

THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD

BY BECKY ANNISON

WITNESS

Professor Anushri Davy is the diligent and charismatic head of the new Bioinformatics Cross-Infection Division at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Anushri is an expert in medical wetware which requires medical and computing skills. Her strength is a *sense of duty* to her patients and her personal trait is a *quirky sense of humour*.

OTHER CHARACTERS

- *Nakanya Mannivongsa* is a Lao poet with an interest in ancient folklore, studying the hidden connections between the serpent traditions of the Naga, Coatlicue and the White Snake, among others. She is conducting research in the School's library but has suffered an onslaught of strange and troubling dreams since her arrival.
- *James Thorogood*, an office worker pursuing conspiracies in the deep web. He dug too far and ended up as patient zero for the Dock virus. Since James woke from his coma he's been upbeat and cheerful but with troubling memories.
- *Rowan Sanderson* has been a nurse at the School for nearly 50 years and knows all its secrets. Currently they look after the Dock patients' day to day needs and provide regular doses of gossip and tea to the junior staff.
- *Nuit* is a hacker in the deep web providing information about the dock virus to Anushri. Nuit has revealed they are a former student of Anushri's (though she isn't sure which). They have nerves of steel, but where are they getting their intel? It can't be legal!

*A new scent, earthy and redolent
of decay. It is pungent and
altogether repulsive.*

LOCATION AND ERA

In 2132 the London School of Tropical Medicine is the first line of defence in the latest potential pandemic. One year ago the first computer virus appeared to jump the machine/human barrier. It was named the Dock Virus and since then it has claimed 50 known patients most of whom are being cared for in the London School of Tropical Medicine.

The School occupies a large and extensive premises on Euston Road above an abandoned tubeline; the perfect quarantine storage facility for viral and bacterial samples. It is the world's leading epidemiological and multi-disciplinary research centre.

OTHER LOCATIONS

- ⊙ *Dark Gate* - this node in cyberspace is frequented largely by teenage hackers daring each other after too much caffeine and too little sleep. It is the last location James visited before falling sick.
- ⊙ *Research Labs* - The labs are underground, hot and stuffy. The latest technology rubs up against ancient and jury rigged equipment as funding comes and goes.
- ⊙ *School Canteen* - everyone eats here; students, staff and the more mobile patients. It is buzzing with life especially on Fish Wednesdays.

SPECIAL CARDS

- ⊙ Sorcery
- ⊙ Warped Bodies
- ⊙ Visions
- ⊙ A Bizzarerie
- ⊙ Eldritch technology

The debris which has littered the floor since we began our descent is suddenly gone. No dust, even. How can this be?

THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD: SAMPLE CLUES

- There have been 7 false quarantine breach alarms in 3 days, but the system shows no faults.
- Dock patients are presenting rashes uncannily similar to binary code.
- An oily black slick appears every night under bed 3 in Keppel Ward.
- Pieces of apparently orphaned code in the web match the brainwaves of recently recovered Dock victims.
- All Dock patients sit up and open their eyes in unison at 3.24am.
- The food in the canteen has lost all taste and texture but no one else seems to notice.
- The viral and bacterial samples stored nearest the Dock samples grow in strange and unnatural ways.
- Anushri's research notes on the Dock virus are found vandalised/stolen/destroyed.
- Books in the school's own library have appeared with strange annotations; like computer code written using biological viral notations.
- Anushri receives anonymous messages through cyberspace warning her to stop her research.
- Anushri has the fleeting but overwhelming impression that all electronic devices, implants and wetware are watching her.

The quality of workmanship here represents a precipitous decline from that in the city. Shoddy, barbaric, even.

These new, debased carvings are overlaid on the originals, as though they were deliberately defaced. The work seems almost a parody of the Elder Ones' distinctive style.