

# **SHARED WORLDS**

## **2018**

# Shared Worlds 2018

By the teens at the Shared Worlds Camp 2018  
Wofford College  
Spartanburg, North Carolina



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# Introduction

By Jeremy LC Jones, founder and co-director of Shared Worlds

Shared Worlds at Wofford College is a two-week long, residential creative writing summer camp for rising 8th through 12th graders. Students design science fiction and fantasy worlds in groups the first week and then write individual stories set in those worlds the second. This inter-disciplinary program provides students with a variety of fun, energizing, and informative presentations by historians, biologists, game designers, New York Times best-selling authors, and more. It's a very busy, very exciting two weeks.

The basic strategy behind Shared Worlds is to provide young writers and artists with the resources, time, and space they need to create something big and wonderful. We give them the reins and get out of their way. They do the difficult part.

In July 2017, we celebrated the tenth year of Shared Worlds, but I started working on the concept that would become the Shared Worlds camp back in 2003. I was a high school English teacher with a freshly-printed MFA degree. My wife and I had just welcomed our daughter into the world. And I had a handful of students who reintroduced me to the joys of science fiction and fantasy literature.

It was an exciting time filled with creativity and happiness. I stayed up long hours with our new child, reading, writing, singing to and just simply being with her. This wondrous creature had blessed our lives.

Our daughter changed everything for the better. I found myself re-imagining my own childhood through her eyes. Everything was magical—in ways that it never had been before.

Around this time, I became interested in worldbuilding and shared universes. I was familiar with both concepts as a reader and a writer, but now I was thinking of how to apply them as a teacher. How could I tap into the enthusiasm and energy that my students and I had for science fiction and fantasy, in the classroom?

In 2006, my family moved to my wife's hometown so that she could begin teaching at Wofford College. One day in the faculty dining room, the Dean of the College mentioned that Wofford needed summer programs for teenagers. Without planning or forethought, I pitched *Shared Worlds: How about a science fiction and fantasy writing camp? The students build worlds and write stories and live on campus for two weeks. Bring in a bunch professors and writers. Game designers and artists. Give the students the time and space to work together and build something amazing. Let 'em loose!*

Two years later, we launched Shared Worlds with 17 students and two world-building groups. We've grown since then. This past summer we had over 60 students in six groups. We've reached a nice balance between "small enough" that students can get to know each other and "big enough" to provide the students with a larger experience.

Give a roomful of teenagers the space and freedom to create, and they will do astonishing things.

There's nothing quite so thrilling as a group of teenagers working independently, exceeding expectations, taking ordinary objects and ideas and shaping them into something extraordinary, into something that wasn't there before.

Those of us who work at Shared Worlds are lucky. The students bring their vast talents, expansive dreams, and open hearts. They bring themselves. They make Shared Worlds *work*. They *make* Shared Worlds.

We provide a safe place for teens to experiment with ideas and develop their imaginations, in ways that are fun and useful. Shared Worlds also offers students an opportunity to get together with other teens who love to read and write speculative fiction. Students at Shared Worlds are bright, creative, and enthusiastic young people who want to make stuff up, to tell stories, to dream big. And to support each other while they do it!

At Shared Worlds, students don't just build an imaginary world. They solve the problems of a complex system and negotiate the perils and pleasures of collaboration. Every decision has consequences and leads to more decisions. Every solution ripples throughout all aspects of the world.

Shared Worlds is about interconnectedness and relationships. It's about order and chaos. About balance.

Everything goes into the stew of an imaginary world. Students draw on what they've learned in school, in books, and in everyday life. They draw on their unique talents and interests. They draw on each other. It's all blended together, mixed up and stirred.

The following pages are a rare treat. If you are a student, then some of these pages will seem familiar. Other pages will be quite surprising. If you are a parent of one of these writers, these pages will serve as a sort of Thank You note from the young person you supported. Either way, this book serves as an entry way into worlds of OLLIDAMRA, AIGYPTOS, TIBIDI, AQUARI, OCICIAE, and NYLTIAC. Worlds that wouldn't have existed if, in July 2018, these writers hadn't convened at Shared Worlds and worked so tirelessly to build and share worlds of their own imagining.



# Ollidamra

Ollidamra is a mechanical armadillo big enough to house several different species, sentient and otherwise. The gods created the armadillo-shaped planet after the original planet was destroyed as a new home for the inhabitants. The elves and the Nepetis (cat/human hybrids) moved to Ollidamra. At that time, the gods created two new sentient species, the Namrata (crystal people) and the elementals (six-armed beings created out of the remnants of the destroyed planet). The Namrata were created to keep Ollidamra functioning, and the elementals were created as a peace-keeping race. Ollidamra has two crystal moons, one for livestock and the other to provide nutrients and energy to the planet through a giant column of water stretching from the planet to the moon. The world contains many species of life, including corkscrew-trunked trees, pest dragons, and terrifying corpsejacks.

## Isabel Astwood

### *Object #8*

When the gods created the Namrata to keep the BMA (Big Mechanical Armadillo) running they also gave them a gift. They didn't want to force us to do work with no reimbursement, so they created six figurines distributing them to the six families. These figurines would come alive when the right person obtained them. Passed down through generations of Namrata, none of them had ever been activated. My family is the blue family and we are the second largest family in Namrata. Our figurine is a brown animal. It has three horns on its head, a collar and wings. The figurine's eyes also are heterochromatic, blue and green. I had already accepted that I wouldn't be the one to activate our figurine. Whenever someone is born, the family's figurine is placed beside them. No one knows quite what would happen if it was activated, since it's never happened, but we'll know it's happened. It had been 14 years since I had been born and no figurines had been activated. Now I had been looking at this animal figurine my whole life. It sat on a shelf all its own over our hearth. I had always wondered if it was just a figurine. Are there any secret compartments? Perhaps it comes apart and another figurine comes out? But my mama says that our ancestors tried everything when they got it. It's all fine and dandy to hear about something but I needed to know for sure. I was going to touch that figurine.

I waited until my mama and mom came home one day tired from work in the BMA. I wanted to make sure they would be in a deep enough sleep so that they wouldn't get up for something and see me. As well as being told our ancestors had done everything they could, I had also been told not to touch the figurine. It was old and fragile and not to play with. That had been made *very* clear to me. Especially as a small kid when anything and everything was a toy to me. So, my moms went to bed and I did as well. Well, technically, I went to my room and lay in bed not doing anything, thinking. After a while, I peeked into mama and mom's room. They were both in a deep sleep. Mom was spread across the whole bed while mama curled into a ball

in a far corner, both as motionless as a rock. I crept back out of the room to the hearth. Standing on tippy toes, I wrapped my hand around the figurine. I could feel the layers of dust that had settled on it from long years of not moving. I wiped the dust off, peering at it. This felt slightly surreal, like the one time I saw an elf that had snuck down into the BMA. I had seen this thing my whole life but never actually touched it. I turned it over in my hand peering at the back, bottom, and sides which I didn't see much of from its perch on the shelf. I lightly touched the horns on the head. When I touched the middle one I felt a slight move of the horn. With a jolt of guilt, I thought 'I've broken it!'. Panic set in before I realized that I couldn't have broken it by just grazing the horn. I carefully brought my hand back the horn and tentatively pressed down on the horn. I pushed into the figurine when a bright blue light erupted from it. I was blinded by the sudden bright light and I had to close my eyes. After a quick moment, I peeled my eyes open and looked at the figurine. The eyes had moved from their position, looking to one side forward. I nearly dropped it in surprise. I could hear a grinding noise like old gears started up again as the wings on the back came unattached and started flapping. I had awakened the figurine.

## **Mextli Garcia**

### *Object 39*

No one knows how or why it's here, but it's what we based our village around. I guess our ancestors gravitated towards this solitary pole due to its location. Its origins are still a little skewed, but we do know that it helps our baba, Vita, contain the wind's whisper words. It's been said that, if you stand close enough to it, you might be able to hear the conversations our ancestors are having from the afterlife.

Personally, I stay as far away from it as possible because I get real bad juju from it. No disrespect to our ancestors or Vita, but I'd rather stay far away from anything that could predict my demise at any time. The thing is I know that it rarely brings any bad omens to our tribe. Perhaps it's the last bad omen that it alerted Vita of that sort of still haunts me.

Back on our home planet, Vita had an omen whispered to her by our wind spirits that something terrible was going to happen to our tribe, and it was going to happen soon. What we didn't know was that it didn't just affect our tribe, but our planet as a whole.

As the legend goes, the world went dark as night, the wind blowing icy air straight through the huts. It was completely quiet, no noise at all, not even from the Fairfolk. The world started to shake and everything came crashing down.

First, it was the sky. The birds fell at rapid speed, like little meteorites falling out of the sky. Then everything started to shake. Massive shudders that would stop suddenly and then gradually start back up. Shrieks so loud they were heard for miles and mil--

Never mind, that's not important. I mean, it is, but not right now. Right now is my story, and my story only. So, let's get back to the sacred Rock Stick.

Recently, the Rock Stick has been giving me even more bad vibes, and Vita has been acting very strange. I heard the Rock Stick make its distinct metallic ding, sounding for the baba to come out and listen to the wind spirits. Vita came out and had a ghost-like

expression overcome her face as she listened to the wind. I was just coming back from my hunting expedition, and I watched her from behind the tree line. As I was trying to make out what her expression might mean, I heard some rustling behind me.

“Who goes there?” I asked, spear raised and aimed towards where the noise came. A soft mumbling came from the other side, and I jerked my head around towards that sound. As soon as I did, the wind was knocked out me and I fell to the ground.

In a soft, angelic voice, I heard the quietest most frightening thing I could’ve heard: “You will die an unexpected and painful death, and the Chosen One will rise.”

No way did I just hear that. There is no possible way that I heard that. Um, I’m freaking out a bit? I can’t even wrap my head around this. I’m going to die? Why?! Out of all people, me?

Wait..., there wasn’t anyone actually here with me, though. Does this mean...? I heard the wind spirits?! That’s not even possible! Only the baba can hear them....

A feeling of dread comes over me as I realize what this means. Vita is going to die. But who’s the Chosen One? If I heard it, does that mean I’m the Chosen One?

## Christina Grier

### *Object 49*

Clara and her family were sitting at the kitchen table, talking about their days which were all the same. Get up, get ready for the day, work in the fields, go home, eat lunch, go back to the fields, work until dinner, prepare dinner, eat. It was all the same almost every day. Clara thought this was incredibly boring at some parts, but this was what she was born to be—a wood elf, a farmer. The little amounts of drama that happened would be told at the table as theatrical stories, the audience thriving on each word like the story would power their every move, to brighten their dull lives.

Today, Clara's brother, Flore, had seen a dragon in the fields and was reenacting how he had chased after it. Clara couldn't help but be bored. She played with the tip of her golden hair, zoning out. Her mind wandered to the oddity her mother had sculpted the day before. In her mind, the creature was quite horrid with its long neck connected to the diminutive, misshapen body. Her mother had insisted that the aberrant lumps on the creatures were feathers, Clara didn't believe her.

Clara snapped out of her trance as her brother finished his story and her father announced the time to clear the table. Clara got up accordingly, picking up her empty plate, her mind still wandering. She was making her way to sink when, suddenly, she tripped over a leg of a chair. Everything she was holding went flying, her plate shattering on the hard, cold floor. Unfortunately for her, her arm landed on the shattered plate, a piece impaling her arm. The room was still for a moment before erupting into chaos. Clara was crying out in pain, her mother dropped to the floor beside her, her father began to clean up the plate, shouting at Flore to go get an elemental. Flore raced out as Clara's mother scooped up her daughter, carrying her into a small living room and laying her on a couch.

It didn't take long for Flore to come back with a water elemental. The elemental quickly took charge, pulling the plate shard out of Clara's arm and quickly bandaging it and advising Clara not to

work for at least four days. Clara couldn't believe it, At long last, her schedule had changed.

Clara found out pretty quick that staying inside all day was even more boring than working in the fields. She ran out of fun things to do by the second day. On the morning of the third day, after her family had left, Clara was sitting in the living room, consumed by an overwhelming urge to do something. Her eyes traveled across the room and settled on the horrid creature her mother had sculpted.

It still had the same glazed expression in its two beady black eyes. She got up, taking the thing off of the mantle and examining it closely. Up close, the lumps really did seem like feathers, details etched into the cool clay. Her mother had taken the liberty to paint the thing. Its flat beak-like mouth was painted yellow with light shades of orange for details. The more Clara studied the item, the more minuscule fine points she found. It was like an entirely new object she was holding. A small curious smile crossed her face. She wondered what other small, beautiful things she could find in her world if she just looked closer.

## Britney Jean

### *Object 43*

Something about wood fascinated Dermis. Oak wood, Spruce wood, deep and dark and smooth, much like Ronetta's eyes. Always mysterious, egging you on to look longer and harder for what she might be hiding within her gaze. Truth that stretched across the entirety of her face, but never truly gave herself away. Hidden, furling in on her identity in a way that almost crushed it. She was... one of a kind, the way her smile spread ear to ear, yet her eyes drowned in tears, and she seemed so satisfied with grasping at her frail dreams with equally shaking hands.

"If I could just leave this tribe. Someday, I hope. I could make it out there, you know?"

Genuinely, sweetly, she hoped. It was all she could do, and it was beautiful, Dermis often thought, as he saw her sitting alone outside of her hut. Her chocolate eyes stared out towards something she might never see in the sky. It was always murky, gray, ugly and cloudless. Nothing like what she wanted, never enough for her heavy heart and fleeting expectations.

Dermis had not thought of leaving the tribe. His hopes were rather to stay and one day have her hand in marriage... naturally, her ambitions to travel crushed him.

It was then that Dermis reached his eighteenth birthday.

There was never anything special associated with the day he was born, he thought. His maoma and paopa found it strange, called him an undecided boy, if he could not even see the significance of his own birth. 'A strong, confused dede.' He laughed at it just as they had, finding nothing more to say and refusing to justify his position. On his birthday, his paopa got for him a strange wooden object. It was passed through generations—handed down, interpreted differently by each of its owners. It was a red, sleek wood, polished and beautiful and, all the same, mysterious. The picture on its top was one that they'd never seen before. It seemed worn, the age prominent in its edges, the handle long and skinny. Dermis fondled the object. His father left it with him



to decide on his own what it might be. That was an honor—or so he was raised to believe. And he did.

“What do I do?” He spoke to himself, as the sacred trees rustled overhead.

Ronetta drifted through Dermis’ head once again, here and there, bouncing through his subconscious and landing at the center of his thoughts like always. Her beauty had a way of wreaking havoc on his existence. Burrowing into his head like a maggot—feeding on his brain, laying his pride to waste. She did that to a man, and so, as he turned the object around in his callous hands, he thought of her. There was no way he could calm the rebel within her heart. She sought freedom, to escape from the forced marriage, the pressure of being a Nepetid woman, something he couldn’t even begin to comprehend as a male child of the chief. A child of privilege. When Dermis heard her cries, he immediately knew this fire burned hotter than the flame in his chest when he thought of holding her. It was a rebellion too wild and aimless. Or maybe that was the pain talking...

Dermis clutched the mallet to his strong chest. Or that’s what he began to call it, imagining his ancestors banging it down onto a table to be able to govern the small community they called their own. As he traveled through the village, he held the object, his feet their own beings as they guide him to Ronetta’s family hut. She only lived with her mother and younger brother, or deto, therefore they were very poor, and would depend entirely on her bride price. Whomever married Ronetta would be rich but old, and Dermis wanted to change that.

He arrived at her hut and announced his presence. Still, the mallet was held close to his heart. Foolishly, he hoped Ronetta would also have this as a piece of him. Dermis couldn’t stop her from leaving, but if she had this—a part of his soul could be with her, and they might find each other one day and start anew.

Ronetta’s mother appeared, her cloth tattered like those of a peasant. Her eyes were old and worn and pleasantly surprised, being greeted with the sight of the chief’s son.

“Makito. I welcome you.” She lowered to a knee with respect, despite Dermis being less than half her age. Her knee had been injured

some time ago, and Dermis saw the frail limb shake. His hands came to her shoulders.

“Please don't bow. I'm only here to see Ronetta.” His voice was equally respectful. Ronetta's mother frowned at this contrast in his nature. All at once, her lemon eyes flood with furious tears, and she turns her head as if Dermis' question has brought her shame. “Ronetta's has brought me shame. Missing since the nightfall, and never seen again. Pursue a good girl, one that is worthy of your class, Makito.” Dermis stared. The hand holding the mallet dropped to his side, limp and boneless like a vine, and Ronetta's mother watched his reaction with equal frustration. “You were going to give her your family tradition?” She asked, and already began to step back into her hut. Her face was if she smelled something rank. Perhaps the remnants of her daughter's stupidity, or the foul stench of love reeking from Dermis.

“I'll be leaving now, Makito.”

## Avner (Lauren) Lyons

### *Object 48*

The blank open empty of space—it was an expanse of darkness. You can't play golf in space, the ball never reaches its destination, it just floats endlessly. Imagine it, an endless golf game, see how far the ball can go before it crashes into a planet or a sun. I slumped down into my chair, the massive ship humming along through the black. I guess I missed our planet, full of green and blue, forests and rivers. I was told by my neighbors to take a few items I loved—it was an easy choice. I chose a few seedlings, a couple chairs, and a wooden golf club head. Golf is quite the sport, contrary to the thoughts of the fair folk and the dark elves—guess that's why I grabbed the head of my first club. It was wooden, fairly large, about driver-size. I wasn't very good at the time. I ended up with a 30+ after the first game. In golf, you can't get any worse. Passenger's log, day 40.

We're fairly far away now. We've left the heliosphere—the exit was slightly rough, what with all the floating rocks, I think they called “The Celestial Barrier” or something. Not so celestial if you ask me. I wonder sometimes when we will set down, get off this hunk of metal, floating aimlessly through space. The captain says she has a plan, but I've seen the course change several times already. We are alone, a dark people, a dark mind, lit by no sun. They finally opened up the entertainment areas, turns out you can play golf in space, albeit very different. It has a lot to do with whether you can hit the ball in zero-G or if you just whack yourself in the face with the club shaft. Passenger's log, day 419.

I've gotten a bit better, I can get roughly bogie every hole. I guess it's kind of hard to aim with no gravity, but you can get used to it. The physics of a golf ball, all based around gravity. Doesn't help when you're an inch off the hole and your ball bounces off the course and back into you face. The food is nice at least, they have BBQ every few days. It's a nice taste of home, aside from most of the food catered to the dark elves and the fair folk. I found a seat in the cafeteria—it's

in the back, away from everyone, lets me eat in silence and think for a while, nothing like the rest of the room, full of all the other elves, dancing and drinking. Passenger's log, day 440.

A dark elf came to my table today, sat down and ate, didn't say a word. I think he was shy, probably didn't like being around the other elves. I could relate. I saw him again at lunch, decided to make conversation, turns out he's a nice guy, was actually interested in golf. I said I'd teach him sometime. He showed up at the zero-G golf course later. I saw him after completing the game. I think he was there the whole time. I invited him in, showed him some basics, stance, how to swing. The dark elves were the engineers, so he obviously knew how the zero-G thing fit in. He ended up with a 30+ on his first game, just more room to learn. Passenger's log, day 460.

## Sarah Crosby McKay

### *Object 1*

#### A New Birth

“Dasat.” The final words of the prayer escaped our lips as our prayers for a child ascended to Vester. Nepi rose from his knees, but I stayed. My knees were cold, touching the metallic floor of our bedroom, my feet nearly numb from kneeling so long.

“Vergis, you’re going to crack. Just come to bed.”

A smile broke across my face as I sprang out and tacked him. I pinned him to the floor and bounced up again, making it clear to him who was victorious. “Who’s cracking now?”

He laughed as he rolled off the floor. I helped him up, and we both walked to our bed. I had just turned around to take my combat boots off when I heard an unfamiliar sound that resembled a sniff. I turned just in time to see Nepi wipe deep blue tears off of his opalescent face.

“My love, what is it?” I said, climbing across our bed to hold him, to comfort him.

“We’ve been praying for so long; why haven’t we been answered? What’s wrong with us? We’d be incredible parents—you’d be a remarkable mother—I just don’t see... I just don’t understand—” He cut himself off; he couldn’t hold himself together as his crystalline shoulders quaked with torrential grief. He sat next to me, continuing to sob. There we were: just two Namrata, next to each other, one holding the other, two deeply in love.

The next day, we rose and prepared ourselves for work—the same work as yesterday, and the day before, and the day before.... Before I realized it, I was back in the belly of the beast—the boiler room of Ollidamra. Rosale and Emitacia were talking to the right of me. ‘I’m sure it’s just their typical gossip,’ I thought to myself when I heard Rosale say it—“dying.” I felt my own limpid ears perk up as I began to walk toward them.

“Rosale, did I understand you correctly? Is someone dying?” I asked, my eager energy filling the air around us.

“Yes, Emiliace mentioned it to me—she has a week.”

Excitement surged through my body before I could blink—we would finally have a child. “Oh, I see—I have to go check out the heat exchangers, I’ll see you both later.” I turned and I couldn’t help it as a smile exploded across my face at the mere thought of a child, the thought of Nepi being happy again, the thought of us, being truly, sincerely happy.

A week rolled by as if it were a year, and *it* happened. Emiliace was going to die. The day of the Ceremony, I woke Nepi up by bouncing the mattress, pure joy radiating from my body. For the first time in years, Nepi smiled as he woke—a genuine smile. He stood up and wrapped his pellucid crystal arms around me. “Today,” I said as bright yellow tears slowly rolled down both of our glass faces.

He replied with an affirmation of my excitement and hope: “Today.”

Emiliace’s crystal body began to crack from the inside out as Vester’s light shone down on her. The rest of the Namrata were gathered around, the young in complete awe. Out of Emiliace came her final breath, a smile on her face since she had waited so long to break out of her body. The number of cracks grew at an increasingly rapid rate; soon, her body was covered in cracks. The already hushed crowds somehow became even more silent as the body that had once been inhabited by Emiliace exploded in front of all us. In the pile of dust lie the single Souel Crystal, the piece that made Emiliace, Emiliace. The light of Vester got brighter and the Souel Crystal rose above us; Nepi and glanced at each other, ecstatic and ready to see our Streak color in the light. We were ready—to see our Blue, to hold our child—to be happy once more.

Yet, rather than blue, a deep red shone on the Souel Crystal. The world went silent. Nothing existed except for my weak yet rock solid body. I could feel my crystal beginning to crack as everything shattered in my mind. I saw two other Namrata rush toward the center of the circle, toward their baby. I realized my mouth had been open in utter shock ever since the red first appeared. That’s when I sensed it: Nepi. I looked at him and saw his face entirely dark blue, staring at

me in shock. We stood there, staring at each other, as the rest of the Namrata cheered for the Reds, hollers of congratulations rising into the sky while the light of Vester dimmed, then disappeared.

We returned to our home after the Ceremony, using words sparingly. Once inside, Nepi toppled onto the floor. “I cannot cry anymore,” he mumbled.

I could do nothing but gaze upon him. Before I could speak any words of support, an object appeared on the floor before us. A tall, black statue of some sort; it resembled a doll I had seen in the city tailor’s shop, a fitting doll.

“Nepi, is that—” I was interrupted by the mannequin spinning, gaining speed on each turn. Deep orange flames burst from the object as it spun, Nepi and I both staring at it with intense disbelief. Suddenly the flames became water, the frigid, blue liquid shooting from the doll. After several seconds of spinning and shooting water, what looked like a Soule Crystal replaced the object with a note next to it. Nepi and I looked at each other for a brief moment before returning our gaze to the Crystal. I bent over to pick it up as a blue light shone down on the Crystal. Tangerine tears rolled onto cheeks while I met Nepi’s gaze. The light dimmed and before us was a pile of crystals- at least, what I thought was a pile. I blinked away my tears and saw that a crystal baby sat on our floor. We both leaped to the baby and read the note together: *Raise Her well*. I picked up the fragile baby as Nepi walked toward us. He spread his arms around the baby and me while we both stared at the baby--our baby--in awe. And there we were: three Namrata, deeply in love.

## King Snider

### *Object 24*

Verus was having a rather good day. He'd closed contracts regarding two priceless artifacts today, and by holy Indris's sacred name, he was going to add one more before the sun set. Being an archaeologist in the city of Antragis was no easy task. The nobles were adept at getting their stingy little hands on important relics, and most dark elves could not hope to best their contractual mastery. Most dark elves were not Verus Latharian, executive director of the Holyhead Historical Research Institute, whose legal skills were nothing short of legendary. In true dark elf fashion, he'd beguiled noble after noble into signing away valuable pieces of history for him to add to his collection.

Of course, he wasn't merely a collector of fancy trinkets by any stretch: he was an accomplished researcher of the ancient and often-misunderstood past. When the many cooperating societies of Antragis and elsewhere left their original home planet to inhabit the great Ollidamra, countless knowledge was lost, traditions forgotten and artifacts misplaced, and it fell to people like Verus to piece together the lost puzzles of history and rediscover the past.

His latest endeavor in this task involved a formal meeting with a rather minor baron. It was strange, suspicious almost, that this particular individual had come to supposedly possess the mythical *Ars Machina*, the rumored divine manual of Ollidamra's mysterious inner workings, and had been the one to approach Verus with a deal.

Still, an opportunity is an opportunity, and dark elves don't easily pass up such things. Verus quickly agreed to meet the *Ars Machina*'s owner, a rather young lad by the name of Haldreth, at the latter's estate in High Strata, Antragis's wealthiest district.

Ordinarily, even a half-hour casual conversation between dark elves would result in the signing or updating of at least twenty contracts. Haldreth proved to be no ordinary dark elf, rambling on for long stretches of time about tales of his "great romantic endeavors" which usually consisted of wooing some low-class wood elf with his



great riches. It took Verus a good deal of effort to redirect the conversation towards the contract that they arrived to sign in the first place.

As soon as Verus saw the contract being offered, he realized exactly why Haldreth was dancing around even the most mundane contracts: his legal skills were absolute trash. The *Ars Machina* itself, which Haldreth displayed boldly on a nearby end table, was being offered for less than half of what Verus was willing to pay for it, and it even came with a free coaster. Although he very well could have negotiated himself a staggering portion of Haldreth's wealth right then and there, Verus was swayed by a bit of pity, and by Haldreth's grating post-adolescent voice, to speed through negotiations and leave.

Inspecting the book later in his sanctum, he scoured it for some form of trap or trick, almost trying to convince himself that the wonderful bargain he'd managed was some sort of scam, but there he was, holding the one and only *Ars Machina*, containing...

He couldn't read it.

For all his experience reading legal fine print, the script was absolutely illegible to him. Verus could understand five different ancient languages and this was in none of them. No wonder Haldreth misvalued it; he probably had very little idea what it was.

Verus knew of one artifact that might help him with this: the Clarity Glass, an ancient crystal plate of unknown origin he had found years earlier and sometimes used as a magnifying glass. It could translate text, which was handy.

Peering at the *Ars Machina* again, but this time, through the shimmering veil of the Clarity Glass, he could finally read it.

He had known the *Ars Machina* contained ancient secrets, but this... this went against everything he had known to be true. Forgotten empires and powers thought impossible, myth, facts taken for granted shown to be falsehoods, and ancient sins of staggering magnitude-

Verus realized with a startling jolt that he completely forgot to investigate the coaster. There it sat, innocuously formed of cast iron in the shape of a strange bird, but he sensed its magic and immediately knew what it was.

It was a homing beacon.

Verus had been tricked after all. Haldreth must have known Verus would be able to read it and know the forbidden knowledge it contained. The only way he would ever part with such an artifact so cheaply was if he would get it back promptly. The contract's fine footnote stated "shall be returned if recipient dies within a week", and it had only been a day.

Haldreth knew exactly how forbidden that knowledge was.

Out of the shadowy corner of the room, Verus slowly saw the magnitude of his folly emerge into the light. Long, spindly limbs of withered flesh sheathed in coarse, formless fabric, a featureless face, and clawed hands with a terrible, unblinking eye in each palm.

A Silencer, one of the mysterious guardians of the forbidden inner reaches of Ollidamra.

Verus saw his folly, he saw his punishment, and then he saw no more.

# **Bryton Tanner**

## *Object #6*

### The Tools of Cleansing

“I’m late!”

How did this even happen? I’m so stupid. She’s going to hate me.

“Placement piece, check.

Ritual cloth, check.

Exfoliator, check.

Crystals, check.”

On pins and needles, I rush down the corridor trying to reach the center. The biggest day of our lives and I forgot. How did I forget? The ceremony, the equipment, what’s wrong with me?

“Gotta be faster. Gotta be faster.”

The roaring clanks of the raging gears, working effortlessly to keep this thing able. It only worries me more. The anxiety roaring through my veins sends a jolt of fear up my spin.

Fear.

Why fear?

Why does the first thought always amount to fear?

What’s making me feel this way? What’s this pounding deep within me? Did I forget something?

No.

I must forget. I must forget my fear.

I see it. I see them. I see the light. I made it.

“It took you long enough!” Without having breath or reason to look, I immediately realize that I’ve been spoken to by one of the Councilwomen.

I fall to my knees in respect wondering what my punishment will be for this blunder.

“Calm down, Thest.” I peer over beside me. Standing tall is Rose. So strong. So beautiful. So true.

My thoughts have resigned. I believe I can make it through this without a hitch.

“Are you alright?” The concerned Yellow Councilwoman questioned.

What do I say? Am I fine? If I say I’m fine I’ll be fine, I wouldn’t lie about that. Would I? If I tell them then it must be true isn’t it? Isn’t it?

“Do you have the tools for the ceremony, Thest?” Before me is Thieti, head councilwoman of Family Violet.

“I believe it’s in the best interest of all who have attended that we begin, if that’s alright with you?” She made it seem like I had a choice.

“Yes ma’am. I do believe your right.” I say in as relaxed a voice as I can squeeze out.

One by one I check each item off the list again.

“Placement piece, check.

Ritual cloth, check.

Exfoliator, check.

Crystals, check.”

“All the components are here madam.” I pass them over to Madam Thieti.

“May the councilwomen take their places,” Thieti let out with a hardy grunt. One by one they each filed from their original positions coming in, circling around Rose and me.

No.

No.

No.

This isn’t the time.

My spine feels as though a million knives have been thrust into my back.

No.

The ritual must continue.

“Now, gathered before me are two whose lives have bonded that they wish to see solidarity within each other’s embrace. Do the great women of this council believe this should be so?” Thieti spoke.

Silence stilled filled the room, but a sense of acceptance encompassed my heart. Even so, the fear still lies. Lies within me. For no purpose. Why? Why? Why?

Thieti began again, “So, woman of Blue, first, take this cloth. With it, show the dedication of your heart, soul, and purity for the responsibility you have chosen to share. Please, cleanse your gem.”

Rose did as she was told and, in turn, looked into my wide eyes in a sense of relief.

“Now, man of Blue, whose streaks were servant to House Orange,” Thieti intruded, “I must ask you do the same with respects to the burden you will now share.”

I think I’m gonna be sick. But I do as I’m asked.

“Now please take the Exfoliator and remove the impurities from our newest vessel.”

Rose took my hand and together we gently brushed the unfinished gem.

“Well done,” she said with unexpected relief. “Take now the Placement Piece and, with Vester’s blessings, welcome a new life to our world.”

Slowly, gently, quietly the gem is slid into place and the room lights up like the night sky. You’re here, finally here. Your face is like the radiating moons. You are truly a gift from the Vester himself.

What’s happened? The feelings I had, they’re gone. I feel joy. But is this truly joy? Is my heart, are my emotions completely satisfied? If this is peace, true peace, then even for a moment I’ll accept this. Whatever is to come, I feel fine. Better than fine though. Like I have some sort of purpose on this ship. Like I’m not just another sinking stone.

Peace.

“I’ve never seen you this way,” a gentle voice awakes from beside me.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” It was Rose. I’ve never heard her voice this raw. Tears stream down her face.

“What’s wrong?” The only thing I can think to say, the one question I felt I could never answer myself.

“Don’t you see? Our newest chapter of these simple lives has just began. Our lives have a new meaning.”

Meaning. Is that what I felt, meaning? Is the thought of a simple life what cut my soul so deep? Will she feel what I felt? This new creature, this newest responsibility that I've taken on. This child. I can never allow her to feel that. That's my meaning. To help her understand that she's worth this. I swear that to myself and to her.

## Michelle Taylor

### *Object 58*

#### Woven Strands of Memory

Today started like every other day. It started out the same and I thought that it would end the same as every other day. I got up when the bell rang, did my assigned work, went back home, and went to sleep. The only thing that changed was what I was working on that day. My job is to walk along the pipes and gears to make sure that they are still in good condition.

Today turned out to be different. It was both a sad day and a happy one. The Namrata have a specific number of people so when a person dies, their soul goes to a child, therefore giving it life. I am one of the yellow-veined Namrata.

It was early in the afternoon and I was about to inspect another area when my mother's companion found me. That's when I knew something was wrong. Our companions are extremely loyal and don't ever leave our side. I then heard a voice in my head. *Ward is nearly gone. Come home now. He wants to talk to his great grandson.* It was somber for a normally sarcastic creature.

"Tell Mother I'm coming." I told it and watched it run off into the shadows.

I felt something against my cheek and looked down to see a small, deep blue, salamander-like creature on my shoulder. It was my companion, Des. *I'm very sorry for your loss.*

"I know. I will miss him but his spirit will live on in the red veins's new child."

Des rubbed his head against my cheek trying to offer comfort. *You hurry home. Say good bye. Then weave memor."*

The fact that he couldn't use more words with more than five letters meant that I had to ignore the bad grammar and half words to understand what he said. He was talking about the ceremony we did to honor a person when they died.

I took off running. I needed to get home.

The walls started to blur. I didn't know what to feel. My brain seemed to be filled with fog.

I climbed to stairs three steps at a time and ran through the door. I saw great-grandcrystal Ward in the center of the room. As a Namrata gets older, their body slowly crystallizes. Great grandcrystal Ward was crysallized to his shoulders.

"You arrived just in time, Fract. We are saying our goodbyes."

I walked over to my great-grandcrystal.

"I was wondering if you would make it in time," he said.

"I'm here," I said. "I won't leave you."

"I know. You have always held a special place in my heart. You are my only great-grandchild. I wish I would be here to see the man you become but I'm lucky to have known for the handful of years we had."

I had to fight back tears. I've never had to say goodbye before. I reach out and give him a hug.

"I love you."

"I know."

I stayed hugging him for a long time. I listened to his soft breaths and started crying when they stopped but I stayed holding him. Eventually the crystal that was once him crumbled to dust. I fell to the ground. I had no more tears to spend so I just lay there crumpled on the ground. Not seeing. Not hearing. I knew somewhere in my mind that someone would be taking a piece of the crystal to the red veins so they could do the soul transfer ceremony but I just lay there. Eventually, I heard someone say that it was time to start the memory weaving. That made me sit up.

While I had been laying prone, the room had changed. The crystal dust was still on the ground but now everyone but me was sitting in a circle with a piece of colored reed in their hand. I saw an open place that had been left for me and I walked over to it.

I sat and picked up my piece of reed. Shock made it through the fog in my brain. My piece was yellow. This was the color of our veins and it was a great honor to be given the reed for the center decoration. Usually it would be the leader of the family that would have the piece but for some reason I had been given it.



The person to the right of me started talking. She shared a memory of Ward. Then she passed her piece of reed to the person to her right. As that person was telling one their memories of Ward he started to weave the two pieces together. This went all the way around the circle with each person sharing a memory while weaving their piece in. Eventually it was my turn.

By now, the pieces of reed had formed a circle with a small space left in the middle. I started to talk about all of the things that great-grandcrystal Ward had done for me. Everyone else had shared one story but, as the person with the honor of weaving the vein strand in, I could talk for as long as I needed to. As I was talking, my hands went through the motions of finishing the weaving. I don't know how long I talked.

When I was done, I looked down and saw that, while I was talking, I had been given more reed than was usually used. The end result was a simple, white, woven circle with an extravagant flower coming out of the center.

I looked around and saw that everyone was smiling through their tears. His death didn't weight heavy on our souls because we had remembered him. We had woven his memories together into something that was tangible. We knew we wouldn't forget him.

The day may have ended much differently than it began but I knew that I would treasure my memories and hoped one day someone would do the same of me.

“Goodbye.”

## Pen Zuleger

### *Object 4A*

#### Ajeihihina

I was grateful to get away from the farm, to be honest. My parents were the same as any old-fashioned wood elves: hard-working, stubborn, and down with an extremely bad case of raging anger issues.

As one can imagine, I got yelled at quite a bit in my childhood. Eventually, however, my parents foisted a bag of food into my arms. Both told me to go down below the surface of the mechanical creature we lived on, down to the huge city of Antragis. I was to deliver some of the food to the High Cathedral of Falla. I was told not to tell any Dark Elf my true name, as they would use it against me. I was told a great deal of things not to do.

Of course, when I set out to make my way down into the interior of the planet, it was a very different story. My parents had never really let me this far outside of the house at all. It was a pretty long journey, but I ended up making my way into Antragis.

When I beheld the cathedral for the first time while walking in from the temple district, my breath hitched in my throat. The whole place was lit by several candles. Light poured in through the stained glass windows. I could hear gorgeous chanting in the Old Elven tongue, ancient hymns about blood and gore that resonated through the chapel. When I looked up, I could also see the famed metal bells of Falla. Some of them rang in the dark, the engravings upon them growing softly.

It was there, as she was hanging bells in the chapel, that I saw her for the first time. Words... words fail me. Everything around her seemed to be softer, kinder. The content smile she had made my heart melt. She wore a white cloak—a symbol of her priestess-hood. Her white hair, also, was braided and fell onto her shoulder. My clumsy tongue somehow found the courage to speak while seeing her.

“I have not seen beauty like yours in all my life.”

She turned to look at me. Somehow, I got a shiver down my spine.

“Fine flattery, but is it true?” she said, her voice lyrical.

“It is, I’ve never been to this city before.”

She tied the last bell, then stalked towards me. “So, might I have your name?” she asked, making a beckoning motion with her finger. For all her otherworldly beauty, I also found myself deeply terrified.

“Y-You may call me Grey,” I replied. She grinned at me. “Clever. You may call me Pallas Lyr.”

She and I began to meet up more during my time in Antragis. She and I would simply talk for hours and hours. I often watched her make bells for the cathedral.

“Be careful, the metal is hot,” she would warn me. Her fingers were quick as she molded the metal, shaping it with her gloved hands like pottery before she began carving engravings onto it. Sometimes, the bells would be covered in holy script that she painted with a glowing glaze. Other times, she would draw strange creatures into it.

My favorites were the “river dogs,” as she called them. They were strange furry pawed creatures with horns that she would carve into some of the bells. When I asked her about them, she would laugh.

“My father often makes up creatures. One of the ones he made up was the river dogs. He would tell me tales of the little river dogs that yip and jump by the creeks. They were my favorite animal. My mother even sewed a plush river dog for me one turn,” she said to me, “and I was so happy I thanked her over and over.”

There was always a gleam in her eye as she talked about it. It was cute when she got passionate about some things. She was my reason for staying a bit longer in Antragis than I had to. I got so caught up in it that I could barely comprehend going back.

Yet, on the day when I had to leave Antragis, I could not find her. I could not see her, I could not hear her. She was gone.

A year passed, and I tried to pry her from my mind. Pallas Lyr had been the most beautiful girl I had seen in ages, and I really did love her.

I tried to push her out of my mind with the thought that even if I had stayed, I would not be able to marry her; Dark Elven engagements were full of years of deliberation and the contracts they placed forward would be a nightmare. She still stayed there in my head. I couldn't let her go.

One day, I wandered out of the farm. When I stepped off the porch fully, I looked around and saw Pallas Lyr in the yard.

Her hair was still as bright white as the last time I had saw her. Her cloak blew in the winds, her face full of an emotion I could not fully identify. Even her eyes glimmered with this strange, soulful melancholy.

“Grey.”

“... Lyr?”

In her hands, I could see a little bundle of something wrapped in cloth.

“My uncle pulled me out of the convent,” she explained, “He tried to get me I refused, and ran, but not before I went to the convent to make one last bell for you. Consider it... a gift of my true self to you.”

As she explained, I listened. I also acutely noticed that in the forest I could see a pair of glittering purple eyes focused on her. I stepped a bit closer to her, and she unwrapped the bundle.

It was a pewter bell, engraved with river dogs and rivers.

On the bell's lid, written in glowing font, was her true name. The name she hid from everyone else.

*Ajeihihina Lyrin Alteris.*

## **Aigyptos System**

In the solar system of Aigyptos, there exist two planets called Alkhara and Selya, and a single dwarf planet called Torem. Selya, the largest of the two, houses the majority of the people in Aigyptos in large dome-cities, shielding them from the hostile environment and allowing the civilians to live out their industrious lifestyles there. Alkhara, on the other hand, is the seat of power for the religious monarchy, the Empire of the Sun, along with the other members of the rich and powerful. Torem, which resides on the edge of Aigyptos, is home to the many people who have been mutated by the rips in space that dot Selya and rarely Alkhara called rifts. These rifts give the people who pass through them, called "rifters", physical mutations which can range from mildly unnerving to the obscenely grotesque. The members of the Five Royal Families of Alkhara however, are gifted with powerful mental mutations given to them by the Sun God, Azmir. Azmir is the god of light, the sun, and order, a stark contrast to the snake-wolf god, Kevanll, the god of darkness and chaos. And while these two major gods occupy a major role in Aigyptosian religion, there are many other smaller deities that rule over one domain or another.

## Georgia Bailey

### *Object 56*

I look up at the sun, watching as it pulses. It expands with every pulse. Soon, it will either explode, or become so large that it consumes our planet, Selya. If it consumes Selya, people on other planets will live for longer, but not by much. It's not worth trying to escape. There's nowhere to go. Everyone I know is dead. When chaos was defeated, we celebrated. Finally, no more rifts, no more mutants, no more darkness. But now, everything has changed. Without the chaos to balance order, without dark to balance light, without pain to balance joy, our world has fallen apart. Too much good can be overpowering.

The god of sun and order, Azmir, defeated the god of darkness and chaos, Kevanll. Without Kevanll's chaos and dark to create balance, Azmir's power grew. I look down from the sky, anger manifesting. I will not let Azmir eradicate me. If go down, Azmir goes down with me. Today is the day that everyone dies, and I kill the sun god. I clutch the small object in my hand. The object is made of a black metal, it is round and the size of my palm, with a black button one on side. A weapon supposedly powerful enough to obliterate even the strongest of beings. My father had given it to me before he died. Unfortunately, he never told me exactly what it does. I step over a corpse, wincing at the thought that it was once a person with a life. There are corpses everywhere; people dropped like flies when the sun grew. It grew and depleted all of the water from the planet and made the desert suffocatingly hot. People died from dehydration and heat stroke. I have to avenge my people. I have to restore balance.

I march past the rows of buildings contained in the dome, making my way to the center of Trialis. In the center of the city lies the sacred temple. The sight of the temple truly does take one's breath away. A towering golden pyramid, with a quartz room filled with altars and statues for Azmir, resting on top. I was once one of Azmir's most devoted followers and am very familiar with the temple. How ironic. When I reach the entrance to the quartz room, I glance at the

sun. It blares a fiery yellow, nearly touching the top of the dome. I will either leave this temple triumphant and there will be no god or I will never leave the temple. I stride through the grand entrance. I set down an offering of the last of my food, a small lizard. I shove my other hand into my pocket, attempting to hide the weapon from Azmir. I light candles around the offering, adding more heat to the already boiling room. I've never actually noticed the inside of the temple. Statues of Azmir gleam, showing off the god's body and mesmerizing tattoos. Stunning tapestries display the past of our people. The architecture is also incredible: a vaulted ceiling that probably touches the top of the dome, columns that accent the height of the room, and incredibly detailed carvings in the walls. A voice echoes through the temple,

"I once loved you." It seems that Azmir has responded to my offering. I glance towards the voice and see a shimmering, ethereal figure.

"Do you not love me now?" I ask, flinching at the sound of my own voice, made deep and raspy by the lack of water.

"I no longer love anything. Without balance, there is nothing to compare love with. I no longer feel anything," Azmir responds, thoughtfully.

"Azmir, you were once the lord and ruler of this world. Now you have killed it. I have lost any respect that I once had for you. I am here to end you before you can end us."

Azmir turns towards me, smirking, "There is nothing powerful enough to kill me."

I flip the device over in my pocket, my long fingers feeling every detail of the object. The metal surface somehow cool, every gear and piece that makes it function, and the button yearning to be pushed. Azmir paces around the temple, contemplating tapestries and other works of art. I walk up behind him and ask what he thinks of one of the pieces, knowing the answer will be lengthy. I pull out the small object, mulling over every reason to destroy Azmir, completely tuning out his answer. For every drop of water, sucked from the planet; every person's life, ended while they were still useful; every moment wasted, devoting myself to them; every innocent animal drained of their life force; everything and everyone that was ever hurt by Azmir.

“Goodbye Azmir,” I mutter. I push the button on the object and toss it onto the temple floor. It blinks. I back away from it, unsure of what will happen. All I know about the weapon is that it’s supposedly strong enough to “end a god.” Darkness pours out of the object, like an ink-spill. Azmir turns around, horrified,

“What have yo-” he is cut off as the blackness consumes him. A well-known myth comes to mind: every 10,000 years, time in Aiggyptos is reset. A never-ending cycle. The darkness consumes me and I melt away, into non-existence.



## Samuel P. C. Contreras

### *Object 31*

#### Curator's Log:

Specimen 31, alternatively known as the Imperatrix's Bane or Ruby Ruin, is a simple, black bangle with red, precious stones imbedded in its sides. The appearance of the bracelet is not what makes it special, but rather the rich and bloody history or the ankles, arms, wrists, and marvels of technology it has adorned.

The creation of the wristlet was somewhere around 2,000 years after the founding of the Empire. It was used as a focus for the energies used in the making of the first portal to ever grace the Imperial arsenal of technology. The process was complex and painstaking, but eventually, through rigorous trial and error and scientific processes, contact between Test Site 1 and Test Site 2 was established. After the link was confirmed, Laqar Peyren, a *persona non-grata* and convicted felon, became the first to use a rift, broken and made to submit to order and law, and refined into a safe, passable portal.

The focusing circlet was used to take divided energies and direct them to a single point and was instrumental in every part of the portal's design. Back when the bracelet was used in the scientific wonder that makes interplanetary transportation possible in the Empire—thanks to our rightly respected and wise heads-of-state—it was a simple, clear green band. It was later taken after the success of the first prototype portal by the Head of House Araano, Mathis Araano, to the master craftsman, Aune Sil. He covered it in comfortable, black wrapping and applied the precious stones gently and with all the grace of a heron to the bangle. The silver-backed jewels melded with the crystal with grace, searing steam rushing and hissing. This finely crafted piece of jewelry and art was presented by Mathis Araano to the Imperatrix of the time, Her Imperial Majesty, Dyanna Saan II. Despite being a woman known for her general

displeasure for gifts, she was very thrilled with the delivery of the wristlet and put it on immediately.

It was the temper and stark harshness of Her Imperial Majesty Dyanna Saan II that angered the assassin's hirer, Dion Karroe, and drove him to have the Imperatrix killed. The assassin dropped into her room from the balcony. It was the stealth that led to the success of the assassin, who was never apprehended, as all other attempts on her life were met with a snap of her fingers and her assailant a smoldering pile of ash at her feet. Dion Karroe was taken into court, tried, and found guilty by Dyanna's widower and by Azmir, God of Sun, and was summarily executed.

The bloody trail of the circlet known as Ruby Ruin continued, and at least 5 more rulers have died since owning it. For many generations, there was no record of it, sometimes disappearing for hundreds of years, only to be presented again to a new leader, and again, bringing them bad luck. This may be and likely is all speculation however, as the small bangle has been completely harmless to some. It is far more probable that the little wristlet simply is on the wrong person at the wrong time. It is now to be kept here, in the Vault of Relicts, in Maior, Alkhara.

End of Entry

## Sophia Harlow

### *Object 4*

#### Cheap

The thin red fabric of the coat was itchy. It felt like sandpaper was brushing the skin of my back with each movement. I couldn't help but pull on it awkwardly as a blinking sign stared back at me. *Lucky Shot*, the sign read. To others, it may look like the strobing lights were hypnotizing me 'cause after a while I just stood there and stared. I had never seen electricity used in this way. In such a wasteful and flashy way. Well, I had but only from the roof of my gangly apartment as I gazed through the glassy shimmer of the dome housing everything I had ever wished to have. Now it was right in front of me and I could only grip the cheap ring of fake leather in my hand. "Hey kid, are you okay?" I turned to the voice quickly and was only able to see the figure in the dark after my eyes recovered from the glare. A man stood before me smirking wildly. Amusement laced his tone and I could only let my fist curl around the ring even tighter in embarrassment, letting my head fall forward a little.

"Yes sir," I murmured wrangling my accent back. I had no clue as to why, but this made the man laugh. It was a loud laugh that forced to him tip his head back and open his mouth wide. It bellowed from his chest. I let out a choked version in response. Then he stopped abruptly and peered at me as if I were suspicious for whatever reason.

"You from the slums?"

I had shaken my head, ready to lie, but he cut me off, "Don't lie to me, kid."

This made me shove my lip into my mouth and chew on it not wanting to admit anything. Now the false jewels were cutting into my skin as my fist tightened to its utmost capacity. This seemed to attract the man's attention as his eyes down to pink leather strand dangling from the crevice of my curled fist. Before I could move fist to behind my back the man had already reached my wrist and was yanking it

into his grasp. I began to struggle that only made his hold tighten and my arm burn in pain.

“You stealing?” he growled from between clenched teeth.

“No, no, no, no, no sir,” I repeated as I continued the struggle. This made him reach his bony fingers into my fist and rip the bracelet from its clutches. Now that it was sitting in his palm, he looked at it. It was a fake pink leather bracelet with rainbow plastic jewel lining the middle in rows. It was also old with weird amounts of dust in crevices and multiple jewels missing from their spaces. “What is this?” he snarled. “You a pansy, boy?”

With somewhat misplaced courage, I snatched it from his hand and pulled it close to my chest, “No, it was a friend’s.” At that point, I had not cared about my accent and let it rip my already tattered image. This made the man squint at me, leaning forward on the balls of his feet, “Then why are you here, slinking into parts you’re not supposed to be in?”

“I’m returning it to them” was my answer.

He rocked back onto his heel and looked up as if he was considering believing me, as if I needed his validation. “Hmmm, alright kid, how about this? You give me your friends name and then I’ll help you find them.”

I didn’t answer this time. I only just stood still trying to muster something to say. In the end, I could only come up with a soft “no, thank you” before running off. I felt like the longer I stayed talking with the strange man, the more my grip loosened on my dignity.

I couldn’t count how many alleys I had run down before I deemed myself as safe. My back hit the wall and sunk down, chest rising rapidly either from the running or the hand taking my heart into a deadly hold. I couldn’t tell which.

Ripping the cheap red jacket off my shoulders, I chucked against the brick wall opposites of me. I just felt so cheap. I thought I was ready to go into the dome. The bracelet was even the perfect excuse to tell Ma. Adorned in the clothes of fake aristocrats I thought this would be the night of my life, but anybody could spot me from a mile away. They could all tell I was unworthy. They could tell I was cheap. Cheap like mama, pa, my sister, my friend. It was in my blood. Like a grime, I couldn’t scrub from my skin.

Cheap.

Cheap.

Cheap.

Cheap.

Cheap.

I took a deep breath like I was gasping for air. It made my throat burn, but it pushed me out of my downward spiral and I just let myself sink into the alley floor. That's when I noticed that water seeping through my pants and now my shirt. I shot up and looked around me. The alleyway was damp. All of it. Water was dripping pipes and pooling into the concrete. I couldn't stop my body from crawling toward the pools. I stuck my hands in them and dragged them around in the shallow pool. The laugh that ripped from my throat was that of a madman. People would lick the ground for this water and it was just laying here. I kept laughing to myself. I put face to the cold, dewy ground, finding a strange comfort in it. Inside the dome was such a strange place, wasn't it?

## Murphy Kalil

### *Object 19*

Imperator Calius Vandaran strode through the white marble halls of the Primum Templus, his gilded armor reflecting the somber light cast by the torches along the walls. His time in this world was almost over, but this didn't bother him. Azmir's light would burn away his imperfections and he would be born anew in his realm. Meditation was the first way to curry favor, intensifying the light, making it brighter. Hotter. More radiant. He took an incense dish out of a small wooden cabinet. It was a delicate thing, and ever so old. Forged of the metal making up the sphere Azmir had brought mankind forth from, it was stylized with the creepers and leaves of a darec vine, a fruit-bearing plant which flourished in the flames, the intense heat causing rapid new growth. It was a symbol of Azmir. A symbol of growth and rebirth. The cluster of glass darec fruits caught the light of the torches and glowed like drops of the sun itself, like drops of Azmir's own blood, the blood that had granted the families their gifts. Calius climbed the steps and emerged at the exposed top of the temple. He knelt and placed a cone of incense in the center of the dish and lit it with a snap. He closed his eyes, picturing the smoke dancing around the delicate metal vines of the dish, picturing the glowing ember. He listened and heard the sound of the waves crashing on the shore so far below him. He heard the chants of the Brothers of the Sun, the caretakers of all the temples. He inhaled. The earthy scent of the incense hung in the still air. In his mind's eye, he saw the glass berries of the dish, a luminous orange. They danced before him, spinning faster and faster until all Calius saw was an orange ring of radiant light. The light grew bright, so bright that even he, an Imperator blessed by Azmir's luminance itself, had to avert his eyes. Then it was gone, and all there was, was darkness. He stumbled, dazed, waiting for his vision to clear, but the light didn't come. Even in his old age, after all he had seen, Calius was afraid. Until finally, after what had seemed like an eternity, a blood red sun rose over the horizon, revealing a rocky, slanted battlefield with clumps of tall white grass

sporadically sprinkled throughout the landscape. Returning his attention to the skies, Calius did all he could not to gasp. The sun, unlike the small, luminescent star of Aigyptos, was massive, so big that it seemed to blot out half of the crimson sky. The light was dim as well, casting eldritch shadows behind boulders and thick grass clusters. Then he saw them: an army of warriors, their gold armor sanguine in the light of a strange star. At the forefront, he saw a woman, in gilded armor like the rest of them, but apart. Her eyes alight with a golden glow, a night black cloak and copper hair billowing behind her. Her hands and sword wreathed in a fire only an Emperor or Imperatrix could wield, the fire of Azmir. The Imperial Army charged, and Calius spun around, finding the opposing army behind him. They were twisted, their bodies ranging from merely strange to horrifyingly grotesque. The hordes brandished their mismatched and brutal weapons. At their forefront was a man in a long coat and an iron mask. He stepped forward, his hands alight in a fire similar to that of the Imperatrix charging him, but unlike her radiant glow, his was sickly. It flickered, appearing more liquid, then more solid, then more gaseous, with no particular pattern in mind. The Imperial Army drew nearer and nearer still, until finally, the Masked Man gave the signal to charge. Calius looked back to the Imperatrix and her soldiers and charged the horde of monsters with them. The moment the two groups clashed, Calius's view went dark. When it returned, the battle was over. Soldiers in gilded armor splattered with blood and mutants leaking viscous liquids were strewn as far as he could see. His head spun, looking for any sign of life. He saw there, bodies strewn around them, the Masked Man and the copper-haired Imperatrix. They fought, her flaming sword clashing against a spear of dark eldritch energy. Calius stood, unable to move, unable to make a sound. The two fought, light on dark, order on chaos. At the end, the wounds of the Imperatrix shining with the light of Azmir and the man's mask cast off, revealing sunken eyes, with pupils like pinpricks of pale golden light and a face so disfigured it was only in the barest sense human. The Imperatrix advanced, her sword still wreathed in flames. The man lunged, his spear crackling with sable energy. The sword piercing his chest. The spear shattering golden armor and the bones it protected. A silence fell on the battlefield, Calius still petrified. The Masked Man

and Imperatrix slumped to the ground within moments of each other and Calius's vision went dark for a third time. When it cleared, he was on the top of the temple again, the incense dish smoking before him. He gasped for air, shooting up from his meditation mat. The day was cool and a light breeze had picked up, yet his short grey hair was almost soaked with perspiration. The decorative glass fruits of the incense burner dimmed, though the bright light of the sun still shone upon them. He snatched up the dish and with his considerable strength, cast it into the sea below the temple. He made a silent vow to himself, swearing that what he had seen would never come to pass. As Calius strode back down to the room under the top of the pyramidal temple, a figure in a long coat watched, vague amusement hidden under an iron mask.



## Felix M. Killingsworth

### *Object 1A: Blue and gold metal dish*

The child feels small on the winding streets of Trialis, a city on the planet of Selya. He is dragged by his father across the cracked sidewalk, trash that litters the street crinkling underfoot. Posters advertising new factory jobs and warnings about the dangers of Rifts peel halfway off the sides of buildings and some fall to the ground to be trampled. Heat is felt in waves, despite the dome that covers the city, that was meant to protect the citizens of the planet from the heat and the fading atmosphere. The dome makes him feel even more miniscule, while clutching a beaten golden offering dish to his chest. The heavy dish is so large he must hold it with both arms, while his father carries a messenger bag with their offerings they have for Azmir, the sun god, as well as a small red clay statuette of Azmir depicted in a humanoid form with laurel leaf head piece and a tattoo of a phoenix stretching across his shoulders. His father also held a rudimentary sandstone figurine of his patron god, Tor, the god of success and livelihood.

He watches the people he and his father pass—they keep their heads down and shove through the crowd, hands in the pockets of basic, threadbare pants that were the same pants that his father wore when he came home from work. He sees no other children on the streets, but he isn't surprised. He doesn't see other kids a whole lot anymore, except for the ones at his school. His dad told him a few days ago that families couldn't have more than two kids anymore. He asked why, and his father said that it was complicated. He stopped asking.

They reach the temple and it isn't all that crowded. There are altars for the minor gods in the entry hall leading up to Azmir's larger altar. There was a large statue of the sun god on a platform and below that was a place for offerings. His father began his own smaller religious ritual at Tor's altar where a young business woman was also kneeling. The younger of the two continued to the large altar for Azmir, looking at the depictions of their sacred stories. The paintings

were a rare moment of beauty for the city where simplicity is the most valued quality over the beauty of an object. He stopped in front of the altar and sat on benches positioned there. Light flooded through stained glass high above.

The boy sees a tall man sitting nearby, his face concealed. He wears a long, dusty coat with muddy boots and has a satchel crossing his slender shoulders. He moves to sit next to him, looking up into his face, to see that most of it is concealed by a simple, dull, metal mask.

“Sir,” he begins, “why do you have a metal mask when it’s so hot outside?”

The man turns to look at him and the boy can’t make out any features except a single solid gold eye that was visible. “I wear it because I have to,” the man states simply.

“Why?”

“It’s complicated.”

“That’s what my dad said about why there are rules about the child limit on families,” the boy says. “I think he thinks I can’t handle the truth.”

“Can you?”

“Of course!” he says, pulling the offering plate closer to his chest.

The man’s eyes crinkles for a moment at the corners at this confident, but naïve, kid. “No one is ever totally prepared for the truth. The world is much darker and complex than you can imagine.” He grimaces and stares up at the statue of the god that loomed over him.

“That’s what all grown-ups tell kids!”

“Then maybe it’s true.” The man stands up and looms over the tiny child who is drowning in a white linen shirt two sizes too big. “I know the truths in these lands, and I wish I didn’t.” Dust drops off his boots as he walks, leaving trails of dust in his wake. The boy leaves the plate and scuttles along behind him, taking quicker steps to match the man’s long strides.

They reach the end of a corridor and there’s a distortion in the way reality looks, and the boy can barely comprehend what it is. The way the world should look is warped and there’s a darkness beyond the distortion. He realizes quickly what this distortion is—a Rift—and backs away quickly, shrinking against the wall. His father had told

him about the Rifts and the god of chaos, Kevanll, when he noticed people in the market disappearing. His father told him that when he was very young, his mother got taken through one, and she never returned. It was said that those who went through the Rifts became horribly deformed and were thus shunned by the gods of all that is good.

The man with the metal mask turns around and looks at the boy who was attempting to blend into the white walls. The man pauses and takes off the mask, revealing a face of a man who had been scarred by something greater than humanity or those in the imperial family. The scarred skin hangs on his face oddly. The man drops the mask at his feet.

“Who are you?” he asks, his dark eyes wide.

“They call me the Traveler.”

He looks at the boy before turning around and walking forwards into the Rift. He is swallowed up by it and the distortion closes behind him. The Traveler is gone, leaving the mask and a kid who didn’t know what the truth was.

He reaches for the mask but withdraws at the distant, echoing sound of his father calling his name down the corridor. His father turns the corner, clutching the offering plate he had left behind when he took off after the man of myth—the Traveler. He stood up and left the mask on the ground.

## Devin Lewis

### *Object 27: Ceramic Cat*

#### Fenris

On the planet Selya, before the founding of the great domed city Trialis, the new world travelers lived on the harsh and hot desert that was the planet. Due to pollution from manufacturing, the planet's environment deteriorated and morphed the local fauna. However, during their times without domes, there was a terrible monster that came out of a rift and terrorized everything in its wake.

It had a giant feline body, but the fur looked like white fire and it had massive distorted claws. Its eyes were able to pierce your soul and cause any that looked into them to turn into dust. The people had no idea how to combat it, for fighting it seemed to only make it stronger.

They asked the Dreyfid family (the royal family) for help, and through many offerings and begging, they decided to take it down. Alas, even the mightiest of the Empire of the Sun couldn't step up to oppose him, all were vanquished and the beast eventually grew to the size of a hill. The people were in turmoil as the royals dropped one by one, all hope was lost until the arrival of a mysterious old man.

In reality, this old man was Kevanll, the WolfSnake god of chaos (yes, this is part of our world). He asked the populace of a local settlement for the location of the beast. They told him that it makes its home inside of a giant cactus. They knew what the old man attempted to do, so they all tried to convince him otherwise. Kevanll, seeing how paranoid this monster made them, only became more motivated and began his journey to its lair.

Once he arrived, he exclaimed, "Your name shall be Fenris! And you shall proceed to torment these people no longer. Unless you wish to face my wrath." Fenris, detecting a challenge, came out of hiding and leaped right in front of Kevanll's path. He roared into the air, roaring so loud that a mini-earthquake began. Fenris went to strike but before he could, Kevanll had already poked his belly and Fenris

began to shrink. Fenris began to decrease in size until he was small enough to fit in your pocket.

Although he had shrunk, this did not deter him as he had already leaped towards Kevanll's throat, preparing to strike with his dangerous but now cute claws. Kevanll grabbed Fenris in mid-air and then snapped his fingers. Now Fenris was slowly turning into a ceramic animal. But before he was completely transformed, he managed to bite Kevanll's pinky which caused the transformation to take a slight turn. When it was complete, Fenris now looked like a sea green ceramic cat with two holes on its body. One on the back of its neck, and one on its butt.

However, instead of turning him into ceramic, it only trapped him inside of it. So, using the second hole, Fenris attempted to reform by slowly poking his way out but Kevanll quickly formed a powerful seal and placed it inside the hole. While he was unable to make a seal for its neck, he put powerful diamonds on the ceramic cat's eyes, creating a powerful force field on the neck hole that never permitted anything from leaving.

Now with Fenris securely trapped, he went back to tell the people of his actions and they all rejoiced for three days straight. After a hundred years, Fenris's body had adapted to now be a part of his prison. His fur created rose-like drawings on the front, and even caused it to grow a ceramic tail (although the tail wasn't able to move). Eventually Fenris's body and spirit fully merged with his prison, wiping him away from this world forever. However if you look closely, you can still see his shine on one of the roses.

## Olivia Russo

### *Object 12*

I'm standing in the middle of the darkness, bracing the chilly, dusty wind. The dust saturates my hair and sticks to my skin, almost molding itself to me. There are no stars in the dark blanket that is the sky, just impenetrable unmoving clouds. It's been that way for as long as I can remember. Darkness, the cold, and rocky terrain, miles upon miles of it, are the only things that I've ever known. It's suffocating, living here on Torem, when that's all there is to this tiny planet.

No, it's not like that at all. My planet died and soon became a shell of what it once was, and with it, so did my people. So did I.

Because my planet is already in ruins, Alkhara decided that it would dump its waste onto it, out of the way of its pristine beauty through a single portal that its leaders created.

My face flushes. *How dare they? This planet has living creatures on it too. We don't deserve to be treated as a wastebasket.*

Straight ahead of me, I see it. That single portal. Like everything else that the Alkharans create, it is beautiful but terrifying. Every day, when I look at that aberration, I feel an electrifying rage, one where I feel as if I am strong enough to tear that wretched portal to pieces all by myself. I flush again; the reminiscence of the rage still there.

There's a slight problem with my idea: the portal is intangible. It looks like a hole suspended two feet into the air, a hole in which there is no end. When I look into it, I feel as if I can see into the soul of my planet, all empty and cold. If I reach into it, leaning as far as I can, there is nothing to catch me if I fall. If I fall, where would I go? Would I keep falling indefinitely, stuck in a limbo for the rest of time? Would I hit the ground? No one knows. The ones who have tried never came back.

Disgusting. No one should have the ability to build such a despicable thing.

Next to the portal is a heaping pile of large rocks that I've been collecting for weeks. I reach into my pocket and take out a small

rubbery object shaped like a tear drop with an elongated, tubular tip. It is said to be a “baster,” whatever that is. My planet has no use for it, but I certainly do. Grasping it tightly, a thick liquid oozes out of the tip, reeking of chemicals. Industrial glue. The tiniest drop of it can hold even the heaviest rocks together.

Inhaling deeply, I get to work.

I take hold of the heaviest rock, placing it at the bottom of the portal. I grind it into the hard soil until it is solidly in the ground. I squeeze a few drops of the glue onto the top of the rock, waiting for a few seconds for it to get tacky. I survey the rest of the rocks and choose another one of the largest rocks, once again grinding it into the soil and placing a small amount of glue on the top.

I continue this for what feels like hours: choosing, placing, gluing, repeat. Like a puzzle, the rocks must fit together or else the wall won't be strong enough to hold back the vile garbage. Sweat slithers down my back and my arms ache. I smile, noticing that I am almost done.

Suddenly, something crashes into my wall, and I jolt back, breath catching. Garbage.

*Will it hold? Please, please let it hold...*

Another crash rattles the rocks. And another. And another. Dust poofs out from between miniscule cracks and pebbles tinkle down to the ground. I'm holding my breath and my chest aches for a breath of air. More crashes follow, battering the wall, yet it holds.

The crashes stop so now the only thing I hear is a disturbing silence. I finally breathe out. Hesitantly, I touch the wall, running my hand along the seams of the rocks, testing for weakness. Call it a miracle or chance, but it holds. This small victory courses through my veins and I can't help but grin.

*Take that, Alkhara.*

There's only a little bit left. My pile has diminished into the smallest rock, a fist sized. I pick up the remaining rock, smothering the last bit of glue onto it. With a shaky, tired arm, I place it onto the very top. I sigh, stepping back. I appraise my handiwork with tired eyes.

It's time for a change, and that change begins today.

## Mia R. Torres

### *Object 32: Children's Owl Hat*

*Considering his work, the man had always been used to the dark. Even so, no mine shaft could have ever prepared him for the darkness of the rift, nor the primordial chaos that ripped through his body after he fell through. There were no words to describe the darkness; even 'darkness' itself seemed too bright. It took the man a moment to realize the swirling darkness in front of him was still there when he opened his eyes. It took him longer to realize it always would be. He made as if to stand, but his body would bear no weight. It didn't help that the ground was nowhere near as stiff as the cracked and dry planet he'd left behind. Crumpled on the ground with the unforgiving wind whipping past, the man cried out in agony.*

*That was when he felt it. Like a net, anchored in his chest but cast from his mouth. The darkness was no longer empty but dotted with the hazy outlines of shadows. Struggling into a sitting position, he slowly extended his hand towards the nearest silhouetted pile. He dug his nails into the ground and began pulling himself forward with all the strength he could muster, the pained whimpers, and stifled cries that escaped somehow sharpening the details as he approached the pile.*

*He reached forward and grabbed the first object he made contact with. His hands told him it was hollow and soft. The shadows told him it was small, and his heart constricted as his brain told him it couldn't have been anything but one of the hats they made for children in his dome. Collapsing next to the now tangible mound of stolen artifacts, the details started to fade once more, causing a whimper of fear, complete dread filling his stomach at the thought of being plunged back into the darkness. The man clutched the hat to his chest like a lifeline and wondered if it came here the same as him. Wondered about what poor child had probably been scolded for losing it.*

*"No," he whispered. The man had heard rumors of things disappearing, and there were always a few who went out and never*



*came home—but there had always been. It was just as easy to die in a collapsing mine shaft, as it was for one of the soldiers to decide you weren't moving fast enough. The possibility of being swallowed by a hole in the universe had never come to mind. Now, it was the only thing in the man's mind. It wasn't like there was any light to wash it away.*

*Blind, hurt, and incredibly lost, the man had never felt so alone in his life. A child's hat, the only thing he had to hang on to. A silly hat, from a silly factory, swept away from a silly child, by a not so silly force. Angry and in pain, the man cried out once more. With all the confusion and despair and fury in his heart, he cried out into the darkness, and as the storm in him reached its peak, the cacophony ceased. The anchor of the net meshed with the turmoil in his heart, and the man sat up, dimly aware that there were considerably more shadows than before. Some of them were even moving. Once more, he pulled the hat to his chest, and collapsed, having figured there was nothing more the universe could do to harm him, as the misshapen silhouettes closed in.*

“That still doesn't explain the hat.”

She couldn't help but roll her eyes. Did kids really have to have the emotional depth of a teaspoon? “The Rift took his eyes and any semblance of a normal life. Can you imagine what it would be to have your world ripped from beneath you?”

“Well, no, but—”

“But nothing. I told you not to ask in the first place.”

“I just wanted to know!” came the defensive rebuttal.

“If you really wanted to know, you would've listened. And if you had listen, you'd have been able to put two and two together.” She raised her eyebrow and the minor bared his palms in surrender. “I'm sorry... can't you just explain it to me?”

The girl gave him a hard look before softening. “Do you know how many of these people would kill for a sliver of normalcy? For even the inkling of the world they left behind, or memory of something as innocent as a child's hat. Child, you must understand that losing one's home can be easily equated to losing oneself.”

## Jamey Whisnant

### *Object 15*

#### Such a Trivial Thing

*Even the sun seems dimmer here.* I remember that was the first thought to come to my mind. I suppose I had taken it for granted back home, that I assumed its warmth would always bathe my skin. Now the black smoke had choked the light from the world. There was only the stench of sweat, the slickness of blood, and the bite of cinders as they peppered my skin.

I walked heavily through the white ash, which came falling like snow in a blizzard. My golden armor had never had this much weight before, but now the very act of keeping my shoulders back and chin up was exhausting. I let my eyes wonder around the warzone.

I had never regarded this planet or its people as beautiful. The very thought of living in these industrial cities, with their domed ceiling surrounding me, had always turned my blood to ice. It was like a bird cage without the room to even spread my wings, the idea of freedom just beyond reach. But now looking up at the shattered dome and remembering how easily it had broken made my chest tighten.

Soldiers pushed through the wreckage, their armor emblazoned with the Imperial Symbol. There was no enemy presence here, just people, average people. When I cut down the first one, I noted how easily I had done it. Now my arms felt heavy.

We had rained down with fire, burning everything and everyone around us. We had fire, that was certain. Fire was our bloodline—our heritage—and it hadn't taken much burn the rebels and their hope to ash. Not that I had time to dwell on the insignificants. I was the Heir, a god among men. I didn't have that luxury and sympathy is such a human thing. Such a trivial thing.

I watched a little girl run by, her chocolate eyes glancing up as I walked through the wreckage. She looked disgusting: soot smeared her tattered clothes, fresh cuts and bruises covering her skin. She was just another human, a commoner below me. But the way she stared at

me in terror... No doubt she saw my solid eyes, the entirety of them like gold, or my hair which glinted like obsidian. No doubt she thought I was beautiful... but also terrifying. But terror was such a human thing. Such a trivial thing.

Those maddening screams had begun fading as I came to the ruins of a collapsed building. It was like all the others: a heap of smoking rubble and bodies. But my eyes caught sight of something different in the ruins. A pile of jewelry, all ruined. They looked handmade and I could almost see the time put into them. But now they were nothing but broken gems and golden chains.

That was how it should be. Humans don't deserve beautiful things, not jewelry or any other form of riches. But then, as I began turning away, my eyes snagged on something. An open container in the shape of a heart, made of felt and covered in seashells, and inside, a necklace. Its gems glinted like the stars, its gold as bright as the sun. It was completely and perfectly untouched.

I stared at it for a moment and felt my stomach twist. It was ridiculous. It was just some stupid piece of jewelry. But my blood already felt like poison like it was running through my veins the wrong way. I was jealous. But jealousy was such a human thing. Such a trivial thing. I had been trained to kill and to rule. But despite this, my eyes lingered on the necklace laying delicately in that hideous container.

Then in a single moment, I smashed my gilded boot against that container. The seashells crunched beneath me and the velvet of the container turned to ash. I could hear the diamonds in the necklace shatter and the golden chain snap. I expected a smile to cross my lips, but none came. Instead, my stomach twisted farther and sweat dripped down my forehead in waves.

The jealousy was still there. I felt sicker. I didn't hate humanity because of that beautiful necklace. I didn't hate them because they had beautiful things at all. No, I hated them because of what they were. Humans were beautiful, and I was jealous for it, and I wondered how, even as a god, I could feel such a human thing. Such a trivial thing.

## Sarah Wulf

### *Object 6A: Hanger*

I sat inside the thin closet and stared at the empty padded red hanger, ignoring the weeping I heard around me. I hadn't heard this much crying since my brother said he was going to join the revolution to get the Empire's factories off of our planet. He said they had been creating too much smog.

I tilted my head, letting my dusty-colored hair fall into my face. Supposedly, I looked so much like the desert that surrounded us, the people in our dome called me Isarra, meaning 'desert.' My mother never called me that though. She called me Xanse, my real name.

I remembered her telling my brother this as she was sewing red flowers onto the hanger she'd made out of the red satin of her wedding dress. She said that pretty things had no use and must be made useful.

"But Pap said we're going to Alkhara, and you can wear pretty dresses all the time!"

Mother would mutter gently and tell me to go play with my brother, Copo.

As I was remembering, I felt the warmth of the memory in my heart rush up to my face in hot tears, leaving it cold and sick and empty. I heard feet stalking toward me and Copo yanked the door open, grabbed my shoulder and pulled me to my feet.

"Come on, Isarra! You're too old for to be sitting in a closet staring at an ugly hanger".

I scowled at the ground. I didn't really know if the hanger was beautiful, but I wouldn't call anything our mother made ugly, even if she were here.

"Well, you're too young to be running a family" I clipped back. For that, I got a smack on the back of the head.

"You still play with dolls" he scolded "What do you know?"

He was the one who didn't know anything. I hadn't played *anything* in over a year; I'd been helping Mother with work.

“I never play anything, but you’re always in the nice part of town, playing all sorts of games and losing money.”

“It’s not your place to argue. I’m in charge now,” he barked.

“I’d rather have a cactus in charge rather than you!” I yelled. He smacked me again, and this time, it hurt. Tears welled up in my eyes as he stuttered and tried to take it back.

“Isarra I...”

“What did that revolution do?” I asked, my voice dipping into a growl.

“Isarra...”

“My name is Xanse!”

The coldness in my heart grew stronger and turned from water into stone. I grabbed the hanger he found so disgusting and raced to the door. Some Empire monks and the ruler of our dome stood outside and spoke. Their pure golden eyes bore into me as I shoved past them.

Copo called out to them, “My sister!”

I felt long retractable claws in my shirt and broke into a run. People from the Empire of the Sun were taller, faster, and in better condition than I was, but I knew the town. I sprinted, hooking the hanger to a hole in my dress so it bounced against my legs as I darted toward the outer gate. People crowded around to get in or out, creating a wall of people in front of me, and I ducked in, weaving between legs.

I burst into the desert. The heat and lack of air hit me like a brick. My lungs heaved but I wouldn’t stop running. I’d run until I became a goddess of running.

A horrible ripping sound stopped me in my tracks, and in front of me stood a jagged dark emptiness. A Rift. They appeared everywhere, drawing in people, turning them to mutants and dropping them onto Torem, where they lived their lives in shame, worshipping Kevanll, the god of darkness. All my life, I’d been told never to go near Rifts, but it’d always been by Copo. My mother never said that...

“Xanse!”

I leapt. My world spread out and a thousand devices of torture hit my body at once. I couldn’t even cry out—the cold void was too big. I forced my eyes to stay open, to watch for the Traveler that every child was warned of ever since they were born.

“Hello”.

He was there. A tall man in a dark cloak, wearing a low-brimmed hat that only revealed a metal mask at his chin.

“Hi,” I said softly. He offered me a hand, which turned out to be a long tentacle he’d curled up his sleeve. Scared to say no, I took it.

“You interrupted me on my way to Selya” he said monotonously. His voice was low and gravelly.

“I didn’t mean to” I whispered.

“I’m sure. Well, a new Rift opens every minute”.

Just like that, I felt every piece of me pulled apart and I screamed as I plummeted to the icy, trash covered ground of Torem.

I folded my arms around my mother’s hanger hugging it close as I stood up, staring at all the caves that riddled the planet. In one, there was a group of women, looking curious, but not surprised.

“Seems you’re invisible” one with three eyes stated.

"What?" I asked.

“That’s a new one alright” another carrying rocks agreed.

A woman made of wood picked me up and brought me to the caves, I wanted to tell them I could walk just fine, but I couldn’t speak. I was looking at my hand. I didn’t have one, or legs or toes or anything! Copo made it sound like everyone who entered a Rift turned into Kevanll himself, but I didn’t even *know* what I looked like! I was invisible! I was a dress and a hanger floating by themselves! I shifted in the woman’s arms as she brought me further underground.

“What’s your name, child?” a woman near the back asked.

“Xanse” I muttered, confused “It means ‘unseen but not forgotten’”.

## Tibidi System

The Tibidi System is comprised of two planets and one dwarf planet. The two larger planets, *The Shell* and *Iloko*, view the smaller dwarf planet, *Bwlis*, as an orbiting moon. There are six major, sentient species that inhabit these planets. On *The Shell*, a planet broken into pieces now caught in *Iloko*'s atmosphere and circling around it, giant ground sloths known as *Slōths* live; they feed off the love of nearby humans in order to sustain themselves and their magic. *The Shell* is mainly made of huge, old-growth rainforests with occasional mountains and waterfalls flowing over the edges into basins on *Iloko*. Three species live on *Iloko*: Humans, *Eleals*, and Shifters. Hundreds of years ago, *Iloko* was pulled into *The Shell* by the *Slōths*' magic, fracturing the larger planet. Humans live scattered across *Iloko*, with a majority living in the Forests of Dusk and Dawn, which grow along the edges of the shadows cast from the *Shell*; the Tundra, which sits underneath the center of the floating islands above so sunlight never reaches it; and also in the deserts, where sunlight is able to reach down to the surface without any obstructions from *The Shell*. The *Eleals*, a water-dwelling species that survives on both human and animal instincts, live in the interconnecting basins of water provided by the waterfalls from *The Shell*. They do not interact with the other species outside of hunting humans who visit the basins' surfaces. The final sentient Ilokan species is the Shifters, an ancient predator race that, while once living on *The Shell*, were thrown onto *Iloko* by the *Slōths* after the collision of the two planets. The Shifters live in the Forests of Dusk and Dawn and are able to change between their human forms, which, though hairless, are realistic enough to pass as real humans, and their animal forms, which, no matter what type of animal it is they can shift into, have pale, nearly translucent skin that is extremely light-sensitive. These monsters are so hideous to humans that Shifters have

been labeled ‘Stitchbacks,’ the boogeymen of the Tibidi System. The dwarf planet, Bwllis, is composed entirely out of metal ore and is inhabited by the *Poleans*. This one-foot tall species has human features except for a mouth in their abdomen that feeds directly into their stomach. These humanoids used to live on The Shell with the Slōths and acted as their much-needed source of love and affection, but they were driven away when the Shifters began to aggressively hunt them as food. They fled to Bwllis, where they spent the next several decades using the planet’s natural resources to advance their own technology. For over 50 years before Iloko’s collision with The Shell, Bwllis and Iloko had engaged in a conflict over Iloko’s resources. During this time, the Poleans took prisoners of war from the human planet and enslaved them, giving them specialized bionic limbs to help aid them in their tasks. These cyborgs, or *Stalen Vrienden*, make up the sixth sentient species of this system, though they personally view themselves as Ilokans with unwanted physical changes. It is customary in their culture to remove any bionic limbs after death in order to be closer to their Ilokan roots.



## **Katie Barnett**

### *Object 36: Token*

Declan, although young, knew well enough he shouldn't wander the forest of Dusk and Dawn, let alone so close to when the Stitchbacks come out. Around him, the air was turning cooler, signifying night would be with him soon despite the already dark sky. Declan stared at the sky then. He looked up at the floating island far above him, where his gods resided. He knew he'd make it up there someday. To the right of him, a twig snapped, causing him to leave behind his thoughts and fall backwards. Gripping his leather sack tightly, Declan bit his lip and rose again. He needed to get to the temple. Everything would be okay there. As he walked in the direction he believed the temple was in, Declan prayed quietly under his breath. Before he stopped speaking, Declan's father always told him that his Gods would come when he needed them most.

In the back of his mind, a small part of Declan wondered where his Gods were now. The thought unnerved the boy, reminding him far too much of his mother. He shook it off, continuing on with his journey to find the temple.

Declan had been walking for what felt like far too long when he spotted a familiar small building. He cursed the miniscule doubts in his mind, and, smiling to himself, jogged towards the small forest temple. When he reached the door, he pulled with no hesitation, already relieved. The door didn't open, stubborn. Declan threw his shoulder against the door, already fearing the worst. The door was barred on the inside.

Declan stepped away from the door, taking a deep breath. Somewhere in the forest behind him, a noise like sharp, howling wind rose up. Chills went down Declan's back. He was all too familiar with the lore of the Stitchback's scream. Desperately, Declan tried the door again. The door stayed put. The Stitchback screamed again, closer this time. Slowly, Declan backed away from the small temple of his Gods in the forest of Dusk and Dawn.

He looked up at the floating island, praying for his Gods to listen to his plea.

“Please,” was all he could muster.

He waited.

The Gods didn’t answer.

Declan looked around him once more, his grip tightening around his leather sack as he noticed just how dark it *really* was. A scuttling that couldn’t have been too far away startled Declan out of his spiral. He needed to get somewhere safe. Gulping, he moved toward a tree. He put his hand to the trunk of the tree warily and used his other hand to grab a branch. Slowly, Declan reached the highest branch. He unstrapped his leather sack and opened it. Declan took out a smaller pouch, which he held gingerly in one hand. Remembering a myth his brother told him about Stitchbacks catching scent, Declan flung the leather sack as far as his weak arm would allow, hoping it would throw off whatever was to come.

Declan leaned back against the trunk of the tree. His hands shook as the screams of the Stitchbacks grew closer. As his shaking hands untied the small pouch, Declan went over the list of things his brother had told him about the Stitchbacks. They were creatures of the night who could easily blend in with anyone from Declan’s village during the day. They ran fast as anything on all fours, their eyes glazed over with hunger, and their sharp teeth ready to be used. The movement of the creatures were unnatural and eerie. You could practically see the knots of their spine as they hunched over, searching.

Declan closed his eyes as he undid the last knot on his pouch, and pretended the nearby screams *were* just howling wind. He slipped his trembling hand inside the pouch, and pulled out a small, circular piece. Declan traced his finger over the raised bump on the light blue circle he held, a tear slipping down his face. Before his mother had left, she had given Declan a parting gift. A pouch full of colorful, circular objects, no raised pattern alike. She was convinced that the raised lines on the circle meant something, like words from the previous inhabitants.

Declan didn't remember much about the night his mother had to leave his village, but he certainly could remember her last words to the crowd who had come to watch her depart.

"Someday soon, you'll find that your 'Gods' have abandoned you. When that day comes, I'll laugh in your faces."

Declan's hand tightened around the circular piece. He sent one last prayer, squeezing his eyes shut. When he received no answer, he opened his eyes once more and carefully wiped the tears from his face. Rhythmically, he traced the raised lines on his piece again, realizing that his mother had been right all along. The Gods had abandoned them.

Deep in the forest of Dusk and Dawn, a child held his breath. Nearby, the Stitchback caught a scent.

## Dylan Boswell

### *Object 26: A Rock*

#### **YOUR ROCK AND YOU!**

“GREETINGS TO YOU, THE NEW *resource manager* OF THE POLEAN CITY OF *Kruntag*, AND WELCOME TO THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF *rocks*!”

The screen flickers before switching from a production symbol to an effervescent picture of a shining metal city lit up against the dark night sky. It takes a second for your eyes to adjust to the painfully sharp contrast. When you adjust, you find a man wearing a large mech suit entering the frame to deliver a large thumbs-up to the camera.

“Welcome new employee! I’m sure you’re going to be as valuable a member to society as the great Kr’t himself!”

The screen flickers again, this time to a low-resolution still of a room full of different rock chunks of varying sizes and makeup.

“THIS MAY NOT LOOK LIKE MUCH NOW, BUT WITH JUST A LITTLE BIT OF ELBOW GREASE, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.”

A star wipe covers the screen for an excruciating ten seconds as the image slowly shifts to an entire warehouse full of feed material.

“WOW, WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT! ENOUGH TO FEED A CITY FOR YEARS! AND THIS IS ONLY A SMALL EXAMPLE OF WHAT CAN BE DONE IF YOU REALLY PUT YOUR MIND TO IT.”

Another painfully sluggish transition as the view changes to that of a machine’s interior. Two men are working on some sort of wiring.

“HEY THERE, FELLAS! HOW’S THE WORK COMING ALONG?”

The men greet the voice with a wave and a big thumbs-up before returning to their work. One of them picks up a small chunk of

rock and delicately places it into an empty socket, only to receive a visible electric shock.

“WOAH, CAREFUL THERE, FELLAS. DON’T WANT TO GET HURT NOW, DO WE?”

The men laugh, and the shocked one successfully places the mineral into its proper location without any more problems.

“EXCELLENT WORK, BOYS, KEEP IT UP!”

The screen cuts from the enthusiastic workers to a pure black screen, where it lingers for almost a full thirty seconds. When the footage resumes, it is of a dark and abandoned city.

“BE CAREFUL, *mineral resource manager*, IF YOU’RE NOT CAREFUL, TRAGEDY COULD STRIKE AT ANY MOMENT. YOU MUST STAY VIGILANT, TO ENSURE THAT THE CITY PROSPERS IN ALL OF ITS ENDEAVOURS.”

The camera cuts to a slow pan through the ruins of the city, lingering on torn up conservation posters and stray object left in the street: clothing, bedding, furniture, and a single stuffed animal left on top of a mound of garbage. The camera lingers on this one especially long, making it more obvious by the second how deliberate the placement of the item is.

“YOU ARE THE FIRST DEFENSE IN THIS WAR AGAINST *attrition*. THE ENTIRE CITY DEPENDS ON YOUR GOOD JUDGEMENT. NOW, GO OUT THERE AND *manage some rocks*.”

As the screen slowly fades to black, you realise that you still don’t know any more about what the responsibilities of your new job are than before you watched the video.

As you consider this, you are handed a clipboard and a hard hat by a security guard and instructed to “benefit the colony the way only you can, friend.” You walk past the long line of new workers waiting for their own orientation on your way to your new career, content to learn your duties on the job.

## Genevieve Cook

### *Object 41: Chair*

The sand beneath my shins is gritty, and I think that it never used to feel like this. Now, at the edge of 40, I think that a lot of things never used to feel like this. It seems as if my comfort in my lifestyle all but disappeared overnight, because I cannot remember a time before today in which I felt so despairingly about my life wasting away. Out of the corner of my eyes, I see Savitri approaching.

“Being overdramatic again, Bennie?” Savitri’s light-hearted joke does nothing to lift my spirits. She must notice, because she sighs and sits down next to me.

All is silent for a few moments as she contemplates what to say. “Your mom is worried. About you, I mean.” The words that leave her mouth are followed with silence, and suddenly I know what I want.

“I want to move to the forest.”

Savitri is less surprised than I had imagined, but she is still obviously uncomfortable with my admission.

“I think you should talk to your mom.”

Her tone is condescending. I can feel the anger spreading through my mind.

“I’m not a child, Sav. I’m 39 years old, and I can make my decisions for myself. I don’t need ‘Mommy’s permission’ anymore.”

Savitri exhales through her nose before saying, “You’re only saying this because you know that she would object. It’s dangerous out there, Bennie. Neither of us has ever even seen a stitchback in real life. You should stay here, where it’s safe.”

“Here is where I’ve stayed my whole life. I don’t think you understand what it’s like to travel around the same deserts building the same shrines for the same gods for 40 years. I understand that it’s still novel to you, but I can’t do it anymore. When we were joined, you promised to follow me through the deserts. Why is this not the same?”

Savitri is slowly giving in. I can see it in her face. “Okay. I’ll go with you, but you need to tell your mom. You, at least, owe her

this,” she says, and I stand up to follow her inside of one of the parked caravans.

As I enter my childhood home, I see my mother sitting on the floor, planning the quickest route to the next temple. Her head slowly moves to look at me, and I can see the joy in her eyes. I look away, not wanting to have to watch it fade.

Savitri stands behind me in the doorway as I build up courage. I hate this, hate that I feel guilt for wanting to move on, so I blurt out my thoughts before filtering them.

“Savitri and I are moving.”

I look back over to her the moment that I hear a sound of joy, confused by her response.

“Oh, Beneatha! I’ve been so excited for this day! I know some people in the next town over who have very nice caravans, just for you and Savva!”

When she sees my face, she continues on with “Not that I’m kicking you out, but your father and I bought our own caravan when we joined, and I’d been anticipating this.”

“Mama, that’s not what I mean. Sav and I are going to the forest.”

My mother looks to Savitri who lowers her head to the ground in shame. “Savitri, Savitri,” she pleads, “You’re agreeing to this? You’re taking my baby away?”

“Sav, go start packing.” After saying this, I take my mother into my arms and explain to her why I need to leave. This passes in a blur that I don’t want to remember.

My mother is kind enough to give me her caravan anyways, telling me that she’ll live with my uncle. The only piece of furniture that she leaves us is a large corner chair, one that she gave birth to me on. She says that if my life began on that chair, it’s only fair that I keep it. It’s as I’m helping Savitri load our few belongings into the trunk that I realize something. I’m leaving home.

On the second day of our life in the forest, we stumble onto an abandoned house. Upon entrance, the reason for its abandonment became obvious. The house seemed to be victim of a house fire, and all of the furniture was charred black.

After the two of us finish cleaning out our new house, we both sit on the corner chair from my home. From her spot on my lap, she says, "So this is home now?"

"I suppose."

My first encounter with a stitchback was a few days ago. I was out scavenging when I saw it. It was standing a mere 30 feet away. The pale human skin clinging to its ribs showed that it was starving. It stayed cautious, and I was able to make it inside while it just stood there, waiting at our house for the opportune moment.

This morning, when Savitri and I woke up from our spot on the chair, we saw four stitchbacks waiting outside of our window. They're still there.

This is the fifth day since the incident. Every day they get closer. Savitri won't stop crying now, and I don't know what to do.

"Why are you upset?" I ask.

Her sobbing is interrupted by "I want to go home!"

"Savitri, we are home."

Suddenly, she stands from her spot on the chair. "I can't live like this, Bennie. I can't do it." Her heaving increases between sentences. "I followed you here, Ben, and now what? Are we just supposed to live alone forever, just waiting for the day the stitchbacks finally get us? What were you thinking? Just come home with me!"

"I can't! I can't! Why don't you understand? We came all the way out here; we can't just crawl back now. I'm staying here. If you want to leave me to die with the stitchbacks, go ahead. This is my home now."

Savitri is at the door with her bag and a knife. "Please come with me, please." After a few silent moments, she leaves. I can hear the engine of the caravan starting up.

Hours pass, and I can almost hear the stitchbacks breathing in my ear. I stand up, move to the door, and open it.

From my spot on the chair I was born in, I watch the stitchbacks make their way inside. I see their almost human smile as they realize I'm not putting up a fight. I close my eyes.



## Marcus Huellstrunk

### *Object 47: Bell from Belltower*

When I first saw it, I realized that the end of an age was near. Its glaze reflecting the dim dusk light, it struck me as an image of beauty, and the workmanship let me know it for what it was. Carved out of clay, it was decorated with a smear of Algant, a bioluminescent liquid used to color surfaces, commonly used in the Dark areas. This seemed to be a particularly well-crafted one, with a surface so smooth one could barely believe it was there. But there it was. This image of beauty contrasting everything else in the city, the stray cats, huts, and filth on the cobbled roads. Even the elegant manor, lording over the teeming poverty, was shadowed by the perfect workmanship. Everyone in the area had come to see the spectacle, touching the coolness of the clay thing.

As I neared the crowd, I saw clearly what it was. It was a bell, the one you put on the Manor house to keep the hours. A bell built by our conquered enemies to pay homage to the brilliant coalition. The Queen's procession had brought a gift indeed.

Due to popular consensus, the Bell was hoisted to the Manor's tower. We tested the bell, and I heard the most beautiful bell sound that ever pleased the city streets, like the low humming of a choir, reverberating. The city the crowd rejoiced in victory, calling for a chant for their brave soldiers, and to forget the dead. They were in the Darkwoods now anyways. And the conflict was finally over.

Back then, they still called it the Triumph Bell. Back then, we still knew what was right and wrong. Back then, we didn't have a selections or inspections. We had no curfew, and we had still had a market. Back then, there was dirt and grime, and the poor lived on the streets

But then something changed quickly. The Queen wanted to increase the efficiency. The most of us laughed it off and continued as per usual. But almost overnight, the poor were off the streets, sent who knows where for efficiency. Most of us were actually glad that we got

those do-nothings out of sight, but I was worried where this new “efficiency” would lead.

The streets were next, in a cleaning up process that the guards called “Trash removal.” The community quickly joined in, eager to show their commitment to helping the coalition. Soon, the streets were clean as they had never been in my lifetime.

The next day the Market burned down. At the time, no one knew how but it happened. The Queen sanctioned an inspection and forbade any other markets because of “hazards from foreigners” Soon, the inspection ceased with no news for the public, but the Market ban was not lifted. Instead, the manor would feed everyone with its vault of food and money to spend on caravans. Many frowned at the idea, but the new guard’s cold stares dared anyone to move.

The Bell is renamed to the coalition bell, but no-one talks about it anymore, and it falls out of use. Now, the bell represents the coalition. Now, the bell represents silence. Now, the bell represents us.

## Brianna Kale

### *Object 34: Human-Turtle*

No one is really sure where it came from. It was always just there. Ever since I was small, I could remember the strange object sitting on the shelf of the curio cabinet. Its face and arms looked just like ours; its human eyes seemed to stare into the crevices of our home. It has the shell of a turtle, its body hidden within the shell.

But it was precious. Not because it was made of rare metals or because of the expense, but because it was ours. It had been in the family for generations and generations, being passed down from father to son, from mother to daughter. The meaning of the item was never really explained, and the beginning of the tradition was questionable with no clear start or reason.

And in the days before my 13th birthday, I noticed myself dwelling on the item. It was fragile and often kept away from any source of danger. It was dusty and old, the hand painted exterior slowly chipping away from age. It was strange, to say the least. But soon it would be mine.

The celebrations had been settled. The food had been consumed. Gifts lay unattended to on the table. As any child would be, I was rather anxious to see what lay behind the boxes and bags that withheld the items from me.

While the anxiety of the gifts was beginning to overwhelm me, I couldn't help but wonder if it was more than that. The small, old, dusty box that held the trinket felt connected to me. Every time I glanced towards the pile, it was always the first thing my eyes landed on. It was like there was something more to the trinket than met the eye.

It didn't take too long before the boxes were on the floor and the bags were discarded. My gifts were laid out in a neat little line across the front of the table. The only unopened gift was the trinket left sitting behind my new gifts. My eyes drifted away from it, forcing a smile onto my face. I could be content with this. Not everything had to be open. Right?

No, that was rude. You couldn't refuse a gift.

I stood up off the floors and walk over to the table, picking up the box and taking the top off. My fingers were light as they put the minimal amount of pressure possible on the lid. The fear was bending the thin cardboard, worn from the age. Paper was plastered over the lid, creating a design of overlapping scraps that was perfect for trapping age and dust through the gaps of the glue.

The smiling expression of the faded painted face stared back at me. It was soft but uncanny.

"Don't you love it? It's been in the family for four generations. You will be the fifth," my mother said, a hand placed on my shoulder.

"Yeah. It's... beautiful," I replied, "I already have a place for it in my room. On my bookcase where it can watch over me." I was hoping that answer would fool my mother into believing my joy in the gift, or maybe to trick myself into liking this haunting thing. The truth was it would most likely sit behind some books before being hidden in a drawer, far away from my sight.

"That's really wonderful, sweetheart. Now, you should head onto bed now. You wouldn't want to faint again while working, would you?" She prompted.

I nodded, slowly lifting the aged item into my hands and carefully walking towards my bedroom. I set the item, rather carelessly now, onto my bookcase and climbed into bed.

The curtains were open, but the darkness still seeped through. It wouldn't make any sort of difference now. A day cycle had already been completed; it would seem forever before another one happened.

It made it rather easy to sleep though. And sleep didn't take long to find me. But I wished that I could say that it stayed with me.

A soft glow reached my eyes, stirring me from my slumber. The light assaulted my eyes as they fluttered open. Groaning, I stood up, walked to my window and drew the curtains, trying to block out the bioluminescence that flowed into my room.

But the light didn't go away. The pain in my head still blinded me, causing me to stumble towards the source. My hand felt around, blindly knocking things over. Books tumbled off the shelf as I neared the source. Finally, I found it, my hand covering the source.

The coolness of the ceramic hit my senses first. I opened my eyes, shocked to see the newest addition to my room under my hand.

A whisper filled the room, my head swirling with thoughts that weren't my own. History became knowledge and knowledge became power as a million things overwhelmed my memories, new ones flooding in. Or were they old ones?

I could see people I'd never met before. People that looked like my grandmother, my grandfather, my parents, and myself. Strangers with features like ours and faces that mimicked shadows of our own.

As soon as it had started, it had stopped, the dim light fading away and my thoughts leveling out into my own.

I jerked away from the heirloom and crawled into bed, pulling the blankets over my head and falling back to sleep.

When I awoke, the turtle was missing from my bookshelf. I rushed out of my room, shocked to find it sitting back behind the curio cabinet doors.

## Brooklyn Long

### *Object 44: Wooden Dog*

Most people tell me that being born a hybride is a gift. Being able to transform into whichever animal your tribe is a part of makes me feel secluded. I want to be able to be free and become whatever I want to be. My Grandpap always told me that being able to shift to a bird left us with a higher advantage apart from the other tribes, scoping the ground and being able to see our prey from miles away. I contemplated my life as a hybride while I stared up at the pinkish-reddish sky, my back on the ground and my arms behind my head.

Something about the Dusk Dawn forest made me want to end my life constantly. My friends and family would ask me why. I would always reply with the same answer, “Why would I want to spend my life in the same place? I could be out there exploring Iloko and meeting humans and the slōths.” They would call me crazy. All except Grandpap.

One night after feeding, Grandpap took me to this waterfall near the edge of the forest. “Skog,” he started, clearing his throat before he said anything else, “I want you to know that I am not here to tell you what to do.” Grandpap paused and raised his eyebrows at me, as if he was seeing if I was listening to him. I nodded in agreement. “Ending your life is a big deal. The people you love will be devastated for a long time. However, if you strongly believe this is the decision you should make, then you should do it here.”

Grandpap patted my shoulder and started walking back towards our cabin. I didn’t turn around and waited a while to move until I knew he was gone. I wondered to myself why my Grandpap would tell me to go ahead and end my life right here? I walked around the waterfall to explore when I stumbled across this wooden statue.

“Wow!” I exclaimed out loud. The statue was about twenty feet tall and looked like it was hand-carved. The wood looked like it was falling apart, due to all of the moisture from the waterfall. The off-white paint that was on the statue’s tail and two front feet looked

as if it was chipping and rubbing off. I walked over to the statue and sat down on my knees in front of it. I closed my eyes and exhaled a deep breath.

A few moments passed and all that could be heard was the constant flow of the waterfall. I was about to stand up from my position when I heard a low voice.

“Hello,” said the voice. I looked around, expecting to see someone come out from behind the trees or bushes.

“In front of you,” the voice said again. “I am the past elder. I know why you are here, and I can help you seek tranquility.” I looked up at the statue and smiled.

“How do you know what I am seeking if I don't even know what that is?” I challenged the statue.

“I know that your name is Skog. You are a sixteen year old hybride and you are not content with your life. Skog, you want to be able to see humans and to be free from your tribe.” The statues face didn't move. I do not know why I expected it to but it was still strange. I asked the statue how come it could talk.

The statue replied saying that long ago, he was an elder. “I was what the tribes looked up to in seek of guidance. This is how we kept peace among the tribes. I work out the conflicts and make sure no one is about to take charge on another tribe. You are all family, whether you like it or not.” The statue took in another breath as if he was about to speak again but we just sat in silence for a few moments. I finally voiced my thoughts to the passed elder.

“I want to be free. How am I able to do that?” I asked. The statue didn't say anything for a long time. One minute, two minutes, five minutes. When was this going to end? I decided to give up. I stood up from my spot on the ground and turned around. Just as I was about to walk, there was a bottle in the middle of the walkway.

“This will grant you what you desire most,” the elder finally said. I asked him what the liquid was. He replied, “It will set you free. It will make you who you want to be, and the important thing is you will be happy.” With that, I thanked the elder and went to a secluded part of the forest. I opened the bottled and downed the liquid.

My hands and legs started shaking and my whole body felt as if it were on fire. For a split second, I thought the elder betrayed me,

but then, I saw the other side. I saw the tundra and the desert and the rainforest. I stepped over the boundary and took in a deep breath. I began my long trek trying to find the first human I could to tell them all of the trouble that I had gone through.

Hours have passed and I began to think about my Grandpap. He saved me? He told me that if I wanted to end my life, then I needed to do it at the waterfall. The statue was right next to the waterfall. I smiled, knowing that this was all set up because Grandpap wanted me to be happy from the very beginning. I know that I will never forget Grandpap and the wooden statue that saved my life.



## Catherine Low

### *Object 2a: Gold Disco Ball*

“You have all learned about the Slōths, yes?”

The small group of children gathered around the storyteller all nodded.

“Good. So you know all about their golden eyes that they use to peer down into Iloko to find the most devout and loving among us, yes?”

Again, the children nodded. They had all learned the significance of the Slōths and their all-seeing eyes in their lessons years ago.

“Very well. This story is of the day the Slōths shut off the Shell from Iloko.” The storyteller took a breath and began to speak with a seriousness not usually present in his stories. “That day was a day of mourning for all of Iloko. The Slōths have been our direct protection for generations upon generations, and to have them suddenly rip themselves away was a shock that many are still trying to reconcile with.”

A little girl piped up, confused and impatient. “But what *happened?*”

The storyteller sighed but began to speak once again. “The Slōths cut us off not because of the actions of the many, but, as is so common, because of the actions of a few.” The storyteller paused, leaning forward in their seat and fixing the small crowd with a heavy stare. “Remember that obsession is a dangerous thing, and that obsession disguised as love is what drove those few to commit a crime so terrible, they were killed for what they did.”

Muttering and shuffling spread through the group as they took in this information. The storyteller didn’t stop for long, though, and pushed on with the story. “Those few were part of a group known as the Church of Love. Before the Slōths withdrew their reaching claws, it was the Church of Love they reached for the most. These people were so devout, it scared outsiders to see their passion. They always seemed to go too far, were too devoted, but nevertheless, the Slōths

pulled them up one by one to repay their love as they have always done.

“The Church loves all of the Slōths, but there was always one particular Slōth that they loved even more because it had been the one to pull up most of their group. They couldn’t imagine living on the Shell without it, even though this Slōth was very old and very much wanted to depart from his place on the shell. This Slōth—”

Another little girl interrupted, asking, “What do you mean, ‘depart’? I thought the Slōths couldn’t die.”

The storyteller fixed her with a stern look. “If you wouldn’t interrupt, you’d soon see that that is not true. Not in the least.” He paused, waiting to make sure she stayed quiet. “Now, this Slōth had already made up its mind that it wanted to leave, and once a Slōth’s mind is made, nothing can change it. Frantic, the Church devised a way to keep the Slōth with them. They broke off branches from the toughest of the old-growth trees and carved them into spears. They made enough for nearly every member of the Church and surrounded the Slōth when it was alone and unprotected.

“You must remember—” The storyteller interjected, leaning forward again to catch the children’s attention. “This was a very old Slōth, one of the very oldest, in fact. They killed it by stabbing it through its right eye, but they harvested the left and threw it down to Iloko for the rest of the Church to catch and keep safe and hidden. The other Slōths of the Shell gathered faster than they had ever moved before, for the murder of one of their own was an unforgivable act. The members of the Church of Love involved in the murder, and even the few that weren’t, were thrown from the shell as they had thrown the eye, but there was no one to catch them when they landed in the trees of the Forests of Dawn and Dusk. The members of the Church, as well as many others, searched for them, but they were never found. Some say that the Stitchbacks found them and devoured them, leaving nothing but the clothes they wore tied around the tallest trees.”

“Did the Church of Love catch the eye when it fell?” Someone from near the back of the group asked.

“We don’t really know,” The storyteller answered. “But I have a feeling that they didn’t.”

“But if they didn’t, what could have happened to it? Is it lost forever?”

The storyteller smiled, a smile that spoke of something he wouldn’t, or couldn’t, say out loud. “Maybe it *is* lost forever, or maybe not. Maybe it’s in a place of protection, kept safe from the rest of the world. Or maybe there’s still a bit of magic left in it, and it’s hiding in wait for the right person to trip over the right rock on the right day.” The smile gentled, and they winked, grabbing a cane from the ground and stood, leaning on it heavily and signaling the end of the story. The children’s curiosity, though, was not sated.

“Excuse me, but why do you have a cane?” One of them asked after the majority of the group had cleared out of the room.

The storyteller looked down at the child, seemingly debating what answer to give. They leaned down close to the child’s ear and simply murmured, “The fall from the Shell is a long one.” They stood up again, and with their cane in hand, followed the children out the door.

## **Rebekah Maguire**

### *Object 34: Wooden Top to Perfume Bottle*

The truck pulled into the camp, sending dread into everyone's hearts. Who would be taken today? Who would forget everything and everyone they knew?

Lotte knew she was old enough to work in factories and after seeing Thijs being taken only months ago, she knew her father wouldn't be able to take the loss of another child.

As the wind whipped through the camp, the metal structures barely bending to the wind, everything was silent. Not a child cried. The sun beat down and the metal ground grew hot. They had learned long ago to wrap their feet in whatever bits of cloth they could find, since they weren't important enough for shoes.

As the Poleans moved through the still crowds, Lotte stared into the distance. Even from here, the gray haze around the planet was seen. It was the technology that disguised Bwlis as a moon, keeping Iloko or the Shell from spotting them.

A Polean stopped beside her. Backing up, the metal hand of the Mex suit yanked her right arm. Her hand hit against the machine and she cried out in pain. She had received many canings from Polean guards, but the pain still lived on.

The weakness was noticed, but the Polean moved on. Three men were taken that day and their families retreated into their homes to mourn the death of the people they were before being brainwashed.

As the truck drove away, she heard the clang of something dropping on the metal ground. No one else seemed to notice it, but she had. And she wanted to know what the Poleans had dropped.

She slowly moved closer, her long blond braid whipping into her face. The Polean guards would just... have fun with her, if they caught her sneaking towards the exit. But she had to know what it was.

Not a guard in sight, she ran to the object and picked it up. She didn't look at it before placing it in her pocket. She prayed to the Gate Mother that no one would notice her.

As she entered her home through the open doorway, the first thing she noticed was that it was empty. Her father must be consoling the families, as was his job as one of the leaders in their community. Stepping forward, Lotte almost tripped over the cybernetic parts laying on the floor, remnants of their people. Their people who had been stripped of their identity and forced to serve a thankless race.

She kicked the parts out of the way, determined to do something with them later, providing that a Polean didn't do a house search and discover them, leading to punishment.

As she sat on the ground, she examined the object more closely.

"Strange," she whispered to herself.

Unlike everything on this planet, it didn't feel like metal. She wondered if it was like the cloth, made of thin metal fibers that had been stripped to be made soft. But it felt as tough as the ground that she walked on. It was a brown color, with lines of black twisting through it. But the top of it, that was familiar. A golden metal piece, that when pressed, went down.

But in the time Lotte had spent examining this, she had failed to realize her father had walked through the door. Seeing the object in her hand unsettled him, after he had spent time with the grieving families. They prayed to the Forger and to the Half-Human, that the lost ones would be safe.

"What is that, Lotte?" he asked. His low soft tone made her uneasy. She knew how furious he really was.

"I just found it," she said.

He walked towards her and memories whirled through Lotte's head. She pushed them back as her father took the item out of her hands. Fear ripped through her, fear that he would throw away the one bit of rebellion she had.

Instead he took in a deep breath, closed his eyes, and then opened them, revealing a brilliant green. His short brown hair barely moved as he walked to the other side of their small home, praying to any one of the gods.

Lotte held back tears, and instead grabbed her tools and cybernetic parts. Working with materials that would one day be

crafted onto her was eerie, but it prepared her. The same fear that the others had was lessened.

“Papa?” she asked, breaking the silence that threatened to crush the life out of both of them.

He turned, still holding the foreign object, “Yes?”

His eyes were tinged with red, and tear tracts ran down his face. This unsettled Lotte more than anything she had seen today. Her father hadn’t cried since Thijs.

“What is that thing?”

“Nothing you should worry about. Forget you ever found it.”

Her father stood up and stuffed it into his pocket. A coldness had filled the room, a gap between the pair. As he walked out the doorway, Lotte heard him muttering to himself. Saying things she couldn’t hear.

She wouldn’t leave it that. She tore out of the house, following him.

“Papa!” she shouted.

Her father turned around, “Lotte, stop.”

“Tell me.”

Her father walked towards her and pulled her towards the house. As they walked in he looked her in the eye.

“What I tell you, do not repeat.”

Lotte nodded quickly, needing an explanation for the state this object put her father in.

He raked his fingers through his hair, a wild look in his eyes. An excited look.

“Lotte, this is from home.”

Confusion struck her for the first time since she could remember. Her whole life, nothing changed. How could this object be from this place?

“It can’t—”

“No. Not Bwlis.”

Realization struck the twelve year old girl. Home, their home. Not this place they had been brought to, chained to. Despair struck her heart as Iloko ran through her mind. She had heard the stories of lush green trees, nothing compared to the metal forests of Bwlis. Of food grown out of the ground, not in labs. Of running free.

“This was used in our people’s ceremonies, to wash us clean of wrongdoings. This is old. Older than you, older than me, older than anything in our lifetimes. It’s made of something called wood.”

Lotte took the wooden piece from her father, holding the tiny thing in her hand. She felt the call of her people, a free people. A different culture of people. The Gate Mother had answered her many prayers over the years. She finally felt a sense of purpose.

## Zoe Phillips

### *Object 9: Magenta Ox*

#### Instinct

The dry heat was something Leo was familiar with. If you live in the desert, nothing can save you from experiencing that soul-sapping heat, not even uncracked tile floors or the tightest insulation. You'll have to go outside sometime, and even if you didn't, it would still seep in eventually, pursuing you like a redback.

The heat, Leo was used to, but experiencing it in the wild was an entirely different scenario altogether. His feet and his chest burned with every step, and his rapier, meant for hunting, functioned multitudes better as a walking stick through the orange dirt. A reed hopped up to him, sniffed him.

"What? Am I not a threat to you?" He took a long, labored swing at it—maybe to prove he could. It didn't matter. It deftly leapt out of reach and trotted away. His eyes followed it to the horizon, where a red-orange mountain loomed. When he reached it, he slung his pack to the ground and slumped down against one side of the mountain, grateful for the shade. He pulled the map out of his backpack and tried to orient himself. The sun, today in the middle of setting, silhouetted the landscape. He traced a path down from Henderson to where the road out of it disappeared under dirt and sand. Then suddenly—

"A landmark!" It was true, there was a landmark—a Nomad shrine, just big enough to count for something on the map, and likely a trail to the next town too. Leo breathed a sigh of relief, but the feeling didn't last long.

Something was here.

He didn't know how he could tell, what long-forgotten sixth sense picked it up but it was definitely here or approaching. He sat, paralyzed by fear, fearing that whatever choice he made in survival would be the wrong one. The air seemed to intensify in heat. Leo silently grabbed his pack, not daring to take the time to fold or the sound to crumple the map up and took off across the flat desert lands.



The closer he got to the monument, the flatter the ground became, dotted with brush and grasses sometimes but more often than not a grayish-greenish yellow color, like someone had desaturated the landscape. It was a far cry from the orange mountains and ground, he thought, as he slumped down beside the monument, knocking the rocks and twigs that had been stacked and sending them scattering behind him. He took a drink of water, eyeing the plush box in his bag. He shrugged. He was almost out of this desert anyways, and if there was any a moment of weakness, now seemed like a decent one.

The box was an octagonal cylinder, short, wine-red, beaded across the top and embroidered with roses on the sides. It had been a gift from his aunt. Incredibly expensive, it'd been. He lifted the top and retrieved one sachet of Fliceaf leaves. He tapped the leaves into the bowl of his pipe with one hand. As he brought the smoking pipe to his lips, he heard a clatter. Three stones, some of the ones previously incorporated into the monument, rolled in front of him. He turned slowly around to see the vague outline of a quadruped striding through the rest of them.

Leo yelped, dropping his pipe and getting to his feet. He reached for his pack, and then the box, and then bolted. He kept running, clutching the box and his bag. He kept feeling the heat of the creature closing in—closing in, until finally he was out of breath. He nearly collapsed in a heap to rest but stopped himself just in time, looked around. He was in the midst of a forest of green trees, with sharp spikes sticking out and up from the trunks. He crouched behind a dense clump and caught his breath. Setting his bag and the box in front of him, he assessed his situation. He had left his sword back at the shrine. The map was gone, but he was confident he was going the right way out of the desert. The Fliceaf had spilled from its bags out onto the desert floor, but the box was fine. He had left his pipe behind, anyways. The biggest problem, he discovered, was that his water skin had been punctured. He made his way to a river he had seen earlier, one that came to about knee high when he stood in it.

Leo knew not to drink the water, but he was dehydrated, tired, and once he drank it, whatever bacteria was in the water took hold quickly. Delirious and shivering, the only goal still clear to him was to move forward.

There was a familiar mountain on the horizon. Unbelieving, he made his way to it. It was the same mountain from hours before—he had made a circle.

The creature was here, too. He felt the heat wave rise up and come down around him. Slowly, he turned to look behind him. It was silhouetted against the perpetually sinking sun, jaws slightly open to taste the air, huge claws glinting as it strode towards him. Leo, breath ragged, crawled backwards, fixated on the figure.

Suddenly his mind was set. Not clear, the haze remained, but he stood up. He walked back a little from the creature, testing its response, and the creature pounced. He bolted, running with a purpose, backpack and box forgotten on the ground, not knowing what it was but running somewhere. The creature gave chase, following Leo across the desert ground. He passed the scattered shrine, and into the cactus forest. He heard the creature walking behind him into the forest, and heard grasses shift as it prepared to pounce. Right as it did, he threw himself to the ground.

A second later, he looked up. The rustback had jumped up, but it had forgotten the spikes protruding up from the trees- its fatal flaw. Leo and the rustback watched each other as it remained, impaled, on one of the spikes. When it finally passed, he left, and receded into the wild.

## Luke Taylor

### *Object 21: Box*

The rhythmic tone of the jungle was paired with the steady crunch of plants underneath Barends' feet and paws. His huge claws dug into the dirt while his massive legs sunk half a foot with every step. Standing almost twenty-two feet tall with shaggy brown fur, Barend was a normal-sized Slōth.

"THEEESSEE VINNEES... ARE... SOOO ANNOOYYIINNG" he said to himself in a gentle voice, causing a loud rumble through the jungle. He stopped, sinking into the ground yet again.

He exhaled out of his nose and focused on the green vines that had become entangled on his head and chest. His vision glazed over to a rose color. Old Slōths told him how to use the power, and Old Slōths always knew what's best. Barend giggled as he felt the warm feeling enter his chest.

"HEHEHE...OH HH YEAH...I FOORGOOTT ABBOUT THATT" he said to himself.

Barend felt a dull humm coming from his chest, along with the power building within him. Before he released the influx of power Barend looked at the vines with sad eyes and said "I'MMM...SORRRYYY LIITTTLLE PLANT BUDDIES" as he felt a tug in his chest as the plants snapped off his body, incinerated by energy as a perfect arch of force cut through the overgrowth before him. Carving a path through the jungle. A huge smile spread across the Sloth's face as he looked at the aftermath of his power.

"WELL NOW... ISN'T THAT JUUSST A HAPPY LITTTLLE ACCIDENT, NOW ISN'T IT", Barend said as he continued his slow pace along the new path.

After a few hours of walking Barend found himself in the clearing he was looking for. The wall of force had cleared a path straight to his destination. He giggled, "WWOOW THAT POWER SURE IS SOMETHIN'."

He emerged from the canopy into the clearing. Wooden huts clustered around dirt paths creating a small village. Barend smelled some small jungle critters being cooked over the people's fires. He also smelled some not so good things like the hides they had drying on racks over their small huts, or the stone house with the strong-looking people putting metal into big ovens and then taking it out to hammer the glowing material.

"NOOWW WHATTS THAT ALL ABOUT NOW?" Barend thought to himself.

As he walked further into the clearing, he noticed the sounds of the little people's village slowly beginning to die away. He walked through one of the dirt paths in between the small huts. As he passed, he noticed that all of the humans were bowing to him. Many had baskets, food, and building materials lying next to them, seemingly they had stopped whatever jobs they were doing to bow to Barend. He made his way to the center of town but stopped as he passed the stone house with the metal in the fires. There were two strong-looking peoples wearing leather aprons bowing in front of him. Barend turned his head and looked at the two of them. They whimpered as he said to them, "NOT TO BE RUUDE...BUUTTT...I DONT LIKE HOW YOUR HOUSE SMELLSSS."

One of the people started crying while continuing to bow to Barend. He continued his journey to the center of the village, thinking in his head that the house didn't smell that bad. As Barend reached the end of the dirt road, he saw what he had been sent to fix.

A massive eight-story high tree dominated the center of the village. Its branches and trunk were dying, despite the great weather during the past seasons. Surrounding the tree were dozens of rocks sticking out of the ground covered with writing. Barend turned around to see almost a hundred humans gathered a good distance away from him in awe. He looked over his shoulder and called to them, "IT'S OK...IT WILL ONLY... TAKE ME A JIFFY."

Barend turned around and marched toward the dying tree. He felt confident as he strided through the clearing with all the people watching him, at least until he felt a crunch under his foot. He looked down and saw one of the stones had been crushed under his foot. He

heard some people gasp and he turned around again looking embarrassed, “SORRY ABBOOUUT YOURR ROCK.”

He finished the walk to the tree and placed one of his claws across the surface of the withered bark. The gathered humans were awestruck as they saw pink light shoot through the surface of their dying tree.

“DON’T YOU WORRRY NOW,” Barend called to the gathered humans, his eyes glowing with power. “I WILL HAVE YOUR TREEE RIGHT AS RAIN IN A JIFFY, JUST YOU SEEED.” he said as the tree snapped back into place and color returned to the trunk.

With a flash of multicolored light, the tree seemed to transform from a dying plant into a glowing bastion of nature. Full lush leaves created a beautiful canopy as healthy copper colored bark knotted down the side of the renewed trunk. Barend turned around and faced the village of little people. “WELL, YOUR TREE’SSS ALLLL BETTTERR.” He proudly looked at his handiwork and then started walking to the dirt path leading back to his path through the jungle. The humans parted as he approached. All except one little girl. He looked at her and said “WHHAT ARE YOU DOING LITTLE BUDDY? YOU COULD GET HURTTT STANDING IN THE ROAAAD LIKE THAT”.

The little girl shuffled forward and held out her hands. She mumbled under her breath.

“YOU’RE GONNA’ HAVE TO RAISE YOUR VOICEED LITTLE ONE. I CAN’T HEAR YA’ SO GOOOODD.”

Barend leaned down and the little girl stood on her tiptoes and whispered in his ear “Th... thank you, Slōth.” She held out her hands and Barend saw a little wooden box held in the air for him. It was simply made with painted butterflies and flowers. He looked at the little girl who was still holding up the little wooden box. He reached down with his massive claw and gingerly picked up the box.

He looked at the girl. “THANK YOU, LITTLE ONEEEE.” He looked at the crushed stone on the hill. He faced the people around him. “SORRY IF I CRUSHED YOUR ANCESTOR.”

The little girl ran back into the crowd and Barend made his way through the rest of the village. He didn’t look back, but he felt all

the people's eyes still on him as he made his way back to his tree. Barend missed his tree and fellow Slōth and couldn't wait to get home with his new box.

## Aquari

The planet of Aquari is cube-shaped and composed mostly of water. The cube rotates along a straight axis such that four of the sides receive sunlight while the top and bottom do not. The top, known as Duskhaven, houses a hairy sentient species with large pupils, features that are adaptations to the cold climate and pitch-black sky. The bottom, Glowing Sea, entertains a plethora of bioluminescent creatures in its oceans. The Aquarians that live here have bioluminescent skin, and they are completely hairless. Neither Duskhaven or Glowing Sea have biotech, for they are both conservative and rely on spiritual influences. The other four sides of the cube make the Aquarian Empire. Citizens of the Aquarian Empire have dark skin and wide eyes, and they follow the strict social procedure of Name Giving in which every person is assigned a letter at birth corresponding to a certain caste (A is the highest ranking, Z is the lowest ranking). A person's caste determines her wealth, education, and occupation, and she must always show a small tattoo of her letter on her wrist. Plagues have been a reoccurring catastrophe throughout history, and currently, cardiathanatos is ravaging the planet, taking the lives of millions of residents. Whilst prejudice, disease, and misdirected altruism flourish, the planet of Aquari has survived for 10,000 years, and the stories you will hear are sure to be twisted and wonderful.

## Renata Bourin

### *Object #10: Small silver cup*

Her eyelids fluttered open as a large growling noise echoed through the room, a familiar noise to anyone who took up residence there. She blinked the sleep out of her eyes and pulled herself into a sitting position. Her tired gaze scanned the room, just as it always did when she awoke, and shifted to something of disappointment when it realized that nothing had changed.

“Zara!” The sound of her name blazed a painful feeling through her chest as she looked to the door of the room. The boy who stood there had an odd smile on his dirt-caked face, and he was holding something that she could not see behind his back. “Good morning,” the younger boy smiled with a touch of mischief to his expression. “How did you sleep?”

“Fine,” she sighed, rubbing the top of her head. “What’s that look for? Did you do something stupid?” She raised an eyebrow. Maybe it would seem to be out of anger.

“No...” The boy’s lie was so obvious that Zara wondered why he bothered lying at all. “I just found it! I didn’t steal anything...” His lips turned down in a pout, and the four slits of his nose flared in annoyance.

“What is it? Where did you find it?” She stood, her eyes focused entirely on the arms hiding whatever that object was behind his back.

He looked down at the ground, almost sheepish, and removed his hands from their position. Between his tanned fingers rested a perfectly round, perfectly painted, perfectly maintained silver glass. Small star-like shapes dotted the exterior and shone with the bright shine of actual stars, as if the painter had captured a spark of light and shoved it right into the material of the cup. The whole thing gave an almost eerie aura of pristine and flawless craftsmanship. Zara was almost afraid to reach out and touch the thing for fear of creating the smallest dent or mistake in the perfection of the object before her. Nevertheless, her dirt-caked hands reached out and wrapped their



fingers around the base of the cup. Her eyes scanned the thing over and over again as her fingers relieved the weight of it from those of the younger boy. She pulled it closer to her eyes to get an even better look at the thing before finally lowering from her gaze and refocusing on the only other occupant of the tiny, filthy room around them.

“Warren, listen to me, this is very important.” Her eyes were firm and commanding as she leaned closer to the boy. “You have to tell me where you found this. If you stole it, you have to tell me. We can deal with it if you did, but I have to know.”

“I found it outside Ava and Beckam’s house.” Warren’s eyes were practically pleading innocence. “I didn’t steal it! I swear! I wouldn’t steal stuff...”

Zara’s hands were nearly trembling against the cup still clenched in her grip. “Warren, you have to put this back. You know that anyone who sees it here will think one of us stole it, right?”

He nodded, tucking his wide-set hands behind his back and rocking back and forth on his heels. “But look at it, Zara! It’s so... so—”

“Out of our class,” she interrupted. “You have to put it back where you found it. Do you want to be sent to the corners?” She looked at him with a slightly raised eyebrow and a deadly serious expression. “Because I don’t particularly want to see you get banished to the corners.” She held the cup out to him.

“But... but...” His eyes were downcast and his lips formed a pout. “It’s just so... pretty.”

“I know.” Zara sighed, pushing the cup into his grip and letting go of it. “That’s exactly why we can’t keep it.” She gave him a small smile. “Go put it back, okay?”

“Okay, Zara.” Warren gave her a slight nod and finally turned around, heading back out of the room with the all-too-perfect cup in his grip yet again.

## Maia Chapin

### *Object #57: Pig-head Paperclips*

The island at the edge of the world had visitors.

A boat, with triangular sails and sturdy outriggers to combat the rough seas, was pulled up on the beach like a wooden whale. Nearby, a group of sailors sat around a dancing fire. They'd sent a man in to explore some days earlier. He was going to try to climb the impossibly tall mountain at the island's heart.

A noise came from the edge of the forest—twigs cracking and heavy breathing. It was the adventurer, looking like a ghost. Sweat and blood glistened on the dark skin of his limbs, and his black hair was plastered to his forehead.

The other sailors rushed to help him to the fire. He was clutching the brooch that closed his coat.

It was made of black wire and decorated with a strange pink material. Into the pink was carved a farcical image of the entelodont good luck god. With its big nose and tiny eyes, the god had kept watch from his shoulder this entire time. His sister, back home in the central island, had one just like it.

The adventurer's scraped legs were cleaned, and he ate ravenously. After some time, he cleared his throat.

"I set out straight towards the mountain," began the adventurer in a raspy, phlegm-filled voice. "The trees have sharp, tiny leaves like needles as you get further up."

"I almost fell and died, but the entelodont saved me. Further up the mountain, the air is very thin, so you cannot breathe. And the mountain moves as you go up it."

"What?!" demanded the captain of the group. She leaned forwards, her thick ropes of hair hanging in her face. "Thael. What do you mean?"

The adventurer shook his head. "I can't really explain. I walked up the path, and as I got further up, the mountain sloped steeper. Changed under my feet. It is steep, to be sure, but you can walk up it.

“But as I climbed up, it changed under my feet. Got steeper. I wondered then if I was light-headed, but no—it did change. Wella, you know I wouldn’t make this up. I didn’t dream it.”

The captain shook her head again. “You don’t lie, Thael. But a mountain that tilts under your feet?”

“I got over the top,” said the adventurer. “It took me forever, but I made it to the top after a thousand false peaks. And... it got stranger.”

“What was there?” asked the captain. “Thael, what was it?”

“The edge of the world itself. Maybe.”

The captain gasped and the mission’s cartographer, who was listening in, leaned far forward, his face leering through the fire. Fire glinted off of the adventurer’s entelodont brooch, making its small eyes seem to glow. “What did it look like?” demanded the cartographer.

“Did you stare down at the stars beneath the world?” asked the captain. “See the nighttime sun, or the daytime moon?”

“No.” The adventurer shook his head. “If it was the edge, it went on forever. A dark world. It was daytime, but over the mountain there was nothing but night, rocks, and this sea in the distance. A shiny sea, like blue blood. I walked in, down the mountain a mile on the dark side. It was instantly night. I could barely see the sun’s glow over the mountain. And then I looked west, and I saw that—” He took a deep breath. “The ocean curved around the corner too.”

“What?” demanded the captain.

“I can’t explain... let me draw it,” said the adventurer. The cartographer gave him a stick, and he drew in the same. When he was done, the cartographer and captain stared at the crude diagram.



“You’re joking,” said the cartographer. “This cannot be.”

“I do not think I hallucinated, Haron.” the adventurer said. “It is terrifying. But that is what I saw.”

“And this night world extends... how far?”

“As far as I could see. If it is the rim of the world, it is massively thick. And as I walked down... well, I did not fall off, and nor did the sea. The further down the mountain I went on the night side, the less steep the mountain seemed. If I went many more miles, I would think I was standing on flat ground, but really I would be sideways.”

“This is... bizarre,” said the captain. She shook her head, the black ropes swishing around her shoulders.

“Does this mean that the world is not a flat disc?” asked the cartographer, chewing thoughtfully on his beard. “If there are other sides, might it be a cylinder? Or something else entirely? With some... some huge magic at its center that pulls a man towards it? Down on the top—on our world—and pulls sideways on the sideways parts? How do we *know* we are even on top?”

“I don’t know,” said the adventurer hopelessly. “I don’t know.”

They sat in silence for a long time. As dawn broke, the adventurer burnt his coat as a sacrifice to the entelodont god, using his brooch as a totem. He gave it his thanks for protecting him over the edge of the world and safely back. The smoke was thick and acrid, and wafted lazily up through the sky.

Later that day, the ship heaved itself off of the shore and left the edge of the world. It bore its odd news back to the central isles. Others traveled to the far reaches and found these edges. Some sailed beyond them, to worlds of freezing night and glittering day.

No one now remembers the names of Thael, or of Wella, or the cartographer Haron. Ten thousand years is a long time. But they were the first to realize that the world is not flat, but in fact a cube. They were the first to venture from the home of our kind.

Truly, the greatest adventurers of our world.

## Ricky Dillard

### *Object 55: Turtle on a Tire Swing*

#### How the Lichen Came to Be

In the beginning, light bathed Aquari; harsh, bright light. Woman lived peacefully together, ruling over the land without the fear of wild animals. They did not stretch far and wide, as the creeping water held woman back from exploring the wide, wide sea. There were stories of islands far away, in a land of darkness, where no one lived. But woman did not dare cross the sea, as it was teeming with danger. One especially hot day, a turtle was found crawling by a roadside. A child spotted it and picked it up, shrieking for its mother. The mother allowed the child to take care of the turtle but made the child promise to let it go once night fell. The child did not heed the mother's words and kept the turtle for many days and many nights. The turtle began to thirst for freedom and became bitter and hateful of all Aquarikind. It had heard snippets of conversation about three powerful gods with awesome powers. In a moment of terrible rage, the turtle decided to spite the gods in hopes of pushing them towards a destructive mood. The turtle escaped from the home in the quiet of the night and climbed the highest mountain in hopes of reaching the gods. With every step, its rage grew and grew and grew. By the time it had reached the top, its anger was so powerful it shook the mountain to its core. It began taunting the gods, yelling hateful words and mocking them. It screamed for many days, each word louder than the last. Soon, the skies began to darken, and a golden bird, the Lord of Light, a one-eyed cat, Lord of Darkness, and a long-tailed rat, Lord of the Sea appeared before it, shaking the ground with impalpable fury. They had heard its mocking words, but they had also heard its story. After much debate, they decided to curse the turtle to forever carry a burden, so that it would never be able to climb down the mountain, trapped forever. They then decided to spread a terrible plague to wipe out Aquarikind, punishment for creating a being that disrespected them so. And thus, the Lady of Lichen was created and carried disease

and terror across Aquari. Woman was scattered across the land, spreading to the realm of the Lord of Darkness, leaving the realm of the Lord of Light. The turtle screamed and screamed, and Lady of Lichen became angrier and angrier. Lady of Lichen decided to follow woman into the realm of the Lord of Darkness and spread the disease further there. Everywhere she walked, horrible lichen began growing over rocks and in crevices, storing a dangerous spore, lying in wait for an unwary Aquari to stumble across its path. The disease was very painful, did not take but did not give. But after many years, woman began to glow. Lady of Lichen grew jealous and commanded the lichen to take woman's brightness. The disease grew even more painful, and scars were left behind after the lichen left the body. To this day, the turtle screams, and Lady of Lichen remains angry and jealous and takes whatever she cannot have.

## Allen Hank

### *Object 42: Miniature Lighthouse*

Your hands are a lovely lavender shade due to the tightly wound vines wrapped around your arms, but the good news is the pain from said vines is very minimal because they appear to have been on your hands for quite a bit of time. Two armed guards watch your every move.

Slowly, you are beginning to remember what is going on. To say the least, it appears you are in a little bit of a predicament. Because your government-selected name doesn't start with a letter high enough on the alphabet, you have to get the local lawyer for all the other low starting letter civilians. He's out of town this week and we are on a bit of a tight schedule and can't set it on a different date, so you will have to disprove your capital drug trafficking charges on your own.

"Keep it *moving*, w-class," the larger looking guard hollers at you from behind your back. Then you are prodded by one of the guards with a metallic, chilling-to-the-touch tube.

Your destination is the lovely ocean-side courthouse of Ubpravedno Neojstvo. There is an inescapable stench wafting throughout the entire courthouse. The decayed wooden planks that make up the lighthouse-converted-courtroom appear to be state of the art for about three-hundred years ago, and overall, it appears a very strong gust of wind would topple the entire building. The judge calls the court to order. You notice that on everyone else's wrist is the letter A, B, or C. This is the most high-ranking citizens you've ever seen in your life and it is most likely many of their first time ever seeing such a low-ranking citizen. They keep their distance and try to give you around a yard of space at any given time and a few of the older folks in the crowd appear to be a bit queasy at your appearance. You could have put on clothes before you came to the courtroom, you know?

"Would the prosecution like to begin with an opening statement?" the judge booms.

"Of course. Obviously, this man is a danger to society and a bit uncivilized." He pauses a second to survey the room; multiple

audience members are snickering. “And I am afraid for not only my own life with him in the society but my children. Let’s think about the children here. Helcrichczhen is a horrifying drug with devastating results on entire communities.” You recognize him. The prosecutor is also a lobbyist that helps pass laws that very rarely help anyone except legal drug companies. His first major legislative breakthrough was about fifteen years ago when he was the main architect behind a law that helped Sivorp, the largest medicine manufacturing company in the Aquari, legalize a derivative formula of Helcrichczhen. “It is stunning at how you do not even bat an eye at how evil your actions are. How can you live with yourself?” Now your hands are even more purple as you ball up your hands into fists.

“I could ask you the same question. You helped pass a law that makes almost the exact same drug legal and—”

“Are you saying that *I* am the equivalent of a *drug dealer*?! *Clearly*, this one is out of it.” He points at his head, rotates his hand around his ear. “The difference between me and you is that you sell a drug that makes people see crazy things and be lazy. I helped legalize, not sell mind you, a *similar* drug that helps children relax and and, and, uh can calm down the crazy ones. Obviously, what I am trying to say is that Sivorp’s drug has numerous medical advantages and your drug is a street drug with *zero* medical uses. Are we done here?”

“Yes, I think we’re finished here. Guards” He points to a back door behind his chair. As you pass, he scoots back in his chair. Outside the door is a trench. You look down into the trench. You now know where the stench is coming from.

BANG!



## Molly Jones

### *Object #13: Wooden Barrel*

#### Wooden

Screams filled his ears. Not the kind that shake your teeth and make your heart visit your stomach, but the kind that makes you grimace or giggle. One was a lower voice than the other seven, but just slightly. That's usually how it goes for young boys. Especially surrounded by seven older sisters. You'd think it'd be inescapable, the high-pitched laughs, screeches and hair braiding, but it wasn't for Tyler. He always found something to keep the ground from slipping away.

He learned at a young age that it'd be easier for him to get along with his sisters than fight them. As the youngest, it was expected from him to behave. He was always quiet and hid away in his own thoughts. He would also find bits and pieces of wood and carve them into objects the family could use. Most golden warm afternoons are spent up the hill from their home in an old Oak while his hands create the images in his head perfectly.

Despite the low class his family fell into, all 10 of them live comfortably in an old house that practically used cobwebs as wallpaper. A wooden door with scribbles of animal claws rests on an arch of ground smothered in dead grass. So burnt that each blade crumples like a pie crust. The entirety of this patch lies atop a pile of soil, creating a hill that used to be greater than it is now. After years of erosion, the mountain became more of a molehill.

Beneath it lies an old abandoned Loot burrow; a huge hole in which many lower-class families use for a home. Tyler had made different chairs for the dinner table, lamp bases, and wooden baskets for the Draper berry harvest. Beside the table sits a fireplace filled with wood he couldn't use for creation. Photos of ancestors line the walls, frozen in time before death. Lanterns rest in each corner of every room, giving the home a glowing color, swelling with the anticipation of a flame.

“Hey Ty, can you light the fireplace?” asked his fourth-oldest sister, Tia. Out of habit, he said nothing and grabbed a lighter off of the table he had made when he was around six. His first work of art was a small wooden barrel that fits in the palm of your hand. It has ridges that trace the lid of the barrel, along with the bottom half of the main container. His finger flicks the lid open and a small reptilian animal with hundreds of legs and flourishing wings popped his head out. Instinctually, it opened its mouth, releasing a fast stream of flames onto the pile of idle wood. It spread over the mound as if maggots had taken the form of fire.

The door creaked open, and his mother and oldest sister stumble into the room, darkness looming around them. Their eyes were swollen from a sting, but not from an animal. From a beast known as grief.

“Where’s Dad, Mom? Tiffany?” asked Tia. Silence greeted her question, causing hair to raise on the nape of Tyler’s neck. With the words hanging in the air a little too close, Tiffany ran into the next room with hot tears flooding her cheeks. Something had happened. He knew it. He could tell from the moment his mothers’ exhale while walking into the home.

“Your father was in an accident down at the mine.” A choked breath crawled its way into the phrase. “He didn’t make it.” The words barely reached his ears. The room began to turn, knocking the doors of his skull, sounding almost like the drum of a heart. He dropped the barrel but didn’t notice. A fist of shock gripped his chest, taking away every bit of air he had. A burning ran through his face, making tears spring into his eyes.

A scream shocked him back into the world, but not the kind that makes you grimace or giggle. This was a scream of losing something you need. A scream that’s saying goodbye to someone you would never hold again.

## Aubrie McFarland

### *Object #60: Light-up Spider*

It is said that the birth of the world took place in The Hollow, where the first beings were born. However, every life is a cycle, and from The Hollow is where the unraveling of the society would take place. In times before, it was seen as a place of light, a place of birth and sanctity that couldn't be marred. Now, it was a cesspool, and as times change, so do attitudes.

It started from The Hollow. Tiny, thin roots of corruption reached out, and held a tight grasp upon the living creatures. If one was to get close enough, you could see the tiny white threads webbing across the skin, and the blank, pale-over eyes that meant it had been taken. Animal and flora alike fell to the slowly spreading influence of the threads, until it had taken the whole island. People came, and they were taken too.

From the Hollow came one that had long been asleep, a woman-like figure that was just human enough to be disconcerting, but not enough to be recognizable. A thick veil of plant material fell over a face that had never seen the sun, and the white threads of hair fell down. From her feet sprang fungus and mycelia of a hundred colors, a thousand shapes. They trailed her like footprints left on freshly-fallen snow. The white threads in the ground tightened, and as she stepped, they took control.

Humans were reborn as walking mushroom-monsters, animals falling to the very same fate. Nothing could touch her; fungus would rise to meet any incoming attacks or blows, if there even was anything left to attack. The mushrooms grew, and grew, and grew, reaching the size of any home or modern tree, and the land formations changed. Land grew black, heat was leached from the soil, and the air felt as if someone had just poured a bucket of ice-water over your head.

Once the island was taken, a war was launched upon the rest of the world. Overgrown whale-mammoth creatures carried the plague, and with it, the destruction. Cities crumbled, screams could be heard as mycelia crept through bloodstreams and brain matter. Loved ones

turned on loved ones, as they never would have in life, and soon, even those with weapons were taken. Similar to something you would see in a science fiction movie, mounds of pulsing plant material rose from the ground and formed into mushrooms as large as buildings. The spirit of The Hollow was merely completing the world how it was meant to be, merely moving along the passage of time.

Once the cities were taken, the fungus merely spread faster. Soon even the nomads were gone, and the planet was barren besides walking fungus and mold. All was lost. Until things were reborn. The one thing the mycelia couldn't take, the one thing they held no power over would soon rule. The machines would rule, and it would all start with a small, black creature with long fuzzy legs. It had been gone a long time when it sparked to life once again, its inside lighting up as if there was fire there. It rose creakily, the once children's toy being the movement for new light, and hope. It would be the beginning of a new age, and it would be the savior. The little black robot with a clear string would dawn a new age, and it would be an age even the gods themselves couldn't end.

After all, what could they do against creatures of metal and fire?

## Daniela Morales

### *Object #23: Brown/Orange Tie*

#### You Don't Keep What You Get

Lyle was on her way back from school when she saw a beautiful brown tie with glimmering flower-like orange stitching laying on the street. She picked it up and put it on her backpack, thinking it would make a great decoration for her room. As she walked, she felt her backpack become heavier, but not much, so she ignored it. Once home, she greeted her parents and went to her room. Lyle opened the small pocket of her backpack, expecting to find the tie. What she found there, however, was not a tie. Instead, she found a small rectangular object the colors of the tie with a blunt end that shifted from letter to letter. Lyle took a step back. Should she touch it? She'd never come in touch with technology of that level, thanks to being born into one of the lower classes. Although, for some strange reason, the object seemed familiar; as if she'd seen it in a dream a long time ago and it made an impression on her. Going against her most basic instinct, she reached inside the backpack and took the object out. She held it in her hands. It was warm against her skin.

Lyle sat down on the edge of her bed and started exploring every detail of the "tie". She noticed the patterns of the tie where still part of the now strange object. She watched how the end shifted from A to B to C, lost in the smoothness of it. As she went to touch it, the door to her room opened. Lyle froze and dropped the rectangle in a beat.

Her mom entered the room. Her tall frame making a shadow across the floor.

"Lyle, what have you been up to? Dinner's ready."

"Erm, nothing. I'll be there in just a second."

"What's that on the floor?" Lyle's mom tried to grab the rectangle, but Lyle pushed it out of the way with her foot.

"Nothing." Lyle smiled. Her mom stared at her.

"Lyle."

Lyle sighed and bent down for it. She showed it to her mom. “On my way back from school I saw this tie on the ground. It was cute, so I took it. But once I got home, I took it out of my backpack and there wasn’t a tie anymore.” She couldn’t read her mom’s expression as she examined the rectangle. Lyle got the feeling she already knew what it was.

“Do you know what it is?” Lyle asked.

“I’ve... I saw something like this once.” Her mother put the rectangle down. “In your naming ceremony.”

They stayed silent for a while, until Lyle’s mother stood up and headed for the door.

“Wait, mom. What is that? What are you gonna do with it?”

“None of your business, Lyle. It’s better if you don’t know anything else about this.” She walked into the hallway. Lyle followed behind her.

“Mom! Please, tell me. I found it. I should have the right to know.”

Her mother ignored her and kept walking. Lyle knew she was going to her father’s bedroom. “Why are you telling Dad? Why can’t I keep it?”

Lyle’s mother entered the bedroom and closed the door behind her, leaving Lyle sulking in the hallway. Lyle considered her options, which really weren’t many. Stay outside the door and try to overhear or go back to her room and forget she ever found the tie. Was it worth all the trouble? She could be using her time to play games, instead of standing in front of a closed door. But then again, Lyle had never seen something like that in her entire life.

Lyle sat down in front of the door and put her ear against it. She heard the muffled voices of her mother and father.

“Need... get rid... down... ports.”

“Who... official... letter marker...”

A letter marker. That was what she’d stumbled on. Lyle looked down at her right wrist, where an L was engraved in her skin. That little *thing* was the one that marked her fate. The urge to barge in the room and destroy it started to take over her body.

She didn’t give in. Lyle walked back to her room. She’d put her parents into a dangerous position the moment she picked up that

tie. There was no point in making it harder for them to do what they needed to do.

## Sadie Netzer

### *Object #14: Miniature Lottery Spinner*

Yatimah walked carefully down the hall to the answer to a question that determined her child's fate. She was careful not to make too much noise, for that was frowned upon for people like her. The Q-through-Z's. She, of course, didn't know if anyone else called them that, but she liked to pretend there was some mutual friendship between them and the higher class. Worry began tugging back at her mind when she was reminded of the hate lingering between each class. She held her child close to her bosom, hoping – praying – that he would stay with her.

“Yatimah and Tim, please step forward with...” A man sitting on a high stool to an even higher counter boomed. He glared down at the woman clutching her baby boy, and her husband, not being much help in comforting her. She looked worriedly up at the man, as he finished. “Yatimah, Tim, and their child.”

Yatimah's husband, Tim, stepped up wearily. He gruffly yanked Yatimah up by her shoulder. She almost lost her grip on her baby, but she wouldn't let that happen. She would never let him leave her arms after she took him home from this awful place. Never.

The man sighed as he cranked the handle of an ominous lottery-drawing ball. It had a gold sphere cage turning around the middle filled with little white balls with small, harshly written black letters on them from A to Z. Yatimah swore she could've seen multiple U's in the cage, but she wouldn't dare question the system.

The man picked up the first ball that rolled out of the sphere and into the holder. He raised his eyebrows, and Yatimah tightened her grip expectantly.

“B,” he announced.

Yatimah felt as her heart sank at the foul word. Just one word—just the one—had ruined her life. She always dreamed of having a baby boy and raising it with her husband. She'd raise him better than she was. Her parents were both in the C-class. Thus, they had the option to pick her letter again and possibly give her a better



life, but they didn't. They said they didn't want her and sent her to live with the Q-through-Z's. Of course, she didn't get the *worst* house, but she could've had so much better and been able to keep her child.

But life doesn't always turn out for the better.

She stood in denial, gripping her child closer to her than ever imagined. The boy began crying quietly, and she released her death grip and held him up to her to gaze into his eyes longingly as men came towards her with a tattoo needle. Yatimah let out a shriek of despair as the men reached for the baby. She turned away, tears rolling down her bony cheeks and falling onto the boy's head.

"You can't take him," she choked. The men looked at each other.

"Please," she whispered. "He... He's mine."

"I'm sorry ma'am," the man with the needle said. He was used to this, but he still didn't like it. Even though she was a lower class. "It's the law."

"I don't like this law anymore," she wept. She kneeled, clutching her only child to her shoulder. "Please, please, I want to name him before he's taken..."

The two men looked up at the man at the table with the lottery machine and sighed. "Fine, what'll it be?"

"Beau?" she looked up at the men. Tears littered her beautiful cheeks, stabbing at the guard's hearts. She clutched her child tightly, quickly looking back down to gaze upon him. She would probably see him again, but he may not remember her. That was always the hardest part—when you see your child and they only look upon you with disgust because *you're different*. Once again, Yatimah promptly broke into tears. She screamed when the guards reached for her the child in her arms. Tim grabbed her arms as the guards ripped the baby from her reaching arms.

"No!" she sobbed. She could barely spit out any noises let alone words.

The baby was carried away behind the table to a door in the back of the room. Yatimah lunged herself at the door, screaming, and slammed her shoulder. Tim quickly came and collected her in his arms. Not in a comforting way, no, but more of a stern, disappointed way.

“Please,” she whimpered, just before she was dragged to the door.

“Please, let me say goodbye?”

“Please remind him I’m his mother, so he doesn’t hate me?”

“I love him so, so much, please...”

All her pleas were answered in cold gazes that couldn’t be broken. It felt like a thousand chains being shot into her sides, which were already bleeding. Like a piece of her was ripped out of her, then she was judged and chained down for reacting. She returned the glares through her teary eyes, then broke free of her husband.

“I love you, Beau,” she whispered, reaching her hand towards the back door where they had lead her child, before her husband yanked her out and slammed the door.

“Please, don’t hate me,” she sobbed into her ruthless husband’s forearm.

## Elizabeth Scott

### *Object #17 – Bird Whistle*

Torem looked down at the small statue. He reached for it, the blue glow of his hands slowly lighting the dark wood. It was strange looking to say the least. The woodcarver had given it to him, on the accounts that he was to paint it. Torem was watching now, the woodcarver's blue glow slowly being enveloped by the darkness as he crossed the village.

Torem picked up the wood—it was smooth and felt cold in his hands. Strange, seeing as the woodcarver had been holding it for so long. He quickly set the carved bird back down. Setting it in the corner of his matted workspace. He rushed inside the hut behind him, past furs and brightly glowing insects.

“Perii!” Torem called.

“Yes?” A startled voice quickly responded as he turned behind other furs. On a tied mat, a girl glowing purple stared back at him. A wooden jar had been knocked over, its contents spilling onto the dark grass.

“The woodcarver,” Torem stuttered, watching Perii pick up the tipped jar. A small wooden rat rested to its side. A neatly painted symbol was now covered in a large pool of red paint.

“The woodcarver?” She looked confused. Torem shook his head, pulling her to up to stand next to him, her black braid whipping him in the process.

“He isn't warm.” Torem started pulling her towards the door, her realization eventually kicking in as she rushed with him.

“The Moss Mother?”

“Maybe.”

“Why the woodcarver?”

“He clearly made her angry.”

“Go to the prophet then!”

They pushed past the door's furs. Perii stole a quick glance at the wooden bird under the light of a luminescent insect. Torem was already ahead of her, disappearing towards the prophet's hut.

Torem slowed as he entered past the fur. He didn't wait for a greeting before he was before a man in light furs. His green markings more defined and striking than any other. Torem shrank to his knees under the eyes of the prophet and the eyes of the gods.

"Why do you interrupt me child. There are times for to you visit. You could easily disrespect the gods. This is their time of peace from their children."

"I repent for my crimes but please—the woodcarver, he's cold," Torem buried his head into the braided floor.

"The Moss Mother—she wishes to kill one of their children. Repent and then lead me to the woodcarver's hut. The more she takes, the stronger she grows."

Torem started to whisper to himself, only seeing fragments of his blue glow. The prophet's warmth left the room, green colors vanishing. When he finished, he looked up at the prophet who had re-entered the room. A small rodent dangled from his green arm by its tail.

Torem eyes widened as he tripped over himself standing up, the realization of this close interaction causing waves of thoughts to crash into his head.

"Lead me," The prophet commanded again. Torem nodded as he scrambled out the door. Hunters returning from the hunt looked on with their companions as he raced by followed by the enchanted glow of the prophet. It caused people to rush after them.

Torem lead the parade until he reached the hut. Pulling back the furs violently, the prophet raced past him to the bedding. Perii stood next to the woodcarver. He was breathing heavily and visibly shaking, his blue glow flickering and dulling.

"Stand back child," the prophet commanded as he pulled back the woodcarver's silks quickly. Perii stood next to Torem at the doorway, a few other tribe members filtered through.

Underneath the silks, a large plant tightly wrapped around his torso, hidden by cloth. The Moss Mother was intelligent and knew how to hide her corruption. Flowers blossomed from a gash into his glowing markings. The prophet took the creature and lowered it to the Moss Mother's flowers. The creature uncurled and with two mouths,

started to eat and chew at the flowers. The prophet started mixing a glowing goo under insect light.

The man cried out as the creature ripped the roots from his gash. It scurried across his body, reaching for each and every flower, vine, leaf, and root. The prophet returned, covering the man's injury in the liquid as well as drawing a symbol on his forehead. It looked like nothing more than a line. Torem had seen the symbol hundreds of times—he still didn't know what it ment.

The man's eyes opened slowly, still twitching in pain. The bedding was draped in a small pool of blood and the glowing liquid. The creature jumped to the ground at a few remaining leaves. The prophet dropped the rest of the bow onto the man's head before whispering prayers over him.

The prophet gave a nod before turning around. People started to murmur before dispersing in relieved conversations.

"Thank you," He mumbled to Torem and bowed to Perii, kissing her purple hand. Picking up the creature he disappeared into the glowing darkness.

Perii sighed in relief as she looked over to the man now resting peacefully. She lead the way, leading Torem out of the hut and towards their painter shack. The small pathways between the clusters of huts lead to their own. It was warm and innocent surrounded by huts on all sides. Not at the center of attention, not at the edge nearing the terrifying darkness.

Perii entered inside leaving Torem behind at their door. He stared down at the wooden bird. It looked back at him, empty and ready to be painted. Torem sighed again to himself before disappearing under the furs, leaving it behind.

## Victor Wall

### *Object #52 – Small Bird*

#### Before the Plague

Transcript from the speech delivered by Provincial Representative Claudius Corvus, to the General Provincial Assembly:

“Thank you, Representative Shao.

Once, there was a nation, far larger than ours. They did not need to fear for safety, for health, nor even the biting chill of the dark zones. Names were chosen heedless of letter, for all could live in comfort. The mighty loot dragons were first tamed then, the hands of our founder’s nation guiding the bit. Great cities, larger then Redoubt, stronger then the Pale, and wiser then Alexandria, spread across the continent, each as distinct and beautiful as a mosaic pane.

Before the Plague, the Faces were covered with people. After the Plague, it was blanketed by them.

The shrieks of the warblers were met with silence, alarms left to wither on the vine. Buildings rotted, their tenders fighting their own pestilence within the decaying husks. The nation stalled, then crumbled. And so, they scattered, populating the myriad regions of Aquari. A few went to the dark zones, and were lost, but most stayed within the light. At first, they despaired. Though they had long fled the charnel metropolis, many found their deaths along the road, be it plague, feral creations, or other survivors. Scattered camps of refugees rose and fall, the tatters of conventional order becoming more frayed by the day, replaced by the bloody edge of violence, prior triumphs long forgotten. Then, the cure was found. The first of the founders had synthesized it, after years of dedication. This scientific miracle was first used to consolidate the population, freeing the inhabitants of the third Face from their blighted shackles. Newly liberated, they turned their efforts to the second face. Though there was some resistance, soon the cure was administered throughout the second face. It was at this stage where their troubles began. Some believed that the system wasn’t flawed, that they could return to their prior methods

inconsequentially. Our founders realized the truth. Things would never return to the way they were before the plagues. With a heavy heart, they began the lottery, a process soon adopted by all. The fourth and first provinces were rendered members of the nation shortly thereafter, bringing the Illuminated under one banner. Sadly, the darkened zones were lost, and remained trapped to this day, bound by their own reliance on petty idols and superstitious terror.

Through these hardships, trials, and tribulations, our nation has prospered. In place of the crumbling ruins of our ancestors, we have created life anew. In place of the paltry thoroughfares, we have created tunnels to bypass the impassible. In the place of the aimless sheep, we have taught the dutiful shepherd. And yet, the threat presents itself once more. Adversity has reared its spectral head, dragging the stench of death along with it. It seeks to splinter us, to drag our glorious province to the level of squabbling dogs, our misery fueling the corrupted cycle. We must face this beast and prove that we remain uncowed! We must track it back to its layer and ensure our safety once and for all!

We must reclaim the darkened Face!”

## Ociciae

The world consists of three main continents and a chain of islands scattered sparingly amongst the world. There is interaction between species on each continent and religious preference is dependent upon the individual—the inhabitants of the Pulau islands, for example, exercise their faith as it relates to a connection with nature. The world is made up of thirty-percent oxygen, so the climate can be a bit unpredictable and is highly susceptible to tectonic activity which cause uncontrollable volcanic eruptions. The sun of the world is a bright, funk-a-licious neon-green hue. Thaulmium is an element found in the world's core and acts as an energy source that has caused conflicts between beings throughout the world. Expansive efforts in trade, vicious revolts, and peace treaties have occurred due to the magical significance of Thaulmium. Although war has inevitably plagued the world, there have also been alliances formed between uncommon beings so that Ociciae remains culturally rich and diverse. Modern day, the people in the world, regardless of their differences and past mishaps, keep the overall sustainability of Ociciae in mind.



## Kate Brunton

### *Object 50: Wooden Fish A Found Object*

For the past two centuries, the Pulau Islands had been almost completely deserted, except for the occasional small creature emerging from its burrow to gather food. There was a Thaulmium factory near the northern side of the main island, however. The entire Pulaian Tribe had been killed off in a devastating massacre staged by the Mantids and their allies. A group of deer-cowboys, sent by the leader of their “Great Posse” to colonize the desolate islands, rode on horseback in hopes of finding suitable land to claim. They all abruptly came to a halt when they noticed one of the younger stags falling behind the rest of the herd. The rest of the deer rode back towards him, wondering why he had stopped. He motioned towards a painted wooden object that was partially buried under a mound of dirt. One of their horses swiftly kicked at the ground, revealing the rest of the mysterious object. It was a wooden carving of a fish, that, even after being buried for so long, looked as though it was freshly painted. The deer-cowboys stared at it in confusion.

The wooden fish was crafted by a Pulaian artisan 200 years before the deer discovered it. The tribe was known for its adoration and respect for animals. In fact, they believed that certain creatures were their spiritual guardians sent from the heavens to protect them from harm. So, as a tribute to one of their many animal guardians, the wooden fish was crafted and used as a centerpiece to a table in their dining hall. To honor their spiritual guardians, the Pulai held an annual feast, which was to be held on that day. The warriors, who stationed at the shores to defend the island from possible attacks, feasted in the dining hall alongside the rest of the tribe—the entire island was left completely defenseless. While the unsuspecting Pulai Tribe happily feasted, the Mantids and their allies saw the opportunity to strike. The

Mantids, who founded and operated factories that produced Thaulmium ore until they eventually ran out, had been plotting to obtain more of it from other locations. There were only two places known to still have an abundance of Thaulmium: under the ocean and on the Pulau Islands. The Mantids didn't have the technology needed to mine at the bottom of the sea, which made the tropical islands the only possible place to collect Thaulmium from. However, the inhabitants of the island were fixated on protecting the mineral from those who would use it for selfish or even nefarious purposes. After the tribe was gone, there would be no one to stop them from turning the island into a mine and establishing a new factory. They promptly stepped out of their ship and onto the island, their plan racing through their minds, recalling every single order that was given to them. Approach the dining hall, set fire to the building, and kill anyone who tries to escape. The cluster of Mantids silently surrounded the building, torches held in their pincers. At the sound of the Mantid general's high-pitched chirp, the Mantids dropped their torches against the base of the building. In a matter of seconds, an unforgiving sea of flames crawled up the building, curling along the wall, hungrily devouring the wood in its path. Once the people inside realized what was happening, their cheerful, roaring laughter and conversations turned into a chaotic mix of wailing, cursing, and praying. It became apparent that no amount of praying could have saved them from their fiery, excruciating fate. Not even their beloved Gods could have saved them now. The Chief's eyes seemed to lose their brightness and her last glimmer of hope diminished as she took her final breath. There were no survivors. By morning, the only evidence of the Pulai tribe's existence were scorched skeletons and 13 small wooden statues, each one representing one of their sacred animal guardians. Soon after the elimination of the Pulai tribe, the Mantids built new factories on the island and restarted the production and exporting of Thaulmium. The story of the Pulai Tribe's devastating demise had, over the centuries, been reduced to a mere myth that people from other continents would tell their children. The tribe's legacy was eventually forgotten and people began to speculate that the civilization had never even existed.

The deer cowboys realized that they had found an authentic Pulai artifact, that they could prove the existence of the tribe's existence. Nah, nah, they thought, It just seems like way too much work to lug this boring piece of wood around. Nobody'd care about it anyway. They all shrugged indifferently, mounting their horses and riding away from the artifact, never to see it again. They had decided they were too cool to be seen caring about a meaningless piece of history that didn't involve them

## Teagan Crane

### *Object #18*

Since I was created, seemingly just a few days ago, I have been passed from hand to hand, each so very different from the last. I have seen all of the sights of many lands and seas. I have been brought along on journeys that take me traveling far across the big and beautiful world and seen all that it has to offer. But then, the dreaded day came. The day that comes for every creation ever made. I was brushed off to the side as newer and better technology took over in my stead. I was kicked by feet and rocks, and the wind had picked me up from the rough ground and blew me all around. Up and down, looping and curling over oceans and seas and mountains and rivers. Days passed by, turning into months, which turned into years. I soon left the wind streams to fall into the waters below me, the calming, rocking waters. My metal parts had become caked with mud and dust and dirt, and my cloth had been stained and discolored to unrecognition as to what the once beautiful and magical fabric had looked like. All of this *character* coming from my long journey around the world, but the waters I fell into quickly washed away all of the impurities on my surface. Sinking down, down, down, deep below the waters' gleaming surface. Eventually, I was gently carried through the icy, dark, and gloomy waters to come to rest softly on top of some brightly-colored coral, only to be soon carried away by the cold streams once again.

Once upon a time, a *very* long time, I had a more important purpose. An important reason for my travels overseas and my exploration of the world. I was a protector and guardian, to those who could use and wield my properties. While most common folk would think that a belt could not *possibly* hold *any* of the redeeming qualities and attributes of Thaulium, they would be completely and utterly wrong. I was specially created for that exact reason. An experiment, just to prove that all of those who doubted my success, were wrong. They didn't think that it was possible to refine a metal, even one that

is considered soft, so much that it could be used as a thread and be weaved into a fabric just as easily as if it were made of string. But, to everyone's complete surprise, it was. I am the first of my kind. A belt made partially of the metal that most beings would utilize as magic. I was so popular! I was in such demand, that beings would trade things to each other, just to get the chance to hold me or wear me, for just a few minutes, or sometimes even hours at a time, depending on their worth.

While I was revered and loved and treated like a sacred artifact, no one truly cared enough to actually keep me for more than a while. I was always *in the moment*. Never, *never*, did anyone ever see me as more than just a stepping stone on their path to power and glory. I was just a small piece in their puzzles and plots and plans to get to the top, just like any other being that has that exact same ambition. Hopefully, in my resting place, at the bottom of the ocean, I will finally be used for a worthwhile cause, and I will finally be able to get some rest.

## Alex Duffy

### *Object 54*

The ground sprayed upwards as a young man ducked behind a stone wall. He clutched his weapon by his side and slowed his breathing. He looked around past the wall for a split second, soon driven back by a second hail of bullets. He saw three of the Mantids standing behind some contraption, made of gray steel and warped magnets. A thin and oily voice came from one of the creatures.

“Surrender with your hands up and you won’t be killed!” The young man knew a lie when he heard one. Never once had these self-righteous insects ever shown pity to him or his people.

The voice sounded again: “Lay down any blasphemous magical abominations along with all your weapons and we won’t have to kill you!” He fished around his pack silently and laid down an old copper vase belonging to his family. It was inscribed with runes for luck and good fortune. Saying a short prayer to the gods, he opened up a small pouch labeled “*ΔThaum*” and swallowed the contents whole. He looked at his hands and stepped out in front of the wall, walking towards the three Mantid soldiers.

He laid down his sword, leaving a light singe around the grass where it landed. The tallest of the three heavily armored Mantids leaned towards the central one, whispering a command. The young man broke out into a sprint. The tallest Mantid barked orders to fire as the young man’s skin began to glow brightly, he leaped towards the three. His skin reached a fever pitch of redish white as the young man reached the three soldiers.

“For freedom!”

*Aleksy Banik*

*Y 50 - Y 78*

A young woman rushed behind a large wall of stone, feeling the air from a magnetic projectile on her face. She grabbed her weapon tightly, calming down and bracing herself. The Mantid soldiers shot at the stone wall, causing a regular thud along with a small showering of dirt. The sound of machinery whirring was oppressive.

“Drop your weapons, heathen!” A Mantid soldier boomed from outside. “Surrender now and you will receive a fair trial for your crimes!” The young woman looked down at her feet and spotted a rusted copper candlestick laying in the dirt. Grabbing it, she opened up a pouch of treated and refined Thaulmium and poured it down the tube of the vase into a bulb at the bottom. The young woman smiled to herself and opened up a flask, pouring the water into the vase. She dropped a pellet of something wrapped in paper into the vase. She shook the vase up and used a tool to seal it off, creating an airtight chamber. The young woman walked out from behind the wall, slipping the vase into her pocket. She dropped her weapon and when it hit the ground, it made a clink of metal against metal. She walked with her hands up towards the Mantid soldiers.

“We are doing this to help you!” a soldier bellowed, “You must understand that we only have your best interests in mind! It is Umier’s will that—” Time slowed. He took his hands off the gun. He looked up at the young woman. She broke into a sprint towards the soldiers. And towards the magnetic gun. The vase full of magical explosives was vibrating dangerously, and the young woman vaulted onto the weapons installation and towards the soldiers. She tossed the vase into the air between them both.

“You’ll never take our freedom!”

*Olesia Banik*  
*Y 280 - Y 298*

## Sam Evins

### *Object 3A*

As the natural light slowly fades away, replaced by torch, the miners, who might as well be covered in dust already, rub the lucky stone on their way down deeper. It had been there for many years, too many years. So many years that no one knew, or no one remembered, who had found it first.

It was Thaulmium, of course, but it had formed like nothing anyone had ever seen. But soon everyone knew it was special. It had a simple small, spherical core, but from this core jutted out large spikes in all directions, exactly nineteen spikes in all. Some miners went so far as to call nineteen their new lucky number, but most just rubbed their hand gently across its spikes, every morning as they went down into the mines.

And even though no one really remembers who found it, or exactly when, everyone in Kolpania 3 remembers this. A few months after they found the rock, there was a cave-in, a disaster that colonies like this one had to face regularly, but never without loss. A few hours after the cave-in and people were rushing in and out, doing their best to get to the miners, the special rock began to glow. This was normal—after all, the energy in these stones was powerful and they glowed all the time. So, no one noticed it, until it glowed brighter and brighter, so bright, no one could look at it. Everyone covered their eyes and quickly left the mine, for fear of going blind entirely. And when the glow stopped and the rescuers went back in, a perfectly rectangular chunk, the size of an ordinary door, had been mysteriously removed from the boulders blocking off the mine, and the trapped miners stepped out into the light with their eyes full of wonder and glee. Glee that no one here had felt for a long time.

There was of course a great celebration. No one really knew what happened, but at the exact same time, no one cared. It was a great miracle, an act of mercy the likes of which these people had not seen



in more than 300 years. The choking dust of the mines, and the steam of the engines, coming to take their spoils away. It was an oppressing scene of smothered light, smothered hope. That rock gave them light. It gave light to the miners, and their families, and all the people of the colony who thought there could not be hope. It was a preliminary beacon, showing them that there is always a place with light. The kind of light that smoke cannot smother.

So now, the special stone sits in the entrance of the mine, rubbed carefully everyday by the miners who pass through. It was the light that guided these miners home, on the long nights, the nights that seemed to drag on longer than the rest, when the miners were even more exhausted and debating how hard their backs would hurt if they slept in a minecart for the night. The stone seemed to glow brighter than the lamps around it, guiding the miners back towards it light.

## Ryan Healy

### *Object 32*

Carine hurried down the street and dodged a celenut. She ducked just in time as the spiky green fruit sailed over head into the waiting hands of its customer.

The vendor called down, “Enjoy! Please come back soon!”

Carine didn’t have time to admire the vendors wares today and she increased her speed. All around her, vendors called to customers from their balconies. Some of them had pulley systems to swiftly deliver customers their purchases, others used energy shields to lift items down. Carine watched a man expertly flicked his hands at a pile of bracelets and slowly lift them. Carine slung her bag over her other shoulder; she winced as her long hair was pulled and she shifted to maneuver it off. Once successful she charged ahead slipping in between the crowd. As she turned the corner the gargantuan harbor came into view. Calamars traders were the finest on Ociciae and their harbor proved it.

“Hey! You, you Carine Jessel Iadir?” A deeply tanned woman with scraggly brown hair barked. She was tall and built like a ship post. Carine raised her eyebrows at her brashness. She knew midlife traders were more “direct” than Calamars from the mainland.

Nonetheless, Carine confidently sauntered toward her, “That’s me.”

The woman smirked, “I’m Eugenia Philipae Bush.” Carine was going to reply, but Eugenia moved behind her to grab a gigantic crate. “This is San’s personal order! Take it!”

Carine scoffed at this. Eugenia narrowed her eyes and shoved the crate at Carine. Carine wasn’t out of shape, she just didn’t have the muscles Eugenia did. As the crate slammed into her chest and sent her stumbling back, Eugenia shot her hand out and stopped the crate from breaking by producing an energy shield.

Carine bit her lip and felt her cheeks flush; a rare occurrence for her. "I'm sorry. Let me help you get that."

Eugenia held her hand up, "No that's enough. Pick your shit up and follow me. If you're late, San will kick you off her ship before we leave the dock." Eugenia lifted the crate as if it were empty and started walking. Carine scurried after her. Eugenia walked past a dozen vessels as Carine hovered excitedly. She couldn't believe she'd gotten a position on 'The Celenut' the most revered trade ship on the entire planet of Ociciae, named for Capitan San's favorite fruit, the celenut. Carine had only heard the stories, and she couldn't believe she was going to get to work on it. Eugenia trudged forward and The Celenut came into view. It was just as impressive as Carine had imagined it would be. Eugenia gave a low growl and motioned with her head for Carine to follow her. Eugenia clambered up the steps as Carine jumped up them. Eugenia handed the crate to a small girl who scurried away. Eugenia again grunted and motioned for Carine to follow her. They left the busy outer deck of the ship and navigated the winding halls. Eugenia stopped at sturdy door with a golden circle with an 'X' through it.

She knocked and a voice called out, "Enter!"

Carine shuffled in as Eugenia slammed the door. "Carine, this is Capitan San Marthanoir Pebulz. San, this is Carine Jessel Iadir. She's the newbie we hired about a... week ago?" Eugenia said blankly. Carine stepped forward, trying to see past Eugenia's muscular frame. She looked around the cabin. It was a hodge-podge mix of colors and fabric. Silken scarves were draped from the ceiling and dried herbs from the Pulai tribes hung next to them. A sweet scent wafted, filling the cool room. A dark wood desk with divots took up the back half of the room. Capitan San sat on a straight-backed chair, peeling a celenut. When she stood, Carine finally got a good look at her. Capitan San was shorter than she'd expected, but she had toned muscles and calloused hands. San's auburn hair was cut to her chin in a blunt line. She had a rigid posture but there was an air of relaxedness. San's tanned skin was spotted with hundreds of sunspots. She had an oval shaped face with pillowy chapped lips. Her green eye was was big and slightly cross-eyed. Her golden glass eye was made from

Thaulmium and had a slight glow, and the thin white jagged scar on her face was eye-popping against her tan skin.

“It’s an honor to meet you, San.” Carine said.

San gave a lopsided smile, “How old are you?”

Carine straightened her back, “I’m nineteen.”

San nodded, “Good. The younger you are the more time you have to learn.” Eugenia nodded at Carine and left abruptly and waved goodbye to San. “Take a seat Carine.” Carine plopped down onto a chest armchair and turned it face San. Up close her oval face was spotted with dark brown freckles.

“So why are you here?” San asked.

Carine furrowed her brows in confusion. “Well my parents wanted me to leave at twenty. They were never big fans of travel surprisingly, but I wanted a head start.” Carine answered. Calamars were world travelers. They left home to travel, trade and see the world. It was how they were educated; seeing new cultures and learning new languages.

“So why’d you leave now?” San asked as she popped a piece of celenut into her mouth.

Carine cleared her throat as her thoughts snapped into place and she could see Elise in her mind. “My friend Elise. Well my best friend. She’s like my sister. Her parents were big traders back in the day, they pushed her to leave young and make a name for herself. She left last year and it’s been... well about a year since she left. We don’t know where she is.”

San reached into a chest near her foot and opened it. San handed Carine a small red fabric turtle. “It’s full of Thaulmium. Keep it between us. I’ve had this pouch for twenty years—maybe it will bring you some luck in finding Elise.” Carine took the pouch in her hands, “Thank you.” Carine clutched the pouch and looked out the open window to the horizon.

## Sara Madani

### *Object 44 (Brown and white polka-dot coin purse)*

It wasn't unheard of for unusual things to wash up on the shore. This was common knowledge to Otami, who spent most of her days patrolling the forest line, squinting against the sun for boats or rafts drifting across the horizon line. The beach was much like a second home to her, especially after leaving her mother's hut at an early age to become a warrior.

Otami wasn't allowed to participate in most of the elder warrior's patrols, like inside the forest or in a cave, due to her age. So, after she finished training and had her head shaved, like all the other warriors, she was positioned to patrol the beach for unwanted visitors. Nobody ever guided their vessels close enough to their islands.

However, when Otami thought her day would be just like any other, the most intriguing item appeared in all of its soggy glory in the salty sand: a brown coin purse, spotted in slightly smudged white.

Otami didn't exactly understand what the strange object was at first, but as she trudged to the small mystery item, she realised the two shiny balls crowning the pouch could be unlatched to reveal a pocket.

How unusual.

Then she realised—whatever's in here could be completely unique, something nobody else in her tribe has, one of a kind. Her mouth spreads into an eager smile.

Unlatching the coin purse, she becomes giddy with excitement. She opened it up wider, and prepared herself for whatever would be inside, and—

"OTAMI!" a voice called from behind her. With great haste, she shoved the item into her skirt, turning around to greet the voice's owner.

“OTAMI!” it called once more, a head poking out from the thick line of wilderness. It was Ilo, Otami’s sister. Ilo jogged down to where Otami stood, her cape billowing out in the breeze behind her.

“Seriously, Otami, where were you? Kita’s back, and she’s been looking everywhere for you!” Ilo scolded, grabbing Otami by her pointy ear, dragging her to the forest line. “Honestly. If you keep this up, you won’t be positioned in the treetops any time soon.” She huffed. They reached a path, blazed by years worth of Pulai stalking away from the tribe and towards the beach—or at least that’s what Otami assumed.

Ilo finally let go of Otami’s ear, looking down at her through her sharp eyes. Otami avoided the line of her glare, finding interest in the smooshed grass underneath her feet.

They reached the end of the path and entered a clearing in the shape of a circle. Facing away from them, a tall figure stood, arms crossed, waiting.

Kita, the bravest warrior of the Pulau islands.

Otami gulped.

They came to a stop. Kita turned around to face her.

Her intimidatingly tall height loomed over her, her sharp gaze blazing into her. Then she turned to Ilo, dismissing her with just a bat of her eye. Otami was left alone with Kita.

“This is the second time you have been gone. You were gone again.” She told Otami. “What to do, what to do...” Her gaze softened. Otami’s face blazed hot with shame, watching Kita’s every move with wide, owlsh eyes. “I will let you go. But just one time. Next time, I feed you to the Birds,” She threatened, her eyes crinkled with amusement.

Otami nodded fervently, as she looked restlessly at Kita. The coin purse. “Sorry, ma’am. It won’t happen again, ma’am.” Kita barked out laughter, as if Otami would never understand. The coin purse. Otami fiddled with her skirt, where the purse was hidden. Kita watched her. “Think ahead, Otami. Some things are best left a mystery.” With that, she turned on her heel and marched away.

She stood there a moment, in a daze. Then she remembered.

Otami reached into her skirt and pulled out the coin purse. Finally. Stalking to the side of the empty path, she leaned against a

tree and unlatched the two silver balls once more, and eagerly peered inside.

A chunk of bone.

Her eyes widened, remembering the pact her ancestors had made long ago--respect nature, and it will respect you. Kill nature, and it will kill you. By consciously being in possession of a bone, Otami was breaking her pact.

She felt a rumble below her.

Dropping the coin purse, Otami bolted through the forest.

The beach. She had to get away, or the island would be the end of her. Otami sprinted, trees swaying in the wind above her head, the earth splitting on the ground below her feet. The eyes of a million creatures zeroed in on her, watching her every move as she hurdled through the forest, towards the smell of the sea.

She reached the part of the forest where the ground is no longer dirt, but sand, and the trees begin to part way. The ocean seems to beckon her, drawing her in with warmth and welcoming arms, as the island turned against her and pulled her down by the ankles.

She's running on sand now, which slows her down, but she nears the ocean anyways.

Her knees are engulfed in the water, her fatigue getting the best of her.

Otami keeps swimming, farther and farther out, tasting the water in her mouth.

She floats in the water, laying on her back.

She closes her eyes, giving in to the soothing lull of the sea around her.

She remembers the coin purse, and what Kita told her about controlling her ambitions. Otami squeezes her eyes shut, tight, and falls asleep.

She sinks down, down, deep into the sea, and becomes fully engulfed in the warmth of the water. And she feels small. Like she could fit inside of a coin purse.

It isn't unheard of for unusual things to wash up on the shore. This was common knowledge to Eteli, who spent most of her days

patrolling the forest line, squinting against the sun for boats or rafts drifting across the horizon line.



## Jack Miller

### *Object 5: a small framed picture of flowers.*

“Your great-grandpa always said that man could only know hell when he had experienced it. Your great grandpa was, also, unrelated to this, a giant dumbass,” my father said, taking a deep breath that for some reason he made sure I could hear.

I squinted towards him, my eyes braving the harsh, green sun’s light, and he stared back, his hat-shadow covering his face, and barely extending to my chest.

He exhaled more smoke than a deer could reasonably hold in his lungs, flicked his stub of a cigarillo onto the ground, and crushed it under the heel of his ancient, leather boot. It made a crunch, then a sizzle, then screamed, which was pretty weird. I had always told him it was bad to inhale that stuff and that’s not even how you’re supposed to smoke them, but my old man knew better than me, I suppose. I’ll never touch those things myself; they make him cough up gross stuff and my mom doesn’t kiss him like other kids do. She says it tastes gross.

I went inside to get water, and I passed the old framed picture my ma had of some flowers. I didn’t quite understand why she had it still, but it seemed important to her, so I didn’t venture to ask. Sometimes I traced my fingers around the edge of the frame and tried to know, to comprehend, to feel its meaning to my mother—but that’s just touching wood, and there’s not really much that actually does.

It wasn’t much cooler in the house in actuality, but the windows open and the cool breeze blew the warm (and a fair bit of sand, which my mother would no doubt yell at me for later) right off me.

I walked into the kitchen, and at the creak my feet caused on our ancient wooden floors, my mother snapped, showing me the end of the barrel of the mag-revolver she had been cleaning. She took a deep breath, set it down, making an effort to huff and cause a fuss.

“Sweet Lord, child! You ‘bout scared me to death and back!” My mother drawled these words out terrifyingly, so it sounded more like ‘sweet lahwd, chaald.’ She polished the batteries of the gun that had belonged to her great-great-great-grandparents, who had supposedly taken part in the Grand Posse of legend. My friends and I were in general agreement that it had not happened, even though most of the older people were at least of a vague belief in it. It’d been well over 300 years ago, so even if any of that was true, it didn’t matter much.

Besides, had it happened, those before me would be horrendously, nigh-unquantifiably guilty—the enslavement of an entire race is nothing to be proud of (kind of the opposite, actually. Shocking, I know.). As a younger one, I had sworn to make right the wrongs of my forebears through glorious vanguard—to free those my ancestors accidentally enslaved through glorious, sanguine and magnificent insurgence.

In the back of my mind, it had always stayed—my mother had taught me straight, true, and right, and to ensure my actions were the same. I was, in her mind, her way to help the world, a creature to free the damned, to assist those who needed it, to take up arms for those who could not.

This was, in all likelihood, a pipe dream at best. I was across an ocean from those poor souls, and a mere child.

## Anjali Nath

### *Object 46*

The year 2,364

The object resting upon the coral was rounded at the top, with a curved side and a straight side narrowing slightly towards the bottom. The black streaks stood out against the glowing tawny wood in the weak watery light. Several Risi perched on sturdy coral shelves that protruded from the rest of the coral lining the walls of the cave. Their rough green hides glowed with streaks of blue and purple. All stared intently at the object which had captured their attention, their long feathery gills moved slowly back and forth. To the outside observer, they would seem to be in a strange trance of some sort. In reality, they were debating the uses for such an object.

*According to the deerboys, this object somehow survived a large volcanic eruption. But how is it possible that it survived the heat?* the largest of the Risi projected its thoughts clearly.

*As far as I can tell, it seems to be created entirely of the substance known as wood. In the records of the expedition of the year 124, the members mention many different varieties of wood, another Risi added, with a mental image of a large forest. But as far as we can tell, they all come from plants.*

*The living matter could only survive such heat if it had a certain amount of Thaulmium in it and was adapted for such a purpose, a third purple-streaked Risi mentioned. And according to our scans, it appears to be a hollow container with large amounts of raw Thaulmium filling the inside.*

There was a stunned silence.

*Who would put so much Thaulmium inside a container of wooden matter? To what purpose?* the eldest Risi wondered, its blue-streaked hide rippled. *As a science outpost, we should notify the city of the discovery and ask how to proceed.*

*That se-*

*The ground shook and several rocks fell from the ceiling.*

*The volcano is erupting!*

*Escape the tunnels before they fill with lava!*

*Hurry!*

The water was already heating up, large chunks of rock and coral fell from the walls as the volcano prepared for the eruption. In their desperation to escape the Risi scientists had left the strange wooden device inside the cavern. As the eldest turned back to try and save this strange object filled with raw Thaulmium, a large section of the cavern collapse burying it in the rubble.

Outside of the lava tubes, the Risi watched the volcano erupt from a safe distance. Large columns of steam and pyroclastic ash blasted to the surface from a vent on the flank. Viscous lava quickly solidified in the frigid Issal Ocean as this underwater eruption continued on. Nothing was abnormal about this quiet eruption for the Risi, as they were used to the strange temperament of their home.

*Why didn't we know ahead of time?* the largest Risi demanded. *Was the equipment faulty? An eruption like this would've been showing signs weeks before now.*

*The equipment was working perfectly, but something affected the volcano. Something made it erupt. Our equipment showed all the signs of an erupting volcano but there was no warning,* an engineer thought.

*That shouldn't be possible,* the eldest Risi added. *Only an unstable form of liquid Thaulmium could do something like this. But none was even close to the volcano. We learned long ago that liquid Thaulmium is dange-*

The green and purple Risi interrupted, *It is possible that the wooden device contained an unstable form of liquid Thaulmium. When mined and melted, Thaulmium can become unstable and cause dangerous reactions in the presence of volcanoes.*

*The eruption is heading towards one of the main colonies. If it reaches them without warning, hundreds will die!*

The eldest ignored the breach of manners, agreeing with its younger companions. *We must commune with the council right away.*

As ash and rock fell through the heated water, they warned the council of the danger before being entombed in the lava. The worst

kind of death, stuck in a place where they wouldn't be able to give back to life in their death. Due to their sacrifice hundreds of their kind were saved from the eruption.

## **Sandy Ortiz**

### *Object 40: Small wooden chest*

#### Found Object

The Gods and Goddesses of Pulau Island had left the pulai tribe one gift. They had given a small wooden chest to one family. The chest was to be left open and only closed in a time of need. This chest could only be closed once and it would alert the Gods and Goddesses that the sacred ground of Pulau had been invaded. The chest had been created from a special type of tree that existed in Pulau. These trees had a layer of wax-like substance to protect them from some extreme conditions on the planet. The chest was to be passed down by the family and only be closed by a member of the chosen family when there was no other hope. The chest seemed like nothing special but it showed evidence of its long life. The Pulai were not all sure what the Gods and Goddesses planned to do when it was closed; all they knew is that it will not end well for those who have tried to take from Pulau, and us who have failed to protect our sacred land. We had been created to protect this sacred land and all of its living creatures, but if someone managed to invade Pulau and disrupt the land to take thaulmium, the box would have to be closed. That had been the reason for the chest's creation, to avoid disruption in the island from happening. The tribe knew we were destined to one day see the chest close, but until that day, we will protect our Pulau with honor. Although many were scared of what would happen when the chest was closed, we cherish it because it was a gift that was given to us by the Gods and Goddesses. Many of the pulai think similarly to the Gods and Goddesses; we believe that we must protect the land and its animals, and it is done with pleasure. A lot of us have accepted the fact that the box would one day be closed, and until that day, we will do anything for Pulau because that is the reason for our existence. Many have wondered if they would live to see the chest close, and all of the family members

who have had the chest hoped they would not be the one to close it nor anyone in the future. Many speculated what may happen when the chest was closed, and some thought that the family with the chest knew what would happen, and could not tell them, but they could not know until it happens. The family with the chest tends to be a bit distanced from the rest and are the ones who care most of Pulau. The chest is passed down every twenty to thirty years to a member of the family—that day is celebrated by the whole island. Tomorrow is the day that the new owner of the wooden chest will be announced. Tomorrow... I will become...

## Ellie Patt

### *Object 16*

#### Play

On the colony, life was mostly monotonous. The most interesting part of the day for the Southern Searching Frimarke was when The Ball arrived.

The Ball was lime-green, a bit like some of their feather-crests, about as far across as any other rock, and was covered in tiny, scale-like baubles that caught their eyes like flashes of silver for a flock of crows. For this reason (and others), The Ball was the Deep Creature's favorite toy—it caught their attention, allowing the amphibian to note which individuals were best at maintaining hold of The Ball, and which of the feathered little (compared to her) sea-leopards were less suited to search-and-rescue and would need to be found a separate duty to perform as, if left alone, high-powered avians and their tendencies towards boredom were not attributes you wished to mix.

With a slap of her tail, the enormous Risi sent the prickly ball flying towards the beach-sleepers, who scrabbled with their feathered flippers to heave their smooth bodies into the water.

A large female—whose bulk had nothing on her watcher's but was sizeable all the same—closed in on The Ball first, executing a perfect spinning maneuver and breaking away from the rest of the pod, waving her back flippers almost mockingly as she raced down to the bottom, below the mammoth shadow taking note of the female's extraordinary energy. The Risi left reminders to make sure that she would not be left to boredom, her mind to rot, when she so clearly could use it. The large female had, for the past few rounds (and all the rounds—one of the reasons she was the Risi's favorite), maintained control of The Ball for significant periods of time, even when larger and faster Frimarke seemed set to take it from her.



Tuli drifted down through the murky water, keeping massive, flat eyes on as many of her Frimarke charges as she could. Merikissa (for that was the Frimarke's name) turned her frightfully intelligent dark eyes upwards, somehow finding Tuli's monstrously-sized shape in the darkness of the depths. Tuli sunk lower into the kelp, attempting to avoid the contact with her favorite charge who would most likely be leaving soon, for her duties would call to her, and Merikissa would not be one of Tuli's carefully raised fledgelings for much longer.

Merikissa, of course, being Merikissa, the most stubborn of that year's Frimarke fledgelings ever since she was still more of a pup than anything else, would not bother with such nonsense as not visiting Tuli.

The dark green-spotted shape rocketed up from the depths, circling about Tuli's feathery gills and, with her almost-scaled snout, nudged The Ball back to the immense amphibian. Tuli, with one of her thick-skinned flippers, swatted it away. Merikissa looked almost offended, and Tuli reached out a reassuring tendril—to comfort the upset creature, she thought, not to help herself.

The cold polar water rolled over the whole pod, sending many rushing back to warmer shallow water and the slightly warmer sun-heated rock. Merikissa returned The Ball again, shoving the glittering tool towards Tuli, surfacing for a beat, and returning to the kelp bed where the Risi was floating.

Tuli watched with amusement as Merikissa clicked irritably at her, rolling around the kelp bed, never straying far away from her flippers or tail.

*"What am I going to do with you?"* Tuli wondered as Merikissa continued to broadcast faint irritation and boundless amusement in her direction.

Merikissa looked to her as if the answer was more than obvious, it was expected—and Tuli was lacking.

Irritation grew on the other end of the link, and the Frimarke shoved The Ball at Tuli again, finally heading up towards the surface. Tuli stared at the glittering green sphere, tucking it under one clawed flipper as she swum downwards.

The problem, she decided, was that Merikissa understood that she was leaving, that she would most likely never return to the rookery

where she grew up, that the pod would be separated in order to achieve the most possible success, to help the most.

Merikissa did not understand that, Tuli knew, and would most likely resent whoever took her in. While she was a brilliant searcher and excellent at keeping her eye on The Ball—after all, its purpose was to give the pups an opportunity to prove their concentration skills—she was also very set in her ways, and would not take kindly to being uprooted for whatever reason.

Tuli kept this in mind as she circled around the base of their rock. The question was, in essence, how to keep Merikissa both on-task and emotionally healthy- the latter being the more prudent issue of the two, seeing as Tuli knew that the Frimarke would be able to do her job, at least.

Her eyes landed on Sjavardyr.

The carving she'd made of the old Frimarke—from the last pod her elder sister had trained, before handing the reins over to her—specifically, as the real one was long dead. A nest-parent, a teacher better than she'd ever been.

Sjavardyr had been frightfully intelligent, and goal-driven. He'd also been incredibly emotionally vulnerable, and had hated leaving her sister's side for any reason.

Not unlike Merikissa.

Tuli turned the sparkling globe over in her flipper-hands again. The toy had been Sjavardyr's, or at least mostly his, for almost every round he'd ever been in, something that he would return to her sister every time he could.

As she swum up to the surface to begin the next round of competition, Tuli made her decision, clinging firmly to the little green ball that seemed to have chosen well twice. Tuli wondered if it would choose the next of them to stay.

She would have to inform those interested that Merikissa would not be leaving, though something told her that they already knew.

## Lia Zhao

### *Object 5A*

#### A Memory from the Tool Box

##### RECORDING #1

Do you remember? Of course not. I arrived at your neon-green abode when you were only five days old. It's impossible, despite your supernatural memory. I recall your horrendous shrieks, piercing sharp needles into my conscience. Why are you laughing? It's true! Anyway... Sika and Ma—, I mean your parents welcomed me inside. Your mother cracked a micro-grin and your father's legs softened into tofu.

“Thank you for getting here so early...”

“You're welcome, I am Grey, and you?”

Yes, they misunderstood me. You asked me! Why are you making me stop now? Wazza! I am just going to say their names.

So, Mauk said, “I can see that. I'm Mauk and this person—” he waved his hand towards your mother, “—is my wife Sika. What's your name?”

“My name is Grey. I know I am grey by the way.” Before Mauk could say anything else, I tugged him up from his spot on the crimson carpet, avoiding the clear discomfort that had grew.

You were still crying, squirming as if a thousand Dum Dums marched on you. What now? We're getting there. Anyway, I was here because of your household's needs, that includes assistance in caring for you. Your favorite toys were the Pulai huntress figurine, the Dytza, and my tool box. Yes again, those were all from the Bag of Situations... you stole from it.

A few years after that, I needed to do a self-checkup. However, that requires my tool box. Sika, Mauk, and I decided the best course of action was to reclaim it as my own after your fourth birthday. We figured you would lose interest in such things in just a few days after

you have received your birthday gifts. We were right—sort of. Your attachment to my tool box was not severed all the way through. Luckily, you only kept the grey wheel. I don't know why. Perhaps, you tell me.

RECORDING #75

Hey, I guess you're leaving. As an AI, you don't speak like one. Huh... um... the Mantids are only fixing you right? Wait... Grey, please tell me they're not reprogramming you. I'll find a way to repair your Shell. Why do they need you to go? It's Thaulmium isn't it? Return to Calama soon.

RECORDING #76

This is Mantid AI 314. I've been deployed to the Palau Islands. I will reply to your messages after the search.

RECORDING #77

It's been ten years, Grey! Where are you?

RECORDING #130

Mantid AI 314 is no longer available.

Do you remember, Grey? I remember because of my supernatural memory. I remember because you were my brother. The flaws of your program are not mistakes to me. I know you can't hear me, see me, or comfort me. I know you no longer exist, but you will always be in my heart. You don't know why I have the grey wheel and honestly, I didn't know either. Perhaps, Fate knew everything from the start. I know because this is the the only piece of you that I have.

## Nyltiac

The floating island planet of Nyltiac is vast and magnificent, filled with an array of flora and fauna. The three seasonal moons that orbit Nyltiac, Neea, Leilos, and Nievus, are home to the photosynthetic moon cats, worshipped by the airship-dwelling Yoha and Yetam. The Yoha pirates rule the skies, hunting dragons, while the more peaceful Yetam sailors offer their services to land dwellers. The four-armed Azumin make use of the landscape, while the scaled Tunnundrunan tend to the magical Sirli plant underground. Old myths ensure that nobody dares go near the water, where the Merdragons and their once powerful—now fallen—slaves, the Oshida, live. The world of Nyltiac can be beautiful, but also dangerous.

## David Alexander

### *Object 45: A Golden Egg*

I have done it. I have finally done the impossible, something that no man nor woman on the island has ever accomplished before.

I have stolen the sacred Golden Egg from the infamous Captain Calico.

Legend has it that the Golden Egg is the holiest of all religious items and has the ability to allow direct communication between those who dwell in the sky and the all-powerful mooncats. The Dragons of olden time were once the guardians of the egg for centuries until they were systematically destroyed by the Yoha over time, eventually finding itself in the possession of many Yohans. As time went by, the owners were quickly dispatched before they had the chance to utilize it, whether it be by assassination, arrest, mutiny, etc. until it found itself in the hands of the most dangerous man who ruled over the skies: Captain Conium Calico.

Truth be told, there should have been no possible way for me to have escaped from the clutches of that monster (praise be to the mooncats!). Any fool that dared to cross him never lived to tell the tale after he got through with them. I swear to the mooncats above, a creature like that man should never, ever be allowed to roam amongst us mere mortals. Calico has pillaged numerous villages, murdered an innumerable amount of innocents—even some children—and has struck fear into even the most blackest of hearts. An object this divine should not be in the hands of such a monstrous human being. I may be just a simple cook but even I know that.

This whole adventure began when I snuck into Calico's bedroom one stormy night while he and the other crewmates were busy getting incredibly drunk on various bottles of rum. I rummaged through all the drawers into his room, even underneath his bed, until I finally found the prized egg stowed away inside his closet hidden amongst his varied assembly of clothes. With the haste of a millipede, I grabbed the egg and hid it securely within my jacket pocket, making sure to shut the closet door soundly behind me before breaking into

what felt like the fastest sprint in the history of humanoids. I made my way all the way to the top of the ship, the weight of the egg slowing my stride with every passing second while a panic and dreadful paranoia began to rise inside of me. At any possible second, the captain could appear, it seemed, out of thin air and foil my plan of escape. I could be hanged or set ablaze, or worse, yeeted off of the ship.

Where to go? Where to go? Where to go?

I could feel the increasing sense of dread invade my entire body, the paranoia almost turning into full on hysteria—until I finally saw my escape.

We were temporarily resting right above a small tribe of dragons that night to baste in the success of our most recent hunt and there seemed to still be a few dragons roaming around below us. I knew that what I was about to do would probably be the dumbest decision of my entire life (or at least, what was left of it at that point) but one look at the egg convinced me to do what had to be done.

I took a deep breath, said a quick prayer to the mooncats, all the while steadying myself off the edge of the ship. I looked down at the vast emptiness, the scaly back of a particularly large dragon coming within sight. I clutched the egg closer to my torso for good luck and finally exhaled.

I jumped off the ship.

Soaring down the sky at the speed of light I felt a cacophony of emotions: freedom, glorious, perfect freedom for the first time in my young life and yet, absolute fear, the almost supernatural knowing that my life would soon plummet to its end. Then—I felt it.

It appeared like a jolt, a prickly, smooth, hallelujah of a jolt.

I had miraculously landed on the back of the dragon.

The egg was still in my clutches, there was still breath in my lungs, I was alive.

Gloriously, miraculously alive.

As I turned back to look at the now shrinking sight of the once daunting ship, only one thought penetrated my mind.

I have done it. I have done the impossible.

## Winter Appleton

### *Object 38*

It was something made by the Oshidans, a shiny glass thing, tinted with blue, purple, green, and a glittery white. Something useless, yet beautiful.

"I don't want it," Aada said, pushing it aside with the tip of one of her claws. She had always been a bit snobby. She probably thought that there was something wrong with the colors.

"Don't give it to me!" Bennam yelled, glaring at Aada and shoving it back to her. Aada merely pushed it back, starting a cycle of competitive sliding.

"I want it," Subira piped up, her tiny head and claws peeking over the edge of the table. Her siblings stared at her, then turned away with annoyed looks.

"Fine, take it," Aada grumbled, pushing the glass over to her runty sister.

"I don't care," Bennam insisted. Subira let out a happy cheer and grabbed the glass before swimming to her room.

"Aaaand, there!" she murmured, smiling in triumph as she looked at her shelf. Among her siblings, she was the only one who liked the Oshidans' items. She had a few bracelets, some misshapen coral, and now the glass thing. Unfortunately, the bracelets would never fit around her arms, and they were still too big to fit around her nubby horns. She giggled and rested her head on her shelf, nestled amongst her collection of items. Her content sigh echoed back to her.

"Do you like it, sweetheart?" her mother murmured, swimming into the room and hovering lazily by Subira's bed.

"Like it?" Subira hummed. "I love it!" She cheered, grabbing the glass and spinning in a twirl towards her mother. Her mother chuckled and grabbed her, holding her tightly yet gently to her chest. "Can we get more?" Subira asked.



“Not today,” her mother replied, letting go of Subira. “But I’ll check the markets tomorrow.” Subira nodded eagerly at the notion, the glass still held protectively in her claws.

“Don’t break it,” her mother warned.

“Okay, Mom!” Subira replied, nuzzling against her mother before swimming back to her shelf.

“Subiraaa! Don’t be such a hoarder!” Aada grunted, trying to retrieve a bracelet from Subira’s shelf.

“No! They’re mine!” Subira insisted, batting her sister’s claws away. Despite the many years that had passed, Subira was still the runt of the family, but she still had a passion for her Oshidan items, and she wouldn’t stand to let either of her siblings take them.

“Can’t we just go already?” Bennam whined, leaning against a wall and flapping his fins and tail impatiently. “We’re gonna be late to the trials, and I want to see them this year.”

“No, let go! It’s mine!” Subira shouted, tugging at the bracelets Aada had grabbed. Aada tugged back, and it soon became a cycle. It reminded Subira of when Aada just messed with Bennam and left *her* alone.

“You don’t even wear them! They’re *still* too big for your horns anyway!” Aada objected. With a final tug, Subira finally yanked the bracelet out of Aada’s claws, crashing into the wall in the process and freezing at the sound of shattering glass.

“Uh ooooh.” Bennam mumbled, snickering as he saw the look of fear on Aada’s face and the absolute shock and rage on Subira’s face.

“Moooooom!”

“You can’t just take your sister’s things,” their mom lectured, carefully scooping up the glass and setting it in a bowl.

“But Mom—” Aada whined.

“Don’t. You have your own horn bracelets, young lady, make use of them.” their mother continued. Aada nodded dejectedly and swam off to her room. Silently, Subira pulled the bowl of shards over to her and rested her head on the table. Her mother just barely stifled a sigh. “We’ll fix it, sweetheart. Don’t worry,” she said. Subira nodded

and followed her brother out the door. The leader trials were today. They'd fix her glass later.

## Mikaela Ashton

### *Object 62*

#### Scales

“Of course! Let me see, child.”

I take the scales from your hand as you enter to escape the rain, eagerness causing my shrunken hands to shake. There are four of them, misty blue pale where fingers touched their surface—dragon scales. My permanently slumped shoulders slump further. I will have to wait longer still for the scales I desire.

“Oh, don’t worry so my young Pirate; do I look incapable? I worked dragon scales before your parents were born! And yes. I knew them. I see them in your face.”

The startled look you give me forces a smile. Youngsters always forget that the world is older than they can imagine. Far older. But you look smart. Maybe even wise. Pity to waste yourself on pirating.

“Heh—so surprised I know your profession? Only fine Yoha as yourself seek *magic* talismans. Relax, I’m not one to turn away business. Anyhow, I suppose you’d like a love talisman? How easily startled you are! I’m not prying at your mind if that’s what your thinkin’.

Perhaps you’d like a health talisman instead? One you could give to your love? Very practical! Very pretty! You see child, love talismans turn brown scales pretty and pretty scales brown. Lovely scales as these would look like the mud surroundin’ merdragon waters—if you’ve ever docked there. No, don’t suppose you have. Hm? Of course, a health talisman would result in a different color! Different herbs, different *forces*, are in play child.”

My hand moves involuntarily to my chest. If you could see the magic that extends my life woven in dragon scale, Gorf bark, and red gold, then you might be tempted to do harm. My simple clothing is a bit of theater—the cane is too. No, love, not violence, is in your eyes today.

“You sure? Alrighty. Your lover better like mud.”

I shuffle over to my wood worktable and place the scales upon it. I turn to—

“Don’t follow me trackin’ water and—poor thing, you’re shiverin’! Go warm yourself by the firepit. I’ll let you watch when you’re good and dry. I can hold off on the excitin’ parts till you’re no longer so miserable. Alrighty? Good.”

I place the cauldron over the fire and use an earthen mug to fill the bottom with soft sand. Satisfied, I move to my overladen shelves to scrummage through a century of useful junk. The table is swiftly covered with small vials. The fire causes the colors within to tremble and cast rainbows against the walls, even as the light outside succumbs to the rain. Tonight will be a sleepless one. I am too old for this. My body sore. My soul heavy.

“Better? Heh. Damp’s always better than drownin’. No, sit! Sit! And hold still while I measure herbs; my memory isn’t what it used to be. We can talk while I inscribe the scales.”

I shuffle between the table and cauldron. A little of this. Some of that. The sand, now a crystalline liquid, encases each ingredient with a thin layer of sparkling silver. “Done. Come now, I’ll show you the process. Oh, quite whinin’, Bessie. Who’s Bessie? Why, my chair! You pirates still name your ships, don’t you? Don’t give me that look. We social outcasts make do with what we have!

“See here, I’m to carve runes on the underside of two scales. That is where the paste will glue them together, back-to-back. No, the runes I’m doin’ now are for stalwartness. Heh, the love rune itself isn’t engraved until *after* the matin’ process is complete.”

Cupping one of the translucent scales in my left hand, I select one of my more worn tools, one I trust, and begin carving the forgotten language. The shavings twinkle in the firelight as they slip to the earthen floor, surrounding me with blue-gold fireflies. My body shifts into the trained dance between blade and scale, my hands sure of their mark.

“You needn’t hold your tongue any longer child, though I’m impressed. Whoever raised you did well! Hm? The merdragon waters I mentioned earlier? Pardon me, I often forget most haven’t seen merdragons. I was referrin’ to the ocean near Harvethsform. There’s

only one ocean? I suppose you'd know. Then you *do* know the waters. Heh. Afraid it will be *that* brown. I warned you!"

I allow a wistful smile. I'd made the same mistake once. Real love isn't broken over an ugly brown. Brown is the color of the earth where the Aleakim make life grow. Brown is the true color of love.

I hum as I work. You babble on about your love. I remember mine. Time passes in its secretive manner as my cottage fills with an airy smoke. Content with the runes, I retrieve some of the paste from the caldron and lather a generous amount over the engravings.

Now to wait.

I move to the fire, lowering myself carefully onto the woven carpet.

"Merdragons? Picture child, the meanest dragon you ever saw with a serpentine tail where its legs should be. No. They're real. I've seen 'em, though nothin' alive should have to.

"It was a day worse than this. I lived by the waters at that time with my husband and daughter. My little girl loved the rain. She would dance in it. Heh. Then came the storm where merdragons washed ashore. Lightnin' gave glimpses of... I'm glad I didn't see more. They tore at my Aleria, ravaged her little body, and...

"My husband. He made a water boat to hunt them, to find Aleria... find her body."

I stand, hobbling to the hardened brown scales. Movement hinders self-pity. I need to move.

"Don't look at me so. He knew it was dangerous. He knew there was a reason ships fly. We didn't care."

I place the talisman in my barrel in the corner and take hold of the sharpened stake. Then, standing on the stool, I put my whole weight into the stake's descent. Stepping down, I take the talisman out and put a yellow ribbon through the new hole.

"Complete.

"What are you thinkin' child? My husband? I don't know. That's why I'm doin' what I'm doin'. Perhaps one day someone will bring me merdragon scales. Then I could read 'em. I could *know* the merdragons that had owned those scales and perhaps, perhaps, know what became of my beloved husband."

## Lucy Brunelli

### *Object 15: Owl Figurine*

The ship lurched and a shriek came from above, followed by the sound of shattering glass. Grandfather's desk toppled over, navigation charts and written documents strewn everywhere. A miscellany of different novelties was thrown from their shelves; each item rolled and bounced down the polished wooden floors as they slanted down to the right for a quick second then evened back out sharply. I stumbled, pushing down on the broom in my hand to catch myself before I went flying with the rest of the treasures. I managed to catch a lucky few from making the fall to their doom: a miniature model of our ship, Father's pipe, a small teapot, and a strange bird statuette that I'd never seen before. It must have been stored behind the books on the shelves, hidden away from any nosy onlookers that could examine the figurine. It was made of golden brown carved wood. Well, it looked like wood, but felt much stronger, much sturdier, almost powerful. It was obviously something that meant enough to spend hours scratching and chiseling out every minute detail. Little flowers were incorporated into the feathers of its wings, and little divots spotted its back. The orange red eyes began with a protruding circle, a dome maybe, then funneled out into ruffles. They were open wide, almost eager or expectant. Its nose sat right in between its large eyes, and a row of smooth feathers arched out over them, making it look as though it was deep in thought. I stood amidst all the rubble around me, junk carelessly clutched in one arm as I studied the little bird that had found its way into my life and into my left hand. Shouts on the deck above became mere whispers. The shaking of the floor underneath my feet as the ship attempted to recover from the sudden halt was just some soft vibration. The object in my hand seemed to suck the atmosphere out of the room, drain my thoughts from my mind. No more shouting or shaking or clattering or creaking or *air*. Everything seemed to be focused on the figurine. It drew attention to itself. My body felt looser, maybe even freer, but my mind felt as though it was being pushed into a cage. There was an

underlying sense of dread that built up, blocking any cognitive thoughts. The rest of the items clutched in my arms slipped through them, unable to avoid the hard and polished wooden floors. The clatter they made sounded hollow, echoey. The little bird gave off a kind of palpable energy, something that couldn't be ignored or dismissed. It had a strange warmth to it, the eyes so very wide. And red, so very red. It made the hair on my neck crawl, the way it stared at me. Like it was sending out a message, broadcasting into my brain a feeling a terror, dread, or... submission? Entranced in its eyes, I could feel myself shutting down. Hours could have passed, but there I stood, in the ruins of Grandfather's office, clutching the bird as one would a lifeline. Its eyes were so very red.

## Ana Chavez

### *Object 2*

*Just a couple more steps, keep breathing* repeated like a mantra in my head. I was so close to reaching the cabin, but each step seemed to take more effort than the last, and my feet felt like they were growing heavier by the second. My burning lungs were a constant reminder that I'm not very used to walking long distances, much less walking up hills. I glanced back at my tethered ship, now just a speck in the distance, floating up in the sky and swaying gently in the breeze. I wish I had just stayed on the ship with the other half of my crew members. I could've painted from there too. I was just about to decide that maybe the view wasn't too bad when I tripped into a pile of mud, ruining my paint brushes and canvas I had brought along.

*Crap. Land is definitely overrated.*

When I finally arrived at the cabin, I saw that my crew members had already dropped off their stuff and left to go make trade deals. Oh well, more alone time to paint for me. I sat in a desk next the only window in the cramped, musty cabin, brushing the thin layer of dust off of it and set down all my things that weren't ruined by my mud fiasco. I was left with some brushes, my cool colored paints, and a small square of canvas. All I needed was some inspiration. I put my boots back on and headed outside to try to find a pretty tree I could paint.

As I was walking (on flat a flat trail, thank mooncats), I noticed something shiny out of my peripheral vision. I cautiously veered off the path and followed the shine to the mouth of a small cave. I finally found the source of the shine in the form of an... egg?

It was fairly large, about the size of my head, and really heavy. Unfortunately, it had some cracks in it. It must have gotten hit or something, which meant whatever was in the egg had died. I hoisted the egg into my bag and headed back to the cabin to paint it. Thankfully it was mostly blue, so I had the right colors for it.

I decided to paint the egg outside because it looked nicer when the light hit it at a certain angle. I went inside to fetch my supplies.



When I came back outside, the egg looked even more cracked than before.

“Huh. Interesting,” I mumbled to myself. As I sat down, I saw another crack appear. I froze, watching as the egg became more and more cracked, when suddenly, there was a small white talon sticking out of the egg. With an undignified squawk (which I later denied), I hastily scooted away from the devil egg and clutched my canvas to my chest fearfully.

“Mooncats, please protect me! I don’t want to die yet!” I whimpered rather pitifully into my hands. I shut my eyes tensing up as I heard the cracking get louder and louder and then... silence. I slowly opened my eyes and all the tension in my body melted away.

“Awww. Okay, you’re adorable.”

It was a baby ice dragon, delicate and small, with half developed pale blue scales and brilliantly shiny not-yet-sharp ice horns on its head. It regarded me with wide, curious eyes and waddled itself closer to me. I hastily began to paint his scales. The painting was a mess, really one of the worst I had ever done, but it was the only way I could have any proof of what I saw. In that moment, I was suddenly very glad we would be staying here for 5 months.

Maybe land wasn’t so overrated after all.

## A.J. Davidson

### *Object 33*

#### The Museum

I was amazed. I had always been fascinated by stories of the past of my people. We are merdragons resulting from the mating of power-hungry mermaids and ice dragons of the sky above the surface. But we rebelled against the other merfolk and now have ruled over them for some time. My parents and I were now going to visit an entire museum with a multitude of artifacts to look at.

It was exciting just to see the museum. It was made of dark blue and purple coral. My parents had saved up a good bit of coin to be able to go to the Illustrious Museum of History. Then we entered in and gave an employee the coin that was needed. I was then able to walk into two large doors where I would get into the rest of the building.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. I was awed to see a large room with so many cool exhibits.

“Is it what you had hoped for?” my mom asked.

“Yes, I want to see everything I can!” I said ecstatically.

“It will be good for you to truly see the glorious history of our people. I am sure indeed that you will be inspired to do even greater things.” my dad said with a smile of pride. I was now a teenager, and I could remember in childhood being enthralled by my father’s fantastical tales of the exploits of our family—and, by extension. our people—so I was very ecstatic.

The first exhibit I noticed was a large trident that was bravely used to defend our first king against a pack of merwolves. Then against the wall to the left were tribal masks made from coral that dated back to before all merfolk were united in one city.

“My, that must have been such an uncivilized time before we merdragons showed the mermaids how to live in a truly virtuous manner. I mean they were all a bunch of squabbling tribes before our united nation,” my father said.

“Well, perhaps they took better care of nature at that time,” my mother said.

“There must be more to being virtuous than taking care of nature,” my father said.

“We get food and shelter from what is in nature, so maybe it is good to be mindful of it,” I said. My mother had recently become interested in conserving the environment when some of our people began wanting to use our knowledge to study ways to possibly go beyond our ocean to the surface world.

“Of course, we have to take some care of nature,” my father said. “Not to say that the mermaids are an inferior race, but we had to show them a better way of life,” he said.

I knew what he meant. The mermaids were power hungry and wanted to expand even beyond the surface to truly wage war against the peoples of the land. When my people found out that they planned on such power, we then rebelled against them. At first the mermaids were mere slaves, but now their lives are better as a sort of lower class citizens.

“Oh my!” I exclaimed. It was the most interesting statue I ever saw, though I hadn’t seen many. I remembered that my grandfather occasionally told cool stories as well, and he said he had heard an old tale of the defeat of the last mermaid king. While this was titled “The Last Mermaid King”, it looked nothing like his description. I was told that the last mermaid king was a staunch idealist who stubbornly fought against those who wanted to gain as much power over as many people as possible.

Even the article going along with the statue seemed to be strange propaganda. The article stated that the king actually had intentions that were the opposite of what he said. It stated that, even though he acted like he was against the social climate of his day, because he looked like he was acting foolishly, he was really trying to make the other proponents of his views look bad by association with him. I wondered why it was so hard to take his words at face value.

This figure was a comedic caricature. The nose was long and ugly. The face was a picture of naivety and goofiness. The costume he was wearing was something between a royal outfit and that of a jester.

“Well, now that king sure looks like he didn’t have much of a right to rule.” My father said.

But then while the statue was still affecting me, I then saw something in conjunction with it that completely changed my mind. A mermaid labor worker was working on the statue. But she wasn’t making it clean. No, she was making it more dirty, in a way that showed that she was clearly making it look worse as part of her job. Then, as we were leaving the room, I looked back and noticed that she had the emblem of The Coral Relief on. It was an environmental protection group my mom was a part of.

I was struck. I realized the mermaids should not be blamed for what their ancestors did. They were just like us and there wasn’t any reason to attribute attributes to them that are really idiosyncrasies that could occur in all of us. I would work to help them have a better place in our society. We looked at many other artifacts and articles that only cemented my new view. Later that day at our house, I went to sleep with a truly changed viewpoint.

## Mercedes Dubberly

### *Object 30*

I'm running out of time, I can sense it. The Runaway's ship will be leaving any minute, with or without me, and without me, they'll die. I quickly grab the box off my desk, drop it in my bag, and rush outside, because this is no ordinary box. This box, or rather what's inside, is the key to the Runaway's survival. Inside, disguised as an ancient artifact from a museum, are the last of the flowers that give inhabitants of our planet magical powers. These plants didn't used to have to be hidden, but that was all before the Takeover, and since then, all forms of magic have been banned.

The Takeover was when the Moon Cats invaded Nyliac, making sure to first kill off as many magical non-humans as possible. They wanted to flush out all magic so that they could rule without being challenged. No one believed it at first, as magic had been how our planet functioned for years, and we had just thought the Moon Cats were a myth. But they weren't. As soon as people realized they were serious, all magical creatures went into hiding, praying, hoping they wouldn't be found. They started underground communities, even further down than the pangolin people used to live, and that's when the Runaways were formed. The Runaways, started by the pirates who value freedom and survival of their own above all else, are a band of rebels who decided to steal the plant that gives magical powers to its user and start a new life on a smaller island similar to our own. The final ship to that island leaves today.

Running fast through the forest, I stop behind one of the large trees to catch my breath, when I realize there's a hole in my bag that the box has slipped through. I examine the rip more closely and realize it has the distinct mark of claws, and panic sets in, all the way down to my very core. I steady my breathing and begin to form a plan in my head to retrace my steps and find whatever cat has stolen the box. But then I see the box, the load being shared by two of these small, but evil, creatures, and rage takes control of every ounce of me. I break into a sprint, my feet moving quickly and lightly, barely touching the

forest floor, its dirt bathed in golden light, as I give chase to my precious box. I slow down as I near the felines, like a spy nearing the target, and prepare to delicately pluck the object from the cats' back, when they stop as if sensing me.

I tense, afraid to even breath, as if something as simple as that would ruffle a hair on their back, and then all would be lost. I can almost hear them thinking, maybe they have a way of communicating telepathically, when I make a split-second decision—no thinking involved, and grab the box off of their back. I flee.

I make it to the ship just in time and climb aboard. I need to find the captain immediately and give him my mission report, but for now, I can rest comfortably knowing that the plants are safe along with some of our creatures. We will start a new life, and someday we can reclaim the—no, *our*—island from the mooncats and avenge those lost during these dark times.

## Dani Horne

### *Object 53: Wooden spork with a boar carved into the top of the handle*

Twilight spilled into the broad streets of Lufte, the golden glow of the neighboring moon Leilos disappearing beyond the horizon, bringing dusk and quiet with it. Now, the city slept. As night fell further, it became apparent why this city was chosen as the capital of the Big Island. Its sprawling cityscape was like a majestic beast, standing proud and tall. Its market streets boasted the smells of spices and foodstuffs.

However, as its roads twisted and turned, they became narrower and danker, settling into a rundown state so divergent from the main stretch that one might think they took a wrong turn and ended up in a different city.

On one such road, my footsteps echoed across the pavement as I walked quickly, head down, not wanting to draw attention. To these people, I looked alien with the dark hair and tan skin that were obscured by the hood of my cloak.

Today was an important day. It was the 4th year of the current emperor's reign, month 3, day 6; the newspaper in my hand said as such. I'd been waiting.

I ducked into an alleyway and trailed a hand across the wall, all but blind in the pitch-black alley. The sky darkened further, the air seeming to draw in and compress against my back as I took cautious steps.

I reached the far wall without issue, pressing my back up against it so it wasn't exposed. I learned a long time ago that erring on the side of caution was not optional.

I was meeting a customer tonight. The iciness of the bottle in the pocket of my cloak bled into my skin. I disregarded the unsettling feeling and scanned my surroundings for my customer. He hadn't arrived yet, but I was early, so I wasn't suspicious. I waited.

Everything should have gone smoothly. If not, I had come prepared. An elaborately carved wooden weapon from the forests of Daklos weighed heavy against my side, hidden under my cloak.

At the sound of footsteps, I squinted into the darkness that surrounded me, straining to make out a figure.

As it approached, the shape became more defined. It was him, my customer. He stopped a few feet away, and we faced each other off in the narrow confines of the alleyway.

His hands were trembling. “Do you have it?” He broke the silence to ask me, anxiety seeping into his words.

“Do you have my money?” I replied.

He fell quiet, his foot tapping with the jerking, spastic motions of a film reel set on high speed. His silence was all the answer I need.

“Then there’s your answer,” I said, with a distinct lack of sympathy.

The man stumbled forward, but I stood my ground. My hand twitched towards my weapon.

“I’ll pay you back! I can get the money by next week.” He was lying through his teeth. It made my skin crawl.

“You’re desperate. It’s pathetic,” I spat. “It’ll be double the usual price.”

“Please,” he begged. “I need more now. I’ll pay you triple that next week!” The pitiful display didn’t sway me.

He tried a different appeal. “I haven’t taken any in weeks, I swear. I’m not addicted.”

Suddenly, I shoved him against the wall, anger eclipsing my impulse control. I hated liars most of all.

“I can still feel the magic coursing inside you.” I forced it into his ear like the threat that it was. I could feel the man’s breaths coming quicker on my neck.

Abruptly, I was pushed off of him with unexpected strength. I stumbled backwards but my feet stayed planted on the ground.

I clipped him in the nose, catching him off guard, but he returned the compliment fast by shoving me down and straddling me, delivering blows to my face and chest. One connected where my bottle was stowed away, and it came flying out, shattering on the pavement beside me and releasing its blue gaseous contents. The man’s gaze



snapped to the substance he craved as it was lost to him in the night air.

I noticed his distraction and took the opportunity to roll out from under him, holding my fists out in open invitation. He punched me hard in the mouth before I could react. I went down, an unpleasant copper taste sitting on my tongue. I drew my weapon from my side.

Before he could take another swing, I launched myself up and slashed out with the sharpened teeth on the bottom side of the Dakloan weapon. It sliced clean through his neck and he choked on the blood bubbling up in his throat before his body met the ground.

The exertion my body had undergone caught up to me, and I collapsed. My breath puffed out in harsh gasps.

My customer's corpse laid on its back, long strands of his pale blue hair framing his head and shoulders, a pastel backdrop to the bloody slice that had ripped his neck open.

I produced another empty bottle from my cloak and placed it against his lips. Pushing down hard on his chest forced the last of the air in his lungs out, filling the glass at his lips with the same blue gas that inhabited the previous bottle. He shattered my product, so he was paying for it with his own remaining magic. It was only fair.

I would leave for Sväva Sten tomorrow. There was always a market for what I sold.

I left the man's vacant eyes fixed lifelessly up at the narrow strip of inky sky above.

## Jacob Rawson

### *Object 28*

The winds howl around me while I carefully lower myself, step by step, down the sheer cliff face of the planet I call home. Rappelling down the cliff isn't usually done alone by someone that is unaccustomed to the route. I've been making my way down for a month, maybe two; time is hard to keep track of when all you do is climb down a never-ending summit. Each day I have to make it to the next camp, a refuge for climbers like me to sleep and eat at regular intervals. I take my last step onto the basecamp's platform, waiting to be greeted by the people that permanently reside on them. Instead, all I hear is the droning of the wind that I've grown accustomed to. I step forward and accidentally walk into something. I look down and see that I had knocked over a shiny, brass colored box with two skeletal wheels at the top. It is covered in knobs and buttons on its front face with a lens covering a nozzle on the side. I'm accustomed to the odd knick-knacks and trinkets that usually accompany the hermits and merchants that call basecamps their home, but this is a different beast entirely. I began to flip switches, press buttons, and turn knobs haphazardly, eager to know what function it served. The wheels sprang to life and began spinning while a light shown out from the lens. Shocked by the fact that my efforts to revive the machine proved effective, I quickly shut it off and went back to examining it. I saw a set of grooves running along the centers of the black skeletal wheels. I hoisted the object and set my rappelling rope around the wheels. The floorboards creaked as I made my way over to the edge. I found a handle near the driving wheel of the device and readied myself. I cautiously began my descent down. I flipped the same switches as earlier and once again the wheels spun. The wheels mechanically and methodically lowered the rope in a slow but consistent fashion. I looked down into the abyss below me and saw that the light from the device let me see more clearly and easily.

As always on my trips between camps, I felt unparalleled boredom wash over me. Not knowing what to do with my time, I tried to get a better understanding of the device that I was trusting with my life. It's well-made with professionally attached panels interlocking to create the shiny box that serves as the body for the device. Knobs click with a metallic twang when turned and I can feel each increment as it falls into place when rotated. Dusty switches without markings or labels of any kind rest on the panels. Scared to fall into space below me, I restrained myself from conducting experiments on it to the extent that I risked a tragic mistake. Instead, I admired how the red gradient of the sun-moon shines off of the brass plates. I became entranced in the hypnotic patterns of the reflection. After a few minutes, I realized that I forgot to stop at the basecamp and that I'm already descending without recuperating. I decided against risking it and attempting to go back up. Hungry and tired, I found the willpower to continue on. Besides, the trip down must be significantly faster with my new machine. I wondered if this was another climber's possession, one that I stole. I pushed the guilt away by justifying my actions with the fact that I had found it laying at the edge of the platform. It must not be that valuable despite its novelty.

My feet hurt through my thin as they dug into the jagged cliff side. The path I took was discolored and somewhat smoother than the rest of the cliff because of the constant traffic on this common route. I constantly looked down into the small cone of bright white light that granted me a little bit of extra visibility, looking for the next safe haven I could stop at. The drone of the wheels slowly unwinding the rope and the unrelenting wind were my only company. It was a lonely life but one I was willing to risk for the sake of some relatively quick wealth. Eyelids heavy, arms tiring, I longed for a stop to be nearby. My wishes came true as the dull brown of old planks loosely riveted together came into view. I collapse onto the platform and switch my device off. I lug the burdensome machine to an empty bed and begin to res

## Isabel Townsend

### *Object #7*

The smallest of the Yoha boats danced in the evening sky, the strong, dry gusts threatening to tear them away from the larger vessels to which they had been tied. As Leilos set, the sky faded to a transient purple, casting an eerie glow upon the land that made even the most harmless of creatures seem like menacing beasts. The hoarse and harrowing croaks of giant amphibians could be heard coming from every direction. He stood alone among the looming trees, their shadows a heavy weight that prevented him from trying to escape the forest that was keeping him prisoner. A large ball of fear and anxiety had gathered in his chest. Even the rustle of leaves in the wind made his muscles tense.

He slowly turned in a circle, looking up at the trees, eyes wide, trying to find a gap in the shadows through which he could escape. He froze in terror at the sound of thousands of feet scuttling across the ground behind him. He quickly turned to face the noise and saw the outline of a giant furry millipod moving through the trees. Alone. He was alone, and now the sky was going dark. The only source of light was the faint glow of magic within the veins of the plants that blanketed the forest floor. He cautiously knelt down to the ground and reached for a plant that radiated a pale orange and chewed it. There had been just enough energy in the plant that he was able to set a small branch he had picked up earlier on fire to create a bit more light. Now able to banish some of the shadows that had kept him prisoner, he found himself able to move a little more freely. Despite the newly created light, the young Yoha scout stayed alert. He wished desperately to be back on his ship in the sky, where the familiar groans and creaks of the old wood would lull him to sleep.

This had been his first scouting mission of his own, checking to see if there were any dragons for his ship to hunt in the area. He was supposed to have made it back to his small scouting vessel before

Leilos set, but he had gotten turned around briefly. By the time he had figured out where he was, the moon had already started to sink in the sky. He had been on missions with others that had gone into the night before as well, but alone the dark seemed more alive. An ominous presence that watched his every move, breathing, shifting.

The scout took a deep breath, and slowly started moving towards the clearing where his ship was anchored. He tried to pay attention to all of his surroundings at once, staying aware of what was happening. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a grodor, its slimy skin illuminated by his torch. He decided it was best to start running, terror pulsing through his veins.

He reached the clearing where he had left his personal vessel earlier that day. He almost ran past it at first, its ebony colored wood blending in with the night. He quickly boarded it and was immediately comforted at the sight of the little piece of wood on the ship that his younger brother had painted an imaginary friend of his on a couple years before. He had been mad at his brother initially, but had forgiven him in time. As the scout ascended from the trees and their imprisoning shadows, he felt just a little bit safer. Almost like that little, weird, pink figure was protecting him.

## **BESTIARIES**

### **David Alexander**

The Alexander is a lanky, slender panther with caramel-brown skin. This creature has an overwhelming addiction to chocolate and Kool-Aid. It is friendly to all creatures but can be quite sassy and even violent when provoked. Its brown eyes are the windows to its soul, a mirror into the essence of this majestic creature.

### **Winter Appleton**

The W. Appleton is an animal with a very feline personality. It sleeps for quite a large chunk of the day and has quite the skeptical, snarky attitude. That's not to say that this creature is never kind—quite the contrary, when with those it considers friends or family, it is often very affectionate. This creature is small, round, and squishy too. It feasts on foods that contain high carb levels and meat too.

### **Mikeala Ashton**

Aleakim are maidens born from the snoring of El the Giant, who sculpted the mountains when the world was young. Few are the maidens, for El breathes at the season's turning. The maiden Spring covers the earth's barren scars in flowers before melting away in summer's heat. Her sister Fall spreads a blanket of leaves so the world may sleep before freezing in winter's deep kiss. Content with the short lives given them, the maidens remind God's children that although life is brief, each season is its own, and to breathe deeply of life, for its end is not to be feared.

## **Isabel Astwood**

The Astt is a small, omnivorous animal which for the most part does not kill other animals but can if necessary. The Astt has auburn fur and a long slender tail. The Astt changes from being nocturnal to diurnal for no obvious reason and can react badly to being in a nocturnal state for too long.

## **Georgia Bailey**

Rare to be seen is the Tacere Chao, a relatively small fox-like creature. Minimal are the animal's roars into the world, but when it roars with confidence, it spouts everything and nothing, all at once. A storm brewing in ocean blue eyes reveals complex, human thoughts behind the madness in its roars.

## **Katie Barnett**

The Kather is a melancholy creature who resembles a hermit crab, hiding in her shell, and occasionally coming out.

## **Dylan Boswell**

The BBoi is a slow creature, prone to short periods of hibernation followed by quick bursts of excited working. Its perception of space is faulty, causing it to misjudge distances and even miscalculate its own body size.

## **Renata Bourin**

The Bourin is an oddly-heavy looking cat. This strange animal seems to have a fear of spiders, insects, and other small creatures that have a tendency to latch onto its fur. This cat will hardly ever be seen during

the day, preferring to sneak indoors during daylight hours to protect itself from the exhaustion of the sun.

### **Lucy Brunelli**

The Seul is a tiny white mouse that burrows deep into sand. Rarely does it come out and explore, opting to stay underground and build nests out of rocks and straw. It feeds only on the finest selection of nuts and berries, gathering at night when predators are not around. It nests alone, but often finds itself befriendng other rodents.

### **Kate Brunton**

The Mamula is a timid and aloof rabbit-like creature that only emerges from its burrow at night. It has dark blue fur with white spots; large, droopy ears; and glowing eyes that allow it to navigate through dark tunnels. This small creature harnesses the magical ability to heal itself and others.

### **Maia Chapin**

The wild chapin (*Mayinica sloveniensis*) is a small blue-grey carnivore with a spiked tail. It is a confusing animal, because it spends half of its time in a loud, tight-knit pack of exactly twenty-three and the other half silent and alone.





### **Ana Chavez**

The Chavez (pronounced “calves”) is a very eccentric and cat-like creature. It can be very loud and awkward, but also likes to try to make other creatures laugh. The Chavez changes color when with people to a bright orange-red when around other creatures but mellows out its colors to a blue-purple when alone. It is generally a very happy creature, but don’t push it. It needs its alone time and can unsheath its claws if disturbed during that time or when insulted.

### **Sam Contreras**

The Syvrian is a large, solitary panther-like cat. The Syvrian exhibits unusual behavior, taking to covering itself in soft leaves like Lamb’s Ear. The exact reason for this is unknown, but a popular theory is that the Syvrian simply for reasons of warmth, or, as it also does this in the warmer summer, because it enjoys soft things. Syvrians also subsist on leaves, berries, and nuts in addition to meats, and generally whatever is the closest edible thing. Its defining physical traits are its

wide array of fur patterns, and existence in forested and snowy environments.

### **Genevieve Cook**

The Genevieve is an omnivorous mammal that is often found in fields and woods. It is a very social creature, but it treasures solitude as well. Its diet includes trail mix and roast beef, and it is very loyal when domesticated.

### **Teagan Crane**

Flooftons float gracefully in whatever direction they choose to go. Their light, fluffy bodies drift through the water's currents like a leaf on the wind. Shiny sparkling particles catch their easily distracted eyes as they pass by, dancing aimlessly toward it. They call out to their other friends, all of them as easily entertained as any other one might find.

### **A. J. Davidson**

The Blue Manatee is a quiet creature, but sometimes likes herds. Its communication of happiness is loud, but in short bursts. It eats specific plants. It is a creature that also likes moving upward and onward whenever possible.

### **Ricky Dillard**

A bird, flying silently through the water, dodging the roots of cypress trees, floating below the air.

## **Mercedes Dubberly**

The Mercedes is a rare and magnificent creature with long golden hair and grey blue eyes. Most think of it as shy but realize it can be quite playful once it becomes more comfortable around them.

## **Alex Duffy**

The three-legged haggis is truly a thing, wandering ‘round the hills of Fife. Due to its legs it always circles a hill, and once its reached the top of its hill it rolls all the way doon again. Now ya would think this is a pointless life, but the haggis and I disagree. For the haggis loves these cycles and wouldn’t change but a thing. So, I see myself in the haggis, and, I dare say, it sees some haggis in me.

## **Sam Evins**

This great beast wears a weapon on its head. A thick helmet that can split the strongest warships in two. And with its great tentacles it sweeps through the wreckage. Feasting happily.

## **Mextli Garcia**

The Quetzalmixtli is a small wild cat with soft, green fur. It has tiny purple paws with seemingly endless claws made of ivory, which it only ever uses in times of great distress. It mostly keeps to itself in the depths of the dark forest and is very rarely seen, for it only comes out to the light for a midnight snack of oats that it steals from the closest farm.

## **Ana Christina Grier**

The Nariand is a small, lapis colored house cat with bird wings and a fluffy fox tail. This creature is social in small groups but as soon as the population is above eleven, the Nariand stops talking and sits in a corner. Its imagination is a distraction everywhere it goes. If you are traveling with a Nariand, experts would suggest travel music, so the creature can sing along.

## **Allen Hank**

A small, blind, fuzzy, animal with the heart of a lion feeding on the small mosses on his cliff-side habitat.

## **Sophia Harlow**

Two Faced Feline: Slinking from person to person letting their black fur brush against bare skin and pants. Stopping abruptly at the feet of who they find worthy, looking up with two twin eyes and purring in content. They found their person.

## **Ryan Healy**

The Isdavikas is a dark grey color with speckles of scarlet red dots that trail from its neck to its back. The Isdavikas has narrowed suspicious eyes, which glow a bright green. It is untrusting and very paranoid. It has sharp gnashing teeth that are very useful when they chose to attack. The Isdavikas is one of the most stubborn animals in existence. They trust very hesitantly and if you betray them they will never trust you again. When alone, the Isdavikas loves to nimbly swing from trees and eat heaps of mangoes.

## **Dani Horne**

The elusive Danielle is seldom seen out in the open, preferring instead to tuck itself inside its comfy nest and sleep all day long. It eats a highly unusual diet of exclusively cup ramen, and its extraordinary red eyes have spawned many a legend about this creature over the years. Its white fur is stark against the forest landscape but grows darker as it ages.

## **Marcus Huellstrunk**

The Marcualian Turtle is a red, large turtle. It commonly eats smaller turtles and sea mammals, contradicting the rest of its species family. It's turtle hosts two eyes, which act as a warning and eerily resemble human eyes, just twisted and lifeless. A Marcualian turtle has a surprisingly small lifespan of two weeks, but its shell remains as a warning to leave its corpse unscathed.

## **Britney Jean**

The Britiff appeared like a ferret, long and brown with fur that somehow shined in low light. Not glow in the dark, per say, but enough to catch the attention of anything that can see it. The eyes are big and brown, but fear that small build! For it will chase you and bite your ankles with poison fangs.

## **Molly Jones**

The Jones is a fox-like creature who is so slight that she can fit in your hand. Her fur is silky and snow white with dusty grey tips on her pointed ears and tail. Her tail is larger than her body and head combined and is about the size of a hard-covered book. Her most stunning feature is her glistening blue eyes that resemble a Larimar

stone. She may be timid at first, but give her time; after a bit, she will be your best friend.

### **Brianna Kale**

The Yigg is a monstrous but friendly creature who is driven off by conflict. It travels in packs and is covered in long brown fur. It walks on four legs that are very stump-like. The Yigg is known to be very protective and look out for other species.

### **Murphy Kalil**

The Kapul is, in its unaltered form, an amorphous bronzish mass, with its altered form dictated by mood. When the Kapul is frightened, sad, or uneasy, it takes the form of a small bat with tawny green and brown markings. When it is confident, angry, or excited, it appears as a deep red legless lizard with silver eyes and mouth. Finally, when it is calm, comfortable, or happy, it takes the form of a large, navy blue and gold tawny cat.

### **Felix M. Killingsworth**

The Súaeli is a reclusive, inconsistent creature with hair that changes depending on its mood. Its eyes are light colored and see everything. It hides in plain sight and eats anything. Beware, should you try to hold a conversation with the Súaeli, it will probably keep you talking until something larger than itself comes around.

### **Devin Lewis**

The Molak, a noble and rare creature living near volcanoes to eat lava or magma. Proud and strong, with the ability to destroy with its mighty claws. With fiery redish-orange hair that contrasts with its void-black

eyes, reflecting the beast's absent mindedness. While intimidating, the Molak is a quite friendly and timid creature, and wishes no harm on others unless needed.

### **Brooklyn Long**

Skoyde is a small creature that loves other humans. However, Skoyde gets scared away if it is surrounded by loud noises in their extreme case.

### **Catherine Low**

The Wrin is a skittish creature, easily scared off by loud voices and sounds. Even though it doesn't spend much of the day sleeping, it still likes to stay in its den when not gathering food or other such necessities. While its own fur is only a dark blue-grey-black, it spends much of the time when it's not in its den with creatures of a much brighter plumage in the hopes of gaining some of their coloring for itself.

### **Avner Lyons**

If I were to be a beast, I'd be a broken clockwork golem. I'd have once had rhythm and purpose, but now my cogs spin uselessly, unconnected to any form of movement.

### **Sara Madani**

The Fina is an exceptionally charming royal-bellied fawn, whose long twig-like legs wobble as she walks. She enjoys eating berries, and tends to find companions in the forest easily, as her bold, blue stomach sets her off from any other fawn, and is what makes the Fina so distinct and charismatic.

## **Rebekah Maguire**

The *Kiryivan* is a shy, docile creature. With dark almond eyes, and a nocturnal life, it flees from the claws of predators. It is said that if you show it something new, it will come closer. And if you look into its eyes, you will be drawn in.

## **Aubrie McFarland**

The Aquan is an underwater-dwelling, humanoid lizard-like creature with seaweed-like growth coming from the shoulders. It has terrible vision, and navigates using its other senses, which include an extreme sense of taste. It is an omnivore but enjoys creating delicacies out of rarer materials.

## **Sarah Crosby McKay**

A wolf-like creature, the McKay is frequently seen running through the forest. This illusory animal has the camouflaging abilities of a chameleon. With a fierce, genuine love of the natural world, she is usually heard communicating via screeching.

## **Jack Miller**

Jack is a small salamander that fancies himself a fancy gunslinger of an older sort, grey in color and small in size. It spends time in saltier spittoons and more wholesome saloons, shouting at sports games, and quite enjoys a very, very small hat.

## **Daniela Morales**

A Danmor is a brown owl with silvery feathers that hides between the trees and only shows itself when a meaningful conversation for it takes



place. It is small and easily missed when light doesn't shine on its feathers.

### **Anjali Nath**

The Nath is a small winged mammal with warm brown eyes and pointed ears. Its fur has the ability to camouflage with its surroundings, it is a shy creature and only shows it to those whom it knows are friends. It is omnivorous but a very picky eater.

### **Sadie Netzer**

The ??? is dark like a galaxy.

A vast dark space with small sparkles.

It has fire erupting viciously and unapologetically from the top.

It's a formless creature, recreating itself to fit other people's molds and styles.

It is a whole mood.

### **Sandy Ortiz**

The sandy cat lays comfortably by the window watching others walk past. She waits as her food is prepared differently from everyone. She can sometimes appear to be unwelcoming, although that is not always the case when she wants some affection. She spends long hours curled up in the comfort of her warm blankets.

### **Ellie Patt**

The Patt is, to put it simply, a large, tired owl, who sleeps so far into the day that it becomes night again but will never feel fully rested. While it has a loud screech, its beak contains no teeth, and its claws are dulled. The feathers of this owl are perpetually ruffled, with even

the best of preenings failing to smooth them. Lastly, the Patt has eyes made to look larger by the dark markings beneath them.

### **Zoe Phillips**

A Noelle is not quite a mammal, but not a reptile either. You could call its short fur purple, but it's also looked pink in certain lights. My friend said she saw it sneak into her pantry and drink all her Pepsi.

### **Jacob Rawson**

The Rawson is a grazing beast with a purple coloring on its thick coat of fur. It is significantly smaller than the bison it resembles and travels in herds when possible. It feasts on the grass of the vast plains it grazes and prefers to stick to the warmer parts of its environment.

### **Olivia Russo**

The Russon is a very energetic creature with two observing eyes and a huge mouth. Its favorite things to do are go outside and eat copious amounts of food, which it chooses to do as frequently as possible. It is reserved when you first meet it, but that quickly changes, and it becomes the loudest, most annoying thing in existence.

### **Elizabeth Scott**

The Elizabethan Penguin is a plaid, flightless bird. It lives in small communities of only a few dozens of its kind in the arctic. It is known for making an irritating shriek whenever it sees other penguins not of its community.

## **King Snider**

The King is a strange, elusive species of snow-white lizard that lives in tall rock spires. It exits once a day to feed and eats nearly anything. It lives in pairs; the males are larger and spindly, whereas the females are smaller and plumper.

## **Bryton Tanner**

The hluk is a bird-like creature with a variation of colors but quite the sorrowful countenance. Upon close inspection, though, those who live to see the bird experiences the narcissistic laugh, reappearing in their dreams for years to come. It is said that its laugh evokes the most terrible memories of the victim.

## **Luke Taylor**

The Luke is a tall creature with arms and legs stretching much longer than its body. Its grey hide is only differed in color by the patch of blue across its stomach. It uses its long limbs to travel across the land stepping on top of the trees, using its eyes to scan for prey and plants beneath the canopy it strides across. When faced with a river or ocean in its way the Luke simply slides into the water and swims its way across in powerful strides.

## **Michelle Taylor**

The Korupce is a small deer-like creature who is pure white and has small, slightly curved antlers. She looks normal and pure. However, when you look closer you see that she has bat wings, bone antlers, fangs, and blood speckled hooves. The Korupce knows more and is less innocent than most assume.

## **Mia Torres**

### **Rós**

A creature whose form is so incredibly inconsistent, the only defining feature is the sheer intensity crackling in it's dark eyes. Easy enough to lure out but be warned that attempting to corner or offend the Rós would be a grave mistake with no return. On that note, be mindful that if one ever decided to go looking for the capricious creature, know that it has probably seen them first.

## **Isabel Townsend**

Verord: Controlling, chaotic, organized, easily intimidated, occasionally intimidating. Friendly, focused, absent minded, strange, specific, vague.

## **Victor Wall**

Wall's Moth is active during all hours of the day. It is friendly when approached, and desires to see all.

## **Jamey Whisnant**

The majestically epic Whizz-Ant is a large creature resembling an ant but with the quirk of having butterfly wings. Its known to feed on meat, fear dairy, and force itself to eat vegetables in order to maintain its wings. The Whizz-Ant is called this because of its ant-like appearance and extreme speed, even if only for a short time.

## **Sarah Wulf**

This is a rare Wulf. She eats little, and barely barks, but with no one around for miles, she has the most haunting and beautiful howl ever

heard from any Wulf to ever live. This Wulf is not a strategist, as most Wulves are, but she has proven to be very clever, and a formidable hunter. The Wulf will feast on many things but is well known to especially enjoy a treat.

## **Lia Zhao**

The Trella is an owl, born gray, but it grows new colored feathers each year. This animal is not a social creature. It prefers to listen to K-Pop and observe its surroundings. The Trella also enjoys reading books, sketching, and writing stories. It's hard to spot a Trella, since they stay mostly in their cozy home.

## **Pen Zuleger**

The Penstroke is a strange auburn-furred creature that looks like a mix between a ferret and a cat. It has many pairs of legs like a centipede, and it is known for its many strange routines. It is also known for standing on some of its hind legs and flapping its little paws when happy. It sleeps in nests of little blankets and prefers offerings of Chinese food.

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