

## **ADDITIONAL WEB RESOURCES**

You might read this book and find that afterwards you have more questions than answers.

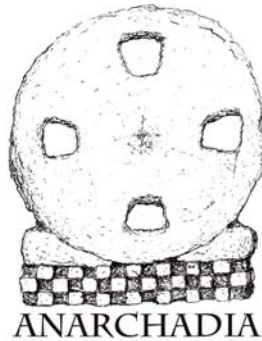
In that case, I cordially invite you to explore the Anarchadia website.

Its additional multi-media features include blogs, links, news, interviews, glossaries, readers' questions and additional artwork.

It may reassure you, confirm a funny feeling, help you recollect a distant memory, make new connections or allow something that has piqued your interest to metaphorically emerge from the shadows of obscurity.

It may also serve as a warning to the curious.

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## **BOOKS WITH GO FASTER STRIPES**



## CHAPTER 1

Once upon a temporal anomaly, a warning light blushed self-consciously in front of a beautiful young scientist. It had never warned anyone before, let alone someone so good-looking and clever. It found itself in earnest, prompted by sophisticated sensing instruments into raising the alarm.

Therese Darlmat had been using her temporal anomaly to take a little time out. Whenever she felt overcrowded by the less brainy, she liked to gaze at the stars through her gull-wing glasses, pondering on the frayed and patchy fabric of whatever universe she happened to be in and wondering if a stitch in time really could save nine. She had been admiring the Krill Nebula when she noticed a curious red glow about its nether regions and it took a little time for her to realise that she wasn't looking at a new gas cloud but the reflection of the warning light in the glass of her windscreen.

There were a number of what she called idiot lights on the dashboard of her car and most of them told her things she already knew. There was just one to which this rule did not apply and this was the mother and father of all idiot lights. Therese had considered etching "The End" into its lens. Now that it was illuminated she was glad she hadn't.

She took a closer look at it and it burned with shame. There was nothing wrong with her car, a pink six-wheeled Cadillac Rushmore convertible. Somewhere and somewhen beyond the safety of her temporal anomaly, a universe was collapsing.

Therese was endowed with timeliness as well as comeliness. She had a brain so huge that she could turn base dimensions into time. Her temporal lobes, which, in the female of her species were usually given over to remembering birthdays, were now so highly developed she disguised her high-rise forehead with an immense blonde beehive. Despite the size of her brain, she avoided the need for any unsightly cervical supports since women's brains are not as dense as men's. Her neck was so dainty it suggested that her head was filled with nothing but helium.

Apart from her towering intellect, the rest of her was in the most attractive proportions. Prior to devoting herself to science, Therese had made a fortune from a high-profile modelling career.

She tapped her elegant fingers on the ivory-coloured steering wheel and

moved the column gear-change lever from N for Neutral to D for De-materialise. The Cadillac shifted. Its tail lights glowed red, then orange, then yellow and finally white as Therese flicked through the physical dimensions as if they were gears on a gearbox. A standard Cadillac Rushmore had a one thousand cubic inch V16 engine but Therese had souped it up by incorporating a fusion reactor in the glove compartment. This didn't make it any faster. It made it instant.

She liked to call her temporal anomalies "blonde moments" and, having perfected their creation, she found that stepping outside the dimensions of length, breadth and height was easy. Therese discovered that alongside her own universe were all sorts of other ones that stretched off into the distance in every direction. She came to appreciate their more varied spectra of light, their varied flora and fauna and the need for a whalebone corset in the very ticklish ninth dimension. She also came to spot little paraversal problems, like dimensional instabilities and lavatory seats that had been left up. True to the acceptance speeches she made whenever she won a Miss Universe contest, she did what she could to make the paraverses better places.

She had just saved yet another galaxy from getting a wet bottom on the pot when the warning light came on.

Without the universal tyranny of light years, her temporal anomaly gave her remarkable insights into the negotiable nature of the laws of physics and allowed her to laugh at any deadline, no matter how severe. Sometimes, Therese would restyle her hair a little differently during a fleeting visit to her temporal anomaly just to see if anyone noticed and if they did she would nip back and return it to the way it was, out of sheer mischief. She liked to think that sort of behaviour was behind her but the possibility of doing it again still appealed.

The Cadillac shifted through time and space and Therese caught the collapsing paraverse in her headlights. However, even within the safety of her temporal anomaly, she exercised caution. If her by now incandescent idiot light was correct, there was no telling how far the instability could spread. It might even jeopardise her own bubble out of time.

Therese saw flashes of unnatural physical phenomena rippling across the sky, making the stars twinkle brightly for a moment. She checked her position on her CadNav using Astroroute and dived down to a blue-green world mostly covered by water. Then she chose her future parking spot through her chronoscope and moved the column change lever from D to R – R for Re-materialise.

Her sudden appearance in the middle of an emergency summit meeting caused uproar. The Cadillac Rushmore convertible, with its tailfins and six headlights, had been styled by Harley Earl and his team at General Motors' design studios during the chrome-laden nineteen fifties. It subsequently proved too outrageous for the North American market and had been a commercial failure. Since modifying her Cadillac for pan-dimensional interstellar travel,

Therese drove it with the top down because headroom was always a problem in whatever dimension she inhabited. Fortunately, the force field in her handbag, which took care of rain and the odd meteorite shower, also protected her from the hail of bullets that the already jumpy security forces hurled at her.

The guards stopped shooting because of dangerous ricochets and it seemed wrong to shoot at someone so good-looking.

An elder statesman approached, signalling reassurance.

Therese selected P for Park and alighted from her car. Her exquisitely cut white lab coat, which fitted her as well as any little black dress, showed that she was unarmed but as the elder statesman stood before her he viewed her towering beehive with suspicion. This was nothing new for Therese.

“Your universe is dying before its time,” she told the assembled delegates, “but I might be able to help.”

“Madam,” said the statesman, “I apologise for our inhospitable welcome.”

“I quite understand,” Therese replied. “If I’d announced my arrival you would never have believed me or let me in.”

The conference hall was full of tables and at each one was a distinguished individual. Triangular-section nameplates indicated their country of origin. Therese became aware that all around the upper walls, in the press galleries and glass-fronted windows for the simultaneous translators, people wearing earphones were looking at her, then each other, then at her again.

She glanced at the triangular nameplate at a vacant desk. The elder statesman was called Mr Post-Unification Euphobia or Mr PUE for short.

“Our universe?” echoed a younger leader of a superpower.

From her experience of beauty pageants, Therese took him to be Mr United States of Consumerica, or Mr USC to his friends.

“We thought it was just our world,” he said.

Therese sighed. “No; it’s much more serious than you first thought.”

“Just how much more serious can it get?” demanded an intimidating woman in a red silk robe. She sat at a desk triangularly labelled either *Federation of Gondwanaland* or *Toblerone*.

Therese didn’t even begin to explain that their troubles were affecting neighbouring paraverses.

“Do you know what might have caused this?” she asked.

“Ah,” said Mr USC.

“It wasn’t us,” replied Mr PUE.

“We’ve been trying to stop it for years,” said Ms Federation of Gondwanaland or Toblerone.

“Stop what?” asked Therese.

“The Wild Hunt,” said Mr USC.

“What’s that?”

Mr USC paused before answering her. He took an infra-red button box

and called up some poor-quality video images on the main screen.

“The Wild Hunt is the eternal chase,” he explained.

And there it was, a speeding procession of the most disreputable vehicles Therese had ever seen.

“It’s been going for thousands of years,” he went on. “It used to be a survival ritual but now it’s taken to wheels and become mechanised. We’ve been trying to control it, from a road safety aspect as much as anything, and we’ve encouraged alternatives and built motordromes for them to race in, but the Wild Hunt just carries on. It does things to time and space, you see – things we don’t fully understand.”

Mr USC glanced at some scientists, who all blushed deeply.

“The Wild Hunters,” he went on, “lose themselves in the thrill of the chase and can find themselves in quite alien surroundings.”

“That’s a classic description of a fost,” said Therese, “a leakage into an adjacent paraverse. Every time it happens, your universe is destabilised.”

The screen was now showing pictures from some video game. Law enforcement officers pursued a poorly animated image of a sinister looking man on a supercharged motorcycle. They were closing in on him but whenever they had him cornered, he somehow slipped away.

“This is Hob,” said Mr USC. “He has many other names. Some say he leads the Wild Hunt.”

“That isn’t actually him,” admitted Ms Federation of Gondwanaland or Toblerone. “He’s very difficult to capture, even on film. We’ve had to digitally animate him from survivors’ descriptions.”

Therese watched Hob riding his bike down stairs and bursting through apparently impregnable roadblocks.

“We would particularly like him to help us with our enquiries,” said Mr USC, “but so far he has chosen not to.”

“We had him cornered,” added Ms Federation of Gondwanaland or Toblerone, “but he doesn’t seem to exist by the normal rules of physics.”

Therese, who didn’t either, said nothing.

Mr USC froze the video on the best image they had of Hob. He wore a black leather jacket that looked like it had been down the road a few times, jeans, a plaid shirt, big boots and a black open-faced helmet with a peak. His eyes were covered by a black visor.

“He’s made fools of us all,” put in Mr PUE.

Hob’s slightly crooked teeth caught the light as he grinned at them from the big screen.

“So where is Hob?” asked Therese.

## CHAPTER 2

Hob was daydreaming happily about superchargers when he felt a tremor through the frame of the jumbo jet. They had been flying for hours, diverted from their course by extreme weather events. While the storm raged outside, weary stewardesses collided with each other and sprinkled passengers with sachets of salt and plastic cutlery.

Hob congratulated himself. He had got away with it again, and was now putting as many miles as he could between himself and his would-be oppressors.

He checked the darkness outside but merely saw his own reflection. He made an incongruous figure for air travel since he was still dressed for the Wild Hunt. The stewardesses had tried unsuccessfully to get him to remove his crash helmet. He'd laughed when they'd asked if he was a nervous passenger but, when they'd explained that he was making the other passengers uneasy, he'd laughed even more. Of course, he refused to take it off. He said it would be a character-building experience for the others. He liked building people's characters.

Hob had a highly developed sense of mechanical sympathy. Although everything looked normal outside, the Song of the Machine, in which he was particularly well versed, was approaching a dirge.

"How much longer?" demanded someone a few rows ahead.

"Just a couple of hours, sir," the stewardess replied.

"Haven't we outrun the storm yet?"

"It's still keeping pace with us." She carried on scattering salt as if re-enacting a Biblical proverb – anything to distract the passengers from their suffering.

Hob couldn't understand what the fuss was all about. He could think of far worse places to be. He considered moving back to the aisle seat so that the thighs of the stewardesses could brush his shoulder again. He liked stewardesses a lot and, apart from the issue of his crash helmet, he was easily the most charming passenger on board.

Instead, he stayed put and tapped the window. After an interval, tiny, mischievous female faces appeared outside, long hair flapping around them. Hob glanced back at his fellow passengers, even though he felt sure none of

them had the gift of the sight. From his battered leather jacket, he pulled out some weather-forecasting symbols. He held a black cloud with a lightning flash towards the window. The faces nodded. He showed them two wind symbols, stuck together for greater emphasis, which he pointed to the north-west. He also held up some numbers to indicate 150. The faces threw back their heads and laughed, white teeth flashing in the lightning. Hob held up a black cloud with drops of rain in each hand. He pulled off two drops from one and held it under the three drops of the other. The furies looked at each other and rolled their eyes. They gave Hob a thumbs-up and were gone.

Hob sat back. Into every life a little rain must fall. It was just his fellow passengers' bad luck to be chased half way around the world by a storm that registered at least thirteen on the Beaufort scale, when the Beaufort scale only went up to twelve. Severe bad weather was just Hob's way of coercing public transport into going where he wanted it. It was much more interesting than chartering a flight and the experience would touch the souls of his companions.

The Song of the Machine from the outer starboard engine had become funereal. Hob was interested to see how his fellow passengers would react when the engine failed and they began flying downwards.

The passenger ahead of him was still complaining.

"And where will we be landing?" he asked another stewardess who'd run out of ghizzits.

"Possibly Mourion. It's in the Euphobian trading block."

The passenger huffed and puffed and said he knew perfectly well where Mourion was and that it was half way round the world from where they should be.

Hob had never heard of Mourion, but he thought it could be a fun sort of place.

The bad vibrations were getting worse. Restless children ran around, their more elemental natures alerting them to the strange atmosphere around them. They played tag and I-spy and inevitably I-spied Hob's rucksack, securely belted into the middle of the three seats he had taken as his own. And the more they I-spied it, the more certain they became that it moved every time they glanced away. And somehow, when they looked at it, Hob's rucksack looked back at them. Hob bared his fangs at them and the children ran away.

Before angry parents could complain, there was a bang and a flash of flame from the ill-starred engine as it exploded.

There was an undignified scramble for life jackets and the inevitable sound of some of them being prematurely inflated. The captain appealed for calm, but even over all the shouting the co-pilot could be heard issuing a May-day message in the background, which rather spoilt the effect. As the call to "Save our souls" went out across the ether, Hob slumped down into his seat and sank out of sight. Then someone in a window seat shouted, and everyone rushed to starboard to look out at the engine that lit the night.

Hob was rising out of the wing, as if powered by the plane's hydraulic system. He stood for a few seconds, silhouetted against the flames as the sky twirled around the plane, and then he walked across the wing, in complete defiance of the slipstream and the furies' storm. His fellow passengers made out the motif of a wheeled cross on the back of his leather jacket. Above this wheeled cross was the legend *Terminal Murrain*.

Hob walked right up to the blazing engine and climbed down inside it. Within the inferno, he pinched shut severed fuel lines with his fingers. The flames went out and he pointed and said, "You!"

A terrified gremlin flattened himself against the inner cowling.

"So," said Hob, "who didn't know that Old Weird Wheels was on board?"

The gremlin stared at him in horror.

"I'll give you a clue," said Hob. "It's somebody in this ruined engine but not me."

The hapless gremlin began to emit a torrent of noises like the screech of worn bearings and the gnashing of mismatched gear teeth. He gesticulated wildly, rolled his eyes and leapt around the shattered engine like an amphetamine-amused monkey.

Hob caught the gremlin in mid air. "Curiously strong mint?" he asked and, before the gremlin could refuse, he squeezed his neck to pop his mouth open and fed him something hard and white. A swift blow on top of his be-horned head, and the gremlin gulped and stiffened. Ice frosted his ugly features and his eyes glazed over. Hob clapped his hands together and the freeze-dried gremlin exploded like a meringue case.

"Next time, check the passengers," Hob growled.

The cloud of dust slunk into a crevice within the engine cowling.

Hob took a mint himself and set to work.

"As these revs have been revoked, I call them into being again! May these thrust winders and fan spinners be whole once more!"

He prised some missing fan blades out of the engine cowling.

"May these fan blades and combustion chambers develop thrust sufficient to stop the earth in its rotation if called upon to do so!"

In his fingers, the blades twisted and writhed until they were the right shape again.

"May the Song of the Machine be accompanied by the close-fitting, fine-tolerance turbine whistle of contentment!"

Hob counted up the turbofan blades and carefully fitted them all back together and when he wasn't whispering up horsepower, talking the torque or delivering the thrust of his doctrine, he hummed the Song of the Machine.

The gremlin, who had thawed out and reconstituted himself, watched closely from his crevice. As Hob's humming grew, he joined in.

"I am the metal guru," muttered Hob, "Master of the Engine Henge. I



also dabble in carbon fibre.”

The gremlin looked impressed at his dabbling.

Hob took the ends of the severed fuel line between his grubby hands and breathed on the pipes, mightily and mintily, before sticking the ends together.

“Of course,” he added, in a more modest tone, “I prefer reciprocating piston engines.”

The gremlin rubbed his little hands together.

Hob suddenly grabbed him. “You realise what this means, don’t you?”

The gremlin gulped.

“No more mischief from you on this trip.”

He put him down and traced powerful sigils into the alloy of the engine cowling, as if his black fingernails were made from industrial diamonds. “Your job is to make sure this plane gets us to Mourion.”

The gremlin nodded, eager to help.

“Good,” said Hob. He went back to work for a bit and then said, “I thought these things were supposed to fly all right with two engines gone.”

The gremlin nodded and began to speak rapidly about such a litany of mechanical and electrical disaster that anyone with even the remotest degree of mechanical sympathy would have cringed and shuddered to hear him but Hob just kept on working on the jet engine, glancing at him from time to time. Occasionally, he said, “You didn’t!” or, perhaps, “You did!” and once he said, “Ah, so both port engines are operating at barely half thrust!” and when the gremlin finished describing with gestures how he’d over-ridden all the safety systems, Hob laughed and said, “You little tinker! Of course, this is going to make me look absolutely brilliant when you put all this right!”

The gremlin nodded eagerly and, without Hob saying another word, disappeared. By the time he re-appeared, Hob was sitting on the edge of the turbofan’s intake, dangling his legs over its lip.

“All done?” he asked, and the gremlin nodded and sat down beside him.

“I’m going home,” said Hob, conversationally.

The gremlin wasn’t used to Horsepower Whisperers opening up to him and didn’t know what to say.

“To Anarchadia,” Hob went on. “Of course, usually I would fust but sometimes I choose not to.”

They sat companionably on the jet’s cowling for a few moments, watching the approaching earth spinning in front of them, as if the planet were in a tumble dryer.

“I haven’t been to Europe for years,” said Hob.

The gremlin thought for a moment and became quite agitated, speaking rapidly in his strange language.

“What?” said Hob. “Euphobia?”

The gremlin nodded.

“Don’t you mean Euphoria?”

The gremlin chuckled and shook his head emphatically before going on. “Whaddya mean, ‘re-branded’? That’s ridiculous! Why would they want to re-brand a continent?”

The gremlin explained as best he could.

“Socio-political entity?” Hob translated.

The gremlin gave a Gallic shrug.

The clouds were boiling into strange shapes as they plunged through them. Some looked like racing cars, coursing through rolling landscapes, snaking through mountain passes and weaving their way through forests. When the full moon came out, strange clouds gathered around it, turning it into the headlamp of an enormous motorbike.

“*Nosferatu!*” exclaimed Hob. “Look! That’s me on *Nosferatu!*” and the two Hobs grinned at each other before the clouds broke up into another race, this time with endurance sports cars. “The furies are putting on a splendid show! They’re advertising the next Wild Hunt for when we land in Mourion.”

The gremlin was puzzled. If Hob was unaware of the re-branding of Europe, was he aware of any of the other changes?

“No,” replied the Soul Trader, looking down onto the darkened land below them, “but it can’t have changed that much.”

The gremlin tried to reconcile this with his own knowledge of Post-Unification Euphobia, but failed.

“Mourion can’t be far from Spa and Lee Age,” said Hob peering into the gloom.

The gremlin wondered if he referred to the old road racing cities.

Hob nodded. “Mind you, they’re having terrible weather down there at the moment. The Low Countries could flood. I might have to send you out for an olive branch.”

The gremlin pulled a face.

“How high up would you say we were?”

The gremlin made a pessimistic estimate.

“Look at all those long faces,” said Hob.

At every window down the fuselage, anxious passengers peered out.

“Do you think it might cheer them up if we re-started the engines?”

The gremlin thought it probably would.

“It might even make them grateful.”

The gremlin suggested that this was not unlikely.

Hob grinned. He picked the gremlin up by his overalls and hurled him into the storm to land in the air intake for the inboard engine, which had also stopped but without catching fire. He waited for the gremlin to compose himself after a rather heavy landing and then shouted across, “After me.”

Hob took the central spinner of the turbofan in his grubby hands and gently turned the engine over.

Somehow, despite the size difference, the gremlin managed to do the

same.

Everything being in order, Hob began to wind the turbine up to operating speed and said, "I call these engines once more into power and glory, revs without end, ring ding a-ding!"

The gremlin chuckled ecstatically as the turbofan blades of his engine whizzed around.

"Sing the Song of the Machine, my well tuned wonder!" yelled Hob. "Trouble's going!" and he spat a ball of flame into the engine.

The gremlin muttered something similar and also spat with results that surprised even him.

First one, then the other, the engines, burst back into life and the Boeing 747 yawed to port under the sudden surge of power.

"Trouble's gone!" shouted Hob, above the roar of the engines. "Bloody hell! Is that the ground?"