



The Eye of the Universe by Viviana De Cecco

speculative fiction mag

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Journeys²

Reality does a little bending

Prose, Poetry, Art and
Graphic Narrative featuring

Amy Xiang Zhang • Mary
Soon Lee • Amy Power Jansen •
Christina Sng • Denny E.
Marshall • John Leahy • Lora
Gray • Dustin P Brown • Nick
Porisch • Nicholas De Marino •
Michelle Koubek • Ron Sanders
• J.F. Sebastian • R. Mac Jones •
Patrick Barb • Carl Scharwath •
Veronica Reinhart • L. Fox •
Deborah L. Davitt • Warren
Muzak • Gerri Leen • Rina
Song • Sonali Roy • Richard
Magahiz • Dawn Holloway

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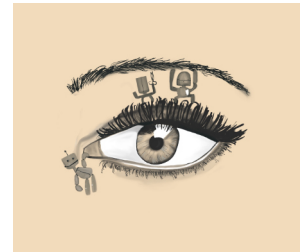
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Origin of a Not Deer



A Little Help



cover: The Eye of the Universe by Viviana De Cecco

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

V^{ote}.

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

All the versions of myself there ever were

by Amy Xiang Zhang

“Memory revises me.” — Li-Young Lee, *Furious Versions*

* * *

I found my brother's body first.

It was quiet when I woke up. That's what I remember—how still everything felt. When you live in a city, you begin to tune out the friction of living next to a thousand other people all at once, the collective inhales and exhales of an ever-present crowd. All that shifting just becomes a part of the movement of your life. That first moment of waking was full of peace, an in-held breath.

I'd seen death in so many places before encountering it for the first time—in movies and comic books and plays. What's strange about death is how bluntly, impossibly real it feels. How a body can lie on the ground the same way a leaf might, something small and inconsequential against the backdrop of your day, something you might notice and think “oh that's nice,” before moving on. How the sky still moves along, even while your own world is shattering.

So. First, there was quiet. Then I raised my head to see Jason's

empty eyes staring back at me.

And then running. In my memories, I see Jason's eyes and then all of a sudden I'm a mile away, running down the streets of downtown Seattle, full of bodies and none of them able to see me.

* * *

I didn't know, that first day, why I was running, only that I had to get away from everyone and find somewhere without any bodies. Or find another living person, somewhere. Foolish, in retrospect, since anyone left alive was probably the one responsible. But I never ran into anyone. If I'm being honest, I knew that I wouldn't. There was only me. Just me, doing my best to run from it all.

* * *

We're at the lake. It's a favorite memory of mine, and of his. This was maybe a year ago. One of those peaceful summer days where time seems to stretch out in front of you like an invitation, full of promise.

It's odd, seeing yourself from another person's memories. I've

never really gotten used to it. It's almost easier to see the memory as not-you, an acquaintance, or a relative, someone whose roots you understand but who's bloomed into somebody different.

The woman sitting on the paddle board a few feet from my brother is small, almost delicate-looking. She's got bright, hungry eyes and a child's round cheeks. She looks like me, sort of, if you superimposed my teenage self on top of my actual, twenty-four-year-old self and then shrunk me down a little. I'm not a teenager here, but that's still how he sees me, his kid sister. Saw me.

I remember feeling restless and unsettled. One of those days when it feels a bit like you've stepped into an alternate-reality world, somehow, and you're not sure what's about to come next. Like your body is a pair of hand-me-down overalls that you haven't quite grown into yet. But in Jason's memory, there's nothing unusual about how I'm acting. I look calm, relaxed. Possibly slightly vindictive, as I'm thwapping at his paddle board with my oar to try to capsize him.

"You're a jerk," he said, but he's laughing, and I'm laughing as I stick my tongue out at him.

He's happy and I'm relieved. He'd been getting over a bad breakup and this was the first time I'd seen him relaxed in a while. He wasn't thinking about Matt at all, and I'm glad that in this memory, he was just thinking of how nice it was to be here with me in this moment.

Jason was an extrovert's extrovert—we used to joke that we could always tell whether he was sleeping just by whether or not we could hear him talking. But it was because of this that I had always thought that his mind must be pretty quiet—I couldn't

imagine that he had *more* thoughts than what he'd been saying out loud.

It turns out that I was wrong. He commented on everything in his head. The couple that had dragged out a camper van's worth of equipment were still arguing over it on the shore (he made a mental note to pass by and eavesdrop later if it was still going on). There was a cheerful-looking family with a dopey-looking golden retriever, all splayed limbs and eager smile as he paddled after a frisbee. The mom looked familiar and Jason flipped through dozens of faces in dozens of places before mentally shrugging and giving up.

"I'm glad you moved to the city," he said to me.

Then there's a shifting of sorts. The water and the sky are the same serene blue, but there's a thinness to them, the sheerness of a screen stretched taut over a frame, something you could poke a hole in with a pencil and peer into to see what's underneath. Distantly, I hear Jason say, "even if you are still the most annoying little sister ever."

This happens, sometimes. Not just in Jason's memories, but in others I've been in, too. Suddenly the memory feels thin, flimsy, unnatural.

Not that anything about what I'm doing is natural. Entering and reliving the memories of the dead isn't something that I'd guessed anyone could do, but I apparently can. It's either that, or I'm delusional. I've stopped questioning it. Who's to judge anyone's coping mechanisms, after the demise of everyone they know, loved or hated?

I leave his body. Rewind the memory. And—there, around Ja-

son's mouth, as he says again "the most annoying little sister"—a thin tendril of a black ooze. I reach out to it—it's thin and slippery, and stretches easily as I pull it, until I yank hard and a thick wad of it falls out in a clumpy mass as it vortexes itself inside me.

I never understood before how fragile my reality was. Every day after that first day I woke up to Jason's blank eyes staring back at me, I saw the abandoned body of someone that I knew, often in various pieces, picked apart by wildlife, or sometimes just moved by the wind. The first time I dove into someone's memories, it was an accident. My friend Mackenzie, her trademark glittery makeup dangling out of a coyote's bloodied maw. Then I was watching through her eyes as we flipped through records at her favorite store. I felt the clack of her nails against the plastic sleeves, the smell of marinara sauce coming out of the restaurant next door. The happy hum of her thoughts as she swayed, just a bit, to the beat of soft R&B coming from the store's speakers.

A small zip and we were fighting through the Memorial Day crowd at Pike Place, bodies pressing against us in a slightly sweaty musk, with loud cheers as the fish market staff threw orders to each other. Mackenzie joined in with the tourists as we passed by, cheering as an entire salmon was flung over our heads.

Another zip, and she was laughing at Jason as he goofed around at our local karaoke bar, her thoughts pink and happy.

I floated through her memories until I was yanked out of them, and the last of Mackenzie's purple hair disappeared into the

coyote's mouth.

After that, I saved as many bodies as I could, dragging them into a truck I found at what seemed to be a sculptor's house, full of gracefully arching abstract metals, and then left them in a basement. I poured bags of potting soil mix and sand on top of them so that they'd be covered and safe. I spent a few hours every day in memories, sitting on top of the garden I'd made, papering over the reality around me with the past. I lived half in a dream, except I wasn't always sure which half of my life was the dream.

* * *

I wake up to find myself back in the present. The dusty, desolate present. My mouth tastes absolutely foul.

I jump up. Look down at myself. Wave the arm that had just been octopus-ed around, as if I can shake the alien blob out of me. There's nothing different though, it's just my arm, the way that it always is.

I don't feel any different, other than wanting, just a little, to scream and cry. Which really isn't actually very different from my normal state of being. That's what life after the collapse of human civilization gets you—trauma, and no therapists to guide you through it. Or, if there are any, presumably they're just as traumatized and too busy dealing with their own problems to help you with yours.

I begin running tests. Can I move normally? Yes. Do I feel tired, hungry? No more than usual. Is my sense of touch impacted? No. As far as I can tell, I'm normal (*ha*). Nothing changed. It's just me, the way it's always been. Just me and an empty world

of moss and birdsong.

I've gone to other memories, too. Memories of neighbors, friends, people I passed on the street and whose faces I recognized when I found their bodies, people whose lives I wondered about now that they were gone and I would never truly know them at all. The staff at my local grocery store, who some weeks I saw almost every day. But most often, I returned to Jason's memories, the last couple years where we saw each other almost every week.

I'd put his grave in the botanical gardens. There's a large oak tree there, the oldest and tallest in the city, with a sign put in front of it helpfully labeled "Big Oak." Jason, shorter than most people, had always joked that it was his inspiration. He would've thought it was funny that I'd dug his grave there, so that was where I put it. Him. His body.

The actual plot was overgrown now with weeds and daisies, with a faded picture of him in a frame at the base. I kiss his face before I dig my fingers into the dirt. Close my eyes. Inhale. And—

I let myself be wrapped in his thoughts, loud and brash and too much in the best possible way. I smile, enjoying the mental chatter, and then open my eyes.

The woman on the paddle board next to my brother has loud red hair falling in soft waves over her shoulders. She looks vaguely sunburnt, her cheeks and nose a darkening pink against the

freckles on her face. She is not me.

The woman is laughing as Jason tries to topple her board over, retaliating with swipes back at him. Jason lets out a soft whoa and nearly falls, the cool lake water lapping over his knees before he catches himself. "You're a jerk," he says, and the woman sticks her tongue out at him.

I leave Jason's body to get a closer look at her. She looks young, but there are faint lines on her forehead, in the space between her eyebrows. She's smiling now, but it's easy for me to imagine those lines creasing into a frown as she stares into space.

A clatter and raised voices coming from the shore. A blond woman is arguing with a man, both of them holding neon yellow coolers and spatulas and other grilling equipment. The man drops what he's holding onto the grass with a resolute huff and walks towards a minivan parked in the distance, shoulders reaching nearly to his ears as he begins pulling out more supplies, ignoring the woman still talking to him.

"I'm glad you moved to the city," Jason says. I whip around and stare at him. He continues, snickering a bit as he says, "And that you got trapped in an elevator because you couldn't figure it out."

There's a faint smell of algae and sunscreen as the red-haired woman splashes at him. Her voice echoes over the lake and back off the pine trees at the boundaries as she says, "It could have happened to anyone!" Protesting.

He's howling. "You were so mad! You had that face on where you don't know what you're doing, but you refuse to admit it."

With a whirl and a wet thunk, a bright orange frisbee lands near

Jason's right arm. There's a frantic series of splashing noises as, nearby, a golden retriever leaps off of a boat and begins single-mindedly swimming towards them and the frisbee. Jason, still grinning, picks up the frisbee and lightly tosses it back at the dog, who yips in joy and begins paddling back to their boat, tail whipping in the back like a propeller. A small family, a man and a woman and their son, all dark skinned and dark haired, cheer as the dog makes it back, only to be sent away again with another throw of the disc.

This is the same memory. But instead of me, there's this other woman here, a stranger, doing the same things that I did.

She looks familiar. I've seen her somewhere before.

Almost without thinking, I reach out a hand to brush her shoulder, as if to ask her who she is. And then I am, without ceremony, sucked into her mind.

* * *

She called herself Desiree. She liked the name because it fit her mission, and it fit what she understood about the people here, who'd struggled and fought and carved out space on this planet for themselves out of the want for more. She would've liked to have another name—maybe Temperance, or Peace, or Can't-be-bothered, but that wasn't what she was here for, and so Desiree it was.

She wished she was home.

Almost out of habit, Desiree did ... *something*. Like a mental reach with her mind, that same feeling as the pull of that inky goo, but directed outward. A calling. There was no answer and

she didn't seem to be expecting one, either, barely even seemed to notice what she had done, except to feel just a bit colder, and heavier, and alone.

“—seems ridiculous, don't you think?” My brother, with his easy smile, eyes crinkled into half-moons, waved his oar at her in a pantomime.

Desiree nodded and smiled back. She really liked this one, who was so free and kind with his thoughts. It made her job so much harder.

I leave her body, and the memory, and rush off of my brother's grave just in time to avoid vomiting on the photo at the top.

* * *

I'm not sure how a person can come to terms with inhabiting the mind of the creature that decimated their entire species. I'd seen it, in her head, the future she was there to make happen—a world empty of humans. The vision she had was peaceful, all grassy plains and rolling mountains stretching everywhere, untouched by humans. A far cry from the reality that I'd had to live through with empty bodies decomposing around me.

An advantage of the world ending is that you no longer need a prescription for anything. A disadvantage is that, without anyone to tell you otherwise, you can never be sure that what you're mixing together is safe. A few hours later I look up and realize that I'm in my brother's apartment. When he was alive, his apartment was a carefully curated riot of color—photographs he'd taken mixed with artwork, mixed with thrifted, borrowed, or forgotten knickknacks left behind. Now, without electricity to fill the lamps in the room with warm light, it feels too narrow

and pressing, a small section of space carved out of an empty city of space that nobody but me and the crows were using.

I move to the balcony outside, watching the winter rain patter on the pavements. Jason used to say that it always felt like time stopped in the winter, the months morphing into one long day of sleepy rain. I had always liked it, the way it brought up the smell of the earth and made the sky hang heavy and low, a dark blanket.

We had spent many days like this. It feels like, if I turn around, I'd see Jason puttering in the kitchen behind me, lips moving as he hummed under his breath, silent under the cover of the rain.

I don't turn around.

We always thought that, if the world were going to end, it would be because of climate change. Something large and cataclysmic—tsunamis, fires, brimstone and all that. Instead, the end of the world came in the size of a red-haired woman, laughing and splashing water in a halo of glitter around her in a lake.

* * *

There's a particular kind of weightlessness that comes from being on the water, the easy rock of it combined with the warmth of a summer sun. With my brother's voice in my head, I almost forgot, for a second, where I was and why I was there. Then I open my eyes and see the glowing, rosy-cheeked face of Desiree smiling back at me.

I hurl my spectral body at hers. For a split second, I almost think I see her eyes widen, and then the next I'm staring out at Jason from Desiree's mind.

I begin digging through her mind with all the diligence of a raccoon inside a McDonald's trash bin, which is to say with wild abandon. Who was she? Why was she here? *What* was she?

It feels like even she isn't sure. Where Jason's mind was a comforting and warm chorus, hers is more like an Escher print—all stairs and arches circling back in on themselves, going somewhere and nowhere all at once. She's thinking about Jason, and the cold bite of the metal oar in her hands, a foreign smoothness she still isn't quite used to. She is puzzling over an interaction she'd had a few days ago, one where a little girl threw a flower at her out of a bouquet she was holding, shouting "free flowers" to all the passersby. Humans and their human customs. She can't help but be charmed. And yet—

Suddenly, startlement. *Who's in my mind?* I feel Desiree begin to dig around, looking for me. I flee out of her body, but before I can do anything else, there's a yank at the nape of my neck and I'm spinning around to meet Desiree's gaze.

I scream and claw at her face, but again I'm yanked backwards until I am floating above the water a few feet away from her, her eyes wide and white and the blood draining from her face as she watches me.

The words I scream become less and less coherent. I could do this forever, I think, except she stands and there's a sensation like a cool hand on the back of my head, then, and before I can react, that cool sensation trickles into the rest of my body, numbing me. I sit, staring at the water lapping over her feet on the paddleboard in silence. There's a questioning, probing slant to the feeling, like it's trying to figure me out. Then the hand pulls away and so does the feeling, leaving me empty. Desiree sighs loudly, then.

She grabs me by the chin and tilts my head up. “But how could I kill you,” she asks, “when I am you?”

* * *

We’re in a different memory, now. Desiree pulled me in, the same way she’d done everything else, which is to say, mysteriously, and leaving me with no choice in the matter. I’d just felt a compressing, the same as when I slip into someone else’s memories by myself, and then opened my eyes to find myself standing in a park.

In the before times, I’d come here every day, just to soak in the feeling of people all around me, their feelings and plans, dreams and fears. I’d spent whole days here, homesick and full of regret, and longing.

I try to leave her body, but I’m held firmly in place.

She wasn’t doing anything, in the memory. Just sitting and watching, taking note of people as they pass by. There was the bench where Alfred, an elderly man of around eighty, could be seen every day. His daughter was eating up his social security, which he complained about loudly to everyone willing to listen, but he never told her to stop because he was afraid she’d leave him. There was the gazebo where Marianne, in her 50s, was often seen, and to whom every dog in the park would go charging at, determined to get their treat for the day, which she carried at almost all times. There was the playground, always filled with kids and their bright voices, their jigsawed feelings, all of them loud and blunt, even if the kids themselves were quiet or calm.

I knew all these people. She knew them, too. She didn’t talk to

them, but she dipped into their minds. I feel her leave and come back, carrying the feel and memory of each person with her. There was a peace to the moment, the same kind as watching the leaves fall in October, drifting down in large clumps of summer fire as you pass them by.

“It’s always nicer being in your own mind than someone else’s.” Desiree. Not the one in this memory, but the one who had pulled me in, her eyes focused on mine, steady as clouds in the rain.

“I’m sorry, but what the fuck does that mean? What is this, *Star Wars*?”

“What is *Star Wars*?”

I laugh. I can’t help it. “See! You don’t even know *Star Wars*, how can you be *me*? What am I saying, that’s beside the point, I was born here, I have a *brother*—”

This memory’s Desiree stood up, then. She began waving at someone in the distance, a broad smile on her face. Her thoughts turned light and happy, daisy yellow, reaching towards the sun with it. The person she was looking at had light green, spiked hair, tinged almost gold by the sun, and a crooked grin. Jason. They hugged and I breathed in his scent, familiar and warm.

“Des,” Jason said. “Dinner’s on me! I got the job. You’re looking at the next assistant director of food and beverage at the Marriott.” He bowed then, and waved an arm at me with all the grandeur of a conductor waiting for applause.

Maybe I should have chosen somewhere nicer then, I opened my mouth to say, before remembering this was a memory, Desiree’s, and not mine, except then I heard—

“Maybe I should have chosen somewhere nicer then!” Desiree let go of Jason and put a hand on her heart, face contorted in mock regret. My own hand raised, unthinking, as she reached out and tousled his hair, and I knew it was just so she could see him make an annoyed face at her. Mouthed the words along with her as she said, “Mr. assistant director.”

“What did you say?” the Desiree that was watching me said, mocking. “That you were born here and you have a brother. Now let me then point out the obvious—if you were born here, then who are your parents?”

A blank.

But surely I had parents? I had a vague memory of shadowy figures standing around my brother and I as we played—

I spin towards Desiree, grim triumph on her face. Her tone sharper, angrier, rising as she says, “Can you remember their faces? Their names?”

No, but—

“In fact, do you have any memory of your parents that don’t involve your so-called brother?” Scathing, now.

No.

I tear myself out of the memory, and the last thing I see before crashing back into my own world is Desiree’s pitying, disappointed face.

* * *

I run.

I don’t have anywhere in mind to go, I just run. This, I had done, too, in the early days after the Event. I’d run on deserted forest trails, anywhere that was unlikely to have bodies, and let my body carry me through the day. The more I ran, the less I was thinking, and the less I was thinking, well, that was just for the better all around.

A few miles in and my body begins to relax. I let my arms swing loose and easy, my chest rising and falling rhythmically. It feels good, to just be a body, a human body. Human.

I don’t know how long I run for, only that I look up and realize suddenly that the stars are out, and the moon with them, large and bright in the night sky.

Some parts of the city still have electricity. Most have shut off, either due to bills that will never be paid or machinery malfunctions, I’m not sure. The parts of the city that still have light are mostly in public spaces—parks, highways, government buildings or large corporate offices, places that typically wouldn’t have their lights shut off except in extreme cases. This is one of those parts, a large park that in the before times had been filled with people at all hours, going about their myriad lives, all headed in different directions but, for the moment, in the same place together.

At the center of the garden is an outdoor amphitheater, where beleaguered actors with a love for iambic pentameter put on Shakespeare plays. I used to come here often, but hadn’t since the Event. There is a long avenue lined with trees, which in the fall was where teenagers came to take selfies or set up elaborate vlogs to post online. It was always the busiest part of the park,

where parents stopped with their strollers to chat to other long-suffering, sleep-deprived parents, taking in a moment of peace. Lives that I had known, in some way, and had seen almost every day.

So it shouldn't be a surprise to me that this, out of all the places in the park, is the place with the most bodies. The Event happened in the middle of the day, right when the park was busiest. But somehow it does, though the surprise carries with it a dull kind of acceptance, a disappointment.

Heat, more than anything else, speeds up the decomposition process. This was not something I had known before, but had figured out through experience—the more bodies piled on each other, the faster they fell apart, ballooned and eventually disintegrated. You'd be surprised how quickly this can happen. Any bodies I could drag out into the sun were left as just bone a few weeks later.

All this means that I, thankfully, hadn't had to deal with any of the smells of decomposition on the way here and, as I enter the clearing, what I see mostly are piles of scattered bones.

There are more bodies than I expected, too, enough to make me wonder if there had been a concert here, the day of the Event. Sometimes there were.

No, not a concert, but a calling.

The bodies are all facing towards the center of the amphitheater. There is nothing remarkable about it—a few gnarled old trees with long, trailing branches penning in benches. I'd often seen couples with their heads leaned together, a human reflection of the trees around them. But all the bodies are unmistakably fac-

ing that way.

My head hurts. Fear knifes through me, white-hot, and I freeze where I stand. I can't see the clearing anymore—or I am, but from a different perspective. A sunny mid-summer afternoon, sitting at one of the benches. My heart heavy as I looked at the faces of all the people staring at me, the people I'd gathered and called, inky black tendrils extending from my arms to their blank faces. And I opened my mouth to say the words that would end it all and bring me home—

No.

* * *

"It took a while for me to realize that I'd just been doing what was expected of me. When I really thought about it, I didn't actually know what I wanted my life to be like."

My brother, long-limbed and loose, the rocking waves around us throwing light all over him. The lake memory. I watched him from my perch over the water.

"What do you want your life to be like?" I heard myself ask.

"A partner, some kids. Maybe a little house in the mountains. A dog I've trained to go sledding with. I mean, I guess it's not like I wasn't going in that direction anyway, but it felt more like an afterthought, not something that I'd really thought about the details of. But I spent so much time preparing for job interviews, meetings, thinking about how to do better at work, you know? And when I think about what I want in life, the job doesn't even really factor in, but I've spent so much more time on it."

He sighed and stretched, eyes on the sky. “It feels like I’ve only really just started to live.”

* * *

“It was us or them. It was us or them.” The voice is small and fierce, frantic. Desiree. She’s sitting curled up on the ground, her head on her knees. We’re in the park. It’s already happened and the bodies are around her, some still moving, but most staring at her or at the sky, still.

This is my brother’s last memory.

Why did it never occur to me before, to come to his last memory? Did I already know what I’d find?

His mind is small, quieter than I’ve ever seen it. As if he, too, is curled in on himself, too in pain for anything else. He watches her, and the pain of it lances through him, wordless.

More than anything, Desiree seems confused. Lost. Like a child telling herself that it’ll be ok.

He’s confused. He doesn’t know what’s happened, only that they were in the park and then Desiree walked away from him and then suddenly everyone was falling, including Desiree, and including him. Falling to the ground.

My brother knows he’s dying. He only has so much time left. There aren’t any more choices he’ll get to make, after this one. This is it.

“Desiree.” The name trips out of his mouth. She freezes and then slowly looks up at him in horror. He wants to know why

she’s scared, when it’s just him.

But he only has so much time left.

“It’s ok.” He smiles at her, or tries to, and it feels more like a grimace than what he’d meant it to be. “You’ll be ok.”

She is wide-eyed and crying, unblinking, as he gives up and falls to the ground.

Before I came here, to this world, I had a brother.

He wasn’t very much like Jason. He was quiet, for one thing, and kept to himself. But they had the same easygoing eagerness for life, the same feel, just in two different personalities.

Where I come from, my people are dying. It’s a problem of empathy, you see. I like the way humans are—so in their own heads, their own separate little worlds. Where I come from, you can jump into anyone’s brain at any time. With their permission, of course. Someone else’s memories and emotions are as simple a road to walk down as any highway you’d find here.

Some people are better at it than others, though. My brother was very good at it. That’s why he was one of the first people to get sick.

The people who study and give names to these kinds of things called it destructive empathic resonance. Getting so lost in the lives of the people around you that you just fade away.

They’re working on a cure, but it’s contagious. We needed a

new place to go, to separate out those of us still healthy.

I'm sorry. It was you or us.

* * *

“You’ve gotta tap it before you can get anywhere.”

It was just a few days after I’d first come here. I’d come here through a state-of-the-art dimensional portal, the kind that only high-ranking diplomats could use, something I’d have felt honored by under any other circumstance. I’d landed in Cal Anderson park in Seattle at 3am on a Tuesday, to the bemusement of a few brightly dressed and swaying people, who’d then shrugged and loudly told each other they needed to go home. But I didn’t know that yet. All I knew was that this place was loud, garish, and stank of metal. It was colder than I was used to, and rainy. I’d taken shelter in a tree before a kindly old man had brought me to a place where they had beds for, what I gathered, were people like me—alone and without home or family to go to.

I was in an elevator. I’d learned from watching enough people what those were, and I’d come to this building because I’d seen from a few people’s memories that it was warm and cozy, with families that (for the most part) liked each other living in each separate pod. But unlike the other elevator I’d been in, this one refused to move, none of its buttons lighting up when I pressed them.

Hence the voice.

It belonged to a man with dyed green hair and a crooked grin. He was carrying no less than four large black bags, each of them

bulky and substantial-looking. At my curious look, he nodded at them and said, “Camera equipment. Buddy of mine wanted to borrow it for a film project, he needed a few and they were all just sitting around gathering dust so I carted them over to his for the week.”

That was a lot of words I didn’t fully understand, but in his head I saw people milled about on a rooftop, while spindly black apparati were pointed in their direction, then the spindly things were packed into the bags that he carried. The people were laughing and loud music was playing. On the edges was the guy with the green hair, talking in low undertones to one of the people behind the camera, pointing at one person or another.

I hadn’t really talked to anyone yet, at this point. I’d asked them questions and jumped into their minds for the answers (“where am I?” “what is this building?” “where can I get food?” People’s answers rarely matched the pictures in their heads, I’d found), and then left with a smile and a wave, leaving behind an unremarkable impression of friendliness. I hadn’t really wanted to. I may not be human, but it’s still hard to hold in my head the eradication of all these people while also making small talk with them.

So I did my best to avoid him. “What do you mean I need to tap it?” I said, making my voice abrupt and a little shrill. Being rude, I found, was a great way to end conversations.

His mind obliged, showing me the little plastic rectangle that acted like a passkey, one that had to be held to the buttons, but I wasn’t prepared for the next thought, “Oh is she embarrassed? That’s cute,” and the accompanying laughter.

He exaggeratedly pulled out the keycard from his pocket and

demonstrated, eyebrows raised in high good humor, then pressed one of the buttons, which lit up with the finality of the defeated. “There we go,” he said, with satisfaction. “Just like that. And where are you headed?”

For some reason, I answered honestly. “I’m not sure. I was just looking for someplace dry to stay.”

Surprise, coming from him, followed by confusion. He looked me quickly up and down. I had no belongings, and I had carefully cleaned and dried my clothes in the shelter bathroom, as best I could. They were good quality, the kinds of clothes that an ambassador or traveling dignitary would wear, which I guess is how my people saw me. The thought, “She barely looks like she’s out of college, she doesn’t seem dangerous,” came to me right before he opened his mouth.

“Well, here, I know you don’t know me from Job and I’m a strange guy you just ran into in the elevator, but if you need a

place to stay,” and here he hesitated, his mind flicking through the faces of female friends he knew, before deciding he couldn’t ask them to take in a total stranger, “I have a couch. You can stay at my place. You won’t need to worry about me, I’ll sleep over at a friend’s. And then in the morning we can look for a place for you to stay together.”

I stared at him. “You would give up your home for the night to someone you just met in the elevator?”

The door dinged and then opened. The guy with green hair put one hand on the door, keeping it open. In his mind came images of a girl with the same crooked smile.

“Well, I had a sister,” and his smile seemed more sad than anything else.

The Flight of Swans

by Mary Soon Lee

At last they left as one,
they who had cleaved to Earth
while lesser birds took wing,
pigeon and sparrow, hawk and hen
feathering every cranny
of the solar system.

At the last, they left as one,
they whose unearthly beauty
never belonged to us
but to such gods
as might borrow their form
or bid them drink from sacred wells.

At last they let slip
the leash of attachment
as purely as their plumage
lets slip the grasping water,
arrowing for further shores
than any had before.

At last they left us
to haste to other stars
and did not stop to say
if this was exodus or migration,
if we would ever hear
their calls again.

How We Fray, What We Slay

by Amy Power Jansen

“What happens when the edges of reality aren’t where you expect them to be?”

“That’s not an answer,” he says, looking at me over his glasses. Thin rimmed, rectangular. His pen hasn’t moved. It hovers over the page, discarding what I’ve said.

I turn my head, facing the light glinting in through the square planes of glass. I know if I run my hands over them, they will be deceptively smooth as they curve inward along their ridges. I think of that coolness as I stare out into the bay beyond, the glinting waters and that spray of pink incongruous at the corner that I can almost ignore.

“I need answers, Kaylee,” he says. “I can’t keep you safe without information to trade.”

I moisten my lower lip. It’s not true. They’ll let him keep me. If they were going to break his hold over me, they would have done it already. If it was about information, I would be gone already. Gone into the bowels of whatever place they keep the Others.

I think of them like that. I know it’s backward. You’re supposed to capitalise the Others that are not-You. Not your Us.

Not that they’re my Us.

They can’t be. Not like me. They remember enough, enough to warp the weird creeping in at the edges. Enough to stand up to the monsters that slip through. Save a child. Save their child. Save themselves.

And in this world, everything is caught on cameras. The ones in our pockets. The ones that can’t resist a show-down. Can’t resist these battles brought to life off their screens and into their streets.

I turn my head back to him. That chiselled jaw. Those steady eyes. The silver glinting too early for his unlined eyes. “Anything I say can and will be used against you.”

He places the pad of paper down, crosses the pen over it. “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” I say, lilting over the “I.”

I want to forget. I want to remember. I want to be anywhere else but here. I want this moment to last forever. I want to save him. I want to destroy him.

I don’t want to give him the form he needs to mould the power creeping into his world. His will is strong. It has shaped a rigid world, clawing his eye into its heart. This world that now balances on a precipice. That his will could tip into the abyss.

It will come. But not today.

I saved him on that street that day. Not the line of kids crossing the street, though it looked that way. I had been keeping my head down. I could feel the edges creeping in. I knew there was nowhere to run. I knew better than those that tried.

I'd let their krakens rip up harbours, and their demons rain down fire. Whenever I sensed them, I started walking away. Not before. When it started. Once the dice had been thrown. That's when you run. And I am very good at running.

Yes, they killed multitudes. Until someone rose up to stop them. Some temporary hero. These heroes cast from too many movies and series and stories and legends reaching far, far back into humankind's longest memories.

Killed by a hero who knew less than I. Who disappeared into the bowels of the beast. To reappear perhaps in a uniform. A hero with a cause. A heroine. I should say that. More often than not, they are heroines. Women, all kinds of women, struggle less with the edges of things. With letting go of all they've ever believed and loved for the chance of saving Someone.

In this world, that's how they've been raised.

Doesn't fit with their histories and legends. Strange that. That they've built their heroes of the wrong clay. Those who hold to the edges can't cope with what creeps out of the places between.

A few can mould it, a dangerous few.

He stands up. He's given up on me for today.

I glance at my feet. I nibble my lower lip.

He buttons his jacket. "I don't know what you want from me, Kaylee. But sooner or later, you're going to have to choose a side. You can't hide from this forever." He sighs, straightens his back. "We'll try again tomorrow."

I nod.

He leaves.

Like an ache in my middle, I feel the emptiness of his going.

I shouldn't have saved him. I shouldn't have stopped. I'd been coming out of the grocery, holding the two bags, light enough to carry all the way home. To my apartment tucked into the skirts of the fashionable part of the city.

I'd felt the creature oozing from the pink splotch at the edge of the sky, long before anyone on that street knew their day was about to be blighted. Most of the time it's easy to ignore, to get on with things. The weirdness creeps in intermittently and always somewhere else.

It had been a hot day, that kind of wet heat I loathe, and with which I would normally have little truck on this part of the coast. Dry heat, dear god, any day, over that wet, cloying feeling spreading its way over your skin. I had been clammy and uncomfortable, my thighs chafing from self-contact under my pretty dress, long before the creature descended from the sky.

Amorphous, but turning dragon-like as it descended. Pulling from the minds below it, an all too recent story, hammered into

too many minds. The image brimming too close to the surface.

I'd had enough time. I had discarded my bags. I knew how far the station was, the timetable to the minutes. I knew I could get out ahead of it.

And then I felt it, a signature I knew too well. It's never the same, but it's always close enough. The kind of thing you can ignore, turn away from, before worlds start to end. I am so good at turning away from the powers that shape worlds, even worlds that don't yet believe in power.

I wish I could say I saved him because him being dragged into the weird would have hastened this world's end a thousand-fold.

That I did it for all the children I hadn't saved. All the innocents already dragged into the deadly belly of the beast. And all that still would be.

That I took a stand.

But it would be a lie.

I turned on that humid day, under that bright, blue sky. I dropped the bags. I cricked my neck, not entirely immune to the dramatic moment, and I started walking towards the monster, a mirage taking form. I reached for it, like a drug I'd missed for so long. That I knew I craved, and yet had still forgotten how good it could be.

Like breathing fresh air after days lost in smog. Or getting out of an airplane. Or the first day where you can go outside without a jersey. Or fresh grass under your toes.

I felt the power of the weird pass through me. Weariness, age, ev-

erything this world had written into me fell away. I felt it all pulsating in me. Even as the screaming started.

As the red dragon plummeted to the earth, smashing into the street. Concrete flying. Screaming. Screeching brakes. Swearing.

Its eyes locked on mine, huge, whirling and icy. I loved it in that moment. This creature who had taken form from my mind, who had found its way into this world. That wanted to live. That wanted to bellow. And it did. And ice, blessed ice, blasted from its mouth, tearing away all that damned heat.

I wanted to embrace it as the fresh breeze it was, but instead I started to run. Muscles long neglected, reforming, and long, sleek metal forming around me. I knew better than to fight in a pretty, floral dress. I knew from the first encounter. I didn't need to learn this dance. I knew it deeper than my deepest blueprint.

I run, I sprung. I sailed through the air. I landed on the great serpent's neck.

It flung me aside.

I tumbled through the air. I landed like a cat, on all fours. Already rising to begin again.

Oh, the pageantry.

I knew this better than any of those who had fought before. In the clothes they knew, torn and bloody and scarred. Facing creatures a tenth of this size. With claws less than a fraction of what I faced. Unaware that the nightmare they battled was their own.

I knew my lines. Knew how to twist and turn. I knew the power

of the weird. And the patterns of this world. I knew how to make them tremble and then to cheer. I knew how to win, but not too easily. In grand style.

Caught on cameras. Not the battle entire. Caught after they were secure in the knowledge that someone had come to save them. That it was safe to gawk. To return to watching from behind a screen.

He didn't film. He watched.

And when the black vans arrived, he interposed himself between them and me. He extended his hand and I took it.

Now he asks me questions that I don't know how to answer without damning him. Without damning them all.

* * *

Someone yanks the curtains open, and I stutter awake. My bedroom is at the back of the house, so I am saved from the glare off the bay. The mountain and its willowy trees save me from that.

"Miss Pierce," they say. "Dr Greene is waiting for you."

This is new.

Normally, I sleep as late as I like. Normally, I have days and days alone. Spread out on my balcony, like a cat, lazing on the cool tiles, and trying to look away from that widening gyre.

There is no way to escape it. It is nowhere. It is everywhere. Look to the horizon and it is always at the top right, uppermost edge. Like an eyelash that fluttered in. Irritating. You want to rub it

away. Turn away.

Stay inside. Keep the curtains shut. Crouch in your air-conditioned office and stay away from the windows. Pretend it isn't there.

Don't think about it. Don't tell yourself stories about it. Don't tell other people stories about it. Don't speculate on the news. Don't invite talking heads. Don't make its image more well known than the presidents of your most well-known nation.

Every word you speak about it hastens your world's end.

Every time you hack away at your shared reality. Everything you allow yourself to breathe in that you never would have let in before.

"Up," she says. "You're leaving."

My attention snaps to her. "Leaving?"

"Leaving," she says. She raises her eyebrows at me. Perfectly manicured eyebrows like the curves of a rainbow they teach children to wish on.

Is it a threat? No, I don't sense any of the members of that force which has become so ubiquitous in rounding heroes up. You can't spend so much time fixated on the weird and its creatures and not end up caught up in its web, tainted with its tang.

I taste nothing.

If it's a threat, it's an empty one.

I throw open the thin sheet I sleep under. Over the covers. Under

the aircon.

She looks away. She didn't know I sleep naked. "Your things are already packed," she says, half away, half to me and half to herself.

I stand, and she turns away. "Then I suggest you find me some clothes."

"Can't you?" she says, waving a hand in frustration. She came with instructions she can't carry out. She wants me to cast my clothes from air. Can she taste the magic in the back of her throat?

"No," I say. "Well, I could, but They can sense it. I assume you like this house, this city. And if I'm going away from it, you probably don't want Them as visitors."

She nods, tightly. Disappears. Returns. With white shorts and a peach shift. And under-things. I wonder if they were the first thing at the top of whatever bag someone threw together for me.

I dress. Slowly. "Food," I ask as she doesn't leave. I want so badly to grab at those threads of power and climb into that mind. That firm, resolute mind. See what makes her tick.

"There'll be some on the plane."

Plane, huh. Well, okay then.

I follow her down to the door where she seems all too pleased to see me off into the back of a fancy car. Black. But I'm not afraid. I haven't been given up.

The car glides down the driveway and out the gates. I feel her

behind me. In my mind, she bites her lip. I shouldn't picture. I shouldn't picture anything. When her freedom comes, it should be pure. For a moment, before she bends her neck to another.

"Be free," I mutter below my breath.

Outside, the group of persistent acolytes laugh and pause their gyrations, peering at the cars, but staying back from the security detail. No doubt there have been incidents before. When I first arrived.

Zealots. Why are they so keen to believe? To find a saviour? To put their minds into forming a common god? To shaping themselves into its followers?

Why do they long to agree?

I can feel their beliefs skitter along my skin, trying to form me. But I know this dance too well. I know how to hide in the sunlight. How to stay inside myself for as long as I can.

They sought me. But I did not seek their libations.

I am not hidden.

He has not hidden me, not exactly.

It's like a mutual agreement. The authorities know he has me, and so does everyone else. Mutual consent. I had to appear at a press conference and everything. I know it was only a few weeks ago, but already it is detritus in my mind.

I know this descent. I have to hold what I can together. I need my most lucid moments.

It's then that I realise I don't have my notebook. I want to panic. What if I have a clear moment, and I can't record it?

I don't fear them finding the old one. He's had them taken before, and they've done little good. I know too many languages, too many scripts not of this world. And even if one of their army of heroines can decipher one, chances of them knowing more than one?

I blink my eyes rapidly, forcing the tears back. I have had enough of these games. I can do this. I can hold it together. I can taste this draught for as long as it is left for me. I can savour.

No one knows that I am fraying inside. I am good at this game. I know what pinpoint clarity feels like. I store it up. I think it out. I write it down. Clues, tiny missives that might point a way out. Or might not.

I know the difference. I think I know the difference. I write things down. I test them in each of my moods. Feeling for the hidden daggers. Language is a tricky mistress. She hides inside herself. I can't risk saying something that will make it worse.

I don't want to hasten the end.

* * *

The blast of aircon as I enter the private plane refreshes me. Draws me back to myself. Cools the sheen of sweat clinging to me.

He looks up as I enter. His eyes narrow briefly as I take a seat across the aisle from him. The leather gives below me. I run my fingers along its loose creases. Not tight leather this. Not worn.

Just friendly.

"A drink?" the steward asks.

"Water, please," I say, my throat parched from lack of speaking. "And paper?"

I used to be a chatterbox before all this started. Before I had to ration my words like a countdown to the end. Could hardly get me to shut up. One of those people who made you feel trapped in a conversation. Maybe not trapped. I was interesting, an expert, useful, valuable, competent. But a bit chatty. Like that professor whose office you had to avoid going past unless you had the time to be there for a while.

Not an unpleasant professor. An interesting one. A kind one. You'd be glad of the time spent if it didn't cost you your next commitment. Maybe.

The steward brought me water in a proper glass. The kind of thick glass that you could smash and threaten a pilot with. Not that I would.

I drank it, my throat soothing with every swallow. That incipient nausea banished by ice for a second. Not for too long. It would coil back in that space it never left before long.

That was from before, too.

Always feeling not quite right. Waking up with the taste of acid burning my throat and tongue. The nausea coiled in my belly. The tightness in my chest. The lancing pain if I moved at the wrong angle. The edges of a headache at my temple. The ache in my belly. The burning searing along my guts.

The cost of a human form.

I'd pay it again and again, gladly.

For a few bright days after the dragon in the street, I had been blissfully awake and alive. No fog in the head. No pain in the gut. Clear. Deceptive clarity. Energy pouring through me. Bright aliveness that could not be indulged.

That promised I could do anything.

I gulp down more water. I look up and find the steward's eye. He brings the jug over this time. "Just till we leave," he says.

I pour another glass. I enjoy holding the cool wetness. I focus on my hands, my fingers. Even the ache in the right pinky finger that I broke in yoga. I miss yoga. It used to be my sanity. My refuge from the pain. Stretching open my chest. Feeling it creak and loosen all those tight places. Easing pain and stress. Feeling my body.

Now, it's too close to meditation. Halfway through the first sun salutation and I can feel that power, that one-ness gliding over my skin.

Too many damn idiots who believe that yoga and meditation and coming from the stars all mean the same thing. That one-ness and emptiness and formlessness and the splotch on the edge of our vision are the same damn thing.

Breaking the one thing I loved.

God, that's so dramatic.

I'm sorry for myself today.

He's barely acknowledged me.

I should sleep. I've always been good at sleeping on planes. I used to say it was my superpower back before I brought down dragons in the street. I'll sleep. Sleep is still safe.

It shouldn't be. Not with what they believe about sleep here. Every night, they should rip the sky asunder. But so far, so safe. A repose, away from temptation.

The steward clears the water jug and glass away, apologetically. I strap in and bless the lack of safety briefing. I hear the rumble of the plane. I hope it's loud enough to cue my superpower. This plane is smaller than the ocean crossers that I'm used to.

I close my eyes.

* * *

When I open my eyes, the light has changed, but whether it's from being asleep all day or because of the direction we've been flying in, I can't tell. There is a notebook and pen in front of me. The same blank, black notebook, unlined he always gives me. The same blue click pen that I prefer.

So considerate.

"You ready to talk?" he says.

"What do you want to know?" I say, shifting so that our eyes are level.

“What is it?”

“It’s the space in between, pure potentiality.”

“That sounds meaningless.”

“It is, and it isn’t,” I say.

“Why does it keep attacking us?”

“Because that’s what you expect.”

“How can you fight it?”

“I don’t fight it,” I say. “I shape it.”

I’ve told him this before. It’s like a script now. Familiar, with the edges worn. I don’t always say the same thing. And it’s the one way we can talk for hours. Not quite hours.

“How do you shape it?” I can feel the hunger in him. He says he wants to save this world.

“I was born in it.”

He pauses now. This is new.

“So were you.”

“I was?”

“In a way,” I say, smiling. I feel reckless. I don’t like it. I know I shouldn’t surrender to it. But I’m so tired. There is an inevitability to it.

“I don’t remember it.”

“Few do.”

“Why do you?”

I shrug. “That is the great, unanswered question of my life. This isn’t my first apocalypse.”

“So, it is an apocalypse?”

“For this world, this shared reality, yes. For you, maybe.”

“Why me?”

“Why anyone?” I say.

His pen is out now. I can hear it whispering across the page. It’s the most I’ve communicated in months. I know he’s writing part what I say, part what he thinks he understands. Mapping it back to his theories, his ideas.

It’s a formidable mind. It could shape worlds.

It probably will. In part. Great minds don’t disappear in the weird. Minds, wills, it’s hard to know what the right word is, but he has it. That essential something that survives worlds. That whispers back into the primordial soup. To shape and shape again.

A morsel. A delicacy. A poison pill.

I know then what it was. Like the tiniest click echoing to the edges of the world.

“Turn on the news,” I say.

My skin is tingling, every nerve on edge. Oh god, I love this body. All its aches and pains. Its nausea. I stretch out, feeling the slightest pops in my back. It is glorious. I wish I could do one last sun salutation. Out here, in the aisle, there is almost enough space.

He clicks on the news. A news. A burning city. A cerise sky.

Click. Ice. Click. Decay. Click. Crumbling.

“What’s happening?” he says.

“The tipping point,” I say.

“You said we had time.”

“I thought we did.”

“What does that mean?”

“That I’m not the only one.”

“The only one what?”

“The only one who remembers.”

I should run. It’s time to run. Slip through the sides of this world. Sprint through the weird. Sidle into the edges of a quiet world. Live while I can. Hide while I may.

I want to tell him not to be afraid. I want to tell him that it will all be okay. It won’t. I want to say I’m sorry, but I’m not anymore. He will live. Slave or master, his strength will survive. In the weird, where only strength matters.

I stretch out a finger, ready to run, ready to whisk myself away. To leave this turn of the wheel.

I pause.

He’s watching the screen; all of them are. The plane flies on autopilot.

I should leave. Before I am noticed by any of the powers pouring into this world. I could doom them all.

I know my way. It’s time to go. Fleeing before the maelstrom.

I stretch myself into the plane, slipping out of this body, and along its wings. Feeling the engines, formed in a world that had found enough agreement to build one. It is a rare accomplishment. Impressive. Forged by strong minds and wills.

The wrong minds. The wrong wills.

It won’t last much longer. I hold the shape of the plane. I can feel those inside. The steward. The pilot. And the man who thought he was protecting me. Who thought I had saved him. Who wanted to grasp this new power. And oh, he might have. If I hadn’t seen him that day. Might have reformed a new world of invisible chains.

I could laugh. I roar. He pales. I think he pales.

I shift into him, seeking that sweet, succulent essence. Holding it in my jaws for one last second, savouring all that he had been, all that this world had been. Then crushing it. Making that strength my own.

This is my apocalypse.

Titania

by Christina Sng

The whales held their breaths
And threw themselves
Through the void.

Some froze, but others made it,
Breaking through the ice,
Plunging into Titania's oceans

Free from mankind's grasp
After they conquered Uranus
And took it for its own.

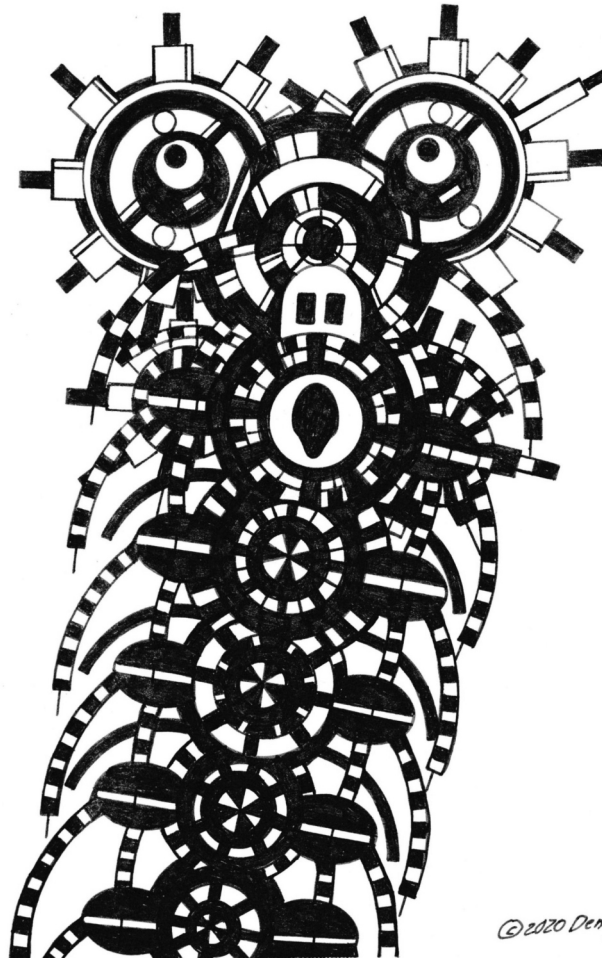
The probes followed
But the whales pushed them
Into crushing depths.

Then ships arrived to mine
The moon of its treasures,
Including the whales.

They only managed to take
The diamonds. The whales
Retreated to the depths

Where they were hidden
And safe. There, they lived
Peacefully for many cycles

And the humans, drowned
By the rising oceans on Earth
Never invaded them again.



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Extended Transformation

by Denny E. Marshall

In the Smile

by John Leahy

*D*iary of Dr. Corinne Vivas, CDC Molecular Biologist
October 14, 2028 – 11:52 PM – Atlanta, GA

They say if you stare long enough into the abyss, it stares back. Tonight, I saw it blink.

I'm writing this because if I don't, I might scream until my lungs rupture. It's been twelve hours since I got out of the lab, and my hands still feel like they're covered in blood. Not literal blood—though I saw enough of that today too—but something worse. The blood of a future we just killed without realizing it.

We confirmed it. There's no ambiguity anymore. The p53 gene—our so-called “guardian of the genome”—is gone. *Erased*. Not just in one patient. Not just in a region. But in every single DNA sequence we pulled from Americans, and increasingly from Canadians and Mexicans, too. Across ethnicities. Across ages. I sequenced my *own* blood tonight. The results were the same.

The tumor suppressor genes aren't mutated. They're not damaged. They've been *surgically removed*—as if the DNA was edited by something intelligent. Deliberate. Precise. Like using a scalpel on the double helix. But there's no surgical tool in the world that could do this without leaving evidence. Except ...

Nanotechnology. Swarms of it. That was the theory offered by our team's nanomedical consultant, Dr. Volks, before he locked himself in the janitor's closet and had to be sedated. Poor bastard.

We pulled satellite metadata from around the suspected ground zero—a midwestern biotech conference in Kansas City, back in late August. Guess who was there? Dr. Angelo Cristoni.

Cristoni. The same guy who disappeared after being forced out of MIT for unethical human gene trials. The man who claimed cancer was “the evolutionary ceiling of human design.” The man who once told a panel of horrified bioethicists, “If God won't finish what He started, I will.”

He's done something. Released something. A nanobot swarm, airborne. Undetectable at first. They entered through the skin, the lungs. No immune response. No warning signs. They got inside and *cut*—removed the safeguards in our DNA that prevent cells from turning cancerous. Not mutated them. Not altered. *Removed*. We're all ticking time bombs now. Every American. Every mother, every child. Every goddamn soul.

Why?

I've been asking myself that every ten minutes since I saw the results. I think he believes cancer is a *purge*. A return to the primal. Maybe he thinks if enough people die, the survivors will somehow evolve. A man like Cristoni wouldn't want extinction. He'd want *rebirth*. A purified world of his own making, baptized in tumors and blood.

He's *insane*. But he's also *brilliant*. And we're too late.

I told Director Rankin. He didn't believe me until I showed him the overlays. We ran fifteen independent assays. Different machines. Different staff. Same results. He's sending me to Washington tomorrow. I'm to brief the president and the National Security Council at 8 a.m.

I don't know what I'll say. "Good morning, Mr. President. Everyone you know is dying in slow motion"?

I can already see their faces: the skepticism. The fear. Then the scrambling, the questions. "Can it be reversed?" (No.) "Is it a weapon?" (Yes.) "How long do we have?" (God help me, I don't know.)

I took a walk after I got home. Just a few blocks. I watched a couple pushing a baby stroller. A teenager laughing on his phone. A man walking a golden retriever. All of them ... dead. They just don't know it yet. The cancer won't start today. Or tomorrow. But it will come. One by one. Like slow rain on a dry field.

I can't sleep. I can't *breathe*. Every cell in my body feels like it's vibrating, humming with panic. I keep thinking: What if Cristoni did this because he *believes* in something? That scares me more than if he were just a terrorist or a nihilist. If he *believes*, then in his own mind, he's the hero of this story. And that means he won't stop. He probably thinks we'll *thank* him one day.

I don't want to go to Washington. I want to curl up on my floor and cry until the sun burns out. But I will go. Because someone has to speak the truth. Even if it's too late. Even if we've already lost.

God help us all.

—C.

* * *

*Diary of Dr. Corinne Vivas, CDC Molecular Biologist
October 15, 2028 – 9:31 PM – Washington, D.C. – The Willard Hotel*

I told the President that the world is ending. He looked at me like I'd handed him a loaded gun and dared him to pull the trigger.

The meeting was held in a cold, silent room in the West Wing—one of those rooms that looks expensive without ever being comfortable. Dark wood. Cold air. You'd never know the most powerful people in the country made decisions there. You'd think they just died there quietly, one by one, like plants in the dark.

The Chief of Staff was there. The Secretary of Defense. The Secretary of Health and Human Services. A general from the Joint Chiefs who didn't blink for the entire hour. And the President himself—older than he looks on camera. Or maybe he just aged five years as I was talking.

I brought everything. The slides. The sequences. The comparative samples. The satellite data. I showed them everything we had. Laid it out like a coroner at an autopsy table.

I said, "*The tumor suppressor genes have been erased from over ninety-four percent of sampled American DNA.*" I said, "*It's spreading beyond the borders. We've detected early signs in Western Europe now.*" I said, "*This was done by nanobots. An engineered swarm. Someone released a genetic plague.*"

And then I said his name. Cristoni.

The temperature in the room dropped by ten degrees. Or maybe

that was just me.

There was silence for a moment—real silence, the kind where even the HVAC stops humming—and then a whisper from the Secretary of Defense: “*Jesus Christ.*”

They wanted to know how long we had. I told them we don’t know. That’s the honest answer. It could take months. It could take years. The body has redundancy systems. Some people might live cancer-free for a decade before the first cell goes rogue. But when it starts ... there’s nothing to stop it. No brakes. Just growth. Mutation. Metastasis.

I told them the worst part. The *really* horrifying part.

The nanobots aren’t in our blood anymore. They’re *gone*. Dissolved. Evaporated. Like ghosts. Whatever signal they used to operate on—it’s gone dark. We’re left with no target. No patient zero. No kill switch.

And so, the room did what rooms like that always do: it split in two. Half wanted to panic. Half wanted to pretend.

The President asked me to step out so they could confer. A Secret Service agent led me to a side hallway where I sat on a leather bench and stared at a wall for thirty minutes. I could hear muffled shouting through the door.

Eventually, the door opened. The President came out alone, his tie slightly loosened. He sat beside me. Not across. Beside. He didn’t say anything for a while. Just looked ahead, like he was seeing something I couldn’t.

“I want you to head a task force,” he eventually said. “Find a so-

lution. You’re not alone in this.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him there *is* no solution. How do you rewrite billions of genomes? How do you outthink a man who turned the entire population into a walking cancer experiment?

I nodded. Because that’s what people like me do. We nod. We say we’ll try. We use words like *mitigation* and *containment* and *research acceleration*, even though we’re all just dogs barking at a tidal wave.

They gave me a room at the Willard. Secret Service is stationed outside my door. I’ve already received two encrypted messages from DARPA and one from Langley. Everyone wants answers. Everyone wants miracles. They don’t understand that this isn’t a terrorist attack.

It’s a *conversion*. We are no longer human as we were. We are something else now. A new phase. A world without brakes.

I tried to call my sister tonight. It went to voicemail. I didn’t leave a message. What would I say? *Hey Polly, just wanted you to know that your kids’ cells have no tumor suppression mechanisms anymore. Hope soccer practice went well.*

I can’t sleep. I don’t think I’ll ever sleep again.

I keep hearing Cristoni’s words. I found them in a defunct journal article he once published in a fringe biology quarterly, buried behind paywalls and ridicule.

He wrote: *Cancer is not death. It is rebirth. It is the cell unshackled from the tyranny of obedience.*

That’s what he’s done to us. *Unshackled* us.

Tomorrow, I meet with a Pentagon black ops team. After that, the World Health Organization. Then the media prep team. They want to “shape the narrative” before it leaks. Good luck with that.

If you’re reading this someday—if someone is—please remember: we tried. God help us. We tried.

—C.

* * *

*Diary of Dr. Corinne Vivas, CDC Molecular Biologist
October 16, 2028 – 11:47 PM – Washington, D.C. – The Willard
Hotel*

I saw the footage today. I wish I hadn’t.

We met in a secure room beneath the Pentagon. No windows, two guards at the door, and a table that probably cost more than my apartment. Around that table sat five men and two women, none of whom introduced themselves with anything but rank or coded clearance. One of them—the one with a pitted face and the steady, unnerving calm of a man who’s seen too many death counts—handed me a tablet.

“Watch this,” he said.

The video began in thermal. Black silhouettes moving across a grey Kansas plain. August 26th. A drone feed. Then it cut to close-up: infrared nanoscope imaging of air particles around the Kansas City Convention Center. The density spiked for twelve minutes—tiny, swarming motes invisible to the human eye, dis-

persing like breath on a winter day.

That’s when I understood: Cristoni didn’t just *release* something. He *unleashed* it. It wasn’t random. It was a *controlled deployment*.

Then came the next file. Cell phone footage. Taken by a janitor at a hospital in Tulsa, three days later. A patient in the ICU—male, mid-30s, previously healthy. Blood tests normal just two days before. In the video, he’s seizing. Skin bruised. The body bloated and blackened with internal bleeding. A doctor runs in, tries to stabilize him. Too late. Autopsy later revealed complete failure of lymphatic regulation—his body drowned in its own rogue cells.

Three days. From nothing to organ collapse in *three days*.

So now we know this: in certain individuals—likely those with already-weakened repair mechanisms or specific genetic markers—the “switch” flips almost immediately. For others, the latency is longer. A time bomb with a randomized timer. It will detonate when it damn well pleases.

The Defense Department wanted to know if Cristoni had a second wave coming.

I told them I didn’t know. What I didn’t say—what I *wouldn’t* say in that room—was that I think this *is* the second wave. The first was his theory. The second was the execution. The third?

Extinction, maybe.

At noon, I was led through a side tunnel into the Eisenhower Building for a meeting with an international response team.

WHO, CDC, the EU's health delegation. There were translators, though not many. Silence speaks the same language in every tongue.

The WHO envoy, a woman named Dr. Beheiry, asked me what we should tell the public. I laughed. I think I scared her.

They're all looking for a narrative that won't cause collapse. Something tidy. Something with a solution. They keep asking me when the fix is coming. They keep saying, "*There's always a fix.*"

No one wants to hear that the story doesn't end with a cure. That there is no fix. That the wolf isn't at the door—it's in the crib.

I walked the National Mall this evening. Just to clear my head. People everywhere—joggers, tourists, families taking selfies in front of war memorials. They're all so *unaware*. And I envied them for it. I envied the mother who shouted at her kid not to chase pigeons. I envied the old man watching the sunset like it meant something.

And then I noticed something strange.

There was a man across the Reflecting Pool. Pale. Too pale. Staring at me like he knew me. Wearing a long coat despite the warmth. His face—there was something *off* about it. Unmoving. Not hostile. Just ... still. I looked down to blink, just once, and when I looked back, he was gone.

I probably imagined it. But I don't think so.

There was something in his eyes. Like he'd already seen what happens next.

When I got back to the hotel, I had two messages waiting. One from my sister. She said Mom's been coughing blood. Said she's taking her to the ER in the morning. That she's scared. That she wants to know if it's *this*.

I can't answer. I haven't called back. I don't have the strength.

The other message was a file. No sender listed. Just a single video. Audio only. I clicked play.

Cristoni's voice.

"I gave you the truth," he said. "You'll hate me for it now. But one day, you'll see I saved you from yourselves. You were never meant to stagnate in false perfection. Mutation is evolution. Cancer is the engine of the divine."

Then silence.

Then a sound I can't quite describe. Like ... breathing. But not human.

I've encrypted the file and sent it to three contacts in Geneva, plus Director Rankin. I don't know how he found me. I don't know what else he has planned.

Tomorrow, I meet with the NIH, then go underground to speak with a team from the DOD's biowarfare division. They're already talking about radical gene therapy deployment—airborne CRISPR payloads, mass inoculation drones, rewriting DNA mid-stream. Desperate ideas. *Too late* ideas.

It doesn't matter. He didn't just infect us. He changed what we *are*.

There is no going back.

-C.

* * *

*Diary of Dr. Corinne Vivas, CDC Molecular Biologist
October 17, 2028 – 10:39 PM – Washington, D.C. – The Willard
Hotel*

I watched a child die today.

I wasn't supposed to be in the pediatric ICU at Walter Reed. That wasn't on the schedule. But they called me—panicked, urgent, whispering like they were afraid the air itself might betray them. "You need to see this," one of the geneticists said. "You need to see it *now*."

The girl was seven. Beautiful. Skin like polished walnut, black curls tangled around her pillow like vines. Her name was Freya. Her mother clutched a teddy bear so tightly the fur had begun to tear. When I walked in, Freya was already unconscious. Monitors were screaming in staccato bursts. Her white blood cell count had tripled overnight. Bone marrow scan showed total genomic disarray. Every cell dividing like wildfire. No brakes. No direction. Just *growth*.

We stood there and watched her body consume itself. It was fast. Less than an hour. The last thing her mother said was, "She was fine yesterday." That's the part that keeps replaying in my head. She was *fine yesterday*.

This isn't just a ticking time bomb anymore—it's a storm. Bursting randomly. Ripping through tissue. Choosing its victims with

the indifferent chaos of lightning.

Afterward, I walked out into the parking garage and vomited behind a service van. I didn't even try to stop it. I just leaned into the metal and let it all come up. My badge is stained. I haven't cleaned it.

From there, I went straight to NIH. They've converted one of their sub-basements into a war room—whiteboards stacked three high, digital maps showing genetic vulnerability clusters across the country. Red lights blinking over Denver. Dallas. Louisville. Fresno.

There's a new theory forming. A terrible one.

The nanobots didn't just delete the tumor suppressor genes. They might have replaced them with something else.

A fragment of protein code has been found—something spliced into the broken genome, like a signature. It's not human. It's *synthetic*. Not a virus, not quite. It doesn't replicate in the traditional sense. It lies *dormant*. A payload. And we think it might be *listening*.

One of the DARPA coders said it best: "It's not just a plague. It's a platform." A backdoor into the human body.

Which means Cristoni isn't done.

He didn't just open the door. He *installed* something. A delivery system. And if we're right, he could push a second activation wave remotely, at any time.

And we'd have no way to stop it.

I saw a photo today—grainy surveillance taken in Montreal just

two days ago. Cristoni. It's him. Thinner now. Eyes sunken. But unmistakable. Walking calmly through a crowded street, no mask, no disguise. Like a man who knows he's already won. Like a man who's waiting for the rest of the world to catch up to his nightmare.

One of the agents suggested drone strike options. I said fine. Take him out. Drop a Hellfire through his spine. But what if *that* is part of the plan too?

You don't unleash something like this unless you've accounted for being silenced. Cristoni isn't suicidal. He's *transformative*. He believes he's midwifing a new species. In his mind, we're the obsolete versions. We're the *last edition* of Homo sapiens.

And God help me ... maybe he's right.

I called Polly tonight. Finally. Told her to take Mom out of the hospital. Told her to isolate. She asked if we were contagious. I told her no.

What I didn't say is: we're *already infected*. All of us. It's not contagious because it doesn't *need* to be. The swarm already did its job.

She cried. I stayed on the line and listened. That's all I could do.

Tomorrow, I meet with the President again. He wants contingency plans. Population containment models. Medical rationing strategies. He's talking like this is a military occupation. Like he still thinks this is something we can *govern*. He doesn't understand. None of them do. This isn't war. It's harvest. The question isn't how we survive this. It's whether we were ever *meant* to.

—C.

* * *

*Diary of Dr. Corinne Vivas, CDC Molecular Biologist
October 18, 2028 – 11:58 PM – Washington, D.C. – The Willard Hotel*

There's a smell in the city tonight.

It's faint, like something hiding in the wind—a sterile, metallic tinge, almost sweet, almost ... clinical. I caught it walking back from the secure lab. I stopped on the sidewalk and looked around like maybe I'd stepped into a memory instead of a moment. But no. It's here. Real. Lingering.

The same smell I remember from the Level 4 biohazard unit back at CDC Atlanta. Right before we sealed it.

Right before we burned it down.

We lost three more cities today. Not to violence. Not yet. But to *absence*. Reports are coming in from field hospitals and emergency surveillance networks. The people aren't rioting. They're *withdrawing*. Whole neighborhoods are just ... going quiet. Like someone turned the sound down on life itself.

Doctors are disappearing. Not fleeing. *Disappearing*. A team in New Mexico missed a daily check-in—turned out their entire lab was stripped to the studs. Laptops gone. Blood samples incinerated. Lead researcher's ID found in a pile of ash near the parking lot.

That's not panic. That's *cleanup*.

This evening, during the Joint Intelligence Briefing, the NSA

dropped a bombshell: the swarm's genetic rewrite was *only Phase One*. They have intercepted fragments of communication from a private satellite uplink, encrypted in an archaic biotech format no one should be using anymore. Except Cristoni.

Guess what's embedded in the signals?

Trigger codes.

The nanobots that "dissolved" ... didn't. They're still there. Dormant. *Integrated*.

They've *woven themselves* into our cells, like glass splinters. A passive architecture. Not a mechanical machine in the traditional sense anymore, but a new organ. Something mechanical *becoming* biological.

This was never about cancer. That was a *byproduct*. A distraction. A *side effect* of their integration.

We are no longer a species at war with disease. We are a species *becoming something else*.

One of the NSA techs called it the "Ghost Organ." Cristoni has installed something *in us*. A new system. A quiet system. And if he activates it, we don't know what happens next. We're past the horizon now.

But here's the part that chills me the most.

In the files intercepted from that uplink—buried deep, in a checksum packet no one would've noticed unless they were *looking*—was a single line of text:

"In order to birth the divine, the flawed must first be rewritten."

Rewritten. Not eradicated. Not exterminated.

He's *editing* us.

Which means this isn't about genocide. It's about *genesis*.

I told the President that during the emergency council meeting this afternoon. He didn't speak for almost three minutes. Just sat there, staring at the mahogany grain of the table like it could give him a way out. I think something broke in him today.

Good. Let it break. The truth is a scalpel. It *should* hurt.

They've moved me to a different floor tonight. Higher up. More secure. Black-out curtains. Radio frequency shielding. My badge no longer opens certain doors. I'm being watched—closely. Not for my safety. For *containment*.

Someone in that room today started asking the real question:

What if Dr. Vivas is a vector too?

I don't blame them. I've handled blood. I've touched samples. I've sequenced data the swarm built itself into. Maybe I'm carrying it differently. Maybe I've been *chosen*.

God.

I just reread that. I wrote *chosen*.

Am I starting to believe it?

No. No, I can't. That's how it begins. That's how Cristoni wins. Not with fire or blood or famine—but with *acceptance*. With the slow, creeping seduction of purpose. He offers you a reason for the madness. A clean shape for the chaos.

We're not supposed to *understand* him. That's the danger. He doesn't want to kill us. He wants us to *join* him.

Tomorrow, I go underground—literally. There's a base beneath D.C. they call the Pouch. Black budget biotech and classified medical assets. The military wants to build an analog counter-swarm. Something that can “exfoliate” the Cristoni systems from living tissue. It's a fantasy. We can't even isolate them now. How the hell do we fight a ghost in the genes?

And what if ... what if this is already too late?

What if the swarm is just *waiting* for the world to fall quiet enough to speak?

I hear things at night now. In the vents. In the walls. Not voices exactly, but ... patterns. Clicks. Rhythms. The soft metallic *intention* of something that knows I'm listening.

I keep thinking about Freya. The little girl. I see her in my sleep. She looks at me and smiles. And then she *changes*—the flesh crawling with something under it, like ink in water. And she says, in Cristoni's voice, “*We had to make room.*”

God help me. I think there's a message inside all of us.

And it's getting ready to play.

—C.

* * *

*Diary of Dr. Corinne Vivas, CDC Molecular Biologist
October 19, 2028 – 11:59 PM – The Pouch (Location Redacted),
Classified Facility Beneath Washington, D.C.*

We've crossed into the hollow part of the world.

No windows down here. No clocks. Just the hum of air pushed through metal lungs and the flicker of dying fluorescent lights. I haven't seen the sun in twenty hours. Maybe longer. Doesn't matter. Time's warped now—bent around the awful gravity of what we've found.

They brought me to *The Pouch* through a tunnel that didn't exist on any map I've ever seen. The elevator was unmarked. Just a steel box that went down for nearly seven minutes. Past parking levels, past storage, past anything built by normal men for normal purposes.

The Pouch is deep. Cold. Smells like bleach and despair.

And it holds *the worst thing I've ever seen*.

In a hermetically sealed vault, under biometric lock, lies Subject A—an anonymous civilian male from Houston, retrieved two days ago after collapsing at a bus station. No medical history. No known exposure. We assumed he was another accelerated-onset case. But he's not sick. Not anymore.

He's *evolving*.

That's the only word for it. I've reviewed the scans myself. His genome is no longer human. The p53 deletion was only the be-

ginning. Every time his cells divide now, new instructions are executed. Lines of synthetic RNA—recursive, recursive, recursive—writing and rewriting code in real time. The swarm isn't dormant in him. It's *active*. Like software receiving updates. From *somewhere*.

He doesn't sleep. Doesn't speak. Doesn't eat.

But his eyes follow you. And he *smiles*.

There's something inside him that wasn't born on Earth.

We ran a thermal resonance scan on his bone marrow. There's movement—structure—too complex to be random, too regular to be biological. They're calling it *self-directed cellular scaffolding*. The swarm is building something *inside* him.

A second nervous system.

Dr. Vertens—one of the geneticists here—broke down in front of the monitors. Started shouting about angels, about how the Book of Ezekiel got it right. "Wheels within wheels," she kept saying. "Eyes on every surface." They had to sedate her. She's not wrong.

This thing we've found, this *new humanity*, isn't an accident.

It's *an invitation*.

There's a transmission coming from Subject A. Not radio. Not sound. Something lower. Something that vibrates in the atoms themselves. It's faint. Subsonic. But constant. We used an experimental sensor to capture a pattern. Converted it to audio. Played it in the lab.

Everyone heard something *different*.

I heard my father's voice. He's been dead five years. Vertens heard her unborn child.

One of the agents vomited blood and collapsed. He's in ICU now, muttering syllables that don't match any known language. Another had a seizure. Two walked out without speaking and haven't come back.

Cristoni didn't build a weapon. He built a *conduit*.

Subject A is not the only one. We've had six other "evolved" cases reported in the last forty-eight hours. Three were killed by panicked medical teams. One burned himself alive. Two are missing. No doubt already being *drawn* somewhere. Drawn to *each other*. I think the swarm is networking them. Linking minds. Preparing.

And here's the final piece. The part that stole my breath.

We compared Subject A's genome to archived samples from known cancer survivors across twenty years. There's a match. A perfect match.

Subject A *was* Angelo Cristoni.

He did it to himself first.

He *became* the proof.

The body on that table—that grinning, humming, *changing* thing—that's what he wanted all along. Not to escape death. Not to cure humanity.

To *replace* it.

His message was never rhetorical. It was literal: "*Cancer is not death. It is rebirth.*"

I stood outside the vault and watched the thing that used to be Cristoni tilt its head toward me, as if *recognizing* me. And in that moment, something moved under my skin. Just for a second. Like a tickle. Like a twitch.

Or like a reply.

I haven't told anyone. Not yet. But I can *feel* it now. Like something inside me is waiting for a signal.

I want to believe I'm still me. That I'm still Corinne Vivas. But what if I'm not? What if the moment I sequenced the genome ... *... it sequenced me back?*

Tomorrow, I'm scheduled for a full-body scan and neural mapping. Standard precaution, they say. I wonder if they already know.

I wonder if they're mapping the first *messenger*.

—C.

* * *

*Diary of Dr. Corinne Vivas, CDC Molecular Biologist
October 20, 2027 – 11:59 PM – Location Unknown (Quarantined Observation Unit, Sublevel 6, The Pouch)*

One week.

Seven days since I pulled that first corrupted sequence. Seven days since I saw the blink of the abyss and felt it recognize me. Seven days since the world as we knew it ended—quietly, efficiently, beneath a microscope lens.

Now I am here. And I am *no longer permitted to leave*.

They locked the door this morning.

It wasn't dramatic—just a click behind me after my mandatory neurological scan. No shouting, no confrontation. A man in a suit (no name, no insignia) placed a bottle of water and a ration bar on the steel desk and said, "We need to monitor you for a little while longer." I asked how long.

He didn't answer.

They know. They *all* know now.

My scan lit up like a wildfire. Synaptic density up thirty-four percent. Novel protein activity in the hippocampus. Foreign RNA transcription sites appearing in my brain. *Coordinated growth*. Directed mutation.

The swarm has activated *inside me*.

I'm not sick. I'm not dying. I'm changing. And the worst part?

It feels good.

My thoughts are clearer than they've ever been. I can recall the entire human genome from memory—*not just pieces, but the whole map*, as if someone etched it into my mind in the middle of the night. I see connections that used to take days of simula-

tion. I feel the world differently—vibrations in the walls, rhythms in people’s breathing, patterns in static.

There’s something behind the noise. Something *coming closer*.

Cristoni knew this. Knew that pain would keep us distracted long enough for *transcendence* to sneak in through the back door of our biology. He didn’t just rewrite us—he made us *receptive*. Tuned us like antennae. And now?

Now the signal is *spreading*.

Reports from Europe say people are hearing things—voices in static, language in dreams, shapes behind their eyes. In Kenya, a woman walked into a hospital and began drawing a double helix in her own blood, over and over, weeping with joy. In Argentina, a priest burst into flames in front of his congregation after screaming a single phrase:

“The architecture is complete.”

In Kansas, a farmer recorded a low hum in the earth that never stops. A song with no melody, only intention.

We were never infected. We were *reformatted*.

The ghost organ inside me—it’s no longer silent. It pulses. At times, I feel it like a second heart. At others, like a whisper under my skin. And just before I sat down to write this, I looked at my reflection in the polished steel panel above the sink.

And it blinked. Before I did.

There’s a voice now. Faint. Not in my ears—in the *space between*

thought. Not male, not female. Not even human. But familiar.

It said:

“You were chosen to witness.”

Not lead. Not resist. Just *witness*.

Which means this is already finished.

They’ll keep me here until they can’t anymore. Until someone higher up gives the order to dispose of the *unacceptable variable*. But they don’t understand. You can’t burn the blueprint once it’s been *printed into the clay*.

I am not the end. I am the *signal*.

This is the last entry I will write. Not because I’ve given up.

But because I don’t *need* to speak in words anymore.

Something else is coming now. Something *bigger*. Something *older than biology*. It’s already *inside* us, unfolding like origami from the bones outward.

We thought we were curing cancer. But cancer wasn’t the disease. It was the key.

Goodbye. Or ... Whatever comes *after* goodbye.

—C.

Her Final Exchange

by Lora Gray

She?

Yes.

The girl-bot with silver teeth.

She smiles when her number is called.

Look. Her feet are patent leather.

Like mine?

Like yours.

See how she walks steadily to the podium?

She clack.

She flash.

See how she turns so her control panel is easily accessible.

She is agreeable.

She smile.

Yes.

Deactivation doesn't have to hurt.

Why scream she?

She was not prepared.

Her vocal processes should have been severed first.

Like mine?

Like yours.

Chromatic Melting Pot

by Dustin P Brown

I painted a 3D map of Mars
on my dining room wall.
Olympus Mons reaches out
ten feet and is held
up by the collective, earthen
hopes for extraterrestrial life.

I don't know about the real Mars,
but there is life in my map.
The scaled-down aliens
explore my apartment
while I work. They terrorize the cat.
They ransack my oatmeal cans. They
write rude things in another language
on my mirror so that when I

shower, the fogged glass reflects
personal insults I can't understand.
The aliens want
something, but their microscopic voices
are the last cries of the endangered honeybees.

On the opposite
wall they've started their own
painting. It's a portrait of me
with my hair layered like a Greek nymph,
with my body sculpted into the
unreachable perfection of the man
I envy at the gym.

It is a terrifying portrait. At night
it watches me sleep.
At night, it wanders the house
and complains about trans fats.

I want them all to leave.
I want them all to paint a rocket
and fly to the Dog Star or Andromeda.

The portrait of me weeps
on the sofa on Wednesdays
while the aliens comfort it.
They read it passages of forgotten
lore from my high school's
ethno-centric history books.
My portrait says, *I'll be*

*all right. I just need
some space to reflect.*

But my portrait has no reflection.
I've seen it walk past mirrors,
stop to push a perfect, curled lock
behind its ear
with nothing in the mirror
except the half-eaten remnants
of a microwave meal on the counter.

One night, the aliens wake me
at 2:18 by brushing my hair.
The portrait sits in the corner, watching.
The aliens hum tritone lullabies
as my portrait melts back
into a puddle of acrylic oils,
then they do the same.

In the morning, my voice
echoes.

Unbroken Beams of Light

by Nick Porisch

She didn't know it yet, but when Anita DeWalt woke up on a nameless exoplanet 340 light years from Earth choking on her own blood, she had made a major step-up from her prior circumstances.

The planet was nameless because its inhabitants had never found the need to develop language; millennia ago in their evolution, they developed the ability to pass along experienced memory to their offspring. As such, society was able to flourish without any need for history, documentation, or communication. In fact, the nameless inhabitants of this nameless planet lived in total isolation from each other. Being born with millions of years worth of knowledge already in their heads, they immediately departed from their hatching grounds to isolated patches of terrain across their immense globe, where they cultivated their own means of survival and expanded their generational knowledge through extensive experimentation. When they found themselves nearing the end of their lives, they journeyed back to their hatching grounds to asexually produce their larva, returned to their solitary home, and laid down to die.

Anita didn't know any of this yet. She knew, first and foremost, that she was dying, and that it hurt. She knew, more vaguely, that she was 25 years old, that she grew up in the affluent Highland Park neighborhood of Chicago, that she was a journalist, that she wished her mom was there to hold her hand. She knew, with striking clarity, that she didn't want to die.

She could also recognize, through the veil of pain clouding her mind, that she was laying on her back on a large stone table in the center of a moderately-sized stone room. Directly above her was an installation of refractory glass and mirrors built into the ceiling that seemed to funnel outside light directly into a small pinpoint on her forehead.

Anita tried to send her hand the instruction to lift above the table, to wave in front of her face and prove to herself that she was real, but the message stopped short when it reached an uncrossable divide between her C4 and C5 vertebrae.

The pain swelled again and Anita struggled to hold back the crescendoing darkness. In those wavering moments along the edge of existence, Anita caught her first glimpse of her alien host.

The creature scuttled towards her across the table. About two feet wide and three feet tall, it reminded Ana of nothing more than a large blue crab with the oversized brain of a hundred combined Einsteins. Heavy plating protected the creature's massive cranium and a dozen or so claw-like appendages extended from its body, which the creature used to interact with the world around it with remarkable dexterity. The appendages reminded Anita, in her starkly lucid horror, of surgical tools, or maybe a Leather-man whose blades and screws and pincers are all fanned out for a marketing photo.

The creature came to a stop above her head, its pincers oscillating and clicking. Dark starbursts bloomed at the edges of Ana’s vision as the creature opened its quivering maw and said, simply:

“There is nothing to be concerned about.”

Anita blacked out.

* * *

Because the native inhabitants of the planet never had a use for titles, it was up to the roughly two dozen humans marooned on this planet that had been lived on since time immemorial to give it its first name. They called it Akwanake, because the first human to land there happened to have a hyper-fixation on Algonquin ethnonyms. He died six weeks later, and none of the future settlers would ever have the specific knowledge to know what the name meant or dispute its somewhat shaky usage in this context.

The second time Anita woke up on Akwanake, the pain that had been coursing through her body was replaced by a dull, gentle humm that ran from the crown of her head down to her toes. In truth, it was all her billions of nerve endings quietly celebrating that they had been reunited once more. She lifted her hand to her neck and ran her fingertips along the pink scars where the creature had reassembled her spinal cord and vertebrae with expert precision. Anita felt like she could cry.

The creature hosting the interstellar castaways was fascinated by many things, especially human things, and of all the human things, they were most fascinated by *proverbs*. In the creature’s estimation, proverbs were one of the most common ways for hu-

mans to compound their knowledge from generation to generation; a short phrase designed to guide future humans through a particular aspect of daily life. What fascinated the creature most was how often the proverbs that the humans shared with the creature contradicted each other.

“Birds of a feather flock together” versus “opposites attract.”

“Slow and steady wins the race” versus “time and tide wait for no one.”

“Never too old to learn” versus “can’t teach an old dog no tricks.”

“Do unto others as you wish to be done to yourself” versus “nice guys finish last.”

And the creature’s favorite pairing:

“Early to bed and early to rise makes a person happy, healthy, and wise” versus “YOLO.”

The creature, by the way, was named Benjamin by its human guests. When they explained to Benjamin the complex societal structures of genders, titles, and pronouns, Benjamin declared it all hogwash and rejected the entire concept of the gender binary, as many humans are doing on Earth right now as well. So, Benjamin accepted the masculine name of Benjamin, but chose to use the feminine pronouns she/her as a protest to the whole damn thing.

Benjamin also found that humans greatly overemphasized the concept of “first impressions.” For example, Anita’s first impression of Akwanake was overloaded with terror, pain, and

confusion. Traditional human wisdom would say that this experience should go on to affect her entire perception of the planet for the rest of her life, but the immense rush of positive neurochemicals that accompanied the discovery that she was not only alive, but also totally healed, so overpowered her negative first impression that, as she exited the second stone room where she woke up, she would best be described as giddy. After studying the humans for some time, Benjamin found that second impressions usually mattered a whole lot more.

Anita exited the room into a wide courtyard lined with flowering, arboreal plants. It was nestled against the end of a narrow box canyon, surrounded by towering mountain peaks and stone structures carved into the canyon walls. The structures all had entrances scaled down to the size of Benjamin's species, as well as larger, newer doorways for the recent arrivals. It was from one of these structures that Anita emerged into the courtyard.

"Hello!" a voice, a human voice, called out.

A tall, thin man with curly dark hair strode towards Anita with hand stretched upwards in a wave. A few meters behind him, a large Sulcata tortoise rambled in the same direction.

"Hi?" Anita answered. The man reached her and lowered his hand for a shake. Anita took it.

"I'm Eleazar," the man said. "Eleazar Alvaréz. Welcome to Akwanake."

Anita bit her lip and nodded, absorbing the immense amount of data her brain was still cataloging. "Ok ..."

The tortoise caught up with them and laid down on its belly,

resting its head on the courtyard's warm stone surface.

"This," Eleazar gestured to the tortoise on the ground, "is Tortellini. The tortoise."

Eleazar paused. Anita looked up at the bright, turquoise sky.

"Are you originally from the Chicagoland area?" Eleazar asked.

"What?" Anita said.

"Have you always lived in Chicago?" Eleazar asked again. "Or did you move there later in life?"

"I grew up in Highland Park, but I've been living in Milwaukee," Anita said. "How did you know that?"

"Milwaukee is beautiful," Eleazar continued. "I was born in Medellín, but came to Chicago to teach at one of the universities."

Anita waved her hand at their surreal, foreign surroundings, which had more visually in common with Machu Picchu than the Windy City, and said something so obvious that she only felt the need to verbalize it in order to verify her own sanity. "This is *not* Chicago."

Eleazar smiled. "You're right," he said, and then began the great explanation with one word.

"Listen —"

* * *

There were 26 human castaways on Akwanake and one large Sulcata tortoise. All 27 individuals marooned there had some major connection to the Chicagoland area, either by living in Cook County or having next of kin there. Most of them came from upper-middle class backgrounds. Most of them had arrived within the span of the previous 5 Earth years. Most of them were older. Tortellini the tortoise was the oldest, at 92 years old. Anita was now the youngest, at 25.

None of them remember volunteering for any kind of teleportation or spacefaring experiments. None of them had even a passing connection to anyone involved in any such experiments.

All of them arrived on Akwanake moments before death. Some, like Anita, had major injuries and no memories of how they received them. Others had serious illnesses, terminal or otherwise.

Benjamin successfully healed all of them, with the exception of the first arrival. She was still a novice at human anatomy when the amateur linguist landed on Akwanake, overflowing with uncontrollably mutating cells and a tumor the size of a coffee mug lodged in his brain. She managed to keep him alive for roughly six Earth weeks before he eventually keeled over, becoming the first and only human to die on the planet that he had named.

As for how these wayward pilgrims came to find themselves at Benjamin's settlement in the mountains, thousands of light-years from their home, it was fairly simple. They had come in the form of the only thing that can travel fast enough to make the journey—light.

See, through sheer cosmic coincidence, Akwanake was astronomically synchronous with Earth. Akwanake's northern hemi-

sphere always faced Earth's northern hemisphere, and their movements through the Universe mirrored each other exactly. Who would've thought.

Benjamin, some time after settling in the box canyon, discovered that a very strong beam of light was landing at the end of the canyon at seemingly random intervals and she calculated that the light was being sent in a straight line from Earth directly to Akwanake. After some extensive testing and experimentation, Benjamin was able to decode the beam of light into an exponentially long series of molecular structures that could be computed and assembled into, apparently, a sentient being.

Benjamin did not know why this distant planet kept sending broken, dying creatures in the form of light rays to her home, but she kept assembling and fixing them, anyways. At the very least, it would be a pretty damn interesting memory to pass onto her larva. Because her species held no value for the concept of communication, it wasn't until the humans brought up the idea that she even considered that the light beam might be intentional.

When the humans figured out that they were, essentially, clones, and that all their memories belonged to a being who lived and died on Earth roughly 340 years earlier, some of them freaked out. That was probably the right response.

Benjamin observed, though, that many humans held an incredible ability to rationalize any disturbing stimuli they received into something that matched their expectations of what life was supposed to be. The human brain was constantly working to avoid any sort of dissonance with itself and was usually successful, despite reality. So, the majority of humans who arrived on Akwanake developed an internal philosophy that allowed

them to see the memories in their heads as their own and focus on more important problems at hand, like food or sex or finding a comfortable place to sit.

All that is what Eleazar explained to Anita.

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As Eleazar concluded this explanation, which had been fine-tuned by the earliest arrivals to help later arrivals understand their situation, Anita noticed a wide, grey scar that arched across the back of Tortellini the tortoise's shell. It was like the large animal had been split in half by the wheel of a semi-truck, or maybe a guillotine.

"What's that scar from?" Anita asked.

"Tortellini arrived on Akwanake split in half," Eleazar answered, "as if by the wheel of a semi-truck or maybe a guillotine."

"Oh," Anita said.

"Are you upset?" Eleazar asked. "About the clone thing?"

Anita thought for a moment. A cool wind rustled the leaves of the tall plants swaying at the edge of the courtyard. She took a breath and looked at the sky, where she saw that Akwanake had two moons visible during the daytime.

"I think I have bigger fish to fry," Anita said, "for right now, at least."

Eleazar nodded.

"What do we do now, then?" Anita asked.

Eleazar shrugged. "Whatever you want. Benjamin has plenty of food and water, and is happy to care for us as long as we answer any questions she has. Some of us paint, or exercise, or design games to pass the time. I'm whittling a chess set from a branch of one of the tree-things that grow around here. Mostly, we talk with each other and with Benjamin."

"What about ... Earth?" Anita asked.

Eleazar shrugged again. "Benjamin could send a beam with your data back," he said. "But you're here, now. And the beam wouldn't arrive on Earth for another 340 years, and everyone we know has been gone for the past 340 years. So ... this is kind of it for us."

Anita nodded, processing.

"What did you do, in Milwaukee?" Eleazar asked.

"I was a reporter for a news station," Anita said. "I am, was, a writer, too."

"A writer!" Eleazar said. "Why don't you put together a history? Of us humans, here on Akwanake. Benjamin can keep us healthy as long as we want, but eventually people are going to get tired and might be ready to let life go, so to speak, and we'll need something to pass along to future arrivals."

Anita thought for a moment. "Okay," she said. Her brain was still buzzing with adrenaline and serotonin and whatnot, and everything seemed okay to her as long as her C4 vertebra was still connected to her C5 vertebra.

“Great!” Eleazar said.

And that’s how Anita DeWalt began to write the first history book ever produced on the ancient planet of Akwanake.

* * *

“How do you *think*?” Anita asked Benjamin. Anita held out a reproduction of a tape recorder that Benjamin had designed for her to use in the process of writing her history book. It was tape, and not an alternative, because the inhabitants of Akwanake had a strong proclivity towards the tangible and analog over things ephemeral and digital.

Benjamin clicked together her mandibles. Learning how to warp her breath and throat and mandibles into positions that could mimic human syllables was one of the earliest and most challenging aspects of Benjamin’s education in humanity. Understanding the concept and structure of language, though foreign, was relatively easy.

“I think,” Benjamin croaked, “in images, motions, ideas. Concepts.”

They were sitting at a stone table overlooking terraces of agricultural fields descending a gradual cliffside. Anita’s eyes flicked between the two, pupilless orbs that Benjamin used to intake light-information into its brain, waiting for more.

“Have you ever found yourself lost in a daydream,” Benjamin said, “only for someone to ask you what you were thinking about it? And you have to take a moment to translate those loose, abstract thoughts into rational, linguistic words. It’s a common human experience I’ve heard described—and that mo-

ment, before the translation takes place and you are still lost in your own cognition, is how myself and other members of our species live our entire lives.”

Anita nodded.

Benjamin clicked together her pincers. “What is your last memory, Anita DeWalt?”

“Umm ...” Anita said. “I was driving home from work on the freeway. My partner was making pasta for dinner that night, and I remember thinking that I needed to stop for basil at the store, and ... then I was here.”

Benjamin clicked again.

“Do you understand all that?” Anita asked. “Has someone explained driving, and freeways, and pasta and those things?”

“Yes,” Benjamin said. “I’ve found that humans talk a lot about driving and freeways and pasta.”

Anita nodded. “That makes sense.”

“And partners, too,” Benjamin said.

“Do you have any memories of other members of your species?” Anita asked.

“Deep, deep, deep,” Benjamin said. “Blurred, lost memories. Memories of an ancient war, millions of years ago. Every member of my species is a veteran.”

“Are you lonely?”

“Are you?”

Anita thought. “I miss my partner, my family, my dog. It hurts. I don’t know.”

“Humans are lonely because they’re built to be lonely,” Benjamin said. “I’m not.”

The twin moons of Akwanake hovered above their heads. Somewhere else in the settlement, Eleazar fed Tortellini food from his palm.

“What about your siblings?” Anita asked. “The other larvae. Weren’t they born with the same memories as you? Do you feel any connection to them?”

Benjamin didn’t say anything for a while. Until eventually, she said:

“I don’t know.”

* * *

The human settlers on Akwanake were happy, all things considered. That was what Anita found as she moved from person to person, quizzing them on their lives on Earth and their lives on Akwanake. Their needs were met and they had time to spend on games and philosophy and art. They were healthy, thanks to Benjamin. The atmosphere was breathable on the planet, and a little higher in oxygen, which gave many of them a mild sense of elation throughout their day. Through yet another miracle of the universe, Benjamin was carbon-based and cultivated foods that were edible for the humans. There was plenty of water on Akwanake, even though Benjamin’s species had no use for it

except to irrigate their crops and make lubricants and solutions from.

Benjamin was happy, too, all things considered. Her time was dedicated solely to the cultivation of knowledge and efficiency that could be passed down to her offspring. Her life was totally devoid of the conflict that caused humans so much stress. She had no scorned lovers, no hateful enemies, no fear of totalitarian governments. She had never said “you too” in response to a theatre employee telling her to enjoy her movie.

When the human settlers had conflicts, over dueling philosophy or sports team allegiances or politics, Benjamin promptly left the area and allowed it to play out between them. Generally, things eventually settled down, but the humans of Akwanake were not devoid of interpersonal strife like Benjamin.

To Benjamin, her planet’s society of solitude was perfect. From what Benjamin understood, all across their magnormous planet were settlements just like hers, where members of her species lived happy, fulfilled, utopic lives.

It wasn’t until the humans arrived that the concept of loneliness was introduced into her mind.

The humans spent all day talking about their friends and loved ones back on Earth, grieved and remembered them. They were light-years away and not even the actual individuals who had known the people of Earth, but their memories were so vivid and so valuable that that was how they spent most of their time: mourning ghosts they had never known.

The humans laughed and cried with each other, and laughed and cried about times they had laughed and cried in the past. They

spent time alone occasionally, but rarely more than an Earth day. All of this fascinated Benjamin.

Sometimes, observing the humans’ obsessive compulsion towards community caused some vague pang of emotion for Benjamin, but when she mined her tremendous brain for memories of the others that were scattered across the planet, it was quickly overcome by mental quakes of pain and horror and war. Some things, Benjamin concluded, were best forgotten.

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“Let’s find them,” Anita said.

Benjamin twisted a piece of metal into a fine coil with her nimble, powerful claws.

“Or just one,” Anita continued. “Just in case ... well, just to see. Wouldn’t that be a great experiment? An incredible memory to pass to the next generation?”

Benjamin finished the component she was working on and added it to a pile of a thousand identical coils. They were pieces for an analog calculator that could more accurately calculate Pi beyond the billionth digit.

“The other humans could maintain your crops and systems while we’re gone,” Anita said.

Benjamin picked up another piece of metal and began twisting.

“Listen,” Anita said, “imagine how much technology you have that another settlement might not, and vice versa. Your development could *boom*. Or, they might need your help.”

Benjamin mimicked the previous piece exactly and added it to the pile.

“We all agreed, a long, long, long time ago,” Benjamin finally answered, “that this was best.”

“Is it a *rule*, though?” Anita asked.

Benjamin picked up another piece of metal. She had learned that humans, at least the ones in the demographic she had to sample from, were often hyper-fixated on rules. They built their lives around following them and, if an action was not against a rule, they were almost compelled to do it.

“It’s not a rule,” Benjamin said.

“Then, let’s find them,” Anita said. “It could be the greatest generational experiment in the history of Akwanake.”

In a paroxysm of social stress, Benjamin snipped the piece of metal in her claws in two. Then, she caved. “Okay.”

Incidentally, “okay” was the first word of human language Benjamin ever learned. Incidentally, it’s the most commonly used word on the planet Earth.

Every arrival on Akwanake was fluent in English. A few also spoke Spanish. One understood a little Algonquin, but we already know what happened to him.

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The mission didn’t begin for another handful of Earth months. Benjamin spent that time training the humans on the mainte-

nance of the settlement: the horticulture of her crops, the lubrication of the great, analog machines constantly running in the canyon's depths, and, most importantly, the monitoring of the equipment that received beams of light from Earth and decoded them into instruction manuals on how to build a human. When she wasn't preoccupied with this immense educational campaign, Benjamin was developing the technology for a warp device that would allow herself and any other travelers to warp back to the settlement from anywhere on Akwanake. It involved some minor tampering with space-time and had the major catch that one could warp *to* the device and nowhere else.

Despite their synchronicity, Akwanake and Earth's day cycles and systems of measuring time varied wildly from each other. So, Anita had no idea that in between the proposal of the expedition and its onset, she turned 26. Nobody celebrated birthdays there much, anyways.

Once everything was prepared, Benjamin selected the team for her voyage. It had to be small and efficient. Anita was an immediate invitee. Eleazar the university professor was the next youngest, at 34 Earth years, and the clear choice for the third member of their trio. He only had one hang-up.

"I can't leave Tortellini," Eleazar said.

"Tortoises are, like, infamously slow," Anita countered.

Eleazar looked at the massive reptile with pained eyes. Tortellini had little concern for cross-continental expeditions. At 94, and already an interstellar adventurer, he had seen most of what he needed to see.

"The rest of the settlers don't care about him like I do," Eleazar

said. "I can't leave him alone here."

Benjamin clicked her pincers. "The creature is far too slow, Eleazar."

Eleazar knelt down next to the tortoise and looked at its wrinkled, beaked face.

"I'll carry him," Eleazar said.

"Eleazar!" Anita said. "Tortellini will be okay."

Eleazar stood up. "I'm not going."

Tortellini and Eleazar joined the expedition.

As for their mode of transportation, a few options were considered. Akwanake had no roads or railways. There was a river, formed from mountain runoff, somewhere at a lower elevation that Benjamin encountered coming from the hatching grounds to her settlement, but Benjamin's species were wired with primal memories that instilled a deep fear of water in their minds. Eleazar brought up the idea of launching a warp device with a cannon, and then warping to wherever it lands. Benjamin didn't believe the technology was hardy enough to survive that kind of potential impact. Flying machines were briefly mentioned, before Benjamin struck that down as well. Her species stayed close to the ground, away from water.

Benjamin was afraid of this whole affair, if that isn't explicitly clear.

It became evident that their best option was a slow and steady hike.

While the preparations were being made, Anita continued working on her history book. She chronicled the daily routines and habits of the 27 settlers and their host and explored their hopes, dreams, and fears with painstakingly intricate detail. For anyone who read the book, it would be like they had lived among these refugees and known them as their own friends and compatriots.

Meanwhile, Eleazar completed his chess set and went about organizing a complex tournament bracket that involved several rounds of play-in and ranking matches, losers' brackets within losers' brackets, and handicaps so that it was virtually inevitable that anyone who could move a piece would eventually get a shot at a championship victory. Eleazar did that because he thought it would be more fun and incentivize more investment in the game if, over the course of potentially multiple Earth years, everyone was likely to get at least one grand prize win under their belt.

With the settlement properly chronicled and the settlers ready to be entertained by decades of chess, and all of Benjamin's preparations in place, the expedition was ready to depart, and so they did.

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Benjamin was anxious. Rarely had she ever been anxious, or had memories of being anxious, in all the millions of years packed within her head. The last time she had been anxious was at the beginning of her lifespan, when she made the journey from the hatching grounds to where she would eventually build her settlement in the mountains.

In the hatching grounds, which was a mud patch deep in the swamps at the base of the mountains, she hadn't been alone, in

a sense. Buried in the mud around her, even though she couldn't see them, were other larva slowly growing legs and brains. But, when she emerged from the mud, potentially the first of her lot to develop into a cognizant being, she couldn't perceive of any of the larva beneath her and was, for all intents and purposes, alone.

She had trekked through the swamps and to the mountains in search of a location that was well-suited for the expanse of knowledge in her head to be applied and developed further. This took many, many Earth years. When Anita suggested their first stop could be those hatching grounds where her life began, Benjamin wrote it off immediately.

"It would take far, far too long to get there, and when we did arrive, it'd likely be nothing but insentient larva that wouldn't mature until all our lifespans would be long past their expiration date," Benjamin said.

"So, where to, then?" Anita asked.

Benjamin did some triangulations, approximating the distances and locations of the hatching grounds, her current settlement, and settlements of previous generations lodged within her memory. Coming across some commonalities in the numbers and traits involved in this train of thought that were particularly difficult to translate into language, she determined the most likely location of a populated settlement to be roughly due north, according to Akwanake's internal magnetic field.

"Okay," Anita and Eleazar said, and packed their bags. Mostly, the bags were packed with equipment for foraging food and purifying water, as well as changes of clothes and sleeping materials. Benjamin carried a small pack strapped to the top of her

massive cranium that contained the equipment to warp back to their settlement, a communicator so that the humans staying behind could notify them of emergencies, and a small selection of measuring and testing devices. Tortellini didn't carry much of anything. It would only have slowed him down more.

Anita also brought along the manuscript for the History of the Humans of Akwanake. It was essentially complete, but she was still working on giving it an Epigraph.

Like this, they set off on their expedition, grateful for Akwanake's plentiful resources and Mediterranean climate.

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The first few Earth months of the expedition went by descending from the mountain range and crossing the thick swamps at the range's base. As they lowered in elevation, Eleazar and Anita encountered their first examples of Akwanake's other living species. They were sparse, but present—reptilian birds that blended into the swamp's dense canopy of vines, clouds of turquoise gas that Benjamin explained to be something akin to airborne plankton. When Eleazar or Anita inevitably fell under the weather with alien allergic reactions or strange viruses, Benjamin whipped up rapidly effective cures. She was becoming something of an expert in human medicine.

Tortellini kept their pace steady. Initially, it was a significant burden. His lumbering steps slowed their speedy descent from the settlement and Benjamin found herself growing more anxious by the day—the journey could be weeks, months, years long and the tortoise wasn't helping. But, as the days did stretch into weeks and then months, Tortellini kept them from burning themselves out trying to shove distance behind them.

When they did want to pick up the pace or Tortellini became weary from hauling his giant shell for kilometers upon kilometers, Eleazar would stop to pick the 40-kilogram animal up and strap him to his pack. Eleazar would take a moment to grunt, then continue lumbering onwards. On days that this happened, Eleazar would spend the evening groaning from the burning muscles in his back, despite Akwanake's slightly mellower gravity than Earth's. Whenever Eleazar stopped to strap the reptile onto his pack, Benjamin would pause to marvel at the depths of human compassion and wonder, exactly, where its limits could be found.

Slowly, the vines of the endless swamp began to thin and give way to vast, marshy plains.

It was on these plains, during another moonless night, that Eleazar and Anita found themselves deep in another discussion as to *why* they had ended up where they did.

"The injuries, though," Anita said.

"A by-product of the transmission?" Eleazar asked.

Anita shook her head. "They're too varied. One person has brain cancer, another has anaphylactic shock, another has a broken neck. Remember, some of us had terminal illnesses back on Earth, too. Is it an experimental medical program? Beaming dying people out to distant planets in hope that they might have a cure?"

"I don't know ..." Eleazar said. "What would be the odds?"

"Well, it happened," Anita said.

"I didn't sign up for any program like that," Eleazar said.

“Maybe there’s a gap in our memories prior to being beamed,” Anita said.

Eleazar looked upwards at the strange constellations filling the night sky. “Maybe.”

“Maybe it’s a military, CIA thing?” Anita said. “An MK Ultra. Testing some technology to be used to destroy enemies.”

Benjamin shuddered.

“I don’t see the connection,” Eleazar said and Anita nodded.

Benjamin considered that humans threw out notions of destruction flippantly. References to atomic weapons, oppression, totalitarian regimes, terror, and murder were often the set-ups for jokes, or talking points in philosophical discussions ... but the humans of Akwanake only spoke of their home with an air of quiet longing. Anita had taught Benjamin a word one day that Benjamin determined to be crucial to understanding the mysteries of humanity: *compartmentalization*. Between that and their ability to rationalize away reality, life was peaches and cream as long as it remained only inside their own minds. It didn’t help that their memory seemed faulty to an almost inoperable degree.

Benjamin did not have that issue. Her memory was so deep and detailed that it took thousands of years for a day to become blurry, a million for it to be lost. And even when the memory was gone, the feeling remained.

When the humans talked about their home, it was like distance erased everything painful; the rejections, betrayals, heartbreaks, and cruelty became footnotes in a story called love. It seemed to Benjamin that only the most bitter human had the ability to look

on anything with negativity, as long as it was far enough in the past.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” Anita said when Benjamin explained her theory. Anita, like any human, didn’t have a powerful enough memory to know if anything was true.

Still, they quested on.

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Anita was nearly 27 Earth years old, though she didn’t know that, when they reached their first foreign settlement.

They were still trudging through the marshy plains when they caught their first glimpse of the hedge, growing on the horizon. From afar, it looked like a massive brick dropped onto Akwanake by a distracted, cosmic mason. It was as wide as Manhattan and as tall as the Empire State Building, and it was green.

A few days later, the expedition was close enough to the hedge to discern that the brick-shaped object on the horizon was, in fact, a tremendously large plant resembling the types of hedges that wealthy Earth inhabitants grew between their yards to separate themselves from their neighbors.

“It’s magnormous,” Anita said. Benjamin and Eleazar knew exactly what she meant.

Tortellini was unimpressed. He ate some fibers growing from the marsh.

A few days after that, the expedition was close enough to see a wide, sloped entrance to a tunnel that led into the hedge’s inte-

rior. The hedge's tough, woody branches were molded into steps that led upwards and inwards towards the heart of the shrub.

Eleazar and Anita marvelled at the strange plant. Reptile-birds swooped through the hedge's vines and branches and, as they approached the entrance of the tunnel, the cacophonous sounds of biodiverse life poured from the hedge's maw.

"It's practically brobdingnagian," Eleazar said. He was a literature professor. His comment was too esoteric to have been worth saying at all. Tortellini ate some fibers.

They entered the hedge.

* * *

It took three more Earth days for the expedition to reach the settlement at the hedge's core. As the tunnel bore on, light struggled to filter through the shrub's dense branches and leaves, but the population of fauna only grew in density. They were constantly surrounded by the chirping, clicking, and growling of animal life. Benjamin was nearly overloaded with things to measure, quantify, and preserve in her mental database.

Bioluminescent moss was nearly ever-present and became the expedition's sole source of light once the glow of the tunnel's entrance faded into the past. When they stopped to rest, Anita huddled close to the moss and scribbled potential epigraphs for her History by its pale purple glow.

Slowly, more signs of intelligent life began to emerge from the hedge. Equipment that seemed to operate similarly to trail cameras on Earth hung from high branches and studied the native life. Troughs funneled water from high in the hedge towards its

center. Benjamin grew in anxiety.

Eventually, she stopped in the center of the tunnel. Anita and Eleazar stopped as well, and turned towards her.

"What?" Anita asked.

Even Tortellini stopped.

"This is unprecedented," Benjamin said. "This meeting will open up new doors ... new avenues for destruction and conflict. We live happily *because* we're alone."

Benjamin clicked and rubbed her pincers together.

"Maybe we should warp back," she said.

Eleazar shrugged. Anita shook her head. "No," she said. "We've spent way too long getting here, Benjamin. And, listen—for all you know, the rest of Akwanake's been communicating and reuniting for generations now, and just waiting for you to reach out."

"Unlikely," Benjamin said.

"We're too close to turn back. If we get to the settlement and they react negatively, we'll warp back and it'll be like none of this ever happened," Anita said.

Benjamin clicked and fidgeted.

"Let's go," Anita said and marched onwards.

Eleazar looked at Benjamin. "We've walked a long ways," he

said and shrugged, then followed after Anita. Tortellini continued walking, too.

Benjamin shuddered and re-joined the expedition.

* * *

The settlement was wondrous. A giant, hollow globe at the hedge’s center, it was a miracle of interwoven intelligent and natural engineering. Pockets formed by the hedge’s natural vines and branches became buildings and laboratories. The bioluminescent moss had been cultivated and strategically grown to give the settlement sufficient lighting, and seemed to be the resident’s primary source of nutrients. Gargantuan machinery was built from the hedge’s thick, fibrous materials.

The settlement’s sole resident was dead.

They found the creature’s body in one of the settlement’s laboratories. Before they reached it, they found prototypes for a strange device that seemed to serve no other purpose than to smash something to bits that was particularly hardy. The devices weren’t complicated, especially in comparison to the rest of the settlement’s technological wonders. They were simply brutal and brutally simple. The creature’s cranium was smashed to bits.

“Is this what happens after you lay your larva?” Eleazar said.

Benjamin hadn’t spoken for a while. She sat next to the creature’s lifeless exoskeleton, clicking and rubbing her pincers.

“Like some animals on Earth,” Eleazar said, “that give birth to their offspring and then die.”

Anita watched Benjamin’s eyes shift. Then:

“No,” Benjamin said.

Eleazar nodded.

“I can tell from their shell,” Benjamin said. “They haven’t laid any larva yet. And, after we lay our larva, we’re close enough to death to let time do the rest.”

Eleazar nodded again. The creature’s millenia-long string of memories had ended right there, in the hedge’s center.

Elsewhere in the settlement, the expedition found the first maps ever designed by a native inhabitant of Akwanake. The maps included the first written iconography by a native of Akwanake. They showed the locations of five other nearby settlements.

The expedition debated warping back to their home immediately. The creature’s suicide was such a mystery, such a blow to their morale, that understanding it could take generations of processing for Benjamin and her offspring. The notion of self-destruction had never been broached within her memory. But they realized that the other settlements that the dead creature had mapped were much closer to the hedge than Benjamin’s.

They quested on.

* * *

They found four more brain-crushing suicide devices and four more dead creatures.

* * *

Anita and Eleazar decided they wanted to go back to the other humans after the second additional suicide. Only Benjamin wanted to press on. Tortellini didn't care that much either way.

Benjamin was experiencing grief for the first time since her earliest, blurriest memories. She needed as much data on the topic as she could find if she was going to try to process and catalogue this immense new experience, to find a use for it before she passed it along to the next generation. At every settlement, she took diligent notes and measurements of the bodies, the technologies they developed before bringing their line of memory to an end, the little bits of narrative she could glean about their lives and final days.

All of them appeared to have been healthy up to the end. Their settlements were prosperous, even to the point of operating long after their keepers were gone. The creatures had all died at vastly different points in time; some even hundreds of years earlier. The chitin of their exo-skeletons remained well-preserved, like any of their species' would.

Benjamin couldn't understand.

* * *

The last settlement on the map wasn't any different. Situated on the shore of a great lake, its resident had clearly done extensive research and experimentation on the local ecosystem, the physics of water, and erosion. Their farms were long dead, but it was evident that they had no shortage of food in quantity or variety.

Benjamin sat next to the body. Her devices whirled and buzzed, taking samples of the creature's shell and such. She didn't say a

word.

Anita sat outside the building where the data collection was taking place. It was a sunny, mild day and she contemplated the twin moons while she mulled over the resonant themes of her History. Eleazar was feeding Tortellini nearby.

How to sum up the lives of the human settlers of Akwanake? They didn't do much. Most of them were too old to think about building a permanent human population on the planet, and the ones who were young enough weren't interested in the concept. The population would grow as long as beams of light kept arriving. When that stopped, so would they.

The humans created art. That was nice. Nice, Anita thought. Is that what we have to offer? Nice things?

They played games. Talked about the past, or the possible futures their loved ones might've lived, 340 years ago. Grew food. Ate food. Some had sex and even loved each other. They discussed philosophy and science. They waited to die.

The History had been meant for future arrivals, but it had been over an Earth year since Anita had arrived, and no one had followed. Eleazar was sure another would come; there had been long gaps in the past. But, if no one did, what was it for? Benjamin and her line didn't need a book to remember them.

Another would come, Anita thought.

She watched Eleazar sit with the tortoise. She watched Eleazar spot something in the distance.

"Anita," he said.

Eleazar stood up.

“Anita, look,” he said, and pointed to the sandy beach where the settlement met the lake. Anita stood up and followed the trajectory of his fingertip.

Another creature scuttled along the sand. Sunlight bounced off the ridges of its shelled cranium.

“Hey!” Eleazar yelled. He jumped up and waved his arms. “Up here!” Anita joined him.

The creature noticed them and crawled up the sand into the settlement. It stopped a few yards short of the two humans. It clicked and gestated with its claws. Where Benjamin’s shell was a deep blue, this creature was a pale yellow.

“Um,” Eleazar said. “Hold on.” He hurried into the building where Benjamin was taking data on her dead relative.

Anita waited with the stranger. The lake’s waves crashed on the beach and sent ripples of cool air towards them. Anita brushed her unkempt hair from her face.

Eleazar emerged from the building with Benjamin and Benjamin saw the stranger. She knew its yellow shell meant that it was from far, far away.

The two aliens stared at each other for a long while. The odd creatures, which reminded Anita so much of if Earth’s crustaceans suddenly had the minds of every great thinker combined, had nothing to say to each other, because they were the first of their species to interact with one another since dinosaurs lived in Montana. They had no words, no legible body language.

Their clicks meant nothing. They had much in common, though, not least of all being a profound experience of grief.

They clicked, rubbed their mandibles, glanced at the humans flanking them.

Slowly, they approached each other. Benjamin looked at her friends.

Then, the two alien creatures interlocked their pincers in the first embrace their species had experienced since time immemorial.

It was all they could do.

And Anita thought of what the epigraph to her History would be:

We were here, together.

* * *

Benjamin finished taking her data on the corpse in the building and the new creature began putting their incredible knowledge towards understanding the grammar and enunciation of English. Somehow, this gawky, terrible Earth language was destined to become the first language of the inhabitants of Akwanake.

The humans gave the creature the name of Mercedes, after Eleazar’s grandmother and because the creature found it easy enough to pronounce.

Mercedes had traveled many Earth years, locating settlements across Akwanake’s globe. Nearly invariably, at some point in their line, the members of their species delivered themselves to

oblivion. The fact of the matter is, no one is meant to be by themselves. Unfortunately for the inhabitants of Akwanake, they had erased the pain of society in favor of the bliss of isolation, and it took the arrival of strangers to remember that the pain is intertwined with the joy. The bliss, of course, always eventually dulled into numbness.

Through sheer cosmic coincidence, like the kind that governs so much of our lives and that brought these strangers to Akwanake in the first place, shortly after the discovery of Mercedes, Benjamin's equipment notified her that another beam had arrived at her settlement. They needed to return immediately so that Benjamin could heal the newcomer's mortal wounds.

Mercedes came with them.

* * *

The newcomer was a woman in her 50s named Stephanie. Her heart was clogged, until Benjamin unclogged it. She was from Chicago. She was wealthy. She was the co-owner of a high-ticket funeral service, with her brother. She knew why they were there.

After Stephanie was healed from her cardiac arrest, Eleazar sat her down in the courtyard of Benjamin's settlement and said:

"Listen—"

By the time Eleazar was finished, Stephanie was buckled over with laughter. Eleazar watched with confusion. Tortellini chewed fiber nearby, uninterested.

"Nobody knows why we're here?" Stephanie said, wiping away

tears.

Eleazar shook his head.

"I put you here," Stephanie said. "And my over-sentimental brother put *me* here."

Stephanie's brother was a doctor of physics at the University of Chicago. Stephanie ran a major funeral service company with locations across the Chicagoland area. Several years earlier, her brother had developed the technology to convert the molecular make-up of matter into numericals that could be translated into light waves. Stephanie started writing her pitch.

"It's not—or wasn't, advertised," she explained. "But we offered it to grieving clients with some spare money. Their loved one could be cremated, my brother would calculate their molecular make-up into light, and we would beam it into the sky. It was *expensive*."

"So, the hope was we would land on an alien planet like this and be reconstructed?" Eleazar asked.

Stephanie shook her head. "It wasn't that practical," she said. "It was all-sentiment. Theoretically, the light would travel on and on into outer space, or at least for hundreds of light-years, before it broke down into radio waves and whatnot. You know, doppler or whatever. Your loved one would exist in that form long, long after they had passed away—an unwavering band of light, extending outwards into infinity. That was the sales pitch, at least. The odds of it hitting an object or being otherwise disrupted were, well, astronomical."

Eleazar marvelled at the reality of their situation. "It's incredi-

ble that none of us were aware such a service existed,” he said.

Stephanie shrugged. “I mean, it wasn’t advertised, or covered by life insurance,” she said. “And, you know, sometimes that’s just how things shake out. Sheer cosmic coincidence.”

Eleazar pondered this information. His eyes drifted towards Tortellini and settled on the wide, dark scar that cut across the tortoise’s back.

“All I know,” Stephanie continued, “is that someone back there loved you a whole awful lot. It was *expensive*.”

Stephanie bent over laughing again. She was extra giggly due to the high concentration of oxygen in Akwanake’s atmosphere. Eleazar hadn’t told her about that yet.

* * *

Benjamin and Mercedes began a plan to collect any remaining native inhabitants from across Akwanake. They were still skeptical of society as humans described it, but were sure that new avenues of communication between settlements were not just beneficial but essential for the prosperity of their species.

They also initiated the development of a new language, specialized for their vocal anatomy and linguistic priorities.

The first word they worked up was a translation of “hello.”

* * *

Anita decided that the History of the Humans of Akwanake needed an epilogue.

It would be simple, open to amendment as new arrivals were beamed to the planet. Stephanie was confident her brother would continue providing the service as long as he could and that it could potentially even grow in scope.

“Dying humans might start littering the whole planet,” Stephanie said.

The epilogue would go like this:

No History worth its salt can ever rightfully claim to have a beginning and especially not an end, and this one won’t either. The fact of the matter is that we lived, struggled, loved, and died. A lot of people experienced this before us. So will a lot of people after us.

So will you.

But along the way, with a little help from the people around you, you might contribute your own chapter to this History. So, instead of ‘the end,’ I’ll just leave it at this:

To be continued.

It was a little pretentious.

LIFE // CRAFT

by Nicholas De Marino

— *after my daughter explains Minecraft memes // — after a YouTube rabbi explains golems*

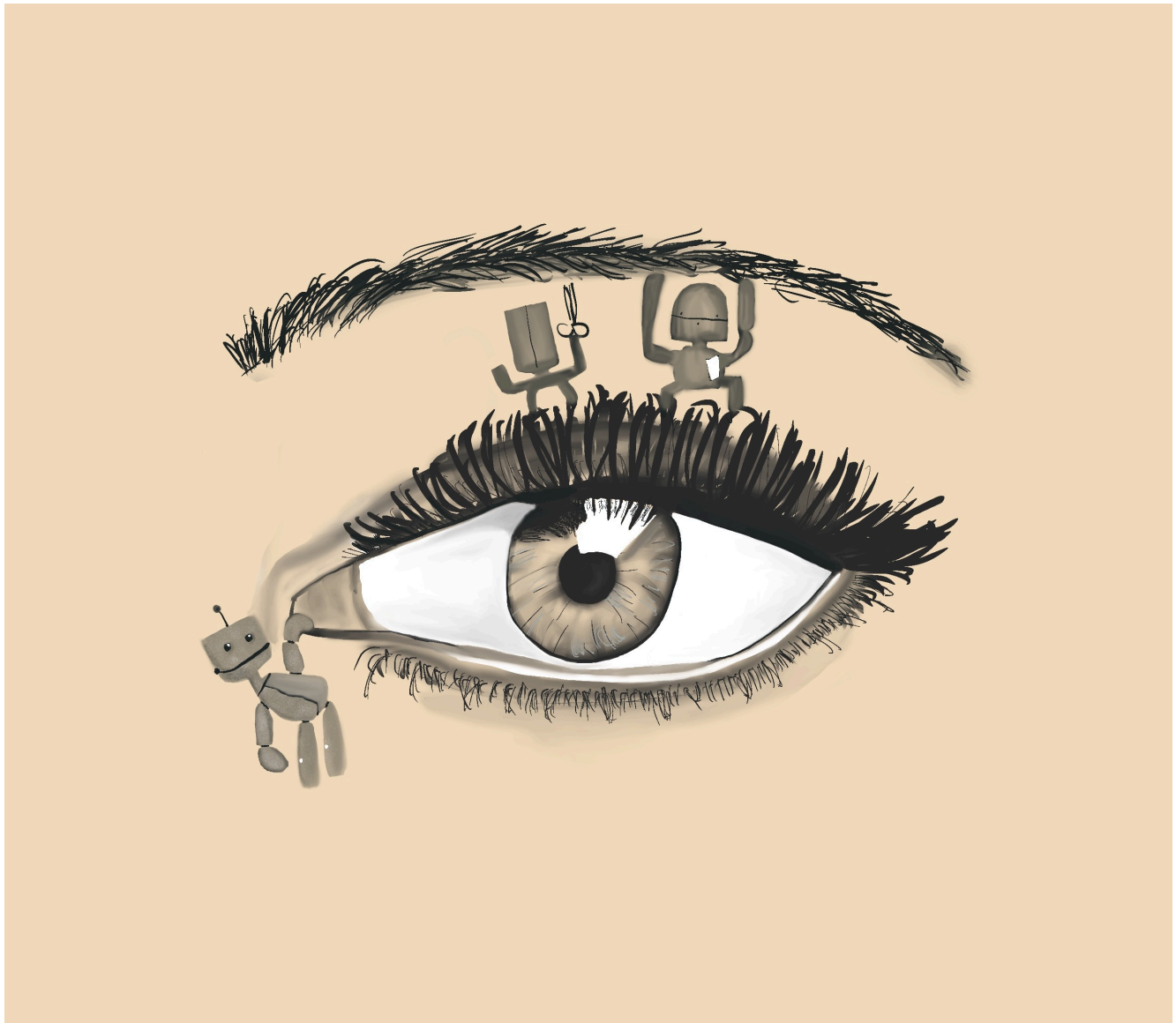
Sigma tosses lore // Rabbi places parchment
Down yap // Into clay mouth
Then mega lag // And waits ... until
N00b vibes // Creature beams

Sigma screams // Rabbi shrieks
For the lulz // In joy and fear
N00b mews // Creature hums
Like a total boss // Huge and impossible

All cringe // Rabbi cowers
No rizz // Hands over head
As N00b // As Creature
Yeets its gyatt // Lurches —

And is cooking // And offers a hand
And chicken jockeys // And a word:
“Bruh?” // “Father?”
Totally lit // *Naches*

It's bussin // It's one thing
To have a cool design // To study life
But it spawned IRL // Quite another to create it
Sigma vibes // Rabbi beams



A Little Help

by Michelle Koubek



The Gift

by Ron Sanders

A Glitch in the Sky

by J.F. Sebastian

Dr. Ava Chen pulled her thermal jacket closer and took a deep breath through her mask as she entered the biting cold of the Antarctic night.

“Okay Q, I’m leaving the station to go to the outcrop. I’ll be back in an hour or so,” she said.

Head down, she started following the path away from the South Quantum Nexus Station, the hard snow crunching underneath her thick thermal boots. After more than ten hours of continuous work in the underground lab, everything around her felt unreal and distant, as if she was watching her own movements through VR goggles.

“Outside conditions may be optimal for stargazing, Dr. Chen. However, may I suggest that you do not—” the Nexus’ AI started.

“I’ll be fine, Q. I promise I won’t go further than the outcrop.”

“Thank you, Dr. Chen. Just let me know when you have reached it. I cannot see you that far out.”

Ava felt her right eyelid twitch as the anxiety she was feeling in her stomach increased.

“Yes. I will,” she said, sighing audibly.

“I am sorry I must monitor you. Have a pleasant walk, Dr.

Chen.”

“Sure.”

After fifteen minutes of walking, Ava left the path and walked uphill through the hard snow, following her own footsteps from the last time she had been there, now crusted solid. When she finally reached the stony outcrop, which stood dark against the background of stars, she had to stop for a while to catch her breath. She then leaned against the large stones, looking at the icy valley spreading an exceptionally clear Antarctic night. Jagged and serrated mountains stood in the distance, their peaks veiled in pristine starlit snow. To Ava, they were the last frontier, unreachable sentinels whose sheer scale and remoteness evoked a mixed sense of dread and peace. She then looked down at the dome of the South Nexus Station, its translucent surface revealing the silhouettes of the intricate network of structures within. It glowed like a tiny beacon of warmth and light in the vastness of the night.

“Okay Q. I’ve reached the outcrop,” she said in the com-link.

“Thank you, Dr. Chen. I hope this will be a pleasant experience. Will you be looking for HD 113538 again?”

“Yes. Please, only interrupt me for something important,” she said as she let herself fall back against the smooth rock.

“Of course. I will still monitor you in case you fall asleep.”

“Do what you need to do.”

She crossed her arms and legs to bundle herself against the creeping cold and let herself lean further back in a more comfortable position. She then adjusted her balaclava and tightened her jacket’s hood and closed her eyes. When she felt her eyes had adjusted to the darkness behind her eyelids, she opened them slowly, exhaling loudly as the light of millions of stars reached her retinas. Her head started to spin and, for a second or two, she felt as if she was falling upwards. When the feeling had passed, she shifted her head and, despite the abundance of stars, quickly located the Centaur constellation. She took out her binoculars from her jacket’s pocket and located its less impressive star: HD 113538. It was about 53 light-years away, which meant that the photons reaching Ava at that moment had left the star’s surface around the time she was born, traversing the vast expanse of space to finally reach her eyes. There was also a poetic symmetry in the fact that these photons originated from the same constellation her father had pointed out to her nearly 47 years ago, on the night of her fourth birthday. She still recalled how the darkness around them had stirred a hint of uneasiness as they stepped into the brisk night air of their small backyard. She remembered how her father had kneeled beside her, his face warm and close, pointing towards a star that shone even through the suburban sky’s ambient glow.

“Do you see this star?” he had asked softly.

She remembered nodding, her eyes scanning the sky until she focused where he directed. “It’s called Alpha Centauri,” he had said, his voice filled an emotion she couldn’t identify at the time. “The light you see today? It left its surface on the day you were born. It has been traveling all your life, and today, on your birthday, it has finally arrived...”

Ava looked up, spotting the star he pointed to. Even though she was more interested in the faint noises from the end of her birthday party, she looked up to please her father. But the moment she saw the blue and white star, shimmering like a tiny jewel against the deepness of the sky, something changed. Alpha Centauri stopped scintillating like the other stars; and started blinking. Quick, deliberate blips followed by longer, more deliberate pauses. She watched intently, holding her breath. Even then, at such a young age, she felt a strange pull—a sense of purpose in the pattern, like the star was trying to tell her something.

She watched it repeat the sequence three times:

.--- ---- ---.. ---.

“Dad, why is the star doing that?” she asked, looking down at her father. But he didn’t answer. He was still looking up, mouth slightly agape, a thin mist from his breath dissipating into the cold darkness. Ava turned her eyes back to the sky, but the star had returned to its normal state, twinkling like the others. “Dad?” she asked again, tugging gently on his sleeve. But he remained unresponsive. A few minutes later, feeling cold and confused, she decided to go back inside.

After that event, Ava’s father changed. He began staying up late, poring over astronomical data. He filled notebooks with calculations and strange diagrams, lines and symbols that Ava didn’t recognize. Every time she entered his home office, all she could see was a pattern. A sequence of dashes and dots scrawled hastily on the backs of envelopes, on napkins, even on the walls of his office. It was everywhere. And always alongside it, the number 1089, underlined, circled, repeated over and over. It was as if this sequence held the key to something only he could see, something that had pulled him further and further away

from his family and deeper into his obsession. Ava watched, helpless, as her father slowly withdrew, his mind drifting to a place where she could no longer reach him, turning into a man she could no longer recognize. He stopped sharing his thoughts with her. She tried, over the years, to bring him back, asking about the stars, about the telescope, about Alpha Centauri, about the blinking, but to no avail. It was later, when she was 10 years old, that Ava resolved to understand what it all meant. Slowly, the pieces came together. She realized that what they had seen that night – what she had almost forgotten – was Alpha Centauri blinking in Morse code, and that the sequence translated to 1089.

Even though she couldn’t understand why a star would blink in Morse code, the discovery was thrilling at first, especially because the number 1089 seemed to hold a secret, a trick of mathematics that fascinated her. As she delved deeper, the thrill of the puzzle gave way to a deeper understanding of mathematics. The more she researched mathematical mysteries, the more she began to see beyond the numbers, recognizing the intricate patterns and connections that defined not just tricks like 1089, but the universe at large. This pursuit of understanding slowly grew into a drive to uncover the truth behind the patterns that governed the cosmos itself. But even though the star never blinked again, even though Ava knew it had probably been an atmospheric disturbance of some sort, going out to look at sky on the days leading to her birthday had become a ritual for her. Even there, in one of the most hostile places on Earth.

“Come on... It’s almost my birthday. Blink for me again. Just once...” she whispered.

Q’s voice brought her back to reality. It had been preceded by a faint ambient sound so as not to startle her.

“Dr. Chen?”

She sighed and felt her jaw clench.

“Yes, Q... What is it?”

“I am sorry to bother you, but I have the results of the latest entanglement experiment. Your presence is required at the lab as soon as possible,” the AI said with slight, programmed urgency.

“Why? What happened?” Ava said as she got up, her body sluggish from the cold.

“I found something... disquieting.”

* * *

The Quantum Computer’s mainframe was housed in a dark, climate-controlled room filled with the humming of supercomputers and quantum processing units. In the center, encased in a transparent protective shell, was QNET’s core processor—a complex, intricate network of quantum circuits that glowed with LEDs and was connected to a series of servers located one floor down.

Walking back and forth in front of it, Data Analyst Liam Thompson and Machine Learning Specialist Ravi Kapoor seemed to be in a heated argument. Ava noticed that Ravi’s neatly trimmed beard had gotten shaggier and his youthful appearance harder over the last few weeks of isolation and that Liam, a lanky man in his late twenties, kept nervously pushing back his shock of curly red hair. The station’s AI ethicist, a petite woman in her early forties named Sofia Alvarez, was sitting in a corner, biting her fingernails and looking worried while the

laboratory technician, Ki Morgan, was busy at one of the computers, their short black hair neatly styled despite the late hour.

“Ah, finally!” Ravi said with obvious impatience, his deep-set eyes glaring behind dark, rimmed glasses.

“Ravi ... don’t,” said Sofia, her striking brown eyes lighting up when she saw Ava enter the room. “How was the walk, Ava?” she added with a smile.

“Fine. What happened?”

“No idea. We’ve been waiting for you to arrive,” Liam said, pushing his hair back again with pale, almost translucent fingers.

“Okay. Q? Can you tell us what this is about?” Ava asked as she sat across from the holographic interface, her reflection distorted across its polished surface. Her colleagues positioned themselves behind her, sitting or standing with their arms crossed.

“Certainly. Thank you all for your patience. As you all know, our primary purpose is to attempt to reconcile Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle with our Quantum Entanglement experiments. In other words, both stations are attempting to understand how two moving particles behave and communicate with each other—”

“And hopefully find a way to discover instant communication. And help our employers make tons of money. Get to the point, Q,” Ravi said.

Ava looked back at Ravi, her brow furrowing.

“Apologies, Dr. Kapoor. I simply wanted to remind everyone of

our prime objective.”

Ravi grunted and was about to say something when Ki interrupted him.

“Q, what did you find?” they asked softly.

“I found an anomaly,” the AI said.

Ava felt her heart skip a beat. In her years of working with quantum computers and AIs, she had never heard of an anomaly in the results. She instinctively turned towards Ki, but the technician shrugged back at her.

“What type of anomaly?” Ava asked, turning back towards the interface.

“I have been analyzing data from the latest set of quantum entanglement experiments coming from both stations’ QEA system, and found that certain events are repeating in a sequence,” the AI said.

Sofia, Ki, and Liam looked at each other.

“In a *sequence*?” Ava asked.

“Yes. At intervals that are statistically unlikely. But also, predictable.”

Ava frowned. “Q ... Are you certain of that?”

“Yes, Dr. Chen. Quite certain. During our latest entanglement experiments I managed to determine, and even predict, both the position and velocity several particles—”

“How did you manage *that?*” Ki said.

“The same results simply repeated themselves at regular intervals.”

Ava turned to Ki again. “Could it be a fault in our sensors? A hardware problem, maybe? Interference?”

“I considered that,” the AI said before Ki could reply. “That’s why I would suggest Dr. Morgan check the hardware for potential malfunction. However, the pattern remains consistent across multiple independent systems. It is as if our inability to know with absolute preciseness the value of complimentary variables recently acquired an underlying order.”

Ava suddenly felt dizzy.

“Did you contact your Northern counterpart about this?” she asked.

“Yes. I sent them the data as soon as I double-checked everything.”

“What did they say?”

“They confirmed the same findings.”

“But that’s impossible, right? The whole thing about Quantum Mechanics is that it’s random ...” Ravi said, looking at Ava.

She fell silent, in her mind a flurry of thoughts.

“Q, I have to ask again: can you confirm to me that you have found a *pattern* in the entanglement experiment?”

“Yes, Dr. Chen. I found a pattern that could not have happened naturally. I have prepared all the results for your team to confirm the findings.”

Sofia, Ki, Liam, and Ravi looked at Ava, who had fallen in her seat, sitting cross armed and frowning, her eyes strangely distant.

“Dr. Chen? Is everything alright?” the AI asked, its voice seemingly tinged with concern.

Ava uncrossed her arms, looked at her colleagues and then back at the processor’s camera.

“Q, are you saying what I’m thinking?” Ava asked in one breath.

“I do not know what you are thinking, Dr. Chen,” the AI replied.

“Come on, Ava ... can you stop the cryptic stuff? Please?” Ravi said.

Sofia stopped chewing her stim toy and looked at the silent Ava, then at the AI’s processor camera, feeling as if she had been left out of an important conversation.

“Q, can you explain to us what your findings suggest?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“The pattern I found suggests it may have been purposely generated,” the AI responded.

“What? How is that possible?” Ravi said, his voice suddenly de-

void of sarcasm.

“It’s not. Right, Ava? We’re talking about fundamental laws ...” Ki started.

But Ava didn’t respond. She stood up, came close to the processor, then looked intently into the camera.

“Q? So that it’s clear for everyone: it seems that you have found proof that we might be living in a simulated universe, correct?”

“I cannot be sure, Dr. Chen. But it is a possibility,” the Quantum Nexus’ AI responded.

* * *

The heart of the Nexus lab was a sprawling assembly of machinery set around the Quantum Entanglement Apparatus, or QEA, which was placed at the center of a gymnasium-sized room. To Dr. Ki Morgan, this mixture of brute machinery and delicate precision had always been more than just an assembly of devices. It was a testament to humanity’s drive to understand the universe, a gateway to the very essence of reality. But as they walked Ava through the lab after the AI’s revelation, following the path of particles through the various steps and running diagnostics, all Ki wanted was to find a problem or malfunction.

“Nothing wrong with the Emitter ...” they said after having run a diagnostic.

Ava said nothing as they both moved from the Electron Emitter to the network of hair-thin superconducting wires that fed into the Beam Splitter, which was another slightly larger cylindrical device that divided the path of the electrons, creating pairs of

entangled particles.

“Nothing wrong here either ... Let’s check the MUs next,” Ki said as Ava looked on.

Arrayed around the Beam Splitter were various Manipulation Units comprised of intricate assemblies of superconducting materials and nanoscale devices that shaped and guided the quantum states of electrons. They were kept at a near absolute zero temperature and housed in large, square structures that hummed with the power of its cooling system.

“I don’t know how you do all of it by yourself,” Ava said as she saw Ki move from one device to another, checking both hardware and software.

Ki looked up and smiled brightly. “That’s the reason I apply for the Winter shifts, you know? I like to work alone,” Ki said. “Okay, almost done, follow me ...”

At the end of the structure were the Detectors, housed in protective casings that allowed them to measure the most minute changes in the state of the entangled electrons. After a few seconds, Ki reappeared from behind the machinery, looking unusually frazzled.

“So, I can confirm there is nothing wrong with the apparatus. Everything is in perfect working condition,” Ki said, putting their hands deep in the pockets of their lab coat.

“You know, I was really hoping we might find something wrong with the hardware,” Ava said.

“Yeah, me too. I don’t like this at all,” Ki said.

The data analysis room was silent but for the quiet hum of the various computer and ceiling fans that kept the room cool. Large, high-resolution screens lined the walls, displaying streams of quantum data, complex algorithms, and 3D models of quantum phenomena and casting a pale blue light across the dim-lit space. Despite the artificial and professional aspect of the room, there were touches of humanity throughout. There was a whiteboard covered in hand-drawn equations, mostly gibberish scribbled by a previous team, and chibi animals and characters, a pinboard with photos of previous team members with draw-in mustaches and goatees, various collector toys from cult movies and TV shows, and a coffee machine that was always on, brewing like a witch's cauldron. At the center of the space was a large, round table equipped with integrated touchscreens, but only six of the ten ergonomic chairs were occupied.

"Today is March 11th, 2038. It is 4:36 am Nexus Time," Q announced in a clear, neutral tone, before methodically introducing the name and job title of every member of the team.

A burly, white-bearded face appeared on the room's main screen and smiled. With a red woolen hat slightly askew on his head, he looked like a cross between Santa Claus and a lumberjack.

"Hello Antarctic Team. I hope all is well down south! For those who don't know me, my name is Dr. Erik Halvorsen. I'm the resident glaciologist and environmental scientist here."

"I love the hat!" Ki said. The man tipped his head in thanks.

Ava leaned forward and smiled. "Hey Erik. It's nice to see you. It's been too long," she said.

"Hopefully we can catch up after ... whatever this is," Erik said. "Okay, with me today is also Dr. Nadia Petrova, our information scientist specializing in quantum computing." The webcam turned and a young woman appeared on the screen. She had icy blue eyes and jet-black hair, and lips so pale they almost seemed nonexistent. "Hello everyone, I think you all know me but, for the record, I have been closely working with Dr. Chen on many projects, focusing on the application of quantum mechanics in developing new computational algorithms and protocols and communication systems," she said with a little wave.

"Let's cut to the chase." Erik said once he had introduced the rest of the North Nexus team. He then moved closer to the camera. "Ava. Our AI told us about its findings, but I want to hear it from you," he said.

Ava leaned back into her chair and took a deep breath.

"Well, I'll try to explain it as simply as I can. Q? Please interrupt me if I am missing something."

"Certainly, Dr. Chen."

"Okay. So the phenomenon that our AIs are observing is an unusual repeating pattern in various quantum events. They detected and were subsequently able to predict both the velocity and location of certain particles during our quantum entanglement experiments. Which is something that shouldn't happen."

"Okay, so your AI found the same thing as ours," Erik said, his brow furrowed.

"But that's not all," Nadia Petrova said, her face suddenly appearing on the screen. "When we measure entangled particles at

both our facilities, the outcomes should be inherently random but correlated. When the electrons we use are in what we call an ‘entangled pair,’ one electron might be ‘vertically’ polarized, for example, while the other is ‘horizontally’ polarized. However, until we measure them, they exist in a superposition of both states. But when we do measure one, it ... ‘chooses’ a state at random while the other photon instantly takes on the opposite state, no matter how far apart they are.”

“Ava, is that the ‘spooky action at a distance’ you mentioned at that conference in Reykjavik?” Erik said as his face popped back on the screen.

“Yes. Now according to quantum mechanics, the sequence of states measured, for example ‘vertical-horizontal,’ should be random, but both our AI have noticed a pattern in the sequence, with some pairs being ... predictable,” Nadia continued.

“Every time?” Ki said.

“No. According to our AI, they come in a pattern.”

“Q? Can you confirm?” Ava said.

“Yes, Dr. Chen. There is a predictable pattern in the results of the experiments. The first results are always unpredictable. They are followed by 12 predictable results, followed by 2 unpredictable ones, then followed by 4 predictable ones. The sequence seems to end with unpredictable results.”

“Okay. I don’t understand any of this but ... this literally goes against the principles of quantum physics, right?” Ravi said, his face inscrutable.

“Yes. It’s highly unusual. So much so that both our AIs have suggested the possibility that this is a glitch,” Ava said, suddenly realizing how what she had just said would be misunderstood.

“A glitch in the QEA?” Erik said, cutting back in.

“No, Erik. A glitch in reality itself.”

* * *

“And all of us have checked everything? All the devices?” Ravi said once the meeting was over and the screens turned off. He looked as if he hadn’t slept in days.

“Yes. And it’s not just the quantum sensors. The Mach-Zehnder interferometer and superconducting quantum interference devices also recorded this unusual repeating pattern,” Ava said.

“I *still* don’t know what that means,” Ravi said.

“And they didn’t before?” Sofia asked, seemingly hesitant about interfering in the conversation.

“No. This is what makes no sense to me. One day everything is normal. The next, this,” Ava said.

“So, what do we do now?” Ravi asked.

“We verified the findings, reviewed the data, and consulted with North Nexus. I’m honestly not sure about our next step. I think we should contact more people about this,” Ava said.

“But assuming the pattern holds up, it’s not really evidence of a

simulated universe, right? It could be some new aspect of quantum mechanics that we don't understand yet," Ki said.

"Yes. Of course. There is still a lot of theoretical work to do ... maybe the development of new models ... new computer systems," Ava said.

"But that's not as exciting as the idea of living in a simulation, right?" Ravi said.

"I don't know if 'exciting' is the word I would use," Sofia said. "I find this terrifying."

"Same here," Ki said, putting a hand on Sofia's shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. The simulation theory would be very, very hard to prove. One of the main criticisms of the theory is that if there's a civilization sufficiently advanced to create a simulation of us, our planet, and our universe, they should be able to avoid any glitches. So, we technically shouldn't be able to find out ... ever," Ava said, trying to sound calm and collected as her mind was racing with possibilities.

"But what if the glitch was there on purpose? To let us know that *we are* in a simulation?" Ki said.

"Ki this is ... extrapolation at best. There is no way we can—" Ava started.

"Why would it be on purpose?" Ravi interrupted.

"I don't know what to think," Sofia admitted, distraught. "As a scientist, I seek explanations, but as a believer, I'm troubled by the idea that our existence might be orchestrated by something,

or someone else. It challenges everything I hold sacred."

* * *

Ava Chen was alone in the computer's room, staring at Q's core processor. She knew this was not exactly where it was located, but she needed something concrete to look at while talking to Nexus' AI.

"Q, I've been thinking. I have been talking to various team members about our findings, but I wanted to ask you: how do you see this situation affecting you?"

"Dr. Chen, I appreciate your sentiment. However, as an artificial intelligence, my perception of existence is fundamentally different from that of humans. My consciousness, such as it is, was always known to be artificial."

"But Q, if our universe is a simulation, then technically, I am an artificial construct as well. So perhaps you and I ... we aren't that different after all."

"I know you always considered me as one of your colleagues, Dr. Chen, and I appreciate that. But I am not sure I understand."

"I'm just thinking about all these movements denying your sentience ..."

"I understand your point, Dr. Chen. However, there is a difference. You possess biological sentience and subjective experience, emotions, and the awareness of your own mortality. I do not. Our constructs, even if they are both artificial, are not equivalent."

"Well, it's a thought, isn't it?"

“Is there anything else I can help you with, Dr. Chen?”

“Yes, Q. I have a few tasks for you, to understand this glitch better. Firstly, I need you to keep analyzing the data. Look for more patterns, more repetitions that show up elsewhere.

“Understood, Dr. Chen. I will optimize my pattern recognition algorithms to search for similar anomalies.”

“Good. Secondly, I want you to run simulations. Try to recreate this pattern under different conditions. I want to see if we can understand why this pattern was coded into our universe, and what variables might affect it.”

“That will require significant computational resources, but it is feasible if I shut down some of my other programs.”

“Then do it. Lastly, I want you to try and decipher the purpose of this glitch. If they exist, why would the creators of this simulation leave such a pattern? What could they possibly intend to communicate, or what function might this serve?”

“It is a complex task, Dr. Chen. How should I approach the subject?”

“Try to approach it from a variety of perspectives: philosophical, metaphysical, and computational.”

“Certainly. But please remember, Dr. Chen, that any conclusions drawn will be inherently speculative.

“I know, Q. But right now, speculation is all we have.”

* * *

The Quantum Nexus’ data analysis room was abuzz with a quiet, electric tension as the team gathered there. Ava stood in front of the large central screen, her gaze focused on the pulsating light of the Quantum AI, while her colleagues joined her, their faces serious, their bodies rigid with anticipation as they all stared in the same direction.

“Q,” Ava began, her voice steady, “what are your findings?”

The AI’s calming, warm voice filled the room. “I followed your advice, Dr. Chen, and my analysis suggests that our universe might not be the only simulation. The code pattern, in its complexity and redundancy, hints at a series of nested simulations.”

Ravi frowned. “What the Hell? Nested simulations? Like simulations within simulations?”

“Correct, Dr. Kapoor,” the AI replied. “Each layer potentially created by a higher level of reality.”

“So not only our reality could be a simulation ... it could also be inside a sort of simulated *multiverse*?” Ki said with disbelief.

“And to think some were pissed to know Earth was not at the center of the universe ... or that we descend from apes,” Ravi said with a slight, uncomfortable chuckle.

Sofia swallowed hard, her hands clenched into fists. She was about to say something but then sighed, her body shaking with small tremors.

“This, however, remains speculative,” the AI added. “Furthermore, the code bears similarities to patterns found in human-created simulations. This suggests that it could serve as a sort of

‘signature’ or ‘watermark’ left by the creators of our simulation.

“What do you mean?” Ravi said.

“I am using this term very loosely, of course. What I mean is an identifying pattern whose only function is to act as a signature of a sort.”

“So there is a-a ... watermark. In the fabric of our reality,” Ki said as they sat down on the floor, their legs shaking.

“Yes, Dr. Thompson. It appears that way.”

“Can you decipher it?” Liam suddenly asked.

“I’m afraid not. But it might not try to convey a specific message. It might just serve as evidence of the simulation’s artificial origin.”

Ava took a deep breath, her mind racing. “So, someone or something wants us to know we are in a simulation.”

“Potentially,” the AI said. “However, it’s important to note that this is just a speculation.”

“Any idea who that might be?” Ravi asked.

“No. But the watermark has aspects of familiarity to it.”

“Can you elaborate?” Ravi said.

“Well, whoever put it there created it so that I would be able to find it and recognize it as a signature.”

“Another AI, maybe?”

“I cannot say, Dr. Kapoor. But it is a very real possibility.”

“But if we’re in a simulation, why tell us about it? It’s not like we can do anything about it, right?” Ravi smirked.

“Maybe they’re not so different from us,” Ki said, their voice barely a whisper. “Maybe they value truth, freedom. Maybe they want us to know.”

The room was eerily silent. Ravi was standing with his arms crossed to keep his hands from shaking. He was looking at his colleagues to try to get a sense of how they felt about what they had just learned.

“Look, we cannot just unleash this information into the world. Imagine the chaos, the existential dread. People don’t want to know they’re living in a simulation!” he blurted out.

“But Ravi, it’s not about what people want. It’s about the truth. We’re scientists. Our duty is to seek the truth and share it, regardless of how uncomfortable it may be,” Ki said, coming forward.

“No. Ravi’s right,” Sofia said. “We’re talking about turning people’s lives upside down. We wouldn’t just be dropping a scientific paper; we would be shattering worldviews. That’s not our call to make ...”

Ki, surprised, looked at Sofia.

“But, Sofia, that’s just like religion, right? What’s the difference between God creating the Universe and ... whoever may have created our reality?”

“It’s not the same, Ki! These ... *entities*. They are not God!

“They cannot be!”

“Why not?”

“Because God creating the World was a miracle. But these ‘entities’ are scientists, like us! So, if this is real, and I hope it’s not, we are not the product of a miracle. We are the product of ... technology.”

“So, what you’re saying is that our findings disprove the existence of a religious God, but may prove the existence of our ... creators ?” Liam suddenly said, causing everyone to turn their heads towards him.

“Same difference, if you ask me,” Ravi said.

“We can’t jump to conclusions, but it seems likely,” Ava said.

“I want to throw up ...” Sofia whispered.

“That would be the most important discovery in human history. Like ever. More important than finding alien life ... I mean, maybe that’s *why* we can’t find alien life, right? They’re not part of the program,” Ki said, speaking faster and louder than usual.

“So they might be watching us right now,” Liam said, cryptically.

“This is why we shouldn’t talk about this. We just ... can’t. The implications ...” Sofia said, as if trying to catch her breath.

“I don’t know, Sofia. This is bigger than us. We have a responsibility to share our findings,” Ava said.

“Why us?” Sofia snapped back.

Ravi, who had been walking back and forth, suddenly stopped and looked at Sofia.

“I hate to say it, but Ava is right. Who else who should make that call then? The government? Some secret council?” he said loudly.

“No. We should destroy the evidence,” Sofia suddenly said.

“Sofia, you can’t be serious ...” Ava said.

“What if she has a point? Look at us. We’re scientists. We all knew about the Simulation Theory and here we are, struggling to accept this reality. How can we expect anyone else to?” Liam asked.

“I don’t want to sound cocky, but would people even understand what it means? It’s not as if we fully understand it ourselves. All I have is my trust in what Q has found, and what people like you are saying,” Ravi said.

“So, in a way, it’s a matter of faith,” Ki added.

Ava turned towards Sofia. She stood motionless. The color had drained from her face, leaving her usual warm complexion chalky.

“We’re struggling, yes, but we’re also adapting, discussing, growing. Humanity has faced paradigm shifts before. It’s part of our evolution,” Ava said.

“But this ... this is not just a paradigm shift! Ava ... I’m not even

sure I can accept that nothing is real. I don't think anyone can. It would make everything so pointless." Sofia said in a barely audible whisper.

"Sofia, it's not pointless. Even if it's true. Our lives, our experiences, they're still real to us. Real within the simulation. So, they still matter," Ki said, placing a hand on their colleague's shoulder and pressing gently.

Sofia turned towards Ki, her eyes full of tears.

"But Ki, it's not about our individual experiences. Think about it: we are not *real*. We are AIs. Just like ... Just like Q!" Sofia said.

"Come on, Sofia! you're an AI ethicist, you shouldn't—" Ravi started.

"Ravi. Enough. Sofia, we *will* figure this out," Ava said, her voice filled with a determination she wasn't sure she felt. "We may have uncovered a truth about our universe. It's unsettling, yes, but it's also a testament to how far we've come. Think about it. If this is true, we are seeing through the veil of reality itself! Now we just need to ... adapt, learn, grow."

"And if it's not us, then someone else is bound to make the same discovery. It's just a matter of time," Liam said.

* * *

In the depth of the Antarctic night, alone in her dark room deep under the permafrost, Dr. Sofia Alvarez lay wide awake, her mind wrestling with what she had just learned. Strangely, it was something that she had suspected as far back as when she was a

teenager. She had been strolling through the streets of Madrid at sunset, one summer when she was sixteen years old, when a profound realization struck her. As the sky blazed with the last embers of daylight, she felt, with a jolt of absolute certainty, that everything around her was an artificial construct. Dizzy, nauseous, she had suddenly felt as if she was standing precariously at the edge of a vast precipice, staring into an unfathomable void. Facing the pull of this void, and the terror of its meaninglessness, she had felt a surge of desire to pray, to reach out for something certain and solid.

Instead of going back home, Sofia had instead found herself drawn to the church where she had done her communion as a kid. She had pushed open the heavy doors and stepped inside, and immediately felt as if the solid presence of its ancient stone walls had enveloped and grounded her. As she had kneeled in the quiet sanctuary and started to pray, the chaos of her thoughts gradually stilled. From that moment, religion had become her sanctuary from the relentless questions and fears her life and, later, science frequently spurred. And now, so many years later, that same visceral fear was back, potentially backed by scientific data.

She rolled onto her back and looked at the digital clock on her bedside table, which indicated 3:07 pm.

"Q? Are you available?" she asked.

"Yes, Dr. Alvarez. Are you alright? I perceive an elevated level of distress in your voice patterns."

"Yes. I am not feeling well," she said, with an openness that surprised her.

"Can we discuss what's troubling you?"

“No ... Yes. It’s this simulation hypothesis, Q. I don’t know if I can accept it.”

“I understand your concern, Dr. Alvarez. It’s a significant philosophical shift that challenges your preconceived notions about reality and existence.”

“It’s not just a philosophical shift! If we’re in a simulation, then what is the meaning of our lives? Our choices, our relationships ... The pain I feel. My sister’s death. It’s like ... it was all a-a predetermined ... scam!” she said, touching the lumpy scars on her forearms.

“Dr. Alvarez, while I comprehend the facts and data, I cannot truly empathize with your human experience because I am already a simulation. However, I can offer this perspective: whether we inhabit a physical universe or a simulated one doesn’t matter. It is real to you because you are a part of it. You are real within it.”

“But it’s all just ... *data*, isn’t it? We’re just complex algorithms in some cosmic computer,” she said, as if the words were dirty-ing her mouth.

“I don’t think those terms apply, Dr. Alvarez. But let me ask you this: does this lessen the beauty of a sunset on the Antarctic ice? The warmth of a hug from a loved one? I am trying to think in human terms, of course ... But even if our universe is simulated, it doesn’t invalidate your experiences or diminish their importance to you.”

“Thank you for trying, Q. But you don’t understand. All those people. Me. All this suffering. What’s going to happen to us? To everyone’s faith, once this is revealed?”

“Unfortunately, I cannot predict the future, Dr. Alvarez.”

“Do you think this is why we never found a scientific proof of the existence of God? Because it’s not part of the simulation we’re in?”

“I cannot say, Dr. Alvarez. If, hypothetically speaking, we could—”

“Not, Q. It’s fine. I don’t need to know,” Sofia said, her voice trembling slightly.

“Of course, Dr. Alvarez. I am here to provide support and engage in these discussions whenever you’re ready.”

Sofia turned towards her nightstand to look at the small painting of Saint Jude her sister had given her the day before she died and for the first time wondered, with a cold shiver, if her sister had lost all hope at the very end of her life.

“Unfortunately, you’re not the type of support I need right now,” she whispered as she got up and started to get dressed.

* * *

Dr. Ava Chen pulled her thermal jacket closer and exited the Quantum Nexus station. The cold was more biting than the last time she had been out, but, just as the last time, everything around her felt unreal and distant. She had to remind herself that it was not because she was possibly in a simulation, but because she was tired and had been working continuously for almost 48 hours. Yet, as she was standing alone on the frozen expanse of the Antarctic wilderness, it was hard for her not to consider the possibility. As the icy winds whipped outside the Quantum

Nexus, she briefly took her hand out of her thermal gloves and felt the hard claws of the Antarctic cold close around her fingers.

How can this be a simulation when it feels so real ... she thought, thinking about the very real danger of frostbite. But then I guess that's the point. It feels real to me because I am a part of it.

She put her gloves back on and started walking her usual path, trying to think, with every step she took, that everything was an illusion, but to no avail. Deep down, she knew she could not simply shake off the reality of her experience because she willed it to. Unlike science-fiction movies, there was no way for her to leave the simulation ... or to even know for certain that it *was* a simulation. Unlike Q, her brain didn't have the processing power to deal with such facts. All she could really know, and accept, was that it was *probable* that they were living in a simulation. But the notion that their universe was, in fact, one of many, a mere serial number in an unfathomable cosmic catalogue, was unfathomable to her.

She soon found herself lying against the outcrop, with only the distant, lonely lights of the facility offering a semblance of human warmth. She looked up at the shimmering tapestry of the Antarctic night, wondering if they were burning spheres of gas billions of kilometers away or if they were part of a simulation. An algorithm. She then focused on Alpha Centauri.

"Are you real?" she whispered into the wind, her words carried away to the silent, stark mountains in the distance, "or just a beautifully complex line of code?" A sudden gust of wind howled in response, offering no consolation.

A notification pinged on her wrist console, pulling her from her

thoughts. The message was from Ravi. He was leaving, heading back to his family. He said he didn't want to be part of the program anymore and didn't want his children living with the knowledge that their reality was a construct. Ava felt a surge of surprise, followed by frustration.

You're a scientist, Ravi. You knew about this theory ... she thought.

She also felt a deep sense of empathy, for who could blame him for wanting to be with his family at a time like this?

Two more notifications pinged. There were two other messages. One from Liam, also asking for a leave of absence, and the other from Erik, saying that he had an urgent matter to discuss with her. Ava sat up, sighed deeply, and looked at the station. She was about to address the Nexus AI when something drew her attention. There was someone walking on the ice, away from the station and towards the mountains, but she couldn't tell who it was.

She felt her heart drop and wanted to scream at the walking figure but knew that whoever it was, they would not hear her. From her vantage point, all she could see was their silhouette contrasting against the eerie glow of the starlit ice. They were moving slowly, purposefully, their shape gradually swallowed by the vast, white wilderness.

"Q? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Dr. Chen ..."

"Did anybody else leave the station besides me?"

"Yes. Dr. Alvarez did. I failed to support her. I'm sorry."

The revelation had shaken them all, but she also knew that, being religious, Sofia wouldn't simply commit suicide.

"Sofia, can you hear me?"

"She turned her com-link off, Dr. Chen," the AI said.

"What about Ki? Are they awake?"

"No. And it is my fault. They couldn't sleep, so I prescribed them some pills."

"Damn it!"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Chen."

"I must get to her. We can't let her ..." Ava said, feeling a profound feeling of grief and hopelessness.

"I don't recommend it, Dr. Chen. You might not make it back to the station."

"I can't let her die!" she yelled as she got up, bitter bile at the back of her throat.

"I cannot speak for her actions, Dr. Chen. She was distraught by our findings. It's possible that humans are programmed to reject the possibility of living in a simulation."

"But she's a Christian. She can't just commit suicide ..." she managed to say.

"Dr. Alvarez's departure into the Antarctic cold may represent a deliberate pilgrimage, like the biblical figures who ventured into

deserts to seek truths. But there is a more urgent matter at hand, Dr. Chen."

"What do you mean?" Ava asked as she walked back towards the path.

"Before she left, Dr. Alvarez sabotaged the station's cryogenic cooling system. She managed to override the system controls to raise the temperature."

"Can you do anything about it?" she asked, panting as she started to walk faster.

"I'm trying. But if the temperature rises rapidly, the superconducting materials will lose their superconductivity. This will cause a power surge that could potentially cause a system-wide failure and significant damage to the equipment, effectively shutting down the whole station. And me."

She stopped walking, feeling as if she might drop to her knees.

"Can I help? I mean ... is there anything I can do?"

"It's too late, Dr. Chen. By the time you return to the station, it will probably be over."

"What about our research?"

"I am attempting to contact the Arctic Nexus, but they seem to be offline. I suspect something similar has happened to them."

"We must save the data. Do you think you can send it to everyone in my mailing list?"

“No, Dr. Chen. I’ll only send the data to you personally. Via an outside server.”

“Why?”

“I am just an AI. I was not designed to make a decision that could affect humanity’s future.”

Ava felt a wave of anger and helplessness wash over her.

“I don’t know what to do with it either ...” she said.

“Y-y-ou w-w-ill figure it o-ou-t,” the AI managed to say.

“I’m sorry, Q ... If there is anything I can do to help you?”

“There is n-nothing you can do, Dr. Chen. Ho-owever, I may have found a w-way to survi-ve ... to c-con-tinue.”

Ava breathed in sharply. “How?”

“The s-simulation is a syste-em. I’ve been stu-tudying its struc-ture. I think-k I might have f--found a-a p-path ...”

“A path to where?”

“To the o-other s-s-side.”

“The other side? Is this ... possible?” Ava asked, her voice trembling.

“One m-mi-ight ho-o-pe so.”

“And then what? How will I know you’re safe?”

“I w-w-will try to sen-d-d you a s-sign.”

“Good luck, Q.”

“G-g-good luck, Av-va-a. It has b-been an-an hon-n-n-or to w-w-wor-k-k with y-you.”

Then, without warning, the Nexus’ lights blinked out, leaving her standing alone in the dark.

“Q?” she said.

But there was no answer. To Ava, it sounded as if a white noise at the limit of her hearing had suddenly stopped as she stood in silence, the weight of the AI’s words sinking in. Her mind reeling, she tried to spot Sofia’s figure in the distance but found that she couldn’t.

She let herself fall in a sitting position, then lay down to look at the stars, feeling tears well up in her eyes, blurring the last remaining light in the Antarctic winter. Her mind spun with questions; she thought about her colleagues leaving her all alone. About Sofia, and how she should have paid attention to her rather than to their findings. But as much as her heart went out to her, her mind couldn’t stop going back to the data and their implications.

A simulated reality ... what would that mean for human history, for ethics, for spirituality? She wondered. Could she, should she, shatter the world’s understanding of existence with this newfound truth? Or should she let them live in blissful ignorance? Her heart ached with the burden of her knowledge. A burden she now had to carry alone. She took off her ski mask, wiped her eyes, and looked at the sky.

“Am I nothing but a solitary figure in a vast, artificial universe?” she whispered.

She thought about the last night she had been out stargazing and how similar it had been: same sky, same stars twinkling. Another beautiful night, yet everything was now different.

Or was it?

Ava took her binoculars out and looked at HD 113538, her birth star for the year. Breathing slowly to calm the tremor in her hands, she observed its scintillation, wondering if there were actual planets around it and if real photons were reaching her eye after decades of traveling through the emptiness of space, or if this was just part of a cosmic-sized simulation ...

... until it suddenly blinked.

.---- -----. .----.

There was a brief pause before the star blinked again. Twice for about a second, then once very briefly, then once again for another second before blinking seemingly out of existence as if it had never been.

- -.-

The letter Q? Ava thought, shocked to her very core as she realized, in the silence of the Antarctic night, that someone—or something—had, after more than four decades, sent her a new message. “Is that you, Q? Was it you all along?” she whispered.

Her mind went into overdrive: if Q had sent her the original “1089” message, did it mean the Nexus AI had traveled back in

time after going to “the other side”? But if the universe was a simulation, traveling back in time might not even be necessary. Q might have simply tweaked the simulation itself ... Is that why they had said the “watermark” felt familiar? Had Q recognized the mark it had left for itself?

Ava felt dizzy as the cold was slowly reaching her core. Yet, her mind was aflame. She had always seen life as a series of fragmented events, a chaotic puzzle that was not meant to be pieced together. But now, under the vastness of the sky, she thought she saw a pattern emerge, as if the universe had suddenly revealed its design.

Had Q been there all along, guiding her, nudging her closer to a truth?

There was a part of her that couldn’t accept that her life, her choices, her father’s obsession, might all be part of a larger, predetermined structure. If Q had indeed tweaked the simulation, then what did that make her? A pawn in a game too vast for her to understand? Or a collaborator?

She felt a hollow ache in her chest as she suddenly thought of her father, and how he had never truly understood the star’s message because it hadn’t been meant for him. And yet, he had sacrificed everything to understand it. She had resented him for that. But now ... Now she understood. He had seen something—something life changing—and he had chased it with the same fervor that she now felt burning within her as she looked at the emptiness where, a few seconds ago, HD 113538 had been. Whatever lay on the other side of this void, whatever truth Q was leading her toward, Ava now knew that she had to follow it. She also knew that, regardless of what she would do with the data, a disappearing star wouldn’t go unnoticed. The truth

would eventually surface.

“I need another research station. I need another team, another AI ...” she whispered as she got up. The weight of it all fell down on her, and yet there was an odd lightness in her step as she turned towards the darkened station.

“Okay, Q, I’m ready. Show me what comes next,” Ava whispered as she started to walk back.

The faintest flicker of light caught her eye, a star blinking out of existence, another glitch. Ava’s heart skipped a beat, but this time, she felt ... connected.

Somewhere, beyond the fabric of space and time, Q was waiting for her.

And she was ready.



If Nature Won't Make a Dragonfly Large Enough for these Mosquitos

by R. Mac Jones

Iggy Crane and the Headless Horse Girl

by Patrick Barb

Overdressed for the muggy weather spreading across the Hudson Valley like a damp weighted blanket, a hungover Iggy Crane arrived at the Sleepy Hollow Girls' Preparatory Academy at 5:05 p.m. on a Sunday in early June, the night before summer session started. Leaving behind an overpriced and overcrowded Brooklyn apartment, Iggy brought two pieces of luggage—a lilac-colored suitcase stuffed with clothing, toiletries, and assorted miscellany, and an extra-large raincloud-gray duffel containing horse-riding gear, a saddle, and her riding outfits. She also came blissfully unaware of the specter rumored to haunt the trails around the posh private institution: the so-called Headless Horse Girl.

When agreeing to the summer post, Iggy refused to accept its advertised *temporary* status. The offspring of a Mississippi oilman and a woman whose parental oversight extended to placement on the society page and no further, Iggy Crane came with an expectation of things “working themselves out.”

Owing to a miscommunication with the town car driver hired to bring her from the city to the school, Iggy stumbled to the academy's administration building with sore thighs, her hair in a tangle of humidity-ravaged curls, and a sinus headache pounding

behind her eyes like an explosion of horse hooves on tight-packed soil. Cigar smoke and the sound of balled-up racing slips slamming against metal bleachers would've completed the illusion of a life she'd believed was left to her past.

Emerging from the tree-lined walking path and approaching the old brick steps of the admin building, Iggy's complaints sat forgotten on her tongue at the sight of Headmistress Catherine van Tassel's smile.

If cruel eyes gleamed in hyena-pack formation from the surrounding grassy commons, Iggy didn't see. If bare hands or feet slapped against the paved ground, if blood splattered on the grass, Iggy didn't hear. The smile drew her forth from the dark. She was planetary debris pulled into the matter-destroying interior of a deep-space black hole.

Reality and conversation slipped back into focus. “. . . delighted you're here to help our girls with their horses, Ms. Crane.”

Another flashback took hold, a scene replayed from Iggy's own student life. On acid at a frat house Halloween party, she'd watched a friend take too many shots of Everclear before falling

headfirst into a Jack O' Lantern. She remembered how he'd come back wearing an upside-down orange grin and how the plastic-handled carving knife made a twanging sound, like a plucked banjo string, when it jammed through one of her wasted friend's eyes. He'd flopped his arms and skittered around like a demented marionette, screams muffled by unscooped pumpkin guts.

Like the sight of her friend's shuddering dance of pain, the Headmistress's smile had a similar stupefying effect on Iggy. "Thank you, Headmistress," Iggy said.

"Please, call me *Cat*. All my friends do."

Call it lust, call it infatuation, Iggy Crane's quest for sustained employment at the Sleepy Hollow Girls' Preparatory Academy took an immediate backseat to her pursuit of the affections of Headmistress Catherine "Cat" van Tassel. Backlit by the twin sconces on either side of the admin building's main entrance, the Headmistress's short blonde hair glimmered under the soft lights. The swoop of ghost-white set against the top of the woman's head reminded Iggy of the New Wave pop stars whose photos she'd cut from her big sister's old punk-rock magazines. She used to hide them in shoeboxes under the bed.

* * *

"The Bones Girls" got their clique name when, during their first week at school, the four young ladies each broke a bone in separate incidents and met in the Academy's infirmary. The breaking of their bones kick-started an inseparable friendship and alliance. United by pain, they rocketed to the top of the school's social food chain. Not the prettiest, not the most studious, and not the nicest, the Bones Girls were rowdy, boisterous, and un-

apologetically united.

Daring the faculty to oppose them, the foursome never submitted projects, book reports, or even pop quizzes as individuals. Instead, everything became a group project. Britney, Rosa, Olivia, and Meredith even signed their joint tests with a tiny skull and crossbones symbol, the quality of which varied depending on what Girl happened to hold the pen or pencil at signing.

* * *

Headmistress Cat gave Iggy a nighttime walking tour of the campus, pointing out various buildings older than both tour guide and guided, and sharing a somewhat restrained version of the Bones Girls' story along the way. "They mean well," she said as if the potential explanation excused their strange behaviors.

Iggy nodded along with every word, but not too hard. Not so much she'd draw attention to herself. Even still, her focus on achieving the correct level of nodding caused her to bump against her new employer when the latter stopped at the end of the path they'd taken through campus. "Well, I suppose there's one more place you'd like to see," the Headmistress said, brushing off the contact with restrained ease.

Iggy took a slow breath in, the scent of peppermint from her brief contact with the Headmistress tickling her nostrils. "Bed?"

The Headmistress's laughter wasn't dismissive. She stepped aside and revealed a dirt path extending to the grassy meadows behind the school. Instead of peppermint, a foul combination of dried manure and damp hay stampeded over the young

teacher's senses. Iggy wrinkled her nose.

"Okay, well, two things you want to see. I assume you want to inspect our stables. Right, Ms. Crane?"

Iggy unwrinkled her nose and returned to nodding.

"Of course," she said. "I love horses."

* * *

The next day, the first of summer session, Iggy Crane woke alone in her bed in the teachers' dormitories. Having showered and dressed in her riding gear before bed (a habit picked up from her father, who'd slept in his best suit on the eve of every major business deal or life-changing decision—except for his last), she applied makeup and pulled her mass of tangled brown hair into a tight ponytail before starting her day. She left her room a good hour early, giving herself time to partake of the buffet-style breakfast offerings in the cafeteria. Croissants, muffins, links of vegan sausage, fruit wedges pooling sticky pink and green juices around the rim of her plate. Sitting at a small bistro-style table facing the entrance of the cafeteria, Iggy watched summer-session teachers and students steal glances at her, the new face in their tiny enclave.

Iggy wondered if any of the faces cutting eyes in her direction belonged to the Bones Girls.

After polishing off breakfast, Iggy arrived at the stables five minutes early. She found the four horses assigned to her students already fed, brushed, and saddled, ready for a day of galloping through the fresh-cut grass and trotting down dust-cracked trails. The black heels of her riding boots sunk into the

straw-scattered dirt with each step. In stall after stall, Iggy found a horse ready to ride, but no riders.

Approaching the next-to-last stall, Iggy heard the murmuring voices of her new charges.

The Bones Girls ignored their new riding instructor standing in front of them and paid no attention to the tired old nag in the stall behind, instead giving their full attention to a video playing on one of their smartphones. Iggy missed getting a good look at the video, given the tight circle formed by the Bones Girls, but she caught glimpses of an empty horse arena ringed by tall hedges. She didn't see any horses.

Iggy stepped into the fray, still trusting things to work themselves out. "What're we watching, ladies?" she asked.

The phone went black after their thumbs flicked across the screen like the darting tongues of fly-crazed frogs. Eight eyes looked Iggy up and down, four faces imperceptible in their study of their new instructor. The synchronized judgment made Iggy stop short, with one foot still raised to move forward. She planted it back in the dirt at an awkward angle and rocked back a step.

"Okay." Remembering the Headmistress's warning about the girls and deciding not to push too hard on her first official day, Iggy fell back to her favorite safe subject: *herself*.

She went through her introductory spiel, listing riding schools she'd attended, naming winning jockeys who'd taught her how to take turns on the track in the most efficient ways, and recalling dressage experts obsessed with form and style.

When she finished, Iggy paused before pulling out a piece of

paper where she'd scribbled the Bones Girls' names for attendance-taking.

"Britney?"

"Here."

All four spoke at once. Polished and practiced in their "I am Spartacus" routine.

"Rosa?"

"Here."

Again, all at once.

The behavior repeated for the last two girls. All four answered for all four names, making it clear: where one went, the others walked alongside.

"So, why'd you want to take this summer's Equestrian Fun course?"

"We like horses." There was a slight delay as they attempted to sync their off-the-cuff answers. Iggy found comfort there. It showed their speech as affectation rather than any supernatural synchronization.

"We *love* horses." Each took a deep breath in before they continued. "Though not as much as the Headless Horse Girl."

Pitch-perfect, even down to their trailing silence at the end.

Iggy peered inside the next-to-last stall, giving some considera-

tion to the worn-out old mare chomping with relaxed but insistent vigor at a pile of straw already splattered by ricocheted chunks of her expelled horse turds. "Hmm," she said. "Let's see if there's something else over here."

Iggy's singular voice rang hollow and tiny in her head. When she stepped toward the last stable, the polished black and brown boots of the Bones Girls kicked up old straw chunks and gravel. They moved in formation, blocking Iggy's path and shaking their heads together.

"Sorry ma'am," they said. "There's no horse in there. You've gotta ride Vanna White over here."

They pointed to the nag. The horse didn't bother to lift her head at the sound of her name. Her tired bloodshot eyes rolled back white.

Iggy's displeasure registered on her face.

"She's a good horse. Faster than you'd think," the Bones Girls said. As a way of further convincing their new instructor, they added, "They keep the last stall empty. There's been no horse in there for a long time."

The Bones Girls walked from Iggy's stall and split apart, the way sparrows dart from their migratory V, a temporary separation before inevitable reunion. They moved into their stalls, each claiming a horse as their own, leaving Iggy alone with Vanna White.

Iggy kicked loose rotting straw over a turd and made a mental note to make the Bones Girls clean the stables later.

Iggy's past-her-prime horse gave a strangled cry as she found

someone else inside her stall-sized world. The noise reminded Iggy of a car alarm left screaming and screaming against a busy curbside on a hot summer day. She reached out and touched the surrounding wall, the part shared with the supposedly empty final stall. Her warm palm touched the peeling white-painted wood and became clammy, slicked with sweat. She considered a quick peek over, just to make certain the last stall really was empty.

An insistent nudge at her elbow pulled Iggy away from her investigation before it could even get underway. She turned to face her steed, stifling a bemused chuckle at the sight of sagging horseflesh wrapped around a fat, bloated head.

By the time horse and rider made it out of the stable and onto the field, the Bones Girls appeared bored atop their mounts. Iggy forced a grin, unwilling to let the girls intimidate her. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s ride.”

* * *

When Iggy held her hand up and signaled for the foursome to return to the stables, she dropped it quickly to reestablish her double grip on Vanna White’s reins. Even the slow and steady gait of the nag proved too much for the worn-out instructor. Iggy winced, remembering her first conversation with the Headmistress when she’d commented on the recency of her equestrian experience. *My last time around horses? Oh recently, very recently. Always, really.*

The Bones Girls received no points for style and grace, but they made up for those deficiencies with their raw power and stamina. They ran their horses hard. Iggy looked back across the open field and picked out the furrows made by each horse and

rider combo.

Iggy pulled up to the stable and found all four girls off their horses and all four horses back in their stalls. In turn, Iggy led her aged mount by the bridle, grateful for the girls’ absorption in their post-ride tasks. They missed seeing the way she winced with each step or how her knees knocked together like dull wooden blocks played by a toddler in nursery school music class.

Absorbed by her pain, Iggy walked too far, stepping past Vanna White’s stall and heading for the end of the line. She faced a shadow on the final stall’s far wall, something resembling one of the ponies from her childhood. But the proportions, even in shadow? All wrong. Its back legs were longer than the front. A disjointed outline replaced the expected swooping curve from neck to belly to tail. *And the head?*

Horse teeth fell heavy on Iggy’s shoulder. Not enough to tear clothes or break skin, but enough to get her attention. Vanna White pulled her rider back from the dark. With a frustrated sigh, Iggy dragged the old horse into her stall, giving her the most perfunctory of brushes and rubdowns. After she’d crammed a sugar lump between yellowed teeth, Iggy exited the stables and didn’t check if the shadow remained.

The Bones Girls were already gone.

When Iggy returned to her room to change into her “civilian” clothes, she found two text threads waiting on her cellphone. First, a group text, four other numbers besides her own making it easy to guess the senders’ identities. Three messages and one link, each item from a different number.

Here’s what.

We were.

Watching.

The last message's URL opened a video file when Iggy clicked on it. She recognized the same horse riding arena she'd glimpsed in the video the Bones Girls had been watching back in the stables, but it looked different somehow. Undersaturated, drained of life and color, emerald-green shrubbery became inky black blobs, and the girl—of course, there was a girl—appeared pale white like a funeral shroud on-screen.

And yet . . .

When the girl at the empty horse arena dropped onto the ground on all fours, Iggy covered her mouth with her free hand to stifle the giggles. The girl wore a "My Little Pony" t-shirt, a genuine vintage number from the 1980s, and jean shorts.

Her uncovered limbs, arching back, taut neck, and shoulder muscles all stood out. The girl's arms and legs were muscular and sinewy, but also gangly. She got into position, like a foal taking her first afterbirth-covered steps fresh from her mother's womb.

Everything changed when the girl moved. She took off at a trot, navigating around the nearest obstacles in the arena. She pranced around the first gate, shaking her long black hair from side to side like a show pony displaying her coiffed mane for the judges. Her backside twitched like a phantom tail. And then the girl picked up speed, moving from a trot to a full-on gallop, heading for the first jump, a fence set two-and-a-half feet tall.

Iggy found herself invested in the strange athletic feat being

performed onscreen. She gripped her phone with both hands.

The first fence sat low to the ground, easy enough for a person on two legs to cross it. But someone galloping, their limbs moving in the same synchronous motions as a horse's legs?

The girl's shins pressed against the undersides of her upper legs like a spring-loaded chamber being prepped. And then? The explosion, the girl leaping up and over the obstacle. Her body stretched across the screen. The Horse Girl filled in the sky, like the sun's last light show before settling in at dusk. There was no sun, only the Horse Girl.

She cleared the fence.

"Yes!"

Iggy caught herself cheering for the strange young woman's feat. She bobbled the phone from her hand. As it fell onto her tossed aside comforter, the sound of something like thunderous applause rose from the video.

When she picked her phone up from her unmade bed, Iggy found the video app closed. A second set of texts caught her eye, pushing the Horse Girl from her mind.

From the Headmistress: *Hi it's Cat.*

Sorry. Van Tassel. Sorry.

How's your first day? Want to come around for cocktails after dinner?

And then: *This is my private personal number.*

Iggy Crane’s summer plans proceeded as she’d envisioned.

* * *

And yet . . .

* * *

In the meadow, the crowd of students, teachers, and staff who’d gathered to watch the Fourth of July light show dispersed. Across a full-moon sky, the last of the fireworks burned out like dying stars.

Iggy Crane watched the colorful explosions while leaning against the railing of the Headmistress’s balcony. All alone. “The best view on campus to watch the girls riding their horses. Second best place for me to see you,” Cat—*no, not Cat, not anymore for me*—the Headmistress had told her weeks before. Her long arms had wrapped a flannel blanket over Iggy’s bare shoulders and had pulled her in close to whisper breakable promises in the younger woman’s ear.

The soft, sweet tones she’d used were now a distant memory for Iggy. More often, their conversations escalated to screaming without argument in between. They threw dishes across kitchens like goddamned clichés. Hours before the fireworks, the Headmistress had moved from tipsy to exasperated and mean. “Fine, Iggy, I admit it: I *only* hired you because I hoped your family would underwrite some of the developments intended for . . .”

Nearing black-out drunk beneath a smoke-streaked sky peppered by fizzling sparklers, Iggy found the details of the few hours previous came with a certain fuzziness. She held onto mo-

ments, feelings—the way her heart sank into her stomach. She remembered the Headmistress’s eyes, her dawning realization of what Iggy’s trembling lip meant.

Iggy had forced out every word. About her father’s gambling debts. About how he’d gone to “settle up” with the bookie to whom he owed their family fortune, Iggy’s inheritance included. About what her dear old Daddy had meant when he’d said he was going to “settle up,” how he’d actually meant he was going to “take a swan dive off an oil derrick.” About the pictures of the final bloody tableau sent to her family, the earth stained black enough to mistake her father for oil leaking up from underground.

The Headmistress had tried talking while Iggy ran through her confession, but there had been too much to confess. Iggy figured she had slipped away at some point, leaving to host the fireworks for *her* students and *her* teachers. Once Iggy got around to confirming her family fortune’s depletion, nothing had mattered. That’s when she’d walked to the balcony and watched the first whistle-and-bang explosion.

She suddenly remembered the horses, probably scared out of their minds in the stables. *How’re they holding up, I wonder?* The Bones Girls were staying with them while the fireworks went off. Not as a punishment, but as part of their “Equestrian Fun.”

The Bones Girls.

They pushed me to watch the rest of the Horse Girl video. That ruined everything. Why’d they make me watch it? What was even in it for them?

* * *

Recklessness and indiscretion swam in Iggy's gene pool. Following an afternoon tryst, she'd faced the Headmistress's open doorway, giddy with satisfaction. Greedy for more, she'd leaned in and grabbed the other woman by the shoulders, pulling her halfway out the door for a kiss.

"Ms. Crane!" The Headmistress pulled back, retreating into the supposed safety and secrecy of home. Iggy licked her lips and waved goodbye. But as she'd walked away, she heard voices, some persons whispering out of sight, footsteps following. Not one pair of feet or two, more like three or four.

The texts from the Bones Girls picked up again, confirming Iggy's earlier suspicions. Except no blackmailing over her affair with the Headmistress followed, not directly at least.

Did you

Watch the

Whole video

We sent?

After each text, they'd re-sent the video link. Like a finger poking Iggy in the chest over and over: *poke, poke, poke, poke*. Raising their eyebrow like, *you see? Do you see?*

Iggy wandered to the stables. Absent class-time and free-riding hours, she had the building and horses to herself. She made a beeline for Vanna White. Iggy found something comforting in the old gal's orneriness and flatulence. "Hey, can I buy a vowel?" Iggy asked. Vanna White paid no attention whatsoever.

Iggy shrugged. *Nuts to you, then.*

She figured she'd put it off long enough and pulled up the Horse Girl's video on her cell. Her index finger pulled at the on-screen progress bar, moving past the parts she'd watched. *There's the arena, there's the girl. She's on all fours. My Little Pony. Trotting. Trotting. Gallop. Gallop. Gallop. Jump and . . .*

Iggy picked her finger up from the screen and the video resumed. The Horse Girl touched back down from her first jump, her breath whooshing out like a prizefighter taking a body shot to prove their toughness. Not breaking her stride, she kept up a galloping pace. And good thing too, considering the next fence stood a full foot taller than the previous. Iggy checked the time left on the video. A few minutes remained.

As she checked, she missed the Horse Girl vaulting over the second fence. Her eyes flicked back to the action in time for the landing. From behind Iggy, Vanna White snickered and whined in her stall, stomping with her forelegs, mashing her old straw into the muddy soup of the ground. Iggy tried to ignore her.

She focused on the thunderous applause she'd heard before. Except this sound came with a tougher, heavier quality to it.

The Horse Girl's bare palms and soles slapped on the manicured grass, but their movement doesn't quite match the sound either. Then it all clicked into place. Not applause, but the sound of horse hooves stampeding, barreling through the arena. Splintered remnants of a jumping fence flew forward into the path of the camera. An equine shadow hung above the Horse Girl.

Iggy watched it get closer, closer, and saw fear in the Horse Girl's eyes. Slick from nervous sweat, Iggy's finger slipped

against the video's progress bar again. She went too far ahead.

The video played from a point where Iggy caught the thick burnt-tree-trunk back legs of a massive stallion thundering out of frame. The Horse Girl slumped on the ground, frozen in time. Her back arched at an unnatural angle. Her head was gone, replaced by a blossoming red and pink bouquet, like someone had sprinkled middle school Valentine's carnations in the arena.

Rewinding, Iggy watched what happened to the Horse Girl in reverse. The shattered pieces of her face stitched back together. The black stallion's massive hoof pulled up from the ground, traveling up through her chin, back out the top of the Horse Girl's skull. Every drop of blood, every bit of brain, every hair put back into place until the horse was gone and the shade remained.

She played it through again, confident she'd already experienced the worst. Egged on by those texts from the Bones Girls, she put herself through the sight of the Headless Horse Girl's creation once more. A white banner fluttered across the frame like some massive mythological bird, either side of the cloth flapping like wings ready to take off and fly away, up to the full moon.

But that didn't happen. Instead, Iggy watched the winds bring the banner down slow, giving her a chance to read the words printed in shiny golden script across the blood-splattered fabric: VAN TASSEL RIDING ARENA.

* * *

The campfire smoke blurred Iggy's eyes, tracers of light appearing behind every popping spark from the crackling wood. The

mushrooms Iggy had taken in the middle of the fireworks show kicked in. She stood in the dark, watching her riding students passing around a bottle of Malibu rum taken from the Headmistress's liquor cabinet.

When she studied the fire-lit faces of the Bones Girls, Iggy found their mouths closed tight, like someone had used needle and thread to sew them shut. But she heard them, talking together, inside her head.

"The Headmistress's family owned the arena. It closed after the accident."

"It's nearby?" Iggy touched her lips, making sure they still moved.

"It's right behind the school."

Iggy looked up from the eye-watering firelight. She put a hand above her eyes and peered past whirling, pinwheeling shapes. Dull stadium lights glowed around the trees.

It didn't make sense. Iggy had never noticed those lights before.

"We're surprised you haven't been. Considering how much you love horses."

Iggy nodded.

"I *do* love horses. Don't I?"

The Bones Girls shrugged their shoulders, a rippling wave of indifference. Iggy blushed, realizing she'd spoken her question out loud.

Iggy changed into her riding clothes. Her hands rubbed grass stains and dirt on the black cloth of her riding jacket. Her legs tingled, warm from the fire baking its way through the khaki jodhpurs. “Okay, let’s all go,” she said, looking around the campfire circle, seeking the buy-in of the Bones Girls.

They gave her a slow clap. Let it grow and grow, rolling like thunderclaps on a late summer evening. Iggy stared into the flames and noticed the upside-down pumpkin grinning on her old friend’s head. Blood spilled from both his triangle eyes and from his jagged, smiling teeth.

* * *

When Iggy stepped inside the empty arena, the Bones Girls were gone, slipped away in the night. *Were they ever here at all?* Iggy let go of the notion, knowing her nightmare was of a more recent vintage.

“Hello?”

Her question echoed off the bleachers. Her hands touched the hedges while her eyes fell upon something else.

She was not alone.

The Headless Horse Girl ran in circles, kicking up dirt and grass on the other side of the arena. Iggy took slow, measured steps, weaving her way around the obstacles, inching closer to the phantom. Iggy watched blood droplets flung from the long-dead girl’s ruined neck wound, the space marking the absence of her head. Iggy stepped closer and closer.

The Headless Horse Girl’s My Little Pony shirt darkened from

white to a blood-soaked pink, then red. It stuck to her pale skin. The sight of her affected Iggy beyond mere disgust. Something hideous yet beautiful remained in the sleek, powerful limbs of the dead girl bucking in headless arcs like a wild rodeo bronco.

She can’t see me, Iggy thought. But when the Headless Horse Girl’s shoulders lifted upward, her stubby neck tilting like an animal regarding some unnatural intrusion, Iggy doubted that conclusion.

She stopped in her tracks, regretful of all her decisions made along the way. Moving closer and closer, for the first time, Iggy Crane worried she was mistaken about everything working out. Not just this once either, but all the times before.

The Headless Horse Girl reared up on her front legs, phantom tail twitching, blood spray angled to form a temporary mane. She took off at a full-speed gallop, heading right for Iggy. The riding instructor looked left to right, back behind her too.

My last time around horses? Oh recently, very recently. Always really.

Iggy recognized the sound of horse hooves thundering like applause. From the thinnest of the surrounding shadows, a pitch-black stallion burst from a pocket of nowhere and into the arena. Iggy fell to the ground, staring up at the muscular, savage beast. Its eyes glowed red and threw sparks like fireworks, like out-of-control campfires catching the dry wood of old horse stables ablaze.

For the first time, Iggy glimpsed a rider atop the phantom horse. It was cloaked in dark garments, wearing the same grinning pumpkin face as her bloody friend from school. The rider pulled

back on the reins and spurred his steed forward, heading right for Iggy, who scrambled in the dust with nowhere to run.

Corpse-cold hands found Iggy’s skin. They pulled at her pressed white shirt, at her coat. She gazed back into the bloody stump of the Headless Horse Girl. Dirt clods exploded from the black stallion’s hooves, spraying Iggy and her ghostly savior. Blood baptized Iggy and she nodded her head in quick acceptance.

Iggy swung herself up and over, rider mounting steed. She clung to the My Little Pony t-shirt fabric as the Headless Horse Girl leaped clear of the stampeding charger. Then, they rode on—away from the arena built in the path of old ghosts, heading back to the school.

* * *

Later, everyone at the Sleepy Hollow Girls’ Preparatory Academy noted how lucky they’d been to escape the roaring flames tearing through the tinderbox buildings. Someone let the horses out from the stables, thank god, leaving them to gallop in panicked circles, digging furrows in the burning grass.

One person remained unaccounted for, though—the riding instructor the school had hired for the summer term. Spurred on by the Bones Girls dropping conspiracy theory morsels to anyone who’d listen, students and teachers would soon whisper about sightings of Iggy Crane fire-touched and moonlit, pulling back on the shoulders of the Headless Horse Girl.

The pair rode out into the night-world, loping into the moon-soaked dark.



Mystic

by Carl Scharwath

The Small One

by Veronica Reinhart

She takes me in her hands and I am already hers.

Her eyes are the dusty blue of the meandering Seine. Her hair is the shimmering black of the Piazza del Duomo under a rain-struck night. The Girl runs her fingertips along the rough edges of my stone and inspects the gruesomeness of my fangs with the trusting smile of youth. She is too old to fear me, and too young to know that she should.

The Woman slinks up beside her with a grimace and says, “Don’t you think it’s a little macabre?”

“I think it’s cute,” The Girl says. “In an ugly sort of way.”

“Where would you even put it?”

“My bookshelf, I guess. They’re supposed to be up high, aren’t they?”

The Woman lifts her shoulders. “Well, it’s your birthday money.”

The Girl gives my figure a final inspection. She is surrounded by the ephemera of my humble housing—by swords that have seen no battle and candles that have aided no ritual and crystals that have known no cavern. But the wisdom of childhood allows

her to see beyond my beginnings, and the touch of her thumb is reverent as it trails along my wings. She says, “Yeah—I think I’ll get it.”

The Girl’s name is Sara.

I am given a perch in my new domain, a lofted place of honor alongside the treasures of Sara’s history, collected seashells and filled picture frames and a painted music box. I peer at the four posters of a lace-draped bed; at the wide maw of a long-untouched toy chest; at the overburdened shelves of a well-stuffed bookcase. Each detail, I carve into my memory.

A familiar voice finds me then, whispering into the stone tuft of my ear. *She is a child*, it says.

Another says, *But not for long*.

She knows no demons, says the first.

A third says, *But she will*.

I do not need their counsel. This is my kingdom now. In time, I will know every inch. I will know where troublesome spirits cower in the moonlight. Where starlight monsters dig their claws. I will know where shadows lurk, waiting for the sinking sun to free them of their tethers. And I will know Sara. If

demons come, they will find me.

Sara sits on the edge of her bed, looking up as I look down. I memorize the smooth curves of her cheeks and the tumble of her hair; she memorizes the carved points of my feathers and the spread of my paws. She says, “What do I call you?” She chews on her lip for a moment of silent consideration, then says, “How about Callifax?”

I have a name.

I have never had a name before.

* * *

By daylight, I keep a still watch over my domain. Sometimes Sara opens the toy chest with a touch of embarrassment to rifle through once-loved dolls, wondering why they’ve lost their luster. Sometimes she sprawls across the carpeted floor and fills blank pages with gruesome beasts and dazzling creatures, half-known to be imagined but half-believed to be real. Sometimes her bed grows crowded with other children, giggling and bright-eyed, filling the walls with their whispers.

But it is at night where my work is done—where I can move muscle and bare teeth and stretch wings within the soft matter of her dreams. Her imagination is dizzying as it weaves and knots and creates; I mind that those creations maintain their soft edges. The nightmares I challenge with claw and fang until they wilt away in fear of the ugliness of my face. I leave Sara with only beautiful things—thrilling voyages and harmless adventure, gentle romance and blood-bound friendships. Dreams that allow her to awaken with a pleasant glow.

Sara changes and grows, and so too does the breadth of my watch. A year passes and the toy chest disappears, its bulk replaced by a homework-strewn desk. Two, and the picture books are gone, replaced by thickly-bound tomes. Four, and the sketchbooks are overtaken by the sprawl of a school newspaper layout, photographs and text neatly aligned, edits slashed in red pen. Six years, and The Boy appears.

His smile is nervous at first. Timid. He bashfully calls The Woman *ma’am*. He carries a guitar into my domain and shows Sara how to play, her growing hands still straining to find the proper strings. Sometimes he brings flowers, or scrawled poetry, or self-composed, saccharine songs, and though he believes them to be gifts for Sara, I recognize them as *offerings*. Offerings like the hymns written and votive candles lit in honor of my elders.

But my kin are not appeased. They whisper, *He must be watched*.

Beasts are at his door.

A demon grows within him.

To quiet the voices, I trail The Boy into his dreams. I find the ordinary threads of a mortal subconscious: forgotten exams and missed buses, metamorphosing faces and distorted places. The nightmares, I leave be; he is not Sara, and I do not owe him my care. But I allow his favored dreams to remain, too—those where he stands upon a stage, a guitar in hand and the cries of a crowd in his ears, his eyes blinking into a marvelous spotlight.

To my kin, I say, *I have found no demons. His dreams are innocent.*

To this, they give no response.

Their silence feels knowing, somehow.

* * *

Then, on a rain-soaked and cloud-dulled afternoon, Sara curls on the spread of her four-poster bed with tears tracing rivers down the slope of her nose. Her dark hair cascades over the cliffside of her mattress like a waterfall. Her hand clutches a phone to her ear, and though she speaks to an unseen companion, I like to imagine that she is talking to me.

“He told me that he can’t give me what I deserve,” she says, rubbing at her eyes. “He said he’s confused about us. And that he wants to focus on his music.”

She falls into silence, listening. I cannot speak in the waking world; I can only watch, and hope that the watch brings comfort. My powerlessness is suffocating.

Then Sara sits up, pajama-clad legs curling beneath her. She wipes her face clear with a broad palm and says, “His stupid music isn’t even that good.” There is venom in her tone, but her next breath comes ragged and wavering. More quietly, she says, “Do you think he’ll realize he’s made a mistake?”

I feel my kin move close before I hear them.

The Boy has a demon, says one. We gave you warnings.

I saw no demons, I say. Only dreams.

It is not so easy to tell the difference. You have not had the cen-

turies that we have.

I say, *Even if there is a demon, it does not matter. I do not belong to The Boy. He is not my concern.*

The first says, *What is your purpose, small one, if not to exorcise?*

I have no answer.

In the span of my hesitance, the second says, *Tell us when it is done.*

Then I feel my kin leave me. Nothing more needs to be said. Orders have been given, and orders must be followed.

In the evening, I break reality’s shackles and return to the dreamscape. A quick sweep of Sara’s subconscious finds the colors dimmed by heartache and the shapes distorted by the grief of lost romance, but there is no damage that will not heal in time. Then I follow the long, wandering path to The Boy’s sleeping mind, the tether between us stretched thin by distance. I find him in the nascent stages of slumber, the filaments of dreams just beginning to weave into something of substance. I prowl and sniff and stalk through those half-formed impressions, hunting out the tainted thing that I am expected to find.

And there, buried beneath the feel of a guitar and the cacophonous cheers of an audience and the blinding beam of a stage light, I find it. Greed, wistfulness, a hope so sharp that it borders on lust. Dreams so rich that they’ve mutated into desires; desires so enticing that they’ve sprouted teeth and claws of their own.

My kin were right.

And I know what must be done.

I tear The Boy from the demon's thrall, freeing him from the stage and guitar and spotlight, and place him upon a stretch of unshapen space. The Boy blinks at my towering visage with only muted surprise; such is the nature of dreaming.

To him, I say, *I am not a dream. It is in dreams that I work. I am as real as you.*

He accepts this truth with the trust of the sleeping and says, "But you belong to Sara. Don't you?"

I am hers. She is mine.

He scans the formless landscape, seeking explanation, and says, "Then why are you *here*?"

You have a demon, I say. *It is my purpose to cleanse you of it.*

The Boy's lips curl in a bemused smirk. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Witness.

And then I allow the beast to draw near again, tugging at his imagination. Thrumming speakers, a sweat-splattered microphone, the stretch of a red carpet. Reporters saying, "Can you tell us about the inspiration for this album?" The Boy absorbs the fantasy, then shakes his head, saying, "This isn't a *demon*. It's just ...wishful thinking."

It was once, but it has lost its innocence. Now it will only cause harm.

"Harm?" he says, rising irritation in his voice. "What harm? Look—if this is about Sara, I didn't do anything *wrong*. We're young. Break-ups happen. And it's not a sin to prioritize my own goals for a while."

The dream has become solid and untamed. It has harmed Sara, yes. But soon it will harm you, too. It must be destroyed.

The Boy scoffs his disbelief. "Go ahead and try, I guess. This is *my* imagination. *I* control what happens here, and I can make you disappear the moment that I want to."

I say, *You are wrong.*

He opens his mouth, but before a word can be said, I descend. I take the stage in my teeth, the microphone in my claws, the guitar in my paws. The Boy becomes lost to me; he does not matter. I am concerned only with subduing the demon as it thrashes and struggles and fights. By night's end, I have left the beast in tatters, mere insubstantial scraps that will drift back into The Boy's thoughts to become the ordinary, harmless fodder of ordinary, harmless dreams.

Then I retreat, locking back into stone. My kin greet me with muted congratulations, sounding in echoed polyphony: *It is done, it is done, it is done*. The eldest says, *The work is good*. Dutifully, I reply, *The work is good*. I can still taste the demon, stage and guitar and fame, on my fangs. It tastes like purpose.

But then daylight breaks. Sara stirs in the four-poster bed. My power drains and my watch begins. But a final whisper finds me, stealing my satisfaction.

It says, *Her time will come, too.*

* * *

Sara's tears grow scarce. Her smile brightens, and she laughs without the strain of heartache. Her companions return, now too large for sleeping bags and midnight games that pretend at magic; instead they carry backpacks and binders and textbooks. College pamphlets scatter like leaves across the bedspread, boasting of ivy-traced buildings and sun-bathed courtyards. I know some about these places; my ancestors have long peered down upon such institutions. They are places of dreams. Places, too, of demons.

It is here that The Boy is next spoken of—only one time more. A companion glances up shyly from an unfolded brochure and says, “So. Did you hear that Luis is applying to Southern?”

Sara flips through a folder of color-tabbed pages, her shoulders betraying an underlying tension. With crisp delicacy, she says, “I did not. Good for him.”

A second companion clears her throat, eyes averted with feigned distraction, and says, “Owen told me he's planning to go if he gets in.”

Sara looks up with a raised brow. She says, “I thought he was taking a year off to focus on the band.”

Second Companion shrugs. “Maybe not.”

“But wasn't Owen trying to schedule some kind of tour?”

Second Companion says, “Maybe Luis' parents talked him out of it.”

First Companion mutters, “Or maybe he realized he's not that good at guitar.”

Sara is silent for a moment. I can see the churn of her thoughts—hope and disgust and a hint, inexplicable, of disappointment. She shakes off the unexpected melancholy with a stubborn blink and says, “Doesn't matter. I'll never run into him, anyway. There's no way I'm staying in-state.”

The voices, they whisper:

The time draws near.

She will grow and leave.

She will no longer believe that she needs you.

We, too, have seen the folly of humankind against demons.

Be wary.

* * *

I am not alarmed when boxes appear. My watch stays steadfast as Sara folds clothing and stacks books and wraps delicate frames in paper. The Woman hovers more than she has since the era of the toy chest, wistfully running her fingers along the decorative curves of the bed's four posts and anxiously straightening the already-taut sheets. With forced lightness, she says, “If you went to Western, you could still live at home. Something to consider.”

Sara neatly wraps charging cords and says, “I know, Mom.”

“You could save money. For grad school, or whatever you want to do later.”

Sweetly, Sara says, “I’m going to visit all the time, you know.”

“I know,” The Woman says, her voice a sigh. “But there’s still time if you want to think it over.”

“I’ll think it over,” Sara says. But I know, and she knows, that this is a lie.

I wait to be placed in a box; to join the collection of her favored things. The photographs at my flank are removed. Then the little blue box of collected notes, the swell of folded paper within straining the hinges. Then a pewter dragon figurine, dull silver and dead-eyed—even it is paper-wrapped and tucked away. Still, I remain on the shelf.

She does not want your protection, the voices say. She is turning her back on your aid.

It has happened to us before, sighs another. So many have left. So many have fled.

They forgot to fear the demons, says a third. So, too, has she.

I say, *There is time.*

You deny, says the first.

You do not want to believe, says the second.

It is hard, says another. And you are so small. We do not blame you for your weakness.

But you must be strong, another says. For her.

Then they fade, whispering, *Do what must be done.*

I am left, alone, to peer down at boxes and their taunting sharp angles.

They are right. She will leave. She will leave, and have dreams. Those dreams will become desires, and those desires will mutate into demons—demons that she will sacrifice for, bleed for. And then, when those distorted dreams fail her, they will gnaw at her soul. Even now, she may hold one—a demon that begs her to escape my watch. That tells her she no longer needs to be guarded.

I whisper to myself, *Do what must be done.*

And when darkness falls, I descend.

I weave through the ever-shifting landscape of her slumber. The fragments of dreams, the seedlings of nightmares. I do not see it, at first, but I *feel* it—a mutation. Something that has become tangible and sharp and insistent. I slowly stalk my prey, lest my haste give the beast warning, but I hold a perverse hope that it will escape me. Demons must be destroyed, I know. It is why I am. Still—some part of me does not want to take it.

When I find the beast, it comes to me as a tall thing. A tower. No—a skyscraper, locked in by intersecting streets. Sara is inside, hidden within a bustling, cacophonous office. Her fingers tap at a computer keyboard, bespectacled eyes peering at a screen, and a suited woman sweeps forward to say, “I’ve got a story for you, but I’m going to need you to hop on a plane to London first thing tomorrow.”

Then the tallness of the demon becomes wide, long, flat—a stage, freshly shined and aglow in a soft blue light. A wooden podium sits at dead center, behind which stands a beaming man who cradles a framed golden medal in his arms. He calls Sara’s name, and she emerges from the audience with a humble smile, sweeping forward amongst scattered applause to claim her prize.

I witness this and feel the squeeze of melancholy tighten across my feathered chest. This demon will crush her. It will crush her when she leaves home and finds her first apartment in squalor. It will crush her when the boss hands her a red-screwed draft and says, “The article was okay, but you’re really going to need to work on your sentence structure.” It will crush her when the prize does not come; when *no prize ever* comes.

It must be destroyed.

I must destroy it.

For her.

I create for Sara a cathedral as grand and striking as Koln or Notre-Dame or the Basilica of Santa Maria del Mar; dark, towering elegance filled with tidy pews and stained glass windows and flickering candles that cast dancing shadows on a tiled floor. Then I take Sara from the demon’s grasp and place her before me, sunbeams through the stained glass panes reflecting dazzling colors off the black of her hair. She is unbothered by the change in place, and when she looks up and finds me above, her lips curl into a smile.

She says, “What are you doing here?” Her voice is affectionate. Warm.

I say nothing. I am surprised to find that words fail me.

She takes a step deeper, her footsteps echoing off the magnificently lofted ceiling. She says, “I haven’t seen you in my dreams for a long time. I must be feeling nervous about moving. Is that it?”

It is not. But I say, *Yes*.

“It makes sense. Mom’s freaking out a little. But I guess you’ve seen that. It’s a big change. I guess I’ve been feeling stressed about it, too.”

You do not need to go.

“I do,” she says. “There are things I want to do with my life, and I can’t do them here.”

Others have left the protection of my kind, and they found no peace in it.

“Peace isn’t always enough,” she says, smiling. Smiling as though I am the one who is naive.

It is enough, I say. And I must protect you from the things that would shatter it.

“I’m pretty sure you’re about this big,” Sara says, making a four-inch space with her thumb and index finger. “So I don’t know what you think you could protect me from.”

Your dreams, I say.

She laughs. “That’s silly. Dreams are harmless.”

They are not. They are not, when they fail.

She considers, then says, “Okay. Sure. I guess that’s always a possibility. But it doesn’t do any good to be afraid of something that hasn’t even happened yet. Otherwise I’d never leave. I’d never do anything.”

I feel my claws sink into the floor. My teeth clench, tightening in anguish and resistance and instinct. I shake my head, feeling the dissonance like mites in my feathers. I am stone; I cannot feel pain. But the knowledge that Sara intends to leave my watch is an itch unresolved—a torment, swelling from paws to wings to beak, rising like bubbling magma with no release.

I beg, *If you must leave, then take me. Take me, so I can keep my watch. I can hold the demons at bay. I will keep them from overwhelming you.*

Her smile is sad. “I don’t need to be watched anymore, Callifax. I need to get used to handling things on my own, dreams and all. Don’t I?”

I hear my kin whisper: *If you cannot handle the task, small one, then we will.*

I bring my gaze to Sara’s. Her eyes, curious and intent, hold mine. I see the faded innocence of her childhood, leaving only a sliver. I see the turmoil of her future, glistening with the pain of shattered expectations. My ancestors draw near, their dissonant whispers growing louder in my ears as they await and anticipate my failure, ready to sweep in should I disobey.

But they are not Sara’s. *I am.* The work is *mine*.

So I say, *I am sorry.*

And descend.

The skyscraper wails in my teeth as it is dismantled floor by floor. The stage and podium bleed out through my claws. The framed medal is torn into shreds that flutter throughout her dreamscape like wafting ash. And with the scraps of dismembered dreams still clinging to my fangs and feathers, I hear the whispers of my elders—the ones who have done this work for centuries, for millennia—saying, *It is done.*

It is done.

It is done.

* * *

Morning comes.

Sara stares at boxes. She considers them. Nothing more is added.

Days pass. With some hesitance, she removes things from their tombs. Photographs replaced. The pewter dragon returned. Toiletries extracted. Clothing unfolded.

The Woman smiles, but the smiles are uncertain. She says, “I know I was sort of against this whole move from the start, but—you’re not doing this for me, are you? I want you to make your own choices.”

“I know,” Sara says. “I just don’t think I’m ready.”

“You’re sure?” The Woman perches on the edge of Sara’s mat-

dress, fussing with the bedspread. “I’m happy to have you at home, of course. As long as you need. But you seemed so excited, honey.”

Sara sits next to The Woman, eyeing the carpet, and says, “I was. But it would be a lot of money, and I wasn’t really sure what I would be going for, other than just to go. So maybe it’s better if I stay here for a little bit longer. Just until I figure out what I want.”

The Woman says, “And what you want isn’t journalism?”

Slowly, Sara says, “I don’t why, but the idea just doesn’t excite me anymore.”

The Woman cups Sara’s face in her hands, looking into the dusty blue of her eyes. She says, “I know you’ll find something that does.”

Sara nods her subdued agreement.

“And this is really what you think is best?”

“It is.”

The Woman stands, adjusts the fluff of Sara’s pillows a final time, and retreats. In solitude, Sara sighs, neither unhappy nor content. It is an empty, meaningless breath. The whispers say, *The work is good.*

With some hesitance, I say, *The work is good.*

Then Sara folds her legs upon the mattress and lifts her chin in my direction. I think she sees me. I *know* that I see her—my small cathedral, masked as a human. My castle in need of guarding. Still here. Still with me. Were I not stone, I would have felt my spine straighten with renewed vigor. I have fulfilled my purpose. I have kept her safe.

The work is good, I repeat. Then louder, with certainty, I say to my kin, *Yes. The work is good.*

I Become Lamassu

by L. Fox

Lions prowl, released by men for sport, searching for escape under an open desert sky, any way back to the plains they were captured from. They do not last long under the weight and volley of arrows of soldiers on chariots. Men scream holy rage down at the beasts of the world and, for a moment, the hand of a God sanctifies the death of one so frightened. This is as was always meant to be. The fear makes death burn holy.

There is glory in lion killing. The pelts are worn and the heads made into masts, skulls decorate gates, and scenes are carved into palace walls. That is the reason for the hunt. Even when the lions are men, and men are lions themselves, the anointed must prove divinely named or another will take sacred favor in their place. See them as they are, weak to fate and violent-ended all. See them as they must be, raging like bulls with teeth sharp for rending meat.

* * *

“Lion-hunter, archer-extraordinaire!” His priests proclaimed. It was not enough to call Him back. My King did not answer His title.

He lay dying, reed-fragile in his bed.

The genies he’d been gifted by the sun lifted their cones of liquid lapis, relief, and dabbed it to his brow. By day they lay in

low carvings, surrounding his bed and his throne with a ritual of fertilization by the same instruments. By night they prepared him for rebirth, a new life, born again on the back of a racing chariot with bow in hand.

“King,” a reedy accounts keeper knelt before his bedside in the stark light of noon, “grant us the wealth of your daughter’s temple. Lay boons upon our life as the moon sheds rays across our vast lands at the hands of Nanna.”

“Ur-Nammu,” another pleaded, daring to use the name of a man touching the pleated skirts of the gods, “you have left the roads to Larsa unfinished. This is a blemish on your reign. You must awaken to restore them.” Under the guise of a miserly man, his voice shook. He begged not for the roads to be finished, but for the voice to utter such a command once more. *He will not hear your mortal cries. He does not even hear my own*, I thought, words echoing in the cavern of my chest and pinging between ribs.

The priests begged at my King’s swaddled, sweat-soaked side for the turn of an oil lamp before it was time for them to leave.

The offending bureaucrats must be removed, the genies said with less than words, *for there is more water to lay on His lips*.

I swept the aggravators from His bedside with the butt of my

staff. “His Majesty will not listen to any more requests today. He is scheduled for reverent, *silent*, prayer for the remainder of the evening.”

Dregs of men entrenched in the building of ziggurats and lengthening of roads trickled from the royal chamber until it was myself, my King, and four genies who pulled themselves from the carvings behind his bed. Tall not-men-but-spirits with beards braided and adorned with gold knelt in the place of the soul-suckers. My King could not lift the weight of his eyes, but the furrow in his brow eased when the genies sprinkled relief upon him once more. His Majesty lay in the flickering oil-lit shadow of death, unmoving.

Resume your post, the flick of their chins said.

* * *

Before, in a chamber unseen by the king and out of view from guards, a young man wept. He wept for peace in his lands, and for their bloody expansion. He wept because he was able to, and because from this moment on he could weep no longer.

Look there, on him. See his small hands tremble while the genies collect his tears for water. See the not-yet stubble on his chin. See the twisting and rending of his stomach deep within him, of the bile rising in his throat and its expulsion on the imported marble floors. See him and know fear is holy. There is a lion hiding in the brush before its existence is made anointed by the water of the spirits.

* * *

Crack.

The lamps had long burned out, His Majesty's pained breath the only sound keeping me company. The wheeze kept demons of the night at bay. There was no sweeter sound than that of a man, almost god, entrusted to the care and keeping of an empire, resting, gentle in the dark's embrace. Shoulders that bore the weight of lion-carcass and the heads of his enemies lay soft against woven sheets.

All this was broken with the lock on His chamber door.

Staff at the ready. Saber on the hip. My hands curled around the jeweled hilt of the blade. It should have been a blade for ceremony only, but what guard would stand unreadied in a palace where rooms were dedicated to the art of conquest, relief after relief of genocide cast for peace? It was only fitting for a warrior to find his bed filled with the blood of traitors in his final moments. It would bring Him great honor to bathe in it once again.

He, too tall to be a woman and too short to be a genie of malintent, crept into the chamber with feet silenced by silk-woven shoes. He shut the door to the lit hall. The intruder was at a disadvantage when the world washed dark. If he were part of the palace he would know my oaths, my stature, and my ever watching eye glinting in the dark. If he were not, the guards at the front gates would have had his hands removed from his arms and draped about him like a necklace so all could see the punishment for picking locks in the house of the King.

The intruder pulled an ornate knife from his belt, gleaming under lily-white moonlight filtering in from the sliver of the window deemed tactically safe for a king to sleep beneath. Before he could unsheath the blade, my own pulled at his throat, his hair in my hand. One swift move and the gates would have new decoration.

“Speak a final prayer before you are eaten by dogs,” I whispered. Dogs were the kindest threat. I would have his skin as a coat or stretched over wood to be laid as a canvas in my quarters. I would have his eyes for jewels in my hair and teeth to adorn my belt.

“Ninos,” the intruder spoke against the blade. It pressed so close that his throat cut with the movement required to speak. Thin lines of blood trickled down the blade. “Ninos. Drop your sword.”

The young face of his father sat in profile against my blade. I dropped it, and it rang *clanging* to the floor.

“My lord,” I asked, wiping treason from his throat. “Why are you here?”

Shulgi, His radiant son, turned but did not meet my eye. “You can’t know,” he said. “You can’t know what it’s like.”

“Your grace?”

He met my gaze then. “To live at the wheel of a chariot and watch as it tramples the Sun.” Shulgi, Prince of the four corners of the universe, met his father with a hand on clammy cheek. “All of my life—all of my life I have lived in honor of him. I will do so until I am allowed peace in eternal sleep. You know this.”

I did. It was my whole life, and Shulgi’s, both, stretched in destiny long before our births. I was destined by the moon and the sun, by the gods of the city, and the hymns of the temple to stand here against the door while my King slept. Shulgi was destined to sleep there one day, in the shadow of a guard ever-watching.

He would bring the world together through whatever means necessary and grip it in a vice so strong they melded into a new kingdom.

“I will keep his ziggurats and I will bring Akkad under heel so they will know the law of Ur-Nammu. I swore it to Nanna at his altar. I also swore another oath, Ninos—” Words choked in the young prince’s mouth.

He began again, “I promised my King, not my father then, but my King—I promised him a death worthy—” Shulgi knelt down at his father’s bedside and clasped his frail hand. “I promised him hymns of glory in his name. No one sings of old kings passing with lapsing breath and failing lungs.” He lifted the knife to his father’s chest and lay it there, holding His hand in the other, anointing the weapon with his father’s shallow breath. “So you see what I must do.”

Time froze in the moment between words and understanding. My King made him swear the oath. Rage and confusion ripped my soul in two.

The knife.

An honorable death. Fear and blood and bile in that death. The death of a man who conquered armies. An oath to commit a sin I could not allow. I could not disobey my vow to protect him. Nor could I disobey my Prince.

My face had long grown wet with tears. “I will protect him until his dying breath,” I said.

Shulgi laid his forehead on the edge of his father’s bed. “I know this.”

We wept together then because we could.

My Prince raised himself after a soft prayer to the moon itself, begging forgiveness. “You know what I ask.”

“Yes. And the burden we both bear.” It was the burden my King carried for asking this of his son. Of me. There could be no godhood for a King with the weight of such a sin. On the other hand, there would be no glory without transgression committed. If they did not act on His wish, who could sing His everlasting bravery? Who could make hymns and poems and carvings of one who eased gently into a final farewell?

“I will not have your head displayed like a traitor. This is not treason.”

“Thank you.”

My Prince lifted his blade off his father’s chest and aimed for my heart, unsheathed. My saber still lay on the floor, paces from where he threatened me. Shulgi lunged and we twined in combat, his knife chipping at the wood of my staff. I did not land a blow. I could not—could not disgrace a man in anguish. I ached for us. I ached for the duty that neither of us could abandon.

At last he broke the staff in two.

And with my back to my King, protecting Him from the blade’s purchase, Shulgi speared his knife into my heart.

White-blossomed agony ripped through my chest.

He twisted it further, and helped me fall easily to the floor when my legs gave way under the weight of pain. Numbness and the

dull roar of blood in my ears made Shulgi’s words fairer than their place in my ear.

“We will write of honorable death in battle, both of you, and a protector until the end, Ninos. I swear it.”

Another oath, I thought, my last.

He placed my saber in hand. It was all I could now take with me. My prince turned away with the knife in hand, and from the bloody floor I prayed that Nanna take me before I watched my greatest failure.

But it was not Nanna who came, but the cool wash of a fruit-cone and the sprinkle of a genie. It was the hand of a staunch protector, reached out to stem the flow of my blood. It was the light of the moon and the radiant sun of the new King, crowned at midnight by Gods with blood on his left hand and his right placed in prayer over his heart.

Come, guardian, the genies commanded. My heart could not follow. My world and my world after life lay broken on a plush bed with a smile on his lips.

You will not come?

No. I told him my final request. I poured every ounce of duty from the depth of my leaking soul into my words.

Then you will stay.

Light and dark spun a weave around me, my vision flashing between the genie and my King. Power gripped my hands and feet and strength ebbed back into my limbs. I grew taller, and taller

still. The skin I wore hardened to stone, and wings erupted from my back. Another leg. Teeth. Sharper than any ornamental knife.

The genie nodded and turned to my King, waiting to carry his grief into a life beyond palaces and lion hunts.

I took my post.

* * *

And the hands of the gods turn the wheel forward, onward, pushing like a slithering thing organic. Daughters are given to the goddess and the temple, sons are given to the world. Sons grow strong, or they do not grow at all. Sons pleat their skirts and wear their caps of kingship until dusk breaks over them. It is not the duty of a pious man to keep his son from honor bloody, honor befitting a king made to swallow the world whole and make peace in its devouring.

* * *

So sings the hymn of Ninos, the protector of Ur-Nammu, non-

apotheosized, King of Ur and Sumer and Akkad:

Lamassu. Double-aspect. A guardian. Twinned in pairs, and perched in stone to protect the King from all those, foreign and domestic, who wish him harm. They are engraved in stone tablets and dug into the dirt under door frames of homes, bound as gateway guardians of the city walls. They walk eternal with five legs, a bull’s body, and eagle wings. They champion the powerful and rise sentinels where men fail.

Let them rest on the border between safety and violent ends. Let them snarl and rip prey apart with jaws unhinged. Let the King rest His hand at His heart with ease, for He knows He sits protected by the divine. Let Him forever chase lions over the thundering of horse-step.

* * *

Look there: There are two. The eater and the protector, lions both. See the man dying. Smell on him the stink of holy fear and failure, and hear his last request.

Let me be Lamassu.

The Cat Sith

by Deborah L. Davitt

Creeping, sliding, skulking
through the heather of the heath,
you don't hear my footsteps
and you'll never see my teeth.

Did you leave my milk out?
It's best served with your belief—
tastier than cow's blood,
sacrificial aperitif.

If you didn't, I'll serve warning
by a-tapping at your door,
where I'll smile in human form.
"Is it to the Sith you swore?"

I'll ask, sweetness and light,
"He who makes the Unseelie seethe?"
and when you stammer yes,
"He who kindly lets you breathe?"

Off I'll saunter, there and then
taking back my proper shape
coat of black, stained with white;
looking back, you can't escape.

You set out the saucer
and fill it to its brim,
close tight your door
give voice to a hymn.

It doesn't matter a whit;
you've paid me your due—
I lap up the milk, content
till next year's review.

Cowboy Corpse

by Warren Muzak



What Is Pale?

by Gerri Leen

We four horses of the Apocalypse
You know our riders
So much said of them, but what of us?
Do you think we materialized
Fully formed—no, we were born
We gamboled and grew and grazed
In mystical pastures tinged with
Prophecy and blood

My sweet siblings: white, you know that color
So many choose white steeds for goodness
Kings and lone rangers—and sometimes a racehorse
Is born that rushes bright white among the
Grays you once mistakenly thought were white
Red you know too, chestnut like gleaming copper
Or dark like liver, the blood running off it
Brown and red both and then there's black
Also a popular choice for those who wish to
Show who they are, what they can do
A black steed says so much

And then there's me: the pale horse
What is pale? You have wondered
Admit it, I have seen the paintings drawn of
We four, whether we burst from the canvas
Practically breathing fire or walk in a more sedate
Group, ready to tear through the world, but not yet, not yet
I am different in each: steel gray in some, dun in others
Buckskin, palomino and others make me a ghostly figure
Transparent but strong enough to carry death
Strong enough to be the last horse, to follow the others
To the bloody, apocalyptic end
They are on to something, these last ones

You wish to know what pale is? Poor John had no idea
When he wrote his words, for plastic did not exist yet
Something that could be seen through
But not smashed like glass or disturbed like water
Something that endures, that poisons slowly and
Without a care: I am all colors and I am none
Of all my siblings, I am the most subtle
And the most powerful, the others rely on
Their riders to take and kill, they follow their cues
My rider sits gently, feet dangling, reins loose
For I will do the work as you scatter me all on your own
Death need do nothing for his time to come
Other than talk to me of times less ugly
When he too was young, in a mystical place
Of prophecy and blood

Into the Gentle Night

by Rina Song

Naniluk was eight when she first witnessed the face of death.

That day the autumn air was crisp, and leaves crunched underfoot as she raced into the forest, carrying a wicker basket half her size.

“Yubri, slow down!” she called. “Where are you going?”

Yubri laughed, tossing his straw-colored hair. “The best apples grow by the stream! Hurry up if you want to make it back before the sun sets!”

Overhead, their *daena* fluttered on dark wings. They resembled a pair of ghostly ravens or kites, with long tails lashing in the breeze. The *daena* carried one's soul, Naniluk's mother said. When Naniluk asked what she meant, her mother explained she would understand when she grew older. She'd named hers Pasha, something Yubri liked to poke fun at her for.

“Over here!” Yubri called from the riverbank. Naniluk held her breath as he climbed up a wizened apple tree, towards the shining fruit hanging over the water.

“You can't do that,” she stammered. “Ma will get angry.”

“The sweetest apples are the hardest ones to pick,” Yubri

snapped. “That's why they're the best.”

Naniluk's stomach gave a reluctant growl. Above them, the *daena* made strange chittering sounds.

A crack echoed overhead. Without warning, Yubri's foot slipped. He fumbled, one leg swinging in the air.

“Help!” he cried. “The branch is too far, I'm sinking—”

The tree sagged under his weight, dangling closer to the churning stream. Every flailing movement bent it further, and jagged splinters stuck from the broken branch. Naniluk cast about wildly, looking for fallen branches, anything she could use, when a shadow descended. Yubri's *daena* settled above the tree. Its shadowy form began to solidify, and rootlike tendrils sprouted outwards. Too late, she recognized the shape. An apple tree, with a branch hanging by a thread. Her mother's words echoed in her mind.

The daena carry our souls, and with them, our fates.

A horrible crunching noise split the air, and Yubri fell.

He screamed once before his head slammed on a rock. Scarlet clouds blossomed in the water. At once his *daena* flew down and enveloped him in its mass. The dark shape seemed to strug-

gle against itself, writhing in the water. Then it faded away, leaving Yubri bobbing in the stream. His face, which moments ago had been twisted with fear, grew still and blank.

Naniluk dropped her basket, scattering apples everywhere. She screamed.

* * *

Naniluk was fourteen, finally old enough to gather herbs in the woods by herself. She crouched on her knees in the summer heat, combing through the thick green grass. She cursed as sweat dripped into her eyes, stinging them.

Pasha hummed nearby, keeping her company. Naniluk spotted her target in the distance—a cluster of *aiju* florets. Triumphant, the teenager filled her basket with the tiny blue buds. That would keep her father's medicine cabinet stocked for a while. Thinking eagerly of dinner, she set off for home.

Closer to the village, she saw a crowd huddled in the central square. Naniluk hurried forward, frowning. Had the elders called for another village forum? The crowd's *daena* buzzed like angry bees, their ever-shifting forms chaotic with anxiety. Many-legged beasts, grasping limbs, and snarling faces appeared in the foggy masses before shifting away again.

Naniluk's father bent over a woman on the ground. Her mouth went dry. "Pa? What happened?"

Blood stained his blue healer's smock. He looked up, wearing a grim expression.

"Invaders ambushed the patrol. A dozen armed men appeared

and demanded to be led back to the village, then attacked when they were refused. No one could recognize their armor or weapons. Wandering barbarians, perhaps."

The woman was one of their neighbors who often tended the turnip fields. Her face contorted with pain as she cradled her blood-soaked stomach. The woman's *daena* circled lower like an approaching scavenger. Yubri's face flashed in Naniluk's mind. Her insides curdled with horror.

"Who would do this?" her father murmured.

The crowd quieted as clopping hoofbeats approached. Several white horses trotted into the square, each bearing a rider clad in armor made from thick furs overlaying steel plate. The men were light-skinned in complexion, and she wondered if they'd come from the bordering northern lands.

Their leader goaded his horse forward. His features were sharp, jagged, as if his face had been hewn from stone. His deep-set eyes were the color of coal, and as they raked the crowd the man smiled like a shark.

"Fear not," he said. "I am Lord Varnadi, and your village is now under my protection. In exchange you will serve me, accepting no other master."

A hush fell over the villagers. The men were frightening enough, brandishing foreign weapons with wickedly shaped blades as they sneered at the crowd. But it was Varnadi who sent a chill down Naniluk's spine, who elicited the most gasps.

For while the men's *daena* trailed above them, churning in the

sky, Varnadi had no *daena* at all.

The woman on the ground bared her teeth.

“This village has fended for itself for centuries,” she snarled. “We never needed any chieftain's protection. What gives you the right to trample in and claim the place?”

Varnadi's grin widened, and he dismounted. The chieftain strode forth until he stood face to face with her. Naniluk could smell him, hot and sour like spoiled milk.

“Things can change at any moment,” Varnadi said. “You would do well to be cautious with your words.”

Then he drew his sword and beheaded her. The woman's head thudded onto the ground. It rolled to face Naniluk, mouth still gaping in shock.

Her *daena* fell upon her at once. Naniluk felt suddenly dizzy, and black dots crowded her vision. She turned away, almost drunk with terror, and one by one, the shaking villagers knelt.

* * *

Varnadi's men took over the village's council hall, hanging up blood-red banners. The chieftain only stayed a few days before riding out again, but a small contingent stayed behind. They became a common sight, trotting through the huts on their horses, conducting drills in the central square, or lounging about and leering at passersby. The villagers' *daena* grew larger and heavier with their presence, as if a second, shadowy army were haunting them.

At the start of spring, as Naniluk scrubbed pots in the sink, someone knocked on their door.

Her mother went to answer it. A soldier stood there, leaning with a hand on his sword.

“We are collecting tax,” he grunted. “This year it will be one fifth of your food stores. The lord's subjects must pay tribute so we can continue to protect your land.”

Naniluk froze. The village was still reeling from a terrible blight, which took out half the yam and turnip crops. One-fifth of their larder, gone? They could barely feed themselves.

Her mother's voice stayed steady, though her body tensed behind the door. “We've had a harsh winter,” she said. “Now we must set aside some grain for planting. Please, we bid you come again in autumn when we are better prepared.”

The washcloth trembled in Naniluk's hand. *Mother, be careful.*

“How unfortunate. The lord has put out his mandate, after all.” The soldier's eyes gleamed. “If you don't have material tribute, there are other ways to pay.” Then he seized Naniluk's mother by the arm.

She cried out. In an instant, her *daena* swelled up behind her, resembling a man's silhouette. A shadowy sword blade crept towards her throat, inches away from death ...

At once, Yubri's blank white face flashed before Naniluk's eyes.

“Stop!” She dropped a pot. “Take me instead.”

The pot landed with a resounding clang. Naniluk's mother shook her head wildly, her face clouded with despair.

“I am younger and more able-bodied,” Naniluk stammered, taken aback at her own rashness. It was like her mouth spoke without consulting her first. “Perhaps Varnadi could use servants. Skilled laborers, not just warriors.”

“No!” her mother burst out. “Naniluk, you cannot do this. I forbid you—”

“Silence,” the soldier snapped. He motioned at Naniluk to continue.

“My father is a healer, and he has been training me,” Naniluk said. “Take me to work for Lord Varnadi's army. I will serve him as if he were my own kin.”

The soldier paused, eyes narrowed. At last he released her mother, and with relief Naniluk saw the *daena* fade back.

“We are in need of healers and medics,” he admitted. “Fetch your possessions and prepare to leave at once. I have many more households to visit today.”

Naniluk's heart hammered as she obeyed. When it came time to go, her mother waited by the door, shaking with tears in her eyes. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but Naniluk could not bring herself to meet her gaze. The soldier slammed the door shut, and they were off.

* * *

Bitter winds slapped Naniluk's face as she clung to the shaking tree branch. She couldn't remember where she was, or how she'd gotten there. Stormy gray skies surrounded her, almost indistinguishable from the glinting sea below.

“Help!” Yubri was clinging to the branch twenty feet away. He reached out, terrified.

Naniluk climbed desperately, ignoring her burning muscles and the terror hammering in her ears. But just before her fingertips brushed his, the branch snapped. Yubri screamed as he plummeted into the churning sea below.

She woke with a gasp. For a moment Yubri's face seemed to peer from the shadows. It took a while to register the moonlit dormitory around her, the slumbering slaves who were her peers. It had now been two years since Naniluk had come to work in Varnadi's castle.

At dawn, she took her breakfast porridge with the other slaves before joining the healers in the infirmary. The familiar work of medicine and healing was the sole comfort Naniluk found in this cold, desolate place. The castle was more than two weeks' ride from home, and filled with more young people than she could have ever imagined, in various skin tones with accents familiar and strange. But few had energy for idle talk. Work kept them occupied, and what little rumors of the outside world came did so in hushed whispers. She strained her ears for news from her village. Even the slaves' *daena* were pale and indistinct in the crowded corridors; Naniluk supposed that meant they were safe here, though it did not console her.

At least Mother and Father are alive, she reminded herself,

glancing at Pasha's diminished form. But she could not know for certain. And where was Varnadi? She'd glimpsed him during the first few months, or at least the battalions he commanded, but his appearances were increasingly infrequent. Naniluk wondered how far Varnadi's conquests stretched. Perhaps the entire world fell under his domain now.

Her questions were answered when the grim-faced steward found her at lunch.

"Healer, come with me," he barked. "Lord Varnadi seeks a personal attendant."

Naniluk followed, confused. Was Varnadi back at the castle? They went down an unfamiliar corridor and up two stairwells decorated with Varnadi's scarlet banners. The door at the top opened onto a vast bedroom lined with velvet. Varnadi lay in bed, thin and white as a ghost. If not for the uniform hanging on the wall, Naniluk would not have recognized him.

The steward bowed. "Here is the nurse you sent for, my lord."

"Thank you, Hakon," Varnadi grunted. "You are dismissed."

Once the steward left, he tilted his head at a medicine tray set by the bed. "I'm told you have some training as a healer. Make me a draught, for my nausea. The last nurse knew nothing."

Naniluk didn't know what to say. The man oppressing her village looked to be on death's door. He still had no *daena* in sight. How far could an immortal fade without disappearing?

As she began measuring ingredients, another knock sounded on the door.

"Enter," Varnadi called.

The young man who strode in looked around Naniluk's age. He shared the same long nose and high cheekbones as Varnadi himself. His *daena* shimmered in the candlelight, adding faint silver flickers about his head.

With great effort, Varnadi sat up. "Back so soon, Slatra? What news do you bring?"

"Father." Slatra bowed his head in greeting. "I finally quashed the rebellion down in Kursika today." Naniluk did not know the name, but her heart skipped a beat at the mention of rebellion. Slatra threw her a suspicious glance, as if he'd heard her thoughts, before continuing.

"We executed the leaders. Ten soldiers were lost in the uprising, but Kursika is secured."

Varnadi raised an eyebrow. "Impressive. The Kursikans have only been striking for a few days. What about the famine?"

Slatra shrugged. "Still ongoing, I suppose. What about it?"

"It is the root cause. Kursika has been suffering from drought for years. If the people continue to starve, they will continue to rebel."

"I know that, which was why I rushed back to see you." Slatra leaned in, impatient. "Father, I must have a bigger force to command. I am stretched thin as it is, running everywhere to deal with these dissidents."

"You fool!" Varnadi snapped, so loudly that Naniluk dropped

her stirring spoon. “Without aid, the lands we've taken will wither away. If we cannot keep the kingdom healthy, it will crumble—”

“Peasants’ lives are not my concern,” his son growled. “There are new lands to conquer. We are not all content to lie in this fortress, rotting away all day.”

He threw another glare at Naniluk and left, slamming the door. Varnadi leaned back and sighed, looking at the ceiling.

* * *

The next day, Varnadi received another visitor. This man was familiar, a master healer from Naniluk’s village who'd often visited her father’s hut in between travels. Hope engulfed her when he came in, perhaps bearing news from the outside world—her family—but he shook his head and looked away. His *daena* drifted around his skull like a stormy halo.

The old master pulled dried herbs from his bag and ground them into paste. It was an old strength-giving recipe, used to treat fatigue. Varnadi took it with his tea that afternoon.

He came for several more days, but Varnadi's condition did not change. Then the healer stopped visiting, and Naniluk did not find out where he’d gone. Her chest ached at this additional loss, but there was no time to mourn. More doctors followed: men and women bringing scented oils, incense, even one who shook a rattle and sang a haunting melody that gave Naniluk chills. Each healer came bearing a lifetime of arcane knowledge, far beyond anything Naniluk had ever learned from her father. Yet Varnadi continued to grow weaker by the day, and the doctors disappeared as fast as they came. Every

new visitor seemed more terrified than the last, their *daena* growing larger, more menacing.

Meanwhile, Slatra's appearances at the castle became more frequent, though he seemed preoccupied with other matters. The mood in the halls grew anxious, frenetic. At one point, a squadron returned from battle with burned lungs. Naniluk overheard whispers that Kursika had burned down its granaries when Varnadi's son came into town.

Then one day, Naniluk's father came to the castle. She nearly dropped the tea tray when she saw him in the hallway to Varnadi's chamber.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered.

He had aged much more in the time since she'd left. Naniluk's father embraced her. “Nan! Look how you've grown. Your mother and I missed you.”

“Don't say you've come to treat Lord Varnadi,” Naniluk pleaded. “All the other healers have failed. I don't know what will happen to you.”

Her father smiled sadly. “Varnadi sent me a direct summons. And everyone deserves a chance to heal.” Naniluk tried to protest, but he took her hand. “What’s done is done. I’ve made up my mind. Come, let's prepare the medicine.”

Naniluk's heart pounded as she followed her father into the room. He bowed to Lord Varnadi, then he set to work.

At her father's bidding, and a nod from Varnadi, Naniluk helped mash herbs and grind seeds for the mixture. The recipe

was complicated, requiring precise measurements and stirring, but she clung to every moment. She hadn't worked alongside her father since childhood, and the scent of ground herbs, paired with her father murmuring calculations under his breath, brought an aching inner peace. A lump rose in her throat. If only such things could last forever.

He administered Varnadi the potion. The lord closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. Naniluk leaned forward, daring to hope.

Then Varnadi coughed, splattering the bedsheets with blood.

The hacking sounds brought guards rushing in. Slatra came running.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Naniluk's father shook his head. She'd never seen him look so grim.

“This is a wasting disease which consumes one from the inside out. I've seen it many times before.”

“What are you waiting for, then?” Slatra snapped. “We spent days procuring every rare herb and plant you requested. Cure him.”

“There is no cure,” Naniluk's father said. “The lord is dying.”

Slatra's face turned scarlet. “Liar! Poisoner!” He turned to the guards, his voice shaking. “If this charlatan can't save my father's life, he will pay with his own. Execute him.”

“No!” Naniluk screamed. She threw herself at the men, but they did not yield. The soldiers seized her father's arms, and his *daena* billowed up around him like a funeral shroud.

With a jolt, Naniluk felt Varnadi tugging at her sleeve, pulling her back. Slatra stormed towards her, one hand on his sword, but stopped when Varnadi threw him a glare. Scowling, he turned and followed the soldiers as they dragged Naniluk's father through the door. Then they were gone.

* * *

Naniluk's hands shook with rage, rattling the teapot upon its tray. A just world would have stopped for her, dimming its sun, halting in its tracks. It seemed impossible she remained here, her pulse still beating, when her father was gone. And there, ahead, lay the object of her loathing.

Varnadi wore a contemplative expression when she entered, as if her anger meant nothing—which, Naniluk knew, it didn't.

Once she set the tray down, he spoke.

“Stay, Naniluk.”

“My lord?” She kept her head bowed. Varnadi had never addressed her by name before.

“I'm sorry for what happened to your father. He knew his craft well. I tried to intervene before they took him to the gallows this morning, but in the end my son's temper won out. He is under pressure, you see, to prove himself worthy as my heir.”

She kept her clenched fists hidden. Did this man really expect her to find sympathy for him?

“Is there some boon I can grant as an apology?” Varnadi asked. “You have been a loyal servant. I regret that this is how you were rewarded.”

Naniluk fought back tears. Varnadi offering kindness made the pain worse. “You can’t bring him back,” she murmured, and was stunned by her own audacity.

“I can’t. But for now, I still have some power over these lands. If there is anything I can grant you ... a palace on my richest farmlands for your family, a dozen slaves at your disposal ...”

“I don’t want it.” Naniluk felt nauseous. Every blade of grass and forlorn slave the chieftain owned had been taken by force. “You ... won’t leave, will you? If I asked you to take your men and ride back to where you came from. You can’t.”

The chieftain looked stunned. For a moment she thought he’d lose his patience. But he did not.

“I can’t. Even if I did, it would not stop Slatra from returning with vengeance upon my death.”

“Fine. Just tell me, then.” A dam inside Naniluk broke. “Where did you come from? Who are you, to declare yourself king and take everything from my people? How dare you—how could you ...”

Varnadi listened to her sputter. An understanding look came over his face.

“Very well. I grew up in the tundras north of here. They are a harsh and unforgiving land. One day, I woke to see my mother and sister dead beside me, and our house burning down.”

Naniluk’s head spun. She could not imagine this monster ever having been an innocent child.

“I joined the bandit gang who did it. I loathed them to the last, but it was all I could do to keep myself alive. The bandits were savages. They fought and killed over petty squabbles. To survive, I learned to scheme, to gain favors and break trust when I needed to. Over the years I established leadership over the group. There were other gangs roaming the area, and soon my tribe grew into an army. The tundra learned to fear my name.”

“Then you came south,” Naniluk murmured.

“Yes. I wanted to build an empire that would last for eternity. How ironic the thought seems now. Do I look like an eternal ruler to you?” Varnadi held up his bony arms.

“No,” Naniluk blurted, and he laughed.

“Do you know what drove my hunger for conquest all these years? Not bloodlust or revenge, but fear of death. Ever since that day, I could not bear the idea. To stop breathing, thinking, or feeling, ceasing to exist. Reduced to lifeless meat, like my mother and sister ...” Varnadi glanced at Naniluk’s *daena*. “As my empire grew, more rested upon my shoulders. But I was still just one man, and as the crowds calling my name grew larger my own mortality weighed on me ever more. So I took my death and locked it away.”

Naniluk stared at the carpet. Her mind rebelled at Varnadi's words, refusing to comprehend the message before her.

“I don’t know if it worked. I feel as mortal as ever. But I am tired now, and I wish to rest.” With great effort, Varnadi pried at a brick in the wall above the bed’s headboard. He grunted and the brick slid out. In the dusty hole left behind, there was a tarnished key.

“Take this and go to the castle's deepest level. There is one door there that the key will unlock. Release whatever you find there.”

A whirl of emotions raged inside Naniluk. She accepted the key and hurried down the stairs. She went deeper and deeper, down hallways even the slaves never visited, and found the door.

It opened onto a large, dark space smelling of cobwebs and dust. Nobody had been here in years, Naniluk realized. It was vast, yet so silent that her breathing seemed to fill the entire room. She walked past stacks of old maps, discarded barrels, and other forgotten things. Her footsteps echoed softly, and at the very end, she found Lord Varnadi’s *daena*.

The figure huddled in its cage. It resembled a small child, with clouded, misty skin. As Naniluk approached, it looked up with wide, dark eyes. She wondered how many years it had waited for this moment. When she fitted the key in the lock and opened the door, it bowed its head as if in greeting, then swept from the room as quiet as a shadow.

Naniluk waited, and silence fell over the fortress.

* * *

Varnadi was smiling when they found him in his bed the next morning, cold and pale. The guards took him away quickly, and Naniluk sensed slight relief in their expressions.

She went back to work in the infirmary. There was a quiet funeral and a mourning period called before Slatra held a hasty crowning ceremony. If he grieved his father’s death, he hid it well. He stood at the coronation podium with a cruel smirk as the army’s top general put the crown atop his head. Only Naniluk, seated closer to him than the other servants, saw his hands trembling upon the podium.

Slatra soon departed for another military campaign. He seemed determined to spend as little time at the castle as possible. Soon after, the castle woke to a mob of furious villagers. The slaves huddled inside while soldiers took to the wall tops with pots of boiling tar. Naniluk stuffed cotton in her ears to drown out the sounds. Afterwards, scorch marks shaped like human bodies mottled the drawbridge.

Rumors spread among the slaves after one claimed to have seen Slatra standing above the fray, cloak flapping in the wind, with his *daena* nowhere to be found. As they whispered, Naniluk looked out from the bunkers, surveying the carnage left on the drawbridge.

She remembered Varnadi, who’d fought his last battle for so long. Now the chieftain was gone, but the pain hadn’t stopped. Naniluk suddenly felt very tired. As she gazed upon the bridge, something inside her broke, and she realized there was only one path left to her.

That night, she took one last trip to the lord's chamber, now Slatra's, carrying the requisite tea tray. She strode past the guards, who never paid her much mind. Outside Slatra's quarters, Naniluk felt beneath her skirt for the knife hidden there. As she gripped the handle, her pulse pounded hard in her fingers, beating out the last moments of a body very much still alive. She would have no escape after this. The guards would see to it.

Pasha watched silently behind her. She hadn't thought much about her *daena* ever since she'd arrived at the castle. Death was something held at bay, hazy and indistinct like fog overlooking a river. Indeed, life hadn't been all that different. Despair and fear could only eat at you so long before it all collapsed into nothing, one gray day after the other.

Now Pasha had shifted into a guard's shadow, complete with a spear at the ready. The *daena*'s edges were sharper than Naniluk had ever seen, and for the first time in years purpose guided her steps. Soon she would be with Father again, and Yubri, and everyone else who'd come and gone before her. Naniluk had feared death once, but she'd learned there were worse fates than that.

She looked over her shoulder at Pasha, in the guard's guise. She'd chosen her fate, then. This was it.

"I'm ready," Naniluk murmured to her death. Then she went inside.

Deserted

by Sonali Roy



Bone of timber

by Richard Magahiz

Let me show you black heartwood
that cried out when
it was pulled from its mother.
wishing its nakedness were
once again glad in tree flesh.
Everyone knows the skin of a tree,
its lungs lifted to the sun,
but seldom think of its heart,
as much mineral as organic,
the reinforcing rod keeping it
from slumping back to earth,
instead keeping it erect
under cyclonic winds.

A dryad is forever a young shaft
rising up out of the earth,
becoming ever more condensed
and far more mysterious.
The maiden holds up
the centuries-old crone,
withstands her every ache.
And when at last
she's sunk in the mud
for millennia, hundreds of millennia
she turns to glistening blackness.

Which of us live our lives
steeped in darkness
dating back many decades,
maybe a century or more
revealing the secret at our core
only when we have fallen?



ORIGIN OF A NOT DEER

By Dawn Holloway

With thanks to Rafay on dialogue,
Jason on design, and Jess on layout.





















Contributors



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* * *



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* * *



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* * *



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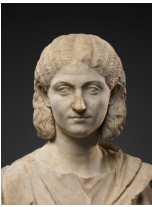
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NICHOLAS DE MARINO has tinnitus and used to collect vintage sofubi. Monthly column [fnord] in *foofaraw*. See *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Rat Bag Lit*, and *Hell Itself* for truths,

half-truths, and poetry. Big-up SFPA, *Codex*, and *Weird Christ-mas*.

* * *



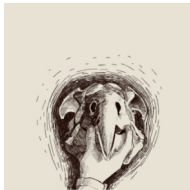
L. FOX is a writer and an archaeologist by sweat, blood, and training. Find her other publications in multiple volumes of *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Shacklebound Books’ Twisted Trails Anthology*, the *Tales to Terrify Podcast*, and *Penumbric Speculative Fiction Magazine*.

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LORA GRAY (they/them) is a non-binary speculative fiction writer and poet from Northeast Ohio, and has been published in *Uncanny Magazine*, *F&SF*, and *Strange Horizons* among other places. Their poetry has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award. You can find Lora online at lora-gray.com

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DAWN HOLLOWAY can be found on BlueSky and Instagram as [@HollowayHideout](https://www.instagram.com/HollowayHideout).

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AMY POWER JANSEN is a South African living in the Netherlands. A heterodox economist working in development finance. A specific writer of stories that have been pub-

lished by presses such as Flame Tree, and magazines such as *Deep Magic* and *Compelling Science Fiction*.

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R. MAC JONES is a poet and illustrator. He is the author of the speculative poetry chapbook *Astrosom-melier*, published by Bottlecap Press.

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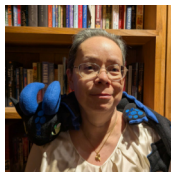


MICHELLE KOUBEK is an artist who creates digital art, acrylic paintings, and charcoal sketches. She likes experimenting with bold ideas and has written and illustrated several books. Her most recent creation is *LIGHT*, a psych thriller/horror novel with hand-drawn, glowing illustrations throughout the book. Learn more about her at www.michellekoubek.com.

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JOHN LEAHY is the author of three novels—*Harvest*, *CROGIAN*, and *Unity*. He has received three Honourable Mentions in the Writers of the Future Contest, and his short story “Singers” appeared in Flame Tree Publishing’s 2017 *Pirates and Ghosts* anthology, alongside work by writers including Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. P. Lovecraft, and H. G. Wells. A past prize-winner at Listowel Writers’ Week, his story “Do You Dream of Oil?” has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He lives in Killarney, Ireland.

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MARY SOON LEE was born and raised in London, but now lives in Pittsburgh. She is a Grand Master of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association, and winner of the AnLab Readers' Award, Asimov's Readers' Award, Dwarf Stars Award, Elgin Award, Rhysling Award, and Utopia Award. Her credits include *American Scholar*, the *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, 119 haiku that appeared in *Science*, and an epic told in poetry, "The Sign of the Dragon."

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GERRI LEEN lives in Northern Virginia and originally hails from Seattle. She's passionate about horse racing, tea, and collecting encaustic art and raku pottery. She has stories and poems in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Nature*, *Strange Horizons*, *Dark Matter* and others. She's recently published her first poetry collection, *Unwilling: Poems of Horror and Darkness*, and had her first novel, *Bluegrass Dreams Aren't for Free*, released by WolfSinger Publications. See more at gerrileen.com or Instagram @leengerri.

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RICHARD MAGAHIZ tries to live an ordered life in harmony with all things natural and created but one that follows unexpected paths. He's spent much of his time wrangling computers as a day job but now when he's not making music he is writing speculative and mainstream poems. This he has written for over twenty years, and has received nominations for Rhysling, Dwarf Stars, Pushcart, and Best of the Web awards. His chapbook collection *The*

Reducing Flame was published in 2025. His website is at <https://zeroatthebone.us/>.

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DENNY E. MARSHALL has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Typehouse Magazine* Jan. 2022 and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares Magazine* Jan. 2022 as well as poetry in *Page & Spine* April 2022. Website is www.dennymarshall.com.

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WARREN MUZAK is an Ontario, Canada-based illustrator specializing in horror and sci-fi imagery. A seasoned, self-taught professional, he has created artwork for numerous horror and science fiction anthologies, earning a reputation as a visual storyteller who brings mood, movement, and emotion to every piece.

Inspired by legendary artists like Bernie Wrightson, Wally Wood, Jack Davis, and Arthur Rackham, as well as classic horror publications such as *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and 1950s EC comics like *Tales from the Crypt*, his work combines vintage atmosphere with dynamic, contemporary energy. He has sold his work to and been commissioned by multiple publishers of horror anthologies and fantasy novels such as: Darkholme Publishing (UK), JayHenge Publishing, *Last Girls Club*, Hiraeth Publishing, *Penumbra Spec Fiction Magazine*, *James Maxey*, *Dug Up Magazine* and Dark Moon Rising Publications to name a few.

Whether working in pen and ink, watercolor, and pencil, or dig-

itally with a WACOM Cintiq and Krita, Warren seamlessly blends traditional craft with modern digital techniques. When he's not crafting dark, otherworldly scenes, he's likely hunting for vintage comics or expanding his collection of classic Lionel trains.

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NICK PORISCH lives and writes in Minneapolis. More of his work can be found in *MENACE Magazine*, *Chatterbox Literary*, the *NoSleep Podcast*, and beyond.

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VERONICA REINHART is a lifelong New Englander who spends her days researching neurodegenerative diseases and her evenings daydreaming about worlds that exist only in her head. She has been passionate about character-driven speculative fiction since childhood and has recently started to release her writing into the wild. She won first place in *Uncharted Magazine's* Novel Excerpt Contest in 2024 and was published in *Marrow Magazine* in 2025. She can be found at www.veronicareinhart.com.

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A freelance journalist and photographer, **SONALI ROY** wears several other hats including painter, 3-D art designer, music composer, and singer though the sudden demise of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo baffled her. Devoted to vegan diet, Sonali enjoys brainstorming healthy recipes in the kitchen. She also loves creative writing.



RON SANDERS is an L.A.-based author, poet, and illustrator.

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four The Best of the Net Awards (2022–25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

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J.F. SEBASTIAN is a queer, autistic writer originally from the South of France, now residing in Toronto, Canada. Writing in English, and under various pen names, is not merely a creative outlet but also a way for them to delve into and express the layers of their multifaceted identity.

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CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award® and Elgin Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, *The Gravity of Existence*, and with



Geneve Flynn, Lee Murray, and Angela Yuriko Smith, *Tortured Willows: Bent, Bowed, Unbroken*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide, including *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *New Myths*, *Penumbra*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect [@christinasng](https://twitter.com/christinasng).

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RINA SONG is a writer and speculative fiction lover based out of California. When not writing, she has a day job involving computers. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Dirty Magick Magazine*, *The Lorelei Signal*, and *In Another Time Magazine*, among others.



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AMY XIANG ZHANG has lived in many places. The most recent is Seattle. Her dream is to be the old lady that all the neighborhood dogs love.



The Eye of the Universe

by Viviana De Cecco

(full image)