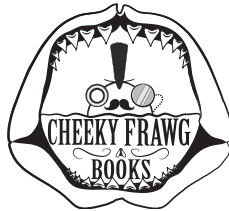


SHARED WORLDS 2016

SHARED WORLDS 2016
STUDENT WRITINGS



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SHARED WORLDS 2016 STUDENT WRITINGS

Shared Worlds Summer Writing Camp
Wofford College, Spartanburg, South Carolina

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the printing of this anthology possible

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For registration and donation information, visit our website:
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Dedicated to the Memory of Cathy Conner who was such
an important part of Shared Worlds and always will be.

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FOREWORD

by Jeremy L.C. Jones

Camp Founder & Co-director

(NOTE: See the website for photos of all found objects used by students in this exercise)

One of the most quietly thrilling moments at Shared Worlds happens at about 9:20 a.m. on the first Monday. That's when the students receive their found objects, this year accompanied by free copies of the world's first visual creative writing guide, *Wonderbook*.

Sometimes the "found object" takes the form of photographs and sometimes objects gathered from thrift stores and antique shops. The only rule is that the image or artifact must be free of brand names or other markers that would make it impossible to reimagine as something else, or existing somewhere else.

This year, camp co-director Jeff VanderMeer handed out (mostly) tiny objects that he and our editor-in-residence Ann VanderMeer gathered from a small, dusty antique store in Tallahassee. The objects were mostly small enough to hold in your palm. There were bells and brooches, tools and totems, and just about any other sort of curiosity. We passed them out at random.

At times like that, I always wish I were a student at Shared World. You don't know what you'll get, but you do know get to write about it. You know you must reconcile it with a world you've yet to create with your group. You have this tiny object and sense, immediately, that it is enormous with potential. We give incredibly talented teens the raw material for inspiration—and they run with it and take it places we never would have imagined.

By not letting anyone pick an object, by minimizing choice, we set the stage for the unpredictable and new. Each tiny object became a sudden intrusion, a spark, embers coaxed with the gentle breath of each writer's creativity into a mighty flame.

While the young writers featured in this book took on that challenge, we also asked them to imagine themselves as fantastical beasts, to consider their true selves even as they transformed themselves into creatures both familiar and stunningly original.

Those tiny objects grew with the worlds. The creatures evolved, growing out of each writer, intertwining with real and imagined selves.

That first morning at Shared Worlds, so much awaited the students, and there was so much yet to be shared. But it was already thrilling for those of us who handed out the tiny objects and it's no less thrilling to hand out these books, filled with fantastical objects and imaginary beasts.

If you are one of the writers, we welcome you back. If you are friend, family, or a curious tourist in these worlds, we welcome you, too. I hope you'll linger a while. Our time at Shared Worlds was brief, but thanks to this book, our stories, and memories, we can always return.

Enjoy!

INTRODUCTION

by Tim Schmitz

Director of Summer Programs, Wofford College

Every summer more than sixty teenagers from all over the world come together at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, to participate in a unique two-week writer's workshop: a creativity camp focused on science fiction and fantasy writing. These are teenagers who love to read, who will strip a bookstore bare in mere minutes, who talk about books with a passion, and who take seriously the opportunity to express themselves creatively through fiction. Many of them also have talent in other creative fields, like art and music.

In the first week, the students form groups of ten to twelve and create their own fantasy or science fiction world from scratch. They build its topography, its cultures, its history, its underlying biology, and more. They debate every major element of that world's essence and come to consensus. Experts on these subjects from Wofford's faculty give lectures on the subject while they also receive guidance and focus from their classroom teachers, teaching assistants, and guests as diverse in expertise as Amazon.com writer in residence Julia Elliott, Hugo Award winner Nnedi Okorafor, and first-time novelist Leah Thomas (Bloomsbury). Skype sessions have been added, too—this year the students had a chance to talk to New York Times bestselling authors Lev Grossman and Daniel Abraham about their novels and their respective SyFy Channel shows: *The Magicians* and *The Expanse*. During their off-time, an extremely able group of RAs supervise down-time and activities.

At the end of the first week, the students present their worlds to the

other students and to the teachers—a rough-draft in preparation for a video presentation at the end of the second week. They also attend readings by the guest writers and have several opportunities to pillage bookstores—much to the delight, we must add—of the staff.

In the second week, each student writes a story set in that world. They have the opportunity to immerse themselves in their fiction. Guest writers are assigned to each classroom, available to answer questions or read drafts-in-progress. These writers provide a professional critique of the story, along with a one-on-one session to discuss the story.

This is a big commitment by both the students and the writers critiquing. The students make this great leap of faith and effort—to create a complete story in four or five days. The critiquers commit to receiving stories on a Thursday morning and have them read carefully with general and specific comments by Friday morning—a 24-hour turn-around. It's a bit of a rite of passage for both the students and the critiquers. Indeed, the mark of that rite of passage from this past summer's Shared Worlds remains clear as day with Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, who both dyed their hair purple—as promised if the students turn in their stories on time.

Part of the prep for that second-week story includes giving the students imaginative writing exercises the first week—anything to help spark ideas for them. Two of these exercises, “Found Object” and “Bestiary” comprise the student writing book, and Shared Worlds founder Jeremy L.C. Jones has thoughtfully given you more information about both in his introductory remarks in this book. The results, as you will read, are a fine testament to the creativity, talent, drive, and imagination of our 2016 students that also gives you a glimpse into the worlds they created while at the camp. (Let's also acknowledge our amazing artist-in-residence, Jeremy Zerfoss, who not only personalized the book cover to include his versions of student fauna from their worlds, but illustrated the bestiary at the end of this book as well.)

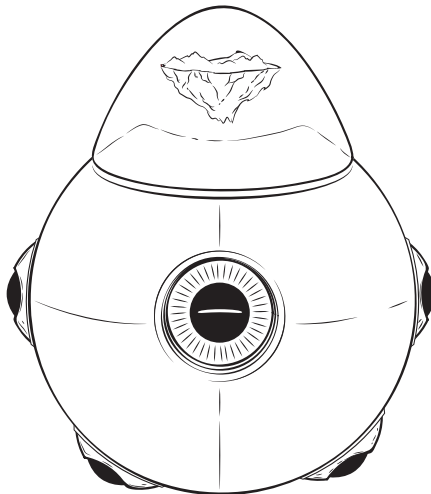
You hold in your hands one example of the creativity of the Shared Worlds 2016 students, but there are many more. Some already exist in the world and many more will exist in the future, brought to you by strong, unique voices. Shared Worlds does not create these great new

talents, but we hope it emboldens and helps them on their journey.

So thank you, class of 2016—you were wonderful and incredibly talented and creative. Thanks also to the entire staff, including RAs, TAs, and classroom instructors.

AVIUS

The World of Avius has been hurtling through space without a sun for longer than any of its inhabitants can remember. Huddled around a bolt of magical lightning called the Lumnis, the citizens of the Undercity, the last survivors of that ancient cataclysm, eke out a living under the watchful powers of the Lumnos, a select few with the ability to maintain the life of at least some of the planet - if they give their lives to the mission. From their floating home called Isle, whence the life-giving Lumnis goes forth into the core of the planet, the Lumnos look over and protect, as best they can the Vidiri, those with magical powers of Life; the Cruxia, those with magical powers of Death; and the Immunes, that small percentage with no power but the power of immunity to the others. In their underground metropolis, surrounded by barren Arctic wasteland on all sides, and tensions rising between the classes, what will be the ultimate fate of Avius? Like the trajectory of the planet itself, no one can say for certain...



Marianna Allen

Object 14: Double candle holder

The Bond of Brothers

The funeral for Api'ta Yolte was nothing short of heart wrenching.

His childhood friends stood behind his family, their heads dropped respectively toward their grey attire. Maylene Ritvuhn sobbed as silently as a heartbroken girl could in the memory of her fallen best friend. In the front row, Api'ta's family stood, the three of them clutching the others' hands. His father cried loudly and shamelessly, like every parent at their child's funeral. His mother stared ahead, refusing to watch as her youngest child's ashes were thrown as an offering to Lumnis, the never ending lightning bolt that sustained our world. Returning the dead to the one who gave them life has been the tradition since the Original Twenty.

Api'ta's older brother, Burnan stood beside his mother, his free hand clenched in pain. I wanted nothing more than to comfort him, but not now. He especially needed to grieve. When the priest stepped forward with his precious brother's ashes, Burnan could not take it. His fist unclenched and clenched five times before he ripped his free hand from his mother's and ran. No one muttered about how rude it was; they understood that his pain was the deepest.

I followed him with my eyes, trying my best to remain still and respectful. My father squeezed my hand, stealing my attention away from Burnan's fading figure. I looked up to him, my face contorted in a desperate plea. He closed his eyes and knowingly nodded his head. I did not think twice as I bolted after him, running just as rudely as he had from the funeral. No one said a word about my escape either. They knew I was the only one who could console him.

"Burnan, wait!" I yelled after him, watching him run away from the twisted golden bridge that held the service with each step.

He stopped beside one of the twin black vases, giving me a chance to catch up to him, but he would not turn around. "What do you want, Vorya?" His voice was hardly over a whisper. Tentatively, I put my hand on his shoulder in an attempt to turn him. His body felt like stone.

"Please listen to me." The pleading in my voice matched the suffering in his. "I know what you're going to say, and it's useless."

"But you didn't—" I tried to spark the happiness he used to have, but he quickly diffused it.

Burnan turned to face me, his amber eyes filled with a heartbreaking sadness that I wished I could cure. "I can't stay here. Every time I look around, I see him. Running through the streets, throwing stones with Maylene, working harder every day all so he could come and see me—" His voice cracked at the mention of his younger brother. I reached my hand out to his, hoping to be the anchor to keep him from drowning. He simply stared at me.

"Burnan, you couldn't have known. That's not your ability." At the mention of his incredible power, he dropped his head. His tears sparkled like falling stars in the low light of the Lumnis.

"It's my ability that did this," He held out his own hands, but not for me, for himself. He stared at them, turning them over and over, inspecting every inch of his own skin. "It was my hands that ripped his soul from his body."

"You didn't mean to! You thought it was a wild animal about to attack, so you did what you thought was best. No one blames you, Burnan. Everyone knows it was an accident. You must know that, don't you?" The two of us stood in silence on the street, staring at his hands, praised weapons used on the person he cared for most.

"You remember him, don't you?" Dodging the question, he continued talking about his brother, not waiting for me to respond. "Of course you do. He had the brightest tangle of curls I had ever seen. No one down in our tunnel has ever seen hair that red, making him stick out as his own person, not as my younger brother. And his kindness. He always put others first, a true heart filled with unconditional love for everyone. He would've grown up to make some woman terribly happy, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

"It probably would've been Maylene. You know, that girl who was always running with him. The two of them practically ripped through our tunnel like it was a public exhibit open for examination. I like to think their kids would've had his red hair and her grey eyes, a beautiful combination, don't you think?" He was rambling hopelessly, but I let him continue. His crying had grown softer and softer until it was an occasional whimper.

"Burnan—"

"I killed him." His voice was totally void of emotion. It terrified me.

If I hadn't been staring at his hands I would've missed it. The blade of his pocket knife reflected the light of the Lumnis as he flicked it out. I felt my heart plummet to the pit of my stomach. Before he could use it, I reached out and cupped his hands in mine. He was trembling.

"I- I can't live w-with myself." His words were broken from his hiccupping.

"He wouldn't have wanted this." Burnan stared at me, not through me, with his grieving, amber eyes. My words finally broke through.

He fell to his knees, overcome by his sobs. I pulled the pocket knife from his hands and quickly fell beside him, holding onto the boy I loved, trying to comfort him in any way I could. I pulled his giant frame against mine and held his shaking body. His cries were of nothing but his brother, sweet, innocent Api'ta. Every Cruxia and Vidiri alike knew it was a tragic mistake, including their parents who had cried with Burnan and mourned the passing of their youngest son with him. But grief is an evil thing, latching onto those who love the most and suffocating them until they slipped from this world into the next with a heart full of nothing.

"Vorya." My name resonated off his lips like a desperate sinner's plea.

"What is it?" He removed himself from our embrace, placing both his hands on my shoulders. A sliver of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. His beautiful eyes, a little brighter now, locked onto mine.

"Thank you."

Dylan Boswell

Object 17: A Mannequin Hand

Thank you for purchasing the Vidirium Hand, and welcome to your new life as an Undercity Maintenance Trainer. This item will allow you to better commune with the animals that you deal with on a day to day basis.

The Hand

- The Vidirium Hand is a small white hand with a plaster-like constitution and a texture somewhere between stone and porcelain. This part of it is made using advanced processes from the Old World that have been discovered during expeditions into Eloton.
- The Hand is broken at the joints, with Symud vines connecting the individual segments together and acting as muscles. This vine stems from the wrist, with the general outline of some of the roots being visible through the skin. Because the vines connect directly to the nerves, the user is able to control it as if it were their own hand.
- In order to use the Hand, the organic hand must be removed and replaced with the item.
- The first Vidirium Hand was made nearly 600 years ago in order to deal with the declining Gwallt population. The Hand itself was based on the legend that one of the Sacred 20 was given healing abilities by Hazul as compensation for their lost hand. The Healer then proceeded to travel the world, healing those in need.
- The Hand itself was originally designed to help focus the growth ability that some Vidiri exhibit, but it has consistently exhibited

the ability to allow the user to better commune with multiple species of animals and one species of plant: Gwallt, Twylladrus, Turies, Wrid, and Symud vines.

The Use

- Twylladrus use Turies to break through the tunnel blockage caused by cave-ins
- As a reward for cooperating they are given treats made of hyper compacted Gwallt fur
- The Gwallt produce this fur at a considerable speed naturally, but the Vidirium Hand helps to focus your powers in order to make them grow fur at an accelerated rate.
- **WARNING:** Vitatech is not responsible for any symptoms resulting from the installation or use of the Vidirium Hand. Do not use the Vidirium hand if you are a Cruxia or an Immune. If you exhibit any of the following symptoms, please consult a Vidiri with healing abilities immediately: Blood loss, Dehydration, Vidiric ability hypofunction, Loss of nerve control, Vidiric ability hyper function, Pain, Root overgrowth of the Vidirium Hand, Muscle damage, and Death. Do not use the Vidirium hand if you are a Cruxia or an Immune. If you are expecting children, do not use the Vidirium Hand. If you have recently undergone genetic modification, do not use the Vidirium Hand. If you have any sentimental attachments to your left hand, do not use the Vidirium Hand. Do not use the Vidirium Hand if you have a history of Asthma, talking to animals, fantasizing about being part plant, blood clots, heart problems, being irresponsible, muscle spasms, acting maliciously towards other living beings, or being outside the Lumnisphere for prolonged periods of time. If you have recently travelled to The Isle or plan to in the near future, consult an expert on Symud vines before installing the Vidirium Hand. **Do not use the Vidirium hand if you are a Cruxia or an Immune.**

Sarah Donnelly

Object 10: Wicker basket with wicker balls

The orbs were small, unassuming, made of tan wicker woven carefully into shape.

If presented with one of them, few would likely have thought much of it. They may have thought it odd or pointless, or even—with the light glowing from inside—beautiful, in a strange way, but none would ever have guessed at their power.

Or at their somewhat questionable legality.

The person who possessed them—who *made* them—did know, of course. She kept them tucked carefully away in their basket at home and never told anyone where that was. When she took them out, they were always kept carefully concealed in her coat pockets; she could feel their heat against her chest when she used them, like a tight hug.

With these delicate objects, she could change everything about herself.

People noticed her working the plants on the cliff walls outside her home, and she saw it in their faces that they understood she was Vidiri—and a powerful one at that.

None of them knew she'd been born Immune. How could they, after all, when she was so skilled at this life-bringing magic? No Immune had that sort of power. None of them had any real power at all.

Except, now, for her.

And better yet: she was young enough to have a chance at being chosen. If she was selected as the next Lumnos, the possibilities were endless. She knew, of course, that there was always a possibility of getting caught during the evaluation process. But she was sure if she made it up there, she would be able to convince them that she was good enough. That she was smart enough. That she was *alive* enough.

It worked like this.

Every day, she walked up to the Lumnis for her morning prayer. The thing shimmered and glowed its white early-morning light, and when no one was watching her, she reached into it with her hands, the orbs clasped tightly in her grip. She felt the heat of the crackling magic rush over them and pulled them out fast as she could manage. Thrust the glowing spheres back into her pockets. Checked to make sure she hadn't been seen.

Her morning prayers were getting later and later these days, as she worked to ensure her time at the Lumnis overlapped with no one else's. She felt only a little guilty about it. She was sure everyone else would understand once she was up there, on the Lumnos' Isle.

Now, all of this—the making of the orbs, the loading of them with life magic—wasn't *explicitly* illegal. It wasn't as if she was misusing powers of her own. But it was unlikely anyone would be very forgiving of her sapping this power from the Lumnis. Except perhaps for a few of her Immune friends, but she hadn't yet dared tell even them. Perhaps she could, soon—as soon as she'd made more, as soon as she made it up there. Whichever of the two came first.

She would get to the Isle, somehow. There was no doubt in her mind about this. She knew this in the same way she knew her own name, the same way she knew how to walk and jump and speak. It didn't matter that she wasn't Vidiri. They would understand, soon, and it would all work out. It had to, didn't it? She had to make it there.

And these little spheres of magic had the potential to carry her.

Alessandra Fleisher

Object 50: Clunky short champagne glass (called the Lumnisphere)

I couldn't help but feel nervous as the genipulator Vidiri read my genes to see if I had the potential to be the new Lumnos. One of the current Lumni, a healer Lumni, died recently, and now the government was rushing to find a replacement Lumnos before it started to affect Lumnis.

"She's a powerful healer, and has potential," the genipulator stated to my mentor, as she jotted something down on her clipboard. The words had a ripple effect as the other people in the room that before dismissed me as just another burrower, looked at me with newfound respect in their eyes. *Oh my Lumnis, I was a possible Lumni.* The Lumnos were the most powerful Vidiri in Avius, who essentially keep everything within the Lumnisphere alive from the great temple on Isle, a floating island above the undercity.

There are twenty Lumni at all times. When one dies, a search begins to find the replacement before everything collapses. The Lumni contribute their powers to Lumnis, a concentration of energy which replaces our sun and creates the Lumnisphere, where all Avians live. The Lumnisphere is a large protective bubble of sorts which has kept us safe since the cataclysm (when the planet lost its sun). All Avians alive now are alive because of the brilliance of the original twenty Lumni, who created Lumnis and the Lumnisphere, before everything died. Becoming a Lumnos is the highest honor an Avian can achieve. Something only Vidiri can achieve. Immunes, Avians immune to

all powers negative and positive, and Cruxia, Avians with relatively opposite powers to Vidiri, could never become a Lumnos in their wildest dreams.

Another official, a precognitive Cruxia, took my hand to see how I would die, which would make it clear whether I was to be the next Lumnos or not; if they saw however Lumni die, then I was the next Lumni, and if not, then I was not the next Lumnos. Instead of saying the answer, they just nodded mutely.

~*~

The ceremony was held at the temple, which had been constructed temporarily on a platform surrounding Lumnis. Government leaders made speeches about honor and service to Avius, but I was too excited to focus on anything other than going up to Isle, and what it would look like. The ceremony ended with some government officials and me boarding a winaca and flying up to Isle.

From the winaca, I could see the Lumnisphere, a pretty, yellowish, protective bubble encasing Isle and The Undercity, the red plant life grown on surface level, made the bottom of the yellow Lumnisphere appear speckled with red. Then Isle came into view.

The city, if you could call it that, was beautiful, but empty. There were no buildings other than the temple, which was built directly around Lumnis. Other than the temple, and the immediate area around it, the island was covered in plant life.

“Where are all of the buildings?” I asked.

Hands grabbed me without warning, and dragged me into the temple. I attempted to break free, but I found that I couldn’t control my body. Instead of fighting like I wanted to, I found myself walking complacently alongside the government officials. *Body control, one of them had to be a bodycon Vidiri.* I wanted to fight back, and flee, but I soon found that desire dwindling. *Emonegation Cruxia.* I was trapped, and I couldn’t bring myself to care.

We walked into the temple, which, like Isle, was beautiful and empty. The temple consisted of one room with twenty thrones, in which nineteen other Vidiri were chained, mindlessly channeling their

power into Lumnis. I could see them slowly dying, their everything draining into Lumnis, killing them and keeping everyone else alive.

I sat in the empty chair and the chains immediately chained me to the throne. This would be my prison. I would sit here until I died. But the thought of staying here didn't seem so bad anymore.

Gabriel Garcia

Object 3: Rubber Red Finger Puppet

In the lone area of the Undercity, there are many oddities surrounding the origins of nearly everything within it. No one could even remember or find any evidence to the times before. But frankly, no one was the least curious about the answer of this question or curious at all. At least, all but one teenage boy, who was known to all as Harvent, an Immune. He had always been curious since he was a little boy, always asking questions, never letting things get past him. Many people, especially adults, found his behavior unfitting, although his few friends would tolerate his quirks, never opposing or encouraging.

One day, Harvent was taking a simple mid-day walk, simply minding his own business. However, he soon turned his attention to something hard he stepped on. He took one look, and his immediate interest sparked. It was a piece to a small figure. It was a bright red figure of an upper torso of what appeared to be a muscular man, or a chubby baby with its arms stretched out. Harvent noticed it was in a small dent in the pavement.

Harvent quickly went to Eltori's home and asked what she could make of it. Eltori was a Cruxia with the ability of Precognition, to see a path to the future. She was conserved and intelligent, and she admired Harvent's desire for knowledge, but was annoyed by his sometimes reckless nature. Eltori found the figure was made of rubber, a rare substance, and it had two unknown words inscribed into it, "Cataclysm" and "Odephius." She also found with her Precognition, that it was connected to something at Lumnis, the sacred lightening. Harvent quickly ran to Lumnis, Eltori following, knowing she had to keep him under control. Harvent soon found the foot piece of the figurine, and soon the piece began to move on its own, and Harvent

followed. Eltori soon saw a precognition of something bad happening in the Undercity's tunnel system, and soon, the figure led him to a restricted area that was shut down due to unknown Elaton Wasteland creatures invading, but Harvent ignored the warning, and Eltori had no choice but to go after him. In the deepest of the tunnels, Harvent was led to the final piece of the figure, the lower torso. Eltori soon caught up, but at that time the tunnel lights went out, and were replaced by the glowing purple eyes of the aforementioned creatures. With the snarling getting louder, and the eyes closing in, the two saw no hope of surviving, but soon, the three figure pieces glowed, came together, and a flash of light blared over everyone.

Harvent opened his eyes to find himself back in his room, and he rushed to see if Eltori was ok as well. Fortunately, she was, and she deciphered a stone tablet with a message. She'd read it to the curious Harvent only if he promised her something, to never ask over something like this ever again.

"Your inquisitiveness nearly got us killed, and I don't want anything to happen to a good person like you, especially from a foolish decision."

"...Ok, I'm sorry I got you into this trouble."

"Apology accepted"

The cipher said, "Odephius, we congratulate you and your friends work."

That night, Harvent swore never to let his curiosity put others in danger ever again. However, in his bed, he found a cipher. Using the code Eltori had used, he found it read, "Would you care to help us again?" Harvent thought it would be ok, as long as long as no one like Eltori got involved with what would come...

Ryan Healy

Object 18: Skiing teddy bear

It was a warmer day than usual in the world. Leai's mother had already left for work. Leai's brother Marok was still asleep and would most likely be late for school again. Leai laughed a bit. Leai's mother and father had told her brother he was old enough to get a genetic modification for wings, if he made it to school on time for insert time. Marok had been doing good but this morning he'd stayed in bed. Leai would've considered going and waking him up because she remembered how much she had wanted her gen mod when she was his age. On the other hand Leai's mother had strictly told her to not help Marok. Leai picked up her bag and gave her father a hug goodbye. School wasn't very far from Leai's house and with her wings it was easy. Children ran and played on the playground, and teenagers mingled and played jokes on each other in the courtyard. Leai saw a blue haired girl make an orange plant erupt from the ground and trip her friend who must've had the power to manipulate emotions because she flicked her hand at her friend and the blue haired girl began to sob uncontrollably. Leai's younger sister Dasia was sitting with her friends.

"Cling, cling!" A noise broke through the air. Leai whipped her head back towards her sister. She flew over. "Dasia! What is that?" Dasia's big purple eyes looked innocently up at Leai. With her bouncy light pink curls and her bright smile she was the picture of sweetness. "It's nothing Le." Leai smirked and a glint caught her eye. She extended

her hand and a vine shot out of the ground and wrapped itself around Dasia's hands. Dasia was a Cruxia who had a low level power of fate. She could briefly and vaguely see people's future. "Leai! Stop it!" Leai ignored her sister and opened her hands." Dasia! How could you!? You know this is moms!" In Dasia's hand was a small brightly colored bear like creature. He was holding two long metal sticks with black circles on the end. The bear was standing on two long, metal boards. When you pressed a button the bear would begin to play a song by tapping the metal sticks on the boards. The instrument was called an Azzar. Leai's grandmother had had it as a young girl and passed it down. It was one of their mothers most treasured items.

Dasia bit her lip. "I'm sorry! Catrine wanted to see it!" Leai shook her head. "Dasia you know I might have to leave soon. I need you to start being more responsible. "Dasia looked at her sister in surprise. "Wait! So you're definitely... Leaving?!" Leai looked at her sister." Well they sent word that one of the Lumnos is weakening and near death. I'm the youngest high powered Vidiri. Dasia's brow wrinkled in confusion. "Why do you have to be young again?" she asked. Leai cleared her throat. "Well you should know this, but when a Vidiri is chosen to go to Isle they use their power to keep our planet alive, so the younger they are the longer they can put power into it." Dasia nodded. "Oh okay and then the Lumnis is their power going into the world, right?" Dasia asked. Leai smiled. "Yep, any other questions?"

One of Dasia's friends raised her hand. "If they're keeping the planet alive then why can't we go outside the Lumnosphere?" She pointed her finger and the energy field surrounding the city. It was slightly visible due to a golden shimmer. "Oh um good question. Well their power only stretches so far, and the land we live on is what they preserved. We can't travel outside the Lumnosphere because it's not inhabitable. Anyways no more questions you'll learn it in history class, ok?" The group of girls nodded. They stood up and walked toward the building, all except Dasia." But if you go up there I'll never see you again! And Alaise told me that her brother said the Vidiri people who go up there don't live as long cause they use so much power! Leai bent down to eye level with her sister. "Dasia there are only about 10% of high powered Vidiri's, it's our duty to keep this planet and everyone on it alive!

Don't you remember the teachings of the Detyre!?" Dasia sheepishly nodded. "Good now c'mon we need to get to school, give me moms Azzar bear." Dasia pouted and handed it over before running off to join her friends. Leai slipped it into her bag and headed into school.

Several weeks later when Leai arrived home to find Dasia sobbing into her mother who was talking with a woman. "Hello?" Leai said. Her mother, father, and the woman looked up. She had rather dark red hair which was tightly braided. Her orange eyes studied Leai. "Hello you must be Leai!" Leai nodded slowly. "I'm Igea, a ... Representative of the twenty, unfortunately Mage Daro passed away, but you have been chosen to take his place!" Leai looked at her mother, a healer, who was smiling brightly. She was very devout and would think it to be the biggest honor. Dasia was crying, Marok was sitting awkwardly on the couch and Leai's father was sitting next to her mother staring blankly into space. Her father was a Vidiri whose power was post cognition of objects. He worked with law enforcement to help solve crimes by reading evidence. Leai's father gave a small smile at her. "Thank you for this honor Igea I know my daughter will do this sacred act expertly." Leai's mother said. Igea smiled. "Oh, when would you like me to leave?" Leai asked. Igea smiled once more and gestured to Leai's suitcase. "Now would be ideal since we'd prefer to have the number restored." Leai's mother stood. "Yes of course, now I want you to have this, I know you can't really use it for much, but it's a family tradition." She reached into a bag and pulled out the Azzar bear. Leai smiled at Dasia, knowing her sister must've managed to put the toy back before their mother returned. "Oh thank you mom I'll keep it safe." Leai said. She took it from her. Igea picked up Leai's suitcase. "Well we should be on our way please say your goodbyes." Igea stepped outside and closed the door.

First Leai's mother stepped forward. "Thank you for honoring our family. I love you." She gave her a quick hug. Marok came forward. "Don't blow Avius up, we kinda need our planet, kay?" He patted her shoulder. "I love you too Mar." Leai said, rolling her eyes. "I love you, be safe." Her father hugged her. "Don't leave, please Le Le! It's not fair!" Dasia whimpered. "Dasia! How dare you! Your sister is following the teachings of Detyre and doing our family a great honor!" Dasia

turned toward her mother and stomped her foot. "I don't care!" She threw herself onto Leai's legs and clung on." Dasia stop this!" Leai's mother pried Dasia off. "Just go," her mother said. Leai looked at her little sister in shock. Big tears dripped down Dasia's face as Leai turned and walked toward the door leaving the only family she'd ever known or would ever know behind, the bear still clutched in her hand.

Danielle Horne

Object 7: Lantern cover

The amber glow from the glass lanterns illuminates the dirt walls with a low blush as dusk rises in the Undercity. It's comforting warm light joins the constant glow of the Lumnis filtering in from the opening at the end of the tunnel to provide a safe passageway for the underground's inhabitants. Each lantern that occupies the hall is adorned with an intricately made cover that shines with expensive Twyllodrus silk and exquisite obsidian beads that line the bottom.

Silk from the elusive Twyllodrus is a rarity indeed, and is highly valued across the cities; if it weren't for the all-seeing cameras peeking out through the back of the lanterns, these would be stolen in a heartbeat, stuffed into the cloak of a dirty-faced street orphan without a second look.

As it is, the lantern remains untouched by the citizens that walk by with their heads down, most opting to stare at the hard ground underneath with carefully controlled expressions. It is quite a shame that not one dares to observe the treasures right beside him that hang elegantly from the sides of the tunnel.

Shadows from the fire inside the lantern dance across the silk around it and give the beads a certain luminescence of their own. This is one of the main tunnels in the underground, so many people pass by at many hours of the day and night. Although pickpocketing is common here, larger crimes like murder or the illicit use of banned abilities are mostly protected against by the safety of the crowd, so the lesser known and lesser lit shortcuts of the underground are generally rejected in favor of the longer, more safe routes such as this one.

From its place on the wall of the tunnel, the camera behind the first lantern watches as people mill by, the buzz of chatter slightly muted due to the time of day it is. Cold hands come up to pull scarves tighter around necks, and those who own gloves wear them instead of stuffing their hands in short pockets that offer little protection against the chilly air. Although the lantern-shade modestly keeps the old camera obscured behind its fabric, mouths are still cautious on the street and responses as clipped and brief as possible.

Pedestrians exchange suspicious glances with each other, probably wondering what reason another has for being out so late, and in the under-guarded tunnels no less. Some men and women are dressed smartly, suggesting that being up and about at this time is a habitual thing for them, and some are content to leave their street clothes on as they scurry along to their destinations along various points in the underground.

The sides of the path are lined with shops; mostly food, clothes, and animal shops, but with some future reading houses every few blocks. Up on the Surface one would come across a multitude of gene labs, but down in the Undercity, demand for a Cruxia with the genetic manipulation ability is significantly less and the range of customers would be extremely limited.

If it were in the next Lumnis cycle, and if it were around the middle of that day, the streets would be impossibly crowded and the dizzyingly sweet fragrance of Undercity delicacies would waft from the various food shops that line the corner. Anyone walking past would lick their lips unconsciously, for the smell would not only register in their nose, but they would also be able to taste the sweet-salty flavor on their tongue that would make extra saliva gather in their mouth at the very thought. One would feel a tingle from the very tips of his toes to the highest hair on his head, and he would be tempted to stop by and taste some underground food for himself.

Perhaps if he instead stopped to listen to the vibrations of the ground underneath his boots and how they thrummed a pattern against the soles of his feet that shook him to his very core, he would become more tuned in to the sounds around him, focusing on two young men arguing beside him and an elderly couple taking care to help each other as they crossed the busy street.

Perhaps he would also hear the quiet flickering of the fire in the lantern, and the slight whir of the camera as it zoomed in on his face.

If one were to take notice of the lantern cover itself instead of what it kept hidden inside, one would discover that the act of following the patterns laced over the side was very interesting on its own, and that the feel of the obsidian beads rolling beneath one's fingertips was a distinctly pleasant feeling. If he were to take rest there and observe the cover with the company of a more detail-oriented mindset, he would discover that the process in which the lantern-shade was created was inexplicably satisfying to imagine in his mind, and that watching the creator's small hands sew jewels into the gold silk with the utmost care and attention in his imagination was entertainment all on its own, and something that he would gladly observe for the rest of his time below.

But perhaps after all one would glance back at the tense crowd and follow in line as they did in tight, structured cliques, as they did every day, without a single glance back as the cameras in the lanterns silently presided over them with one collective, watchful eye.

Molly Jones

Object 63: Butterfly Amulet

Evoco's Gift

Ever since this day, I've had astonishing powers that allow me to... Wait, why should I tell you when you could just find out for yourself...

"I wish they would listen to me. Just because there aren't many Immunes doesn't mean that they can disrespect us for not possessing powers!" I said, my sister half listening. Life just feels as if it has no meaning anymore. Even though I aid the Cruxia with aging the elderly, it isn't fair! I just feel meaningless, or hopeless even...

"Look Elaena, I know it isn't fair, but we can't complain. It would just put things out of order, and you know that. Remember what happened the last time they stood up to a Healer? They were outraged! I have a feeling you don't want to get sent off to the Wastelands like him... Oh, look at the time! Come on, we have to get to the lightning bolt to thank it for blessing us with life, death, and peace," Kamika, my sister, said. She knows what she's talking about, but it isn't what any Immune would want to hear, especially me.

A different family left as we arrived, and then we had the bolt to ourselves. Kamika was alerted by a speaking Kalihila that she had to help a Genetic Mutationist create a new work animal, so I was left alone. Whenever I was with the bolt, it would pull me close, but the surrounding of other people made the pulling weaker. For the first time I was alone, nothing to protect from Luminous's pull. It is against my religion to touch such a holy idol. As the lightning bolt pulled me closer and closer to contact, my feet dragging on the ground, I heard a crackle, then a POP! The ground exploded under my feet. The bolts pull disappeared, but it turned a neon blue. As I flew through the air,

a golden shimmer caught my eye. I found a small metal object by my hip. It was a small amulet the size of a walnut with white, royal blue, and red glass. It had wings in the shape of hearts that sprout from its tiny body. Shimmering gold burnished rim to the wings. As I looked down at the item, it began to glow. Lifting in the air with a slight quiver, it levitated towards me and latched onto my collarbone. It attached without pain, as if this strange object belonged. As it rested there, it faded into a black symbol and stayed as a tattoo. The tattoo had large, flowing wings in the shape of a heart. Long antennae sprout from a small circular head. The body of the creature is two ovals in the center with a gold ring connecting it.

Suddenly, with a flash of light, I disappeared into my thoughts. I saw my home planet, Avius, break away from orbit in an unknown solar system, with three blazing flashes spreading across the land that was soaring away from their sun. Blue, red, and gold, but the gold section was smaller than the other two. Then my mind took me to a new image of a scripture. A faintly skinned woman with crisp crimson hair, golden-rimmed eyes, and wings flew behind the scripture and read, "The blue will give the Cruxia power of Death elements. Red will give the Vidiri the power of life elements. Those who are hit with the tiny sliver of gold magic will be cursed with no power, but blessed by not being affected by any Cruxia or Vidiri power. The Immunes can't be affected by the Cruxia or Vidiri powers, but they don't obtain any powers of their own. The immunes are an oddity that many with disrespect, because they are afraid." The angelic creature looked up from the scripture. This is what she said to me: "Elaena, you are special, for I have blessed you with a power as if all the three lights have hit you at once. I will disguise myself as an amulet, but rest on your skin when I am not needed. You can now give any power, but also take it away. This comes with great responsibility, for you are now stronger than the Original 20. Don't use your superiority for evil, but only for the good of Avius. When you need me, just mutter my name 'Evoco' and I turn into my solid form of the amulet." she said, and then she faded. Suddenly everything became blindingly bright. My head spinning, my vision nonexistent, and an immeasurable assignment was just given to me! This is too much to handle all at once. *I was*

supposed to be in charge of these powers? It's impossible! How on Avius am I going to do this? No, no, I can't doubt myself. I can do this. Maybe I could...

This was many Lumnions ago, aka around 1,000, but these were all the thoughts that ran through my head that day. There are many advantages to my life now, for I am respected. Here's the best part though. Every time a child is born my tattoo gives of a warmth so that I can know he or she was born. I can make them a Cruxia, Vidiri, or an Immune like I was, before I became this supreme being of course. How do I do this? All I have to say is "Evoco", and my amulet appears. I say the type of person and power they will be. The power travels in a flash too fast for anyone but me to see. Every time a child is born, a little bit of Lumnites are given to Lumnis through me. The amulet catches the energy like a net. I do have to live near Lumnis though. I have to take it and put the amulet into Lumnis. My life is pretty amazing now, but I have numerous responsibilities. I am no longer depressed in a sea of meaningless life as I was before. Now I have meaning, and I thank Lumnis every day for that.

Anna Rau

*Object 53: A strange object resembling a
purple apple with clear bumps on it*

It glinted causally in the light of The Lumnis, glowing purple. She could feel the death and destruction oozing out of it. Images of dead bodies filled her mind, wings torn out of backs, feathers bloody. Body parts strewn around, piled up with predators ready to eat. Yanni could only stare at it in horror as it rolled over to her. Whimpering, she slowly backed up until she hit a wall. It rolled even closer till it almost touched her and—

Yanni shot up, her wings flaring out around her panting. In her mind she could feel where it touched her skin, burning. Shaking she stood up and walked into her bathroom running her hands under cool water. Looking up she touched the dark circles under her eyes, growing with every passing night. Yanni had been plagued with nightmares for the past month. Every one of them featured a glowing purple object slowly rolling towards her. Darkness and death poured around it, its aura strange and menacing. Sighing, she touched her fingers to the circles and rubbed softly, fading them till they weren't noticeable. Her mother had done all she could, taking her to be blessed by The Lumnis, and to pray to The Lumnos to help. Nothing worked. As Yanni looked at herself in the mirror, she screamed as it slowly rolled into sight behind her.

The next day she walked to The Lumnis, unable to fly. Colorful wings above her penetrated the almost colorless Undercity. Walking on she didn't notice when someone landed beside her until they reached out and touched her shoulder.

"Yanni. The nightmares?" They asked. Yanni turned around to see Jaques. She nodded and they continued to walk, wings brushing up against each other.

"I don't see why you continue to be like this. Honestly, I'm sure a Vidiri healer or genetic mutator would have found the problem by now. I bet even a Cruxia healer could help." They looked concerned.

"Mother doesn't believe in that. You know she dislikes the Cruxia, and even disapproves of how they use their powers. Father was lucky to convince her to take me to a Vidiri genetic mutator." Yanni sighed.

"Then how did she want you to get better then?" Jaques stretched out their wings.

"She thought because she was a loyal Vidiri, The Lumnos would bless her by healing me through The Lumnis." Jaques made a face.

"She thought that? I knew your mother was devoted, but this?" Yanni nodded.

"It's a bit embarrassing, considering that her great-great-grandfather was supposedly a Cruxia. She's even biased against Immunes. She says that they really have no power, therefore they shouldn't live as close to The Lumnis as they do." Jaques sucked in air.

"She's so-"

"I know." Both continued to walk for a while before Jaques stopped her.

"You know my second cousin, Laconia correct?" Yanni nodded.

"Isn't she a Cruxia?"

"Yes. She is a Cruxia healer. If I ask, maybe she can take a look at you. I don't think she'll mind." Yanni looked up.

"You really think so? If she agrees, then I don't mind. In fact I would be extremely grateful if she tried."

Yanni looked up at the tall building made into one of Undercity's walls. The Cruxia symbol was etched proudly into the door. The building itself was a dark blue, different than The Vidiri's bright colors. Jaques nodded her inside, and closed the door when they entered. The inside was light and airy, with the front not actually walls, Yanni realized, but ceiling-to-floor windows.

"Jaques!" Both Vidiri turned to see the Cruxia flying toward them. Landing gracefully she tucked her red wings behind her.

"I haven't seen you in forever! We must catch up sometime. We don't see each other nearly as much as we should! And this must be the friend you were telling me about, Yanni right?" Laconia talked quickly, whipping her head from Jaques to Yanni.

“Yes. It’s really important that you can help us.” Jaques pushed Yanni forward.

“Of course. If you follow me then we could—” Jaques interrupted her “Yanni can’t fly.” Laconia stopped at that.

“Can’t fly. As in cannot get off the ground?” Yanni nodded.

“I can’t. My nightmares keep me up at night and sap everything I have. I don’t have the energy I need to heal myself, and my wings feel so heavy.” At this Laconia looked serious.

“Dreams? What were in them?” Yanni shivered.

“A fruit. At least I think it is. But it also feels so evil and tainted. When it appears I see images of bodies, all bloody and torn apart. Then they look at me, and smile. Then they chase me and I’m running and—”

“Enough.” Laconia interrupted her.

“Do you know of this?” Jaques walked over, forcing all three to get into a tight circle.

“If I may have a feel of you, to see the root of the problem, then I can give my answer.” Yanni nodded. The Cruxia’s power washed over her, but was gone within a minute.

“I’ll tell you, but you must promise on The Lumnis that you won’t repeat what I say.” Jaques and Yanni looked at each other and nodded. Laconia sighed.

“Necromancy is forbidden within these walls and when allowed it’s strictly monitored. People mostly believe that Cruxia’s with the power mostly deal with raising bodies. But sometimes they sometimes get is the ability to send nightmares. But that too is strictly monitored... if this is happening, it means that the powers aren’t monitored. I’ll see if I can spread the word among the Cruxia about this, and I’m sure that the person will stop in fear that they’ll be caught. Be quiet about this. I fear what would happen if the devoted learn they lost control over them.” Yanni nodded.

“Thank you.” Laconia smiled.

“Don’t thank me yet. Let’s see if this will work first. And I hope, for the sake of us all, this won’t start a war.”

Luke Van Popering

Object 60: Glass Candle-Holder

A pungent sting lingered in the air, this patchwork of scents—concocted from ramshackle candles, succulent religious spices, and hot steam—curling up towards the roof of the cavern. Dull crimson light splayed against the walls; it was interrupted only by the beating of worn boots upon the glowing water below. Rumithery, driven forwards by the marching crowd, eyes fixed firmly on the ground, pulled her satchel close and followed into the red-hued pool. Searing water immediately seeped through into her shoes, sloshing about inside as she took another step in. Her face bloomed into a pale grimace, and she instinctually gripped her arms through the dusty leather sleeves of her jacket. A hand—draped in torn, damp fabric and lavender piping—came down upon her shoulder.

“Care for me to take away the pain?” The words were spoken with a certain delicacy, as if the letters themselves were glass and had to be gently coaxed into existence.

Rumithery—not turning around to look— shook her head and continued shuffling ahead amongst the largely hooded figures, though the hand returned merely steps later.

“There is no need to spurn aid; we are all bound together by the absence of the Great Candle, even those who only have just come to realize the hunger for its presence.” The hand’s grip tightened with the final syllables. Rumithery could now acutely feel the serpentine fingers gripping her from within the glove, and the girl’s breathing developed a staccato bent. The crowd flowed around her as she paused.

“I’m—”, she said, taking a breath. “—an Immune.”

The hand withdrew.

“I see *kleinitch*, my apologies.”

Rumithery watched as a stout woman, robed in a patchwork of burlap and wearing the glove, strode out before her. Then—hesitating for a moment—she folded back into the throng and moved onwards. After several minutes of marching, the water level began to recede, dwindling at a rough portico carved into the midnight stone of the cavern wall. Rumithery followed the crowd inside. The ensuing room was circular, surrounded by a series of worn granite columns. On each leaned several cloaked figures; all were dressed in dark vestments and shimmering headdresses. Three gashes crossed the room's domed roof, and from them leaked a soft blue light that enveloped the space. A tiered dais—slick with a fine layer of water—rose in the center. It smelled overpoweringly of burnt wax, and smoke drifted in a fine haze.

Rumithery took a place at one of the columns near the entrance, pressing herself far away from the crowd filtering in and watching as a young man ascended to the top of the dais. His garb was mostly simple—pedestrian in fact—though illuminated by the careful glow of a held candle. Little reaction came from the gathered audience—a few sparse claps and cheers. The man briefly glanced down before raising his voice to speak.

“Welcome to all those who have come to bear witness to our congregation tonight,” he started, words clear and pronounced. “While the Great Candle of Lumnis may be far over our heads, its Lady has clearly granted us the privilege of being here together tonight.”

A few scattered prayers rose from the audience; Rumithery remained silent. The speaker gestured off towards someone in the crowd and let slip a small smirk before continuing.

“The same, however, cannot be said of our compatriots in Glenpool, whose arrest—excused as preserving public order—is an affront towards the wishes of the Lady and her Light. Let us dedicate our gathering tonight to their memory.”

As the speaker finished and then beamed out to the crowd, there was flash of scarlet-red light, and Rumithery—blinking—felt a strong, sudden pull in her abdomen, a sensation of tugging emptiness that began at the stomach. The audience began to cheer around her; all prior apathy was seemingly dissolved amongst the growing chants.

She dropped down to one knee, and glanced up as the speaker's voice found its way through the noise.

"Now"—the crowd fell silent—"we are gathered here tonight to undergo an initiation, one that many of you around me have already witnessed, but may use as an opportunity to reaffirm your faith in the Lady regardless."

The cheering resumed alongside another burst of light, and Rumithery, now leaning against a pillar, grunted as an unnatural heat wracked through her. The speaker held out a hand; the noise of the audience ceased.

"I'm sure those wishing to become one in the Candlelight Host know of our goals—our aspirations—so let us proceed without indulging in trivial explanation." The speaker paused for a moment and motioned. "We are a diverse group tonight. Let the *kleinitch* first come forwards."

Shouts—exclamations—echoed about the chamber, and Rumithery saw the speaker beckon toward her.

"Come."

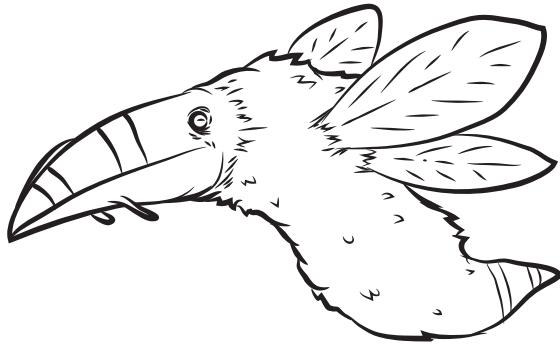
Hands trembling, she hobbled forwards towards the dais, huddling close as hands from the crowd, ethereal in the blue light, brushed against her sides. The speaker nodded, bringing Rumithery near; an attendant pressed two objects into the girl's open palms. Both the wax and the glass were cool to the touch.

"As the sacred candle burns tonight for the first time," the speaker began, "a new member will come together with our order. All prior obligations and attachments shall be burned clean, and another will join with us as we seek to free the Lady's Light."

He turned—eyes flashing with the reflections of the cheering crowd—and handed Rumithery a match.

IRADA

Irada is world where the its' original inhabitants have died, and the shadows of that lost world have left the new thriving species, the Vicus, the Kalis, the Ureshi, and the Lalats, with advanced technology and the destruction of one of the polar continents. They left behind a bridge that connects the two continents together over the vast sea that carried many deadly animals and plants. These new species are learning how to use this ancient tech while also dealing with their own problems, navigating a world that was built by others and is causing their worldwide conflicts.



Emily Arneson

Object 35: Yellow plastic item with two holes

Lethin's Day

Klunk! Thud! Stones and tiny objects hit the ocean floor as the juvenile Lethin gave a pathetic whine and coiled its long body around its aching head. It was very young and had not yet mastered reading the vibrations in the water, which meant it often located walls by crashing into them headfirst.

As the pain in its head began to subside, the Lethin stretched out its slim body and hissed; the closest it could come to its elders' thunderous bellows. It wasn't nearly frightening enough. The large serpent was distracted from its previous occupation by tiny, flickering heat signatures at the edge of its range – *food!*

The Lethin shot forward, careening into the middle of the school of Glowfish. A single snap of its jaws caught several hundred of the three-inch fish, and it caught and ate over half of the remaining fish before the rest escaped. It had been a large school, around ten thousand Glowfish, but it made up only a third of the Lethin's daily food intake. The same school would be only a snack to the Great Sea Dragon, the eldest Lethin alive. That one was hibernating, though.

The Lethin hissed its triumph over the school of Glowfish and slowly, carefully, made its way out of the deep caverns. It had no desire to introduce its head to another cave wall. When it was finally free of the confining caverns, the Lethin cried its joyful liberty and raced along the sea bed. As it went, its tail clipped the sand and sent it careening off-course.

It tumbled through the deep sea, its excited cackling echoing off the sand, and twisted around gleefully for a long minute or two before

catching itself and continuing on. As it went, the water around it warmed and it began to have trouble picking out the heat signatures of the little fish it passed. How curious.

Its cheerful cries as it neared the shallows sent the other creatures in the area fleeing in terror. It didn't really understand why, but it was playing, not hunting, so it didn't really matter. Twisting and curling and tumbling all over itself, cackling all the while, the Lethin enjoyed the warmth. It had never felt water like this before. It would be a terrible place to hunt, as it could barely pick out heat signatures, but it was a fun place to play.

With a gleeful screech, the Lethin threw itself above the surface and out of the water. It tried to cry out again while in the air, but the sound didn't travel anywhere as nicely to its perception. It crashed back into the water, sulking, before cheering and starting to squirm in excitement. For hours it twisted and swam and leapt through the warm shallows, coiling over itself and nearly tying itself into a knot on several occasions. Eventually, though, it was reminded that the Hunt was not finished, and reluctantly returned to the deep in search of Hoopfish.

Three small schools of Glowfish and half a dozen solitary Hoopfish later, the young Sea Dragon was finally satisfied. And just in time, too, as weariness began to overcome it and it burrowed its way beneath the sea floor until its entire body was covered by sand. It would sleep for a short time only before it dug itself out to hunt and play again the next day.

Mia Ballingrud

Object 41: Measuring tape in an off-white and blue plastic container

The colony claimed to be the most responsible choice for the Kalis. They claimed that monsters like us are reviled by the other creatures. They claimed to be eco-friendly, self-sufficient, peaceful. They said we would own our society. They told us that community is power. Alone we are nothing; together we are a movement. They promised us a life without restrictions. They promised us protection. They promised us elation. The colony never delivered on its promises. In reality the communal lifestyle is a codependent, cult-like nightmare.

They were incessantly needy. I would leave the group for some space and they would start tittering behind me. They acted as if I couldn't hear them laughing, mocking. The colony enforces social reliance. Any sort of individuality is considered rude. They found my impatience with their nosiness amusing. I was the problem bug. I know what they were thinking; I'm going to abandon them. They knew that I found this nest atrocious. They knew I ached to join civilization.

I considered them family for a while. When I was a larva, I was very open to the situation. The colony was always there to provide for me. Then they started becoming controlling. They completely abandoned any illusion of privacy. They'd search my shelter to make sure I wasn't trying to "hoard" anything. Any personal belongings suddenly became an extravagance the family just couldn't abide. Of course, I had just turned one; I was a teenager now. So, after realizing that this was a taboo, I had to start hoarding.

Every night, I would sneak away from the family and search for anything unique. It would be better if it was artificial. The family despised anything processed. Everything had to be naturally created

from the soil of Irada. Keeping a precursor-made object from them would be enough for them to finally leave me alone. It is a possibility that maybe, may the ever-glowing Sun help me, I would even get banished.

However, hoarding was more difficult than I had thought. The Lalats loved anything from the precursory era. They would take it all. So my mighty stash consisted of a brightly colored little disk with rope inside of it. This was all I found after a week of searching. It was slightly underwhelming, but all that I wanted. There was no way that this had ever used eco-friendly materials. Plus, it was mine and only mine. No one else knew about it. I finally had something of my very own. Something they couldn't consume.

However, this is a story of the pointlessness of resentment, not a tale of personal rebellion with a cute little ending. I hopped back to my shelter and set it gently next to me. I forgot to hide it. I forgot to bury it. I just set it down out in the open and fell asleep. I didn't deserve anything that precious back then. I was just a dumb kid. I realize now that little trinket could have been traded for a lot of produce. I didn't even consider the wealth I had found. I just tossed it aside, naïve with pride.

When I woke up, its vibrant shell was crushed. Shiny blue shards were scattered on the dirt. The rope was gone. My only possession was discovered and destroyed. The colony ended my fantasy of freedom as soon as it began. This had told me everything I needed to know. I'm not special. I was never special. It was the rope. I wanted so badly to be special when I was a kid; and they wouldn't even let me have this one thing.

All day I planned my escape from the colony. I was going to hop away in the night and join a city. I was going to live on my own. The colonists knew I was a traitor. They advertised it. The elder draped my rope across its back. They were daring me to go. They thought I was weak. They were right. I wanted to leave so badly. When the night came, however, and I was a few seconds away from freedom, I stayed.

When the next night came, I stayed again. And this continued for the next week. My act of rebellion was an isolated one. I was not special. I was a member of the colony. Attempting to defy my community was

simply against my self-interest. I am just a part of a whole and the whole would fall without me. I am important with them. I am useless without them. That's what I tell myself anyway. That's what they tell me.

Michael Chau

Object 21: Bracelet

On the one thousand three hundred and sixtieth day of my life I arrive at the Brace, nearly dead. The dull white sky rains flakes of rust. Sun floats above as always, turning the full brunt of Her malevolent and golden gaze onto my body. My thorax is shattered and blood seeps out periodically when I twist my body, splattering my chitin with cyan streaks. Anger leaks out of every wound. My antennae twitch to attune to the burst of heat on these dry, flat plains.

I had dragged myself the last mile after a vasek tore off one of my hind legs. Before, I had baited it across glowforests and swamp with spittlespear in hand, head full of fear and fury, hunted now hunter. The vasek was left undisturbed by us, the Chryssigna, even as it preyed upon us, killing our larvae. We knew it as Haeomophage because of its taste for blood. Our imago remained aloof as the days grew longer and the vasek took more of us. “*Look to Sun,*” they sang, “*and remember our generations past.*” How I wished I could spit in their faces! How I wished I could defy our elders. How I wished I could refuse to feast when they passed out of this world, having reached the end of their five-year life, when we the children ringed around their corpses and divided their parts among us. My birthma Ketwiss’ meat was ashen; I could barely digest it. We did not even bother to scatter the shells of our elders and the recently pupated to throw Haeomophage off our scent, so great was our grief for the killed and our fear of the vasek.

The Brace is there, after grass shrivels and peters into nothing, past a lip of dry earth. I crawl to the edge and stare down into the basin. Inside the abscess in the ground, perfectly round, a shimmering golden arch rises out

of the dirt. An ancient structure we avoided, for it had been made by the wretched Creators. My journey is nearly ended. Spirals of light glint off the Brace, scintillating in the clear air. If only I could sleep, I shall take a brief rest...

We the new imago could not lead, did not even try. Our brood-songs faltered, our histories rotted, our Sun hymns spluttered, the vasek gloated. Kashrot sung to me in a rare moment of solitude, “*Taszka, have faith and do not let the material world conspire against your eternal soul.*” Oh I wanted to rage against her, I wanted to clutch her so tightly to me! I whispered, “*Sister, we will die.*” I locked scythearms with her and gazed into her compound eyes, seeing the light play over the many, many iridescent lenses. “*Are you afraid of dying, Taszka?*” She clicked. “*Not afraid. Furious,*” I said. I could see her see through me, knew that she unfocused her vision and blurred me into nothing. She spoke to my other clutch siblings and the rest of the new imago, and quickly I could see that I was being excommunicated. They did not let me care for the nascent larvae, did not let me play the greater roles in the brood-songs. Nothing to do. Sun lifted our blood off the forest floor with Her hot arms and desiccated our chitin. Despair and devastation settled across us without a sound. If it was even aware of our seasonal movement patterns then the future would already be set in place. Nothing to do.

I cannot rest. Already in this vast clearing, out of the swamps, I have been exposed for hours. The vasek may have been biding its time, but now I can hear it screech. Someone once surmised that they were distant relatives of ours, but the Creators had altered them beyond recognition. Ah, here it is now, not even emerging from the swamp’s edge but from an innocuous pile of boulders half a mile away, a mass of stone shifting into a beastly figure. Claws and piercers armored in layers of thick, hulking chitin. Careering towards me now, tearing up the dirt. Hello, Haemophage.

Nothing to do but kill it. “*You’re mad!*” Kinaqe exclaimed, and the gathered imago nodded sagely. “*It is too soon to hunt.*” I sneered and said, “*Too soon to die, but we shall die while the seasons crawl onwards.*” Kinaqe shook her head. “*Haemophage will leave us be. Sun is merciful.*”

A young larva slumbering by a great flower, nameless until its first molt, twitched and unfurled its antennae. Kinaqe clicked quieter. “*We cannot risk it, not with our people so few. Thymsabe is not far from here; they’ve left their signs, see? They will take in Chryssigna. Say we confront the vasek and die? What of Chryssigna then? You cannot condemn our brood, Taszka.*” I could not contain my disgust at them. I plucked at a parasitic fungus that had infested Kinaqe’s abdomen in the darkness under her wings. She hissed. “*What is happening to us on the inside?*” I said to the imago. Kashrot clicked in a vexed, yet concerned tone, but I avoided her probing gaze. Dusk came with a new sense of relief, and I could not resist heresy. I cursed Sun in my mind. I cursed her silent judgement. Her empty radiation, Her searing blaze, fixing us in Her view while the vasek killed and killed and would eventually damn all our souls to wander this ravaged earth. So I knew, wrapped in the shroud of night, that I must act, or resign myself to a world that denied us our own existence. “*A foolish sacrifice if you leave,*” said Kashrot when she caught me fashioning my spittlespear. I had finished secreting it from my glands and stood, looking at her defiantly. “*This, or nothing,*” I said and left, and that was all.

Here I face my foe. With my blood tangled in my hands. To make of an act the same virtue as that of its consequences. The Brace is a weapon, said countless foreign rumors I had gathered during travel; word from the heretical monarch-broods who live in the Creators’ abandoned husk cities filtered down to me: this is how you must decode their ancient artifacts... I must sing again the song of the Great Song. We are one, the orphaned children of the Creators that abandoned us, whether we are Chryssigna or Thymsabe or Oh soli or Phothyum or any of the countless broods of Irada. However we change, this fact will not. Now, I end. Farewell.

Murphy Kalil

Object 49: Ceramic Bird

-Begin Information Feed-

Object 49:

A painted clay bird figurine found by the Kalis Cal'kri of the hive Crikila. It has no effect on us, the Vicus, but when it comes into contact with any of the other sentient races of Irada, the bird comes to life and provides a variety of aid to the user. It appears to be triggered by contact with organic sentients only. It was reportedly found in the Precursor ruins on the glass beaches of north Neran. Cal'kri retrieved it and offered it to us in exchange for knowledge, which was provided for him. We have run many tests on it and cannot find technological elements. It stands to reason that this relic is mystical or supernatural in nature. More tests shall be run. The pedestal the bird is standing on is yellow with flecks of rust colored glaze. The bird itself is painted in red, green, brown, blue, and white, primarily. The feathers of the bird are painted with commendable detail. It does not match the files we have on Precursor art and sculpting. We could assume that it was made by the golden age humans, but it doesn't match our data on their art, either. How they accomplished this supernatural feat remains a mystery. We shall investigate supernatural artifacts and sites on Irada in order to find an answer. Reports of one such site near the southern mushroom forests of Tersk have come to our attention. Our scouts will be sent once these reports are confirmed by a more trusted source than Lalat scouts.

List of known types of aid that can be provided by the bird figurine is as follows:

1. Healing
2. Defense

3. Scouting
4. Item retrieval
5. Can be used as a distraction

Supernatural sites and artifacts have substantially less files in the Repository than is acceptable. More intensive research on such things shall begin as soon as possible.

-End Information Feed-

Maddy Lee

Object 5: A small, yellow crab finger puppet

The City is Dead

The city sits at the end of a great bridge, stretching far into the east horizon. Its location was ideal at a time, placed precariously along several routes of trade and steady flowing streams. As large as it is, one could assume that hundreds of thousands had flocked to it. However, in its current state, one is unlikely to find even a single soul braving the adventure. It is said to be haunted, and the sparse skeletal remains surrounding certainly encourage this. Remnants of the architecture twist about themselves, draping shadows across the expanse of the burning pavement below. There is an underlying feeling that the thing itself is a ghost. With every shifting movement, there is the sound of marble scratching. A broken sundial glistens. In this place, time is dead.

A singular kalis creeps slowly through the street: a large creature, nearly two meters in height. Hiding does not seem an option. Their shadow flickers through the open alleyways, continually lit and extinguished by the sunlight. The clicking of its mandibles sound. It is unnatural, but it brings comfort. They are a scout: their mission to find new shelter for the colony—for the monarchy. In the city, they have found the heat unbearable and their stomach unnaturally churning. Still, they search.

Their gaze lands upon the eastern bridge. It is a looming metal abomination. Its steel tendrils wrap around one another in a bizarre,

yet uniform fashion. It is a shape reminiscent of a muscle. Along the edges, the cables are rusted. The texture is akin to orange, flaky daggers, upon which the skin becomes butter. They had been a safety measure once. The irony is not lost upon the kalis. They notice the abundance of flora that creep over the sides of the rails, smothering the floor in a green hue. Then, a large ambulatory flower. It walks upon its roots with a gait that borders on the undead. An amphibious glider sweeps across the beams above. Its brightly colored plumage gives the impression of a soaring comet. The kalis scans the area. In another lifetime, the sheer biodiversity would have been a haven, but time and rumor alike have tainted the world. This place is unnatural.

History cannot trace it to a creator. It has no beginning; it has no end. The kalis steps back and observes the whole of the structure. It reaches well above the head, and far beyond the horizon. A sudden, paranoid moment. The frittering worries of the older generations, whispered in a hushed symphony. This place is surely haunted. The bridge extends for millennia. Each step is a greater hell than the last, and turning back is a luxury ill afforded.

There is a clicking noise. Less so than the kalis produces, but more so than silence. It is the sound of metal on metal, light as a feather. The fibers seem to be rising and falling, swift and smooth and rhythmic. Nervously chittering, the kalis retraces several steps. It is a trick of the light; it is the noise of rickety artifact. To hear the “pulse” of the bridge is a death omen in many cultures. But the kalis did not believe it. The kalis did not *hear* it. With a decisive sound, they turn back the way they came. If needed, the colony could send another scout.

The sun had begun to set rapidly. Soon night will fall upon them. The kalis is filled with a sense of dread. They scuttle back through the streets, but their scouting report is not complete. And duty is binding. They make a point to find the domestic potential in this place. There are signs of past life in every pile of rubble. Items that had belonged to these precursors are strewn about like offerings on a pyre. A beaten sandal, a broken pair of spectacles, a child’s finger puppet. Each home is a tomb without a body, each street a headstone without a name. The architecture is preexisting; the shadows can protect from the exposure; the lands to the west have agricultural potential. These reports will

need to be made to the monarchy. From there, the decision is beyond this kalis. They do not glance toward the bridge, nor dwell on the gentle clicks of metal behind them. There is nothing to fear.

This city is dead.

Noa Lesche

Object 8: Wooden bird bowl

“It’s not real,” I tell my tear stained cheeks, thinking about how I need to venture out of my apartment once again.

Despite feeling a growing pool of nausea filling up in the quarry that has become my stomach, I proceed to throw on some clothes and put the thoughts away, trying to ignore the sickness that clouds my mind with worry of the impending doom. My soul feels aware that I will have to cross the threshold to the outside in a nearing point in the future today. I collect the simple necessities needed, putting my wallet and keys into one of my various pockets before re-entering the bathroom to face the large mirror that shows my pale face, blistered in white discomfort.

The patchy redness no longer gives my skin any tint to contrast the ghostly figure I presented in my sullen reflection. I know I can relive my worries through the pills that sit on my mother’s antique, shaped in a petri dish with a swan neck. The pills, all though they restrict my creativity and dampen my mind and don’t get rid of the monsters that plague me, they do make it substantially easier for me to breathe and cope outside. Partnered with my personal, ‘They are not real,’ the pills allow me to remain calm while outside.

I give myself one last glance into the mirror before I blindly reach for my pills in a hurried quick motion. My hand misses the intended target and knocks the dish over, spilling the round clear anti-anxiety pills into the running water, washing them down the drain. I immediately shove my fingers after almost as quickly as it happens. I jab my nails, hitting the wall and only fill with terror as they escape my grasp.

My breathing starts to speed up feeling my sweat glands start to over fuel, damping my dark hair almost instantly as the sudden dread. I know I have been different since the crash landing. It led to me being asleep in a coma, which is the only thing that can explain the endless dream that has been doing on. It feels so real, but yet the idea of the roach creature always telling me to recycle and worship the sun cannot really exist in harmony with human sized moles who constantly translate for me the whole conversation.

I have been living in this nightmare state, in an endless sleep in which I have my own creepily mundane life task to do during the day. In a constant state on mental paranoia, knowing that this all is a figment of my subconscious, creating what I assume is a metaphor that most people are roaches, dirty pests or either the moles who live for their own daily tasks minding their own business.

Terror continued to chomp on my blood vessels causing to speed up. The pills that let me interact with the large creatures that tower over me are gone. The possibility of salvaging my sanity was down the drain with the pills, even if this was not real. I needed to get more, but to get more then I needed to venture outside without the pills. I was running out to begin with and that's why I was originally leaving my comfort zone. Now I was left with no option, but to ascend into the market space on my own. I started to pace the bathroom slowly mentally becoming more aware of the unescapable fact that I would come into contact with these horrors, unmediated.

I wasn't addicted, but the severity of my illness kept me traumatized enough to seek the use of them. The circus show that has become my vegetable state of mind, because I apparently want to have a freaky normal life in my dream state. I have dreams where I am sleep and yet in reality I am. I have lived a year in this dream and have no space ship in which I can reach home with in this dream. My crew landed with me in this dream and all of us have group therapy sessions in which a therapist helps me with the mantra and provides me with the pills that help my cope with the life in the dream.

The therapist office is my destination as I leave my apartment and don't encounter any creatures in the hallways. Her office is down the street, which is relatively close and as soon as I exit my building I

immediately start seeing them crawling through the streets much like the New Yorkers back at home, they march at their individual fast paces trying to reach their own destinations in a timely manner.

My lungs start to intake rapid small breathes as I hyperventilate, while crossing the street filled with feet marching in all directions. The feeling of suffocation continues as I quicken my steps toward the large silver door. I open it and slip my body into the building finding the familiar setting more consoling then the street. I kept my eyes to the floor as my pace quickened towards the office door, knocking once and hearing the voice welcome me in.

I sit in the chair in front of the human lady across the desk from me. She stares at me and immediately knows what's wrong. Pulls a pill jar out from the desk refilling my prescription for schizophrenia. I immediately start telling her that I have anxiety and am not delusional. She nods with a sadden look on her face and she insists that I try these and ignore the label, explaining she put the pills in the wrong bottle and that these will help since they are the same as the ones I have been consuming the whole time.

They look the same and I trust her so I grab one and swallow it quick relaxing almost instantly.

"Charles, do you remember now that it isn't a dream and this is actually reality? The creatures are a part of this society where you live and this 'Earth' you think you flew from happen when you were a small child, but since you have lived here and grew up here. You are sick and need to take your medication regularly, do you understand me?"

"Yes."

Anna Peltomaki

Object 40: Outlet plate

The Magic Mask

On the eastern coast of Neran the wind always blows, though it is often gentle and warm. Today however, the wind carries a hint of sulfur, as it is blowing from the east, from the direction of the bridge. The mole and the rock stand side by side, facing into the wind, peering at the bridge, because they still haven't reached an agreement. Whuo, the older of the two friends, has slowly begun considering leaving, because he knows that Pok wouldn't have the courage to go alone. Still, he can't help but notice Pok's increasing whining in his head.

For the a few days now, Whuo has had to listen to his rock friend worry about his mother, who had gone to the other continent to sell her goods. It has already been a full cycle of one moon since she left, and the other moon has almost completed half its cycle. No matter how many times Whuo has tried to reassure his friend that the bridge is long and travelling to the other side and back usually takes two full cycles of both moons and half a cycle again, he has noticed that these reassurances have done little more than increase Pok's determination.

Now Whuo can sense a change in his friend's telepathic messages: Pok's pleading no longer sounds desperate, and has taken on a demanding tone.

"But you must know that you cannot set foot on the bridge, you have been told this all your life. You wouldn't survive," Whuo says wearily.

Whuo hears Pok's frustrated buzzing in his head, "*I know, I know, but it's different now. I've tried to tell you, but you won't listen.*" Then Pok, with shaking hands, takes an object out of his boulder-pocket.

The object is a glowing white rectangle with gold decorations along its edges and two holes in the middle. “*Here.*”

“That isn’t an ancient relic, is it? How did...” And so Pok begins telling Whuo about this object, a mask that the mole people found in their digs and that Pok recently bought at the market.

“So that plate, no, mask, reveals danger and guides you onto safe paths,” Whuo confirms after having heard Pok’s tale. Pok nods happily. “But even though it reveals danger, it doesn’t protect you from it, does it? Hey, Pok, wait! You’re too young to go there—” But Pok has already started waddling towards the entrance to the bridge, and Whuo realizes that he cannot stop the determined rock.

The closer they get to the entrance to the bridge, the heavier the air becomes. The stink of sulfur grows stronger, and their surroundings are filled with an oppressive silence, as if they have passed through a gate to another dimension. They hear the bridge breathe and pulse to the rhythm of the lightning flashing in the storm clouds on the horizon. Whuo looks worriedly back towards his home town. Its bright colors are the complete opposite of the bleak view ahead of them. Whuo can still hear the clatter of gears in the city and the occasional calls of its residents, but this close to the bridge, most the city’s merry atmosphere has evaporated. Whuo’s hope that someone could still run after them and stop their plans slowly fades as he sees that his brave friend is already walking on the bridge. Whuo catches up in a few quick steps. Setting foot on the bridge is like stepping onto the back some thick-skinned animal. The surface gives way a bit underfoot, but does not feel treacherous. The indentations left by each step glow with reddish light for a moment before the surface evens out again. The surface of the bridge seems to be covered by a thin coating of grey ash, which sticks to their feet. Whuo looks at his friend, whose gaze seems to be nailed to the horizon. Pok is already wearing the mask. “If we walk just a little way and then turn back, I think that Pok will change his mind,” Whuo thinks to himself, but truth be told, Whuo is becoming curious about the bridge as well.

Peering through the mask, Pok sees the bridge as being even more monochromatic than it actually is. He has no idea how the mask works, how he is supposed to see danger through it. Nevertheless, Pok

steels his nerves by thinking about his mother. For some time now Pok has been bothered by the feeling that the merchants' trip has not gone as planned. He is afraid he will find his mother crushed against the side of the bridge, but takes comfort in the thought that timing is important. If he finds his mother wounded, he could maybe save her. Pok can't tell how far he has walked as the view of the bridge remains unchanging for a long time, nothing by the occasional plant growing here and there. Then Pok is startled terribly by someone grabbing his shoulder, but is it just Whuo, who now steps in front of Pok.

"Maybe it would be best if we turned back. We're not prepared well enough for this journey," Whuo says. Pok responds to this ridiculous suggestion by sending an angry buzz into Whuo's mind, which makes Whuo grimace. Pok doesn't usually like to tease his friend with telepathic messages, and soon stops. The grimace stays on Whuo's face, though, and then Whuo's eyes widen with terror. Pok tries to telepathically calm Whuo, but soon realizes he is not the cause of Whuo's reaction. Pok turns around slowly and his field of vision fills with red dots that are charging towards them. The air is full of some kind of insects—Pok lifts the mask from his/her eyes to see better—yes, long white creatures the size of a fist that have three tentacles, pointed ears and gaping mouths. Whuo grabs the mask from Pok's hand, places it on his/her own face and begins to frantically look around. "That tree there, run under its branches. Quickly!" Whuo yells.

They reach the beautiful, black-trunked tree, which has lantern-like fruit hanging in its branches. The insects still seem to be following them. If anything they have picked up speed. The mask seems to be no help, but a desperate Whuo puts it back over his/her eyes one more time, until his/her vision is completely filled with red dots...

Standing on the bridge, it is as if the rest of the world does not exist. No matter the direction, there is only grey mist. Here and there in the mist, there are enticing lantern-like trees, but can they be trusted? The mole blinks furiously, trying to get his bearings. Whuo is still wearing the mask, but there are no red dots now. Whuo turns towards Pok, but his friend is nowhere to be seen either.

Alix Robinson-Guy

Object 38: Black magnifying glass

Gretten walked down the corridor, thick claws scratching in the dirt, when they scratched a not-dirt object. He stopped and put his nose down to feel. The object was cold, hard- not metal, but distinctly other, long, and with a far colder circle at the end. He tapped the cold circle with his claws; it sounded like glass, but other than that, it did nothing special. Neither glowing nor gleaming, humming nor buzzing, whirring nor clacking. All in all, a rather unassuming little thing made of rough material. Gretten liked it anyways, and the glass may be useful to another creature with better eyesight. He gathered it up in his claws.

Gretten could also give it to the Vicus for this year's pilgrimage, garnering special praise, and they always loved artifacts; if he didn't have a good gift for the Vicus, his blessing may be rejected out of hand.

His mother had been bothering him about finding a wife, but he'd put it off because he never could quite find the proper gift for proposal- or anybody he would offer it to, but it's not as if he could just say that. Garrett, his brother, said he was picky, but it wasn't being picky if no options had presented themselves to Gretten in the first place.

Shuffling into his home, he gently placed the object on a pile of other, equally interesting relics from past civilization. There was the one that made the whizzing noise, the one that smelled like fire and ash and glittered even to the poor eyesight of Gretten, and his favorite, the one that was small and smelled like flowers.

He sniffed- Garrett was here. How dare he break in again?

Gretten moved into the next room, the sleeping room, full of the softest blankets and cloth that he could find, to discover Garrett lying in wait.

"Hello, little brother," Garrett said; he was the eldest of the pups, viewing it as his Vasque-sworn duty to meddle in the affairs of his siblings, much to the dismay of Gretten.

"Hi, Garrett." Gretten groaned. He didn't want to deal with this; he'd found another potential proposal gift and felt accomplished enough to not do anything for weeks.

"Did you know Gratt got elected? Elected."

"Well, I voted for him, so I would certainly hope so," Gretten said crossly.

Garrett's nose twitched in irritation. "I'm just pointing out that our other siblings accomplish things."

"I do things," Gretten said. "Lots of things."

"I just had a litter of pups," Garrett boasted. "And Gervett-"

"That's nice," Gretten cut Garrett off before he got too far. "I'm sure you and Gervett and Gratt are just having a wonderful time living your lives. I'm having fun living my life. Isn't it all just so much fun?"

Gretten's other brothers, all being accomplished in their own ways, found it natural to tease him lightly about his title of "family layabout" despite his steady, well paying- if low level- job.

Garrett frowned. "But don't you want to contribute a greater amount to our society at large? Do something meaningful with your life?"

"But Garrett, the things that you have assigned worth in your mind aren't what hold worth in mine," Gretten protested. They'd had this argument many times. It put a damper on Gretten's entire day, despite desperately trying to clutch the shiny bright feeling of happiness to him, but in the face of Garrett's inquisition, it dimmed.

"Lalats have values-"

Gretten snorted. By the patience of Pagg, not the Lalat values lecture.

"And none of them are overbearingness!" Gretten interrupted. The time for diplomacy had ended when Garrett started the values lecture. "Our families are certainly all involved with each other but not to the point of constant meddling!"

Garrett faltered. "But- I'm looking out for your well-being! I'm your brother. It's common. Ferr's brother does the same. And Sille's. And Creer's. And Yirr's. And-"

"I get it, you know every Lalat from here to the land of the Vicus,

and they all have annoying older brothers. But look,” he paused to gather his proposal gifts from the main room, “I’m making headway towards a marriage. I’ll produce children to vote and dig.”

“I believe you,” Garrett said. His nose feelers wiggled.

“Thank you. Can you leave now?” Gretten begged.

Garrett sighed, taking one last long look at Gretten, then moved out of Gretten’s house. “Come talk to me if you want life advice!” he said as he left.

“Sure,” Gretten replied absently. He stared down at the object in his talons. It was a product of another time, another place, left after the destruction of the precursors, who worked with the Vicus-

Wait.

If the Vicus knew near-everything, then they would know what Gretten ought to be doing, far more than any annoying brother would. What did Garrett know of life that the Vicus didn’t already, multiplied by thousands of years?

They had seen the birth and death of Lalats just like him for millennia, and they would advise him in his path, as long as he had an interesting artifact.

He clutched his relics in his claws. Gretten would set off in the morning.

Rebecca Ruvinsky

Object 4: Red plastic top

She hurried to her house, holding her skirts up and out of the dirt. Most were heading the opposite way as her, but she had spent too long picking lantern fruit. Her basket was heavy with the sweet fruit, and now she was going to be late. Out of breath, she hurried into her little cabin and dropped the fruit on a nearby table, rushing into her room.

Stopping in front of a piece of glass she kept, Caidlen gathered her hair back and twisted it into a knot. There was no time to change into a fancier outfit or tidy up more, so she would just have to leave how she was, dust and all. Next to the glass, there was her *sugeshi*, and she picked it up carefully with both hands before heading out.

Just beyond the front door, a familiar Lalat waited for her, also with a red *sugeshi* in his paws. “We’re running late,” he mentioned before holding the *sugeshi* in his mouth and scurrying forward on all fours, leaving Caidlen to pace herself to keep up with her roommate.

“We’ll be fine, just at the back of the line,” she replied with confidence, though she couldn’t help the slight flush of embarrassment. Why couldn’t she have decided to pick fruit earlier in the week? Dawn was the easiest time to find the trees, but she could have done it yesterday. The ceremony didn’t happen *that* often, and she was usually one of the first to get in line. Well, she would just have to not let it happen again.

The line stretched out of the modest building at the shoreline, taller than it was big. Two symbols were carved into the stone: a circle and, next to it, a pickaxe. As she and her roommate joined the line, she let her attention wander to them. They had a wait in front of them, no matter the fact the line was shuffling forward. The circle was easily recognizable as unity between all four species, working together. When growing up, she had heard stories of how it had started as simply

being Lalats and humans building the village from the ground and eradicating all the dangerous plants from the area. The pickaxe stood for the reason why this village had been erected, why everything was built by hand or paw instead of using the “help” of machines.

Technology had led to the breaking of the continents, the destruction of the precursors. While technology was not inherently bad, *dependence* of technology only lead to ruin. Those were the principles Caidlen had been brought up on, and why this village farmed, built, and lived without any technology, regardless if it was ancient surviving tech or some of the new things she had heard existed in the cities.

As she moved forward in line, she reflected on the pickaxe. Any sort of simple tool could have been chosen, but it was the pickaxe that had been carved onto the walls of the most important building. A pickaxe was not used for violence — it wasn’t a tool that could be a weapon, unlike an actual axe. It was used for breaking through rocks, chipping away at any problems that might arise. It was a tool for digging, too, which referenced the Lalats and their skills in the earth, as well as building.

The village had been settled at a beach, and it soon became apparent that a tribe of Ureshi came to that spot every so often. A scholar in the village had a rudimentary dictionary of their color language, and a rough communication was set up. When the Ureshi witnessed the sharing of cultures and religions, especially as Kalis heard of the place, they had volunteered to share theirs as well. And so here she was, trying to share in the religion of the Ureshi and open her mind to another religion. But really, she was just going to drink some gross water and carry on her way.

Her roommate walked into the old building, holding his *sugeshi* in its mouth as he lowered his head to the small pool of water the Ureshi had brought from the depths of the ocean in a container. Apparently, this water was holy to them, though Caidlen couldn’t understand what set it apart from the rest of the ocean.

She started as she realized her roommate was leaving the building, and walked forward, holding her *sugeshi* carefully. It was red, and very small, with a dip in the middle designed to hold a single sip of water. Some had said that it was a part of a human religion from long ago, now combined with the Ureshi ritual, but it just seemed like it

was designed to keep them from drinking more than their fair share. Dipping it into the water, she lifted it to her mouth and drank the water. It was hard not to cringe with its strong taste, but she managed and nodded to the Ureshi on her way out. The building was built so that the Ureshi could swim under a walls and hover in a pool of water, and they seemed happy at everyone participating in the religion, their bellies glowing blue-green.

Wiping her mouth as she walked back to her house, Caidlen sighed, wanting the taste out of her mouth. At least she wouldn't have to do this for another few months, but then again, a Kalis ritual was coming up their traditions were *weird*.

Evelyn Wright

Object 33: artwork of frog on a bicycle

There was a loud bustling around the tunnels of Andreda Mountain, while Joff shuffled along the walls to his chambers. He let the sensitive tips of his nose lead him to the tunnel to the side that would take him down to his home. The small roots poking through the roof of the narrow tunnels ran soft lines down his back as he clambered down.

The littered objects around the floor of his home made his search for something worthy of his dowry to the Vicus, whom he needed to bless his marriage. He found a small tablet under a pile of small trinkets with the image of a long extinct species. The green animal sat on a stand and wore the garments of the Old Era.

Joff found his carrier sac and carefully laid the tablet atop the collection of traveling cloths and supplies. He attached the sack around his abdomen and almost ran to the tunnel leading out of his chambers, speeding through the crowds making their way throughout the underground city.

Joff considered his options of travel and let his memory lead him through the city. He could either cross the bridge between Neran and Tersk, or cross the chain of islands directly into the tundra and have the long trek across the tundras of Jephian.

Crossing the waters that separated them would require a trade with the local human population, where they would require promises of future gifts, as well as the trade of the most expensive Lalat treasures.

The island chain would take him from his homeland of Neran to the harsh tundra Jephian, where the Vicus lived in cities of caves. The Vicus were crystal based creatures who were made by the Pre-cursors, who inhabited the world before the rise of the New Era.

Joff knew that the journey would take much longer than he was

mentally prepared for, so he thought of Kenna. Visiting the Vicus would let him get the blessing for their marriage or the crystal gods would tell him that there was no future in her.

Kenna's father had a seat in the senate, a high seat in fact, and it made the intimidation of marrying into a large and powerful family all the more real.

His own father had been a farmer in the agricultural division, where every night he brought home three blue radishes, nine lily tree roots, and one potato for the family's dinner. His marriage into her family would mean his past irrelevance in the colony would be erased. He was to be the mate of Kenna, daughter of Jemm.

His father had raised him to be kind, and Joff knew that if he was still alive, he would be furious. Marriage to Kenna would have to be because of love, not his greed to be a part of something bigger. He also knew that the Vicus could read his thoughts, and if he was not careful they would know his intentions of running for a seat in the senate.

The dirt beneath his feet was softer than usual, damp with small roots and grub twisting from around him. The oceans were close, he realized, he had been walking for longer than he had originally thought. The patches of pink and blue fungi led him to the uphill tunnel that took him into the sunlight.

He found his way through the blinding sunlight and traded the collection of small potatoes in his bag for the journey across the narrow straights between the islands connecting the continent of Neran to Jephian.

The journey across the tundra took the majority of three days, and Joff's spirits were almost broken before he saw the shapes of the Vicus hovering just above the ground in the distance. He continued his trek through the snow until he could make out their individual colors; he then stopped and took the tablet out of his bag.

He approached the familiar cave of his family's oracle stone, the gym was floating slightly above the ground and shone a beautiful purple shade that reflected off the crystal walls of the cave.

"I have come with a token, and in return I would like your blessing in marriage." Joff bowed lowly in front of the stone and laid the wooden tablet against the cave wall in the pile of the other offerings.

“You do not come here for marriage; you come here for greed, do you not?” The gym’s disembodied voice whispered in his head and Joff could feel his entire body freeze.

“No, I come for the blessings of marriage for my love and me.” He slowly rose to a stand and sat for a while before growing uneasy in the demi-god’s silence. “However, if you will not bless the union... I must respect your choice. For you are the all-knowing being, children of our makers.”

Laughter filled the back of his brain and he was bombarded by the thoughts that the gym was bringing forward of himself, his thoughts of Kenna, her family, and his own ambition was thrown in front.

“These are not the thoughts of love, Joff, you are of not much substance, and I will not give you the blessing to use another for your own agenda, especially in the event that she is genuine. I suggest you do not go back with this news. Kenna’s father is, as you know of course, influential. You will get nowhere in your lowly ambition.” The gym was slowly beginning to hover farther off the ground.

“I... I am... sorry, for wasting your time then. I apologize.” He turned to make his way back to the mouth of the cave and he heard the faintest whisper in the back of his brain.

“Do not apologize to me, apologize to your gods.”

JANDERMARCH

In a multiverse composed of a finite number of realities, every sentient species possesses magical abilities, but only a certain few called wizards can jump between realities. All but one of the realities has been conquered by a species known as the Ulven, a group known for their warrior-based culture and unique clothing. They reside in Ulvnheim, led by the Autarch, a large, muscular, wizard ulf who has lived for thousands of years.

Those who dwell within the dominion of the Empire call all known creation Jandermarch, or “the Autarch’s Hold.” The only remaining free realm is Pyrth, a magnificent city that fiercely protects its culture from any outside threats. From this moment on, war between Pyrth and The Autarch is inevitable, and the gods themselves won’t be ready for what happens next.



David Alexander

Object 20: Candle snuffer

The Shaman's Pipe

Eons ago in the ancient land of Africa, there once was a shaman named Shaman Bwana who roamed the Earth summoning creatures from the deepest descent with a mystically inclined pipe that the African God of Protection Asa who gave the shaman the pipe in order to summon good magic that would protect his beloved Shaman from The Darkness. The Darkness had existed longer than any other being in the universe besides Asa, it was sent upon the new Earth by the devil himself who wanted to replace all the new humans with his demonic servants and become the god of this new world.

Asa, sensing the danger that was soon to come, sent Shaman Bwana on a mission around the entire globe to protect the powerless from the forces of darkness seeking to destroy them. Shaman Bwana was supposed to cast out all the demons and The Darkness back to Hell by using his Mystical pipe. All the shaman had to do was repeat the chant “Let there be light to cast out this unholy night” over and over again whenever he encountered a servant of The Darkness. The Shaman steadfastly accepted his mission and traveled the entire globe for many, many years casting out those who wished to corrupt the entire world and foiling the plans of The Darkness with every gust of his enchanted pipe. During his time abroad many civilizations rose to immense power and retained their sense of moral righteousness that Asa had always intended for them, all thanks to Shaman Bwana and the power of his pipe.

However, that doesn't mean that there was always peace and easy battles for Shaman Bwana in his crusade against evil. Once, during

the beginning of his perilous journey, Shaman Bwana encountered a demon so unbelievably powerful that it had destroyed entire villages and cast out many people from their homes. The shaman, horrified by the atrocities committed by this creature, immediately journeyed to the most recent village that the demon had destroyed so he could banish it before it could attack anymore innocent people.

The journey took many days and covered many miles but the shaman was able to get to the village before the demon could do any more harm and quickly found the village where the demon was taking refuge. Arriving at the decimated village, Shaman Bwana was absolutely disgusted by the sight: entire houses brought down to their simplest foundation, fire roamed through the whole area rejoicing in the heat of the sun, hysterical children screaming for their mothers and fathers who were nowhere to be found, mourners weeping over the bodies of their murdered loved ones. Outraged, fury gnawing at every corner of his mind and body, Shaman Bwana strutted forth towards the demon that was resting in the ruins of a now-decimated house, gnawing on a new victim.

The demon had the teeth of a shark with ten times the sharpness and intensity, its eyes were a blood red that fit almost perfectly on his crocodile-like skin, his wolverine claws were sharper than knives and as long as swords as that protruded out his large, beefy hands. It snarled a terrible snarl at the courageous shaman and said, "I have heard of you mere mortal fool! Your power is no mere match for me! No God can overcome me with his so called "magic"!" and breathed an enormous wall of fire at the shaman who ducked down just narrowly avoiding a quick, fiery death. The Crocodile demon spared no mercy and kept attacking on the offensive yet failing to hit the stealthy shaman who avoided every blast and bolt of demonic fire with god-like agility. The shaman, fearing that his luck would run out soon, pulled out his pipe and chanted the phrase "Let there be light to cast out this unholy night" over and over again until, all of a sudden, the sky opened, the wind conjured itself up into a swirling mass of air surrounding the demon, lightning descended upon the unholy creature. The wrath of Asa had now been unleashed. The shaman, hiding behind a nearby tree, heard the last screams of absolute terror from the demon, and

then, a moment later, witnessed the beast evaporate completely into the pipe. The terror was gone and the villagers cheered, no more demon! No more destruction! No more evil! The shaman gave these people a newfound hope for a future of peace and prosperity, a chance to renew their world without the influence of The Darkness and its evil servants. There were still heroes in the world and there was still somebody watching over and protecting them.

Julia Baugh

Object 56: A red visor clip with black hooks and black sponge inside the clip to protect the sunglasses' arms

Discovery

It sits, watching the wind whistle as it brushes through its over-robcs. It is not hungry. No. Now it is curious.

Its skin glints red against the overcast sky, or at least those parts of it that can be seen. The rest is hidden, its repulsive body concealed by layers of fabric, while underneath, its grotesqueness is accentuated by a skintight leotard. The leotard itself is bright pink with silver sparkles. It's very proud of it.

It is on this particular day that it stumbles upon a large field, distinct from the towering forests that cover most of the realm by its amber brown waves of decaying grass. The turf is trampled down to such an extent that it should never rise, likely caused by such frequent usage that it has simply given up hope of ever returning to its original state.

There is a dull glimmer from a few yards away. Its ears perk up, instantly interested. It scampers across the field, wobbling dangerously from side to side as if it is about to topple.

The object is of average size and fits comfortably in its hand. It is bright red, with metal additions on its side. When a strange lever concealed against the red is pressed, the object pops open with a delightful *click*.

The Skeeg amuses itself for several minutes clicking its new toy. Then it has a most wonderful idea. It stands immediately, its prize clutched tightly between blood-red fingers.

It hurries off, between the trees and past the various animals that now hold no interest to it. Later, perhaps, when its skin is pale and its

stomach yearns for blood, it will return for a midnight snack.

It takes mere minutes for it to reach the cave. It is nothing more than a gap in the impenetrable rock, likely created by an Ulf's tantrum at losing the target of its latest (illegal) hunt. It works suitably for the Skeeg's purposes though.

Shadows fall across its receding back as it travels deeper into the cave that it has decided to call home. It pays them no heed, focusing instead on the spectral voices that bid it welcome. It lifts its find aloft in order to better allow its incorporeal friends a chance to look on its noble surface.

In the farthest depths of the cave are small pools hewn from the rock. Inside rest paints of many colors, the product of many hours of work and just as many hours fixing the mistakes it has made along the way. (Mostly though, they are a gift from an especially benevolent Ulf in exchange for knowledge on the gathering pools of the realm's beasts.) There are neon greens and fluorescent reds, shimmering silvers and golds that sparkle when the sun touches them.

Many of the things the Skeeg has are gifts from the Ulven, its unseen masters. This includes the unintentional gift of its new toy, a worthless trinket accidentally dropped by an Ulf when it last visited the lonely realm. The Skeeg is not to know this, however.

For now, it sits among its paints, its lower limbs cross-legged while it holds its newest find above its head, where the voices can see it. They whisper admiringly to the Skeeg, complimenting it on its great success.

How lovely! says one.

It's exquisite! says another.

What is it? asks a third.

The Skeeg doesn't answer. It never does. It simply listens as it begins its work, clicking open the unknown object and sweeping a few dabs of silvery paint into the exposed compartment. When it has done this, it clicks it closed once more before opening it again. At the sight, it holds the item overhead triumphantly.

Wow! A way to carry the paint! The voices applaud.

The Skeeg takes an exaggerated bow, its bug eyes shining with joy as it contemplates its future with its new possession. Of course, it says

no words, but visions of murals and battle tattoos that last till nightfall fill its mind.

It gets its chance to test its new tool later that night. An unfortunate cattle animal makes its way past its darkened abode, shuffling forward slowly to compensate for its lack of night vision.

The Skeeg prepares itself. It sits just inside the threshold of the cave and pops open the container. Fingers of fading red dab the paint, then make patterns known only to itself on its face and arms. To it, the symbols represent war and a desire to conquer any opponent it faces.

The beast is still nearby. It lets out a mournful sound, as if it knows that danger approaches, while the Skeeg creeps, ever so silently, towards it. Then:

Crack!

The beast lets out a pitiful cry but doesn't move, too fearful to escape. The Skeeg growls at the branch it accidentally cracked but then uses the opportunity to dart the final few feet it needs to be in range to attack. A second later, it strikes, opening its mouth and biting down on the trembling flesh.

The beast roars in pain and begins to thrash. The Skeeg clasps its fingers around it tightly to hold on as it begins to suck the blood. It can *feel* the redness rushing back into its skin, the glorious color that had just begun to leave lighting up its body with an almost ethereal (or perhaps demonic, it is not sure) light.

The Skeeg loosens its grip as its appetite is satisfied. When the beast stops bucking and rearing out of exhaustion, it lets go, tumbling to the ground in a disgruntled heap. (It has not mastered its landing yet.) The beast, free of its burden, lets out a final cry and dashes off, no longer caring if it runs into trees or bushes in its escape.

The Skeeg sits up and pats its belly appreciatively. Now it is full, and it can go to sleep without fear of waking up hungry later. It presses its blood-red fingers to its side and finds that its tool is still nestled safely against the fabric. Good. Its attack is truly a success.

Kaitlyn Dubey

*Object 46: Small sign shaped like a paddle
that says 'Welcome Friends' and has a fish, an
inner tube, and a lure coming off of it.*

Karolina

The sun was setting low in the sky as Karolina Basara appeared, bloody and tired, on the coast of a small island. In the distance she could see a city; the wizard towers raised high above the other buildings. The water rushed over her booted feet and the smell of salty air filled her nose, a welcome change from the smell of death and dying she had just come from. With a sigh, she headed in the direction of the city, eager to get home.

She had come from Kyv, the capital of her reality, where she worked in Avery Hospital as a medic. It was a long and exhaustive effort, working all day and sometimes all night tending wounded sailors, sick children, and the elderly. She used her magic as sparingly as she could in order to have enough to go around, oftentimes leaving a patient in pain simply because she didn't have enough, and she had to move on to someone that was suffering more.

The terrain changed from slippery sand dunes to rocky coastline as Karolina trudged on, her hands wrapped around the straps of her medical bag. She was approaching Torma, the Holy City, and her steps grew lighter the closer she got to her home. She hadn't been living their long, but it had already become incredibly important to her; she'd made her pilgrimage there almost three years ago, and had almost instantly decided to move from her small mining town to the founding place of her religion.

The walls surrounding Torma towered over her as she walked through the open gate, heading for the jewelry district. She lived

above a shop that sold intricate glass beads, a staple among the Vyma, her people, and the woman who owned the building was nice enough to give her half rent in return for magical help. Karolina was a stronger wizard than most regular citizens, and her skills were valued in the community. Her reality was a refuge for other creatures, coming from other realities that had been destroyed or taken over by the Ulven, an Empire of large muscled creatures that took over realities with ease. In exchange for bringing people between realities, she was given gifts.

The city pulsed with life as Karolina made her way through the districts and smaller communities, each one a different species that had fled the Ulven invasion. Mostly she transferred refugees from one reality to hers, reuniting family members and lost loved ones. She didn't do it often, though, because despite being a strong wizard, she only had so much magic to spare. Her reality was plentiful and lush with resources, but that didn't mean she needed to be wasteful.

She approached the open door of the jewelry shop, where a sign saying 'Welcome, Friends!' hung in the window. She said hello to Nita, the owner of the building, before passing her and going up the stairs to her apartment.

She lived on the third floor, with windows looking into the alley behind the shop. It wasn't much; two rooms, each decorated with gifts from those grateful for her services, and a small bathroom were the only spaces she had. It was enough for her, though. She had made each room lavish but comfortable, colorful without being ostentatious. A vibrant tapestry hung from one wall, separating her sleeping area from the rest of the room, and a rug with rich warm hues covered the floor. She had a chest of drawers covered in colorful glass jewelry, and a wrought iron table with a beaded lamp on it.

Karolina set her medic bag down on the table and went into the bedroom, turning on lights as she went. She was covered in other people's blood, and wanted nothing more than to change and go to sleep. But she was also desperately hungry, and knew that she wouldn't be able to sleep until she got enough food. She had changed and was only just putting a pot on the stove when a knock came from her front door. Frowning, she went to answer.

Opening the door, Karolina's eyes widened as she took in the man

before her. He was obviously some level of law enforcement- Karolina had never quite paid attention to the uniforms- and that was enough to make her want to run for the hills.

She had known long before she started that transporting people across realities without a permit was illegal, but she didn't want to be stuck transporting people all day and most of the people she helped couldn't afford the rates anyway. Wizards who had permits to transport between realities charged steep prices for their services, something Karolina thought was cruel. Families who still had people stuck in other realms, but couldn't afford to pay for their transportation, came to Karolina. She would except almost any form of payment, as long as it was something she could use.

"Ms. Basara?" the law enforcement officer said, gesturing for her to step outside. "You need to come with me."

Robin Holcomb

Object 22: Pop-Punk Amulet

Talisman

“YOU UNDERSTAND THAT WE CURRENTLY TRAVEL AT ROUGHLY EIGHTY-SIX POINT FOUR CUBITS PER SECOND,” said the construct, a trio of eyes fixed on the narrow gaps between mechanical outcroppings.

Ymya said nothing. Her eyes flicked to meet Multitool’s gaze, then back forward just in time for her to dodge a low-hanging girder as the service-steed sped beneath it. She couldn’t spare any attention from the task at hand. Her chin held almost to the handlebars, she kept one arm close to her chest, signing for odd gusts of air, for low wires, for small flying things in the machinery to yield. Even the slightest interruption could allow her to lose control of the steed and hurtle into a nearby mess of valves and dials.

“DESPITE YOUR PERSISTENT EFFORT TO MAKE IT OTHERWISE, THE ASSIGNMENT REMAINS MINOR MAINTENANCE,” the implement of hollow bone chattered on, “AND PROVIDES VERY LITTLE OFFER OF ADVANCEMENT.”

Ymya hunkered closer to the weathered metal body of the steed, feeling the slight thrum of its propulsion system taking in ambient magic and expelling it in focused pulses. At the right edge of her vision, the contour of turning pipes betrayed a branch in the tunnel.

“Turn coming up.”

Ymya’s free hand found the bandolier on which Multitool was

suspended and pulled it over her head. Her arm strained to loop the strap of leather around a jutting pipe, the sudden pull toward the near wall jarring both tendon and panic response. The sound of air rushing past gave way to that of tanned hide snapping apart.

Multitool's yelling only became apparent to Ymya long after she once again slammed down on the accelerator:

“YOUR LACK OF SCRUPLES WOULD CAUSE ME A BILIOUS DISCHARGE IF PROVIDED THE APPARATUS THIS IS A VILE CASE OF MISTREATMENT OF PUBLIC PROPERTY SUCH RECKLESSNESS IS UNACCEPTABLE TO EVEN THE MOST HIDEOUSLY LENIENT OF WIZARDS”

Ymya sneered and eased off the acceleration, if only to get the construct to quiet down. An approaching service platform provided landing space and easy entry into the assignment's object. A circular hatch in the far wall would lead her to the site of the malfunction. Ymya paused, holding its brushed-metal valve beneath a gloved hand, feeling the steely cold through the polymer. The hatch hissed as the hydraulic locks strained open, and through the dust and blue vapor that its opening had produced, Ymya could see the expanse of this arcane corner of the complex. She shut her eyes a moment, waited for the images to resolve themselves against her eyelids. Spots of indistinct color highlighted the path of the power coursing through the pipes, all coursing from a distant yet still immense reservoir.

A single pipe's stream ran ruler-straight until it met a fissured section of pipe, at which point it began to take on a trajectory that rulers routinely didn't.

Ymya opened her eyes and began to trace the path of the pipes. “Shaz it. The open segment's depressurized the whole section.”

“IT IS REPAIRABLE”

“It'd better be, or I'm gonna have a whole lot more to deal with.”

As Ymya continued down the chamber, a jittering clambered up her spine and out into her limbs, coming to dwell in high-pressure pools in her fingertips. The tendons in her hands strained against her skin as she fidgeted.

Ymya found the ruptured panel, little more than a few odd sheets of tattered metal. “Multitool, how old is this section?”

"MAPS STATE THIS SECTION AS SOME THOUSANDS OF CYCLES OLD," it chirped.

Ymya sighed, pulled down her visor to clear the accumulated dust around her eyes. "Then the pipeline was built before we could filter the impurities in the metal. The whole district's gonna have to be monitored for deterioration," she continued as she pointed Multitool at the fissure, "Right now, though, we need to fix this."

The pressure in her fingertips eased, transferred to Multitool's surface. Blindly, her hand searched through her pack for a curved sheet of metal. With the new piping in place and Multitool against its surface, Ymya muttered splicing words.

Sparks fizzled from Multitool's far end. "YOU TRIED"

Ymya looked down at her talking implement with a rage spreading within her. Once again she held Multitool to the pipe.

More sparks.

"I HAD HEARD THAT YOU POSSESSED A DEGREE OF MAGICAL APTITUDE PERHAPS I WAS MISTAKEN"

The anger rose up like vitriol from her stomach, a heated pressure behind her eyes. She held Multitool with white knuckles beneath her gloves.

Sparks.

More sparks.

The panel began to glow a violent red-orange.

"ARE YOU TRYING TO MELT THE PANEL"

Ymya didn't answer.

"BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE DOING"

Ymya stood still a moment. The panel returned to its regular hue. Exasperated and a little desperate, she reached into a deep interior pocket of her satchel and produced an uneven piece of black plastic.

She looked down at her hand, at the simplified silhouette of the skull below. She ran her thumb across its studded surface, over rhinestones worn to nubs, and remembered- of a time before, of long days of youthful joy with another, of looking up at reflective spires with a shared sense of awe.

Once again Multitool was held to the panel with one of Ymya's hands, the other gripping the memento. Ymya's roiling rage sublimated to a

low simmer, then the buzz that usually accompanied her. Even further
she calmed, breathing in time with the subsonic thrum that pulsed
through the complex's many miles
and
the panels
fused

Sarah Kushner

Object 30: A fancy letter opener

“Bobbles and gizmos galore! Get it all right here!”

“Cloth, beautiful cloth! Perfect for any outfit!”

“Jewelry! Amazing glass jewelry here!”

The bazaar was hot and loud like always. Jakov’s voice was hoarse from yelling as to be heard over the other merchants. He looked down at the assortment of objects haphazardly strewn across his booth.

Bobbles and gizmos galore. Glass paperweights, letter openers, rings, small ornaments, statuettes, etc. The only problem was that no one wanted to buy anything. He scanned the area, looking for a potential customer. Another booth caught his eye and he glared.

That bastard. *His* booth was crowded with fools itching to buy his scams. A voice pulled him from his dark thoughts.

“Excuse me,” it said.

It was a female voice, and a young one at that.

He turned his attention to the owner of the voice. A young girl was standing by his booth. Her bright blue hair clashed drastically with her orange tunic.

“How much for this?”

She held up a silver thing. Jakov thought it was a letter opener.

“Lemme see it,” he replied gruffly.

She handed it over. It did look like a letter opener, but even Jakov wasn’t sure about was everything at his booth was.

The letter opener (he decided that was indeed what it was) had a fancy handle with designs etched into the metal. The blade was thin with swirling designs carved out of it. It also bent easily.

He didn't recognize it. He knew it hadn't been in his booth yesterday. Maybe it was in the box of junk he bought? That was a possibility. He turned the item over in his hands, trying to remember where he got it.

The blue haired girl, who was starting to become annoyed with the older man, cleared her throat loudly. That brought the merchant's attention back to her.

"How much for that?" she asked again.

The man looked like he was thinking hard. That worried her, but before she could start thinking of all the things that could go wrong he spoke up.

"Thirty coins."

She took a circular coin and nine triangular coins out of a little pouch. Eleven short. She'd have to go find some, maybe fallen from some pocket or pouch.

She put the money she had on the booth.

"Give me a minute or two to get the rest."

She turned and headed off just as he nodded.

This girl is truly strange Jakov thought to himself. He had never seen anyone like her. Being a native to a land full of refugees, he saw people of all different shapes, sizes and colors. But even though the different races look different from each other, their people looked similar to each other. The blue haired girl didn't look like anyone.

Despite her unusual appearance, she disappeared into the crowd with ease. The spell she used wasn't an invisibility spell, exactly. It was more a spell to make people take no notice of her, so she could glide unnoticed through the crowd without bumping into quite so many people. She found a target, a large red man yelling at one of the merchants. A bulgy pouch hung at his waist, attached by a thin cord.

She slipped out a small knife, using glamour to make it look like a stick, and casually made her way to the angry man.

The cord was indeed thin, and very easy to cut. She quickly slipped the pouch into the folds of her tunic and replaced the pouch with one made from glamour. It wouldn't hold up long, but hopefully it would hold for long enough.

She slipped behind a booth to count her newfound wealth.

Eight square coins, four circular coins and eleven triangular coins.

Perfect. She smiled to herself as she navigated her way back to the booth that held the artifact.

“Eleven more triangles sir.” She said innocently, dropping the coins on the booth. The merchant looked at them, nodded and handed over the “letter opener”.

Jakov watched the blue haired girl smile as he handed her her purchase. He found it strange that she wanted this thing so much. She hadn’t even argued when he stated the price. Most people would have. Well, maybe she was new.

Ariel smiled sweetly at the man who had just sold her the key. She doubted he knew what it was.

“One more thing sir, would you happen to know where a soothsayer named Laverna is? I know she has a stall in the bazaar.”

Jakov looked at the girl. He did know where Laverna was, but no one ever went to her for a good reason. She was a wizard, but a cruel, evil one.

He wondered why this child was asking about her.

Ariel chewed on a lock of her blue hair as she waited for him to answer.

“Head up that way,” he pointed down the line of booths “Then over past the food area. She at the end of dock four. You’ll have to go around to dock five first, since that’s the only way to get to dock four.”

Ariel nodded gratefully. Her mentor had erased parts of her memory after she had stumbled into something she wasn’t supposed to know about. So now she had no memory of her way around the entire town. She huffed at the unfairness of it all.

“Thank you, sir.” She said, remembering her manners. The older merchant nodded at her.

“Good luck, miss.”

She’d need it.

Ariel followed the merchant’s directions as best she could. Finally she saw the familiar black tent. She entered and emerged back in the tower.

“Masteress Laverna,” she called softly “I’m back.”

“I see that child. Do you have it or not?” a grouchy voice said from behind her. Ariel didn’t turn around; she just held out the key.

“I don’t see why you wanted a letter opener.” No way was she telling the old wizard that she knew what it was. She wasn’t in the mood to get her memory erased again.

“You don’t need to. All you need to know is that I do want it.”

A wizened hand grabbed for it but Ariel pulled her hand back before handing it over.

“You may go.”

Ariel headed up the stairs to her room.

Laverna looked at the key in her hand and smiled. It was the smile of one who had gotten away with something particularly nasty.

She doubted anyone would come looking for it. It *did* look like a letter opener, after all.

Jack Miller

Object 24: Butterfly necklace

EMPIRE CONTROLLED WORLD, 3961
YEARS PRIOR TO INTEGRATION

A great glare shines in the eyes of a small lizard. And by lizard, I mean literal actual dragon. Sort of. Think about like a scalie, which, for the uninitiated, is a furry but with reptiles, and then that's about what this guy is. Shlaxk (Yes, that's his name. Don't judge me.) had been rudely awakened by the tall, slender monkey-fellow who ran the ship.

The strong, salty winds whipped the clothes of the monkey dude about, and only served to make him angrier. Count Scimmia had inherited the ship from his grandfather, and, upon realizing that it did, in fact, float, took almost immediately to piracy. The high seas were his canvas, and the blood of unfortunate sailors was their paint.

"Get downstairs, kid. God knows how bananas this storm's about to be. Be ready for whatever happens," the Count says.

Shlax grasped his necklace close to his heart, knowing that soon, he would be home.

He was not. The ship hit a great rock and sank. There were no survivors.

The necklace fell to the briny depths, lost to time.

EMPIRE CONTROLLED WORLD, FOUR
YEARS PRIOR TO INTEGRATION

Many, many years later, however, a child, searching for shells on the beach, discovered a chain poking out from the sand, and, taking a minute time to move the surrounding sand somewhere else, quickly

was overwhelmed. It was shiny and it had a butterfly on it. What more would a little one need?

Her mother, sunning herself not far away, was disturbed by the sudden whipping of a strong wind, and then a screeching baritone noise unlike one she had heard in the entirety of her life.

She had, of course, heard this before. She merely did not remember. Once, as a child not smaller or any larger than her own, visiting family in a far off village, she'd encountered a beast with an almost unholy, masked face, which had screeched, or laughed, almost, as this one did.

The small creature, which many of us would call a raccoon, skittered about, doing raccoon things, such as being adorable and washing its hands in the water after eating. It began to walk towards the two who were cowering in fear.

They began throwing their valuables at it, hoping deeply that if they gave it something it wanted, it would be appeased, and would leave. Gold, jewelry, the small amount of food they'd brought (They might have wished to have a sort of picnic, I suppose) were all flung towards what they thought of as a terrifying creature.

The raccoon, who was exceptionally chubby (even by raccoon standard) and dim-witted, began to be confused. You, too, would be confused if giants began throwing things at you.

"Mother, I think it's going to get us," the child said from quivering, tear-covered lips.

"Give it something, please. Let it find what it needs. I just want it to leave *me-us*, alone," she said, ignoring the child's fears.

Through tears, the child cast the necklace towards the tubby beast. It clasped it in its small, racoon-y hands, and skittered away.

Kayla Moore

Object 23: Red and white earrings

Earrings

During the early years of the Ulven Empire's conquests, in the Damu realm, there were peaceful beings, similar to humans in appearance, called the Koto. Because the empire was still budding, it was not known in all realities that the threat of being taken over and conquered existed. So the Koto were not prepared when the Ulven invaded. Most citizens accepted defeat and let the Ulven replace their culture and ways of life. Many even worshipped the Ulven and their powerful Autarch as gods or saviors. Very few others, though, formed a secret resistance.

Although the Koto had no chance against the Ulven, who were stronger, more advanced, and more experienced in battle, they still felt an obligation to fight back. None of the Ulven knew about this group, and neither did any of the Koto aside from those who were members. Knowing that there were not enough warriors to have even the slightest chance against an army of Ulven, the resistance began to very cautiously recruit more Koto. Their forces were growing and soon there were almost 100 of them.

One of the new recruits was a young girl named Shion, who wanted to prove to her disbelieving family and other close Koto that she was not a child anymore. She wanted to show that she was strong and could contribute to society... and she did end up affecting so many people's lives in the most immense way.

It was close to a year after the Ulven empire had seized their realm, and the Koto Resistance was growing, but were still too few to take

action. The rebels were constantly training, becoming stronger. They located the Ulven base for Damu and made plans for that to be the first place they would destroy once they were ready.

Shion wanted to do everything she could to assist the Koto in taking back their home. She trained almost endlessly. After months of participating in the resistance, she decided to finally tell her parents, hoping they would eagerly join and battle alongside her when the time came.

So when they were on their way home from work, while she was heading back after a day of training, she approached them, checking for any bystanders that may overhear the private conversation. The area seemingly clear, she proceeded toward them.

“I’ve got something important to tell... and ask you both.” She started, and then explained everything: why she’d been out so often, for days at a time even; why she always returned home completely exhausted; how she believed that with some more members and training, they may actually have a shot. She explained to them the resistance’s plans, their methods and locations of training.

They walked home that evening together, closer, with a shared mission.

The next morning Shion’s parents went with her to the resistance training and secret meeting place, but were shocked when they arrived.

What appeared to be all the other rebels were outside, in the midst of a battle. The Koto were evidently losing, already numerous casualties lying in the blood-stained grass, even though there was only a few Ulven. This scene before them was not a fight: it was a slaughter. Panicking, Shion decided to try and take her parents to where the weapons were so they could help retaliate and save as many remaining members as possible, but her plan failed miserably. Before they could even make it to the door, an Ulf was towering almost five feet above them.

Shion watched her mother die first and her father soon after. She didn’t have enough time to even scream. There was no time to cry, to feel anger or misery or fear. The Ulf didn’t even spare her a second to try and escape before he drove his axe through her torso, killing her.

The night before, Shion and her parents had not been alone. There had been an Ulf close by, listening, who informed the others stationed

in the realm and lead them to execute every last member of their petty resistance. The Koto could have never had a chance.

The Ulf that was responsible for the killing of Shion and her family now wears their most prized items and jewelry, including a pair of earrings the girl had been wearing, to remember the great elimination of the rebellious Koto forces and how no one can stand against the Ulvenheim Empire.

Katherine Sokol

Object 36: A coin purse made of a child's sock

Sand shifted under Nalani's feet as she walked in the shadows of the abandoned Bazaar. A month ago these streets had been overwhelmed with people from hundreds of realities. Refugees from other realms walked among the native Vyma in a bustling, chaotic hubbub. With them their own goods to trade and stories to tell. She adjusted her hood.

Her fingers played with the cloth in her pocket as she searched the ruined stalls for anything she could pawn, making no noise as she leapt from shadow to shadow. A glimmer in the sand caught her eye, and she willed the sand aside with a flick of her wrist. A glass jewel, bigger than any she'd ever seen. She summoned it and quickly shoved it in her pack.

Satisfied with her find, she turned her back on the seemingly endless rows of stalls and began to head back to her boat. Debris clattered behind her and she turned, pressing herself into the shadows and keeping her hood low on her face. Something was moving, not ten feet from her. Her blood boiled as a high pitched tone filled the air. In her pocket, her hand gripped the cloth. She would never forget that sound.

She was in the Bazaar when the Empire began their attack. She held tightly to her son as they moved through the waves of people. His wide eyes absorbed everything he could see from his place on her hip. She felt him tug on her hood and looked over at the stall towards which he was pointing. Night plums. His favorite. Tan never asked for much, but when he did it broke her heart if they couldn't afford it. Today, they didn't have enough time, or money, to buy a basket of those. They were on a mission to find him a new pair of shoes and get back to their home before sunset. With the invasion of the Empire looming, one didn't stay out very long. She kept walking, and he kept tugging.

“Tan, we will come back in a few days, and buy you a whole basket of Night Plums.

He shook his head and continued to pout. She sighed and continued to carry the pouting boy through the crowd.

Tan was Nalani’s entire world. He was all she had. She hated that she couldn’t get him the things that he wanted. She hated that they didn’t have a large house. She hated that people looked down on them everywhere they went. Tan didn’t seem to mind any of this.

It was another ten minutes before they found the vendor. Nalani sat Tan down on a bench and began to haggle with the woman behind the counter. She should have known better than to put him down. He was never deliberately disobedient, but he just got too distracted. She had no sooner turned her back than he was gone. Disappeared into the crowd.

When she found he had run off, she panicked. Kidnapping was a common occurrence in the Bazaar. Nalani felt as if all her fears had come true at once. She began pushing through the crowd, shouting his name. It was no use. The people across the lane from her probably couldn’t even hear her over the din, much less her son, who could have wandered off in any direction.

She realized he must have gone back for the night plums. And began to head back to the fruit vendor. She was just about to turn the corner, when all hell broke loose. The sky turned dark with a swarm of what appeared to be insects. As they neared she saw their spindly arms and legs and bodies covered in rolls of fat, but nothing chilled her so much as their huge insect eyes and gaping mouths.

Tales of the Skeeg and their masters had been told for centuries. They had long been expecting this day but nothing they had done had prepared them for this massive swarm.

They descended.

Screams filled the air as well as horrific sucking noises and a high pitched tone. The combination of it all was deafening. All she could think of was her son, and she continued to push against the crowd that threatened to flatten her. Just when she thought all was lost, she spotted him standing next to stall, looking lost. Her heart swelled at the sight of him, and she forced people out of her way, ready to wrap

her arms around him. She was just a few feet away when a large man, fleeing the swarm, knocked her to the ground. Feet dug into her from all angles and her mouth was filled dust and rocks and blood. When she was able to sit up she cried out in horror.

A Skeeg had descended onto her Tan. His skin darkened to a sickening red as he drank from her child.

She watched, helpless, and as she watched, she died.

Tears streamed down her face as she clutched the small purse, made from her son's sock, to her chest. She looked up as the droning drew nearer and grabbed hold of her spear. Leaping from the shadows, Nalani drove the spear into the wrinkly body of the Skeeg. Her face empty as blood oozed out and the red of its skin began to fade.

Isabel Townsend

Object 27: A small sun catcher made with a metal frame and colorful, translucent plastic.

Of all the odd and annoying things in the multiverse, Irmtraud hated communal housing the most. There were other people everywhere and she couldn't get any privacy. Unlike the rest of the Ulven, she didn't like doing everything as a group. All she wanted was to have a little bit of space to herself and a place she could call home. Over the past few months she had spent all her spare time building a house in the forest at the edge of the city of Miklågard, and it was finally finished. Building the house had been easier than she had thought it would be. Her skills as a blacksmith made the whole process much easier since she knew the best way to assemble the house and what materials to use. It was small and made out of wood with metal supports and accents. It didn't need to be big if only one person was going to live in it.

To avoid causing any commotion Irmtraud decided that she should secretly move out during the night. She had been planning this for months and she really wanted the other Ulven she lived with to know that she was leaving. If they knew then she'd have to answer questions and explain. She really didn't want to deal with that. Her housemates would wake up in the morning and eventually they would realize that she had left. It would be as simple as that.

She was almost ready to leave, but she still needed to finish packing. All that remained were the contents in the bottom drawer of a dark, wooden dresser where all of her clothes and other items had been stored. She opened the drawer carefully as she didn't want to make a noise that would wake up any of the others. Inside the drawer were several old books along with a few other items that Irmtraud had

procured over the years. As she lifted out the stack of books, a small, glass pendant that had somehow ended up between the pages of one of the books fell and as it hit the floor, little pieces of colored glass broke off and scattered all over the floor. It had been beautiful to her once, but no longer. Now it was just an artifact, a memory. She hadn't laid eyes on it in years, but she still vividly remembered the day she had bought the pendant almost fifteen years ago.

It had been her day off from work in the smithy, and Irmtraud had no idea what to do with her spare time. In her boredom she had wandered into a little shop filled with odd trinkets of all sorts. They were all so new to her, but obviously quite old and filled with stories. She spent awhile looking around, captivated by all the things, but after she saw the little, broken glass pendant, she couldn't focus on anything else. It had many little, brightly colored stained glass panels anchored to a metal frame, and even though several of the glass pieces had fallen out over time, the pendant was still the most beautiful and amazing item that Irmtraud had ever laid her eyes on. The shopkeeper told her that it had come from the realm of Pyrth, where items such as the pendant were common and the rays of the sun would shine down on the glass and make it glow.

She remembered thinking that such a place would be amazing, a place where she wouldn't have to be surrounded by other Ulven, and that in a place like that, there would be problems. She no longer thought that way; she was no longer as naive as she had been fifteen years ago.

Irmtraud finished packing away her books and the remainder of the drawer's contents before closing up her bag and swinging it over her shoulder. She double checked the house to make sure that everyone was asleep before she grabbed all her stuff and silently slipped out of the communal house and started walking through the dark, in the direction of her new home, the broken glass pendant still lying on the floor of the abandoned room.

Kevin Wong

Object 54: Backscratcher

Wand of the Elder Skeeg

In the beginning of the Ulven Empire's expansion, a few of the Empire's leading engineers found trouble in trying to alleviate irritation located on the dorsal side of their body. This is due to the huge upper body of the Ulven, as it caused Ulven to have limited flexibility. In response to this dilemma great Ulven thinkers collaborated to create the jord. Jords are baton like devices that extend the reach of a being to make scratching their dorsal side easier. The Empire had created several prototypes of the Jord made from metal, but that design did not last long. The original metal design had unintended effects on the user, such as peeling skin off. The Empire decided that it would be best if the final design was made from wood instead of metal. The Ulven Empire began to mass produce these devices in hopes that it would be a great success throughout the empire and its many citizens. What the Ulven failed to realize is that many of the races had no use for this device. Most of the Empire's citizens had other methods to ease dorsal irritation that rendered jords obsolete. Even the mighty Autarch had no use for such a device as he had his great battle ax to ease an itch. The huge flop in the sales of jords and its mass production caused the Empire to have a huge excess of jords. The Empire decided that the jords were a waste of space, but they decided not to destroy the jords, as the Empire believed it was wise to repurpose them. The jords were sent off to a distant reality to clear up space.

Nonetheless, the jords would not stay idle for long, as the leading Ulven scientists created an atrocity. The Ulven Empire was facing a mortality dilemma on the front lines of their conquest of multiple

realities. This pressured Ulven scientists to create an expendable front line unit. The scientists created the abomination known as the Skeeg. The Skeeg are a grotesque race of incredibly stupid blood sucking beings. After a while of fighting for the Empire some of the less moronic members of the race began to question if they were being used as meat shields for the Ulven. The Ulven decided that they should reward the Skeeg for their work on the battlefield, as the Ulven feared a possible mutiny against them. The Empire remembered the abundance of jords and decided to put them to good use. The Empire was to grant the jords to the Skeeg who survive enough battles. The Ulven renamed the jords to the Wands of the Elder Skeeg, as they hope that it would trick the Skeeg into believing that it was more important than it actually is.

Moreover, the possession of a Wand of the Elder Skeeg holds great weight among the Skeeg community. The wand brings great pride to those who wield it, as nearly no Skeeg survive long enough to obtain it. The wands are paraded by the Skeeg who wield them, as they are a mark of great status among the Skeeg. Though the wand is not a main reason the Skeeg fight for the Empire. The most of the Skeeg view the Ulven as masters and they are their loyal servants. The Wand of the Elder Skeeg is more of a bonus than a driving force for the Skeeg.

Finally, the Wand of the Elder Skeeg holds no true value in the Empire. The Skeeg who wield it simply have the belief that they are important. Though the wands never cease to bring great joy to the naive Skeeg who possess them.

PAGOU-ROK

The ice planet was knocked closer to the sun after it was hit by a meteor mid orbit. The ice on the rock formed with the ice on the planet and within 2 orbits of the sun, was knocked into the orbit known now. Different chemicals found on the meteor and the planet created bacteria on the planet. Life forms adapted to absorbing as much energy in the 16 years of summer, to use for the 32 years of winter. Life forms came forth from the fog and over time adapted to live on land, while some creatures stayed to live life in the fog. The creatures on land diversified due to the climate, while one species stayed on the coast to later advance into an economic group.



Emma Antonio

Object 47: Glass tube vase

The test tube sitting in the center of the lab table glowed with bioluminescent essence. The flowery lip of the twisted tube gleamed with the vibrant liquid. Doctor Zephyr Katsaros's laboratory was filled with the same tubes, all filled with the same glowing fluid.

Dr. Katsaros was going down the line recording the properties of each sample, going into great detail on the descriptions on the amount in each tube. A man in his line of work had no excuse for leaving out anything.

In the midst of his intense recording, the scientist found himself mumbling as he wrote. His voice small, gruff, and focused.

"Sample forty-seven, bright luminescence, blue hue, 53 milliliters, high power level expected." His pen scribbled on paper as rapidly as he spoke. "This one should be quite valuable."

He stepped back and placed down his notes before holding the tube in his hand. He deeply studied the material as he held it. The doctor swiftly dragged a gloved finger around the lip slowly, picking up the spare droplets covering it.

"If I had this for myself, I would be a rich man for sure," Dr. Katsaros said to himself as he admired the specimen. "Wish I could actually get paid with this stuff I work with." A sick feeling formed in his core as an impulse arose. Surely no one would notice if one tube of bioluminescence was missing? After all, he would be the only one really paying attention and Dr. Zephyr Katsaros would *definitely* not steal his own supplies.

"I'm being foolish, why would I need to take this? I have plenty of money. What's one more jar of bioluminescence anyway?"

As he placed the test tube back on the table in its line, the impulse

grew intense. What is one *less* jar of bioluminescence? Of the nearly hundreds of test tubes, with just as valuable and powerful samples, there would be no major effect on the world. Besides, think of what he could buy for it.

He stared at the test tube, each twist in turn in its base, with piercing dark eyes. He could do whatever he wanted with it. He could buy more supplies for his lab, which would possibly increase the amount of luminescence produced, replacing the stolen sample. He could spend it on fine furs and exquisite lumber from the Zola people in Arborum. He could provide even more for his family. He could do anything.

However, Dr. Zephyr Katsaros knew in his heart that there was no need to stoop low to earn this money. He had a good job, which paid fairly well, and he could earn that income easy enough. There was no use to risk punishment for a petty act.

Dr. Katsaros, ignoring sample number 47, picked up his notes and continued on writing up information. As he went down the line, the remains of that impulse began to slither down to the back of his mind.

“Sample forty-eight, slight luminescence, yellow hue, 46 milliliters, low power level expected.”

Autumn Ashley

Object 6: Grey plastic container

The stagnant, foggy breeze was far from still as her worn, leather shoes left footprints in the snow. The half-ice, half-water mixture seeped through her socks and chilled her skin due to the increasing temperature and relative closeness of the sun. Winter would soon be over, along with it the ease of obtaining electricity, clothing, food, and water. The days to come would bring despair to the Liposagori and numerous Zola who depended on the industry of hydroelectric power and the fog coast.

Her callused hands trembled as she handled the bag full of glass and fragile, pressurized energy. Her young age of ten years old did not offer her salvation from running chores and errands for her fathers. Even such delicate ones as dropping off the week's supply of mussels in exchange for an equal number of technological vials of manufactured fog and bioluminescent energy to buy groceries, clothing, or to turn into water.

The vials had a unique shape to them, like each one was a miniature vase and could hold anything necessary. The containers holding both the bioluminescent and hydroelectric energy were a darker, translucent color and tiny in size. The vials plugged into a type of outlet, found in most houses in Nebularum, which harnessed the energy inside and converted it into electricity or thermal power. The filled vials were viewed by both the Liposagori and the Zola as a form of currency used for trade and bartering. The energy was manufactured in factory-esque buildings scattered throughout Nebularum and along the coast.

The fog vials were mainly heated to turn the gaseous energy into a liquid form of water for drinking purposes. Those farther away from the foggy coast relied primarily on bioluminescent vials, plants,

and wildlife to provide power, heat, and light for their homes while they utilize the fog vials as a source of drinkable liquid. Less wealthy homes found it harder to come by regularly seen signs of comfort due to the lack of vial outlets built into the older buildings. Lower class Liposagori tended to rely on vials of energy as only a method of currency.

Her family was better off than many of those in Area 4, but she and her parents continually struggled to get by. With mussels being the only advantage they had when it came to trading for power, it was not the easiest thing to obtain. Yet when they finally got ahold of a sufficient amount of vials, her fathers sent their tall, lanky daughter, who is the exact opposite of what a Liposagori is supposed to be, to pick up the most valuable, delicate material in the land. She just didn't understand their pattern of thinking.

When she got back to her small house quite near the border of the grasslands, she took note of the sloshy mixture gathering near the edge of her house as the slight warmth slowly rolled into the valley. Neither of her fathers were outside when she returned, so she figured they must've been working on their fishing supplies inside and waiting on her to get back. Her already wet shoes were soaked through by the time she reached her front door and hung her coat on the back of a chair in the main room. She noticed that her fathers were not inside either as she gently set the bag down on the table where they ate.

She knew that her fathers would be angry if they returned home and there was still no power and no water, so she got to work. She used the last of what they had left from the week before to boil the fog inside of the vials and convert it into the water the three would be drinking for the next seven days. She reached into the woven bag of vials and grasped one of the glowing glass containers, making sure not to tamper with the other glasses or the one in her hand. She carefully walked over to the socket in the wall near the door she had walked through not too long ago. The vial reflected a small ray of sunlight from outside as she clicked it into place, signifying the end of winter and, with it, the end of ease for the Liposagori.

Caroline Brooks

Object 48: Green glass candle holder

Pretend like the material is the most fascinating thing you have ever scrutinized. My eyes are starting to become unfocused with the concentration I have on the weave of my trousers. The pattern is almost calming, if anything could relax me in this state. But staring into my lap is better than noticing the critical stares of my peers sitting close by. I don't want to see their disbelief or hear the whispers that are sure to follow.

My uncle already told me beforehand that I would be receiving the title. Most would rejoice for their luck. But for me, it simply caused massive amounts of stress over the past couple of days. I have always wanted to be a Crannlu (as they aid the Papacrann and even have a chance of succeeding him) and part of me wants to rejoice and pat myself on the back. But another part whispers that I will fail utterly, or that I will be unfit for the job, and that shame and bad fortune will rain down from the heavens like hail.

I am also very concerned about whether proud parents or jealous peers will claim that my appointment was biased. My uncle is the Pishpookcrann, and makes all decisions of great importance in our village, including choosing Crannlu. Although he is family, and I do personally suspect that was an important factor, the Pishpookcrann's decisions are fair yet final. No one can do anything but mutter grievances and shoot dirty looks.

The whispers I had subconsciously been blocking out for the past several minutes abruptly die out. It is time. Everyone must turn to greet my uncle, and I slowly rise to my feet to see him. He walks around the long table used for important community decisions, all eyes focused intently on him. He reaches the head of the table and sits,

and everyone hastily follows. Uncle Eavan's face is calm, and his eyes seem to suggest great wisdom.

"The decision of who will become our next Crannlu has been made. No one can voice their objections." He pauses for a few moments to stare into each of our eyes. My parents, who sat by me the entire time, squeezed my hands and each gave me an encouraging smile. I tried to return it, but the corners of my mouth feel weighed down, unable to turn upwards.

"The Crannlu must be able to follow orders, yet be intelligent enough to find solutions to problems in difficult situations that may arise. They must be utterly devoted, yet be able to find new meaning in their own beliefs. And above all, they must show potential to be a leader. After all, one of you may take over my spot one day." He smiles for the first time, and I can feel some of the tension in the room fizzing out.

"The only person I determined who fit all of these criteria.... is Aisling Neska."

Though no one starts shouting, the atmosphere is certainly right for it. At best, some have sullen expressions. At worst, some are directly glaring at me and whispering behind their hands. I don't have the courage to look up for but a moment, so I don't see the rapidly developing hatred and jealousy of almost everyone around me.

These are all people who I've grown up with. I know every single person's name, and am friends with several girls here. But ever since I was told of my appointment, I began to prepare for this, their anger. It should be a good thing. I'm cutting all ties so that I can devote myself to serving Papacrann and caring for the trees.

But it still hurts to see how quickly they turn on me.

"Thank you for coming, and if you have any celebration gifts, please leave them right on the table." Uncle Eavan has to raise his voice, because the whispers of the people who are already leaving only get louder and louder the farther away they get. Everyone but Eavan and my parents leave quickly. I am honestly surprised when some of my friends come to congratulate me, but their tones are still very bitter. Though many of the nation of Zola's youth are a bit more disbelieving on honoring the trees, all want the honor and glory of being a Crannlu.

But I am stunned when my closest friend came up to me with a gift. It's a green glass pot, small enough to fit in my palms. And when I turn it over to get a better look, it shimmers brilliantly.

"It's made with dried and crushed bioluminescent grasses. I... hope that you can find a way to use it while in the Central Garden, and maybe think of your home." She gives a soft smile. The anxiety I had built up dissolves, and my mother has to drag me away from her hug.

When everyone is gone, Uncle Eavan bids me good luck. My bags are all packed, and a protective caravan is ready to escort me to the Central Garden.

"Do you think you're ready for this?" Eavan asks, and I snort.

"You never asked my opinion before. Why now, when it's too late to change?"

"I didn't ask you because I believe you have all of the qualities necessary to succeed, and that you will bring honor to us all. Maybe even be the future Papacrann." We embrace, then I say my goodbyes with my parents. Eavan's words and the gifts from my friend have changed my mind. The worst of what I feared is over. Everything is ready for my journey, and this is a new chance to turn my life around. I will strive to be the best Crannlu at the Central Garden, and I will go above and beyond to fulfill everyone's expectations.

I step out into the sunlight, smiling as it warmed my face.

And then, they attacked.

A.J. Davidson

Object 25: Wooden rabbit with present

This day has been really nerve racking. My name is Kor. My friend, Gok, and I have decided to go exploring in the day tomorrow. Am I really going to do this tomorrow? None of the Tsetseg ever do anything unless it is absolutely necessary during the daytime. All we do is sleep and we actually do things during the night. Sure part of the reason we had at first decided to consider this trek was curiosity. But we felt as though this journey could possibly save the tribe, because we are migrating right now and all the major sources of known water have been dried up in a drought unbearably hot even for normal droughts. We have had to resort to purely getting water from the vegetation we eat. It seemed as though the night might be as hot as a cool day outside, though we are never completely sure as no one has ever done a whole lot outside during the day. I mean we do have tradition that the night is what guides us in our lives with its darkness and coldness, not the day with its pure shining and brightness. We have also been always told that mean monsters lurk around outside the tribe during the daytime and that they will get any of us that don't sleep much and don't stay at the tribe. I mean I get the sleep part, but I have never seen any monsters out there and surely we would at least have seen some already by now, right? There was no way to be sure. But no matter what is out during the day, we need more water, and could certainly do with some more food, and food will be at a water source as well. I feel as though sometimes we need to break regular patterns when it is necessary at least. But I do need to go to sleep for the next night.

That night we did not do much as we were having a celebration so we did not do much and nothing really eventful happened out of

the ordinary. Gok and I found each other out in the morning once we thought that everyone had gone to sleep for the day and we decided to head west because we didn't know of a better place to start. We got to see colorful foxes and mice scampering around unlike at night when they sleep for the most part. And we got see dull colored grass, as opposed to at night when the grass is full of light that changes all the time naturally. Eventually we came upon a small intrusion of trees.

"Kor, did you see that?" Gok asked.

"What?" I asked.

"Well, I saw a bunny, I think, and he seemed a little green and he looked like he was in a hurry." Gok said. Neither of us knew a lot about bunnies. I didn't really see anything but the trees and other plants yet I kept an eye out.

"I see him!" Gok said.

I saw him hopping too this time and it looked a little green on the stomach, and he did look like he was in a hurry. He also looked like he was all in a fluster. We came up to him and the bunny turned around to look at us.

"Hey it looks like he is smiling." I said. And from his back he produced a strange box with some strange paper on it. He saw we looked kind of confused and started to open it up for us. The way he did it looked a little as he had hands with five fingers and we only have two fingers and a big claw. He produced a strange parchment and gave it to us. It had writing on it.

"Here, Gok; I will read it." I said.

"My name is James Salk. I have been exploring a whole lot and your desert is very enthralling and exhilarating compared to my coast." Neither of us knew what a coast was, but that sounded cool. "You appear to have a drought this year which is so severe it requires a change in plans. But I understand you could use help. I will bestow upon you a map on the back of this parchment showing where you can find a good sized body of water. I have been observed you from afar and also sometimes admittedly sneaking in during the day to learn about you as much as I can. I feel as though if I were to simply barge in on your tribe that could cause much chaos. But I find it fascinating how you drag your arms around and slouch along, straightening up to

show anger. And it is cool how you kind of throw your arms forward in a weird gallop. But enough of that, you need the map so much I had a rabbit trained for this.”

We turned the page over and found a map as we hoped that was very clear that the water was in a cave and where that cave was, which we would never have gone to. We returned and showed it to the elders that night. They were tentative at first, but they gave in seeing as how even if we made up the map it was about the same chance of getting water as the usual path. We found the water and our tribe has lived on since.

Connor Hayes

Object 39: Leather decorative item with metal studs

“Lavs hurry up! If the Calendor Trees are right, the Tsetseg should be up anytime now!” Garus shouted excitedly at me as he sprinted up the hill covered by the sparse wild grasses of the Savannah.

“Garus! Wait up! These lands are so different from the Arborarum. Plus we don’t even know that these primal savages are friendly. Ma’ told me stories of how they’d skin people and then force them to watch as they ate their skin!” I replied, falling into a hole overgrown and concealed.

“Come on! Those stories are so wrong and ridiculous!” He chuckled. “Aren’t those stories how you’re so ‘certain’ that these things are even out here?”

“I read the reliable sources. The ones written by the Papa Cranns and Crann Lus of the past, and they only write things as they were. They had no reason to twist and change the past for entertainment.” Garus descended down the over side of the hill out of my sight.

“So are you calling Ma’ a liar?” I joked at him. There was no reply.

“Garus? You okay?” The small grin that I had quickly was overtaken by concern and worry. I began to run the rest of the way up the hill. I knew we were close to the Harenarum, but did we make it already? Did the Tsetseg get to him? As I overcame the hill I prepared for the worst. I remembered what Ma’ had told me in the stories.

“They don’t have eyes, Lavs. They smell fear and pounce on the weak.”

“Pounce on the weak, pounce on the weak, pounce on the weak,” I kept repeating to myself. “Show no fear and have no fear.”

My hands were shaking and my knees were weak. I could feel my heart pounding against my chest. I came to the top of the hill and saw hundreds of the animals and saw my brother sprinting towards them.

The beasts began waving their arms and gesturing towards Garus. I started to run down the hill towards him and shouted,

“Garus! Get away from-” before I could finish the sentence, I tripped over the vegetation and started to roll down the hill. Seeing the orange-ish hues and the dark night’s sky. Constantly swapping between the two. As I gained speed the two began blurring into one. I began to be unable to tell the difference from what is ground, what is sky, what is up and what is down. I felt a large shock of pain against my head and lost all concept of where I was, who I was, and all passage of time. When I finally regained who I was, I was staring at the night sky. Hundreds of thousands of stars in my sight. My arms were tied down to a large furry creature. The knots were tight and restricting. I slowly worked my way to sitting up and looked around. Thousands of Tsetseg were around me. I let out a screech and tried to break the bonds. A tall, lanky, disgusting creature was walking towards me. It towered over me, I gazed into its small, beady, red eyes. Both covered and shrouded by their thick eyebrows.

“Where’s my brother?” I screamed, “Garus!” The creature raised its hand and waved it around like how the trees move in a harsh wind. My eyes filled with tears and I started to cry. I thrashed around and screamed and cried for my brother and my family. Another monstrosity walked over to us, its arm dragging against the ground. Its face was covered by a cloth like substance, but its red eyes shined through the cracks. The ideas of how they were going to kill and eat me raced through my mind.

“Lavs! Lavs! Calm down, will you?” chuckled a voice from within the crowds. “I told you they were gentle creatures, don’t you listen to anything I say?” my brother said as he pushed his way through the herd. He motioned towards the ropes that surrounded my wrists.

The masked Tsetseg started to fiddle with the knots. The dexterity he had with his two fingers was baffling. They moved so quickly and so precisely. The unmasked Tsetseg made the same flowing movement with its hands and another handed it a vase. The designs were beautiful. A curled up zumole was in the center, surrounded by forty eight beads in a complex pattern that I didn’t think these things could make. The vase itself was made of a rock-like clay substance, but for some reason

seemed like it wouldn't break if you were to drop it. Some of the Tsetsegs surrounding me bowed their heads as it was carried across the gap to the unmasked one in front of me. The unmasked Tsetseg was handed the vase and she held it with one hand and motioned me to come closer with the other. As I leaned forward it braced my head and poured what little water was in the vase into my mouth. The water was lukewarm, but I didn't know how long I'd been out, so I wasn't going to deny the offer. Plus I still wasn't completely sold that they weren't going to eat me if I wasn't nice. After I'd finished the water the masked one reached for the vase and took it from me. I almost didn't want to give it up, because how in the hell would people back home believe any of this? The unmasked one placed a blanket over me and patted me on the shoulder before leaving.

I looked towards my brother who had the biggest smile I'd ever seen him have as he imitated the arm movements of the other Tsetsegs. The ones surrounding him doubled over in laughter as he butchered the movements. I looked around to all the other Tsetseg and saw the smiles of all of them and the love they had for one another.

"Lavs! They're incredible, truly incredible!" Garus said as he gestured to all the Tsetseg.

"Yeah...They really are."

Brett Jones

Object 9: Wooden crescent moon

Aage kept his eyes on the wooden crescent moon, as he crawled across the limb of the tree. He heard the branch creaking, which made him hurry along the limb. The wooden crescent had gotten itself stuck here, when Aage thought it would be a good idea to spin it by the handle and throw. He felt angry at himself for being stupid, and was too lost in thought to hear the cracking of the wood grow louder. It wasn't until he felt himself fall that he realized what was happening. He cried out, holding on to the branch for dear life.

Opening his eyes, he saw the mossy ground only a few feet away from his face. His coat was caught on the branch, which left him hanging upside down from the earth. He cried out, yelling for help, but no one seemed to be there. He wished that he was back home, where he wouldn't have to be stuck in a tree, looking for some stupid toy. So as he hung there, he wished he could say something, anything to make himself feel better.

"Hey, do you need help?" Aage heard the voice, and then turned around to look. It was a child his age, but the skin looked greener than his own, and wore a strange hat of tree bark. His eyes opened, and he realized this was one of those forest people, the Zola. The forest child walked over to where he was caught in the tree, undoing the snag. Aage hit the ground with a *thump*, but rolled over to get up.

"So, what's your name?" the forest kid asked. "Mine's Celto. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm Aage, thanks for getting me down." Aage gazed around at the ground until he saw the wooden moon. He ran over to it, picking it up. Celto looked confused, as he didn't know what it was.

“What’s that you’re carrying?” he asked, “and why is it made of wood?” Celto looked worried, and Aage didn’t understand.

“It’s a crescent moon,” he replied, “we made it from wood because it’s safer. It would hurt if we made it with rocks.”

“Well, was the tree dead already?” Celto was truly concerned about it being made of wood, which made Aage look up at the bark hat he wore. “Your hat is made of wood, isn’t it?” Aage asked. “That’s not any different. Why wear a hat, anyway?”

“The tree was already dead,” Celto said, “and I wear it because it’s what a Crann Leu is supposed to wear.”

“What’s a Crann Leu?” Aage asked, “and why does it matter if this is made from trees?”

“A Crann Leu helps the Papa Crann, who talks to the trees,” Celto replied. “It was so cool to be picked, all my friends were so jealous.”

“I wish I had something that cool,” Aage said. “I don’t really have anything exciting.”

“Well maybe you can find something,” Celto responded, “like something with that moon. Anyway, do you need any help back?”

“No, I can find the way back, but thanks.” Aage turned around, and treaded through the path to head back to his village with the crescent moon in hand. Suddenly, a thought popped into his head, and he turned back around to Celto. “Hey, Celto, do you think you can come back sometime? Maybe we can play here, it gets kind of lonely.”

Celto’s face brightened up, “Sure, I can ask the Papa Crann after lessons. See you tomorrow.”

Smiling, Aage turned around and ran this time, wanting to tell some of the other kids what happened. Maybe now he finally has something to talk about with: he made friends with a Zola.

Nina Kimelman

Object 59: Miniature spatula

Buinnean sighed, and ran the brush down the bark along the tree, annoyed. He had been doing this for hours, and it quickly got boring. He never understood the Zolas' obsession with the trees, and how they are holy and need to be protected. Buinnean didn't believe in thinking that the people grew from the ground like trees, and he also believed that moving from tree to tree for hours at a time, using a long white brush with a pink rubbery end to "dust off the trees" was quite the waste of time.

His parents said that he had to help his people, needed to respect Papacrann and the trees, which he would learn to do by caring for the trees. Buinnean's mother had arranged for him to receive one of Papacrann's sacred tree dusters and then sent him out into the forest to praise the holy trees. Buinnean had always thought the laws and customs of his life were crazy, but knew not to rebel –or even THINK of hurting a tree- for he would immediately be banished or be made into an outcast.

So here Buinnean stood, dusting off a tree, and inwardly cursing Papacrann and the bishop, Pishpookcrann. His people's lifestyles were all he had known, but nevertheless seemed quite strange to Buinnean. He never understood why they had parties for the trees, had rituals for a fallen tree and had the Pope, bishops, and disciple. Buinnean wanted to travel and explore the coast and meet their people, learn about their society, and know more about the Fog. He wanted to travel to the desert and see if the Tsetseg were more than just an urban myth. He wanted to go into the lands on the sides of the forest, explore the creatures of the savannah and the plains.

Although Buinnean didn't particularly enjoy his home and the Zola,

he did enjoy the forest, and the benefits of living there. Buinnean knew that if he could somehow leave and join the Liposagori, he probably wouldn't be as equipped for the harsh temperature that came with being close to the water. So for now he would stay in the forest with his people and learn more about the Liposagori from the elders, and bide his time. He would build up his skills, so as to get a job, and later trade and make Fog so as to get the things he would need for travel.

Buinnean smirked and continued his cleaning, walked over to a tall evergreen and started cleaning it with Papacrann's sacred pink and white tree duster. He knew that soon he would be able to leave and go to the Liposagori and start a new life there. He knew that it would take time, and he would probably become an outcast from the rest of society, but he had no plans of ever coming back. He didn't know how he would start his life amid the Liposagori... or if he was going to be allowed in.

I am going to leave the forest. I am going to have an adventure.

Luke Taylor

Object 52: Small mirrored tray

It was a calm autumn day; and the city was frozen. Everywhere you looked a numbing cold rain gently fell on the countless houses and structures that covered the city proper. Blankets of ice and frost clung to everything beneath the sky, making the city appear to be constructed of ice and snow. From the shoreline where Alvaro stood in the shadows of the massive hydroelectric plants he could see the entire Southern portion of the city. The wide scientific research facilities that he had worked at for almost all of his adult life. He saw the masses of people traveling home to the residential districts not a single one walking around without a bundle of heavy fur and polyester to defend them from the harsh weather. Those who did not walk on foot rode the massive trolleys, shooting through the fog pipes at astonishing speeds. It was all he had ever known. It was the greatest city in the world, it was his city. And this would be the last time he set his eyes on it. *He had grown up there*, he thought as he gazed upon the massive obelisk which dominated the skyline as well as a large portion of the center of the south city.

He then turned his attention to the other direction. His new home much grander than the old. He gazed out to the churning mass of fog that was known as the ocean. It threw its long ever reaching arms toward the shoreline, attempting to find purchase on the mainland, engulfing some smaller fisheries and plants. Smashing into the larger ones, and right when it appeared that it may have found its purchase it receded back into its endless tides as another swell soon grows large enough to try again. Alvaro was terrified. His people respected the ocean, they even relied on it. Without the constant supply of water and energy the fog provided his beloved city would have never existed.

And yet, it has taken much as well. In the winters past and soon to come the great storms that manifested from the raging tides would more often than not flood and destroy many buildings and even lead to the deaths of those unprepared. And she had been one of them. He looked out across the city again and then his mind drifted back to the funeral. It had been four days ago.

Their friends and family had gathered around the large dark grey casket. It had been a bad autumn but none expected that storm. She had just left the foundry when the wind picked up. The gales were so strong that three people had simply been thrown into the ocean. And four others had been injured, and she was one of them. His mind drifted again to the funeral. He remembered everything so vividly. The way his friends and family had tried to console him, the way the casket had her story engraved into the walls of her final resting place; every engraving a monument to her life.

But all that meant nothing. Because what he remembered most of all was her face. Her dark blue skin, purple eyes, the jet black hair that covered her head and most of her face. And he remembered when they sealed the casket and then slowly, deliberately, set the stone tomb upon the water's edge and all those present gathered upon that short pebbly beach to watch her drift slowly into the ever churning tide. She had been his wife; Alexane. They had met near the middle of summer, about nine years ago. She had been a manager at one of the many hydroelectric plants that covered the coast of the city, while he worked as an inventor and engineer in one of the research facilities. They met through friends and after a while fell in love. They had built a good life together. They were not wealthy, but could still afford to live comfortably in the small house they had designed together. But after the funeral none of that mattered. Alvaro had not returned home for two days after Alexane's death.

Instead preferring to reside in the local bars in an ill-fated attempt to wash away the grief. The third day after the funeral he returned to the house one last time knowing of the journey that he would soon be embarking on. After taking one last walk through the sheltered basement which housed their kitchen, living room, and bedroom. As he was about to walk out of the house back into the cruel autumn

wind something caught the corner of his eye. An ajar drawer exposed a strange object enough so that the light illuminated from the luminescent plants which hung from the ceiling dashed across its reflected surface. He picked it up. It was a strange object with a back of black velvety like material, which from sprouted a fence of a yellow metal that shimmered in the light almost as much as the mirrored surface that resided within the metallic ring. He turned it over and examined it. He had never seen the object before so he assumed that it belonged to his wife. If you asked he couldn't have told you why he decided to put the foreign object into his bag. But after he did he took one last look around and left; and never looked back.

He gazed back out across the chaos that was the fog before him, and he took a step towards it. And another step, and another, and another, until his toes were over the edge of the small outcrop in which he resided. He looked downwards to the sea pounding against the shore fifty feet below. He leaned over, and picked up his bag. He made his way down the organized walking paths that had been established near the docks and plants. He passed the towering presence of some of the waterfront foundries; as well as the extensive network of walls and flood gates to deal with the crashing torrents of fog that endlessly through themselves against the coast. And after twenty minutes he was at his destination.

The small dock was crowded with friends and family to see their loved ones off. The Expedition was a small ship, barely 250 feet long. She was manned by a crew of 20 handpicked professional sailors as well as scientist. Alvaro was one of them. The crowd parted as they saw him walking toward the gangway. Halfway up to the ship, the entrance was blocked by a very large man. He was almost five and a half feet tall and well over a hundred and fifty pounds. He had a thick mane of black hair covered with streaks of grey, and a beard that fell to his stomach." Alvaro Serman?" he bellowed. "Aye captain" He shouted up somewhat less heartily. "You ready to sail to the ends of the world?" he asked a grin spreading across his face. "I believe I am captain." And with that the captain moved aside and Alvaro stepped aboard, his wife's mirror feeling heavy in his pocket.

Mattie Ward

Object 12: Potato masher

It was a tool of creativity; it was a tool of war. Used for growth, perhaps, or entertainment—or to complete other products? The young Lipo Sagori wasn't sure, even as he held the thing in his hand.

Its handle was rough around the edges, and brittle because of the cold. Thick wire sprouted from the top, bending and zigzagging to form a platform on which the thing could stand upside down. The paint flaked off with springtime ice, the metal was rusted, and he could see no purpose for the thing at all.

He had found it in a forgotten part of his family's frozen basement—here on the coast, the wooden houses weren't enough to stand up to the storms when the fog rolled in. The house may collapse, but most of their belongings stayed in the cellar, each protected in their carved-out holds.

What this meant, though, was that sometimes things got frozen shut. Holds on the side near the sea sometimes shifted, fallen wood freezing over the entrances or new ice forming from the temperature drop. Sometimes, these things could be dug out reasonably; sometimes, it would be more efficient to simply let it be and replace the item. That depended on how useful the item was, or occasionally how much it was worth.

The boy turned the thing over in his hand. He couldn't imagine anyone missing it, although it must have served *some* purpose. Their society did not like to permit useless things to exist. He turned back to the old hold, looking for more clues or more tools, but saw none. He'd come back to this.

*

He brought the object to school, in case any of the other kids his age

knew what it was—but they didn’t. The teachers might know, but in any case he’d hidden it from them, predicting that they’d tell him to put it away and stop wasting time. He did not tell his parents about the thing.

*

He tried to do research on old technology, old tools, old anything. If this was a product, it was only a matter of time before he found it in the city-state archives. If it was a specific tool, used in a specialized trade... that would take a lot longer. He ignored that possibility for now, even though it wasn’t good practice to disregard a whole slew of possible solutions. He spent the final months of spring looking in the records and in back in his basement, looking for hints.

*

“What is this?” His mother asked one day, when she’d been down to the cellar to look for extra energy vials. She held up the thing by its handle, unconsciously wagging it in his face. “I don’t know,” he replied.

And he was being honest. By now, he knew what it *wasn’t*; a shovel, a comb, a brand, a cooking instrument. It wasn’t for music, though it made a nice ‘ting’ when he tapped on the wire. It wasn’t for communication, or hygiene, or hunting. His friends had mostly given up on finding out its purpose, even if he was still determined.

His mother wasn’t so convinced. “Why is it on the floor of the cellar?” she asked, instead of accepting his answer. When she looked at him, he knew he wouldn’t be able to lie.

“I found it down here...” he said slowly. His mother shook her head.

“Why are you wasting your time on silly things?”

Now that was the beginning of a lecture he’d received many times. *Lipo Sagori make sure to use all their resources to be as efficient as possible. Where lumber, fog and energy are all resources, time and focus are as well. When you’re grown, you won’t be able to just daydream because you want to... You need to prepare...*

He nodded through the lecture and promised to be better. His mother wanted him to prove it, not promise. He agreed to that as well, so the thing went ignored... for a while.

*

In the end, the answer hadn't come from his research or the cellar at all. Summer had finally arrived—it would be summer for most of his adolescence since the seasons were so long—and he was sitting outside with the thing. Of course, 'summer' on the winter-coast wasn't warm, but it was warmer. He was allowing himself to admire the land in the brightest he'd seen it, when he felt warmth under his fingers. The boy looked down in surprise to see the tool in his hand, radiating slightly. He turned his full attention to it and watched the heat channel, down through the wire into the handle. *So... an old energy storage? Keeping warmth from the sun... transferring it...* He fingered the knob at the end; it must have attached to something, once. *And saving it for the winter, when there's no sun.* He smiled. He wasn't sure that he was right, but it sounded better than anything else he'd come up with, and it made *sense*. On a rare whim, he planted the tool, metal side up, in the thawing ground near the house. He thought it looked good there.

Jessie Watts

Object 37: Door hanger with bells

The wet and dampness of greenery seeped into Tali's toes as he dragged them back and forth along the moss of the garden floor. His fingertips dug into the soft soil along the edges of the cobblestone marker he was sitting on, tracing the sides of the nearest stone that barely touched the other. His soft opal toes brushed against the plant life that grew in and amongst the moss, a few saplings and small species of fern caught along his heels.

Tali was fond of every leaf and stem growing there in his garden, their beautiful green palette reflecting sunlight onto his similarly emerald skin. He cared for them each day, pouring water down onto them and watching as it filtered through their branches and plumes. The mist would settle amongst their roots, until finally the water would drip down into the earth below, only then would Tali sit and admire his friends. Bright red eyes would scan over each and every fern, every tree and flower, until he felt that they were satisfied with the amount of attention given to them. Tali knew that they were thankful, he understood each sway and shift in their structure, every tiny amount of movement, and lack thereof, told him something different.

"To be able to hear the trees, is being able to speak with our ancestors," said the pa'pa Crann, Tali's mentor and the leader of their people.

"Listen to them and in turn they will listen to you, that is the blessing our fathers have passed down to us," the old man had told him, fog rising from around his knees as he sat cross legged in front of Tali on the floor of the throne room that would soon be his own. Tali had looked deep into the eyes of his mentor, their pale pink irises would convey only honesty and Tali had no doubt in his mind that what the older man told him was true.

Pa'pa Crann was like him, one of a chosen few to have the gift of communication between creatures of the flesh, and those of leaf and twig. There was apparently so much more to being the elder Crann than Tali knew, but for now he could enjoy the simple happiness of being the prince of trees, Crann L'u.

The door behind Tali shook with the force of someone knocking two fingers against it, the bells that hung to the wooden handle now bursting into a flurry of chimes and rings. The prince was pulled from his thoughts as he turned to see who had disturbed him, surprised to see the tall woman he had come to refer to as mother, one of the many bishops of his mentor's cabinet. The woman smiled warmly at him, moving the soft silk curtains that hung from her headdress away from her eyes so that she could see him clearly. Tali stood, brushing off a few tufts of stray moss from his robe, and walked up to her.

"Hello Arila, would you like to sit with me?" he asked, craning his neck to look up at her.

Arila laughed and placed a warm green hand on the top of his head, her long and slender fingers brushing softly against his white curls.

"I would love to Tali, but Pa'pa Crann has requested your presence for another lesson"

Tali frowned a bit but his shoulders rose and fell as he spoke.

"That is alright, will you walk with me?" the prince asked, tilting his head to the side.

Arila nodded and turned, motioning towards the door with one long arm.

"Of course I will Crann L'u" she said and bowed, placing her hand on her chest. Together the pair made their way towards the heavy wooden door. Tali turned to look at his friends one last time as the bishop held the door open for him. each leaf was shining with moisture in the early spring sunlight drifting down from above, Tali could almost hear them saying goodbye, swaying back and forth and sending water droplets falling to the mossy floor. Tali waved back with a smile, before the sound of bells filled the room and the garden was left undisturbed.

STRYD

The world of Stryd is a land of technology, diversity, and both political and physical strife. The sea of Stryd is made out of black slime and is known as the Lohi Sea. If you touch the Lohi slime, it will suck you in and pull you down like quicksand. Living in the Lohi are various types of creatures; slime frogs, jellyfish, slime goblins that are the only ones known to leave the Lohi to terrorize the humans, and the bad omen known as slime dragons. On Kalah, the continent, there are two groups of people; the Cyons and the manhunters. There is this city called Modem where the Cyons industrialize. During the course of industrializing, the smoke and exhaust from the factories started to build up and left the city fogged up. The smog makes it hard for the sun to peek through the blue sky, making the color unknown to all those who are on the bleak landscapes except those who live in the Modem.



Tristan Buckner

Object 11: Blue and white scarf

Dim, ruddy light poured through the small window of the containment cell. Metal bar walls split the bleached white cell in two, giving its two occupants just almost enough room to stretch out their legs. The only sound was the shuddering of the cramped cabin as the prison carrier's treads ran over the stark, rocky terrain. Of the four figures, only one lay awake. The others, limp, swaying to the tilt and turn of the mobile cell. He lightly brushed off a speck of dust from his metal arm guards, letting his fingers circle around the large welded bolts. They had tried to take them when they threw him in the cell. Stared at him in horror when the metal wouldn't budge. "Bolted! To its arm!" They had whispered to each other, "Savages! Who would mutilate themselves like this?"

He chuckled to himself, hand still tracing over the tarnished metal. They were so naïve. So ignorant. But it served its purpose. He let his head lean back against the bleached white alloy interior, his hand slipping from the metal skin. Slowly, he closed his eyes, tried to think, escape from what he could not. Perhaps, just perhaps if he focused hard enough, he could wake up in a cold sweat, and then calm himself as he reminded himself that it was just a nightmare. Abruptly a violent jolt interrupted his fruitless meditation. The other member of the small cabin slowly stirred to life, sitting up and stretching. Something bothered him about it. The motions were too normal, too commonplace. They seemed to contrast the situation in a way that made him uncomfortable, as if it they did not take what was happening seriously. A frown flickered across his lips. He had not truly taken a moment to look at his companion, being too caught up in brooding. She was clearly that of the low class. A metal arm. Greasy,

stained, cumbersome. With every move, it hissed and squeaked in protest. A status symbol. A totem that would have kept her underfoot of those who deemed themselves 'higher'. And then her eyes locked on him. His skin prickled. Not eyes, eye. The left side of her face was rough, pocked, and taut. The skin looked like a disgusting, beige river, churning around a milky island of an eye. For a moment he simply stared at her, her pale, discolored eye accusing him. The spell broke, and he finally could look away. Yet when he glanced back, he saw something he had missed. A subtle curiosity. Her good eye peered at him, unwavering. It seemed to pierce his metal shell, leaving the soft flesh underneath naked.

"You're a savage."

The statement jarred him. Something about the way she was so calm was off putting. To the rest of the world, Savages were what fueled nightmares. The very mention of the name seemed to come with its own aura of unease and paranoia. Yet here this woman sat, unwavering.

"I think that would be a matter of opinion."

She brushed a few strands of blue dyed hair from her face, her eye continuing bore into him, as if unsatisfied by his answer, digging deeper and deeper, trying to find a suitable answer.

"Opinion?" She sounded confused.

He turned away from her, resting his metal clad head against the vehicles walls.

"Yeah."

Silence fell between them. The light from the windows dimmed, the cyan artificial glow overpowering the pitiful light from the sun. He heard her shifting in her half of the cell.

"What are your people like?"

He glanced over at her. She no longer stared at him, her gaze unfocused, as if deep in thought. The entire conversation seemed dreamlike, surreal. He was a warrior. A savage. He was what people saw in the shadows, what people heard in the night. He was fear. And yet now they both of them sat there, being herded to their death. Both out of their element.

"Frail."

Her gaze snapped back towards him. She calculated him. Her gaze dissecting him.

"How can a people who live on hunting others be frail?"

"Are all people not by nature frail?"

He matched her gaze with one of his own. He felt a flicker of a flame dance deep inside.

"But you hunt humans"

Her mechanical arm clicked and whirred. A bubble of black oil expanded from a crack in the mechanism, and after a second popped. The prison carrier jostled. Outside, the stone plains dragged on.

"We eat those who once starved us."

"They starved us too. You were the cause."

The flames start to spread. He tried to force them back, snuff them out. There was no use to frustration.

"They cut off our food because they thought we were uncivilized."

A somber air settled between the two. Each lost in thought. The ruddy, smog muffled light brightened, mingling with the artificial light blue light.

"Why do you dress like that?" She waved her hands, motioning towards his steel casing, "Doesn't it hurt?"

His tongue subconsciously ran over his metal teeth. Even after years, the steel bolts still pained him, with every move it felt like they were being hammered into his body. Blood still occasionally dripped from the corners of his permanent armor.

"Yes."

"That's terrible."

From behind his metallic mask, a look of doubt formed. The woman unnerved him, disturbed him, made him feel like he was being forced into the open.

"It is necessary."

She didn't respond, simply fiddling with her mechanical arm. The curiosity was still there. But something else seemed to have infected it. He couldn't place what it was. It was almost like sullenness...

His eyes unfocused, his mind slowly escaping the world. He had always wondered what the last thoughts of a condemned man would be. Now that he was nearing them, he realized how little he wanted

to know. His eyes again refocused as he heard the sound of a metallic grating. The woman pried off a grimy plate from her arm. Underneath hid a small piece of smooth cloth, wrapped around an unknown object. Delicately she pulled the bundle from her arm. Something was almost haunting about it, the contrast of the cloth and its owner. One so clean and refined, the other scarred and tarnished. She unwrapped the small bundle, taking out what looked like a cluster of leaves. Quickly she stuffed the dry vegetation under her tongue, almost as if she expected the vehicle's drivers to stop purely to confiscate the bundles contents. Seeing that he watched her, she held out the cloth towards him, offering him the unidentifiable leaves.

"Want some?"

Unseen to her, a single one of his eyebrows rose.

"What is it?"

"Tea."

An unabashed smile pulled at her partially burnt lips. He let himself chuckle silently.

"Sure, why not."

He took a pinch of the leaves, putting them beneath his tongue.

"You really are normal, aren't you?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"I guess."

Ash Haq

Object 34: Wooden plaque with painted flowers

You're laughing, waving a beer around and grinning at a kid with a black eye because he's felt it too. The boy is young, dark skin with hair bleached to the color of rose water, tugging a white cloth away from his nose and mouth. His hand is brass and three of his teeth gleam gold when the racers' taillights strike them.

After a minute, six motorcycles turn the corner and come to a halt, steaming and rattling. The one with the roman numeral XI etched into the side pulls in first, until you're almost nose-to-nose with the cyclist, who removes her helmet.

She's the one you betted on.

You hold out a cupped palm, waiting for everyone's pledges to pour in.

At first, it's only brass earrings, a couple of solid silver gears, and a half-empty oilcan. You've gotten used to identifying whether or not the metals are genuine by their weight. It's a delicate system. Then something surprisingly light slips into your hand.

You raise your eyes from the glinting treasures to your pale-haired benefactor. It's the boy from earlier, caught off guard. His features are soft, almost demure until he looks directly at you. The bruise around his eye is worse than it seemed from afar, with a blossom of purple blood unfurling beneath the skin of his temple and cheekbone.

He smiles and darts away and you're stunned under the streetlight.

A few more people toss you their generic trinkets, and you place them all in the velvet bag at your hip. The only one that makes an impression on you is the boy's: a slice of sandalwood painted olive green, with a slick acrylic illustration of a flower vase. For some reason, it disquiets you.

You set down the beer and turn the wood canvas over, inspecting

its surfaces. Was it valuable at all? Why couldn't the kid have given you something functional? Something you could use, or at least sell, goddammit.

Without a word, you weave through the crowd and make your way home. Steel toed boots clatter against pavement. The parked motorcycles are perfectly still, casting twisted shadows across brick walls like an inner city theatre.

On the segment of wood, you notice a blackened steel hook at the top. As if it was meant to hang above someone's front doorway.

You reach the apartment building, pulling your wool coat tight as cool air collides with cold. Atoms against atoms. You reach the stairwell, glossy with turpentine, and ascend towards the sixth floor. The hallway is a long, curving balcony. From here you watch the incandescent city simmer beneath a layer of smog.

Modem bursts through the clouds, the silver stem of a leviathan peony. You turn to the uniform row of doors and draw a ring of keys from your black velvet string bag. There's always been a nail on the door of your flat, and you place the painting onto it. Olive like a beacon against drywall. Maybe it would lead somebody home.

Brook Long

Object 51: Seashell flask

This odd-colored shell is used for a two similar reasons. Under the mythical world of Amarone's and the Cyborgs are caverns which are used for their prisoners. During their time there, knowing they are going to be killed in a short amount of time, the enslaved prisoners shape and form shells. They fill them with glow rocks and make light-up figurines.

This particular shell was used by a prisoner, Jack, who recently got thrown in the Terrordome to be demolished by an Amarone. Jack committed the worst crime you can possibly do out in the Cyberpunk world he stole from the government while he was working there. Jack took some Top Secret files so that he could get some extra money off of them to buy his family a vacation that he could not afford. Now, Jack is dead and his family has nothing but the one thing Jack left; the seashell. It turns out Jack left it for one of his loved ones because there is a little heart handle where you can open up the tiny seashell. Hand crafted and worked, you can see the love that was present during the making of this object.

Now, the shell is used by Cyborg, Katrina who found it when Jack's family got sentenced away in the Terrordome. Katrina received the shell with special potions that she kept from everyone else. Since she is in the lower class, having something this special and valuable is worth to keep on hand. The bottle consists of three potions: healing, good fortune, and death. Katrina decided that she was going to drink one of the potions and see if it actually worked or if it was a myth like she heard from stories. Thinking that the legend was in fact just a legend, Katrina opened the bottle up and chugged the first potion. At first she felt fine; she didn't feel affected. The Cyborg drank the second one and

didn't feel any change in her body. She was feeling pretty good about herself believing that the legend was not true. The foolish Katrina drank the last potion.

"Ha, I knew the legend wasn't true!" Katrina exclaimed to no one in particular. She was getting weird stares from the other Cyborgs and wondered what they wanted. "Quit looking at me." Katrina whispered under her breath. The Cyborgs soon started screaming and running away from her. At first she thought it was just another Amarone, but she realized that the Cyborgs have on protective suits so the Amarone's can't get to them. Katrina ran back to her hub to hide away from everyone. She walked to her room and gazed in the wall mirror. Her body suit was melting, leaving only her organs. Katrina fell over and clenched her heart, literally. "Help," she tried to yell out but her voice only came out as a squeak.

Katrina soon understood that the legend of the potions was true; drinking the death potion didn't kill you until three days later, but drinking three potions at once melted your skin away. Maybe one day instead of being too cocky, you will listen to the stories your grandmother and all the children told you when you were little.

In conclusion, this beautifully made seashell used for two reasons (to keep prisoner's occupied and potion keeping) ended up killing two people; the man who died making this for one of his loved ones and Katrina who was not superstitious about potions actually working. Maybe next time you should just ask your boss for a raise and actually ask your grandma if the legend was correct.

Mattie March

Object 62: Gold and salmon brooch

Everyone in Modem knows who wears the golden tree pin, but few know who makes it. If you ask the Cyons, they'll tell you it was made by one of their synthetic mechanics, ask an Amarone and they'll tell you it was one of their own. But only the family knows that years ago, when our nation formed, it was a common "Rib," as we're called, who made it. And even now, when a new member of the Southgate family, the highest-ranking Amarones, is born, they still call on my family to craft it.

So when I was contacted about the imminent birth of Caerys Southgate's second son, I snuck out of the caverns to the old metal working shop my family owned before the Cyons eradicated the need for manual labor with their machines.

I worked away the days, perfecting the layers of looped copper wire, attaching the red and pink beads, and coiling all the left over wire into a trunk. Securing the back and clasp took almost no time, and after 4 days spent in the shop, Sparrow Southgate's status-stating pin was finished.

Of course, the pin was much too heavy for an infant to wear, but, as per tradition, it was always presented to the child and family at their First Ritual, the Anthropofagoi's celebration of a child's birth.

The crafter of the pin was expected to present it to the parents, so when Bronte Southgate's designer, Jackie walked into the shop with his three assistants, all dressed in fine garb, it was no surprise. For one night, I was to act like an Amarone. I dined on the finest food, wore clean clothes and pretended to be wealthy. It is the highest and lowest points in my life.

It's the highest because for one night, my belly is full. But the lowest,

because I am forced to listen to the derogatory thoughts of the higher class in person instead of interpreting their disgusted looks.

"Hello Jackie, how have you been?" I asked the man staring in disgust at the filth around him. He jumped at the sound of my voice.

"Finley, my gracious, don't scare a man like that!" He replied, putting his hand over his heart. When his heart rate had sufficiently decreased, he smiled and answered my question. "Except for being startled by a 20 year old in her metal shop, I'm doing quite well."

"Wonderful. I suppose you've come to dress me for the First Ritual?"

"Well I'm not here on a social call. And considering you probably wore your last outfit into rags, I'll have to procure another one. I don't suppose your sizes have changed?" He asked, absentmindedly picking at his nail beds.

"I got smaller, that's for certain." I picked at the dirty pants I was wearing. When I found them, I barely had to tighten the thick strip of cloth that served that served as a belt, but since then I've even had to put new holes into it.

"That's alright, I'll just take new measurements and come back when your clothes are done." He snapped his fingers and one of the assistants came forward to measure me. I stuck my arms out to the side, spread my legs a little and waited for the familiar sensation of the scanner. As the green light slid over the front of my body, I kept my face neutral, not even blinking when it hit my eyes. I knew from experience that blinking or scrunching my face would be cause for another, closer, scan. Jackie needed to know what kind of makeup my face would require. After the assistant scanned my back, he nodded at his boss and stepped back.

"All done!" Jackie chirped. "This shouldn't take too long, so I'll be back soon to make you beautiful!" He called over his shoulder while he and his employees waltzed through the back door of my shop. Now, I wait.

Alyssa Mazzoli

Object 58: Frog on a pedestal

With Frogs

“Look,” she said. “Look.”

She meant the sea, that black thing, which sent flecks of itself into the air and onto the rock at our feet. I looked but I saw only heat and thickness and slow, deep rolls. I looked but I didn’t see anything. The sea swallowed light like a child swallowed toys. It bubbled, sometimes, and burst. I watched it bubble and felt a bubbling in my gut, and then I watched it burst.

I didn’t want to look at the sea anymore so I looked at the sky instead, roiling with smog and hot smog things. The sky was grey and felt like wool around me. It engrained itself in my lungs, my mouth, seeping through the rag that I’d wrapped around my face. I adjusted the rag with two fingers. I started to cough, and then I didn’t want to look at the sky anymore.

I looked at the rock, but that was as grey as the sky and equally violent. It was hard on my tailbone and my hands when I leaned on them. I couldn’t find a flat place to put my feet. When I looked closely, I saw cracks that led to dark and darker places. Beyond my angled feet, the sea pressed itself against the rock and sucked it out in pieces, bubbled it down into an ocean gut.

I looked at myself and saw the same kind of bleakness. My clothing felt heavy around my chest, dirty and black. Soot streaked my arms like charcoal on canvas. I looked at my legs and the way they bent at the knee. I did not have knees but convex scraps of metal, attached by screws to the rods of my legs. I did not have legs but metal pillars that itched at the seams.

Finally, I looked at her. Her skin was dark with soot and her right arm was a tangle of metal and dirty oil. A grey rag covered the lower half of her face and bunched up under her eyes. I couldn't see her eyes because of her goggles. Her goggles were coated like everything else. Still, I saw her hair, a brilliant shade of green. It stuck up at the top and tangled around her face, it was ripe with dirt and other darkness—but it was her hair, and her hair was green.

"I have something for you," I said, and pulled the thing out of my pocket. As tall as my palm was wide, the sculpture was crafted of cracked stone. Its base tapered to support a ball, and atop the ball sat a frog with a body the size of my thumb. Two rows of warts ran down its back like buttons on a coat. Its eyes poked from their sockets and its tongue poked from its mouth. The frog's hind legs folded and stuck up from its body, and its forelegs stood like columns at its front.

I held the thing in my hand. I moved my fingers over all the parts of it.

"It's for you," I said, and held it out to her. Her face was turned towards the sea, and I could just make out the slope of her cheekbones and the green strands of hair that floated across her face. She didn't look at me and she didn't take what I offered. Her hand sat like a dead thing on the rock, like a bug on its back by the ocean. Minutes passed. I held the thing in my hand.

"Please," I said. "Let me save you as you have saved me."

She took it without looking at it and without looking at me. When she took it, her fingers closed around it like vines around a tree. There was a moment when our fingers touched. There was a moment when she touched me, and then the moment passed.

"Look," she said, so I did. Something moved within the thick black ocean. Something rose out of a bubbling wave. First the head appeared, then the body, then the legs. It moved slowly and in a struggling way. It pulled itself from the sludge onto a dry slab of rock.

It was a frog. It was a frog covered in slime, climbing into the world.

Austin McDuffie

Object 57: Smiling plastic jellyfish-like sea creature

I've always liked catching swimmers. I liked seeing them, feeling their presence, and watching their long, bright feelers trail behind them like a trail of fighters following their leader into The Dome. Just as you begin to doubt the grace and speed of a swimmer, seeing it slowly zig-zag through the slime, it changes all of that, wiping every last ounce of uncertainty in its abilities from your mind, replacing it with feelings of shock and awe, and the unshakeable belief that your eyes have successfully and cunningly deceived you. All of this with a single, striking display of the creature's true knowledge of how to traverse the thick, black sea; a single whip of its tail.

I no longer felt such awe when observing these creatures. I felt then, just as I had for some time, a hunger. When I see these beings an insatiable hunger rises from the pit of my stomach, from the recesses of my mind, from the bowels of my very soul. A thirst, a desire, and a need for their deaths—and for my revenge. While what they had done to my people was unforgivable, and I believed that they must pay in blood to right their wrongs, I hunt them not for my people, but for myself; to quench my undying thirst, if only to feel it engulf me once more soon after. I could no longer repress the urges to hunt, for it had been says since my last journey to the shore, and so I set out for Vatana to gather materials.

Vatana never died, not even for a moment. Not even when the smog distorted distant images of kiosks and the vendors who tended to them. The crowded cluster of metalheads and security bots always smelled of oil with metallic undertones and a hint of desperation. The hot, heavy stench of the black smog could coat the walls, floors, and ceilings of our homes, but not this place. This place had a mind of

its own, and a body all the same. It lived and breathed, for we gave it life. We gave it its distinct smells, its soot-covered sidewalks and dark alleyways, its incessant roar, and its true importance as the heart of our community. Vatana breathed smoke and bled oil, just as we had for so many years.

I approached Sayum's kiosk and conversation ensued. Sayum had always been my only real, for as long as I could remember. In the city of Blackmetal you choose your family and they choose you. When I was born an orphan Sayum chose me, and when I grew to one day understand the concept of family, I chose him. It was my relationship Sayum that taught me how the world truly works.

After greeting each other, I asked him for what I needed. He slipped me three sharp, steel disks and I deposited them in my pocket before promptly and discreetly thanking him and beginning to make my way through the crowd. I carefully but subtly turned to see if anyone had been trailing me, and thankfully no one had.

It didn't take me long to reach the shore. The smoke parted as the scent of the black sea hastily entered my nostrils, flooding my nose with its putrescence. It was as if the wretched landscape had anticipated my arrival and was welcoming me as a guest in its home.

I proceeded to the shoreline and began my vigil. Surprisingly, after only a few minutes, I saw a swimmer rise to the surface and begin to bob from side to side. The damned thing was mocking me. I stared at the thing and it stared back at me. It had no eyes but I knew that it felt my presence, my stare. I waited only moments before tearing a disk from my pocket and propelling it towards the creature as fast and hard as I could with a swift flick of my wrist. I watched the sharp edge of it slice straight through the bright, veiny skin of the creature, yet it did not sink. It did not die. Strange, I thought.

I set foot in the slime and before I was in knee deep I noticed a trail of dark red liquid running through the slime. Blood, I thought.

"But swimmers don't bleed red," I said aloud.

"You're right!" screamed a voice. "But metalheads do!" I heard a loud crack, and then a sharp ringing noise. And then nothing.

Zoe Phillips

Object 19: Strange and unusual compass

Cigarette Smell

Your grandson pounds down the attic stairs, and he shows you a gem you never thought you would see again.

“Oh. Look what you’ve found,” you say, not unkindly. He grins. Clutched in his hands is a device that you had stored away in the attic to be forgotten about like the rest of your old junk. Honestly, you had expected to kick the bucket before someone dug this old thing out again.

You raise the device to the light of the window next to you. A small needle trembles back and forth in the glass casing in the center, and numbers frame the outside plastic.

“What is it?” he asks, bouncing on his toes. “Was it from when you were in the Cyborg-Cannibal War? Did you fight with it?” You laugh.

“Yes,” you say. “I did use it in that war. It’s called a compass. It’s set to the metal that your partner’s limbs are made of. That way if you lose them... you can navigate back to each other.”

The plane you are flying careens like a drunk under the onslaught of the thunderstorm and enemy planes. Your partner, Greg, is in the seat behind you. He is studying his own two platinum legs.

“I’m going out!” shouts Greg over the noise.

“Are you mad, Greg?” you shout back.

“No! Just trust me! I’m the only one here with metal legs. I can use them to climb across the plane and fix the engine that blew out.” You balked, but notice the flashing red warnings lighting up across your dashboard like fireflies.

“Fine! Be quick!” He nodded, grabbing a parachute backpack and tool belt, and tossed his cigarette out the ship door.

As you steer the ship, your partner’s heavy footfalls reverberate on the ship ceiling. Even though you’re clouded with worry, you know there’s nothing you can do. His life is in his own hands now.

“Aargh!” The ship, unbalanced, began to spiral, lurching forward into it. You stabilize it after a few rolls of your ship.

Three knocks come from above- your “okay” signal to each other. Greg is still there.

Relieved, you go on the defensive. Two fairly small enemy ships, and in bad shape. You realize you might actually come out of this alive.

BOOM!

With sharp clarity, you understand the implications of the blast that has just come from behind.

One, you’ve been tricked. A third ship has been lying in wait- as the two “battered” ships drew you in front, you were shot in the back.

Two, your precious ship is damaged beyond repair. An emergency landing is the only way for you to survive.

Three. Greg is gone.

You know this. Theoretically, you suppose he could be hanging onto the side of the ship, not having a chance to knock yet, but he’s not. You just know it.

You see a place in the jungle below that could serve as a landing strip, and looks overgrown enough to seem like a deadly crash. You begin the nosedive, shoving everything but pure instinct and will to the back of your mind.

You fall silent, studying the scratches on the glass casing. Your grandson, however, is not deterred.

“How did you use it? Did you lose your partner? Did you ever find him? Why did you lose him?”

You are in the supermarket. The war is over, the government has recollected your gun, and cabbages are more prevalent right now than ships or war.

You are about to toss the offending cabbage back into the pile when

your purse begins to twitch. Wary and scarred, you prepare to throw an object, whatever it is, as far as you possibly can.

It's your compass. You choke back tears. Is this the way the universe has decided to repay you- in food stamps and cruel teases? You are about to return the compass to your bag when you look up and see a man with metal legs.

Platinum metal.

You toss the cabbage behind you, somewhere. You're running, running as fast as you can because your search, it's coming to an end, and-

"Who are you?"

You step back, examine his face, and it's not the same, Greg didn't have freckles or glasses and it's not him. You back up against the wall, slide down it, a middle aged woman with a fear of fireworks and cigarette smell in your hair.

You angle the compass so it catches the light and makes it flit across the table.

Your husband walks into the room, ruffling your grandson on the head.

"Can that *really* be the time?" he asks, with the exaggeration reserved for children. He shoos your grandson off to his bedroom.

"Do you mind if I see it again?" he asks. You hand it to him.

"You'll find him someday," he says. You shrug. You're quite old, after all.

"Perhaps," you say.

"Perhaps."

Koral Runge

Object 45: Bicycle pedal

Delroy burst into his home with rainwater soaking his hair and his lungs burning for a chance to relax and breathe. Kicking the front door shut with the back of his heel, Del slapped his hand over the handle until his right metal forefinger clicked into the molded keyhole, twisted his hand until he heard the satisfying *click* that his door was locked. Stumbling over to the window, he drew the blackout curtains shut.

Finally able to catch his breath and look around his dark room, he remembered the object he was holding in his human hand; his most recent steal.

Usually, as a Scavenger living in Blackmetal, Del tried to resist the temptation of stealing even when given the chance. However when he had seen the pristine bicycle pedal sitting there all lonesome at that table, he couldn't resist the temptation to discreetly pick it up in his human hand. Not only to avoid accidentally catching the light on his recently cleaned metal arm, but to feel that clean metal with his actual flesh.

Still holding his new treasure he walked over to his work table, water dripping off his clothes, his soaked boots squishing out puddles of water with every step he took, he reached up with his synthetic arm to yank on the chain of the single, and slowly dying, lightbulb in his home. The light flickered for a couple seconds before the bulb caught a dim glow and held it alight. With a tired smile and slow shaking of his head, Del plopped down in his chair with a stiff neck and sore feet. Ignoring the aches and kinks in his shoulders and the place where metal and flesh combined in his right arm, he dropped the Quill bicycle pedal down onto his work table.

The bicycle pedal fell onto the smooth plastic of the toe cage, the bendable parallel cage plates not the best support but still holding up the heavier titanium steels pedal enough so that Del could examine it as carefully as needed. Three main things caught his eye straightaway and made his smile turn into a beaming grin instantly. There were two nuts screwed down by bolts, a long rectangular strip of nylon fabric, and two orange light reflectors.

Del laughed at thought of when a fad within his poor city known as Blackmetal had emerged. The image of his old best friend, Kellian, popped into his mind, making him sigh nostalgically while leaning back some. The quill pedal sat comfortably on the table while he pressed both palms of his hands together and he fingers linked together, as if in prayer. The memories of that day when Kell had fallen victim to the fad flickered on his mind like a projector turning on a movie.

“See? There *is* a light in the attic!” Kell had exclaimed about the new red colored light reflector that he had just gotten screwed onto his metal forehead. He was skipping ahead of Del while they walked the sidewalks in the rain; red hoodie looking like it was stained with ketchup because of the rain and his chin-length dyed blonde hair sticking to the sides his oval face. It was their usual route home from their poor job. In its the simplest form, it was a pretty crappy job—if you could even call it that—of taking the parts that they’d stolen from market dealers to the *other* market dealers. It was a pretty messy career path. From today’s haul Kell had gotten two ounces of oil and was singing in the rain as if he were in a musical, while Del had gotten ten ounces and looked as serious as ever.

Delroy rolled his eyes at his friend before brushing his unruly bedhead hair out his eye, the fringe that always got in his right eye bugging the hell out of him as he walked through the rain. Pulling up his black zippered jacket’s hood, he replied back dryly, “Only if someone shines a light at you. And you’d only be *reflecting* that person’s light. So what could that say about your intelligence?”

He watched as Kell paused in mid-swinging around a lamppost before the cheery blonde stopped and fell into step with Del. “You’re no fun, ya know that? Just cause you’re a year older than me doesn’t mean you always have to be so serious and mean.”

“I didn’t think that was mean; just maybe not what you’d want to hear.” Kell raised an eyebrow up at the taller black haired boy. “It was a joke,” Del clarified.

Del was always the one to be realistic and bringing everyone he knew—especially Kellian—back down to the sad reality of their lives. Kell was the exact opposite, always looking at the glass half-full and trying to make people smile, making the two stick one another like glue.

Remembering his old friend like that made Del’s heart wrench. The next images overtook his fond memories like camera film burning away horrifically. Kell’s bright smile was replaced with the horrific image of his best friend’s gaping mouth as A.I. droids dragged him away to be taken to the Terrordome. Taken to his doom, to most likely be slaughtered then fed to cannibals. And what was he getting sent to the Terrordome for? Getting caught sagging a loose bolt off a rusty arm someone had been trying to sell to a new survivor of the Terrordome battles.

Del opened his tired gray eyes wide as he suddenly felt the cold sweat dripping down the back of his neck. Or was just it just rain. He rubbed his eyes with his cold, human hand before looking back down at the pedal in front of him.

Groaning as he stood, he tore off his wet jacket and threw it across the room. The Quill pedal with its nuts and bolts and light reflectors could wait for another day.

Olivia Russo

Object 31: Black sparkly skull on a headband

In a chamber deep in the planets' bowels, a large cauldron is bubbling under the watchful eye of a hunched old man wearing nothing but ragged scraps of cloth, dirtied beyond recognition. He holds a rugged lamp that radiates flickering light. The meager light dances along the rough walls, creating snaking shadows that stretch their fingers to the ceiling.

Jars, some colorful and some transparent, sit on shelves in dozens upon dozens of rows like scales on the back of a dragon. They wink in the lantern's light, momentarily revealing the mysterious contents. Twigs, crushed leaves, powders, gems... He twists his beard, his rheumy eyes scanning the jars. With tremors ravaging his fingers, he grasps a handful of the jars and reads the scribbled labels, flattening down the curled edges.

Behind him is a long table that displays a quite gruesome sight; a human body, dismembered and bloodied, is laid out. Hammers, scalpels, and a wickedly sharp saw lie scattered around the table, sticky with gore.

The old man turns from the shelves and shuffles along the length of the table, bones creaking and joints popping. He slowly makes his way back to the cauldron, all the while cradling his glittering jars.

The cauldron was now at a steady boil, the water steaming and hissing against the rusted metal edges. The man, gazing into the rising steam, thrust all of the jars into the water at once. Boiling droplets splattered on the floor and sizzled away, disappearing from sight. He gazes into the water with hooded eyes, squinting against the steam. The water, once crystalline, was now blooming with black clouds that soon overtook the rest of the cauldron like a sickness.

Before his very eyes, the water thickened into vile sludge that writhed as if alive. Bubbles rose from the cauldron and burst, releasing a stench that stung his eyes and latched onto his skin.

Wafting the scent away, he hobbled around the cauldron to towards the back. He breathed deeply. Bracing himself, he placed his hands on the edge of the cauldron and heaved with all his might. With a metallic screech, the cauldron began to tip, sloshing the sludge inside it onto the floor. The scorching metal sent searing pain rocketing through his bony fingers. He smelled burning flesh, but ignored it and kept pushing and pushing until the cauldron finally tipped over with a deafening crash.

Sludge cascaded from the cauldron, carpeting the floor in a bubbling, foul mess. A human skull stripped of its flesh and cartilage slobbered out of the cauldron, landing face up to the man, staring with empty sockets. With much difficulty, the old man lifted the skull from the thick, revolting sludge, shaking some out of the crevices. Horrible inky smoke rose from the bone and the floor as the sludge fizzled away into nothingness. Only a dark, ominous stain was left behind.

The skull, bearing a menacing ebony smile, was blackened from the sludge. It was perfectly intact and smooth as a river stone.

The old man, exhausted, managed just enough strength to roll the cauldron away from the fireplace. He stood in the place where the cauldron was, feeling the heat that soaked into the floor warm his bare toes. Using a poker, he mixed around the coals and ashes so it was a glowing uniform surface. He placed the skull to his heart, murmuring a few words, and thrust the skull into the coals.

Flames roared up and died down again, drowning the skull in crackling heat. The old man waited for the embers to die and turn into powder before snatching it from the fireplace, shaking the dust from the sockets. The skull, permanently black as the night sky, was finally ready.

He ambled past the table, the carnage now beginning to reek, and to the shelves where the jars were. He grasped a small one, gems jingling within it. He shook out two pea-sized jewels, both a stormy grey. Next, he sat at his desk and fashioned a headband made of a stray band of copper, blackened from time spent in the fire.

The gems were placed into the eye sockets, giving the skull a mysterious stare. The band and the skull were bound together with fraying rope and set with melted wax. At last, he was finished.

The old man gave a satisfied sigh and set the skull on the table with the body. It clunked hollowly, echoing through the confines of the dim room. He scooped up the lamp, the last of its oil sloshing around, and hobbled out of the chamber. His footfalls pattered away until silence overwhelmed his steps.

In the shadowed gloom, the jeweled eyes seemed to glow.

G Torrence

Object 43: Drapery pull with tassel

Last Thoughts of the Trapped

How have I survived? Every day I have fought in this wretched dome ready to die, and yet I'm still here. Maybe it's because I'm not ready to accept the fate of death. The others don't know what happens to the dead losers but I've seen what is done to their corpses. I have yet to share what I know with the others here to not stir up a fuss. The last thing needed here is the speculation of if they are eaten after death. However the decision wasn't simple, every person I kill I have to live with knowing how even in death their body is violated and eaten. Even with my body being mainly cybernetic I still have my brain and morals, yet I look past them every time I fight. Maybe it's because I want to win, or maybe it's just my human instinct to live. Whatever the case may be I'm no better than anyone here, and that fact alone eats away at me every time someone dies and are just taken away, with me being the only one who knows what happens to them. But it's not like any of us are leaving anyway. By now I've been here the longest and I've realized there is no leaving this place just surviving. Waking up in this place every day and hoping that I don't have to fight is taxing. I don't know why I'm complaining though nothing will change. Most people don't even know about us only the upper class people know about us, hell they set it up. We're just prisoners who fight for their amusement and basically train their gladiators. I've seen everything done to escape this place. From running for an exit in the dome to trying to start a breakout riot and nothing works. Watching the new meat in an amusing as well as a bit saddening. Everyone thinks there is a way out of this hell but the only way out is death. Sitting here and

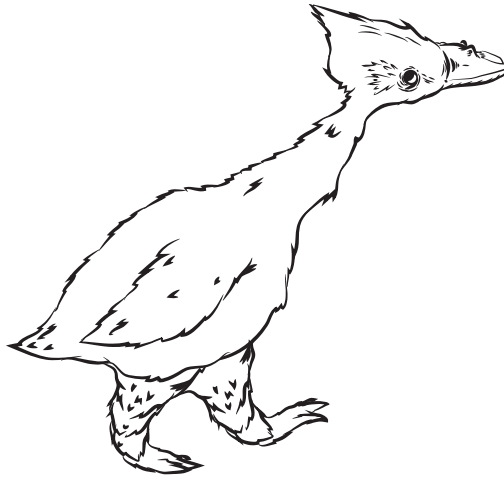
pondering about all this, is the best I can do with my time.

Another fight today, this time I'm fighting a new inmate. He looks so young, and it saddens me to have to kill him, but I still plan on killing him. If I really cared I'd let him win, however that means my death and I know I'm not ready to die yet.

I'm here again standing over the body of a dead man, one that I have beaten and killed with my own two hands. It reminds me of my first fight in this hell I beat him to death and took something from him as a trophy. It wasn't anything special just what looked like a fancy rope, with its brown basin and silky strings at the end, as well as the bright color of the rope itself. I dwell on it longer than I should have. After taking so many lives you start come to grips with the realization that the blood will never go away. It disgusts me to look around and see people cheering and congratulating me on killing a man for their enjoyment, but it's like I said there is now way out of this living hell you can only survive. When I first got here I killed so many without even a thought of what I did to them, even seeing the dead being eaten in front of my eyes and figuring out that's what happens to the losers, I had no sympathy. It took me losing track of how long I was here to start to thinking about what I had done, and what I doomed those peoples bodies to. That's when I changed for good. Maybe that's me punishing myself for all that I have done. Now I live with no name and no rights just a license to kill when I'm ordered to, and die while there whether it be from myself or by the hands of someone else here, death can't be avoided. However my human will to live will keep me alive for as long as it can and I will let it. I still doubt I will reveal about what happens to the dead and defeated, but that may be me trying my best to not let anyone here give up because I'm to that point and no one else should be where I am it is a dark place for only the truly evil and I'm truly evil in my own eyes. Are you?

VAILARA

The planet Vailara has two moons, Agenor and Belus, and orbits a sun much the way Earth does. The surface itself consists of two main continents and a collection of islands. To the west is Azguyin Kokteyl, to the east lies Rantria, and in the north you'll find the Nyika Islands. After a devastating war, the environments on land became largely uninhabitable. Fleeing from the chemically-altered flora and fauna, as well as from the remnants of their biotech-based war, the citizens of Vailara turned to man-made islands. The large cities of Inverati, Avahim, and The Republic of Lvanstadt remain anchored to the ground, floating near land to allow scavenging. Various smaller nomadic cities float freely, allowing the tides to direct them through the sea.



Approximately 200 years after the war between the continents, Vailara was visited by mysterious spaceship. An expedition of an alien race called the Ara came to Vailara from their home planet, Library, in search of stories driven by emotion. The Ara's

own world is perfectly regulated and ordered, and, while the Ara experience emotion, they do not attach the same significances and connotations that humans do. Driven by their instinctual curiosity and a near-addiction to the story and meaning denied them by their own world, the Ara search space for planets on which they can collect stories. The Ara orbited Vailara in their ship for eight years, learning about the species on the surface and adapting their own drone class, the Dexin, to match human appearance. Six months before the present day, the Ara made first contact with the people of Vailara, and, via the Dexin, began the process of collecting stories, even going so far as to interfere with and manufacture events to create the most powerful narratives. Vailara's few million citizens have responded in a range of ways - awe, love, and most of all, fear.

Tayler Benton

Object 55: Small clear and blue plastic box

The Pawn Shop

The dusty room reeked of mildew. Between the boards nailed to the bay window up front, a ray of light exposing the dust in the air fell upon a small circle in what might've been a brilliantly detailed rug in its prime but was now just a faded antique.

A child bursting through the door and setting off the overhead bells snapped Adalia out of her daze. A boy with brown, curly hair and eyes to match, he lifted his hood to reveal a face no older than eleven with dark circles under his innocent eyes.

"Hello!" His cheerful voice filled the stuffy space causing Adalia's face to break into a grin.

"Elyot! I was starting to grow worried." She pouted, feigning upset.

"Sorry! Forgot I had to help my brother at the port this morning." He looked up and saw her widened eyes, "Oh, don't look at me like that! I'm fine, aren't I?"

Adalia mumbled something under her breath as she turned away from him.

The port was an infamous part of Avahim. While a majority of the city could be described as slummy, the port had the reputation for being the most dangerous (barring the black market, but that's a whole *separate* story). Half of all crimes were committed in the port while the other half were split evenly between the aforementioned black market and the whole rest of the city, so he could understand her solicitude. Her concern came from care, but while the port may

have a high crime rate, it was unlikely that someone as unimportant as Elyot would be part of that percentage. This was a concept people like Adalia couldn't quite grasp.

She lived in a part of the city that had completely disassociated itself from the rest of its neighbors. Ever since The Rebuild, those left in a more fortunate situation (fortunate being loosely defined) decided to hide out in an area called Uptown. People there were like mythological creatures to those who lived elsewhere and vice versa.

Before Adalia, Elyot had never seen an Uptowner. The myths all seemed to be true. Standing out in a crowd among filthy, greasy, cursing beasts of men and women alike, there was a little girl with shiny brown hair tied up with bright pink ribbons, matching the coloration in her cherub cheeks. Her bright green eyes, albeit with a terrified look in them, shone with an innocence that wasn't common in the city.

"Hey, Adalia, come here." Elyot called for her. "It's a collection of drawings from before the war. They have a whole chapter of ones of Azguyin!"

Adalia smiled, not because she was interested but because she knew Elyot loved stuff like that. Drawing was something he'd taken up recently and he'd always been interested in pre-war Vailara. He could never afford such an expense, though.

She smiled at the memory of meeting him for the first time years ago.

As a child, she often found herself immensely bored. There wasn't much to do Uptown; because it's such a small area. There was really only housing and a few food and clothing shops. Although being rich seemed to offer her everything she could ever want, Uptown could never provide her adventure. About five years ago, when Adalia was eight, she'd started to sneak out of Uptown and venture into the city in small doses, testing the waters of Outside Avahim.

It was nothing like she'd expected, it was so much more. Sure it was scary and the people seemed brutish, but she also found the Outside exhilarating and teeming with life. Soon enough she was able to leave on excursions that'd last the whole day. She even had a few favorite places to return to, like the pawn shop. It was nothing like the Uptown

shops. The items for sale were interesting and Adalia found she could spend hours looking at the shelves.

The pawn shop was the place she met Elyot. He was a year younger than her but they had started a conversation about a magazine on the continent's creatures and a friendship was instantly formed.

Elyot continued looking throughout the store, hoping he'd find something cheap. He had scraped up a few wires and an antenna so he was determined to get Adalia a gift. He just didn't know what.

Suddenly a woman appeared beside him, causing Elyot to jump backwards in surprise. She was tall with silky blonde hair and eyes so mesmerizing he couldn't tell their true color. She dressed like an Outsider, but the clothes didn't look right on her. She was too... perfect to fit the image.

"Give her this." Her voice was eerily angelic. She handed him a small clear box with something wrapped in velvet inside. He took the box from her without question and she was gone.

Elyot stood there stunned with the box in his hands for a moment before taking the box up to the counter. He tossed the wires and antenna on the counter and the cashier told him, "Good choice." He was starting to wonder what was inside when Adalia walked up to him.

"What's that?" She asked, tilting her head.

Elyot handed it to her and said, "For you." A guilty look spread across her face as she shook her head. Elyot held his hand up, insisting.

She hesitantly took the box and unearthed the object. It turned out it was a ring with a shiny black rock. He had to admit it was pretty and couldn't help but feel proud of himself even though he had almost no involvement.

Her eyes lit up as she slipped it onto her finger and admired it. "I love it so much!" She hugged him before continuing, "I actually got you something too."

Adalia pulled the book of drawings from behind her back as if from thin air and handed it to Elyot. He opened and closed his mouth, at a loss for words. Then a thought occurred to him.

Had Adalia encountered the same woman?

Emily Clark

Object 64: Gold lock

If Only I Had a Key...

My name is Alek Fajal and I am twenty years old. I live in the Nyika Islands on an island called Matu. The city of Inverati sometimes stops by to get supplies they need or to trade. I live with my mother, Peoni, and three younger siblings. My sister Mali is seventeen and helps our mom with her work at the hospital. Qorli is my ten year old who loves to play sports with her twelve year old brother Raki who also loves to read. I work in the mine, which is where about half of the men work. Our island specialize in mining and furs.

“Hey, Alek! Shift’s over, let’s head up,” the foreman says.

“Okay, I’m on my way,” I respond, grabbing everything I brought with me. Once we all have gathered our belongings, we get in the elevator box and go to the surface. When we get to the top, we get out and head our separate ways to our homes. On my way home, I feel a pair of eyes burning through my back. I turn to see if there is someone watching me, but I only see the backs of my coworkers on their ways to their homes. I shake the thought from my head and continue on my way home.

As I come near my house, I see Qorli and Raki throwing a ball back and forth, trying to see how long they can keep catching the ball. Once they see me, they immediately drop the ball and run up to me. They tackle me with a bear hug while laughing, causing me to laugh with them while we all fell to the ground.

“Welcome back!” They both yell as they sat up still on top of me.

“Thanks you guys,” I replied back. But then said, with a mockingly annoyed tone, “Now could you get off of me!” They giggle but still got

up and helped me stand, knowing that I was tired from working all day. The three of us walk into the house and see that Mom and Mali are making dinner.

“What are we having for dinner, Mom?” I ask as I head to my room to get some clothes to change into once I take a shower.

“Roasted Zvaris and radishes,” Mom replies while pulling everything out of the oven.

“Why don’t you got take a shower and then we can eat?” my sister Mali suggested.

“I was planning on it,” I reply. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” With that, I got to the bathroom and turn on the shower. I take all my clothes off and throw them in the laundry basket. Once the water is warm enough, I get in the shower.

I start washing my body and notice that the strange feeling from before has returned, the feeling of being watched. I look out of the window in the shower and notice that like before there was no one there except for the few creatures and plant life outside the window. After I finished washing everything and I have dried off, I got out and changed into fresh clothes. I go to the dining room and see that the table is set and see Qorli and Raki waiting for the food to come out of the kitchen so I joined. Almost as soon as I sat down, Mom and Mali bring out the food and set it on the table. They sit down and we say a prayer to the gods. When we have finished our prayer, we start eating. We eat quickly and quietly, although a few stories and laughs are shared. Once we have finished eating, everyone heads to bed except me because it was my night to do the dishes. I still have the feeling that I am being watched. I go outside to see if there is someone watching and see that someone is running away from a collection of bushes near the house.

I run after suspecting that this person has been watching me all day. From what I could see in the dark, it was a man who was taller and browner than me but I still followed. He ran into an abandoned building. I wondered why he was going into the building as I stopped at the door to peek through and see which direction the mystery man was going. Once he turned the corner, I followed him and did same thing I did at the door, peeking around the corner to see which

direction he was going. I did the same thing all the way up to where he stopped on the third floor. I stayed behind a wall so he couldn't see me. He started towards the stairs on the other side of the room and I followed him. Once I was on the stairwell, I was suddenly grabbed from behind. I was then dragged back out of the stairwell on the same floor and thrown onto the ground. I heard two clicking noises and looked up to see that the mystery man had put a lock on the only doors exiting this floor. I stood up and started questioning the man.

"Why have you been following me? What do want? Do you want money? If that's what you want I don't have much." I was furious at this man but also curious as to what he wanted.

"I don't want your money," the mystery man finally spoke with a rough and husky voice. "I want you to suffer." His statement confused me but I didn't have time to respond. He attacked me and pinned me to the ground, knocking the wind out of me. He grabbed a pile of rope and bound my hands. He dragged me over to a brick column. Forcing me to stand, he pushed my back against the column. Then he proceeded to beat me and break several bones. I felt each bone break as the man continued his assault on me. I could have escaped. If only I had a key.....

Seth Etchells

Object 15: Miniature life preserver ring on a rope

It was approaching dusk, and the first moon had already risen. Alya was climbing down from the canopy to retrieve her bag when she saw the note. It had been tucked into the top of her satchel, nestled in between the Iswei plants that she'd been gathering and the incense sticks to keep the Wythcrura away, with only the very top corner poking out. Her expectations had been fairly low before she looked closely, probably just another note from Dima, asking her to attend the Atus Day celebrations with him. She'd go, just to see if she made another appearance, but it wouldn't be with him. She'd been considered just throwing it into the water when she noticed quality of the paper. It wasn't just written on the back of a food card, or even the flimsy parchment you could request from the depot that he'd left for her last time. It was the kind found in The Centre, the kind used for the lavish artworks that had been on display the last time she'd bothered joining the rest of her class on a visit. Alya glanced around her, checking that no one was close by, not that that was likely; she always went as far as she could while still being able to make it back for curfew. She snatched it up, glanced around again, and opened it.

Alya

The tide will rise.

We will meet near the house of the Dryfoot
when the second moon rises tomorrow

You will know the house by the mark it bears.

Viansola will guide us.

They will guide us.

Beneath the message was a symbol, a circle, surrounded by a second, thinner circle with a point. She let out the breath that she barely realized that she'd been holding. Her heart pounded in her chest. There was no doubt about whom 'She' referred to. It had to be a trap, she thought. Nothing that had sounded this good, this perfect had ever been anything but a lie. But for it to be a trick or a trap or a deception, the Subversion Agency had to know. And they never waited. She would have been taken already. Maybe. Unless they were breaking pattern to throw people off. Or it was a test. That if she went she'd be taken and she was supposed to hand it in. Not that that was really an option: if it wasn't a test she'd be dead and she'd have given up the people who had been trying to do something.

She had to go, Alya thought. It was reckless and dangerous. She had to know whether it was real. It would mean going out past curfew. She'd done it before, and she'd be doing worse. The agency might kill her. They'd find a reason sooner or later. Her mother would hate her. Her mother could go down. To see the figure again, maybe even up close, she'd risk anything in a heartbeat, just for a chance.

When she had read the letter there could be no doubt about who it referred to at the end.

She could still remember the intake of breath when the creature had stepped into the hall where the celebration had been taking place. It was if the whole world had stopped, that nothing else existed but the figure. The crowd had parted almost instinctually as she stepped forward. Alya had been at the back of the room, leaning against the pillars where the highest seats in the stadium met the roof of the building, away from the bright electric lights and the unnatural shadows they cast. Even from her distant vantage point, it had been clear that the woman who had strode in with such confidence, in such a brazen disregard for the established order that even the most complacent among the gathered students felt the inherent challenge to those that ruled. She'd moved slowly up until she'd reached the pair of guards at the edge of the platform, and they'd finally reacted pointing their spears at her. Alya hadn't been entirely sure how it had happened but there had been a flash, and the two guards had been dead, blood

spurting from their necks, leaving her free to step up onto the stage, and approach the stuttering official. Just moments before she had been assured in her position, preaching to a largely compliant crowd of the graduating classes about the good of the city, and how all jobs were important to survive, and now, now she stumbled backward, her foot catching on something out of sight falling back. The woman, Alya now noticed the clothing that she was wearing, more beautiful than any she had seen before, even when visiting the center. She reached down with one hand, grasping the collar of the official, holding a slender blade. She looked around the room, observing the crowd, and Alya. Her heart had pounded as for just a brief moment; their eyes had met, before her gaze had moved on. Then she leaned in close and whispered something into the speaker's ear, before cutting her throat. The crowd finally broke at that, mostly scrambling to the exit with a few brave or stupid or enthralled individuals heading towards the figure. She'd ran until she reached home, and had wanted to run further, but some part of her was cautious enough to realize that breaking curfew on a night like this was potentially fatal, as opposed to the beatings that were usually given. She'd dreamt of that brief glimpse of perfection that night. And the next night. And the next. And the next. Alya could scarcely recall a night when that figure hadn't existed in her dreams. She had to go. She had to see her again. Viansola. She had to see Viansola.

Amy Gardiner-Parks

Object 13: Large wooden spoon bowl

Everett raced through the market head held high, eyes fixed forward, barely blinking. He wove through the bustling crowd giving no heed to the Vailarians around him. In, out, in, out. The boy ducked under arms, and stepped over slimy wythcrura. He dodged barrels sloshing with various fowl smelling sea things, and wriggled through a throng shouting incomprehensible profanities. All the while clutching a small object to his chest, as if it were his own heart he held in his grubby fingers.

“Watch where yer goin’ ankle biter!” A man shouted angrily from somewhere behind Everett, but the boy didn’t care. He had only one thought in his mind. He had to save his mother. He had to find a cure.

Everett stumbled his way free of the bustling market and emerged into the splendor of the main city. Small skyscrapers towered over him casting needle like shadows at his feet. Holographic glass shimmered in the sunlight, sending rainbow refractions onto the pavement where it appeared to dance with a myriad of colors. And still the boy did not falter. His feet continued to beat the ground, an indomitable rhythm pounding through his body with no intimation of ceasing. His mother was all he had left. And he was her last hope.

As Everett ran past the luminescent buildings a surge of fierce anger rose from deep inside him. Anger at the Ara. Anger at the world. And anger that there were people living like kings in these sparkling fortresses while his mother lay in a cot dying.

Without thinking the boy drove his fist as hard as he could into the nearest structure. Glistening shards of silvery glass erupted from where Everett’s knuckles struck the surface as a needle-thin crack snaked its way skyward. He let out a beast-like scream of frustration before running off once again. He hardly noticed the throbbing of his hand

or the splinters of glass that remained trapped in his flesh. He kept running. His chest burned and his legs ached, but he kept running.

The boy had a crumpled map in his pocket, quickly scribbled by his mother with shaking hands. But he knew where he was going; he had been there before, though his mother was unaware of this. She couldn't know. She couldn't know what Everett had sacrificed for her, it would only bring more pain. And although the boy was terrified there was nothing he wouldn't do for his mother.

Suddenly, Everett stopped. For the first time since leaving his mother's side, the boy wavered. The multi-colored buildings had faded, replaced instead by cement shacks. The outsides of these pitiful hovels were weathered and cracked. Carnivorous fungi climbed the sides of the small structures, snapping up any unsuspecting insect that was unfortunate enough to crawl near. Children and beggars ambled aimlessly amongst each other, one just as bedraggled and dirty as the next. Pickpockets and crooks dawdled in the shadows, draped in loose rags to conceal their weapons. Everett shivered, for some reason this place made him feel uneasy, like he was being watched, examined as if he were prey. He gulped in a mouthful of air and quickly walked towards the city's harbor.

The trek seemed to drag on for hours. Everett's back prickled as if the eyes of those around him were piercing his skin. He tried to shake off his feelings of apprehension but his heart continued pounding and his palms grew slippery with sweat. He pulled the wooden object in his hands closer to his body, almost like he thought it could protect him from harm.

"Excuse me?" a small voice whispered behind him. Everett turned and his eyes met the scared brown ones of an impoverished girl. She looked to be around his age, maybe 16 or so, but her skin was darker and the sorrow in her face made Everett's stomach churn. He knew it was wrong but there was nothing he could do, nothing he could give her, so he turned away and ran. Guilt and desperation mixed together in the boy's body and he began to feel sick.

Everett swallowed his discomfort and continued towards the dock, but his strides were no longer swift or confident. His essence sagged under the weight of his choices, the ones he had already made, as well

as the ones he had yet to make. He was scared and confused and he wasn't sure if his sacrifices were even worth it. But he knew he had a choice. A choice between watching his mother die, and risking his own life to save hers.

As Everett neared the harbor the smell of stale fish and urine assaulted his nostrils and he could taste salt in the air. The ramp leading down to the dock was slippery from wythcrura residue and a variety of other unpleasant sea substances. Vendors called out to the boy while he trudged down to the boat yard, trying to sell charms and spells to ward away the Ara. He barely heard them. Everett's mind was fully focused on the task at hand. He looked around, checking to make sure no one was watching. Then the boy swung himself over the ramps barrier and disappeared.

Everett landed with a thunk, emerging into the city's underbelly. It smelled of smoke and unspeakable evil. The boy got a sudden chill and shivered with apprehension.

"Well wouldya look what the wyth dragged in." A figure chuckled from the shadows, his face concealed by a ragged hood.

"If it isn't our little pal Rett." Another man spat as stalked up behind the boy.

Everett froze. He knew that voice.

"Ajhtahag," he snarled.

The man sneered, "Oh please, don't look so happy to see me."

His voice was sour. Like milk left out for too long, curdled and fowl. It made Everett want to run.

Ajhtahag grabbed the front of the boy's shirt, pulling him so close Everett could see every pore.

"After all, you do know what happens to little boys who don't pay on time," he hissed.

Everett whined and pulled away from the man's grasp. "Please," he whispered, "I couldn't find anything valuable."

"Maybe you should've looked harder."

It felt as if there were a zveris sitting on Everett's chest, crushing his lungs, trapping him. He couldn't breathe.

"My mother needed me." The boy gasped, "I couldn't leave her alone." Again he fought for air, head spinning, lungs tightening.

"Please... you have to understand... I couldn't-"

"Enough excuses, boy." Ajhtahag growled, "You either pay up, or face the consequences."

Everett extended the object towards his tormentor as if ripping a part of his own substance away. In his hands lay a small wooden spoon, the handle intricately carved in the shape of a fish. It was simple, but quite captivating.

"This-this is all I have," He stuttered brokenly. "It's been in my family for years and-"

He was interrupted by an almost feral cackle. Ajhtahag's eyes flashed with amusement and anger as he snatched the heirloom from the boy's fingers.

"You thought you could repay me with this worthless piece of trash? Do you take me for a fool?" he shrieked.

Hot tears spilled from the boy's eyes as Ajhtahag flung the spoon into a wall where it shattered.

"Please..." he begged. But it was too late.

A pair of arms grabbed him on each side and held him immobile. Everett tried to break free but the figures holding him were too strong.

"...please..."

Then came the first blow. Followed by a second. Third. Fourth. The boy lost count. Again, and again, and again. They kept coming. Everett didn't know who was hitting him, all he knew was burning agony.

Then it stopped. The arms encircling his form released him. Everett fell to ground, gasping and choking on blood. He was drenched in sweat and shaking uncontrollably. The boy tried once again to speak, but he couldn't get his mouth to work. Stars danced across his vision as Ajhtahag pulled back his hair and sneered.

"Goodbye, little pal."

Everette felt his body sink beneath the water, but he was too weak to swim. His whole body ached and he couldn't remember which way was up. The last thing Everett thought before the world faded was that he had failed.

Allen Hank

Object 29: Red, black and white heart charm ribbon necklace

My name is Jinni. In my world, everything was pretty nice. I lived a rather happy life, even if the world around me was in panic. I lived in a neighborhood that was for political leaders only. I didn't understand it, so it didn't matter. All this changed would change very soon.

When I was a little kid my mother would always leave during the middle of the night. I was told by my father she had an "important" job. I would then shrug it off because it meant nothing to me. I didn't comprehend that I was very fortunate to have such a rich family.

When I was 13, my innocence was snatched from my arms when my mother was kidnapped by these men. My father tried to stop them but they had guns and he had a kitchen knife and he knew that it would be his duty to raise me. They were in one place for an instant and then they were gone the next. It was like magic. I still don't know why they took her. I made a vow that day: to find my mother once again.

After they took my mother, I felt empty inside. The only thing I had left of her was this peppermint-colored, heart necklace. It was so pretty and it had such a meaning to me that I had to keep it with me. Then the worse of the worst happened.

Weeks passed and I was still struggling with my mother's kidnapping. I woke up one morning after a terrible night sleep to a loud boom. People shouting, babies crying, smoke was everywhere. It was so bad, I couldn't breathe. Then, a few hours later a yellowish-green haze approached the gaggle of shouting people. Then we heard a siren go off. I heard these sirens go off all the time in drills. But this was no drill. Rantira had attacked us. They came in with sleeping gas and then while we were asleep they tied us up and took us to a prison deep in the heart of Rantria.

I awoke to a terrible headache. Everyone was gone and there was a loud humming noise. Then there was a loud shout of a woman.

“DON’T TAKE HIM!” she exclaimed. “He is all I have.”

Then there was a loud ping and everything was silent.

The officers came into my room next. They began yelling at me in their own language. I couldn’t understand what they were saying at all. They then began to speak to me in extremely butchered English.

“Who am you?” the grizzled looking officer said, strolling into my officer like he just won the lottery. I began to laugh at his terrible grammar. “THIS IS NO JOKE!” he hollered and I immediately stopped laughing.

“I am Jinni,” I respond. “Why did you take me?” He then hits me and shouts at me in his language. Then realizing I don’t speak his language he straightens up and translates.

“You ask no,” He said. But I could feel the rage boiling in me. I had never been hit before. He would be the first on my hit-list.

The interrogation seemed to last for hours. I then noticed his keys. I decided, when he was turning around, I would grab them and stab him with them.

“Thanks for playing,” He said, turning around while I stifled a laugh and snuck behind him. I snatched his keys, but they were clipped to his belt. He then fell to the floor and grunted. I then climbed on his chest.

“You will never hurt anyone again.” I then unclipped his keys and stabbed him in the chest. I saw the life leave his body. It was the culmination of all the rage in my body that was taken out on this one person. I then began to feel tears running down my face. I had killed a person. *What if he had a family? What if he had a little girl like me?* I had to keep going although because I had a burning desire to find my mother and father. Something told me that they were in this complex.

I began unlocking rooms and I found horrible things, shocked prisoners, corpses, toys, and even scrap parts of factories. But not my parents. I was starting to lose hope. As I checked the final room, I found a trap door. As I opened the door, I was petrified. I was horrified. Dismembered bodies were hanging from the ceiling and the floor was

flooded with blood. I then saw, in the corner, a woman sobbing. It was my mother.

“Oh God,” I said meekly.

“I missed you,” She replied. “I have seen...” her eyes wander “I saw things. Who are those people behind you?”

“These are the people who were caught with us. We are free know though. The door is over there. If we are quick, we can make it,” I said.

“I am done. I can’t,” she said as she lifts up her hand to show a huge hole in her stomach.

“Where is father?” I inquired. She just shakes her head. I began fighting the tears.

“I have this for you,” I said. I then pull out the necklace.

“I am surprised... surprised you have...it”

“Let me get you some water.”

“It won’t matter... nothing does. Goodbye.” And then she’s gone.

“All of you need to leave,” I whispered. “I am done... Broken... bye.”

“Come with us. We owe you our lives,” said one of them with the rest of them nodding in approval.

“No, I am done,” I said with tears now streaming down my face.

That was the last thing I remember.

Maya Homziak

Object 16: Black foam numeral 8

Eight was having a particularly bad day. Not because she lived in Avahim, the crime capital of Vailara, or because as the highest number all the lowers gave her the nasty jobs, but because she was *bored*. Usually, there was all sorts of lovely mischief an unsupervised scrawny urchin girl could get into without even leaving the rundown building she lived in with numbers Seven through One, but today nothing was working out. Ugh. She poked idly at her pet wythcrura's mantle and it squeaked in irritation, air sacs pulsing as it breathed. It seems even Cheep was having a bad day. He was her partner in crime, a bad-tempered trained cephalopod who liked to hang from the carved wooden number eight dangling from the doorframe. He enjoyed snatching things off people, and the doorframe was the perfect location for a tiny wythcrura's nefarious plots. Most days Eight preferred his company over that of other people, especially since he was always ready to go along with a plan.

There was a loud thunk from above, and dust rained down from the ceiling. Cheep released his perch and flopped onto her arm, settling comfortably on her palm and glaring at the source of the dust. Four and Five must be fighting again, and if this was like the other times they wouldn't be stopping any time soon. The creaky wooden construction of the house they lived in was absolutely terrible, and all the Number Children complained about it except One (and nothing changed because One was in charge). Coughing from the dust, she scooped up Cheep and stepped into the gloomy hall. Eight scuttled through the warren of hallways towards the street, avoiding piles

of garbage as she went. Her foot caught on the stoop as she finally emerged from the maze of rundown apartments and she hurtled face first into the ground. Her arms were occupied by Cheep, but instead of dropping the tiny cephalopod to catch herself she held him out in front even as her own face met the platform with an ugly thunk. The grimy deck that kept Avahim afloat on its great pontoons stank of fish and too many people. All of a sudden, Cheep screeched as a foot made contact and launched him straight out of Eight's hands and into the air! The foot was attached to a very tall person with a dark hood over their face, and an air that sent chills running down her spine. Eight's common sense was screaming at her to get out of their way, but that was not going to stop her from giving this jerk a piece of her mind for kicking her Cheep! All four feet of her puffed up with righteous fury and she began to peel herself off the ground.

"Oh...excuse me!" Eight froze, and their anger fled like a flame hit by cold water. The person had bent down and was holding out a hand to help her up. From this angle, Eight could see their face, and it chilled her to the core. It was neither male nor female, and it frightened her. Too perfect and icy pale, like a porcelain doll nobody thought to paint. Even the way the creature moved was unsettling, alternating between jerky and too smooth to be human. The hooded figure pulled her up anyway, and while Eight stood frozen it glided over to Cheep and carefully lifted him off the ground. They handed him back to Eight, somehow expressing mild concern with only their large empty eyes. "Is he alright? I do not know much about the wythcrura, I cannot tell."

Eight glanced at Cheep. He seemed fine if a little cranky, and was still a healthy dappled green color. "Probably?" The hooded figure simply stared back at her, expressionless and completely still. Cheep crawled up her arm and situated himself comfortably around her neck, peering out from behind the curtain of her tangled hair. "If you want to know more about them, I can tell you. They're pretty much pests around here. One question though, what are you?"

The figure's lips curved up slightly. "I am a child of the Library. Your people call us the Dexin. I accept your offer to teach me about the wythcrura."

Eight's mouth dropped open and her hand drifted up to stroke Cheep's mantle. "Oh, o-ok," she stuttered, "We should go to the market then. There are wythcrura all over there; the vendors practically have to beat them off the produce!" She turned and scurried into the twisting alleyways of Avahim. Eight halfway hoped the Dex wouldn't follow, but the soft sound of alien feet followed her into the shadows nonetheless.

Ella Kelly

Object 61: Button with heart design.

THE BLUE EXPERIMENT

We're all unique; not one of us matches the other completely. This is a universal truth understood and passed on to one another as a source of inner perseverance. This one universal truth is supposed to make up for the deformities that each of us carry. I live without sight. A deformity that isn't common amongst Vailarians and is often disputed as a deformity at all. Most have an extra limb or two, extra eyes, extra joints, and or extra things in general. Most deformities don't take away.

In honor of this one universal truth, I don't absorb the downfalls to no sight, only the somewhat positives. I find myself incredibly fascinating because along with the white *soul piercing* eyes, I have elongated fingers and toes, and a highly developed sense of hearing. My alien friend, Dane, calls me *interesting*, even though my name is Blue, because I'm apparently so interesting that I need "to be experimented on."

Although I have never seen Dane, I'm well aware of his overwhelming beauty that normally would manipulate my species, the Vailarians, into partaking in his experiments and stories. But since I cannot see his beauty, I am not affected by it. When I ask him what he thinks of the universal truth of "uniqueness", he usually tells me that it's just a bunch of space hooey that Vailarian parents tell their children as to get them through the years of being bullied. My reply is always along the lines of: "Well my parents never told me that, and neither did Granvailara. And you're not from here so you wouldn't know what my parents had or had not told me. You're from your Ubuntu, or the Ara spaceship in the sky, not here, how would you know?"

I usually get an exasperated sigh from him. He tires of me quickly and often runs off to do other things that he tells me are experiments for stories. I wish he would tell me his stories, but he never does. He tells me that they aren't for people like me, only people like him. Granvailara is kinder to me than Dane. She says that Dane is just different than us, which I know, and that he has a different set of priorities than we do. She says that her and I play a little game of "Keep a Secret". I don't exactly know what the secret is, but I assume it has something to with Dane being a Dex instead of a Vailara and us two being the only two that know that he lives here with us. Sometimes I think the secret may be about the communicator button I found in the orchards. Either way I keep both secrets under my tongue and behind my teeth.

Each day when I wake up and go out into the cold, snowy city to get to the apple orchard under the warm greenhouse, Granvailara sends Ander, an orphan older than me, with me. He's from The Republic of Lvantstadt, instead of Avahim, like me. He usually talks when he picks the apples and throws them into my bag. I like the way the bag gets heavier as each apple gets tossed in. He says he's glad that Granvailara adopted us for labor and brought us to Inverati when she couldn't keep up with the orchard on her own anymore. He says that her real children left for smaller floating islands where they thought they could better connect to their roots. Since we don't go to school, Ander tells me what he's overheard throughout the cities to keep me entertained.

He says that before we were alive, more Vailarians were. They lived on all of the continents that became inhabitable after the radiation from the biologic and chemical warfare turned our pets into larger more carnivorous beings. We created three floating stationary cities: Inverati, The Republic of Lvantstadt, and Avahim, which were later invaded by Dane's species, the Ara. When I ask Dane about the invasion he says that they didn't mean to cause alarm amongst the natives, but it wasn't exactly easy when the Dex, the story collectors, needed to create stories and gather information on our capacities of emotion since they had none.

Dane says that I'm part of one of his stories. He talks about my button and how it's actually from his planet. He says that it's older though

because none of the buttons have black heart designs with red circles anymore. He says it must have been from when his species was first surveying us eight years ago. One of the Dex must have snuck down to get a closer look. He says it was a communicator in disguise, but that mine no longer works. It makes me sad because I can't talk to Dane from far away like I wish I could.

Sometimes when I'm really lucky though, Dane will ask me questions or tell me to describe things to him. He calls it "Gathering Data" and I call it "Ask and Answer." Usually he asks me these questions in this order:

"Do you feel anything?"

"How do you feel?"

"How do you know you feel that emotion?"

"Why do you feel that emotion?"

"Who made you feel that emotion?"

"How can I feel that emotion?"

"When should I feel that emotion?"

I don't really understand why he asks *me* those questions. I never know how to explain the emotions to him, and almost always simply tell him that you just know what you feel when you feel it. When I ask him why he can't answer them himself, he tells me it's for my story and so it wouldn't make sense for him to answer them. I've asked Dane if he was writing down my story and drawing it out like in the picture books that Granvailara describes to me. He says that he doesn't write those types of stories; he writes them without the pictures.

I've often wondered into the kitchen or overheard a conversation between Granvailara and Dane in the living room. I hear them talking about my story. Granvailara tells Dane that she doesn't want him to share my story, that he has no right to experiment on me this way. I don't know how one defines an experiment, but Granvailara doesn't seem to appreciate that I'm a part of Dane's. Dane says he needs it to survive, that it's his *necessity* to gather this information. Granvailara doesn't usually stand for it and threatens Dane with turning him into the people of Inverati.

Sometimes I wonder how Granvailara withstands the overwhelming perfection of Dane. I've asked her this more times than I can count on all my fingers and toes. She says that she travelled to Avahim once

and asked a secret man for a way to withstand the Dex's beauty so she couldn't be manipulated. She came back to Inverati with 25 less items of technology than she left with, because that's the currency there, and a pair of glasses that do exactly what she asked for. I don't know why Granvailara dislikes Dane so much, or his stories and experiments. Sometimes I think I'm just too young to understand, or that maybe since I haven't completely embraced my uniqueness that I can't understand. But other times I figure that there's a larger, more complex story behind the hatred than what meets my eyes.

Riley Michlowitz

Object 32: Small brown leather change purse

Living in the Republic of Lvantstadt is not as luxurious as it may seem when the whole city is split between the wealthy and the poverty-stricken. The people like me who live on the outer circle are penniless. We live on the rickety hand-made land, in small houses, and we have to scour for resources just to get our bare necessities. Unlike us, the wealthy live lavishly in the center of the city where the ground is more solid, and they are given anything they want.

“Kamala! C’mon, if we wait any longer there won’t be anything left for us to take to the trading posts!” my dad shouts from the door. It’s been him and me ever since Mother passed away when I was five. Since then, I’ve been helping him rummage for resources to bring to the trading posts to earn money for our simple food and water necessities

“I’m coming,” I say while braiding my long wavy brown hair. I look at my face in the cheap wooden framed mirror in my room that has a small, but noticeable crack through the center, and sadly, I have the darkest of circles under my eyes. I grab my red bag; though it’s small, it can fit several items. I run out the door towards the water crops that surround the city. Just past the water crops, there is Rantria, the continent, where we can find most of the resources in the area.

As we make our way home from the hunt, I see a small boat gliding on the horizon making its way toward the city. We’ve never had visitors come to Lvantstadt before, or at least not in my lifetime of 16 years.

“Dad?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Do you see that boat near the horizon?” I gesture towards the water.

"Yeah, visitors I guess," he exclaims as we reach the city's border. Once we step back onto the unsteady surface, we make our way to the trading posts to get our rations; we get about enough to last us the week.

Our home is the closest to the water so we have a vivid view of the iridescent dark blue ocean that lies before us. Looking through the foggy, almost plastic-like window in my small living room, I can see that the boat is almost to the city. Judging by the direction from which the boat came, the visitors must have come from Avahim, a city on the west side of the planet.

Closer. Closer. Closer. The boat creeps up towards the border of the city. I'm able to get a better look at the boat; it looks as if it was handmade by driftwood found along the shore.

"Dad! The boat is almost to the city."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's headed in our direction. I think there are about three people on it," I say, squinting to see through the foggy darkness.

Dad walks up beside me looking out our front window. "I wonder why they're here. I don't ever remember having visitors come to the city," Dad claims as he opens our front door and walks towards the city's edge.

I follow after him, making sure to close the door behind me. As I walk toward the water, where the newcomers have pulled up next to the boundary, Dad reaches down and helps the strangers tie up their makeshift boat.

We help them off their raft and onto the slightly steadier ground. "Thank you," the older man says. He looks as if he's in his late thirties. He turns to look at the woman standing next to him, "This is my wife Adrina Haugen and my son Dane Haugen, and I am Holt. We come from Avahim."

"Welcome to Lvantstadt. I'm Alek Havorsen and this is my daughter Kamala" Dad says gesturing to me.

"It's nice to meet you! Let's get you inside, it's chilly out here," I suggest as I turn to lead the new family towards the house.

Inside, I go into the kitchen and pour five small glasses of water. Dad walks into the kitchen just as I am finishing. Dad says, "I was thinking, if they plan to stay in Lvantstadt then they should move into one of the neighboring vacant houses."

"That's a good idea," I say, grabbing the tray of glasses. "Who knows, maybe we will have new neighbors!" I nudge Dad on the arm before returning to the living room where the newcomers were standing.

"Your hospitality is remarkable compared to the people in Avahim," Adrina comments taking a glass from the tray. I glance at Dane to see that he had finished his water in a matter of two gulps.

"How long have you guys been traveling?" I question.

"Six days," Holt replies, after a large gulp of water.

"Wow, glad you arrived when you did. Why did you leave?"

"Well, Dane is reaching the year of his independence and we didn't want him to start a family in Avahim, because it's too dangerous." Adrina explains. That must mean Dane is seventeen. His short brown hair, finely chiseled jaw, and green eyes giveaway his age. I'm only five foot five, so he certainly towers over me as he must be at least six feet tall.

"I don't blame you. I wouldn't want Kamala living there either," Dad agrees. "Lucky for you all, there is a vacant furnished lodge just next door."

"That would be wonderful, thank you so much," Holt exclaims.

"I'll take you over there," I offer standing up and walking toward the door. The Haugens follow behind me to the neighboring house. To no surprise it's open. I hold the door open while they file in behind me. "It's small, but certainly functional."

I brush some dust off the counter in the kitchen and wipe it on my tattered jeans.

"It's perfect, thank you so much," Holt cheers, looking around.

"It's the least we could do. My Father and I get rations by going to the mainland to search for resources to take to the trading posts, so we will take you there in the morning. Sleep well." I turn around toward the door. Once outside the Haugens' new home, I turn around to close the door, but Dane gets there before me.

"Thanks again, Kamala," he says with a sincerity in his eyes.

"Wake up early, and I'll show you around," I say with smile. He nods and flashes the most charming smile.

"Sure," he says as he shuts the door.

Benjamin Wightman

Object 26: Chess Piece

Black Knight

A chisel cut deep into a slab of onyx, a comet shearing through a starless night. It did not shake or shudder as it delved into the stone. Occasionally it would pause briefly, not out of hesitation, but care and precision. It was driven by a strong, meticulous hand that wore its experience in thick callouses.

The hand worked the chisel and the chisel worked the stone, revealing recognizable contours as an artist's paints reveal the pictures lurking within the canvas. The curves of a detailed black tail were exposed, sweeping out behind the powerful muscles of a rearing stallion's legs. The legs of a man clenched the animal's side as it raised its head proudly into the sky, proclaiming its absolute mastery over its kin. Reins pulled on the bridle, held tightly in the hands of an armored warrior who pressed his helmeted head into the stallion's flowing mane.

The horse and rider stood, frozen eternally in preparation for battle on a tiny island of stone with a flat base, placed on a checkered wooden board with others of its kind, gleaming in the sunlight that passed hurriedly through the wide shop window to surround the brilliant black knight. The experienced hands had placed it there, with a soft touch that it knew would be the last.

Then hands found him. Weary hands with thin skin that stretched over prominent veins and knuckles. They wavered but were sure. They gently smoothed the curves of the piece, greedily absorbing the sunlight that had surrounded the knight. The fingers gripped the piece tightly and removed him from his kin on the checkered board.

"I'd like this one." A voice, hollow from long use. Tenuous and firm.

The onyx knight was placed on a cold marble countertop as coins changed hands. Then he was surrounded gingerly by the wavering fingers and taken from his sire.

The knight was given a new home atop an identical checkered board. His latest companions, however, were cut just as adroitly as he, some perhaps more so, from stones deep in the ocean or the tallest peaks or the black glass of a volcano. The knight still stood proud, but could no longer lord himself over his peers.

Yet this board was incomplete. There were not half enough pieces of quality to join the exceptional figures that stood atop this grid of squares of white and black. They would be diminished, ashamed. Wooden mannequins next to marble statues in the halls of kings.

The knight watched from afar as other boards and pieces were used, the confident, apprehensive hands of the old man making every move with care. He bristled every time the hands moved past him, trying to stretch higher, to prove his worth. Without hands to guide him across the board, he was purposeless. Nothing more than black emptiness. Space.

Then one day the hands came to him. They caressed the contours of the knight, softly smoothing the piece as they had the first time they'd held him. Then one hand gripped the piece with the same shaky resolve and carried him away from his companions again.

The shaking hands passed him to those more firm. Strong hands, smoother hands. They too regarded the piece carefully, but they were cautious as well. Not the same reverent respect as the old man's hands, but fear, as if one wrong move would shatter the knight into a thousand glittering onyx fragments. The owners of both sets of hands exchanged no words. They had already said everything there was to be said.

The knight was brought to another board, and brightened with glee as he realized that this one was full. As hands reached for pieces, he relished the moments where he would be free to follow the commands of the fingers that carefully lifted him into the air before setting him down on a space of the opposite color.

One day he was lifted from the board again, this time too high.

The strong hands trembled. Not wavered, as the old hands did, but trembled. The fingers sought out familiar features on the knight, the thumb circling the knight's perfectly curved helm. Then the knight felt himself being offered up again to new hands.

These were different than any he'd encountered before. They were thinner, with glossy red paint shining on well-kept nails. They held the piece eagerly but tentatively, and the horse pricked up his ears to hear the words being spoken.

"This was my grandfather's."

"It's beautiful."

The knight was brought to yet another board, and he grew proud, once again strutting amongst its lesser kin. Here he could often feel the fond gaze of the woman, and he brightened further when the familiar strong hands returned regularly after a time. The knight cantered gleefully into battle in either the woman's or man's fingers.

Then the man's hands were gone. The knight waited patiently for their return, but neither his nor the thin fingers of the woman moved him away from his cold position out of the sun.

He revived himself when thin, elegant fingers came for him again, eagerly preparing to leap over a row of hunched pawns and land gracefully before them. But the fingers held him at their tips, keeping the knight far from the hand. They took him from the board and brought him to new hands. These hands were shorter and thinner than any the knight had ever known. No veins strained against skin to break free. The hands' knuckles were nothing more than small wrinkles. Stubby fingers grasped clumsily at the knight, yet they felt him more intensely than any of their more dexterous predecessors.

"This was your father's." The words were poignant, the voice muted. There was no reply. The short fingers pawed at the knight's face.

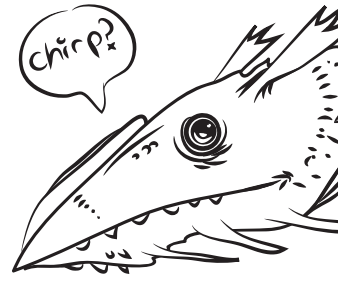
Overtime, the new fingers and hands grew, acquiring deeper lines and scars. As he always would, as he had been created, the knight eagerly charged into battle at the hands' commands.

Then those hands left too, following the example of the knight and their father.

The woman's fingers returned again. They were thinner than before, frailer. They shook as they lifted the knight from the board and placed

him on a long shelf of wood. They said a final goodbye, their last touch a gentle stroke across the horse's head. Their anguish matched the knight's as a door closed, leaving him in darkness, alone.

Forgotten, the knight grew cold.



BESTIARY

David Alexander: The Dalexro is an absolutely fantastic yet incredibly shy sea-blue hippogriff which eats copious amounts of meat, flesh and all. It is enormous but doesn't use it to terrify others, it is incredibly gentle and kind and its sole purpose to comfort and give nourishment to others.

Marianna Allen: The Zorinia is a bright yellow flower, resembling a miniature sun. Its only desire is to attract bees and befriend the gentle creature, but, unfortunately for the Zorinia, its petals are practically dripping with the deadliest poison of all: Sarcasm. Scientists are beside themselves trying to find a cure for its fatal toxin, while the Zorinia, blissfully ignorant of its predicament, blooms brighter with each passing day.

Emma Antonio: The Furgao is a small wine-red, winged, weasel-like creature with bright golden eyes. It is a creature that lives in mostly solitude, with the exception of having one or two companions. It eats a variety of foods, but prefers sweet things. It enjoys hoarding random soft and shiny objects.

Emily Arneson: The Emsie is a rare and quirky type of cat, skittish and wary of strangers and known to avoid groups of people. To find the Emsie approach alone and slowly – for best results, try offering sweets. This cat is known for its small amount of sleep, tendency to stare at nothing for hours, and creative means of self-entertainment. However, the Emsie is best known for its incredible loyalty to those who befriend it.

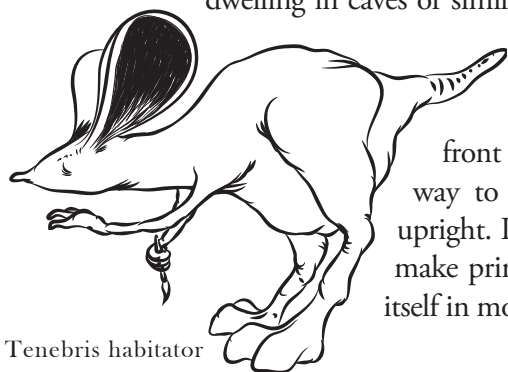
Autumn Ashley: The Lynnx is a creature almost always seen, but never heard, that practices a lifestyle of solitude and darkness in its secluded home. The Lynnx enjoys the taste of grasses and berries much more than that of flesh, and drinks only the iciest of waters. The Lynnx is an odd, two-legged being with a large nose, small paws, an untamable mane, and fur darker than the night sky.

Mia Ballingrud: Mia is a narcissistic but lovable mouse. She likes to think she's intimidating, but she's harmless. She is a fiery red.

Julia Baugh: Maleda is a spirit cat. Its fur is spotted, much like its relative, the snow leopard, that lives in the be-specked Himalayan cliffs. Its fur is draped with jewels like tears, and its cry sounds like laughter. When its cry and the sound of the wind sweeping the jewels mix, the resulting sound is a melody that draws thought and story and echoes them into the night, begging others to let its magic into their hearts. It is a friend to both dragonkind and ghostkind, and it will often feast with them on banquets of meats, finished with desserts of decadent chocolate.

Tayler Benton: The Tortigra is a velvet turtle, richly purple in color, which finds itself inspired when the moon is out. Although shy, the Tortigra is an amiable creature who can be coaxed out of its shell with funny jokes and words of encouragement.

Dylan Boswell: The *Tenebris habitator* is a curious species, primarily dwelling in caves or similarly dark locations. As such, it is

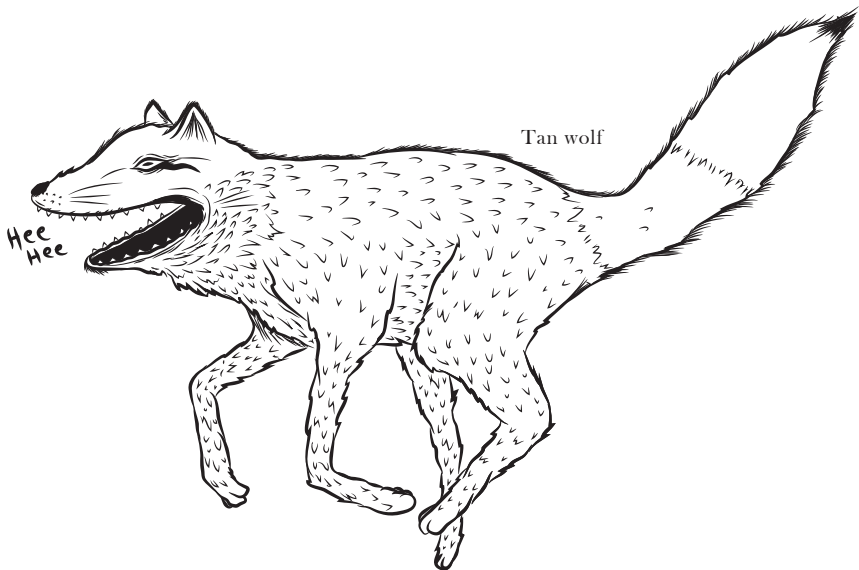


Tenebris habitator

nearly blind, making it easily startled by sudden stimuli. Its hind legs are much larger than its front ones, but are positioned in such a way to discourage standing completely upright. It often scavenges for materials to make primitive cave paintings, and covers itself in moss and fungi to keep warm.

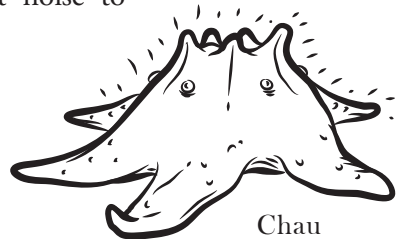
Caroline Brooks: The Aamu is an amethyst-hued owl, and prefers the night to sunshine. Reading and observing everything while gliding smoothly over its dominion. When in low spirits, it can only be appeased with music.

Tristan Buckner: The tan wolf is an odd creature. To someone who doesn't know its ways, it may seem confused. It stays quiet and secluded at first, but once it is at ease it is loud and sociable. Its bark is unnervingly human, almost like a cackling man.



Michael Chau: The Chau is a plump starfish that busies itself in quiet tidal pools, but begins to glow when other fellows drift in. The sounds of crashing waves may be discordant noise to them, but are music to it.

Emily Clark: The Molarf loves music and tap dancing even though she is blind. She is tall and lanky with skin as gray as can be. Her hair flows to her knees and looks like a starry night sky- pitch black with solid white stars scattered across her



long hair. She has been told that even though she is blind she can beautifully navigate a stage while doing a routine. She loves to listen to any type of music and even plays a few instruments herself.

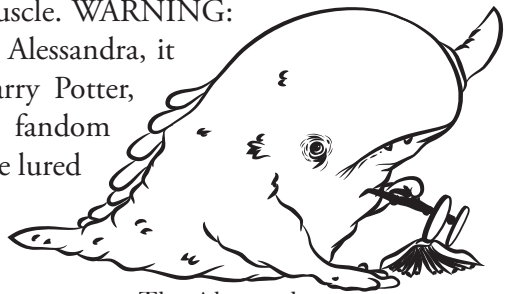
A.J. Davidson: The fuzzy Kinchu resembles a parrot and its face looks older than it truly is. The Kinchu contemplates before decisions, sometimes to the point of hesitation, and loves words in general.

Sarah Donnelly: A brown-feathered creature with large eyes, which somewhat resembles a cat. The animal is known to make long annual migrations, but otherwise prefers to remain stationary. Its behavior is generally non-aggressive, responding passively to those who take notice of it, and it can often be found at home in its nest, resting or carefully watching the skies.

Kaitlyn Dubey: The Kate is a small, bear-like creature with bright eyes and a forked tongue. It has shimmery golden fur and wings of amber, which wrap it in a warm cocoon to protect from frigid temperatures. Its primary source of nutrition is wheat, and it only leaves its den to search for food.

Seth Etchells: The Etchells arrives in the summer from a foreign land as part of its migration every year. Living on an odd diet, its social habits change depending on its mood.

Alessandra Fleisher: The Alessandra is a nocturnal, cave-dwelling creature that only leaves its cave when forced to. It has weak eyes, pale skin, and no muscle. **WARNING:** If spotted, do not approach the Alessandra, it will talk your ear off with Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, and other fandom references. The Alessandra can be lured out of its cave with books, food, or fandom merchandise, but it is not recommended to disturb the beast.



The Alessandra

Gabriel Garcia: The Garcia is a rare type of raccoon, distinguished by its midnight blue fur color. It relies on its intelligence to solve its problems, however, if pushed too hard, it will begin to fight back. Its main interest is its family, and it pursues to complete the task at hand, mainly eating a diet of fruits, insects, and crayfish. It's very precise in keeping order to its den, and though it can be distracted at some points, it will always make up for lost time.

Amy Gardiner-Parks: Bees?

Allen Hank: A small, fuzzy, blind, little animal with the heart of a lion feeding on the vegetation around him.

Ash Haq: A mouse with fur in #AEB6EC.

Connor Hayes: The Elenfare is a curious creature. Always joining herds, packs, and murders alike, though never being in one of its own. It rarely remains still or quiet, always having sporadic yelps and hollers for no particular reason.

Ryan Healy: A Kroef is a lion-like animal that has two spiraling horns that come out of its head. The horns give the Kroef the power to tell when someone is lying. They can change size on command. Kroefs are a lilac color with patches of silver. Large feathered white wings adorn their back, allowing them to go where they want. Kroefs love to travel and explore new places. They eat a fruit called Ginju that gives them the power to spit poison. They are fiercely loyal and will protect their companions until death. Kroefs live in the mountains and can see in the dark. If aggravated they can be a danger, but they will be most dangerous if you attack their companions.

Robin Holcomb: Shifting Dune Man wanders sandy places in the night as a glinting mass trailing behind the vague impression of a human form, all wrought in nebulous particulate. In the pursuit of perfection, it often finds itself poring over its components, searching

for those it finds repellent and strives to purge them from the cloud that constitutes its being. In the meantime, though, it likes to manipulate its body mass into puppet shows for the enjoyment of those around it.

Maya Homziak: Maya is definitely a human. No question there, right? Ignore the whiskers and the tendency to sleep at any given opportunity. All accusations of being a domestic cat are completely false, despite the pointed mobile ears tipped with fluff. Maya the human enjoys eating sushi, listening to electronic music containing far too synthesizer, and tries her best to avoid doing undignified things while other people are watching. Cats don't like these things, do they? They do? What are you talking about? Well, I don't care. They make Maya go to school and do math, and cats don't have to do that!

Danielle Horne: A brilliant creature, but deathly afraid of morning light and water, the skittish Ashdrake is an obsidian-dark dragon with an insatiable sweet tooth. It should not be provoked under any circumstances, for it is terribly sleep-deprived and agitated easily.

Murphy Kalil: The Kalmur is a nocturnal and night-blue cat like creature with shaggy hair and human eyes that is native to Washington D.C. and the surrounding area, but has since migrated to Indiana, New Hampshire, and the Carolinas. It is an omnivore and is sometimes seen sleeping with house cats or wandering around bookstores or libraries. It is lazy and will often wait until the last possible opportunities to do things. However, it usually does what it has to do well.

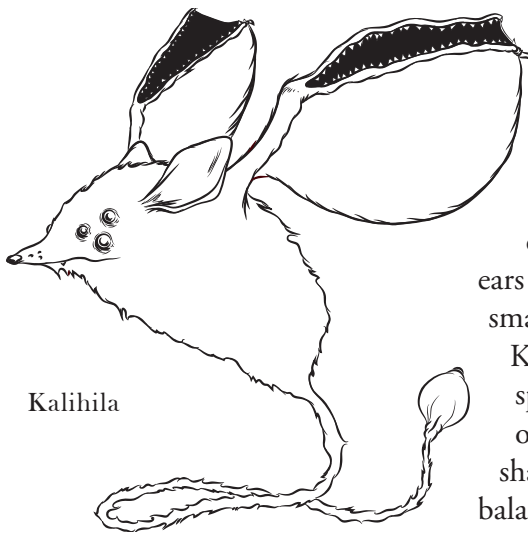
Ella Kelly: The spindly, wide-eyed, feathery Malu, at first glance, appears to be a rather dull creature. However, upon closer examination it has been found that the Malu hides a layer of soft colorful feathers within its dull outer ones. Its eyes are said to spark wonder and a sense of adventure into all those who get close enough to it to gaze into them. The feathery, wide-eyed, spindly Malu, is an unpredictable creature and thrives when given the chance to.

Nina Kimelman: The Pearl is a loud Great Dane that can often be seen lying alone with a book across its paws. It is a joyful and bright creature, known to not be the first to run and play, but rather to eat and bark with its playmates. The creature can be seen cradling a pencil between its nails, but is always ready to have more adventures and fun with its friends and family.

Sarah Kushner: The elusive Suri is a strange beast. It spends most of its time in its lair, coming out only to feed, preferably on something with a fair amount of sugar. The Suri is nocturnal and can become quite violent during the day, particularly in the morning.

Brett Jones: The Brettiteli is a large bird located in the mountains. It's usually solitary, and drawn to bright and creative objects. People believe that the Brettiteli is sentient, and able to understand human emotion.

Molly Jones: A furry, flying, fanged creature with six eyes is no animal to mess with... Just kidding! The Kalihila is a sweet, loving, and adventurous pet. She loves



Kalihila

to eat, because of the mouth on each wing, and, yes, she does have a mouth on her face too. She also has a hound dog nose to sniff out her prey and enormous ears to listen out for it. To catch small insects, which is the Kalihila's main diet, she springs up with the strength of her tail; it has a bulb shape on the end to keep her balance. She may be a little crazy at times, but she will always stay by your side!

Maddy Lee: The average Lee is a reptilian creature of small stature. With an innate need for height, it balances precariously on wooden slabs strapped to its feet. Its four eyes have been described as uncomfortably large, making it seem almost unhinged. When excited, there are known to defenestrate.

Noa Lesche: Dressed in widow clothing the Noa marches on endlessly filling in the morbid questions in her mind with more cynical answers as she copes with the reality that is the messed up society of humanity.

Brook Long: Everyone knew about the Iolanda; this creature tends to roam around after everyone is deep in their slumber. The Iolanda is an irregular and misshaped monster that is covered with slimy skin with patches of black fur on top of that. If someone spots this creature around at night, the Iolanda rolls up in a ball and uses its bad smell to run away any wandering humans. The Iolanda lives in the ocean and eats mostly fish and jellyfish.

Mattie March: The Mamilton tends to reside in a cave for most of the hours of the day. It requires much sleep, but rarely gets enough. It's a quiet, nocturnal creature that will only become aggressive if disturbed. Its diet mainly consists of cocoa and nuts. One can identify it by the dark curly hair that covers its large body.

Alyssa Mazzoli: The AlyKat is a golden retriever that can often be found with its nose in a flower. It mostly eats flowers although it is morally conflicted about this because it really likes flowers. It originated on the world of Serenitus, but has since spread to Suevat Prime, Rigma, and Stryd, and is expected to spread to other worlds in the future. As time passes, it continues to evolve in unexpected ways.

Austin McDuffie: The Perspikaz is a tall, slender beast that often makes a fool out of itself and offends others if only to provoke the laughter of another creature. It is remarkably insightful, for it is born with poor eyesight yet is able to see through walls and tell exactly how

a creature is feeling based solely on its body language. The Perspikaz sometimes moves and acts in a very serious and professional manner, and when it is not it relaxes completely and seems to forget what seriousness is. The Perspikaz is an intelligent and passionate creature, yet its positive attributes can sometimes be overshadowed by its love to make an impression, no matter the cost.

Riley Michlowitz: The Riwolf is a miniature wolf that spends most of its time tucked away in caves for no one to see. Once she becomes brave enough to venture into the unknown and meet other creatures, she is not the shy wolf most beings think she is. As soon as the Riwolf is out and about, she forms a bond with the creatures she sees as friends. Although she is a short and quiet creature, she can be fearsome and loud when something disrupts her territory. She does not like speaking in front of crowds, for she becomes completely still; but she works well with small groups.

Jack Miller: In the great depths of an otherwise uninhabited cave, a salamander, known as Jack, glides about the pond, being sad and alone in the dark. Those who walk by the edge of the cave report poor singing and mediocre ukulele playing.

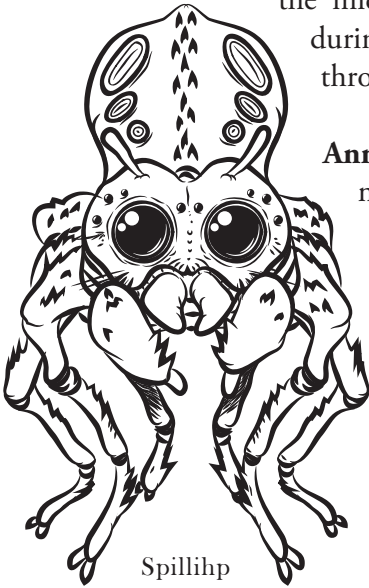


Kayla Moore: The creature known as the Rame, despite its love for the outdoors, can almost indefinitely be found inside, due to its irrational fear of confrontation with the human species. It has an unreasonable obsession with foreign places, primarily Japan, and you can perfectly derive an accurate summary of the being from its name.

Anna Peltomaki: This little beast is a furry creature that is small enough to sit on your shoulders – though it wouldn't do that since it scares everyone

and everything that moves. That's why it thrives in abandoned places such as behind the library's furthest shelf or in shade of trees. Overall, this shy beast is very harmless if you keep your distance; if you come too close, it might say things you better not to hear. Otherwise it really doesn't want to hurt anyone – it's even a vegetarian. It is most creative when it's rainy, twilight and cool, then it may want to leave small traces of itself in drawings. This way it gets enough attention to its taste.

Zoe Phillips: The Spillihp, a cat-sized spider covered in forest green fur lives in the forest-covered mountains. It sleeps during the midday in a cave, and goes into hibernation during the summer. Its long legs help it hike through the forest.



Anna Rau: The Chur Mav is a tiny dark purple mammal that represents a bunny, with very small rounded ears and feathered wings. It is very quiet and enjoys being included in things even if it doesn't talk. However, when the Chur Mav has something it needs to say and wants people to hear it, they will roar to get attention.

Alix Robinson-Guy: The Robin is a peculiar blue nocturnal bird. It collects bits of shiny metal, twisting them around the nest, and has an incredibly loud squawk. Robins tend to live lower to the ground, as to better hunt the little amount of food it needs to eat to survive. They will collaborate, but are primarily solitary birds.

Koral Runge: The Kgeal is a complex creature with many likings and dislikes. For one, the Kgeal is a small creature with short, soft, and fluffy strawberry blonde hairs all over its long (but still small) body and it sheds a lot. Kgeals stop growing after roughly around 12 years and are known to always been born with terrible eyesight (nearsightedness that basically makes them blind) despite their large,

and, typically blue-gray in color, eyes. Kgeals are also known to enjoy quiet and very solitary lives in dark and humble habitats, the dark not helping with their eyesight but a nice and helping factor in the fact that they are nocturnal. Kgeals, however, will faint (like those goats) in instances of being scared from behind, loud noises happening in their ear, being caught in thunderstorms, running out of reading material, or running out of food to eat (although it will die a harsh death if given Brussel sprouts to eat and with prolonged exposure to sunlight and nature in general).

Olivia Russo: The Amati is a small, fluffy mouse with observing hazel eyes. It lives primarily in dark places and will come out only if it smells food. The Amati, though usually docile, has a terrible temper and will screech viciously if provoked.



Rebecca Ruvinsky: The Blischat is a strange, dog-like creature that keeps to herself for the most part. She has a fluffy tail, large ears, and tiny wings that should be impossible to fly with, but somehow she manages. When approached, she will talk in a series of excited yips, but prefers the company of solitary nature. She is rumored to have an enchanting singing voice, but only does so when she believes she is alone.

Kat Sokol: A Kat is a Kat and that is that.

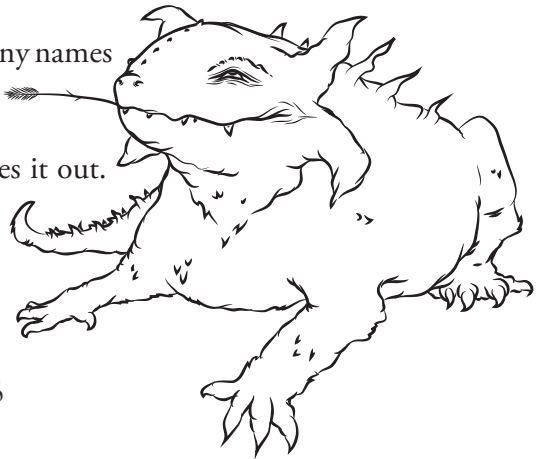
Luke Taylor: The Grey Lukamysis is a gentle giant. With a towering form and blue eyes, it prefers to relax and go with the flow. Somewhat slow at times but quick enough to learn and very creative, the Grey Lukamysis prefers to take the simple solution over the complex one.

G Torrence: G is a large hairy creature with piercing red eyes. Under its outer skin hair are sharp spikes that are used if anyone gets too close. It is able to retract them when it feels safe, however it is not completely trustworthy with others because it always has its razor sharp teeth and claws.

Isabel Townsend: The Einsling is a small, intelligent bird with bright red and orange feathers. It enjoys flying at great altitudes and eating a variety of bugs and berries.

Luke Van Popering: The Acritui Oculi – or the Evening Specter as it is often termed – appears as an ephemeral being, primarily translucent, though seemingly with a capacity to alter its own pigmentation. While encounters with this creature are frankly somewhat rare, it is thought to have a vaguely humanoid form with some reportedly observing the Oculi surrounded by a dark cloak of sorts. It typically resides in relatively warm, humid environs, though it has demonstrated a surprising level of adaption to far colder climes. Oculi also are prone to remain unresponsive to stimuli for extended periods of time with some remarking that this suggests that the creature is perhaps “lost” in thought, though the validity of this theory is currently unknown.

Mattie Ward: This is a creature of many names and expressions. It does not like to go outside, and trying to coordinate meet-ups with other creatures stresses it out. Just let it choose some dessert to eat and nice music to listen to, and it won't bother you at all.



Jessie Watts: The TimmerRat, a quite large species of rodent, is a very strange animal for it collects bells and other metal objects to attach to its pelt. When the TimmerRat walks, it can be heard for miles around due to the overwhelming noise that the many ringing objects create. The TimmerRat is very fond of loud sounds, and often creates them herself.

Ben Wightman: The black-coated wolf is a creature comfortable only in cold environments. It has a strict adherence to a very small pack, though it will often strike out on its own. It has an excellent memory but is frequently distracted. Above all, it prizes devotion to work.

Kevin Wong: In the deepest reaches of the Mint of Legends lies the Evix. The Evix wields not a sword, as he is a pacifist. The Evix utilizes an armored shell to protect him from outside forces.

Evelyn Wright: A dark purple and green shrew like creature with stars in its eyes. A nocturnal creature that purposely puts itself in dangerous positions and is still surprised when it gets scared.



AFTERWORD

WORLD BUILDING MEDITATION

by Will Hindmarch

Most years at Shared Worlds, we discover certain themes or motifs that recur across multiple worlds. This is just what happens when you introduce creative people and ask them to create, in my experience. These motifs might be something in the current cultural air supply (magic-as-science, robots, etc.) or they might be coincidentally simultaneous influences shining through (this year: bioluminescence and pangolins). In 2016, we saw an array of diverse worlds, each with a tenor of its own, reflecting the students' own unique harmonies and visions. Every one of those worlds crackled with potential, with fascinating characters sure to find fantastical adventures.

Every year at Shared Worlds, I walk away from the experience feeling a little bit panicked (in the best way) by how fast the next generation is going to be moving when they lap me. I also come away reeling with an optimistic jolt. Just days earlier, the worlds shared by these students didn't exist. They were atomic components, buzzing in individual heads. Just days later, the students have crafted something singular out of their many imaginations. It's magic.

Every story takes place somewhere. The search for a missing ring might involve sifting the sands of a dead river or dismantling the pipes in your bathroom sink. Fighting for your child's future can mean running through storms toward a national border or fretting out loud to yourself at the kitchen table as you type a letter that gets them medicine. Imagine the dashing heroine who throws a rose toward

her cheering parents in the stands at the jousting tournament. Now imagine she's throwing that same rose toward a wedding from her biplane, swooping low over Bruges fields.

Stories help us speak to each other and understand new friends and old strangers from different perspectives. Fiction is a form of wonder. It doesn't happen in a blank room.

Imagination helps us write and communicate. It helps us understand other ways of thinking, so we can bridge the gulfs between people. We communicate so we can see the world in more ways than just our own and—now this is magical—our stories aren't bound by earthly walls and trappings. We take what we know and we invent new worlds to share.

Think about that: bridges and gulfs, worlds to see, and earthly walls. Physical environments are often vital to understanding ideas and emotions, to relating with each other, to making intuitive sense of complex notions. We imagine that the immaterial is material and we walk around in it. Whether it's as elaborate as a "mind palace" we construct in our memory to recall information or as simple as imagining what it's like inside a building we commute past, imaginary places intersect and touch our real world almost everywhere.

Space is important to exploring our own thoughts—and seeing each other's. Consider two identical dorms or apartments, decorated by two very different residents. How they're decorated and arranged says a lot about the person whose space that is, from the temperature they keep to the stacks of books they mean to put away.

Spaces are therefore important to revealing character, as well. People act on the spaces around them and the spaces they inhabit act back on them. Fictional spaces act not just on their characters, though, but on us as creators and readers. We can speak towers into existence and write cities to life, lifting both out of the blank page. Our voices speak through them, clear as the clapper speaks through a bell.

Let me give you an example:

Someone puts up a poster about a lost cat named Gertrude. The poster is a murky Xerox copy, and the cat pictured on the poster is all black splotches and bright eyes. The poster is marked with a phone number and a hashtag (#findgertrude, maybe). Bold text reads

“Reward If Found.”

Annie walks past the poster and, glimpsing it, thinks of her childhood cat. His name was Milton. She keeps her eyes peeled for Gertrude but doesn’t see her. Getting home, Annie looks at a couple of old photos of Milton and writes a song about him. Annie plays it at an open mic and makes new friends.

Meanwhile, Douglas sees the missing-cat poster on the day after he’s lost his job at the paper mill and decides he’s got time and could use a reward. He looks for Gertrude. He sees her in the front yard of a nearby apartment building and collects the cat (and a dozen deep scratches) before stashing her in his car. Leaning against his passenger-side door, he calls the poster’s phone number and learns that Gertrude came home yesterday. Douglas realizes he is accidentally halfway to stealing someone else’s cat. He hangs up on Gertrude’s owner and opens his car door, to let the cat out. Being a cat, it is sleeping in a patch of sunlight on the back seat. Douglas touches his clawed-up arms and decides to wait for Not-Gertrude to wake up on her own.

Annie and Douglas never meet Gertrude. Their everyday tales are activated by aspects added to the world they’re in by other characters in the same world. On the one hand, because I made up this example, everyone in the story is plain fiction, colliding not through chaotic forces in a vast and complex universe but through one writer’s whimsy. On the other hand, I have been acted on by the world in which I live and the worlds that I have read—though within the fictional world of Gertrude the Cat, the characters don’t know that—and all of my work is *informed* by so many pressures and peoples who have influenced me along the way.

Fictional worlds are depictions, descriptions, evocations built out of ideas we get as we go through life, reading books and buildings, scanning articles and passersby. A fictional world can be as theatrical and spare as a lean set on a dark stage or it can be so robust that it has its own songs and foods, strange animals and weird weather, dark stages and plays. No world is total except for reality, so the question becomes what to create and what to leave out (or leave to the reader to fill in). Like choosing what to paint, what notes to play, what parts of the statue to sand down, that’s an artistic choice.

When actors play a scene, we sometimes talk about the choices they

make as they do. When do they arch an eyebrow? As they lean in to kiss, do they hesitate? Where do they look—where do they point their eyes—in that shot where most of their face is obscured by shadow?

Description is a writer's art. It depicts a place's performances. And description is also about choices.

What do we describe? To what do we allude? What do we leave out?

Most places, like characters, are combinations of things. Combine different ingredients in different ways and you get distinctly characterized places that can contribute to how and why a scene unfolds the way it does. These ingredients can be as literally transformative as the chaos of a burning castle. A burning castle dictates how (and how quickly) characters must move within it to survive, acting on characters in ways that can change the stories therein.

At **Shared Worlds**, fictional places take on great power and incredible diversity because the ingredients and choices being combined come from many minds at once: the minds of the students in collaboration. These fictional places don't have one thing to say, they have many things to say and in many different ways. Yet they fuse together within the pressures and ideas of certain themes and motifs—often discovered as the world is built by the students.

The world-builders at Shared Worlds are not only in conversation with each other about the fictional places they're creating, but *through* those spaces. These worlds talk about hope and dread, about places we wish we could visit and challenges we want to overcome.

At the same time, even as these worlds are fantastical works in their own rights, they are a kind of scaffolding or toolkit for the stories the students write within their worlds. The worlds—and their fellow world-builders—lend support for new characters and stories, new illustrations and maps by suggesting what's possible in these worlds. Instead of facing a blank page alone, they face the page together, discovering that it is not so much blank but full of the possibilities and potential they poured into their worlds.

Building up these worlds through creative collaboration helps the students to discover their own processes for structured creativity and cooperation. It helps them adapt their ideas not only to the page but to interact with the unforeseen puzzle pieces of others' imaginations,

too. By learning to imagine in tandem, to build something together that their imaginations can walk around within, live in, and explore, these young artists cultivate talents for cooperative adaptation.

Whether they choose to become artists or doctors or scientists or astronauts or whatever else they like, they'll be able to draw on this experience. Whether they want to hang up a flyer for their book-launch party, put their name on a hospital, or leave a footprint on Mars, making fictional worlds is good practice. We change the world first by imagining something amazing and then working together to make it real enough to share.

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For more information on Shared Worlds, visit our website:
<http://www.wofford.edu/sharedworlds>



Student writing from the Summer
2016 Shared Worlds science fiction
and fantasy teen writing camp.

