

Week #1

@manoldonchev - Host

At the 204th issue of Intergalactic Ancient Cultures Convention on Altair Prime's moon a precious relic was expected to be brought forth for the first time. Its contents - finally immortalized as part of the virtual libraries of the Subspace Web. 'The Complete Halloween Encyclopedia' from Old Earth - thirteen tomes in hard cover of authentic Old Earth oak.

And it was stolen. The admiral of the Courier Armada had immediately resigned upon confirming the fact that it was, indeed, missing. His act was of no consequence whatsoever to the attending billions.

What mattered to everybody was that somebody would do such an act of barbarism and what threatened one culture's artifacts threatened the principles of civilization itself.

A committee had to be organized and something done to restore peace in the multitude of minds...

@sarez - 211/303 words remaining

"Are you sure about the report Mike- No pictures or holo feed for 15 seconds?" Major Ria sub-vocalized into her communicator.

"Yes sir. All the ports along the route from hold -22 to the main corridor were down for 15 seconds."

"OK. Thanks. Send the Data packet, raw copy and the analysis."

Major Ria Gallant logged off and donned her private communication helmet to report the development to "the Council".

Like many of it's operatives Major Ria was exceptionally intelligent with a genetically fortified body- human in this case.

@manoldonchev - Host

Ria Gallant does receive a reply by an 'old friend' program running additional analysis and it states: 'Our only find that might be of interest to you, Major, concerns the time period specified. A black out with the same length was experienced recently regarding scientific equipment orbiting Bob Marley, Rim sector 25. This was also the period required by the oldest models of Subspace Diving Craft which would nowadays be owned by private collectors only for no obvious practical reasons.'

@veryspider - 223/302 words remaining

Olligar Hoom: 31 years old man, descendant from a bloodline of Shadow People. Was unfortunately called Oilier when was younger. He inherits a Shadow creature that has been passed from generation to generation in his family, which has, like, dwindled away... The creature is a tiger-sized spider, who answers to the name of Argathrax! Though it looks VERY SCARY, it is a timid animal who likes long naps and safe spaces. Also, it likes fruits. Mangoes, especially.

@improv - 275/302 words remaining

Oak tree, 90' tall, leafless, voice like leaves rustling in the wind.

"My ancestors gave their lives for this. I shall join the retrieval expedition."

@manoldonchev - Host

You hear voices close to whisper nearby but still quite audible for you:

'All this must be pretty painful for a tree.'

'Don't worry, they have thick barks.'

It is not obvious whose lines those were.

@veryspider - 3/304 words remaining

Olligar was internally screaming. This was not a weird thing for him. He did this all the time, though very few knew about it since his face was pretty much dead-pan most of the time. He was still trying to improve on this 'emoting' business that seemed to be a prized preoccupation of some species.

News had just broke about how a few different 'tomes' appearing at various places in the galaxies, each of them claiming to be the real one, which was, well, silly, considering that it was reported to be *stolen*. But then again, some people probably were born with different priorities. Apparently, being a criminal could be considered 'pretty hot' in some sectors, and would increase one's sex appeal. Apparently. Olligar wouldn't know ANYTHING about things like that.

However, there WERE things he was super adept at. One of the things was that he was one of a very small numbers of technical officers that had studied, labored, suffered, graduated, and attested in the field of Artefact Verification.

Olligar was still screaming internally. He was able to do this thing for a long stretch of time now, after years of (silent) practice.

As his messenger beeped, his screaming intensified. It flashed: "#Report4Duty. 0900 hours at the newly formed Committe", with capital C, "at the headquarters' conference room."

@calluna - 198/302 words remaining

I stand before the Committee, having received the same memo as everyone else.

"Arch Dafter, of Decassatus descent, in case the ear's didn't give it away. You made the right call in inviting me here today, as they say, it takes a thief to catch a thief. Cat's may always land up their feet, but we of the Decassatus, the ground rises up to meet our step, we never fall to need to land. The universe guides our paths, and today, it brought me here to you."

I am distracted by a scuttling across the room.

"Oh my, what a cute spider!"

@manoldonchev - Host

A working core of a committee has been established and others would be joining the effort of unraveling the mysterious disappearance. All expenses coming from the Commonwealth Funds would be kept records of but not denied.

A few clues have given hope of the success of the mission. Two of those stood out from the rest - a coincidence of a malfunction on planet Bob Marley and a surfacing selling offer coming from the domains of New Mo'.

The first of those places is known for its pacifist culture which focuses on the spiritual.

The second one is a bustling nest of 'free entrepreneurs' and their hordes of customers. A place where one could contact any type of specialist, receive any type of service or buy anything, forbidden or not, provided it is in stock. The perfect place to avoid taxes or attention.

Both planets share the same rim sector and both are pretty dry and dusty with large desert areas and sparse vegetation. Water supplies are the major import of New Mo' while Bob Marley relies mostly on subterranean sources.

Wood is an expensive commodity on New Mo' and sending treefolk there is similar to sending naked males in a female only prison. It would be illegal to touch but still...

The Council warns once more about the unknown aspects of the 'Halloween Tomes Accident' - neither the purpose, nor the means of the theft can yet be explained, let alone talk about the entity behind it.

@calluna - 168/308 words

With a compulsion I can't fight, my tail tenses, and I step forwards to speak,

"I've worked freelance out of New Mo' before, although I'd prefer not return there alone."

@sarez - 101/306

Major Ria slowed down her ship to a crawl 20 clicks away from Bob Marley. The farthest distance from planet where she could scan the news and government satellite feeds. She kept her ship cloaked and proximity scan on high alert. The computer had scanned all near space and a three dimensional image rose before her. Bob Marley slowly spinning in the middle surrounded by myriad space -stations and orbiting satellites.

The news feeds, public system scans and even the planetary data base had very little information about the small satellite Ria had pin pointed- the one which had apparently blacked out for exactly 15 seconds according to her source.

@manoldonchev - Host

The FSA Observer M-U34 has been dedicated to a specific area - a natural rock phenomenon 2230 (land) clicks N-NE from Port Redemption. Physical anomalies have been reported since before observations began and have also been registered after.

Asimov VI xenoarchaeology professor Van Marcken was the only person to communicate with the observer unit during the past six months, his last entry - less than a week ago. The same person has been reported missing just two standard days ago by family members.

His entries were all encrypted. Official A. VI Academy code which would be easy to break were it not illegal. It would be 'impossible' to leave no traces of breaking it.

Week #2

@manoldonchev - Host

Thus a committee that should be taking actions on the case known as 'The Halloween Tomes Accident' has been born and is expected to grow in members. Planning is not yet complete and only preliminary measures have been taken by a certain agent. The rest is discussion.

However, words of the theft have also given birth to some countermoves. There has appeared the idea that something such as the *Tomes* should have never been scheduled for transfer to virtual space and should not be ever given such publicity. It has started a social movement that is against meddling in knowledge that might be considered sacred, secret and bound to specific culture.

Nobody quotes any source of this idea so far but many are beginning to support it. Omitting the fact of the crime and other details.

Other random news of the day:

Wildfires on Darwin's Circle threatens to reach 'global' proportions. Should the Council step in nature's way and save the ring world's wildlife?

'Let them adapt!'

- A comment by a popular Sirius bee swarm actress which gained her relatively equal amounts of billions of approvals and disapprovals in the first one standard hour.

An infamous pirate has been brought to soon face justice on Osaka XIII.

Intergalactic Black Hole Hockey League managers on strike. Star players deny them their annual leaves because supposedly now is the time to make money. This has been going on for a couple of centuries.

Weather will be all kinds of.

@veryspider - 194/305 words remaining

Olligar reported to the Committe and sees Arch Dafter.

He attempted to keep his opinions to himself and failed, really failed!

"Do we really need to work together with a thief! I say!"

Once he unsuccessfully ignored the awkwardness, he said, "I will make sure to lock up all of my belongings securely in this quest. I mean, I look forward to working with

you, Arch Dafter. You seemed ...capable in... retrieving things from unwilling participants."

And he introduced Argathrax also. The giant spider seemed to like Arch Dafter a lot more than his master.

"Looks like you've been in New Mo' before. I will follow your lead, Arch Dafter."

@calluna (commenting on an old post)

No one volunteers, and faced with the prospect of returning to a planet where no questions are answered for free alone, I decide to make a quick stop by the committees private quarters on my way to the ship yard, see if I can find anything worth flogging.

/

@calluna - 227/308 words remaining

"Unwilling participants," I wink, "Those who follow me willingly find their pouches swell with coins and fate guides their step, unless they decide to run a little mutiny and elope with my sweet chef to Osaka XIII... but that's beside the point when a ship awaits"

As we board the vessel, I eye the friendly Argathrax, rather hoping no one notices the mango tones in my perfume.

"I have ne'er met a real shadow spider, does he spin the unbreakable thread?"

@veryspider - 130/305 words remaining

"I... uh, willingly follow! Towards RICHES!" Olligar answers, a bit too eagerly. "Wait, what was that about mutiny and a sweet chef?"

Argathrax scuttles past his master and follows Arch happily.

"Sounds like a band name!" Olligar muses, boarding the ship. "He poops some mighty thread, yes. When he chooses to."

"He doesn't really obey very well. Except when there's mangoes in the equation."

@ manoldonchev - Host

There's a reason New Mogadishu is called Scavengers' Paradise and it is not because of all the good dead scavengers' souls which inhabit the planet. Although there's also plenty of those in the vicinity.

A fierce mother of a dust storm forces you to land your shuttle 30 clicks away from the city in a rocky area with a few dry canyons crossing it. Which at least provides some shadow and sight obstruction. It all seems safe at first and some sand on top should cover the entrenched vessel until you call it by close range remote. Navigation seems to work properly.

You will need to stop and make a camp at some point during the night. Nobody would come and collect you until the storm is over but at least on foot you can go below the worst part of it. Good thing you brought proper protective suits.

You are even able to discern the warm colors of sunset through the shifting curtains of fine sand.

An hour later and just before you call it a day, you see the outlines of a salvaging outpost. Electric lights prove it is currently inhabited. And that little hovering drone has certainly taken an interest in you. Maybe it has signaled about your arrival already.

Week #3

@manoldonchev - Host

'At the sound of the first bird singing

I was leaving for home

With the storm and the night behind me

And a road of my own'

- *From July Morning by the band Uriah Heep*

A lonely figure walked through the dunes, cloak flapping in the wind and still shedding dust accumulated during the hours of Fury's nightly visit. The skyline of the busiest city in the Rim was still a blur. Nothing bigger than a beetle to shoot at. Hunger was the last of his problems. Too many trails he saw in the dark, most of them probably indicating crash landings. This race was crowded already...

@improv - 277/304 words remaining

"closing time
I hope you have found a friend"
-semisonic

I grow my roots deep into the ground, anchoring myself, and spread my branches to provide even more protection to the small creatures accompanying me.

@sarez - 193/310 words remaining

Ria docked in at the Toonie spacestation. A neutral ground for all races and types. The interior has millions of nano sensors, cameras and lasers maintained and supervised by the Toonies, all conversation is garbled by a software so meetings and discussions can be conducted safely in a snoop-free environment. She connects to the local intranet, paying for information on Murgreev from Osaka XIII. As twenty credits fly out of her account Ria proceeds to the White Star Sims, one of the many facilities offering residence customized as per your homeworld of choice.

Murgreev is a retired bureaucrat and one of the best brokers of information. An he owes Ria a big favor.

@manoldonchev - Host

'Yes... Milady, of course I would never forget that... So... the whole mess was about turning old, out-of-date beacons... back on. Nothing around them but dangerous debris now... and some gas clouds. Some species mine those for old-fashion fuels.'

The transmission is interrupted by a high priority alert. A water-breathing Council member has had an accident while leaving Altair Prime.

Week #4

@veryspider - 151/310 words remaining

"I see the outpost... Something's telling me that we might be expected. That drone was looking mighty friendly, and I should know about friendly drones. I've had to verify some of them in the past, and let me tell you, there are dodgy drones out there that would do anything, and I mean, **anything**, to keep their distance between themselves and a vericator officer such as myself, so, you know, **my** expert assessment is that we have a super friendly drone here, just absolutely friendly."

"..."

"There's sand in my mouth :("

"Can we please get somewhere inside?"

"..."

"No, I don't think mangoes grow in this place, Argathrax, now stop clinging to your new friend as if you are a tiny kitten. You are the size of a pony, for goodness sake."

Argathrax had decided to try and stand up on two legs, like all the other cool people.

Argathrax failed.

Argathrax hoped no one saw.

Week #5

@manoldonchev - Host

The little friendly looking drone seems to be asking for help or at least encouraging the strangers it just met to hurry towards the camp. Which they find abandoned but for a relatively small round clay hut with a small fire burning inside. Where a half-human child stays huddled against the lap of her alien mother who is telling her stories of worlds that were.

They both fall silent at the arrival of hooded, shielded, branch-protected creatures at their doorstep. They seem afraid and hopeful at the same time.

@veryspider - 150/312 words remaining

Entering the hut, Olligar unsummoned Argathrax into the shadow realm and eagerly introduced himself to the mother and child figures.

"Hi! Dusty out there, isn't it!"

Looking around the clay hut, he immediately made some assumptions that the drone would not belong to these two out of a subconscious bias of privilege and that high self-regard sometimes you can smell off people that were born in big cities and who were used to attacking problems by attacking the keyboards or some other buttons. Pressing things and texting expertly!

'What simple folk! They live in a hut made out of the earth itself! This is just like in the books I've read at University. So quaint!'

He smiled conceitedly, producing some chocolate bars and candies he had stored in his pouch, that was meant for his shadow spider, but which he deemed to be suitable for this lowly people to offer to.

"Here, try these! They are good! Sweet! Go on!"

@manoldonchev - Host

The kid immediately attacks the sweets and nobody is to stop her. The graceful adult seems actually to take advantage of the distraction and takes you aside for a private talk in which she reveals that all other camp dwellers have left to inspect what looked like a crash landing not far to the north but have been there for too long and the storm has only worsened since then. No communication has come back, not a soul to report and it has become late. And there are creatures roaming by night...

@veryspider - -167/320

Olligar felt very proud of himself for some obscure reasons and allowed himself to be led outside for the private talk. A rare occasion where he felt as if somehow he was treated like the responsible adult that he was supposed to be, which was something that he hadn't felt very often, since he was a severe sufferer of the impostor syndrome.

After learning that the other camp dwellers were out being also responsible adults, inspecting a crash landing nearby, he could feel the anxiety of the alien person.

"Too long? How long is too long? Maybe they are still out there, being merry. I mean, you never know. Some 'crash landing' could be quite a party, you know. Not that I've been involved in one of those 'fun' ones, but I've heard stories, you know. There was this one story that my friend told me about, and it involved a giant bubble-ship crash landing into a gorgeous lagoon and it had a lot of happy-times-pills on board, and it was like, boom, and the sky was full with raining happy-times and then everyone on the lagoon was having the time of their life."

"What? You never heard of bubble-ships? They are ships made out of giant bubbles!"

"..."

"They ARE very rare, though, I guess. You don't think *this* crash landing is a party one? Well, I guess, the odds would agree with you, ma'am. Uh. Creatures? What kind of creatures?"

Olligar looked around apprehensively. The thought of having to go out there in the dark was very discomfoting to him, no matter how much yelling his Shadow Elf ancestors were pelting his subconscious with. They were, pretty much, wailing in his

eternal soul, screaming, "YOU ARE A FREAKING SHADOW ELF, YOU LITTLE TWAT. ACT. LIKE. ONE."

Olligar utterly ignored such internal pressure, peering into the dying light at the horizon and saying, "What time is dinner?"

@manoldonchev - Host

'Pardon my anxiety, dinner will be in a moment.' The graceful being does recover her composure and serves already prepared cold peeled cactus meals on clay dishes right on the floor in front of the fireplace. The child seems to ignore them at the moment.

They prove very tasty and there seems to be an infinite amount of them. At some point you feel they also have the effect of alcohol on your heads. You might call it 'Jolly Cactus Salad' or something in those lines.

So I don't know about people outside, but you do have some merry time. Cares being as remote from you as possible.

@veryspider - 68/320 words remaining

Olligar ate contentedly. He marveled at how tasty the food was and tried very hard not to compliment the host with his mouth full. Idly, he wondered what the food was made out of but immediately he told himself not to ask questions he wasn't prepared to hear the answers of.

'Jolly Cactus Salad,' he thought to himself, 'yep. That's what I shall call this!'

Being happy and at ease and with a full belly, he asked his host if maybe she could tell him more about her planet.

"Say, have you ever heard about The Complete Halloween Encyclopedia?"

@manoldonchev - Host

'Sorry, I do not know what Helloween is...'

Now, why did she lose her peaceful smile at the word *encyclopedia*?

@veryspider - 8/320 words remaining

Olligar considered explaining the concept of Halloween but he was known of confusing others further when he tried to explain complex stuff in the past and so he decided against it. Instead, he noticed she was not as friendly as before. By instinct, he was at once more curious and more guarded.

"Who came here recently with the Encyclopedia? Hmm?"

Week #6

@manoldonchev - Host

Very self-controlled, this alien femme. She seems to not take offense but unfrowns and replies in the voice best fitting the happy mood of a dinner party thrown for guests under the low roof of a clay hut amidst a sandstorm.

Alright, she is calm, very composed, even though she starts a recollection of events obviously sad to her:

'One very dear sister of mine was a librarian...'

But is interrupted by the child reminding of her tiny self being present. By humming a tune that does not seem random. It goes like this:

'Mm hmm hm hm hm hm hmmm mh hmmmmmm

Hm mh mhh hm mhhh mh mhhhhh

Hm hm mhmh mh mhmhh hm mh mh mh mhhh

Hm mhmh mh mh mhmhh mh mhmh mhhmmm

Hm mhmh mh mh mhmhh mh mhmh mhhmmmmmm'

'... but is now content to just be the concubine of a crime lord in New Mogadishu nowadays', the adult finishes without a sign of perturbation in her attitude. 'If she's not on a holiday, you may be able to find her tomorrow. Assuming you are able to safely reach the metropolis.'

@improv - 296/304 words remaining

I welcome the tiny child into my branches.

@manoldonchev - Host

'Ma, look at this h-u-u-u-g-e-e t-r-e-e-e, we can climb on it and get to New Mo' safely. We should go,' She goes on like this in her mother's general direction. Then she turns towards a branch near her face and talks as if to it specifically. 'Scary here, nobody came back!'

@iimprov - 291/305 words remaining

"who are you chatting with?"

@manoldonchev - Host

'Sorry, Mr. Tree, thought your branch was talkin', the girl replies. 'I'm Hal'leen and I'm a little rascal.'

@improv - words reset to 305

Ah! You might know another one of my plant friends, Alfalfa?

@veryspider - words reset to 320

"A librarian now turned concubine! I should like to meet her!"

"..."

"Your child is making concerning sounds.... Sounds like humming. Is it a robot?"

Olligar consults the map and proceeds to travel to New Mogadishu the day after. He is planning to wear his Most Seriously Criminal face, so that he would be accepted among crime lords and their ilk. This is assuming he can actually reach the metropolis.

Argathrax is having a conniption over the lack of mangoes in the last day or so and is retreating very far into the Shadow dimension. Although 'far' and 'near' is only a matter of feelings in that realm. But, feelings are sometimes the only accurate measuring stick.

@manoldonchev - Host

Arriving at New Mogadishu just before dawn is a dusty, stinging the eyes, and gritting sand between your teeth kind of business. Unless you are a giant walking oak tree or a passenger in the branches of such.

No fortified fence or army patrols are to greet newcomers on the eastern side of the metropolis. Slums, instead, stretching as far as the eye can see... unless you are a giant walking oak tree or a passenger in the branches of such. Then you can see further. For instance, from where makeshift hovels creep inwards towards a denser and denser core with larger and larger structures, up to where a myriad of skyscraper antennae rise above colossal towers and domes. Streaks of light reflecting aircraft criss-cross in every direction - around the city or to the orbit and back again.

From the outer rim point of the suburbs, where a giant walking oak tree or a passenger in the branches of such stands, New Mo looks like an upturned curved funnel or the hat of a witch character of tales of old. Tales, much like the ones that have been stolen just a couple of standard days ago. And at the proverbial eve of the Intergalactic Ancient Cultures Convention around Altair Prime, at that.

And so, a giant walking oak tree and a few passengers in its branches were sent out to this smugglers'paradise of a planet to investigate if anyone would try and sell the millennial tomes of The Halloween Encyclopedia on this black market of black markets. This blackest of markets of a city, though, looked awfully sunny and dazzling since the second the first of New Mo's suns broke the horizon.

Only half an hour later you would feel awfully dehydrated, were you a giant walking oak tree of a passenger in the branches of such.

Besides, a giant walking oak tree and passengers in the branches of such a prone to attract too much attention on the near-slums streets where people would stare at your bark in a way that would make you certain they were thinking about your wood underneath. Such a commodity on a dry and treeless planet.

Among two relatively new passengers amidst the branches of a giant walking oak tree is a graceful non-human lady who gently speaks to her companions:

"It would be most wise to proceed on foot. Each of us walking down on the ground beside our good friend - that way we'll be showing we are many and watchful, and there for each other."

So, without a word, seven smaller creatures climb down the branches of the giant walking oak tree of which they have been passengers. They spread around him, no

walking on the broad and dusty street with the early Beta star shining bright from behind their backs, projecting the shadows of part of them for a hundred or so steps ahead of their bodies.

There they walk. The giant leafless oak tree whose stride lifts clouds of dust. The shadow elf, his phasing spider in its personal mango-trees heavy extra dimensional pocket. The feline-heavy on the genealogical side mystical figure whose fluid motions imply hidden blades. The humanoid femme whose very existence is proof of universal powers who take special care of elegance. Her daughter, a self-proclaimed rascal with beautiful features beneath a most rascal-fitting natural hair styling. The miscalculation twins, embodiment of an earlier narrator's counting disability.

A fearsome bunch. Well, some of them rather terribly attractive. Well, at least one of them. To all species, that is. Of course a giant walking oak tree is also very attractive to some. Not only tho those who see straight through its upper layers and into the market potential of the wood beneath, but also to the more human-minded among the rest of the giant walking oak trees, as well. The same goes for...you get the meaning of these babbles of a sick of mind person with special needs.

As the giant walking oak tree and its former passengers turned walk-mates venture further through the suburbs, and towards the imaginary zone, where ghetto gradually becomes slightly touched by infrastructure area, the newcomers attract more than attention. They are, indeed, approached by a dark colored person with darker colored sunglasses, a smooth moustache and lots of jewelry on his meaty fingers.

"Yo, fella!" The human-meatball speaks in a loud and cheery voice. "Yeah, you with the most seriously criminal face! How you like a job I got for ya? 'Naf credits to buy yourself a shiny new ship with a shiny new shine. Fat enough to have ya and all ya buddies dancing inside."

And with that he spreads his palms and lifts his chin up in the most generous of gestures...

Just a parsec or so away Major Ria Gallant experiences what her generation and a few generations before her time would have considered the impossible. Just as she is about to open a high priority communication channel from the cabin of her personal ship, currently in high orbit around Bob Marley, all connection to civilization disappears. Even light signals on satellites, she has been able to maintain direct visual contact with, blink out. And so does every electric light on the surface of the planet.

Were she a passenger amidst the branches of some giant walking oak tree somewhere on solid ground, she would have no personal danger to worry about. But she's on a small ship which only has enough power left to land somewhere within a parsec or so. Or she could temporarily turn off most of her systems and drift for a while. Fortunately, most of the equipment she has loaded on board, would function under almost all sorts of conditions, including this one.

And there was still the image inside her head of her comm screen flashing just an instant before it died. Her meticulous training in a variety of hypothetical combat and diplomatic situations had also included some pretty efficient mnemonic techniques. Some of those learned from a species of giant walking oak trees. Those techniques now allowed her to recall most of the message.

"Interrogation at Osaka XIII...unexpectedly successful...paid by anonymous...reboot the old systems as backup for when...hit the fan...don't understand that last part. Some ancient idiom...Murgreev."