturals, or sharp consonants.

Helen rolled it around in her mouth. She'd met travellers from a dozen eras and they all used different terms: portal; gateway; faery lights; a dozen names that spoke of adventure and mystery and possibility. But Nick's chosen name was 'anomaly': something out of place.

Out of place like an unwifely wife who didn't do the 'plus one' thing, who didn't bother trying to entertain your friends, and who didn't put her career second. And people wondered why she'd felt like marriage was suffocating her.

1.6.125 Challenge 201 (Sleep): Macbeth hath Murdered Sleep**HELEN**

The doom of man beats ever in my brain
 Shattered cars, fell beasts, the swarms that fill the skies.
 I thought I knew, I thought I was, I thought.
 No matter. All is undone. Dead, he is
 And at my hand. I'll sleep no more. I'll be
 No more. Yet all the people will sleep sound
 Oh! Mother Earth, this stain from thee I cleanse.
 No more will smoke thy skies with darkness fill.
 No more will man thy natural wealth remove.
 No child will weep. No child will laugh. No Stephen.
 No Nick...

Exit, pursued by a raptor

1.6.126 Loyalty

Matt had developed a morning ritual. He'd stare at himself in the mirror and think of his father. Then he'd deliberately think of the people he worked with: Jess, Connor, Abby, Becker, even Lester. Mentally he ticked each one off and reminded himself that his loyalty was not to them.

He didn't even think about Emily.

It was far harder to be loyal to an abstract, to the dim hope of a better future, than it was to be loyal to real, breathing, individual human beings. Matt closed his eyes and told himself it was far harder, but far better.

1.6.127 Rescue

The sound of gunfire was echoing down the corridor. Abby struggled with the heavy helmet of her disguise. It was made for one of Burton's guards and they were wall big burly men and it kept slipping down over her eyes. She checked the list of cells, realised where she was, and shot out the lock.

The door swung open. Connor lifted his head from a make-shift bunk and blinked blearily at her.

"Wha?" he began.

She couldn't help it and pulled off her helmet so he could see who it was. "I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you."

1.6.128 Confession

"For serious," asked Lyle. "Why do you stick with the ARC? It can't be doing your previously stellar career any good."

"Would you believe me if I said I felt a sense of loyalty?"

Lyle took a thoughtful swig of his pint. "No."

"I stick around for shit and giggles?"

"I might consider that."

"The anomalies are the single biggest, most influential event since the atomic bomb. My stellar career may be suffering a short-term set back. History will see things differently."

"Now that has the ring of truth."

"Besides, even Temple has a certain endearing quality."

Lyle just laughed.

1.6.129 Once More Unto the Breach

His final, rousing speech had failed. The soldiers had abandoned the breach.

The entire disastrous campaign had lurched to a muddy and disease-ridden halt. They had been here a month. Again and again the attackers were repelled from the accursed town's walls and the strange light that hung in the gap. The tired soldiers struggled back to the King full of tales of dragons and monsters.

And then the light failed. When the Governor appeared to parley, Harry thought to himself that if he couldn't inspire his troops with words, maybe he could use them to terrify his enemies instead.

1.6.130 Matt Anderson

Emily inhabited the 21st century like a new and uncomfortable outfit. Matt observed the way her nose wrinkled at the ever-present smell of disinfectant and the way her hand lingered uncertainly on strange highly manufactured surfaces.

The century didn't fit either of them and it fascinated him the ways they were the same and the ways they were different.

Emily walked with the same confidence that the natives had; confidence that the world was, fundamentally a safe place.

Sometimes he loved her for the ways they were the same and sometimes he hated her for the ways they were different.

1.6.131 Cold Blood

Someone had to be to blame for her ridiculous predicament and that someone was going to suffer.

Her tail twitched angrily. It was probably Nick. He'd turned her into a reptile out of petty spite, as if that could quench the fiery passion in her blood.

"Good boy!"

The lad would be next 'Good *boy*' indeed.

Then her eyes narrowed as a familiar figure appeared. What was Abigail Maitland doing here?

"I see you like dinosaurs."

"Yeah! They're awesome."

Helen snorted in irritation, it came out as a chitter, which drew their attention.

"His name's Rex."

Oh for fuck's sake!

1.6.132 Getting Married

"Don't they realise this is just a convenience?" Christine hissed angrily at him, as her parents fluttered excitedly around the wedding guests.

"Did you tell them otherwise?"

She humphed, and posed for photographs, and even forgot herself enough to throw the bouquet before rushing off to a meeting.

"I got your secretary to clear some space for a honeymoon," he mentioned casually, as she scrambled into her car.

She rolled her eyes but came on the honeymoon anyway.

When the short sympathetic note arrived from the ministry, he packed the photographs away carefully and wondered if anyone else would mourn.

1.7 Written for Prompts

1.7.1 Power Corrupts (Lester/Leek – “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely” – for curia_regis)

“Leek! What a surprise. I was rather under the impression you were dead.”

“History changes.” Leek shrugged.

“What do you want?”

“I bring you this.”

Leek opened his hands to display a small crystal. Shards of light flickered in and out of it.

“What is it?” Lester was fascinated in spite of himself.

“It controls the anomalies. It lets you see how a tweak here or a prod there can change anything or everything. I searched all through time so I could bring it to you.”

“Give it to me.” Lester’s voice was thick with lust.

“Say please, Sir James.”

1.7.2 And in the Darkness Bind Them (Connor – fredbassett)

Darkness.

“So are you going to help me now?”

“No.”

Darkness.

“Come on, Connor. I’m hardly Mephistopheles. Where’s your sense of scientific curiosity?”

“Where’s Cutter?”

Darkness. Trying to win me over with classical allusions. Melkor would have been a better metaphor - destroying the music through pride. Mundanes!

“Look Connor. I don’t know how to control the changes and they’re getting worse. I need your help.”

“Go to hell, Helen!” (or Angband).

Darkness.

“Connor. London’s gone.”

Light. Orodruin erupts in the distance, somewhere in the region of Hyde Park if my geography serves.

“Well, Helen. Let’s get started shall we.”

1.7.3 As Time Goes By (Nick/Jenny – for yorick28)

Suddenly Nick stepped forward and kissed her. “Don’t Go.”

Jenny sighed. “Inside of us, we both know you belong with Claudia. If you stop me putting things right, you’ll regret it. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life.”

“The physicists might be wrong. You don’t have to do this.”

“We both have a job to do. Where I’m going, you can’t follow. What I’ve got to do, you can’t be any part of.”

Nick’s fingers brushed across her lips. “Here’s looking at you kid.”

Then Jenny turned and walked into the anomaly.

1.7.4 A Walk in the Woods (Abby being fabulous – for alyse)

“Stay very still.”

“What!”

“and quiet.”

The smallest, blondest slip of a girl stepped out of the undergrowth holding a dart gun. She reached out one hand.

“It tracks movement and loud noises,” she said quietly.

The soft touch reassured me. Slowly, she raised the pistol. The creature roared as the dart hit. I tensed to run but the pressure on my arm increased. Her composure held me.

“What now?” I hissed.

“We wait,” she whispered.

Five minutes later the thing was asleep on the path. My saviour graced me with the brightest, most beautiful smile.

“Well done,” she said.

1.7.5 Bored (Lester/Lyle, – for fredbasset)

“I’m bored.”

Lyle was naked and nothing if not decorative. The whitening scar, where a raptor had slashed him open, traced its way across his skin. Lester had the

temptation to run a finger down it, if only to remind himself that Lyle survived. Lyle would be there to hold him when he cried out in the depths of the night.

His eyes flickered to the television. He had really wanted to watch that documentary. However, there was always the record button and, as another lover had once said to him. When you're bored of sex, you're bored of life.

1.7.6 I Don't Wanna know about Evil, Abby/Claudia, – for lukadreaming

Sometimes, in the first confusion of waking, Abby had the faintest recollection of an arm draped across her waist. She had the memory of the sensation of breasts pressed against her back. She sometimes thought she could see a drift of auburn hair across her shoulders and onto the pillow which glimmered golden brown in the morning sunlight.

So it was that, when sick to the heart of Leek's treachery and the death and the destruction, it seemed completely natural to her to seek solace in Jenny's arms. She wept uncontrollably while a soft voice murmured

“Hush, my love, hush.”

I'm Waiting for the Cities to Crumble

Abby trudged up the hillside, Claudia at her heels.

“Are you sure we're headed in the right direction?” asked Claudia.

Abby looked at the compass in her hands. “Helen said due east.”

“I wish I trusted Helen more.”

“So do I.”

They crested the brow of the hill. Abby felt Claudia's hand clasp her own. Vegetation grew over the ruined city below them, adding a green haze to the buildings. Abby could see the outline of a dome and spires.

“I studied at Oxford,” whispered Claudia.

I'm waiting for the cities to crumble. sang a half-remembered lyric in Abby's head.

1.7.7 Julius Caesar Drunk of his Arse in a Pub – for rodlox

“Someone's having a good time,” Lacey commented.

There was a lone pub on the derelict estate. A loud male voice could be heard singing.

*“Bibit ille, bibit illa,
Bibit serves cum ancilla,”*

“That’s Latin,” said Tremayne, surprised.

“How I miss the benefits of a classical education.”

The two women exchanged glances and then hurriedly entered the pub.

“You didn’t think to contact someone?” demanded Tremayne gesturing at the large be-toga-ed man seated at the bar, laurel-wreath slightly askew.

The landlord shrugged. “These are solid gold,” he brandished an aureus, “and he seems harmless enough. Catch me turning down good custom.”

Chapter 2

Celebrations

A Primeval Drabble Cycle

Christening

The special forces team were all there, showing their support.

Most of them had missed the funeral. Those that had survived the IRA blast had been in hospital. But they weren't going to miss the christening of the commander's first born.

Hannah Ryan fought back tears as she saw them lined up in the pews in their dress uniforms. She wished Thomas could have been here.

The baby slept quietly in her arms, but he would wake up and ball when the cold water hit him.

"Grow up to be a good man," she whispered. "Like your father before you."

Birthday

"... Like my father before me." Connor tossed his new lightsaber to one side.

Becky rolled her eyes and sighed. "So be it! Jedi!" and she raised her hands.

"Aaargh!" Connor raised his arms, stepped backwards and promptly tripped over Bob who was playing the defeated Darth Vader.

"That's it!" pouted Becky. "This is a silly game."

"Please, Sis!" said Connor. "It's my birthday."

"Never mind," said Bob, scrambling up and grabbing the other new lightsaber. "Let's do the fight between Vader and Obi-wan on the first death star."

Connor grinned happily. You could always count on your best friends.

First Job

You could always count on your best friends.

Claudia giggled over her wine. “Thanks for coming, Fiona.”

Jenny sipped her Martini elegantly. “Thanks for coming, Fiona.”

Fiona smiled back. “I couldn’t miss celebrating your first job! What’s the place like?”

“It seems nice enough,” they both said. Jenny managed to make the comment sound slightly arch.

“Jolly good,” said Fiona. “Onwards and upwards eh.”

Jenny and Claudia both laughed. If they had been sitting side by side, they would have been identical in that moment.

She raised her glass. “Congratulations! To the first day of the rest of your life.”

Wedding

“Congratulations! To the first day of the rest of your lives.”

The room echoed back Helen’s father’s good wishes.

Helen had a glint in her eye. Her father had relished the opportunity to rib her mercilessly.

Nick hid his grin and his sudden excitement. Helen was looking ravishing. She had opted for a scarlet mini-dress and it showed off her figure to good effect. The danger in her expression only made her look better.

Her father caught his eye and winked. “That’ll get her going,” he mouthed.

Helen was at her best when challenged. Nick sighed. Like father, like daughter.

Wedding Anniversary

‘Like father, like daughter,’ mused Kathy Lester, despairingly.

“Liz,” she pleaded, “I know you don’t like Amanda much, but its just one night.”

Liz raised an eyebrow at her. “OK,” she said, eventually. “I suppose it’s preferable to listening to you and Dad shag.”

With the children gone, Kathy lit the candles and slipped into her slinkiest dress. The surprise meal was in the oven.

At midnight she blew out the candles and put the uneaten food in the fridge.

“Happy Wedding Anniversary, Kathy!” She whispered to her reflection. Then she took of her face and went to bed alone.

Retirement

Then she took of her face and went to bed alone.

It had been a good day. Her feet hurt because she’d been standing up for most of the reception. The speeches had been tiring but she’d enjoyed talking to old friends and colleagues and was touched that so many had come to her retirement party.

Dame Abigail Maitland had had a good career and, better than that, she had done good with it. All in all she didn’t have much to complain about. A handful of regrets and an empty bed. But a job well done and many friendships.

Wake

“A job well done and many friendships made,” Lester had said at the funeral.

Nick hated wakes and this one was worse than most. Stephen’s parents stood shoulder to shoulder in their grief.

“We’re here to celebrate Stephen’s life,” his mother had announced at the beginning of the party with fragile determination.

Abby silently nudged Nick’s arm and smiled consolingly at him. Connor stood at her shoulder.

It was true, mused Nick. The job had been well done and many friendships made. When he looked around the room he saw the special forces team were all there, showing their support.

Chapter 3

Primeval 100 Pirates

A Primeval Drabble Sequence

3.1 Introductions

Jenny let her eyes wander over the figure of her latest recruit: jet black hair tied with a bow; black frock coat, blue waistcoat, with tight breeches revealing a lithe and slender figure.

“You don’t mind working for a female captain?” she asked.

“No!” There was a glint of amusement in the young man’s eyes that Jenny couldn’t quite account for.

She sighed inwardly. He looked very young and his hands were soft. He was clearly not an experienced seaman but she was forced to employ what crew she could.

“Welcome on board Pirate Ship the Ark, Master Sam Page.”

3.2 Lost

“We’re lost,” said Sam.

Jenny swore. “These charts are worthless! Nothing on them is accurate.”

“At least we’ve not run aground.”

Jenny closed her eyes. She was glad she’d taken Sam on board. He’d learned fast and never complained about the hardship. Moreover, of all the crew, he was the only one who never commented on her leadership or made a snide remark about her sex. He was the only one she felt she could really rely on.

“What are we going to do Sam?”

“Make our own chart. We have to end up somewhere sometime. Then we’ll be found.”

3.3 Determined

Sam had a distinctly determined look on his face as he duelled with one of the boarders, eventually disarming him and knocking him over the side. Jenny noticed a second boarder levelling his pistols at the young man.

Without a second thought Jenny grabbed one of the bowlines and cut it. She swung across the deck, knocking Sam to the ground. She pulled her flintlocks out of her belt and fired them. Then she paused, surprised. She was sitting astride Sam and something was missing. She glanced down.

“Sam?” she asked. “You wouldn’t happen to be a woman would you?”

3.4 Rex

Sarah was climbing up the rope ladder at the side of the Ark. Jenny couldn’t help reaching down to clasp her hand and pull her back on board. “How did we do?” she asked.

“Fresh drinking water, fruit, no large animals though.”

“Too much to hope for probably. Let’s load it on board though. At least we won’t be starving in the next few weeks.”

There was a flash of green and a strange creature darted up off the tender and flew around her head.

“What’s that!” Jenny gasped.

“We’re calling him Rex.” Sarah grinned. “He seems to like us.”

3.5 Moonlight

When Jenny came on deck Sarah was standing behind the wheel. For a change, Sarah had allowed her long black hair to flow loose around her shoulders. It was a full moon and silver sparks glinted from its depths in the pale light.

She was still wearing a man’s clothes, but she had stopped disguising her figure. Jenny could see the rise of her breasts beneath the loose white shirt.

A small smile twitched at the corners of Sarah's mouth. Starlight danced in her eyes.

"Moonlight becomes you," whispered Sarah as Jenny came close. Jenny leaned in and kissed her.

3.6 Forgotten

Jenny had forgotten how difficult it could be to get things done.

The customs' official leered at her. "I'm sure we could come to some arrangement to get around the difficulties."

Suddenly his eyes opened wide. Sarah had appeared. She had clearly been shopping. A tricorne hat perched jauntily on her head. Her waistcoat was made of washed blue silk and new breeches accentuated her trim legs. Her hair was tied back in a bow that matched the waistcoat.

A shiny rapier pointed casually in the man's direction.

"I think you have forgotten how to address a lady," she said.

3.7 In the Bedroom

"Why do you wear these hideous garments?" muttered Sarah as she fought with the lacing on Jenny's stays.

"I've seen you looking at my breasts," retorted Jenny. "They don't get into that position naturally you know."

Sarah grunted with satisfaction as the knot came free. "You seem to admire mine without the aid of whalebone and padding."

She dropped light kisses down the length of Jenny's back. Jenny giggled and rolled over. "You are perfect in every way midshipman Page," she whispered, kissing Sarah's lips. "The rest of us have to resort to a little chicanery for the same effect."

3.8 Betrayal

Jenny struggled angrily with the heavy chains around her wrists and ankles. Sarah just raised an elegant eyebrow from where she lay, similarly bound, on the other side of the cart.

Jenny couldn't help smiling. "I must look ridiculous wrestling with all this heavy iron. I'm just so angry at Jim. I thought we could trust him!"

"You looking distractingly flushed," said Sarah. "Never trusted him myself. In fact it's a long time since I trusted a man."

Jenny tugged at the chains again and couldn't help letting out a long, "Grrr..." This time Sarah laughed. "You are so beautiful."

3.9 The Forest of Dean

There were screams and shouts in the darkness. Some cries beseeched the Lord for help and others shouted of witchcraft. "Whatever it is, if they survive we'll be lucky they don't burn us," muttered Jenny.

"My ladies!" It was Captain Thomas Ryan, the least unpleasant of their captors.

"What's happening?" demanded Jenny.

"A hideous beast. I must rally my men to fight it. But I fear you may be trampled or harmed. Watch yourselves!"

Something clattered into the cart and he was gone. Jenny heard Sarah scrabbling in the straw and then a low throaty chuckle.

"The key," Sarah whispered.

3.10 Star Wars

Soldiers were hot on their heels as Jenny and Sarah ran through the forest in the dawn light. They were running down a rough pathway hewn through the forest by the giant beast that had passed in the night.

"Struth!" said Sarah, stopping up short so Jenny almost ran into her back.

Ahead of them, glittering in the undergrowth was a giant star, fallen to Earth.

"Halt in the name of the King," shouted a voice behind them.

Sarah looked at Jenny and smiled. They clasped hands and then ran forwards, leaping together into the light as gunshots went off.