

## The Beheading

By Dean Blake

Much to the resentment of many, Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag loved many men, women and creatures, and in return, these these many men, women and creatures loved Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag. He was a brooding, seductive man, and although he couldn't be characterised as a typical handsome man, there was something about the way he behaved that made others clear their throats and flutter their eyelashes: he would lean back where other men would lean forward; he would laugh when others were too polite to laugh; most importantly, he was not afraid: he was never, ever afraid.

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag's latest lover was the Queen of the South. She was a beautiful woman with beautiful eyes and a beautiful posture who said a whole bunch of beautiful things. When you first hear the name "Queen of the South," you may be guilty of naively assuming that she was the queen of some great empire located south of somewhere. Sure, she had the beauty of a queen, but the only thing majestic about her life was the amount of alcohol she was able to consume on a Tuesday night, and the only thing that made her the Queen of the South was that Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag called her the Queen of the South.



She was enjoying a coffee with a group of friends when she saw Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag running towards their table. He was of medium height; he was scrubby looking with long hair and had an unidentifiable tan. She instantly gripped her purse.

"I'm disappointed in all of you," was the first thing he told the Queen and her friends.

"What?" One of the creatures at the table chuckled, wondering if this scrubby-looking man was there to ask for money.

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag looked all of

them over. “I see two humans, one vukuth, one laracova, two beleth seekers and one—I don’t even recognise what you are, but none of you, none of you are treating this precious queen with any respect.” He bowed towards the Queen of the South.

“What the hell are you talking about?” the Queen asked him with a smile.

“Are you not a queen?”

She giggled. “If I was a queen, then I’d at least be able to pay my phone bills.”

Somehow, Argoth had managed to charm his way into the table. He made them all laugh, he made them all lean towards him in interest and, most importantly, he caught the attention of his new queen.

“Why is your name repeated three times?” she asked him.

“What do you mean?” He pretended not to understand.

“Your name—Argoth Argoth Argoth whatever. Why didn’t your parents just call you Argoth?”

“My father,” Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag said with a proud smile, “wanted me remembered in the history of universe, in the entire history of time herself. If my name was mentioned just once, I would be irrelevant.”

“Do you really think anyone can ever be remembered by time herself? Time is beyond eternal. Hell, time is beyond definition,” said the laracova, who was evidently the most introspective member of the group.

Argoth leant back to say something, and most of the creatures at the table, including his new Queen, held their breath. “Have we not now labelled time as a *she*? It has taken us thousands of years and many brave scientists to finally identify time as female. If time has a gender, then she must have a personality. And personalities are formed through memory. Have you ever wondered why God gives us individual fingerprints, as insignificant as we are? Time will remember me, my dear friend, just as she’ll remember you. But I can guarantee you that she’ll remember me even more, because my fingerprint will be repeated thrice.”

After a period of courting, Argoth Argoth Semibag took the Queen to bed (or, depending on your perspective, the Queen *allowed* Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag to take her to bed). Some months after he had fallen in love with her, he quickly realised that he had fallen in love with her in the same way that he had fallen in love with the countless men, women and creatures he had fallen in love with in the past. His love life was a looping carousel and he was, once again, going to ruin everything. During his meditations he became consumed by guilt: why did he force his heart onto the Queen of the South’s? She demanded he be hers and he wanted her to be only his, but he longed for more. He loved every living being, and he had an uncontrollable desire to be intimate with them all. What was wrong with him? Soon he would rarely respond to her phone calls.

The Queen of the South confronted Argoth Argoth Semibag in his glowing rainforest. There was a small semicircle of giggling centaurides surrounding him, but she didn't care.

"Are you thinking of leaving me?"

"Do you think I'm going to leave you?" he asked, unembarrassed by the crowd.

"I am a queen. You always tell me I am a queen. You don't do the leaving. I do the leaving."

For the first time in a long time, Argoth Argoth Semibag was dishonest: "I'm not going to leave you."

"You liar," she said, wiping away a tear. At that moment, their hearts broke.

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Soon after, the Queen of the South moved away from a southern country on their home planet, to a southern planet in a different system that was famous not only for its captivating views and mysterious Three Stars, but also for being a great getaway for heartbroken women. From the books her mother used to read to her, this southern planet was a planet brimming with beautiful lakes and mountains. She remembered how her mother became teary as she talked about the first time she travelled to the planet: about how the water would float, about how it had its own voice, about how all the creatures in that planet didn't know of heartbreak.

The Queen of the South arrived with nothing. But she worked hard, and at some point befriended an older, wealthier creature who for

some reason took interest in her. This creature, although demanding and sometimes cruel, taught her the key components of business, politics and, most importantly, power. The Queen of the South, although not the most intelligent of female humans, worked with more drive and desperation than any being the older creature had encountered, and within a few years the Queen of the South grew in prominence, and the older, wealthier creature had anointed the Queen of the South as her most trusted advisor and friend.

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Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag remained in his glowing woods. He had never felt guilty about abandoning a lover before, so why was he so bothered about abandoning the Queen of the South? Objectively, she was no more unique or talented or caring or attractive than his other lovers in the past, and if he had remained with any of those other lovers, both he and said other lover were probably bound to have achieved similar levels of happiness as he would have experienced with the Queen of the South in the long run. Was the Queen of the South merely the final reminder from God that he was only supposed to choose one partner, and not thousands? But that reasoning didn't settle with him. Somewhere deep within him was a feeling—a premonition—that he had broken the heart of the wrong person, and that it may cost him his life.

But he cast his fears and heartaches aside for his greater calling: to be remembered in the

history of the universe, and to be remembered in the history of time herself. He believed the way to accomplish this would be to discover *pure understanding*. Once discovered, he wanted every other being in the universe to discover pure understanding. He believed that humans and creatures were haphazardly trying to achieve pure understanding but without knowing what they were actually doing. Humans, for example, out of their ambition and grit had bravely explored space and had now inhabited thousands of planets—yet their level of happiness and tolerance for each other had remained the same: there was still violence, there was still injustice, there was still suffering. If living beings truly *understood* one another, then there would be true universal peace.

Over the years, Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag had come to the conclusion that the first step to pure understanding was to understand nature. He began this step when he was much younger by taking care of one plant. He watched it grow and mature as a parent would watch their child grow and mature. Then he raised two plants, and then three, until he became a father of an entire glowing forest. He felt a divine connection with the soil and the plants—he rejoiced when they rejoiced; he suffered when they suffered. And soon he fell in love with the various animals that began to inhabit his forest; he was suspicious of them at first, but then he understood their nature and the role they played. Was this what it was like when God created the

Garden of Eden?

He would take each lover he had into the forest and be slightly disappointed at their lack of interest when he'd show them around. Why didn't their eyes open in wonder? Why didn't they ask him about the tree with the caterpillars? But the Queen of the South was different from all his previous lovers: she saw a small sapling, and she dug it out, and she asked if she could plant it in her backyard.

"You know it's going to grow hundreds of feet tall, right?," he smiled, and she smiled back, saying, "I know," and he said, "You know everything, don't you?" and she said, "Of course," and he observed the soil between her fingers. But then she said she wanted to hurry home to cook with him.

After three days of meditation and fasting, Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag felt the need to climb one of his oldest trees. He climbed it and looked out towards the stars.

"The Queen of the South is over there," whispered the tree.

"Where, my friend?"

"There." And Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag understood. He looked towards the dark sky and peered towards a star. Beyond that star was a planet, and within that planet was the Queen of the South.

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag climbed down the tree, but the tree held him back.

"Don't go to her," the tree said. "Not yet."

The tree loved Argoth Argoth Argoth

**“My father,” Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag said with a proud smile, “wanted me remembered in the history of universe, in the entire history of time herself. If my name was mentioned just once, I would be irrelevant.”**

Semibag as if he were its father, and there was wisdom within the tree’s instruction. Time to it wasn’t linear, and it could fathom things most humans couldn’t.

“Okay, my son,” Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag said. And so he spent the next decade learning from the trees, and from the earth, and from people. But he didn’t learn like other people: he learnt with the intent of complete understanding, and as he meditated and fasted and begged to hear from the world, he eventually did. Divine revelation didn’t come in waves, but in subtle, gradual whispers in his sleep, as if to fool him into thinking he had complete understanding all along. Soon Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag could see the world beyond what trees did. Soon he knew the names of everyone in his planet, and soon he could understand, and therefore love, every living being. He was only a fraction of the way there—for complete understanding, he needed to achieve a connection with the entire universe, and then a connection with the universes beyond the universe.

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Before long, the Queen of the South actually became queen of the south. The planet she now ruled wasn’t south of anything significant, but she

was a queen nonetheless. The older, wealthier creature—the one who had become her friend and mentor—died in a fire, and she couldn’t have died at a worse time: the planet was running out of resources; there was growing discontent between several nations; they had just lost important funding from the Universal Planetary Fund; and numerous volcanoes, which had been dormant for thousands of years, were now causing havoc in several capital cities. Her inhabitants were dying, rebel factions were gaining strength and if she didn’t do something soon, her entire economy would collapse.

After a week of meetings with her advisors she came to the conclusion that to survive, her planet had one option: to conquer and pillage their neighbouring planets. The neighbouring planets, which were much lower in population, were rich in resources that her own planet needed urgently and couldn’t afford to buy. What the Queen lacked in military might was made up by her sheer number of hungry, angry inhabitants. Her planet was by now one of the most densely populated planets in the Great System, so it didn’t take too long for her to achieve what she wanted to achieve.

Soon, the Queen of the South conquered four more planets, and soon after that, she conquered

all planets in the system and soon after that, she became the Queen of the Great System. Through her decisions came the horrific deaths of over one billion humans and creatures; but through her decisions also came an era of prosperity, peace and authoritarian rule. If one were to be born in the Great System during the Queen's rule, one would rarely (if at all) encounter or experience poverty: it took little effort to find financial security; young people could drunkenly wander around in the city streets in the late evening or early morning and never fear being harmed; and most citizens looked forward to retiring at a young age. The only cost of this great economic freedom was that every inhabitant had to yield their will to the Queen and never, in any public forum, speak ill of the Queen or her ruling Great Party. Or else.

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Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag didn't live in that system. In his System, there was great poverty and misery but, hidden within this misery, like spots of dust that appear only when you look hard enough, were moments of profound joy. By this time Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag could walk to a discarded rose and command it to come back to life; there were even rumours he could resurrect people and creatures from the dead. Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag had gained a reputation over the years as some kind of shaman or seer, and people would venture from all over the universe to visit him in his mysterious glowing forest.

And what a mysterious glowing forest it was! Trees would sprout and grow to enormous heights within a day; animals never seen anywhere else in any Great System could be found clambering around; and people were known to have been lectured, or scolded, or embraced by trees and plants and long, dangly vines. The forest had become so large that it took weeks and sometimes even months of dangerous hiking for pilgrims to reach its centre, where Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag stood in prayer or meditation, often surrounded by followers, government officials, security teams and pilgrims.

After gaining the ability to resurrect the dead, to create life, to create land and water and to even alter the weather, Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag got to the point where he could be present in different times. He could be present in the present, while being present in the past, while being present in the future. Not only that, he could be present in parallel universes. He could understand where people came from and he could observe where they were all going and he could see the infinite variations of their lives across multitudes of existences.

Although he had finally accomplished what his father had wanted him to accomplish—to be remembered in the history of universe, in the entire history of time herself—he found that his joy had not increased. In fact, he found that his joy had decreased and he frequently found that his heart was broken. He lived through everyone's tragic lives, over and over again. He



loved every living thing, and he tried to teach people and creatures and plants that they could accomplish what he had accomplished, but all they wanted was someone who could heal them while they went about repeating the same mistakes. He developed a complete understanding of the entire universe and of time itself, but couldn't understand the stubbornness of their hearts. Why couldn't they want what he wanted? Why couldn't they understand him? What hurt him most of all was that he knew the answers to all these questions, and that he knew that every person and creature and plant that he loved did what they did because of fear and pain.

So after gaining understanding of living beings, of the universe and of time herself Argoth Argoth Semibag desired to completely unlearn all the knowledge he'd obtained. He had so much knowledge that he lacked the wisdom to deal with it. For some time he vanished, and he left all the politicians, and security people, and worshipers, and disciples and pilgrims confused. There were disagreements by his disciples on how to proceed, and factions emerged, and other leaders emerged, but no one got it quite right.

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For some time now the Queen of the System had set her eyes on her home planet. Thanks to Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag, her home planet had become one of the cleanest planets in the universe. Its soil was extraordinarily fertile, its fishes fresh, its land full of extractable minerals. Most of the planet was now dominated by plant

life. Although she'd conquered thousands of planets, only a small percentage of them were self-sustaining. Owning this planet would give her System some much needed resources. Her people tried to negotiate with the planet peacefully, but were repeatedly met with the same response: "But we are a self-sustaining, neutral planet. We trade with all our neighbours—we can't form exclusive trade routes with your authoritarian system. We believe in peace and freedom for all."

Before invading the planet, the Queen of the System decided to visit it herself. First, she visited her home town. Most of her friends had left or passed away, but a few still remained. Like old times, she invited them to coffee: they laughed, they reminisced, and after the coffees she advised them to flee, and then they argued, and then there were tears. But she couldn't do anything about it—this was the fate of her home planet, and death was the fate of her friends if they resisted her. She had experienced enough heartbreak to understand death's necessity. After witnessing millions of deaths, the Queen had obtained an entirely new understanding about life: it's important, but it's temporary, and whatever she did, one day people will stop mentioning her name. She was but a speck of dust in time and in the universe, but there had never been anyone who shared her fingerprint.

The Queen ventured to the glowing forest. Telling her security team to wait outside, she trekked inside the forest for hours, admiring the

trees. She recognised one particular tree—the one she'd once taken from Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag as a sapling. It had grown hundreds of metres tall. It whispered to her and smiled, and she kissed it and smiled back.

“How did you get back into the forest?” she asked the tree.

“My father put me back here.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don't know, Mama, but I miss him.”

The Queen of the System faltered, and then embraced her dear tree as it wept.

The moon rose, and as the Queen scanned its brilliance she realised she'd spent an entire day with her child. She stood up and dusted her legs and backside. She initially planned to trek to the centre of the forest, but now that she was sure Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag was not there it all seemed redundant. Her team had calculated, with eighty-percent accuracy, that after her invasion of her home planet, fifteen million out of the eight billion of its inhabitants would perish over the following twenty years. The survivors—those who didn't resist—would begin a new life of financial security, stability and peace never before seen in the history of her home planet. For some time they even considered a more peaceful invasion of the planet by proliferating the message of “everlasting world peace by following the Queen” or “fifteen million for the future of billions.” Such a strategy had worked in the past but it often took decades of difficult, political manoeuvring and PR, and the Queen simply

didn't have the resources or time.

The Queen exited the forest and entered her ship. She wept during the brisk walk to her meeting room and quickly wiped her eyes before opening the door and taking her seat. She and her advisors then talked, for about six hours, about how they would invade her home planet and begin restructuring its political system, legal system, economic system, trade routes and resources. One particular point of concern was the possible reappearance of Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag: eighty-five percent of the planet worshipped him, and if he were to reappear and publicly oppose the invasion it would cost more lives. After some debate it was unanimously concluded that she would send a team to find him and imprison him in secret.

The Queen signed off on all decisions, attended two more meetings and entered her private quarters. She removed her shoes, rushed to her kitchen, made a drink and slumped into her armchair. The armchair, in all its softness, absorbed her, and she felt all of her muscles relax. The warm comfort of her armchair was all she enjoyed thinking about whenever she was stressed. She closed her eyes and sighed. When she opened them again, she saw Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag sitting on the chair opposite her.

He smiled, though it was a tired smile.

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The Queen of the System looked at Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag. He looked older, his hair was longer, and his eyes had taken on a



quality she couldn't fully comprehend. Argoth returned her stare: with the exception of a few extra lines on her face, the Queen hadn't changed much at all.

Neither said anything until the Queen finally decided to break the silence. "I thought you'd have a beard. I've heard so much about your wisdom that I always pictured you as this topless guy with a beard and a necklace made of bones."

He chuckled. "I'm sorry I disappointed you."

"You know you're trespassing, right?"

"I know."

"That's right," she said, crossing her legs onto the cushion of her chair. "You're supposed to know everything."

"I do know everything."

"Then what am I thinking?"

"You're not consciously thinking anything. You're focused on this conversation. But you have thoughts even you aren't aware of. These thoughts go deeper than your subconscious. Do you want to know what they are?"

"No."

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag smiled, but the Queen could tell that her answer disappointed him.

"You know," she said, "the last person to suddenly appear in my room was an assassin."

"Yes, and he was caught immediately and beheaded."

"Are you here to be beheaded?"

There was silence, and then, "I've missed you."

"No, you haven't." The Queen inhaled and thought about it. "What's it been, fifty years?"

"I've known you for an eternity, in multitudes of timelines."

"Tell me: has there been a timeline where it ended well between us?"

"There has only ever been one Queen of the South."

The Queen scoffed. "How many women and creatures have you been with since me?"

"None."

"You left our son behind."

In an instant, Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag's face softened. It was smothered in sadness. There was no trace of the bright, ambitious man who flirted with the Queen at the cafe all those years ago. "Everyone is my son. Everyone is my daughter. Everyone is my friend. And I'm—leaving."

The Queen of the System opened her mouth to say something, but stopped herself. She stood up to make a drink. "Do you want one?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Queen of the South."

She shrugged as she proceeded to make her drink. "Why are you here?"

"Don't proceed with your invasion."

The Queen returned to her chair. "If you had any chance of persuading me, you would've done so in the forest, with our son. But it's too late now. I've signed everything and I'm not turning back. Nothing will convince me." She paused. "Shouldn't you know all of this? How did you get in here anyway? Don't tell me some of my guards

are your secret disciples.”

“I know the outcome of everything.”

“Look, it’s fifteen million lives for the financial stability of billions.”

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag leant forward, a tear streaming down from his eye. The Queen had seen countless men cry before her before, with a range of different pleas, and they had all seemed *weak*. But this affected her.

“I’m not pleading for the people,” he said. “I’m pleading for you.”

“Why? Tell me. What will be the outcome of this invasion?”

“From your team’s point of view, it will be a success. Only ten million people and creatures will lose their lives, compared to your predicted fifteen. Your System will gain the resources it needs, saving countless lives and our home planet will enter an era of financial prosperity. You’ll take particular care to maintain our glowing forest.”

The Queen laughed. But her laugh had not been genuine in decades. “You’re doing a great job persuading me not to do this.”

“Once the dust has settled, the zealots who have risen in power due to my existence will lose most of their influence. For a time, my people—*our* people—like the rest of the residents in your System, will abandon any faith in God and instead credit themselves for their stability and success. But then there will be cracks—”

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag stood up, and within a moment he knelt and placed his hands

on the Queen’s. At first, the Queen thought she’d see grand visions, or that he was imparting on her some magnificent power, but all she felt was the warmth of his course hands.

“You need to flee, Argoth,” she said softly. “I signed something... If my team finds you—”

“You will change, dear Queen of the South. You will not feel anything new at first, but you will change. You will not tell anyone about it, because you won’t be able to identify this change so easily yourself and also because you’re a leader with no true friends. But you will change. The way you rule will remain, and you won’t do anything drastic, but deep inside you will change.”

The Queen turned her hands upwards, so that her hands were holding Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag’s. She squeezed them, and she sighed, and then she let go and pushed his chest softly. His were the last hands she’d ever touch. She looked at him, at his face that had aged through the history of time, across multiple realities. She placed her right hand on his face while he kept staring at her. Was his mind in the present? Was he existing in another world, in another time? Where was he really? His eyes had changed in shape and colour. Her eyes remained the same, and it was almost as if she hadn’t aged at all. But her expression had developed a coldness it never had before.

“You know,” he started, “I can create people. I created a person. A pair, actually. But I loved them so much I couldn’t force them to

understand my ways. I just let them be, and now they are suffering. Since then, I have stopped creating people. I just observe. I think about them all the time.”

“Aren’t you also suffering? Why make people follow your ways when it won’t make them any happier?”

“But it’s different.”

“How so?”

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag said nothing.

The Queen pushed him away further. She was tired and none of this made sense. “Why are you appearing now? Where have you been all these years? Why are you telling me to change the course of history?”

“Whatever I choose to do, life will go on. People and creatures will persist to live. And both pain and joy will continue. Your fingerprint will remain on my face, but one day it too will disappear. But I will always love you.”

“What happens when we disappear?”

“I’ll tell you, once I’ve disappeared.”

“Where are you going? You’ve never made any sense to me.”

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag lunged forward, strangling the Queen. His grip was strong, merciless, and his thumbs pushed into her throat like a dagger. The pain was excruciating. Were his thumbs going to tear into her flesh? At first the Queen tried prying his arms off her, but he was too strong. She slapped at his arms again and again as her vision faded. His eyes—full of sorrow, full of love, full of guilt—remained on

hers.

Knowing she only had a few seconds to live, the Queen of the System pressed a button implanted in her leg. A security team immediately appeared. One of the guards pulled Argoth Argoth Semibag away with such strength he flew against a wall, causing a picture frame to collapse. Another held Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag down.

The Queen fell to the floor, gasping for breath. A guard eased her up and asked if she was alright, but she waved him away. Leaning against the arm of her chair, she looked at Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag, the first and last man she would ever truly love. He was pinned down, and he could not bear to face her.

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They were forced to execute Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag in secret. He was transported to another planet owned by the Queen, where she and her advisors sat to watch his execution in a separate room. This planet had a moon but no sun, and the moon would change colour whenever the Queen would arrive. The planet had poor soil, no resources, frequent dust storms and rarely any rain—it was a planet doomed to fail. This is the planet where criminals, rebels, uncompromising journalists, spiritual leaders and revolutionaries were sent to be executed. Given the travel time, the hideousness of the planet and rituals involved with every execution, the Queen hadn’t watched an execution in person in years. But she sat down for Argoth Argoth Argoth

Semibag’s execution—one of the rare executions not aired on television.

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag had lived his execution over and over across unlimited timelines. He had witnessed his birth over and over across unlimited timelines. To Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag, everything was infinite yet temporary. He was always living and he was always dying. He had seen the universe after his death, but he had never known what would happen to his being after his death. He had lived and died with every living thing, but his body was mortal, and had limitations. He was alone in a brightly lit room with three other guards, and just an hour earlier he had spoken to a guard about his father, about his brother, about the things he had left behind. The guard wept, and Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag laid his hand on the guard, healed him and given him the Word.

The room was cold, and Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag’s hands had been tied and his feet had been bolted to the ground. His head was carefully placed into a guillotine called the Queen’s Razor. The guard he had befriended whispered, “I’m so sorry. You sure you want to do this?”

Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag ignored the guard and looked around the cold, empty room. His Queen of the South was watching him from somewhere, and he closed his eyes.

“I’m ready.”

In that moment the guards felt a trembling in their hearts, and the Queen of the System leant towards her screen and placed her hand on it. A great rain fell upon their home planet, and all its living inhabitants felt as though they’d just lost a father and a friend. The guillotine’s blade fell, and Argoth Argoth Argoth Semibag was no more.

One of the Queen’s advisors clapped. The Queen said nothing, stood up and returned to her ship, followed shortly by her team of escorts. In one month she’d be back in her room, where she’d make a drink and sit on her favourite armchair. After her drink she’d sleep, and then she’d wake to rule an ever-expanding galaxy.

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Image: [“The Queen of Hearts she made some tarts”](#) (CC BY 2.0) by [Boston Public Library](#)