

I adjusted the crest of my hoplite helmet as I waited and tried to take a drag on my cigarette, but found that the visor of my hoplite helmet was constantly foiling my best attempts to do so. I grimaced. *Stupid fucking hoplite helmet.* I misplaced my hat I don't know how many installments ago, and a diligent search of the battlefield had yielded nothing remotely in keeping with the detective aesthetic I was struggling to maintain. *It's kinda funny the places life can take ya,* I mused. *Roll out of bed one morning, ya end up wearin' a hoplite helmet. Where's the meaning in that?*

Having successfully converted my newfound headwear into an existential quandary, I turned back to Bryce Lanham, who was still staring silently off into space.

“Well, Lanham? You get paid to think, smart guy, so why doncha think about giving me an answer. What do you make of this mess?”

“Well, that's not entirely accurate. I have tenure now, so I get paid to *have* thought. My current research involves getting around to putting a video up on the internet, after which I might make a peach cobbler.”

“So that's what happens to you historians. Ya do all your thinking about the past tense, and before long the thinking itself is in the past tense. Clever, sure. All I know is it's *past* time to be gone, and I'm getting *tense*. I want answers. What do Spiegel's prophecies mean?”

“Hmm... $y=t^2$  is a tough one. Scholars have argued about it for generations. The current consensus seems to be that  $y$  represents the eccentricity of the earth's orbit and  $t$  represents the time, in seconds, since the foundation of the Catholic Church.”

“But that's not even a dimensionally correct statement!”

Lanham shrugged. “Galileo had to deal with a lot of pressure from the religious authorities of his day. It's understandable that he would have coded his most earthshaking discoveries in coded language we cannot even begin to comprehend!”

“Whatever. What else can you tell me?”

“Well, the part about ‘a post-apocalyptic Hitchcock submerged beneath the waves’ must be referring to the ancient prophecy that Hitchcock will be destroyed by a flood during the apocalypse,” Lanham said ever so helpfully. “If that's happening, then we're pretty much screwed. Tell me, does Hitchcock have any levies?”

“We have one Levi. But he couldn't stop a flood!” I grew increasingly agitated at the idea that anything of any importance whatsoever might depend on Levi. “He's so short that his value according to the discrete metric is one half!”

I was struck suddenly by a feeling of déjà vu so powerful it almost knocked me off my feet.

“Well, we can only hope he gets taller before it’s too late,” Lanham replied gravely. “I have one more piece of information that might be useful to you. You know how Ashley Altman has been shirking her vice presidential duties of late? Nobody seems to know where she took off to. Until now. One of my sources repeated seeing her amidst the chaos gripping Section III.”

Ashley Altman. A mysterious figure with a background in medicine and no prior political experience before she joined the Jorgonaut’s machine. And her name was on Jordan Phillips’ list. Maybe I could get some information from her. I took my leave of Lanham and began once again the dangerous trek across the desolate wasteland of Section III. There was no sign of Ashley Altman, no sign of anybody save for the piercing cry of a distressed baby. Make that several distressed babies. Come to think of it, there must have been thousands of babies to cause such cacophony. *Why are there so many babies?*

I was satisfied with this question. It was directly relevant to my present situation, and also managed to suggest profound inquiries into the nature of humanity and its purpose in the world. I gave myself a pat on the back, and as I looked over my shoulder, I caught sight of Erica Fagin, hiding among the ruins of an abandoned building. She saw me see her, and tried to run, but soon found herself cornered.

“Alright, Fagin,” I said. “Start talking. What was Jordan Phillips planning? And what did you do with all the condoms all that time ago. You’re not getting away this time.”

“Not true. I can still escape through this portal to my subconscious,” she said, and promptly did so. I leapt through before the portal closed and found myself in a nightmarish realm surrounded by pale, brooding vampires and Harry Potter characters performing acts that should not be named with their wands. I closed my eyes tight lest I lose whatever still remained of my sanity. But Fagin was not so lucky. The demons she had resisted so long while perusing fanfiction.net descended upon her, and she fell to the ground with an anguished cry.

I groped around blindly through the gloom, found her body, and hauled it back to the material plane, then patted myself on the back again for having accomplished so many totally unphysical acts in such a short span of time. She was covered from head to toe in vampire bites, and losing blood fast.

“Don’t die on me, damnit! I need answers! You’re the one behind all these goddamn babies, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” said Erica Fagin triumphantly between rasping breaths. “When I fled the country with the Hitchcock condom stockpile so long ago, I escaped through a temporal rift...and stole all the condoms from nine months earlier. That’s how we got the birthrate to spike so suddenly. It was all...part of the plan. Now unwanted babies are but one of the plagues that have come upon the people of Hitchcock. You know how the expression goes... You can put lipstick on a pig, but that doesn’t change the fact that it has venereal disease.”

“What? That’s not how the expression goes at all! What are you talking about?”

But Erica just laughed.

“You’re too late...Ashley Altman’s plan is already in motion...This...is just the beginning...”

And so she died. My head was spinning. Were babies, war, and syphilis all tools of an enormous conspiracy to destroy Hitchcock? And what was Ashley Altman’s plan? I knew I wouldn’t be able to answer any of these questions before eating lunch, and I decided to ignore the nagging feeling that I wouldn’t be any better equipped to answer them after lunch. I made my way to Bartlett, but found the entrance blocked by a large crowd gathered out front.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” I demanded of Themis, who I recognized near the back of the crowd. “This is madness!”

Themis turned and regarded me with suspicion.

“Why are you dressed like Leonidas?” he asked.

“This was the only headwear I could find, okay! Just answer my question!”

“Well, tonight we dine in nowhere,” Themis replied gloomily. “Bartlett has closed its doors.”

“What?”

“More to the point, we’ve glued them together,” came the voice of Falkowitz from the front of the crowd. “Bartlett’s core mission has always been to provide a cohesive dining experience, and our most recent surveys indicated that not only was the cohesion between food items and house tables remarkably low, except in the case of sauces, the cohesion between the doors was totally minimal. Our chemists are currently hard at work designing more adhesive foods, but until they succeed, we’ve glued all food to various surfaces inside the eatery, and, as I mentioned earlier, we’ve glued the doors together, making it impossible for any of you to enter our establishment in the first place. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you.”

“But how will we eat?” Came a shout from the crowd. “We’ll starve!”

“Nonsense,” said Falkowitz. “Find a pig and go dig up some truffles. You’ll dine much better than you did under our roof.”

That’s when it hit me. They had planned it all out from the very beginning. Whoever wasn’t killed in one of the Jorgonaut’s wars or by the diseases unleashed by Erica Fagin would be left to starve by Bartlett. ORCSA was in on it too; their investment in so much pork barrel spending was all to prepare for this moment, to enable the conspirators to outlast the famine.

That’s when the second thing that hit me hit me. Snatches of conversation were swirling around in my brain. *Pork barrel spending. Pigs unearthing truffles. Lipstick on a pig. A pattern. But why? Could it have something to do with Ashley Altman’s plan? Unless... No. Even they wouldn’t go that far.* But then a cry from the direction of Section III confirmed my worst fears.

“Swine Flu! Run for your lives!”

That’s when the third thing hit me, and right in the face, too. The third thing was somebody’s elbow, and it was a good thing I was wearing the hoplite helmet or I might have suffered more than a moment of dizziness. All around me, the terrified citizens of Hitchcock were scrambling left and right, trying in vain to escape the hideous, slaving pig-men who had already succumbed to the transformative powers of the plague.

I caught sight of Falkowitz taking advantage of the chaos and slipping away into the crowd. / *can’t let him escape. Somebody has to account for all of this.* Dodging the snapping jaws of a nearby flu victim, I took off at a run after Falkowitz, into the night, as the first snows began to fall.

STAYED TUNED FOR THE MINUTES SEASON FINALE, COMING SOON!