

The Chimes at Midnight

Friday June 1, 4:09pm

None of us thought it'd end like this. I guess, if we thought it'd end at all, we imagined some Third Power attack that permanently disabled our link. All our attention was focused on them, on keeping safe. But, like the man said, this is the way the world ends: not with a bang but with a whimper. Our government, headed by our beloved leader Earlywine, is cutting the funding to the Centre for Reality Research. It makes a sort of sense, I'm not going to say that it doesn't. Mysterious goings-on and unexplained deaths might be interesting for me to investigate, but they're hardly reason enough to keep spending millions of Lecks on a link to Earth, not now the Cube's been found. "These," as my father said to me the other day "are the political realities". I couldn't think of anything to say in response.

I didn't have to. He said it all for me.

"There just aren't the resources to keep this enterprise going, Violet. I'm sorry to disappoint you."

I bit my lip and willed myself to keep looking him straight in the eye, not to let my gaze fall to the floor as I used to when I was a child.

"We'll still be monitoring events on Earth. You'll still get your Earthology feeds."

"But, we won't be able to talk to them?"

"No. We'll still be watching them, though."

Sometimes my father can be downright sinister.

And I keep thinking, now, what was it all for? What does all of this actually amount to? Yes, we found the Cube and saved the world and all that heroic stuff but now that's done... what was it? And I think, maybe it's the journey. Maybe the Cube was never a destination. Maybe it was always meant to be a journey.

There are so many people missing, so many who fell along the way, that it seems almost callous to enumerate the things we've learned, the things we've done. I wish they were here too. But this is

how life is: never just one thing, always mingled, the pure emotions we hope for always tainted by something else.

So, we've been all over this world, and all over yours. We've saved lives, we've solved problems. I've had a year long relationship with a mass-murdering psychopath, which was certainly unexpected. (I saw him recently, at Fletcher Prison, it doesn't matter why I was there. "Not 'mass'," he said to me, still smiling the same wolfish smile, "'mass' is more than ten, surely.") We have battled wrongdoing and witnessed evil. We have gone farther and seen further than I ever thought we would.

As for me?

I have seen the stars at twilight in a world not my own.

I will never be the same.

I hope the same is true of you.

The journey isn't over yet, for any of us, but this is as far as we go together, for now. Ding ding, last stop, all change please. But I hope we'll meet again. It has been a privilege to travel with you, an honour to be your friend.

I've sat staring at this post for hours, trying to work out what to say. I think that's about as close as I'm going to get. Kurt, Scarlett and I are going out to see an Earth play tonight at the Majestic: Henry IV part two. It seemed suitable: a play about endings. None of us are now the things we were. Kurt and Scarlett have their own last posts for you, you can find them here and here. And then, late night poker this evening, I think. Time to give Nipper's boys a chance to win back a few of their lecks. Life goes on. It always does.

Kurt's Farewell

Friday June 1, 4:08pm

There's a story that every child in Perplex City is told by their parents. When they're old enough to understand the history of their land, and young enough to still have a sense a wonder, it's time. They sit down in their favorite spot, everyone's keys are turned off so there are no distractions, and they begin.

You've all done more than this city could possibly ask for. In the last three years, you've worked into the night and into the day again, defending us from our enemies. You've been our staunchest allies, unquestioning in support, whether we deserve it or not, and you've been the most loyal of friends. Even though you've never set foot in our city, you've saved us many times over. That means, whoever you are, wherever you live, you belong in Perplex City. And that gives me the right to tell you this story.

The Stranger Who Saved The City

It wasn't a Great War. It was appalling, devastating, suicidal. Anything but Great. Billions of people were killed, all across the world, and almost three hundred years on, we can see the marks of it everywhere. Massive craters and glassy deserts, formed from the heat of the sun. The land was smashed and ripped, with scars a mile wide and a mile deep.

Perplex City still bears those scars in Catbite Gorge. Fewer than one in a hundred survived the last days of war, and many more would die in the weeks and months afterwards. Later, when we heard the silence of the rest of the world, we would count ourselves lucky to have survived at all, but back then, we were a broken people.

Civilisation had collapsed. It didn't happen overnight, but instead with the weight and inevitability of a falling building. Already exhausted from years of war, the remaining people fought and looted indiscriminately, in a daze. The people of the city didn't just turn away from each other; they turned away from their

past. Schools, libraries, hospitals, universities and museums were all ransacked for the most basic of needs. If anyone stopped to consider, they decided that it was their past that caused this calamity. Their love of knowledge and of puzzles - that's what caused this.

It was about a month after the war when a man named Nicholas appeared in the city. An old man, Nicholas wore unfamiliar clothes and spoke with a strange accent. Even among the chaos, people noticed the man who entered the remains of the city with wonder and delight in his eyes, his head turned up and his eyes dancing across the skyline. They asked him, how can you bear to look up when everything we had is now lost?

Nicholas would always reply, how can you look to the ground when you have such grandeur about you? Never could I dream to see such things in all my life.

The people of Perplex City laughed at him. There was precious little chance for laughter of any sort in those days, so they enjoyed laughing at this madman who saw grandeur amid destruction. And yet he was a peculiar sort of madman: he continued to walk the ruins, asking questions for anyone who would listen, What is this city? When was it founded? What manner of art created it? Why are there plaques, statues and paintings of puzzles everywhere?

Most simply ignored him, but a few answered. At first haltingly, and then with confidence and even pride, they spoke to him about their city, Perplex City. It had been the greatest city in the world, they said. For as long as anyone could remember, Perplex City had loved puzzles of all sorts. They saw puzzles wherever they looked. In the ripples in a stream, in the spiral of a flower, in the colour of stars and in the pattern of minds, they saw ciphers, conundrums and mazes. Through the solving of these puzzles, Perplex City had become the most beautiful, most powerful, and the most learned city of them all.

And now it was destroyed. They would trail off, in sorrow over what they had lost, and walk away.

Though Nicholas was a stranger, he knew it was his duty to offer help wherever it was needed, and these people were in desperate need; but what could he do? There were those who were dying, but he was not a doctor. There were supplies that needed moving, but he was not strong. There were dozens of things to do, but none that he could aid.

As he walked through the city, mulling this over, he came across the ragged edge of the new gorge, created by weapons he could not even comprehend. Few people from the city ever ventured this far north; they were frightened of what they might see. But as Nicholas stood at the lip, he saw movement on the other side. There were people still alive, across the gorge! Perhaps they could help, or at least exchange supplies, he thought. Nicholas rushed back into the city to tell people. On hearing the news, they paused from their constant work of tending the ill and dying, or scrabbling for food, and brightened. They all had friends and family who had lived north of the gorge, and they still held out a desperate, dying hope that perhaps they might still be alive. But as one, they shook their heads. There was no way to cross the gorge. They had no crafts left for flying, and the terrain was impassable on either side.

Now Nicholas knew his role. He had been trained as an architect, and he had designed and built dozens of buildings in his life. What the city needed now was a bridge, and he could design one. With the aid of his new friends, he found a suitable location across the gorge, and began planning.

It would win no competitions, and it was not a difficult design, but it would serve its purpose. His plan was for a basic, ugly bridge, made from parts recovered from ruined buildings. It would require a minimum of labour, but even that, he realised, was a considerable amount. Yet it needed to be done, and so he began painstakingly collecting the parts himself.

Word quickly spread around the city of the strange old man's plan to build a bridge across the gorge. Incredulity was the typical response,

but in some, it was followed by a sense of respect. Here was a stranger, building something new in their city, showing that there was a future to look forward to, no matter how different it was from the one they had hoped for. A handful of people decided to help him. Anything was better than huddling in tents and ruins, hiding away from the world. As the bridge began to take shape over the weeks, dozens, then hundreds of people joined in. It felt good, they realised, to be making something new.

Nicholas's work was mostly finished - he could not help with the physical labour, and the design was solid. The workers, however, enjoyed talking to him as he supervised the construction. He would recount tales of his home, and in turn, they would tell him the famous puzzles of Perplex City, and laugh good-naturedly as he tried to solve them; Nicholas was a smart man, but he had little skill at puzzles. Still, he always tried to solve them, and they were impressed by his persistence.

When this bridge is finished, they told him, you will be able to see where all the puzzles come from: the Academy. The prize of Perplex City, the envy of the world, the Academy had buildings that would make him weep, they promised. Nicholas would smile in anticipation; which architect could want for more?

A scarce few months after they began, the bridge was finished. Perplex City was whole again, but the bridge's construction had done more than provide a path - it had spurred the survivors into organising themselves. After they had tested the bridge, Nicholas walked across it with a group of the city's leaders, who had come to prominence through their efforts in the time after the war.

The Council, as they called themselves, stopped halfway along the bridge. Their leader, a young woman, took a large key out of a pocket. She explained that one of the workers had heard Nicholas talk of his home's traditions. They had little they could give him in thanks for his efforts - no treasures or trophies - but they could give him this.

The key was plain and black, the sort of key used to lock a cellar door. She apologised for its appearance - it was the only key they could find in time - but it was the key to the city. The Freedom of Perplex City. Nicholas paused, looking at it sadly. The Council glanced at each other nervously, wondering whether he was disappointed or if they had made a mistake.

There was no reason to worry. Nicholas was touched, and turned to thank them all. He had always been a modest man, and so he claimed little credit for what he had done. He was simply proud, he said, to have added a building - however crude - to the greatest city he had ever seen. But he was reminded about his home.

Across the bridge, Nicholas' friends guided him to the Academy. As they approached its walls, he could tell that something was wrong. Where were the towers, the vast libraries and great archives?

They were all gone. The entire Academy had been destroyed, levelled into the dust. Nicholas sat down heavily on the ground, unhappily, and his companions shook their heads in shock. The prize of the city, envy of the world, gone. They began to talk in whispers of what had been. Never again would they see the likes of it, they agreed.

Nicholas gazed across the grounds. It was an interesting space, he thought, bisected by a river. Much like academies and museums from his own land. He picked up a twig and idly began sketching designs in the dirt. Courts here. The museum there. A round auditorium nearby.

The leader of the council watched him with interest, and quickly made a decision. If we can build a bridge, she said, then we can build an Academy. That's what Perplex City is. And I would like you to design it.

A year later, Nicholas, already an old man, was growing frail. He had spent the energy of a man in the peak of his life, designing the Academy, and it had taken a toll. His plans would never measure up to the buildings described to him and embellished even further in his imagination, but

they were solid, elegant buildings, and he was pleased with them.

At the same time, he knew he would never see the Academy built. He was simply too old, and the city had more pressing priorities. So on the day he formally presented the plans, he announced he was leaving. He knew he was far away from home, too far to ever return, he judged, but perhaps he might find a way back, like the way he came.

Nicholas steadfastly refused all offers of help and companions, and set upon his way the next morning. In parting, he said that as a youth, he had never been able to tour the lands nearby, but his short time in Perplex City had been the Grandest Tour of all.

After Nicholas had gone, the Council discovered something extra among the plans. It was a simple puzzle, a maze he had drawn, entitled A Gift to the City of Puzzles.

No-one knows if this story is true. There were a lot of legends and tales from the time after the war, and few - if any - records were kept. But this story has been told again and again, and so even if it isn't true, it tells us something about who we are and who we want to be: a people who stand together, in the face of adversity. A people who love knowledge and puzzles.

We know this much though: after the war, a new tradition began, of giving puzzles as a farewell. I'm sure Violet and Scarlett will have filled you in on what's happening with the link. We'll always be watching Earth, and one day, I'm sure, there'll be another bridge between our worlds.

This isn't goodbye or farewell. Think of it as 'goodnight' between friends who'll see each other again one day. And so, I won't be giving you a puzzle as a parting gift.

Besides... there isn't a puzzle that I could make, that you - together - couldn't solve.

Kurt

Scarlett's Farewell

Friday June 1, 4:07pm

The funny thing is, I haven't shed a single tear.

I suppose over these last few years I've gained a reputation for being some sort of soggy weeper. That's what it feels like, anyhow, that any little thing sets me off in tears. I'm not that Scarlett anymore, though. I guess I'm stronger, now, and more able to weather adversity. I suppose that's what experience does for you.

So, well, I guess you've heard the news. Dad came in to my room, his face beet-coloured with rage, and said simply, "It's over, Lettie. They're shutting down the CRR. I'm sorry." And he patted at my arm awkwardly, like he might comfort a colleague, and after a second, pulled me into a hug, instead. I don't think he'd done that since I was ten years old. He was so warm and solid, and I found myself aching from missing him and avoiding him and suspecting him all of these years. That's something I have to make right.

Then my key started chirping with people calling in to make sure I'm OK - Violet, Kurt, Von, Garnet, Iona, Brede, would you believe even Michiko Clark? All of my friends circling round to keep me safe and whole, just like you always have.

I really will miss you all. You've given us so much of yourselves, and there's just no way to explain how much it's meant to me, how many dark times you've pulled me through. I'll miss you madly, don't doubt it, but I'm also strong enough to walk on my own, now. I think we'll all be OK here in Perplex City.

Violet has of course been hovering over me these last days, since we've found out, like she thinks this is the thing that will break me for good. She keeps squeezing my hands or my shoulders and telling me "It'll all be fine, Lettie, I'll make sure of it," and I keep getting these little flashbacks, like jolts of electricity, remembering all of the times she's said that to me before:

When I was small and our mother died, and Violet promised she'd always take care of me. When I was a little older and my best friend Julianna decided not to like me anymore. When I caught my first boyfriend in the park kissing another girl, when dad started getting bad press in the Sentinel, when my pet turtle died, when I got poor marks in applied cryptology, and not even counting the insanity of the Cube theft and all the years that followed. Every time, she's been right there, promising it would work out, that she would make it so by stubborn force of will.

But you know, I've said it before; I was broken - and I'm not anymore. And I'm starting to recognise how carefully she tries to protect me, how she's always tried to protect me. Her execution is sometimes... questionable... but I can see she's trying to be the best sister she knows how. I think it's time for me to start trying back again.

So I guess at least one good thing has come out of this. And I guess it really isn't the end of the world. I mean, I'll be able to watch you, even if we won't be able to talk. And - - after we found out, we had a blue sort of family dinner, and afterward, Kurt and Vi were standing together - I don't think they saw me - and I saw Violet lean against him, and brush his hair out of his eyes, and I saw him slip his arm around her, and it looked so comfortable and right. It is right, and maybe they're finally figuring out what everyone else has known all along.

So it looks like this is a time for beginnings, too, and not just an ending. So I'm not crying, I promise. And who knows, maybe we'll meet again one day.