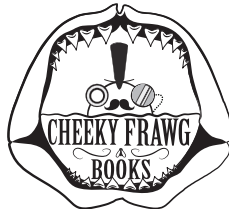


SHARED WORLDS 2014

SHARED WORLDS 2014
STUDENT WRITINGS



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Tallahassee, Florida

SHARED WORLDS 2014 STUDENT WRITINGS

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

Sponsored in part by a grant from Amazon.com

With thanks to Cheeky Frawg Books for making
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The Shared Worlds concept is a creation of Jeremy L.C. Jones with
Jeff VanderMeer and sponsored by Wofford College

For registration and donation information, visit our website:
<http://www.wofford.edu/sharedworlds>

ISBN 978-0-9857904-7-9

Dedicated to Tim Schmitz and to Cathy Conner,
for all they do behind the scenes, and to
Jeremy Zerfoss, designer extraordinaire.

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Thanks to the 2014 students for expressing such great creativity both on and off the page. This book is a testament to your imagination and drive. We hope you enjoy your fellow students' stories and we expect to hear great things from all of you in the coming years.

– The Shared Worlds staff

MOTU'TAO

Motu'Tao used to be an Earth-like planet with an abundance of land. One day, the Flux, a radiation-like magic, became somewhat reactive, changing the gravitational mass of the planet and causing it to gain 7 new moons. This cataclysmic event caused a mass extinction and only a few life forms survived. The remaining organisms, many living near the new coastlines, had to adapt quickly to avoid extinction.

These primitive life forms evolved into fantastical creatures, some more sentient than others. The three main life forms that emerged to dominate much of the planet were the Aqara, the Kohatu, and the Wakari. The Aqara are a highly advanced species of humanoid underwater dwellers. They live in large cities built upon geothermic vents and are governed through a hereditary aristocratic oligarchy. Their society is marked by deep class divisions. The Flux powers the Aqaran cities, and advanced Flux-fueled technology is present in everything from war machines to creature comforts.

The Kohatu are a species of humanoid land dwellers. They live in small city-states, but there is a high council that exerts some central authority over them when unity is called for. The individual city-states tend to be governed by ruling families, and many have strict codes of etiquette that their citizens must follow.

The Wakari are an amphibious species of humanoids that are a hybrid of the other two races. Thousands of years ago, the Aqara and the Kohatu lived in relative harmony, and cross-breeds were not uncommon. When war broke out between the two dominant races, the hybrids were driven out by both sides. Today, their descendants form a seafaring nomadic race that live on ships and practice piracy. Ships are populated by family units, and the oldest Wakari on each ship is the captain.

Today, at any given moment, the Kohatu and the Aqara are either actively at war with one another or preparing for the next conflict. The Wakari harass both sides with their constant raids, not knowing or caring which side might be winning.

MARIANNA ALLEN

Found Object: Hidden World

Erik was killed last week. He was my everything but now he's gone and I don't know what to do with my life. There was no one else but Erik. I vowed to him that I would love him until my dying breath, and I always will no matter what happens. I just never expected that it would be a child; especially a child that was not mine.

I first noticed that Erik was changing a few months after our marriage ceremony. He had started leaving the house at random times and would come home past midnight, and he would look better than he did when he left in the morning. I knew what was happening. I just did not want to admit it to myself. I kept ignoring the obvious symptoms, but after about a year I had to tell someone. The first person I could think of was my brother Karak. He started using the Lux when he was sixteen years old. The side effects appeared very quickly with him because he was so young. He started talking to people that were not there, he became very distant from us, and he also became beautifully bright. He glowed twice as bright compared to any other boy his age. We all could tell then that he was becoming a junkie. The only person who could get through to him was my mother and she convinced him to stop taking it before he completely turned into the monster that the Lux was making him. He still shows some side effects, but they will never be as bad as turning into a creature with bulbous eyes and a face like something from a nightmare. Today, Karak is pretty normal except when he gets angry he glows a dark purple which is not normal at all. I knew, because he had experience, my brother would help me make the right choice.

He told me to plead with Erik, to explain to him what was going to happen to him and that I would never be able to live without him in

my life. The words were useless. He did not hear me anymore. All he ever heard was his inner call which constantly needed more Lux.

I tried to take care of him for a while, but it just made his transition even worse. There were brief periods where he was normal again and they were the best moments of my life. He would hold me and cry and tell me how much he loved me. He would tell me that everything he did, he did it because of the Lux and that he regretted ever taking it. And a second later his eyes would turn crazy again and he would start talking to someone he called "Polly." It broke my heart.

On a bad day, he came up to me and started pulling on my hand. I figured that I might as well follow him if it would make him feel better. He pulled me out of our house and toward the shore. At first I thought he was going to take me to the source of the Lux so he could fully transform, but instead we ended up on the beach. There was a woman waiting there with something in her arms. She had on a bright golden necklace that was shaped like a beetle. I recognized it immediately as a necklace that Erik had given to me at one point. It had gone missing a while ago, but now I knew where it was. She was holding it close to her chest and rocking it back and forth. She looked terrified when she saw Erik and me coming up on the shore.

"Erik, can you at least try to hide?" the woman asked in a hushed voice.

"Polly," Erik said loudly and ran to her letting go of my hand. I almost died when he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. She pushed him away and wiped her lips.

"I don't know what's wrong with him, he's not himself lately," she said to me rocking the thing up and down.

I wanted to kill Polly. This . . . this land whore is the one who has been taking my husband away. But suddenly Erik's words made sense. He told me that he was sorry for everything that he had done and would do because of the Lux. I guess whatever Polly was holding would be the answer to that.

"There were times when he was not like this, and he told me that someone named Kida would know what to do. I'm guessing that's you?" Polly asked looking around her to make sure we were alone.

"My name is Kida. I'm Erik's wife," I said finally eyeing Polly up and down.

"I know. He would talk about you when he was having a good day," Polly said.

Suddenly, there was a sound of a branch cracking and we were no longer alone. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Erik fall to the ground. There was a tall land man standing behind Polly breathing intensely.

"So that's him isn't it?" he asked standing beside Polly.

"Rick what have you done?" Polly screamed. She pushed the thing into my arms and ran to Erik's side. I turned around and saw a giant spear sticking up out of his chest. He was dying. I was about to run to him, but the thing Polly forced into my arms started crying. I removed some of the cloth over the creature's face and for the second time that night felt like dying. It was a child. But not just any child. It was a half breed and he had Erik's eyes. They had a child together. I completely forgot about Erik until I heard Polly scream. I looked down and saw that Erik had died trying to grab my hand. This was all too much.

"Wait, there is another one?" Rick asks raising a rock above his head.

"Kida go!" Polly screamed. She didn't need to tell me twice. I dove into the waters and swam as fast as I could, holding onto my dead husband's love child.

A week after Erik's passing I decided that the best thing to do would be to move away to a secluded cave and raise their child as my own. The child was the last living piece of Erik I still had, and I would do anything for him, just like I did for Erik.

LAUREN BELL

“Careful boy!” Abba snatched the small green fruit from the newest recruit, “if you rip a bag of Fluxx you’ll blow us out of the ocean! Do you see how much tocky is in this room?”

I watched my most trusted advisor tear into the little baby’s innocence and chuckled under my breath. I took a new green striped fruit from the barrel next to me. Funny thing, tocky, it is edible and it tastes delicious, but when it touches a small amount of drugs it creates an explosion that can destroy half of a ship.

“Now boy, I’m showing you this once more because you seem to have little concentration!” Abba’s fist slammed down onto the wooden table, shaking the bombs that have yet to be set. Pogi Adba, the newest, smallest recruit, quickly brought his attention back from staring out at the sea, “Pay attention to this or one day you’ll lose that small head of yours!”

“Yes sir!” Pogi’s voice was small and I could see a faint indication of embarrassment on his cheeks. I shook my head slowly with a bit of shame hanging on my face. If he was embarrassed because he was staring out at sea he shouldn’t show an ounce of it on his face. But I can’t blame him; it goes against my own code of laws so I said nothing. Abba Dook continued his lesson.

“Cut a hole in the tocky, large enough to easily fit the bag of Fluxx, and clear out the red insides and black seeds,” he paused to feed himself the sweet, quick melting fruit, “set the bag inside and replace the hole with the cap, letting the string that has been holding the bag together stay out. Seal the cracks with the sticky, almost fully dried tocky. Later, when we attack, we pull the string letting the bag inside rip and throw it right away.” Abba motioned with his hands how he tosses tocky, underhanded. He looked at Pogi and noticed that Pogi’s eyes were starting to wander. “Then!” Pogi fixed his face to show he was paying

attention, “Then you nicely place the ready bombs into the barrels on the left. Once filled, the older, stronger, more experienced, more—”

“Dook.” My voice was edgy, warning him that with every compliment towards the other men, Pogi is getting hurt more and more. Abba shot a glare at me that could cut like a knife. I didn’t react because of the large, curly, blonde, sponge-like mass growing out of the top of his head cancelled the anger coming from his eyes.

As quick as the glare appeared, it was gone. He probably realized I was his higher up and could have him thrown overboard, if I so desired. I readjusted my long coat and stood up, causing the rest of the men in the compartment to stand. Good, even though we are pirates I have raised my crew to understand respect on my vessel. As I walked up the steps, my slightly slimy, webbed feet making almost no noise upon the wood, the men all slightly bowed their head in greeting. Some said, “Captain Gaz,” and I nodded my head as a ‘hello’. When it comes to a certain time of night I like to say as little as possible in tribute to the four gods.

I stayed on the deck for a time, looking out to the sea that is lit up by the largest of the eight moons. Abba’s heavy footsteps were heard before he even had the chance to speak.

“Talta,” he used my first name, showing that what he’ll say is something serious. I didn’t say to call me Captain Gaz; being childhood friends has its small benefits. I looked at him through my peripheral vision and he continued, “Talta, you need to be more serious and control your crew better. They only respect you because they respect me. They follow my examples and respect you because of my efforts.” I fully turned to Abba now, appalled that he would actually say that. “I know, I know, I’m only saying this now because this is the time you have given to the gods, so you don’t interrupt me like usual.” I twisted my mouth in disapproval and turned back to the sea to show that I’m listening.

“All the preparations are coming together nicely. Everyone isn’t nervous at all, they’re just glad that they will be doing something, rather than being at sea all day. The Kohatu won’t know what hit them when we--”

“Abba, I know what we’re doing and I know that you’re lying about the crew’s position in this. I’m even nervous about this. I mean, we’re

bringing the Fluxx to the people above land? That may have disastrous consequences with how they hate the Aqara, their neighbors under the sea that worships the Flux that comes from the inner workings of the world." I could see Abba's disappointment that my time of silence was over.

"But we aren't selling Flux, we're selling the drug Fluxx--"

"It's practically the same thing! The only difference is that the one we're selling can actually be touched!"

My friend gave me an expression shaming me for interrupting him again. I shot one right back to keep my place above him. Abba shrunk down and calmed my senses with his words, "I have met some Kohatu on a little island a day or so away from here that have become curious about Fluxx and the side effects of taking it. Because of how addicting it is, after one try they won't want anything else and our business will boom. We Wakari will start swimming in an ocean of sea glass, and all of them, red." Red sea glass; the rarest of money all around me is a good looking image in my mind.

"Fine then, just because you talked me into it," meaning that if something happens it will be his fault, "we'll sail to that little island you were talking about... what was it?"

"Rotugi island."

"Rotugi island," I repeated what he said, "Well, we'll go to this Rotugi island and do what we Fluxxers do best."

Abba and I smiled the greediest of smiles as we both imagined the great riches awaiting us.

AARON DIANDA

The Pirum fruit was discovered by the land people two thousand six hundred years after the tides rose which caused the cataclysmic “Big Split” event. The fruit was discovered by Marata in the remote reaches of the jungles that cover Kohatu, the land people’s islands. Pirum was found to be edible and abundant once harvested and cleaned but by accident the Kohatu ship designer and military leader Marata learned of the fruits’ explosive capabilities. Once while he was patrolling the shallow seas around Kohatu he was eating a Pirum fruit looking out over open waters when the ship jerked hard to port, the ship had hit a patch of tall coral and the Pirum was flung from Marata’s hands into the water where it landed over a Fluxx geothaumic vent. Once the Pirum had floated down far enough down to come into contact with the Fluxx flowing out the vent, Marata observed it sparking and crackling under the clear water then after several seconds it exploded, spraying water into Marata’s face. This startled and confused Marata and he repeated the incident, stopping his ship and requesting that the ship’s store of Pirum be brought to him. One after another the Pirum plunked into water then exploded violently, drenching everyone on the deck over time. Finally after the sixth fruit had exploded and satisfied Marata’s curiosity he used his telescope to observe what was under water and directly beneath him he discovered the geothaumic vent.

Once he was back on solid land, Marata purchased several bottles of Fluxx and began experimenting with the combination of Pirum and Fluxx. It took him a year but eventually he had discovered the perfect amount of Fluxx to put the Pirum fruit in, destroying four labs in the process.

As tensions with the Aqara rose Marata began contemplating how he could defend his ship from people that attacked from beneath the

water and he remembered that even when combined underwater the Pirum-Fluxx combination still detonated and he began testing out ways to create some sort of bomb using the two substances. He had to wait though as he was out at sea when he began contemplating the immense task of building a weapon out of a fruit and Fluxx that wouldn't kill the user the instant he armed it. By the time Marata got back to land and went back to his experiments with Pirum and Fluxx his head was full of ideas. Unfortunately, all of the possible solutions failed and one trial ended with him losing his left thumb when it got trapped inside a mechanism which soon detonated on his hand. Testing was delayed until he healed but once his hand's burns had healed he developed a grenade-depth charge combination that could be dumped overboard to damage and potentially destroy Aqara war ships. The design proved a success after a positive result when a Kohatu ship was attacked by an Aqara ship while on patrol around an island that housed citizens and a military outpost. The Pirum-Fluxx bombs destroyed the ship and the two Aqara tanks it had been escorting.

Since that day Pirum-Fluxx bombs have been distributed to all Kohatu war ships. Because of the thumb Marata lost designing the bomb he was no longer fit to serve on a ship but he was promoted due to the number of lives that the Pirum-Fluxx bombs would eventually save.

KAITLYN DUBEY

Found Object: Something on the Beach

It was dawn when she found it.

Wahiri had never seen anything like it before. It had no practical use on a boat, so she never would have had any reason to use one. Although, she supposed that the Kohatu might require one, as they lived on land instead of on ships, as Wahiri and her people did.

It was a basket of some sort, made out of wicker that had once been painted white. It had wheels and a handle, which led her to the conclusion that something was placed inside it that could then be pushed around wherever you needed to go. The question was *what*.

“Wahiri!”

It was her brother, Sonus. He was half way up the beach, helping load supplies into the smaller boats that would bring them back to their ship. They hadn’t gotten much this time; they’d only managed to get away with a few crates of canned goods, and one crate of linens.

Sonus walked over to where Wahiri stood in front of the strange basket, letting the waves crash over his webbed feet as he brushed sand from his hands. “We’re leaving. Come on, or I might threaten to leave you here,” he joked, bumping her with his shoulder.

“Sonus?” she said, ignoring the joke. “What is that?”

“What?” He followed her eyes to where the basket sat, half buried in the sand and one wheel sticking out at an angle. He frowned.

“I don’t know, actually,” he said. “But maybe Kaldar would know. Kaldar!”

The big man looked their way, and Sonus waved him over. “Come here for a moment. We want to ask you something.”

Kaldar stood straight and moved across the beach to them, his dark green eyes curious. “What do you need?”

“What’s that basket thing?” Sonus said, pointing at it. Kaldar stepped forward and righted it, balancing the basket on its wheels. He had to straighten the front one, as it sat a bit funny, but otherwise the basket looked perfectly fine.

“How should I know? We can bring it, if you want, but we really need to get out of here.”

Even with the rush of waves hitting the shore and the moamanu birds crying softly as they flew, Wahiri could still hear the shouts from just beyond the beach. They’d had to hold the foreman at knife-point while they moved the crates through the city and onto the beach, but Sonus had let him go on the way out. Wahiri knew of other pirates who chose to kill their victims, but Wahiri and her crew usually chose to leave them alive.

She carried the basket across the sand to the last flatboat that waited on shore, ready to take them out to their larger ship. It was a large clipper, somewhat ironically named the *Wind Song*, as it tended to creak and groan if you pushed it too hard and none of the crew had a particular affinity for the lyrical arts. The majority of Wahiri and Sonus’s family lived on the *Wind Song*, as did Kaldar’s.

They had just reached the edge of the ship when townsfolk came streaming over the sand dunes and onto the beach, as if they’d had any chance of catching the pirates who’d had almost an hour’s head start. Wahiri watched the beach as the flatboat was lifted up onto the main deck, laughing with Sonus when a few of the Kohatu tried to wade into the water toward the boat.

Wahiri’s grandmother liked to tell stories about how once, a very long time ago, the Kohatu had been friends with their people, the Wakari. Both Sonus and Wahiri had decided at a young age that it wasn’t very plausible, because why would they ever want to be allies with a people who thought of them as a nuisance and an aggravation? Not everyone agreed with them, though; Wahiri’s older sister thought it must have been true at some point, that all of the races had lived together in harmony. She argued that the Wakari could have never existed if the Kohatu hadn’t once lived together with the Aqara, the sea people. That was, after all, what a Wakari was—a blend of sea and land, a hybrid.

“Wahiri, Cari says she wants your help,” one of the men on deck said, once she had climbed out of the flatboat. Cari was her older sister, who had been placed on kitchen duty recently. She was married to Kaldar’s younger brother, and was pregnant with their first child.

Taking the basket, Wahiri headed below deck and toward the back of the boat. Cari stood near the stove, some sort of stew simmering as she stirred it absently and sang softly toward her stomach.

“Cari?” Wahiri asked, placing the wheeled basket near a table. “What did you need?”

Her sister turned, setting down the spoon she’d been stirring with. “Wahiri! Yes, breakfast is about ready and I need you to carry the pot above deck so that we can serve everybody. It’s gotten too heavy for me.”

Wahiri nodded and strode forward to grab the pot, when a thought occurred to her. “Cari, why don’t we put it in here?” She said, wheeling the basket forward. “You can roll it around on deck and dish it out, so that you don’t have to carry the weight. I bet you could even stack the bowls inside as well.”

Cari examined the basket, frowning. “Yes,” she said finally. “Yes, that would work. Good idea, sister.”

Wahiri grabbed the pot and Cari grabbed the basket, and they made their way back above deck to serve breakfast to the crew. This was usually everyone’s favorite part of the day; Cari was a great cook, and made enough that everyone could have second helpings if they wanted to.

They put the pot in the basket and wheeled it around deck, Wahiri pushing as Cari used a large spoon to dish portions into everyone’s bowls. It wasn’t until everyone was eating that Sonus made a comment.

“So you’ve found a purpose for our mystery object?” he asked, speaking around a mouthful of stew.

“Yeah,” Wahiri said. “I guess I have.”

SETH ETCHELLS

In front of her, on the edge of a sheer white cliff face teetered one of the most difficult to get to building in the western archipelago and, now that she thought about it, quite possibly in the entire ocean. At least, she conceded, in the top 20. The problem didn't arise from any kind of manufactured security, but more from its geography. The island had once been a plateau some 200ft above the equator but after the Split it rose only about 60ft from the ocean. This still meant that it was essentially a pillar of rock, and that, other than the heavily guarded bridge, left only one way in: climb. And Hailey Kaitern would, by the end of the night, have robbed it.

Her thoughts were cut off as she noticed Nui reach the zenith of its orbit, its dim light barely lighting the water as the hybrid began her task. She picked up a device similar in shape and design to a crossbow, but with a long coil of rope attached to one side. She raised the device, pointed it above the faint outline of a thick rakau tree and squeezed the trigger. The bolt glided soundlessly through the night sky before hitting its mark on the trunk. The hybrid watched as the rope trailed behind before it fell against the cliff face. She dropped the bow and began to row her slender craft towards the wall of rock. When she reached the rope she gave it a few tugs to check that it was secure before crouching down satisfied that she had what she needed she tied the rope round her waist, slipped a knife in her belt and began to climb. The hybrid people weren't usually known for their climbing prowess but her slender, long limbed body gave her the ideal build and this was matched with a combination of practice, stubbornness, and an unrivaled skill at getting wherever she wanted, which meant that she was almost without equal in her field.

As she ascended the side of the island her mind wandered to what she would be doing once she got up. A fairly reliable contractor had given the job to her, so the chance of a trap was lower than normal but she still was cautious. The request was to “procure” a key to an unspecified tomb. She could only assume that whatever was inside it was worth a considerable amount of money as her hiring fee was pricy, to say the least. The client had also provided the layout of the building, which again pointed to the conclusion that this was bigger than just lifting some trinket from some rich old Islander.

The young hybrid’s mind drifted as she reached the midpoint of the treacherous climb, but even as her thoughts were elsewhere she still heard the sound of something moving through the air in time to throw herself to the side and catch onto an outcropping in the rocks to her left. Glancing sideways at the place she had just been, she saw the deep rends in the loose rock of the cliff face where she had just been.

“Tuteimanu?” She muttered, before another quick glance upwards confirmed her suspicions as she saw the silhouette of the guardian birds above. This particular specimen was huge; at least twelve feet in diameter and judging by the marks to her left very sharp claws.

On land she would have been able to kill it without being injured, but it was too far to reach the top before it went for her again. With one hand still hanging off the ledge and her feet balancing precariously on the roots of a stubborn tree, she reached down to her belt and pulled out a Kris. The blade was short and richly decorated with an ornate handle. The execution of the task ahead of her would have been next to impossible for anyone else but for her it was only very difficult. She glanced upwards and saw the Guardian diving downwards towards her perch and with only a few feet between them she leapt upwards landing on the ledge she’d been hanging from, letting the great claws grab into the tree below. While the stubborn roots clung on she brought the Kris down onto the head of the bird, killing it instantly. Sighing, she kicked the bird’s head, letting it fall down to the sea below.

The night was starting to grow old when she finished the climb. She stood and dusted herself off before checking the surroundings; in front of her she saw the house of the Kohatu she was going to rob. In

between her and the balcony that would serve as her entrance point was a low wall covered by vines and other fauna. Crouching low the thief approached the wall and vaulted it before approaching the balcony. She jumped up, grabbed the bottom, and hauled her slender frame over the side before walking through the archway into the building's second floor. Inside was a single long chamber with several ornate glass cabinets along the decorated walls. The third cabinet on the left was the one she was looking for and inside was an absurd object. It was comprised of a long metal rod before it thinned out and curved at a right angle. From there it looped in an odd spiraling pattern round the end of the rod. Focusing back from the strange object in front of her she felt around the edge of the cabinet that it was stored in until, the hybrid heard the resounding click of a catch and she pulled the glass lid off and grabbed the key.

If, perhaps, she had been a smarter, more experienced thief that would have been the end of the matter, she would have abseiled down the side of the cliffs and sailed away. But Hailey was young and foolish and instead of taking the easy road when she saw the heavily carved chest at the end of chamber she ran up to it and gasped when she traced the outline of the two Mohateni. Anything marked with the two entwined dragons of the Tarakiwis would be worth more than the anything else she'd ever stolen before. The chest was sealed with a heavy lock, but enough time with her lockpicks and the lock sprung cleanly open.

Inside was an egg, about the length of her fore arm, roughly teardrop shaped and covered by speckles that contrasted the darker shade of the egg and it almost certainly contained a young dragon that was going to hatch in the next few weeks. Her mind was split on her course of action, with one half screaming to get as far away as possible from the egg and the other, the side that had led her to become one of the most accomplished thieves of the age, told her to take it. So she did.

Her skiff was far away when they discovered both the key and egg had vanished, with barely a mark on the land to show she'd ever been there.

MEREDITH JONES

Found Object: Like Mountains

White sky, white sand, reflecting off of each other. We have sand like the snow before/after these months of heat. Sand that burns into what you see, especially in closed eyes. The ocean is visible, inaudible. More white glints off its surface. More white where the waves crash. Small waves texture an otherwise smooth tidal pool. My otherwise smooth tidal pool. The sides of the ripples facing me reflect white. White. Fish scatter like broken glass (white) when I step in and the sand gives way under my feet and clouds the gray water, gray water glinting white, white like well-kept teeth. The odd nature of naked submergence could be described as white, if executed correctly, or as the odd nature of naked submergence. The sand underwater isn't white. My (dry) footprints are already filling with more sand, filling like bowls. (Squint) I sink deeper into the water, into the sand (if I'm to hide, I'm to hide in the water, in the sand). My nose is so near to the surface that I feel the water in the air I breathe. My clothes are piled where I was, piled like mountains, more white, whiter than the dry sand. Still, still, very, very, still, I sit and watch fishes (bits of live glass) move and weave through my legs, through my fingers, kiss my toes, oh, affection. Elbows crossed over genitals (vulnerable: not public) (do I do the same in public) I don't move don't do not and the water ripples around me but I do not ripple the water, water, gray, brown, murky, sand, brown, white, powdery after-feel (after-taste), like clay (red, green, white) and the fish scatter like broken glass when I run my fingers through the sand again (even the fish at my toes: oh, affection) thick sand and wet, wet for feet in the sand like my feet are in the sand and like there are live things (not fish things) with feet in the sand like mine. Across from me, transparent waves radiate from white

sand, hot white sand (squint) (hot white sun), steady, steady, waving up and evaporating in cooler, wetter air (if it can be called air, so much wet it's nearly steam, steam from the cooking ocean, ocean cooking only a few feet deep). Hair is heavy like wet fabric, hair is heavy, wet, unwoven fabric, hugs my shoulders, hugs my neck, *oh, affection*. I float. Can't feel my hair. Fishes swim through my hair, (squint) tug on it in gentle places, brush my ear, I stand up, disrupt the water, disrupt the quiet, disrupt the white, the sand and the fish, cascade back down and then back onto the dry sand (hot, white, burns my feet, burns my toes, oh, affection) and into the white clothes (piled like mountains) and hands into pockets *there is something foreign in my pocket foreign like the fish in the sand something foreign in my pocket something foreign like the sun at night*. Panic. Panic. Shouldn't be here. Shouldn't. The sun is unresponsive, still as white as it had been, as well as the sand, as well as the sea, as well as the pool. Extraction is slow, I am deliberate, I am wary, wary, wary, very, very, very aware. Open mouth, open eyes, (vulnerable: without protection), open hands, *glasses*, glasses, a pair of glasses in a deep pocket, a pair of glasses from the sea, a pair of glasses to help me see, oh, how the sea has helped me to see, oh, glasses to the eyes (vulnerable: without protection) to smooth the edges and the warm frames on warm temples, oh affection, oh how they will scatter like broken glass (broken glass fish: their ignorance will reflect the sunlight) when they see how I have been helped by sea, oh, fear, oh, vision, *oh, affection*.

KAS KRAMER

The raft bobbed over the water, and Kai paddled backwards to stop it. “There,” he said, pointing downwards. “It’s down there.”

“Ani peered down into the somewhat choppy waters. “You sure?”

“Yep.” Kai uncoiled a rope with a heavy brick tied to the end and tossed it overboard, waiting until it hit the seabed before looking up. “And it’s all ours.”

Ani fished around in the rucksack that lay next to her. “Alright,” she said. “Let’s go.”

“After you.”

She shrugged at him. “Alright.” She fastened a belt with a selection of strange tools across her chest, then hopped over the side of the boat and splashed down into the water.

Kai followed. The raft stayed where it was.

The water wasn’t dark at this depth. Light shimmered down onto the white sand below... and the twisted wooden wreckage of a ship, already covered in algae. But even now, the name on one splintered board could be seen in white paint: *Venture*.

There it is, Ani thought, taking a breath. She was perfectly capable of breathing underwater—so was Kai, like all hybrids. This is why they were treasure hunters.

She kicked downwards and dove into the ship. Inside, there were still a few twisted, rotting bodies from the ship’s final voyage. Tiny fish darted hungrily amongst them. Ani passed them by without a second glance.

What she wanted was the cargo. Evidently the Aqara hadn’t gotten to collecting their lost shipment yet—good for her, bad for them. There was a load of wooden and metal crates stacked in the rear of the ship. All were locked.

“Okay,” Ani muttered. “Let’s see here...”

The first lock was easy—Ani twiddled her pick and it clicked open. Within, there were some round yellow water-fruits, still whole and healthy in their hydrocradle. She picked one up and handed it to Kai, grinning.

The next few boxes contained more fruits, medical supplies, and in one there were small vials of something they couldn’t identify.

“What is that?” Kai asked, staring down at them.

Ani got an uncomfortable feeling. “I don’t know,” she answered, and started to put the lid back on.

But Kai snatched up one glowing bottle. “What’s the box say?” Reluctantly, Ani knelt and pulled a squat, soft-bristled brush from her tool belt.

“What’s that?”

“A brush, idiot.”

“No! I mean, where’d you get it?”

“I don’t know,” Ani snapped. “I found it. Okay?”

“Jeez, alright,” Kai muttered, retreating.

Ani cleared the sediment off the label and held her hand closer, letting her bioluminescence illuminate it. Unfortunately, it read nothing but a string of numbers. “It doesn’t say.”

“How about on the bottles?” Kai suggested. With a shrug, Ani picked up one of the tiny vials. The label was covered in dirt. She cleaned it off with the brush...

It read “Fluxx.”

Her heart rate skyrocketed. She dropped the bottle and backpedaled wildly. It bounced off the floor and floated, spinning. Kai stared at her, startled, then looked down at his own bottle. “Oh,” he said.

“Drop it!” Ani yelled. “Quickly!”

Kai frowned. “Why?”

“It’s *dangerous!*”

“Not unless you drink it!”

Ani didn’t agree. Fluxx was a terrible drug, pure magic that gave you beauty but took your mind. She didn’t want to be anywhere near it. “Put it back,” she urged. “We can take what we have and go.”

“No, wait,” Kai said. “We could make loads of money off this.”

"Kai, are you crazy?"

Kai grinned at her. "We could sell it to the Kohatu."

Shaking her head, Ani catapulted backwards towards the opening. "No. If you do that, I'm leaving."

"Come on!" Kai pleaded. "We could be rich forever. We could have our own *ship*!"

Ani wavered. To dump the Fluxx on the landfolk and take their money... it was tempting.

"I'll think about it," she said.

A week and a half later Ani and Kai stood on a wooden platform, surrounded by the Kohatu.

"Hunter," intoned one Kohatu before them. It was a tall man, taller than Kai even, with dark hair and stern dark eyes and skin the color of tarnished gold.

"Hello," Ani said nervously. She flicked her eyes down to the crate at her feet.

The man nodded. Ani knelt, slipped one bottle out and held it up. "This is Fluxx, magic energy. I believe you're in the market for it?"

The tall man's eyes fixed on the bottle. "Yes," he murmured. "Tell me, how did you come by this?" His voice was silk and shimmering light.

"Trade secrets," Kai chided. "We can't really reveal that."

The tall man nodded. "Of course," he replied smoothly. "I wouldn't expect it. I was simply... curious."

"To the point," Ani nearly snapped. "Do you want to buy this from us?"

Kai shot her a look. She wasn't good at bartering and she knew it.

"I... yes," the tall man answered. He shook his head and seemed to come back to himself, taking his eyes off the Fluxx. "We are prepared to offer any price."

Any price? Ani stepped back and let Kai take over negotiations.

It went well. Ani eventually turned over the Fluxx to the tall man in return for a bag of coins, and he waved a hand, letting two servants pick up the crate and take it away. He kept one bottle and slipped it into his sleeve.

"My lord," one of the tall man's advisors said quietly, as he watched them flee in their small wooden boat. "You'll let them leave?"

"Yes," the tall man answered. He folded his hands in his robe. "But they won't get far."

Sun glittered off the ocean swell. Overhead, birds were flying west, beating broad wings. They were so high up they were specks.

Ani counted out their money. They were richer than anyone they knew now!

"I told you," Kai crowed. "I told you they'd buy it from us!" See, now we don't have to worry about it, and we're rich!"

Despite her previous misgivings, Ani was pleased. Everything seemed to have worked out. "I... okay, you were right," she relented. "Your plan worked."

Above them, the birds circled lower. Ani took no notice.

Kai did. He glanced up at them, frowning. "Do those look normal to you?"

"They're birds, Kai. Cool it."

He kept staring as they descended. "No," he said suddenly, shifting to get a better look. "Those—Ani, those aren't birds!"

"What?!" Frightened, Ani directed her attention upwards.

They were, indeed, not birds. They were coming closer very quickly, and she could now see that the wings were skin-sails stretched between long thin bony fingers. She could see figures on them—tarakiwis, dragon-riders.

"Dive for it," Ani gasped, and made for the railing.

They never got to the water.

Before Ani even got close to the boat's edge, four sapphire-scaled dragons dropped out of the sky and whirled around the boat, then landed in the water. They splashed down and folded their wings, turning bright green and yellow eyes on the hybrids that cowered in the center of their boat.

"Sorry about this," shouted one golden-haired lady. "We're under orders."

Each of the riders raised a weathered crossbow and fired.

TARA GAMES

“I promise, it’s just a little fun; its Fluxx, Dakà, how bad could it be?”

I inclined my head, remembering the whispers in the hall, or the park, or theater. Whispers about people going crazy, “I don’t-I don’t know, Kazel, Isn’t it addictive or bad for you or—or...”

He rolled his eyes in exasperation at my usual cowardice. “You think too much, Day, just come and have some fun, you’ll look great afterwards too, I promise. No, it’s not addictive; you can stop whenever you want.” I considered it, the Fluxxies at school had always gotten a lot of attention and I had to admit, they were attractive. “Okay, Kazel. You win, but only. Once. Got it?”

He nodded vigorously and grabbed my hand, “Trust me?” He wore that mischievous grin that I had often seen, right before he pulled off one of his infamous pranks. I considered the grin and responded with a firm, “No”. He pulled me along anyway.

I’ve known Kazel since we were kids, I trust him, I really do, he’s my best friend but he’s also a bit of a rebel, daredevil, and a flirt all in one. When it comes to a drug that makes you more attractive? I didn’t trust his judgment.

I followed warily as he swam to the city gates. Just outside was a group of well-known and very attractive Fluxxies; Koba, Tanana, and Addena. Alongside the well-known Fluxxies, there were three faces I recognized from my class at school, although I didn’t know their names. Kavel grinned and introduced me, “Everyone, this, is Davina or Day for short, but I’m the only one allowed to call her that.” He nodded to me. To my amazement I found myself smiling and acknowledging each Fluxxie in turn. Tanana, an admittedly gorgeous woman looked us over appraisingly. Her eyes resting on me. “Now, newlings...” She trailed off

and picked up again after a moment's pause, "Follow us, I presume you know us we're..." She paused again; I didn't think she would forget her own name, but she was a Fluxxie. And if the rumors were true... *'NO, Day, don't think about that, you can trust Kavel. Maybe she's just... tired?'* But even my inner voice didn't sound convinced.

She opened her mouth again and I expected her to complete the thought. Instead the next words out of her mouth were, "Follow me, newlings," As she promptly turned, and swam straight into the city gates.

Koba eyed her seeming concerned, swam to her at a leisurely pace and whispered something in her ear. She nodded with disappointment in her eyes. Koba smiled at us, in a welcoming style. "Now, Newlings as Tanana likes to call you, we are leaving for the temple, follow us." There weren't any other options, I followed.

I was still wary and as much as I could do with the popularity boost, what if something terrible happened and I died? *'Dakà! WILL YOU STOP?! We aren't going to die.'* I nodded trying to agree with my inner voice. Kazel bobbed along beside me, "It really is cool, Day, but it doesn't work very fast, and they only allow you so many Fluxxes if you don't take initiation." He waved a hand in front of my face, "Day?"

"Hmm? I was just trying to imagine what initiation would be."

Kazel looked wary, "I kind of invited you to come see one... but really want you to try some too."

I stopped swimming, "Kazel, You're joining their—their cult?"

"Day, it's not a cult!"

"Yeah whatever, I just wish you would've let me know I was losing my best friend."

"Dakà, you won't lose me, I'll just be with them a little more, I'll still be the same Kazel you've grown up with."

I shook my head, "Did you *see* Tanana? She was wacky in the brain, forgetting names and running into gates that aren't even in the right direction. I'll come see your initiation, Kazel, but after that? You'll slowly lose your mind, and I'll lose you."

His head dropped. "This wasn't how I envisioned today going."

I laughed humorlessly. "Me either".

We continued on in silence, following Koba, Tanana and Addena. "Welcome, Friends, to our temple, "Addena gestured to the structure

of abalone and coral, “today we welcome our soon to be newest member, Kazel.”

Kazel stood and waved.

Addena reached behind her and grabbed a spoon, but it wasn’t. It was deep, like a bowl and silver with a straight handle. “Kazel, you will—

“Wait,” I found myself saying.

“Yes, uh, Dakà?” She sounded patronizing.

“I want in, to your group.”

Kazel’s eyes popped a few inches out of his head. “Darling, you have no idea what this entails.” I growled in the back of my throat, “I do this today or never.” Kazel shook his head at me, “Dakà, what the heck are you doing?” I looked him square in the eyes, “We’re friends, Kazel and friends go insane together.”

Addena frowned at our exchange, “Darling, are you quite sure?”

I nodded in a single staccato beat then stepped up beside Kazel. “Me first”.

“Afraid you’ll back out?” There was challenge in Gidevna’s voice.

“No,” I responded, lip curling. “Let him go first if you want.”

She held up the chalice. “With this The Silver Chalice of Fluxx, You, Kazel, will become a full-fledged brother of magic with us. By the power of Fluxx, you shall become his servant and prophet. Drink and Know.”

He gripped the handle and I cringed as he lifted it to his lips. For a second he was so bright I couldn’t look. But the glow mellowed out considerably, I chanced a glance. He wore a loopy grin and said, “Ready, Day?”

I steeled my nerves for whatever sensation the Fluxx would bring and cleared my throat, “Induct me.” My voice didn’t shake.

Addena stared into me, through my eyes, to my heart and soul. Suddenly I saw the allure of being one of these people, the position in society, the beauty, even if you lost yourself in the process. I hadn’t understood how someone could kill for power, that was exactly what they—we are doing. Killing for power but this time, the victim was ourselves. Was me.

She repeated the words from Kazel’s induction and handed me the chalice, “The final words ‘*Drink and Know*’ echoed deeply. So I did

just that. I drank deeply and as the light exploded for that second that seemed forever. I knew why someone would want to kill themselves to feel like this, to feel the control and beauty and—and-

“How do you feel, Day?” Kavel asked.

“Powerful.”

ZACHARY SADDOW

Thousands of years ago in the empire of Valtakunta there was a wizard whose name was Anu. He served the emperor Rex and his wife Regina primarily as the soothsayer for the royal family but was also a healer. The emperor sent word to the people in the empire saying on this day it was now and forevermore legal to hunt all animals for a price for each head. The price for each animal was \$25.00 to the government and \$1.00 per pound that the animal weighs. The new proclamation upset Anu because he used nature and the animals for his healing potions and this would mean that he would lose his ability to make the healing potions or try to appease the emperor and queen to take back the proclamation. When Anu got to the throne room and asked the emperor "My lord would you please reconsider your new law. I need the animals for my potions so I can heal you when you get sick." "You can use other things besides animals," the emperor said. "Sir, I will not just let you kill all of the animals," Anu said. "How dare you question my say," the king yelled, "I don't have to do anything that you tell me to do!" "But sir..." "Don't but sir me!" "I am sorry for angering you my lord but I have foreseen the future and your command will destroy your empire," Anu stated. "That's it!" the king bellowed. "Guards this man away. He is banished from my lands for treason for as long as this empire remains!"

After he was banished Anu started to collect the animals of the land in order to keep them safe from the hunters and the emperor's foot soldiers who joined the search for the animals by order of the emperor. The emperor now considers animals as fugitives and traitors. Anu in his search stumbled upon an old bottle in his masters old work room while looking for more animals. The bottle was his masters and he remembered that it was used to store the life forces. Anu thought to

himself, “if I am found then all of the animals will be slaughtered for the emperor’s sick obsession with them, believing that they are evil and a danger to the empire.”

Anu came up with an idea that he would capture all of the animal’s life force inside the bottle and send them to the center of the planet to keep them safe if he thinks that they are in trouble. When Anu was in town he started hearing things from the people around him that the emperor’s men knew where the animals were and they were going to kill them all. When Anu heard this he rushed back to his hideout where he got all of the animals together and started the spell. The spell took about three minutes to gather their life forces together and send them to the middle of the planet. When he had only 30 seconds left he finished the spell and the animals were safely at the center of the planet but he used more magic than he had anticipated because he had put a spell on the that if someone opened up the bottle then it would kill all of the animals on the planet and replace it with the old animals that were in the bottle. The extra use of magic was too much for him to handle and he soon passed away from exhaustion.

RHYAN PAUL

You rest your head in your hands, trying to calm your racing thoughts. Through your closed eyes, you can see the glow of your legs. You've noticed how much you've been glowing recently. You see the looks you get when you leave home. You hate your glow, even though this was your intention all along. You wanted to be more attractive.

This morning you woke up with that feeling again. Your entire body felt as if it was being weighed down, and your muscles urged you to swim deeper.

You succeed in pushing that feeling back for a minute before it returns. You can't take it anymore, you need more Luxx. You swim around, thinking of how you could get it so quickly. The temple is the next town over and there's no way you'll be able to keep your head clear for that long.

Life never used to be like this. You used to have friends and family you cared about and who cared about you. It wasn't until Gia convinced you to join the temple.

"C'mon, Kotu, it'll be fun!" Gia says. You cross your arms, annoyed with the conversation.

"How is it fun? You'll destroy yourself," you say. Gia's facial expression is unreadable.

"You know those are just rumors," Gia says laughing. You're shocked by her nonchalance.

"You and I know you don't believe that," a serious expression forms on your face. You aren't sure why Gia would bring this up so suddenly.

"Aren't you tired of your life wasting away?" she says, and before you can

interrupt, she continues. "We don't have very long before we're returned to the life force, and the way I see it is, why not get the upper hand on all the girls trying to find a mate?"

"I agree with you that it would be nice to have that advantage, but this isn't how we should do it." Your resistance is crumbling.

"What are you afraid of? Nothing bad will happen," she says, and her ease is alarming.

That day, Gia had convinced you to join the temple with her. *Nothing bad will happen.* That phrase seemed to repeat itself when the side effects set in, and now, Gia is in the deep with no semblance of herself left.

You continue to swim, trying to quell your need for Luxx. Your momentary guilt is gone, replaced by what you have been becoming for a while now.

A moment of clarity hits you and you remember—sponsors. Some of society's elites donate to the temple, and in return they get supplies of Luxx to keep them satisfied and coax their friends into supporting the cause. One of the temple's major supporters is your city's Rex, and he would definitely have some.

You know just how to get it, too. Since he's your city's leader, you can blackmail him in some way. That way, he would have to give you the Luxx to keep his image clear.

A little while later, you find yourself swimming up to the Rex's ornate front door. Not many people have doors; only the rich or powerful people to ensure their privacy. When you come to a stop in front of the door, you notice the antique door knocker. It is gold and speckled from rust. The design seemed to mimic the pattern of waves and a peep hole was in the center. You grasp the handle and knock three times.

At first there is no response, but then there is a shuffling from somewhere in the mansion. A minute later the front door is wrenched open, and you lose all your control. You hunch over and beg.

"Please, could you spare me some Luxx? Just a little," you plead. The look on the Rex's face tells you everything before he even speaks.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm sorry," he says

nervously, trying to sound sympathetic. Your whole body shakes in anger. You can feel your jaw shifting and your fingers elongating.

He tries to shut the door, but you lunge forward and claw at it. You hear a man's scream, but you don't care. You claw at anything in your way, searching for the Luxx. You can feel it. For once, instead of feeling weighed down, the Luxx is pulling you further into the mansion.

You rip a door off of its hinges, and the pull gets stronger. You've reached the room you've been looking for. As you start to consume the Luxx, you expect to become normal again, but it seems you can't get enough. It feels as if it will never be enough, because all you can think is *more*.

You empty the supply, and you're lost again. The pull is stronger, pulling you down again. You swim out of the mansion, an eerie quiet surrounding you. When you reach the front door, you glance at the body slumped against the wall, but don't pay much attention. You focus on the path that you're being pulled in.

When you make it far enough from civilization you swim down. You're going to the deep.

JACOB WALTER

The V'rokian captain Kel Tiora, stood on the bow of his ship deep in prayer, as he did every morning he could manage. The wind rustled through his long black hair. While some pirates were true believers, the captain's prayers to the god of light were motivated less by faith, and more by superstition. He prayed for his shots to fly straight, for his saber to meet its mark, and most importantly, for them to find some fat trader to play.

A cry from the crow's-nest broke Kel's concentration.

"A GALLEY! GALLEY HO!"

Perhaps my prayers have been granted after all, he thought with a sly smile. He pulled a telescope out of his pocket and focused on the ship. His first mate Pono ran up; a bearded man much older than the captain, he had been sailing the ship since it belonged to Kel's father. He turned to the captain, and asked "Is it worth taking sir?"

"A fat trader if I've ever seen one, and its red sails mark it from a rich costal town. So aye." He nodded, then turned to his crew and yelled

"WE'LL BE FEASTING TONIGHT BOYS!"

The crew cheered and leaned down into their oars, speeding them towards the ship. The captain called his three sworn swords to him: the first a huge beast of a man they called The Bove, Takata the colorful: a showy man who was a talented swordsman, and his first mate Pono. The captain was not one to send his men off to their deaths; he and his swords would be the first over the side.

The ship pulled up along the galley, and at the captain's command the crew threw their grappling hooks, anchoring the two ships together.

"CHARGE MEN! ROUND UP THE KOHATU SCUM" he roared, jumping across the makeshift rope bridge. The first Koha on

the ship came at him with an axe, but the cut was clumsy and put the man off balance. Kel side stepped, and then impaled him on his sword. *No fun killing stupid men*, he thought sulkily, but continued on. The tide of the battle soon threw three more men at him. The first he dispatched with a quick cut to the neck. The second had enough forethought to be wearing a helmet, but his rusted iron mace was useless once he found himself short two arms. The third was trouble. By the way he fought, Kel could tell he was a mercenary, and actually trained with his blade. The two traded cuts and parries back and forth, circling each other as the battle raged around them. But the captain got his chance when the mercenary broke concentration, startled by the sound of a bomb exploding on the deck. It was only for a millisecond, but it was enough. Kel knocked the sword from the mercenary's hand and shoved his saber into his stomach.

With a grunt, the mercenary slid off his sword, and the captain used his momentary reprieve to observe his surroundings. He was pleased to see that his men had made short work of the traders. Nearly all of the Koha had either been killed, or had yielded.

"The ship is ours," Pono reported.

After herding the prisoners into the hold of the ship, Kel walked into the small wooden captain's quarters. There he found his two other swords, surrounding the captain of the galley; a small man, as fat as his ship, and with cheeks as red as his sails. *Let's hope he's smart at least*, Kel thought, *the games more fun with a real opponent*.

The pirate gave a signal, and his men sheathed their swords. Takataran and fetched a table from the corner of the room and placed it down between the two captains. Then he gestured to a cabin boy who had appeared in the doorway, carrying a small brown wooden box.

"You bastard. Pirate. Halfbreed." The merchant spat, with true hatred in his eyes.

"And you're fat!" Kel chuckled "Believe me, I've been called much worse."

At this point, the cabin boy walked up, placed the box on the table, and opened it. Inside were a hexagonal checkerboard and a collection of oddly shaped pieces. They were ornately carved, with flat round bases and conic stems.

"Wai'king" Kel said, matter of fact.

“What kind of game are you playing halfbreed” The merchant’s eyes narrowed

“I just told you, Wai’king!” he laughed. “It’s simple. You win, me and my men leave you in peace.”

“And if I lose?” The merchant said, still seething

“Well if you lose,” The pirate gave a small smile, but his tone dropped and his stare turned to daggers. “We will kill you, take your goods, and burn your ship with your men still inside.”

The merchant’s eyes went wide, his mouth agape.

“So!” Kel said, almost excitedly, with a huge, evil smile. “Will you go first or should I?”

The game was simple. Both players took their queens, the pieces denoted with a large circle on their stem, resembling a crown, and placed them somewhere on the board. Their other pieces, each with their own abilities depending on their kind, were placed around her. If your queen was taken, you lose.

The two captains placed their pieces and then revealed their layouts to the other player, starting the game. The merchant had gone for a simple novice strategy, placing his queen in the back, with waves of his pieces surrounding it. *Disappointing*. A flurry of moves later, and the merchant’s pieces were cornered. His face had turned even redder, and his eyes resembled saucers. They swept back and forth, crazed, looking for an opening for escape for his pieces. A few rounds later, and it was finished.

As his queen tipped and fell to the floor, the merchant burst into tears, gasping out pleas in sobbed gasps.

“Well,” the pirate said with disdain, “I expected more of you.” He gave another signal to The Bove and walked out. He couldn’t stand it when they begged.

THE CRADLE

Two neighboring countries, Dustul and Subetsu, constantly at odds ideologically and otherwise, have seized all the available land on the one continent of their planet, Cradle. They soon turn to vying over island colonies. After a revolution overthrows Dustul's government, the new rulers declare war on Subetsu to legitimize their rule. And so begins the war to end all wars.

Literally.

After over a century of fighting, Dustul grows desperate. This war needs to end. And so they develop a weapon that ensures their enemy can never strike at them again. A gene-altering bioweapon that prohibits its victim and all their descendants from conceptualizing violence. The weapon works, and Subetsu is rendered defenseless and enslaved.

After fifty years of slavery, a renegade Dustuli group envisions a world where everyone—not just the Subets—is nonviolent. They release the weapon into the global water supply, and violence is no longer.

The world turns to other methods of power and control. Thievery, subterfuge, and narcotics abound. Without violence, the conflict rages on: with art, with religion, and with ideas.

MIA BALINGRUD

Found object: A model of a ship wheel

“Blissfully Violent”

“Are you sure you want to do this? It lasts for hours and there is no way out,” my friend said with two shot glasses full of a pulsing black liquid. The parasites attach to your brain and stimulate an emotion from a past user. This breed was a perfect starter. It was a crossbreed that detached and moved on within hours, while other breeds could last years. A lot of people dislike this breed of parasite because it cannot harness memory. My friend didn’t have enough money to buy a breed that advanced, so she got the scitty version. Still, I was excited.

She removed a box from her closet. It smelled of rotting meat and caramel. The source of the smell was a wheel. She removed it and spun it like a top.

“It helps make the emotions more potent,” she explained. The smell wafted throughout the room. It made me feel sick and confused.

“Ready?” she asked. I nodded. We toasted to Otu and emptied our glasses.

They scraped and clawed at my esophagus as they went down. It burned like fire and smelled of blood. None of that mattered though. I could feel them within seconds. They muted my nervous system. These emotions were all I could feel. I felt such overpowering anger and hatred. It was really painful, but it was way too late to turn back. I was too unhappy to think, to talk, or to feel. I could feel the wheel calling me, speaking to me. When I finally looked, I got a different reaction. This time the smell was intoxicating. It made me hungry. I

craved meat, something fresh. I felt aggression for no reason, and I rutting loved it. I badly wanted injure another human, an unheard of and terrifying notion. This is what real power must feel like.

The wheel reminded me that someone else was in the room. She was invading my rutting privacy. There she was, sitting on her ass like an idiot, laughing at a wall. It's obvious she has gone batscit crazy. I had to hurt her. **She didn't deserve happiness.**

I wanted to cry. I didn't want to feel these profoundly evil emotions, but they felt so good. I had to get a hold of myself. She was my friend. Why the hell would I want to cause her pain? **I hated her.** Her rutting laughter was so distracting. Her voice was so rough. I wanted, **I needed to rip that rutting piece of scit that she calls a vocal cord out and feed it to her.** "Damn it!" I screamed and threw my glass. It shattered everywhere. My friend diverted her attention from the wall and started laughing at me. **Who the RUT gave that bitch permission to laugh at me?**

I grabbed that scithead by her hair. I couldn't wait to kill this rutting whore. She cried out in pain, "Get OFF me, you freak!" I was wrong before. She was never my friend. I slammed her against the wall. Her ribs cracked loudly. I felt such relief. I did it again and again and again and again and again.

Her screams were much shriller than I expected. They were music to my rutting ears.

Eventually, I let go of her. She slid down the wall and left a trail of blood behind her. She wailed for a while. It seemed like she was trying to talk to me but was too shocked to speak. "Say it, bitch!" I yelled. She started sobbing.

"Wh-wh-why are you doing this?" she stammered, "Only ANIMALS inflict pain on others. Are you a rutting animal? You're an animal aren't you? Holy scit, what kind of animal are you?"

I was impressed that she attempted to stand up to me. She almost convinced me, but her portrayal had some fatal flaws.

She tried harder this time. "Even if you kill me, I'll just come back as something else. Monsters like YOU are going to GO TO SLEEP! Enjoy Hell! You lost your chance! You..."

"SHUT THE RUT UP! I'M NOT A RUTTING ANIMAL, BITCH!"

She began to hyperventilate. I got bored of all the crying and all the screaming. It wasn't even fun anymore. So, I kicked her in the face, which broke her jaw. That shut her up. Her screaming died down to whimpering. I beat her for almost an hour longer. Eventually her whimpering turned to nothing. The body was crumpled and misshapen. She was barely recognizable. I was calm after she died. The parasite was done with me.

I didn't dispose of the body. There was no need. We were Dustuli. We don't have a lot of empathy here. No funeral took place; no one mourned for her. She was just a lowly Frail, a rutting parasite addict. Honestly, the world is better without her.

No one has found her body yet. Sure, the neighbors have complained about a smell but that could be the wheel or the body. I haven't gone back into the house since then, because I can still feel the wheel. I know that wheel is still spinning, causing dementia and insanity for the people nearby, smelling disgustingly sweet, just spinning, spinning, spinning.

MARCUS BAMBERGER

Found Object: A 3-inch disk painted black. A raised design of flowers in gold is atop the disk.

“A World Gone Mad”

The great stone slab coughed a cloud of dust as the hammer missed the chisel and struck the stone.

“Rutting hell, Darrak!” Kallista swore. “How much did you drink last night?”

“To ash with you, Kallista.” Darrak’s immediate reply was as calm and measured as ever. “I know my limits, and unlike some, I don’t exceed them given the slightest excuse.”

“Both of you, settle down.” Carric’s reprimand was muttered, barely audible, but his team quieted at once. Neither of them wanted to risk one of his famous tirades. The guides that had brought their crew of six: Kallista, Darrak, Kat, Lilith, Lucan and Carric, to the crumbling remains of a Subetsu outpost whispered that he spent more time sharpening his tongue than his rapier.

“Darrak, don’t do that again.”

“Aye, sir.”

Darrak’s next strike with the hammer was true: The chisel bit through the last of the door’s hinges.

“That’s the hinges done, but we’ve still got to deal with the lock. The mechanism’s too far back to cut.”

Kallista brushed nonexistent dirt off her leggings as she stretched and strode to the door.

“No need. This door’s heavy, and nothing supported it but the hinges. All it needs is some encouragement.”

She jumped straight up, drawing her legs to her chest in the air. At the peak of her jump, almost at the top of the door, she uncoiled her legs and pushed off the top of the slab.

Carric saw her land in his peripheral vision, but his eyes were fixed on the stone door. Kallista’s kick had thrown all its weight on the locking mechanism, which shrieked in protest. Even as she tumbled to the ground, the lock snapped and the slab fell inward with an earsplitting crash.

By the time the dust settled, Carric’s team was ready. They strode over the fallen door carrying heavy shields in one hand and torches in the other. They’d all heard of the traps that slew the Thrawn expedition, three years previous, and taken appropriate precautions.

Carric entered first, with Kallista and Lilith on his heels. When their torches illuminated the room they had uncovered, he nearly dropped his shield as he took in their find.

The flickering torchlight revealed a room twenty paces across. The walls were festooned with paintings and carvings that the government of Subetsu had deemed too valuable to be lost to the war. Carric allowed a grin to spread across his face—“*Spend your smiles like they cost you a year of life*”, a memory whispered to him.

“My friends,” Carric began, stepping fully into the chamber and turning around.

“The rumors were true. Welcome to the Subetsu Vault.”

As the others moved past him to wonder at the treasures sealed inside, Carric stepped off the stone slab. Something crunched under his boot. Bending down, he found a number of pottery shards scattered around the slab. A moment of searching confirmed his fear, as he located a chunk of black-painted pottery large enough to discern golden flowers carved into one side.

“I still can’t believe you kept that.”

“Lighten up, Lucan. I can’t sell a broken piece of pottery, so why not keep it for myself? Lilith keeps something from all of our trips.

Besides, I think this is a Stell. I won't lose that."

"Why do you need a keepsake, Carric? This is the sixth successful treasure hunt we've been on. The only thing memorable about this one is that we missed the fiftieth anniversary of the peacemaking for it. For that matter, I can understand a keepsake, but you've been filing that down and polishing it. Isn't a smooth disc of pottery less memorable?"

"Well, yes, but I'll have you know I have very high aesthetic standards."

Kat joined the conversation with a snort. "So tell me, why do you need me to tell valuable Subetsu art from worthless Subetsu junk?"

"Well, you need to do something to feel useful--"

Kat upended her waterskin on his head.

Before long, the gates of Amesul, the capital, lay open before them.

"Right, I need to stretch my legs before I haggle with Robin. The rest of you, get this load shipped to our warehouse. I won't be long."

"Aye, Carric."

Within minutes of disembarking from the carriage, there was a prickling on the back of Carric's neck. Last time he felt that, someone had jammed a knife between his ribs. Without changing pace, Carric bent before a nearby fountain, scanning the area with the reflection in the fountain as he drank. The only thing out of the ordinary was a doctor tending to an injured man behind him, and she'd clearly been at work since before he'd arrived.

Carric's gaze darted around the square, making sure the guards were still in position. He didn't notice the problem until he saw the third guard. Carric's first thought was imposters, but he recognized the men. Fed up with wondering, he strode directly to the nearest guard to confront him.

"You! What are you doing out of uniform, guardsman?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Your sword! Where is it?"

"...My what, sir?"

There was nothing but polite incomprehension in the guard's eyes. Carric let out a low growl and tore his rapier out of its scabbard.

"One of these, you rutting imbecile!"

"Sir, why don't you sit down for a moment?"

Carric made a snap decision. He turned and bolted for his team's warehouse. Carric was almost out of the square when someone stepped into his path. He never slowed down, welcoming a confrontation in this mad world he'd dropped into. Carric recognized the doctor's robes too late, and the woman twisted out of his path and sank a syringe into his arm. Carric stumbled, tried to catch himself, and crashed down like a tree.

His senses returned by degrees. First, snatches of conversation:

"Universally violent and irrational..."

"Some kind of foreign pathogen..."

"All confined and improving..."

The smell of fresh linen returned next. Awareness of his body, and his dry, cracked tongue followed. Finally, Carric opened his eyes to a hospital bed. He stood easily, but before he could leave, a doctor entered the room, mask and gloves covering all exposed skin.

"Mister Carric! What are you doing out of bed?"

"I feel fine. I'm leaving to check on the rest of my team."

"Out of the question, I'm afraid. We believe you've all been exposed to a nasty disease. You all came back from your treasure hunt ranting nonsense and waving strange devices. For now, you need to rest. Although, do you remember what you found so important about this?"

The doctor presented Carric with a long length of steel with an adorned handle at one end. It tapered to a point at the other. Memories stirred, but crumbled like dreams as he tried to pursue them.

"I'm sorry, I've no idea."

"Well, don't worry about it. The rest of your team is coherent and you can visit them once we know you're not infectious. Everything's going to be all right."

AUDRIC DONALD

Once in the northern regions, there was a wizard. Now, this was no ordinary wizard: he was a Grand Wizard, the most powerful warlock in the world. But something was wrong, the country was on the brink of war and the warlock named Shirito was sick because the mystic was disturbed by the violence about to erupt between the two nations. However, there was a cure for him. It would take the power of the ancient relic oculus to save him from imminent death but there was still one problem: the oculus is the only known piece of mythology that can control and harness the power of the mystic but the relic hasn't been seen for a millennium. The only clue he had to its location was a map but the map was blank. The Wizard, only having days to live, asked his apprentice and only son to help him, for he was strong and had nearly completed his training. The apprentice, knowing that his master would not survive if he did nothing, gathered his alchemy kit, bottles of herbs from the storage room, and the most important part of his arsenal, his ring. His ring was special; it was the ring forged by the grandmaster himself so that if he died the legacy of the sorcerer of the north would continue. Among the apprentice was another map of the continent, the areas Dustul and Subetsu, to navigate cities filled with tension for the upcoming war.

On the way, he had to brave the frontier. The rugged terrain of mountains, forest and the most dangerous creatures of all: the looters. They were the stuff of legend; then again so was he. Although these were very real, and if he ran into a pack of them he would be in big trouble. But luckily there were none, but while going down a hillside he suddenly fell, he cursed as he went head over heels and broke his ankle. However, this had happened before; while he had been training with his beloved father and master he had to learn the tactics

to incapacitate a zagnabeast, their northern cousins. Of the dreaded maxnabeast, one of the most dangerous animals in the world, and not only did he have to incapacitate one, but a whole pack of them. His father dreaded teaching him this for he believed that violence was not the answer, but these animals were vicious killers that used instinct to hunt. With this he had to choose the least of two horrors, so he taught his son the protective charm that will incapacitate the animals, but didn't teach him how to attack them. He winced at the thought as when he first used the spell and he fell back and landed badly and broke his ankle. When he tried to heal himself a searing pain hit him as he doubled over in antagonizing pain and then he truly felt the tension of the land as he realized this would be the war to end all wars.

Author's Note: my object is something of an oddity. It is a box looking contraption with a handle on the top and this intrigued me rather than bewilder me. So, I decided to make an epic and this short story will most likely be the prologue to my larger story for next week. I hope you enjoyed the taste of what's coming into the light.

TAYLOR FELD

“Things You’d Never Understand”

Momma and I moved to the riverbank during springtime, when everything thrummed. Yeah, that’s how I’d explain it. Everything sort of swayed and sighed. Even the river. It laughed on its way, bumping and tumbling over rocks and critters alike. I spent those days barefoot, building up a collection of callouses on my feet from scrambling over rocks and bristly weeds. Spring marked my hands, too. They stayed sore all season long from the splinters I got while tacking together a little skipper for myself. Nothing fancy, just a jolly little boat with a job to do.

Most mornings I spent fishing for glimmering eels in the shallows of my river, sleeves and pants rolled up and nothing but my quick eyes and quicker fingers to get the job done. I got so good at it, Momma used to joke about how every day I was thinking more like an eel and less like a little girl. And then I’d say, ‘well I’m not a little girl anymore, and I’m certainly no lady, so I guess I must be an eel!’ And we’d laugh. I suppose she was right, in a way. I always thought glimmering eels were really fine creatures. Their eyes are all intelligent and polite, and the way they twist through the water has to be some kinda poetry. Momma would call that sorta idea my ‘fool talk’ and shake her head, smiling. That probably sounds mean-spirited to you, but you’ve never met my Momma. When she said that, it was like ‘fool’ meant ‘wonderful.’ My wonderful ideas.

Anyway, fishing. Red chortlefish were always trickier than those polite eels. To get them I would run loose-limbed and grinning to a secret glade, speckled with dots of light and very, very still. The trees

all around stood leaning over the glade and watched. Not a suspicious sort of watch, but like a grandma watches her grandchildren playing. I only met my grandma once, and I don't remember it too well, but she was a lot like one of those trees. Warm.

At the back of the glade, my river had reached one of her arms out and made a little lagoon. There I pulled off my clothes mid-stride and dove in with a holler only the birds and tadpoles could hear. Oh, the water was beautiful. It shimmered with dappled light from the surface and with light from the rippling scales of dozens and dozens of chortlefish. As soon as I hit the water, they burst from their hiding places and danced and swirled all around me and I heard their muffled, nervous giggling even in the water. Their chortling made all these teeny tiny bubbles that tickled something fierce. I could never laugh, though, because that would lose me some air and it always took quite a bit of time underwater with my cheeks all puffed-out before I managed to snatch one of them. Once I had one I kicked back up to the glade and wrapped the poor panicked thing in my shirt. Then I dove back down to get another, and I kept doing this 'til I had enough to fill the shirt. Then I got dressed save the shirt and ran back home, dripping and whistling and carrying a shirtful of dinner.

Well actually, not all of the eels and the fish were for dinner. I also used to catch mussels and crawcrabs and really whatever seemed good to eat, and then I'd bundle up some for Momma and me and take the rest to my little skipper. I named her Springtime, and like I said before she's a jolly little boat. A fine boat. After a morning of fishing I'd spend the greater part of the rest of the day with Springtime going downstream to see what we could see. When I made her, I also whittled this smooth, long pole that I'd use to push us around rocks or just wherever we needed to go. Springtime is a fine boat, but sometimes she needs a little help. Anyway, we went like that down the river, and we stopped whenever we found folk willing to buy an eel or a fish or something. I met some really nice folks like that, really decent folks. I remember this one man who said I had 'excellent craftsmanship.' He meant Springtime. I still feel really good about that. Anyway, I said 'thank you very much, mister' and gave him an extra bag of mussels 'cause I heard kids laughing in his house.

Don't be pushy, mister, I'm getting to the part you wanted to know about. First you gotta understand, though: the thing that meant the most to Momma, aside from me of course, was her collection. Back when she could walk we'd spend our days exploring, and Momma always watched for her 'little worlds.' That's what she called them. I don't know if I can explain it right, but one time when we were walking through the woods she stopped and picked up this thing. I thought it was a crinkly insect. But she said it was a shell, sort of like clothes that the insect didn't need anymore, and she held it like it was precious. She said it was a little glimpse into the insect's life. A 'little world.' Momma collected them because they let her see things she couldn't ever see normally. That's the best way to explain it.

So once she had to stay home, I started doing the collecting for her. Little thistles, butterfly wings, tiny pieces of honeycomb. Momma stayed home and made these perfect frames out of driftwood from my river, and when I brought a little world back she'd put it in one of her frames and hang it up. Our walls let us see amazing things, things you'd never understand.

Don't be mean-spirited. I'm having trouble getting there, okay? Finding the words. I just want you to understand what it was like for us, for a while, during that spring. You know, thrumming. Happy, I guess.

Yeah, fine. Fine.

One day I found something different. I thought it was just a poor little dead critter, another little world. It looked like a tiny eel, so tiny, so so tiny. And fragile. I brought it back home and gave it to Momma before heading back out to visit my glade. I didn't know.

It was alive, I suppose. When I got back it was hanging on Momma's finger like some kinda ring and Momma didn't. Well, she didn't move, is the thing. I guess she was already weak and the little eel just... She had this smile. This smile, but it wasn't right. I knew right away that... I can't explain it, I don't know. I—What?

Where did I find what? I don't know, I don't know where I found it, I was just exploring. Look, mister, I don't understand why you're even asking me about my Momma and the house on the river and Springtime and everything when you don't even want to hear about those things, you just wanna hear about the little eel thing, the thing

that put that smile on Momma's face, I don't understand.
I don't understand.

—From an interview with a subject who elected to remain anonymous,
age 67, conducted 54 years after her believed discovery of the first
known species of deadly narcotic parasite

AMY GARDINER-PARKS

Alexander woke with a start from the same nightmare that had been plaguing him for three months. His back was stiff from sleeping on the couch and he was shivering despite the sweat soaking his body. He rolled out of bed, clumsy from sleep, and staggered over to the small bathroom. The young man splashed freezing water across his face in an attempt to rid his mind of that cursed dream. He quickly swiped his hand over his face clearing his pale grey eyes of the salty tears that threatened to fall.

For three months the nightmares had been poisoning his dreams, making sleep something he dreaded rather than welcomed. So much so that he avoided it all together. For two weeks he had gone without sleep, for two weeks he fought the drowsiness. But last night he cracked. Sitting on that couch he hadn't had the strength to keep his eyes open, he wasn't able to fight the dark embrace of sleep. Before he knew it he was back where it all started, tied to a chair, his sister's agonized screams ringing in his ears. His little sister Ulia was being murdered right before his eyes and there was nothing he could do about it. He re-lived that moment every night.

Alexander ran his callused hands through scraggly, fire colored hair as he tried to push the memories out of his head. It had only been three months since he started living alone and yet it felt much longer. He could barely remember the feeling of sharing space with another person. The empty space he lived in felt normal, as if it had never been different. Alexander hardly noticed the silence anymore; in fact he hardly noticed anything now. Even the feeling of pain had dulled. Even so the memories of Ulia's tear streaked face were fresh in his mind as if it were just yesterday that the one thing that mattered to him was stripped away forever.

While he was leaning over the sink, head in hands, something smooth and round slipped out from underneath Alexander's shirt. He looked down and found himself staring at a necklace, Ulia's necklace. Alexander's eyes trace the light grooves in the wooden surface of the pendent. The thin winding lines formed what resembled the shape of a sunflower. Ulia wore that necklace every day, it was a gift from their mother. A small smile flickered across Alexander's face as he recalled simpler times. He remembered watching Ulia running around their old house smiling like there was no tomorrow. And their parents were holding each other as they laughed at the small girls antics. But everything changed when those rutting idiots declared war on the neighboring country.

The Subetsu army came in the dead of night. They burned down every single house in Alexander's small town. After he made sure Ulia was safe Alex ran back in their house in an attempt to free his parents, who had been trapped behind a wall of fire before they could escape. He barely escaped with his own life.

"Those damned fools!" Alexander shouted into the air, his pent up anger making a break for it.

In a fit of rage Alexander smashed his fist into the shining surface of the mirror. For just a moment he saw himself, and was shocked by the stranger he found staring back at him. He had the same eyes but they were bloodshot and cupped by the dark circles of sleeplessness. Then his shattered reflection crumbled into a myriad of glittering pieces. Blood dripped from his knuckles where the shards had cut his pale skin, trickling around the shadows of bone that should not be visible. But that didn't bother him for much deeper cuts crisscrossed Alexander's arms, the scars laced his body like white snakes. The pain he caused himself could never match that which resided in his heart. The void his family left was impossible to fill.

Alexander ripped the necklace from his body and glared at it before yelling "Fifteen! She was rutting fifteen!"

He remembered how the pendent had been torn from his sisters frail neck as they dragged away her broken body. Alexander had tried so hard to hold onto her but the piece of scit necklace had snapped

away on his hand. Then he had watched as the only thing that still mattered was taken away forever. All he had left was the wooden circle in his hand and a few shattered memories.

Alexander pulled back his once muscled arm and flung it against the ruins of what used to be the mirror. The pendent cracked as Alex let out a scream that ripped through the air like the cry of a wounded animal. Why did the Subets pick him to be interrogated? They just kept asking questions he didn't understand. So he sat there, forced to watch as his sister, the only family he had left, was tortured. But he had no answers to stop the torment.

"It's all my fault. It's all my fault that she's gone!" he howled "Why didn't they kill me? It should have been me!"

He wanted it to end. There was nothing left to live for. All he wanted was to forget her blood stained body, broken and empty. To escape those memories forever. He had tried to keep living for her, but Alexander could no longer control the rage that was bubbling inside of him. Without thinking he snatched up a jagged fragment of glass, and with one swift movement thrust it deep into his abdomen. Glorious pain ripped through his body like fire, filling his every muscle with agony. Black spots began to creep their way into the corners of his vision. He could see Ulia smiling at him, a smile that took away his pain. He reached for his sister's hand as the bird in his chest failed. Ulia's brown eyes sparkled as if in welcome. Alexander took in one last shuddering breath, and darkness consumed him.

RILEE HOROWITZ

Year 180 B.A. Day 68

my name is cid. I am twelve and my mother gave me this notebook earlier today, and i was so happy. it is the first thing she has ever let me keep. i live in a small house with my mother. she makes me do lots of exercise and teaches me how to fight. i even have my own sword, which seems really cool. The only thing i do not like about it is using it against mother. but she has a sword too, and it is only to make me better. i am a boy named cid. cid. cid. cid.

cid

cid

cid

i will write later notebook. mother is yelling for me. she doesn't know that i've taken a break from my sword to use you. goodbye.

Year 179 B.A. Day 340

I can't take any more of this. She won't let up. My muscles hurt and my heart is throbbing. And she starts all over again before I can recover. She keeps hitting me with the flat edge of the sword, so that bruises appear to remind me of my missed parry or failed dodge. Sometimes I wish that she would just use the sharp edge and finish it. The fatigue is getting to me.

Year 178 B.A. Day 246

Mother has given me armor. It's lighter than most armors, but it is still heavy and uncomfortable. I have to keep it in my room with me when I don't wear it, but it is just a reminder of work when I have the opportunity to rest. So I keep it stored in my dresser where I do not have to look at it. It has its own drawer that I dread to open.

The rest of the dresser's contents aren't so bad, though. I have my regular clothes in the bottom two drawers. The third drawer is where I keep you, notebook, along with all the other books I love reading.

Mother began collecting books for me to read just a little bit ago, and I devoured them all. I have read every book in that drawer at least four or five times each. And there really is not anything else besides training and sleep to do, so why would I not?

I used to think that Mother had given me these books because she loved me, but now I am not so sure. It could be that she just wants something to shut me up.

And what is the point of all this sword play and physical training? Mother will not say, no matter how many times I ask her. The only thing she will say is that she will 'tell me when I am ready'. I think if that is the case, then I have been ready for a very long time. This is my life. I deserve to know why.

Cid

Year 177 B.A. Day 298

After training today, mother handed me a small picture frame. Behind the glass was a drawing of a young man. Bright blue eyes and short blonde hair were his most prominent features. And he looked very familiar. It was a drawing of myself.

The frame rests on my dresser now. Mother told me to look closely and think hard about what I saw in the frame. Think about what it

meant and how it affected me and my individuality. She was talking about her religion again. My mother is extremely perpetual.

But what she said did hold some meaning. I look at the picture now, and I see me. But also, I don't. It isn't me in the drawing, although it sure does look the same. But the expression on the face looks as if it is ready to kill. There is a coldness behind those blue eyes that I am not familiar with.

I'm getting sick of thinking about the frame. I don't want to have to deal with my mother's batscit crazy religion. I don't understand her, and the only love she's ever shown me is, well, you notebook. She gave me you and you are all I have.

I need to sleep. My muscles are still sore.

Cid

Year 176 B.A. Day 87

Mother won't give me answers. I've been more persistent in questioning her command and attempting to get answers out of her. But I've gotten nowhere. No matter how much I ask she will not tell me what my training is about. She advises that I look into my frame.

She's calling for me now. I have just woken up, yet my training starts immediately. I'm ignoring her. She won't answer my questions. Simple as that. But mother is pounding on the door now. I'll have to put you away now. I'm going to confront her, and I will get my answers. Goodbye for now, notebook. Wish me luck.

Cid

Year 176 B.A. Day 174

I know now. I know why this is my life. Why I've trained so hard. Why my mother does not truly love me. And it is so unfair, notebook. My extremist Perpetual mother is to blame. All of this is part of her rutting insane cult!

Let me explain this to you, notebook, and you will agree with me.

First I need to explain the picture frame. The boy is not me. It is my brother. Yes, my twin brother. As my mother says, my copy.

According to my mother and the Perpetuals, I am not a twin, with a brother similar to myself. I am a copy. Not human. Illegitimate. The way I must prove that I am real and worth the time of day is to be the only one left. I have to be the sole son of my mother and father. I must kill my brother.

And I don't know what I'm going to do. I imagine that my brother is training just as hard or harder. I am scared of losing. But I'm also scared of winning. I need to think about what I need to do. I will inform you of my decision though, notebook. I owe you that much. But for now, I need to get rid of this picture frame.

Cid?

Year 175 B.A. Day 209

It's time. Mother says my training is complete. I've learned all that I can. I'm ready. I'm going to defeat my brother. I can't run from this. It'll haunt me for the rest of my life if I don't go through with it. My mother won't love me.

I've been told that tomorrow my mother and I will meet in a secret location with my brother. And my father. Yes, my father. He exists. And he is my brother's mentor, as my mother has been mine.

I don't know if I'm ready for this, but I must try. My mother believes in me, and although she has tortured me all these years, I love her, and I mustn't let her down. I'll prove to her that I'm worth loving. I'll win.

Notebook, you've been so important to me, and this might be it. I want to thank you for everything. For listening to my troubles and helping me cope. I may not survive to see the day after tomorrow. I know this. I want you, notebook, to be with me. To give me strength.

I'll just slip you into my chestplate, so that y-----e. Hopefully you'll giv-----

at I need. But enough about this mor-----%*\$#-----
 ight. -----%_(#5-----@%#^-----
 -----9#&(@*\$#)-----

(The rest of the page is illegible, as it is covered in blood.)

JAKE KEIM

“The Narcotics Runner”

The sound of heavy footsteps reverberate off of the walls of the alley as I sprint down the narrow corridors in what felt like a hopeless attempt to escape. The moon brightly shines over the alley and on any other night I would've stopped to look at it along with the stars, but all I can think tonight is *rut me*. I was supposed to make a simple delivery, not sabotage competition, not steal from a client overdue on their payment, not set up shop, but make an easy run and make a decent profit from it. The easiest job there is, and my cover was blown.

I exit the alley and come out into the town square, the heart of the city. Sweat streams from my face in long streams and the humidity was not helping. I turn left and run towards the market. I'm out of breath, my heart is pounding against my chest and my lungs can't seem to draw enough air. My pursuers are out of the alley and spot me running. I have a good lead on them now, but they are persistent. The market is only a few feet ahead when a surprisingly loud crack rings throughout the streets. An incredibly fast object flies by my ear and imbeds itself in the wooden stands of the market, splintering the wood. At the time all I could think of was either, *lose these bastards, and hide you moron* and *holy scit, holy scit, they almost took my head off*, although I did wonder later on where in Otu's name did these grunts get fire arms.

Among the tall, empty merchant stands of the market I could lose them. I was in the second largest port city of on the mainland, even if they searched every corner of the market it'd take twenty men several hours to finish. I highly doubt there are twenty men behind

me, and if I do this properly, I'll slip away without anyone realizing it. Among the stands I weave in and out, around and through, the various stands. I can hear them shouting, getting further and further as I deftly move throughout the market. They expect me to wait and hide. They couldn't be more wrong. I'm already exiting the market and their search has only begun. I don't slow down till I can no longer hear their chaotic shouts.

All I have to do is avoid the numerous patrols throughout the city till I reach the ship. Should be easy enough, the patrols aren't necessarily the most silent of people. I finally reach the Magnus Kawa Bridge, the midway point between the city center and the port where I can escape from. I begin to cross the bridge. Over the edge is a twelve foot drop into the flowing river below. Lost in thought, I don't notice the approaching patrol from the other side of the bridge.

"Halt!"

Startled by the sudden command, I abruptly turn towards the guards and grab the bag slung over my shoulder. I had actually forgotten about my bag with the chase and my cautious return to the ship. Judging by the weight, the package I was supposed to deliver is still in it. The guards surround me. They back me into the bridge railing, the sound of their hard leather boots against the ground and the clanking of their armor is drowned out by the river below.

The commanding officer directs orders at me, "you are breaking curfew and are carrying an object of possible suspicion! Hand over your bag and submit before we resort to force!"

Rutting scit! I got careless!

If they take me in they'll surely execute me for the package, yet if I refuse they'll just kill me here. The guards apparently thought I was taking too long and approached even closer, his weapon ready to strike me down.

"By refusing to submit to authority in times of peril you are now seen as an enemy," the commander declared.

His soldiers readied their weapons and advanced.

"Rut," was all I managed to say.

I throw myself over the bridge. I thought there would at least be a chance of survival if I jumped. I plummet towards the roaring water

and vanished into a cold void that swept me away like a leaf in a storm. I'm powerless against the current. I flail helplessly trying to gain control in the river, but I might as well be falling continuously from the bridge. My lungs burn and ache, ready to give out. I struggle to keep my mouth closed. I cannot continue and my mouth disobeys me, allowing the cold water to flow through my mouth and fill my lungs. They feel like lead with the water in them, pulling me to the depths of the river. The cold stings my insides causing me to cringe and convulse. In an absolute panic, I frantically fight the water to bring myself to the surface.

I break the surface and desperately gasp for air, coughing up water while trying to stay afloat. In the distance the bridge appears small and insignificant. I drift closer to the wall of the canal, still coughing and struggling to breathe. A sewage drain in the wall gives me a place to grab on to. With a final burst of adrenaline, I'm able to pull myself into the tunnel and collapse. My lungs finally recover, but the fear of drowning has left my body in shock. Despite the muck of the tunnel I lay down, exhausted and sleepy. I pass out.

I awaken to a dark chamber with a single, pathetic fire in the center. I try to move but I am hog tied. I struggle against my bonds futilely.

"Can this rutting job get any scittier," is all I can say.

In the shadows there is a high pitched cackling, "heheheheheheh, I may be weak, but I can imprison any fly that wanders into my web!"

A lanky creature crawls into the light of the fire. Its skin is pulled tight over its body, with no trace of fat or muscle; it is almost like it is only skin and bone. It wears loose rags that could've been somewhat decent clothes once. It comes closer till it is mere inches from my face. I can now see that its skin is covered in tiny punctures and bite marks that can only come from parasites. Its breath smells like years of rotten flesh and fecal remains, while its teeth aren't any better. It has no hair except for a few strands left on its head. The strands that remain are long and I have no idea how they are staying in. I can now tell it was a Frail, a person who suffered from years of abusing narcotic parasites.

"Get your boney corpse out of my face," is the only response I can muster.

"Now now, is that any way to speak to one of the prettiest girls in

this city? Well, the former prettiest girl in the city, heheheheh! I've seen the stache you've been carrying, and let me say that you've got yourself perhaps the highest quality I've seen." The Frail holds up a device that I only knew too well. A small device used to inspect narcotic parasites, the coveted object of my profession. It has a small base with a bar parallel to it. One of the bar's ends has a magnifying glass to observe whatever parasite was placed in the clamps on the bar's other end. In this particular device one of the parasites I was supposed to deliver was in one of clamps. "I've never seen such healthy, potent specimens," she says. She removed the narcotic and placed it on her bicep.

"Please excuse our friend if she startled you," comes a voice from the shadows.

Two men step into the light, but they aren't like the Frail, they were healthy. I couldn't see much, but from what I could see they are actually kind of handsome.

The other man spoke, "we have a business proposition for you. Work for us and give us access to your merchandise or, well, let's just say that our friend is getting hungry."

It didn't take me long to make my decision, but really, what else could I say besides, "I'm at your service."

CHRIS KUNIN

“A Documentation of a Windup Oddity”

Day one

500 years after awakening

To my scientific colleges, fans, and admirers, I, Professor Francis Herman Malto, have made a massive and revolutionary discovery. Whilst searching for relics of the old world amongst the ruins located on the border of the two nations of Subetsu and Dustul, I discovered a strange wind up oddity. The small machine appears to be powered by a crank on the side, which builds up tension in the inner mechanisms of the machine. The tension is then released by pulling the small trigger at the bottom of the device. The device then releases a tremendous sound and sends a pellet of hardened metal out of the chamber and whizzing threw the air at a great speed. This device seems to serve little purpose but perhaps it had some sort of function in the ancient cultures, I will publish further discoveries as they reveal themselves. As always, keeping you updated, Professor Francis Malto

- the scientific recordings of Professor Francis Malto

Day one,

14 days into war

The difficulty that comes with a wind up pistol is that you must wind it for several minutes if you are to fire. The obvious decision would be to pre-wind the pistol; however, this can lead to the increased chance of an accidental discharge of the weapon while contained in a

coat or pants pocket. As this can lead to some rather compromising circumstances, it is generally considered unwise to pre-wind. It is because of the inefficiency of the weapon that it was eventually discontinued and replaced for the much larger and far more functional and reliable musket. Still at the time of its invention it was a marvel of modern industry. Many bright eyed fools were tricked into buying this strange little oddity of a weapon. My grandfather, one such fool, bought the gun under the guise that it would protect his farm from thieves. After his passing he left the inefficient weapon to my father who used it to the purpose of defending himself during the people's revolt. He placed the small device into my hands the day I marched off alongside my patchwork comrades off to the Subet border to fight a war none of us knew all too much about. As we settle into these trenches I hope that I will be able to break this tradition and bury this ineffective instrument of death and pray that my own son will never require its use.

Sincerely, Isaac Petros

-The personal journal of Isaac Petros

Day seven

500 years after awakening

I think I have discovered it; the device is used for splitting rocks. Primitive cultures would use the device to launch projectiles in order to break down small rocks and even smaller more useable rocks that they could use to build small rock structures wait no, that doesn't work... hang on a second, older archeological artifacts show that they had several chisels and other far more effective rock splitting instruments, so why would they develop an inaccurate pellet launcher to do it also how does a civilization that needs to develop a device to split stones have the ability to make said device out of much stronger metals. I shall have to re-evaluate my notes and determine a new conclusion. Until then I will keep you posted, Professor Francis Malto, signing off.

-The scientific recordings of Professor Francis Malto

Day 60

74 days into war

This trench will be my grave; I have determined this to be so. They have dug us a hole in the ground and have told us to sit there and shoot across the way until we ourselves fall. I pray that no man shall ever again have to see what I have seen here in this trench. When I was a child I would watch the anthills on our farms, as ants from both sides would run forward and killed each other all for what seemed like purpose but I wonder what purpose there is in the life of an ant. Here in the trench we, the men, are starving; we have little food handed out in small rations by the officers. By contrast we have an abundance of ammunition open for everyone, but while we have a surfeit of musket balls a man cannot eat them; although several of my comrades have attempted it. The rest of us try our best to find our own little bits of purpose, at least with the small time we have until our end. Some men choose gin, some play cards. I am determined to write down what I can in this journal in the impossible hope that someday someone may find it and my memory will not be swallowed by this war.

Day 15

500 years after the awakening

I have come to the conclusion that this strange device is no more than a novelty to a primitive people. *What enjoyment could primitive culture find from launching pellets out of a small strange device?* I have no idea maybe it was a children's toy. I also discovered a small journal buried in the dirt nearby where I found the wind up device, however the paper in it had been rendered unreadable. I will attempt to decode it but for now all I can assume is that the traditions of this culture are far beyond anything we can comprehend.

-The scientific recordings of Professor Francis Malto

Day 90

104 days into the war

I am to die tomorrow; the officers have told us that we will attempt

to storm the trenches across the field. I have never seen any of my comrades survive these runs; even if I am to make it across I will surely not be able to clear the opposing trench of the enemy. In my last hours I have chosen to imagine a world far away from here. I hope for a world where man shall not need to strike man, where brother need not kill brother. This world, my far away world, where all people are as equal and at peace: I should like my last thoughts to be of it. I have buried the wind up pistol as a last little bit of symbolism. Of all the little legacy I will leave I hope it shall not be something I will be remembered by.

MADDY LEE

“Only Thorns Can Cut Pills”

The air filled with a noxious smell, and a leech furiously dragged itself across the floorboards, leaving behind a trail of fluid. Mif swallowed the saliva that built at the sight of the broken pill casing—the bug’s original home. He fell back against his armchair, head burrowing between hands. He could feel his body begging him just to take the parasite raw, if only for a momentary fix. His head lolled to the side, neck too weak to even support it. He scowled; this was what the creatures did to him. Frail. He was now a frail, an abuser of drug parasites, pale and weak with the immune system of a radiation victim. His eyes locked on the antique sitting beside him, single handedly the prettiest thing in the household. Not that the competition was particularly fierce. Forever he had had this—this intricate pale pink rose sculpture, trimmed in gold and supported on its own golden leaves. Truly, it was a lovely piece and its history made it even more alluring.

Its present, he shamefully admitted, was a sad and sorry one. Where the petals folded up to show a secret compartment, one would find the damned pills. Within these pills lay a variation of monstrosities. Maggots, wasps, leeches, mosquitoes, bacteria, and other parasitic creatures were doused in their own chemical excretions. To Mif these chemicals, though never directly tasted, were an addictive sweet. A sweet he couldn’t help but long for, as he was plagued by his jaw full of teeth inclined toward them. His thin and veiny fingers itched to pull the petals up, though his mouth tasted foul at the idea of violating the sculpture any more. The old, old antique of his from long before him,

before the drug rush, before the introduction of their society. It was so long before that all he knew was its significance. This precious rose was a part of history, crafted by one that lived before their history began (at least the history that he had the right to access in the archives). He ran his thumb along the jewels embedded in the gold lining, and mumbled to his self.

“It’s pretty. A true artisan’s craft, filled with maggots and worms on the inside.” He felt the tremor of an awakened parasite, frantically attempting to chew through the restraints of its pill. The idea shouldn’t have made him trembled the way it did. “You’re rutting old, little rose. You’ve seen the glowing plants, the canals of the capitol when it was young, gone from clean hand to clean hand...only to come into these.” He studied his own palms, so thin that the slightest blemish upon the skin was practically a pastel tattoo. If he squinted, he could see the greasy stains of the pill on his fingertips, invisible on most other hands.

“Poor little rose.” As to whom Mif truly pitied—his self, the insects, or the rose—he couldn’t say. It was a sorry situation indeed.

He lifted the sculpture and turned it thrice in hand, running his fingertips along the surface once more. Along the bottom, he caught the feel of something he hadn’t noticed before in his years of ownership. He flipped it over and saw, engraved into the base, a name—Cecilia Escultura, the immaculate artist of this tiny expression. What an injustice he had done her in retaliation. The bugs squirmed beneath the surface again. Mif sneered and shoved the sculpture harshly from his lap. He watched with a certain level of apathy as the rose, pills, and all shattered into dust. The insects scrambled from their prisons in any and all directions, the clicking of feet and pincers singing of freedom.

As Mif leaned back, he smiled a bit to himself. For the smallest of moments, all his phantoms were gone, all his nightmares tamed, and all his thirsts quenched. For the ever so tiniest of moments, he was a free man.

BLAKE OSBORNE

I am Lucy Worthright and this is the story of how complicated my life is. I sit looking at the small blue bottle my father gave me. I am different from the rest of the people in Subestu and not different in a good way. In Subestu everyone thinks the same way and if you are even the least bit different you are shunned and no one talks to you or even comes near you. It is like if you are even the least bit different you are no longer part of society, you are on to your own. Society throws you out like a piece of trash, someone no one wants. I could never shame my family like that also I don't want to be thrown out of society and never see my family again. I first found out I was different when I was in school and my class was working on a project and I came with an idea that no one else had heard of let alone thought about. Luckily my best friend, Susan, covered for me saying that I was just joking and would never do or think anything like it again.

After that all my classmates were skeptical about talking with or working with me. I remember talking with Susan on the way home from school about my outburst in class today and her telling me *Lucy, you really have to be more careful when your speaking in class and around people. We are all supposed to be alike; no one is different. You know what happens to people who are different and Lucy I don't want to lose you and I know your family wouldn't want to lose you either.* That was when I was in third grade and now I'm in seventh grade. I had kept my secret a secret this long but with each year it gets worse and worse. It becomes so hard not to say anything or do anything no normal person would. I finally had to tell family about me being different and surprisingly they handled it better than I thought they would.

My father promised me that he would do everything in his power to help me become normal and my mother said that she would find an excuse for me not to go to school anymore so that she could keep an eye on me. She also promised that no else would know my secret and I would not be cast out of society. So that is why I'm holding a small blue bottle with a purple liquid inside. I know I should be thrilled that I can now fit into society and won't have to be banished but then there is a part of me that doesn't want to give up being different and having my own original ideas. I also don't trust that it will make me normal but make me even more unusual. I am just about to drink it when my father and mother came into where I was and sit down in front of me. I can tell it's going to be a serious conversation by their stature and the way they are looking at me.

"Lucy," my mother starts, "I know this is a scary part in your life but this is necessary for you to stay in society and to be part of this household." She looks to my father for reassurance but only finds him staring at his feet.

My mother looks back to me and gives me her best apologetic look before walking out with my father behind her. I try my best to rid my mind of all the negative thoughts and to think of all the ways the little purple liquid will help but my brain keeps coming back to the fact that something could go horribly wrong and I could turn into some mutant person thing. Like that I will definitely be cast out and I don't even think the cast outs would want me around them. As I think of all the other cast outs I realize all of them were about my age when they were cast out. That's when the thought hits me at age eight you become a young lady/man. At age eight society sees you as valuable piece in their puzzle of life and that is when society expects you to contribute to the greater good of the community. That is also when you decide what skill you will contribute to the community, you can be poet; politician; artist; historian; general; scientist; dancer; writer; musician; or philosopher. I had always been into writing because it gave me a chance to be a little like myself and not some mindless drone thinking like everyone else and acting like everyone else. Writing gave me a thrill that nothing in the world could so that is when I decided to become a writer and help better educate my

community. Little did I know that writers could only write down facts and things that actually happened. I thought I would be able to write mysteries, horror, romance, or tragedy not facts. I believe that is one contributor to why my being different became worse because there was nowhere that I could express myself or let out my ideas.

I finally give in and drink the purple liquid, at first I feel nothing and I thought it hadn't worked or at least until I felt my whole brain explode and all my insides do a flip and then turn into jelly. It felt as if my whole body had collapsed in on itself and melted in a pool of lava. I screamed in agony and then laughed at how stupid I could be. I mean there is no way my brain exploded, my insides couldn't have done a flip and then turned into jelly, my body couldn't collapse in on itself, and there is no way it could have melted in a pool of lava. My parents run into my room with concern in their eyes and I see them yelling something at me but I can't hear a word they are saying. The whole world is a haze and seems to be tilting back and forth. As the world straightens and I can see everything clearly again my stomach starts to hurt and something just doesn't feel right in my gut. I lie and tell my parents my fine and that they can go back to what they were doing.

Then I start to think what if someone knows about my forbidden writing and tells someone then I think no one knows about it or wait what if they do? All these thoughts run through my head of if people know about me being different and if they do know how did they find out? Did I give it away, did my parents tell someone who then went and told someone else, or what if I told someone without remembering. When my phone rang I was too scared to pick it up in fear that it was someone calling to take me away. The paranoia kept getting worse and worse to the point where I couldn't take it any longer. I walk into the kitchen to get a snack when I see a knife and my hand shoots out, grabs the knife bringing it up to my chest. Before I can even realize what is happening the knife is thrust into my chest.

ANDERSON SCULL

Found Object: a brass ship (model/music box)

The unnourishing were strong once.

They are strong now as well. But they are strong of mind, when once they were strong of both mind and body. But whatever they have done, they have always been stronger than us.

Now we are stronger of body, and while we are not as strong of mind as they are now, perhaps not even quite as strong as they were then, we are able to understand what our ancestors must have seen once. It comes from all the old buildings left behind in our islands.

Deep in the groves, in places the unnourishing have not touched since the war we now understand, lie what they called outposts. Abandoned, we must presume, in death by those who left it there, and in memory past their loss of strength of body. Surely it is all long outdated. They have moved on since then. They do not touch us, for they are unable. We do not touch them, for they do not touch us and they provide nothing. Nothing but memories they left behind to sit in the dust of time. Wasting them until our ancestors found them and learned the lessons they could provide.

In their structures laid boxes, labeled little boxes, filled with a kind of the hazy scented bugs ("memory leeches," parasites, the scientists say in their memories and journals), preserved somehow. The parasites that let us look back and learn how to become what the unnourishing were when they were strong of body, how to know and use the words they use, and how things used to be. Back when we were dumb

beasts, animals as they called us, and call us still. We are no longer dumb, though they do not notice, preoccupied with their own self-importance.

Things have not changed so much as to render today's unnourishing unknowable.

But still, they made us what we are now, however unknowingly. So many of the other creatures focus on rending and tearing the world that those not as strong in body (though still strong) were left to become stronger in the mind and survive. And so we did. But in doing so we found a way to move faster, to gain strength with speed and valor. To follow those who have taken this path before, and learn from how we have seen them falter.

So we take the way their language was and recraft it as our language now. We take the bugs that gave us the words and the ideas to help us become strong and begin to use them to record our own rise. We take the tools of war long forgotten, and the crafts long discarded, and make them ours. We scavenge them, and the unnourishing are right to call us scavengers, as we have heard from the memories and the lonely ships that stop here overnight, never staying for long, more interested in their final destination than packs of what they only see to be lowly animals. We take the leavings and waste and turn it into something that makes us strong and alive and moving forward.

On the coast of one of our islands, split open and forgotten, was a ship of metal. Within it laid a long neglected room of makeshift containers for the hazy parasites (those of memory and those that make one happy but cloud the mind and weaken the body), and recordings of the songs the unnourishing used to sing as the ship crashed across the waves, and the lives they lived when they still could be strong of body, with the clashing of their tools of war and their battles over territory and the seas. "Dealers" and "pirates," they called themselves in the memories praising themselves aboard the ship and fearing or condemning them in the memories left in the outpost in the grove.

Though gone, with all others of those unnourishing who fought with bodies once upon a time, these pirates look to have been strong of mind and body. So as we continue to learn, to grow stronger of mind with each generation, we work to mend this ship of pirates, to

build others like it in our long-neglected islands, that we may become like them, when it is time for us too to take to the seas and cast out to other chains of islands.

Through the forgotten ideas of the unnourishing, through their leavings that have become ours, we will learn more from them, we take what they once were and make it how we are now, and move to become better than they are now.

-Recording of Mother Heidi Boneclaw, 10th generation Enlightened matriarch

LINDSAY WARD

Found Object: porcelain figure of a man in a chair,
painted, approximately 6 inches tall

“Perspective”

Jasper ran into his room, breathless. “Sorry,” he told the figurine centered on his dresser, “I had to run home because I stayed late at the grocer’s. I was helping the employees,” he finished. The figurine smiled quaintly, as it always did, and said nothing. Jasper looked at it carefully. Its smooth porcelain reflected what little nightly light shone through his window, but it was also covered in dark stains that refused to come off. It didn’t seem right that Otu should be dirty. Sighing, Jasper took the figurine to the small bathroom and put it in the sink. He ran cold water over it, rubbing it gently, and then hot water, but the stains remained as they always did. He dried it off and returned it to the center of his dresser. “May we one day reunite,” he whispered to it, as was custom. With that, he headed to the kitchen to help his parents with dinner.

“According to Finists, Otu was and still is the ultimate goal after death,” a Dustuli archeologist announced to her expedition, over a hundred years later. “The Subets who probably lived in this area taught their children to ‘look forward’ to rejoining Otu. It seems ironic that their primary goal is, in our eyes, the worst thing that could happen to us, but that’s one of the many differences between our nations. Opinions aside: we are searching for any artifacts that could prove that Subets did indeed live here. You all know what their architecture looks like, so let’s get going. Osta, you take the east section. Rio and

Chanson will take the west, and Cruser, you explore the northern part. I'll search south. If anybody uncovers anything, mark the spot and radio us. Let's go!"

Jehan Cruser waved his metal detector over the sandy ground. He loved researching these artifacts, but looking for them was far out of his comfort zone. He always thought while looking he would miss something, or sound a false alarm, and he didn't trust the metal detectors. But since there was no better way to find artifacts, here he was, out in the field. He wasn't the only one who was feeling uncomfortable. Three days had passed with little result—Rio found a piece of metal, but no one could say exactly what it had been a part of. Dr. Iva planned on giving the expedition a little over a week more, and if nothing much showed up, that was that. Cruser knew, however, there was more to it. Dr. Iva had a research convention coming up, and it would be great if she had some new material to work with. Her chosen topic was the relationships between the Subets and Dustuli near the border, but she didn't have any artifacts the other scientists hadn't yet seen. So, if nothing else, Cruser was trying to help a colleague, although he didn't expect to find anything. His metal detector stayed silent as it swept over the gritty ground, so he switched to plan B: temperature testing. The thermal scanner was adequate but vague; it didn't tell the true size or shape of anything it detected, though it gave the temperature to the nearest tenth of a degree. Just as Cruser was beginning to think the scanner was also useless, it began humming. Soon it was beeping repeatedly, as if in protest to Cruser's thoughts. He looked down at the screen, startled. A small, cool smudge appeared about ten feet below the surface on the map. He lodged his shovel in the ground to mark the spot and radioed the others.

"Osta, Rio, Chanson and Dr. Iva... this is Cruser. My temperature probe has located an artifact. It could be a glitch, but if one of you would come over to verify... Stop," he added, remembering to log off. Static crackled through the speakers. For a moment he worried the transmission hadn't gone through, but then the buzzing ended, signaling a reply.

"Cruser, this is Chanson. I'll be right there. Stop."

He checked the scanner screen again to make sure the artifact was still there—and when it wasn't, he almost called Chanson back. '*Calm down,*' he told himself. After turning the scanner off and on again, the smudge showed up once more. He sighed, relieved. Chanson appeared a moment later. She had brought her own scanner to verify the accuracy of the reading. She directed it at the spot Cruser had marked, and waited for it to register. Cruser felt reassured when the spot showed up on her screen too. She called the others.

"Osta, Rio and Dr. Iva: Looks like this artifact isn't just a blip. We'll begin digging soon. We could use some more hands, but this thing seems to be pretty small, so whatever you think is best, Dr. Iva. Stop." The two of them made a circle around the general area of the artifact and prepared to dig. Meanwhile, Dr. Iva replied saying that they'd continue to search for other artifacts.

The Subet territory the archaeologists were studying was sandy, but underneath the sand was a layer of hard ground. It took two and a half days of work to reach the artifact and finally pull it out.

It was a queer thing; a smooth figure sitting in a rounded, cushioned chair. Its delicate design was obvious, but it was very dirty and nicked in a few places. It was also missing a foot. Chanson held it in her hands, its face toward the noontime sun.

"He looks a bit pretentious," she told Cruser.

"May I?" he asked, and she handed it to him. Even after being held, it was surprisingly cold. He looked deeply into its painted eyes, and examined it from all angles.

"It's not a 'he'," Cruser explained. "This is a figurine of Otu. The Subets would refer to Otu as 'we' or 'us', since people were created by Otu splitting into pieces. This figurine looks to have been made in Umet, based on the clothing style," Cruser finished.

The surprised look on Chanson's face made him smile. "I'm more of a research person," he said.

"Obviously," Chanson replied, recovered. "Why did the Subets have such a pompous version of Otu, though? It doesn't fit with their philosophy." She seemed genuinely curious, so Cruser was happy to explain.

"Otu isn't pompous. It's the figurine that makes him seem that

way,” he said. “And even that wasn’t the Subets’ intention. The figurine looks stuck up because we’re looking at it the wrong way.”

He tilted the statue down, as Chanson had it in the first place. “Pretentious this way...” Then he placed the statue on his open palm. “But caring this way.”

Chanson looked down upon the figurine, and she had to say that Cruser was right. This Otu appeared kind and willing to help, more traditional.

“So the god you see is literally determined by your viewpoint,” she stated.

“Yes,” her partner agreed, “Viewpoints are always subject to opinion. That’s the way it has always been between the Subets and the Dustuli.”

TALÖN

The people of the realm bask in the golden, living radiance of their sun, capturing the sentient motes of starlight in crystals to be released at their discretion as magic. Empires have been built and crumbled in pursuit and fear of this power. Now, two hegemonies control the majority of the world—the hedonist trade empire of avian Aquilans and the fanatical human theocracies of the Chosen of Ibis. Caught between the two are the sorcerer-led Hsaldim Houses of Governance and the original inhabitants of the world, the fur-covered, short and stocky Furfolk, who are now left to forage among the frigid icecaps in scattered tribes. Such is life as usual on the world of Talön.

EMMA ANTONIO

Found Object: Porcelain Mushroom Plaque

I never really liked many of the cities in the world, they were either too hot or cold or they were ridiculously crowded; possibly some of those at the same time. I seemed to always find people curious in the lands of the world a bit naïve. Then again, I also find it quite amusing to see such curiosity.

Curiosity must have brought the furfolk family to the capital city of Aquila. It certainly brought me to the child of the families' pocket. And such wonder of the world did display in the crude artistic representation of the bioluminescent forests that I stole from the furfolk child.

It must have been about dawn when I returned from that heist to my secluded home in the pirate capital of Hsald.

"Where to next..." I muttered to myself. As I plotted my next plunder, I studied the art I had stolen. It was painted like wood, but it definitely wasn't wood, and the details on the forest forms were miraculous. "This furfolk was quite talented, I almost feel bad for stealing this." It wasn't a moment's time after I spoke when I laughed at myself.

Feel no pity.

Show no mercy.

Don't break the code, Lucienna. The code is word. The word is law.

"Lucienna, Father wishes to see you." I heard from behind me, I looked around to see my brother, not literal that is, at my doorway.

Father was not my literal father either; he was the leader of our little cult of pirates.

I walked to Father's room and stopped at the doorway. "You called for me, Father?"

"Ms. Lechents," he said to me, looking up from his desk covered in papers. "Come in, my child."

I stepped in. "Do you require something of me, Father?"

"I want you to carry out a deed for this family."

Carrying out a deed for the family meant killing a family member that stepped out of line by breaking the code. I was uneasy about doing such, but I had to keep it hidden. Father did not like such weaknesses. "What do you require?"

All Father had to say was the name of whoever he needed gone. "Brother Antien Maris."

I knew Antien Maris, he was a close friend of mine. "It will be done," I lied. "Does he respite with us?"

"No, but he is within Hsald."

"I will find him." That wasn't a lie; he had to be kept safe.

"Thank you, Ms. Lechent." Father gave me a nod to dismiss me, and I did not hesitate to leave the room.

I sat in my room, in panic, trying to think of a way out of this. I didn't want to kill my friend, we had known each other since kids, Father took us in together.

"I could lie about it...no, Father would find out, he always finds out." I started saying the ideas going through my head. "I could take Antien out of the city and find somewhere safe...no, Father would come looking." I sighed and leaned back in my chair. "I wish all I had to do in life was to steal gold from nobles and art from furfolk." I glanced over at the art sitting on my table as I spoke. I decided to rest so that I could clear my head from such confusion.

When I woke up what I believe was a few hours later, I had a mental image of Father hovering over me saying "I am getting impatient." I was thankful that this was not a reality.

I realized it might be best if I found Antien and warned him of what could be coming, and I may hopefully find out a solution along the way. While wandering through the streets of Hsald, I was trying to

think where he would be. I remember that he liked deceiving people, tricking people into trusting him.

"Excuse me..." I heard from behind me. I looked around to see the source of the voice, and I was quite surprised with who I found.

"Antien..." I muttered.

He seemed surprised too. "Lucienna, I'm surprised to see you in the open." He joked.

"I was looking for you, you're not safe." I decided to be blunt, as he didn't deserve the sugarcoating.

"I know, why do you think I'm hiding?"

I didn't know why it happened, but I had an idea to fix this. "I know how to keep you safe and fix everything, but you have to trust me."

"What is it?"

"Just wait here in the city, look natural, and wait. If I'm not back by dawn tomorrow, then leave the town."

Antien seemed hesitant, I didn't blame him.

"Trust me..."

"Okay, okay."

I gave him a nod and began to walk back.

"Lucienna!"

I looked around at him.

"Good luck and don't you dare get killed!"

I smiled. "I'll try not to!" I was mostly serious when I said that, because I wasn't very sure if my plan would work and I'd end up alive in the end.

As I walked to Father's room, I was thinking what I would do if I pulled this off. I could become partners-in-crime with Antien as we were as kids, travel around a bit, and maybe return the art to the furfolk and tell her of the bioluminescent forests.

I took a deep breath as I approached the doorway of Father's room. "Father," I said. "I must speak to you."

"What is it?" He asked. "I know you haven't done what needs to be done yet..."

"That is true, Father, but I must tell you something."

Father sighed. "Come in..." He stood up and walked over.

I met him in the middle of the room and gestured for him to come

closer so I could whisper something.

“What is it, Lucienna, you know I’m busy!” he whispered.

“Feel no pity, show no mercy,” I whispered, plunging a dagger into his stomach.

I never knew a man could have so much blood.

CAITLIN CHILDERS

Found Object: Brass Cone

Aquilans looked human, but instead of hair they grew feathers and they had talons where their nails should have been. They lived on a beautiful island called Aquila.

A young woman on this island named Keira was a new bride and soon to be mother. She longed for the day when her egg would hatch. On average it takes about twenty two days for an egg to hatch. Keira had been waiting for five days. Every day she'd visit her egg while it sat on the spire, a brass cone that hung on the wall. Spires were used to see your child inside of the egg. You would put a candle in the bottom of the spire and the light from the candle would shine through the shell, outlining the life inside. As Keira stood staring at her baby in its shell her mind drifted back to the day she and her husband brought the spire home. She thought of how his hand closed around the middle of the cone, a brass ring around the cone on either side of his fingers. The black ball on the tip of the spire bothered her. It was said that a black ball on the end of your spire meant death for someone in your family.

While Keira was looking at their child, her husband Jory was at the trading post. He was thinking about the conflict of trading with humans when Norch called his name. Norch was one of the Furfolk from the land of North Furfell, in the Arctic. The Furfolk were each three feet tall and looked like extremely hairy humans with claws.

"Jory!" Norch yelled. "Jory, you goof! How the heck are ya!?"

"I've been better," Jory said, "I'm tired of always being stared at."

"You mean the humans. They're not so bad, the little ones are kinda cute."

"When they're little sure. That's before they're brainwashed."

After considering this Norch said, "It's only what they think is right. After all, in their religion you're pure evil."

In the midst of their conversation neither Norch nor Jory noticed as a boy and a girl walked into a darkened street corner. As Jory had said, there was indeed much conflict between the humans and the Aquilans, however some were more intimate than others. The Aquilan girl's name was Koshy Leeoo and the human boy's name was August Guffy. They'd known each other since childhood. And of course, they were in love. Because what's any good story without a pair of star crossed lovers? Koshy's parents were the king's confidants. August was banished at birth to Aquila for the 'sins' of his father. The so-called sin he committed was asking questions about the religion of the humans. Now August had to serve the Leeoo family for the rest of his life. If Koshy and August's love affair were to be found out they would both be put in as gladiators and would fight until death. They hid in an alley because a merchant caught them holding hands, something the Aquilans and the Humans consider taboo.

"Do you think we lost them?" August asked.

Koshy leaned her head around the corner and said "I can still see him. We need to make a quick getaway or my dad will kill us for sure."

As soon as Koshy said this, the man spotted them. "Run!" She yelled and grabbed August's arm.

"Norch...what's going on over there?" Jory said while watching an Aquilan merchant chase two hooded people down an alley.

"I don't know. Probably just some street rat stealing food."

Norch and Jory stood and watched a merchant and two assumed thieves disappear into the alley. Jory told Norch he must be going because he had to pack. He was being reassigned to the island of Hsald to learn what he could about the pirate civilization there for the Aquilan king. He already knew Keira wouldn't be happy. Jory wasn't happy about it either, but the job would get him a large amount of money. He needed this for the good of their child.

At the moment Jory walked through the door, and he could hear her coming.

"Jory Leeoo I know you don't expect to take that job! Not when I just pushed out an egg! I don't care about the money, you're staying right here! You could be killed by the Hsald."

With an eye roll Jory replied, "I'll be fine Keira. It's only for a few months. I'll be back before you know it."

He expected her to be mad but not this mad. Something else had happened but he couldn't pinpoint what it was. He didn't want to interrupt her current rant. She'd go ballistic. Wait, what was she saying?

"...and I don't see why the king can't go himself!? Doesn't he know how important you are to me? To your family?"

"Did something else happen today?"

Suddenly, she stopped talking. His sister Koshy visited today with her little human pet. Everyone knew she'd been gallivanting around with him. It's disgusting, this little "romance" they'd created. She couldn't stand the thought of telling Jory.

"Well...*she* visited us. There are rumors going around about your sister and the human."

Jory already knew what she was saying. There'd been rumors about Koshy and August since childhood. He didn't know why it mattered now. He hated the humans as much as any other Aquilan but August...he's different. Maybe it's because his entire life has been spent on Aquila but August never looked at Jory like a monster. He respected him, asked him questions, looked up to him. As far as Jory was concerned, August was Aquilan.

Keira opened her mouth, but Jory interrupted her with "I'm going to pack. I'll be home soon. I love you."

Keira went to the docks to see him off. Once she was sure that his boat was out of sight, she went to a man that had magic crystals. She needed something that would stop her beloved husband from reaching Hsald. He's an old Aquilan man who lives alone.

"Hello!" she called as she neared his front door at dusk, "Is anyone here?"

She sputtered out the old cliché while thinking of going home. No one answered for a long time. Just as she turned to leave, a beady eye appeared from the crack in the doorway.

"What do you need?" the old man wheezed.

In her head, Keira thought about how he desperately needed a mint but said, "I need something to keep my husband's ship from reaching Hsald."

“I believe I have a thing in mind, but it’ll cost you something very close.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes.”

The old man took her hand and pricked her finger with a crystal shard. Mesmerized, Keira didn’t even jump. She just watched the scarlet drop roll down over her talons. All of a sudden there was a crack of thunder. It was like the sky exploded.

A few days later she got a letter saying that her husband’s ship went down in the violent storm. Koshy and August were hidden on the boat, and were both swept away in the storm. Keira destroyed her family. This was the price she paid for her magic.

NICK D'ONOFRIO

Found Object: Metal Box

“Tragedy at Pathos”

A large group of humans unhappy with the state of their city decided to make their own. The people moved to a small island near the equator and named the island Pathos. It took time, but after a few months they built a town and called it Klingster. The people on nearby islands called these people Patholens. Pathos was rich in plant life, many of which neither the settlers, nor those on neighboring islands, had ever seen before. The Patholens were overjoyed when they made this discovery. They wanted to find a plant that they could use as a new energy source. The inspiration for their search came from the magic crystals found on Aquila, a large island not far from Pathos. The inhabitants of Aquila were birdlike people who had feathers for hair and claws for nails. The humans despised and often avoided the Aquilans but also silently admired their resources. The Patholens searched and came upon a flower that shined bright when the sun touched it. They believed the flower was sacred, and so they collected it and stored it safely away. Soon after, the Patholens discovered a gelatinous lake not far from the city. The lake had no water but a paste substance that was hard to pick up. The Patholens did not see any use for the lake but the plants growing around it intrigued them. These plants were bioluminescence and each had its own distinct glow. Astonished by this, the Patholens collected all of the light-giving plants they could find. They hoped that one of the plants would contain a form of magic that they could

manipulate and sell on the market just as well as Aquilan crystals. The Patholens then took all of the plants back to their town for further examination.

After a few days, the citizens of Pathos deemed the plants of no value, as once they were uprooted they lost their glow or whatever magic they contained. Then one day the Patholens noticed small blue bubbles glowing on their skin. The bubbles did not hurt unless you touched or irritated them. At first some of the Patholens painfully popped the bubbles but that only lead to more growing in their place. Two days passed and the bubbles were irritating the Patholens skin. Then suddenly, they popped and gave way to glowing plants with two red leaves at the top of each stem. The fungus plant gave off a revolting odor and hurt the Patholens' skin whenever they moved. After about a week, some of Patholens began to die when the fungus grew all over their bodies. Frightened by this, the Patholens believed their Aquilan neighbors were poisoning them in order to settle on the island themselves. More and more Patholens died each day until there was only a handful left. The remaining number took all the bodies from the city and burned them in the square. In a desperate attempt, the final five Patholens conceived a plan to get revenge on the Aquilans. The Patholens created a large fire to signal an Aquilan ship not far from their shore. The Aquilans observed the signal and debated whether or not they should help.

Some of sailors did not want to help because the humans worshipped a false god. The captain ignored the complaints given by his crew and sailed to the island to help. When the sailors arrived they were surprised to find the town of Klingster abandoned. They found a small thin box with a beautiful flower inside. There were instructions for it to be immediately delivered to their king. The fire set by the Patholens had started to spread into the jungle. Lacking the tools to put out the fire, and with no one on the island to save, the Aquilans left.

Instead of heading home, the crew decided to go to North Furrfell, the arctic lands, to trade goods with the furfolk inhabitants. It was a weeklong trip but the Aquilans didn't care; they were instructed to trade with the furfolk, and that is what they wanted to do. Three days into the trip, some of crew started to find glowing bubbles on their skin. One sailor had fungus sprouting on his skin. Frightened by this the crew pinned him

down, ripped the stems off him. They then disposed of them in the ocean. The next day the sailor had more blue fungus on him and crew had the same fungus on them as well. Hoping for a cure, the captain turned his ship around to sail back to Aquila. A day before they reached the island the captain died and others began to drop as well. The Aquilans were terrified and wondered what they did to anger their god. Chaos broke out as they accused each other of dooming them all to death. The Captain's first mate Macay tried to calm everyone down, but this only made the crew angrier. They knocked him out and locked him in the captain's quarters. When Macay woke up he heard only silence. He peeked out a small hole in the door and saw that the whole entire crew was dead. Macay could also see that they were approaching the shores of Aquila.

What had they done to deserve such a painful punishment? Then Macay remembered the flower they had taken from Pathos. Macay paled; their god had cursed the island. Since they had taken the flower from the cursed place, they were all punished. He searched around him for the metal box and it in the captain's drawers. Macay ran back to the door and tried to open it but he couldn't. He wanted to open the door so he could throw the flower into the sea but it was locked shut. Even with all his strength it wouldn't budge. Pain surged through his body as the spores began to spread on him. He yanked the plants off him, cawing as he did. He sighed with relief but then the plants came back spreading faster than before. They were a couple of inches from his head; Macay then had an idea. He quickly pressed his claws on the metal to carve an image into it. For every crewmember that died he carved a thorn onto the box. It took him a couple of hours but he managed to carve most of them on until he felt the agony of the plants traveling up his neck. In an attempt to warn of the dangers of the flower, he used his remaining strength to carve a skull onto the box. He then frantically carved fire around the skull to warn about the curse unleashed by their furious god, but he was running out of time as the plants climbed up his neck. Macay's vision started to blur as he felt the fungus grow over his face.

The first mate of the ship collapsed onto the floor as he saw red leaves crowd around his eyes. He heard shouting in the distance but he knew it was already too late for him. He let out a final cry before his body gave way to darkness.

ALLISON HASWELL

Found Object: tan mini chest/trunk

“Klenara”

Klenara was sifting through trunks and old trinkets looking for the perfect carrier suitable for smuggling. She was about to give up for the day when she saw it. A light brown trunk the size of her palm sitting all alone in the corner. It had an old fashioned golden latch and all the sides were painted with care. The artist had drawn a flower and hearts and swirls with precision. It had the warmth of something that was magic. The thought of a bootlegged forbidden object was too juicy to resist. Klenara knew this was meant for her. She figured out that it could hold anything by shrinking said item. She grabbed it and quickly bartered for it so she could avoid her usual long talks with Karn. He was always flirting with her and she always turned him down. He never seemed to get the memo. She put the trunk in her pocket and continued on her way to her favorite street corner.

Klenara was an artist living in the grand old city of Aquila. She sang and danced for anyone who would bother to watch her. She was requested to perform plays for the nobles all the time. She was that good. During one of her particularly long songs she noticed these kids sitting near the fountain. They looked bored out of their minds. She decided to cheer them up. Scanning the crowd for an interesting mark was proving a little difficult though because of the time of day. Four minutes later she zeroed in on a male performer. This ought to be fun.

"I am you are no better than the rest," belted out a male singer.

"I am you are no better than the rest," lilted Klenara.

He checked out her blue-green feathers and sharpened talons but kept on singing. She was impressed he kept his cool... for the most part. As a sign of respect she left him alone but not before snagging a loaf of bread from his case. He didn't even notice. She walked up to the fountain and threw the bread to the youngest child there. While they ate she walked back in forth in front of the children copy catting a new person each time. A male's gait and a girls slouched shoulders later the children seemed much happier. Contentedly she walked back to her street corner and danced around like no one was watching. But of course everyone was.

Feeling happier than she had in a while she started to browse the stalls looking at all the jewelry. A girl her age was trying to stuff her purse with a picture frame. The owner saw her and was heading her direction. This could only end badly. Klenara grabbed the girl's arm dragged her away before the owner knew what happened. Klenara didn't stop until they were a least a mile away.

"What do you think you were doing," came a voice that oozed selfishness.

"I believe I just saved your limbs."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I didn't want to see you fingerless because you almost got caught trying to steal a picture frame."

"That frame got stuck on my robe thank you very much."

"Ohhh so he was coming over to help you." Klenara would have a lot of explaining to do to the stall owner later.

"Yes but that old bat was taking an awful lot of time to get to me."

"I am so so sorry. I just assumed the worst."

There was a moment of awkwardness before either of us spoke.

"I should go."

"Yes you should."

Klenara left that strange women in the alley. She was so embarrassed by her rash actions. She normally didn't do things like that. Ever.

A few weeks after her little incident with the stall an envelope appeared at her landlady's address. She was requested to sing a couple

of songs for a palace party. She hated doing these performances because the rich and snobby males always made her feel uncomfortable. They seemed to eye her as their next prey. They were pertinacious and always made her head hurt.

She dressed in the finest clothes she had and plastered a smile across her face. It was her turn to sing. The Princess watched her mesmerized by how good she was. The applause became deafening when she finished. Klenara walked to a table laden with food and started stuffing it in her magical chest. A noble touched her hand and she tried not to pull away in disgust.

"That was the best song I have heard all day."

"Thank you sir."

"Yes well I was wondering, I..." The princess was walking towards me. Why was she coming over?

"I believe your wife is looking for you."

"Excuse me, Your Highness." He backed out of the room.

"You were amazing."

"I know." The princess laughed. She paused and did a double take.

"You?"

"You?"

This was Klenara's worst nightmare. "I have to go," and she bolted to the door. On the way back to her guest house she stopped by Benndy's and gave him the food that she stole. He was the best black market dealer.

She was again requested to perform at the palace.

The Princess met her at the door and said, "I am sorry about the misunderstanding at the stall so let's forget it and move on."

"Agreed. I mean yes." The Princess was about to interrupt. "Don't you even dare." They both laughed and became fast friends. But every single time Klenara went to the palace she left with an object. The Princess caught her trying to snake a silver plate but decided to let her keep it. She even decided to start helping Klenara give gifts and things to those creepy people or the vendors who sold at the black market.

ROBIN HOLCOMB

Found Object: Deer Knocker

“Dealer”

The rain beat against Dhalatheen’s cavernous overcoat, soaking the quilted fabric to an alarming extent. Cursing, he ducked under an arch to remove it and wring from it the unwanted moisture. Spotting a small bench beside him, conveniently also under the partial protection of the arch, he took the opportunity to sit and rest. He watched passersby commute to whatever banquet or another they were going to that night, and listened to the shouts of party-goers and the strum of music. Dhalatheen reached into a leather pouch slung over his shoulder and produced a palm-sized disc made of bronze, etched with a High Hsaldic invoking text in the shape of a resting springrunner. With the pull of a hidden switch, the disc’s upper half flipped upwards, revealing an intricate clockwork mechanism. A series of small discs of gold and pearl sat atop the fine gears and springs, standing for the sun, moon, and stars.

Ten minutes before he had to meet the benefactor.

Sighing, Dhalatheen picked up his coat and trudged back out into the rain.

Smoke and vapors clotted about the market ceiling, obscuring the rain-battered, stained-glass skylights high above the loud, bustling mass of tents, stands, and their patrons. Dhalatheen worked his way through the crowd, the smell of spices and smoldering herbs stinging his nostrils, vendors shouting their wares of drink, trinkets, food, flesh, pounding at his eardrums.

At least there was a roof over his head now.

He broke through the crowd to the outer perimeter of the market, where larger, permanent structures were erected for housing the more fortunate businesses. The crowd was less thick here, and Dhalatheen could hurry. He stopped at a door with the mark that signed his written correspondence when the seller was negotiating with him on the terms of the deal. He reached for the knocker on the door, then pulled back his hand in disgust.

It was the ugliest thing he had ever seen. Unmaintained cast-iron was shaped into a crude likeness of some kind of Aquilan ungulates' face, two blunt, branching horns protruding from its awful scalp; its eyes were placed asymmetrically on its lumpy, elongated face; and situated behind it in a shoddily-done travesty of perspective were a pair of... mountains? Trees?

It was terrifying.

Dhalatheen closed his eyes, braced himself, and pushed the door open into a swirling cloud of blue-white smoke. Damp smoke. It smelled of unprocessed silk that had gone bad and then through the digestive system of a sick droond at least once. Once it had stopped stinging Dhalatheen's eyes so much that he could open them again, he could see a dozen or so patrons laying on velvet cushions around jeweled bronze hookahs, sampling from bowls of green-white fibers and exhaling the vile vapors.

"How may I serve you, guest?" queried a voice from behind him.

Dhalatheen turned his head and met the golden-eyed gaze of a willowy figure, clad in a loose-fitting robe. Her hair hung down in flat, broad locks the color of sunshine just before the night.

"I have an appointment," said Dhalatheen, reaching inside the pocket of his coat. From its confines, he pulled out a thin, yellow sheet of parchment and handed it to the woman.

She unfolded the message, read it, and her expression straightened, sobered.

"Come with me, mage," the hostess told Dhalatheen, turning toward a stairway.

Dhalatheen followed her up to a door, also adorned with the bas-relief elk.

His benefactor went into the room beyond, followed hastily by himself, taking any precaution against actually touching the cheaply-made ornamentation. Inside was a low table flanked on two sides with cushions.

“Wait here. I’ll retrieve the parcel, but it might take a little while.”

Dhalatheen sat down before the low table as the woman continued through another door into another room. As he waited, he twiddled his thumbs, gazed at his reflection in the table’s varnished sheen, watched the flicker of the lanterns as the flame within dwindled, studied the silken tapestries on the walls.

He made the mistake of looking back at the door.

The elk’s gaze burned through him, the smug expression on its face seemingly mocking him. Dhalatheen tried to turn away, but always found himself looking back at it. He didn’t know what to do.

The sculpture’s off-center eyes were trained on him, never looking elsewhere.

Watching.

Judging.

A sound coming from the wall behind him startled him, thankfully giving him something to look at that wasn’t the elk.

The benefactor stood in the doorway, a small, carved box in her hand. She sat opposite Dhalatheen, setting the dark wooden vessel on the table slowly and gently. She slid it toward him, gliding across the finish like a not at all aerodynamic boat across a flat beige sea.

Dhalatheen inspected the whittled lid, iron-wood inlaid with platinum, depicting a tree of life surrounded with the gods of Taeloen. Faint violet light seeped through the seam between the lid and the box, drawing his hands to the latch. With his thumb, Dhalatheen pushed up the hook that fastened it shut, pulled the lid open, rested his hands on the table on either side of the container. Inside was a long, dark shaft of sapphire, a faint glow emanating from within.

“So,” the woman said, a sly smile on her face. “What do you think is a reasonable price for a god?”

MORGAN JONES

Found Object: An old insulator used on telephone poles,
made out of translucent green glass

“The Island of Doorknobs”

Raska ran through the jungle, map in hand, and scrambled up the first rock she could find. She looked behind her, and saw her crew a little ways behind her. Further away, anchored out in the bay, Raska sighted *The Isadore*. She took in a deep breath, and ran a hand through her dark hair. And then she waited for her crew to catch up to her.

“Ladies,” she said, and paused. “Ladies, we’ve come a long way, and who knows how long we’ve been searching.”

“I do!” shouted the first mate, and the rest of the crew laughed with her. Raska joined in on the laughter, and began again once it subsided.

“Ladies, we’ve been around the world more times than I can count, and you chose me as your captain. Well, I can’t say I know why, but you’re stuck with me until the end!” Here the crew broke out into laughter again. Raska grinned, and continued.

“This time, I have on *very* good information that there’s a whole trove of treasure that’s ours for the taking! And remember, whoever finds the treasure’ll get their weight’s worth in alcohol!” At this remark, the pirates gave one last cheer and dispersed into the jungle in groups of twos and threes (So as not to be picked off one by one). It was hard to tell if they were more excited for the treasure or the alcohol.

Raska ended up with the boatswain, an older woman by the name of Layle. They set off westward, going in towards the very center of the jungle. An hour or so passed by, and they began to feel tired. Layle

signaled at Raska to stop moving, and they collapsed on to logs placed midway down a decline.

Raska growled, wiping sweat from her brow as they rested.

"We should have found something by now! This isn't a large island, if there was even a sign that we aren't the first ones here, we would... have....found it!" With this last remark, Raska kicked at moss-covered rock on the ground. It tumbled down the hill, making a distinctly un-rocklike tinkling noise as it rolled away. Both Raska and Layle froze, and then bolted after the mysterious rolling object.

Raska, being the younger and stronger of the two, caught up to the object first. She grabbed it and quickly tore off the moss. That didn't really help her, as without the moss it was the strangest thing she'd ever seen. The object was a little larger than her hand, and would have been a translucent green if not for all the dirt covering it. It was hollow on the inside, with one end having a hole and the other a surface like that of half a sphere.

"What is this?" she asked herself. It couldn't be a candleholder, she reasoned, as it wouldn't be able to balance on the roundish end, and there was no way it was a cup or a jar. But...if not that, then what was it? Maybe some kind of instrument?

Raska was so busy trying to figure out what it was that she completely missed the sound of Layle coming up behind her. Layle bent over, gasping for air, until she slowly recovered. Raska was still oblivious to her until Layle suddenly peered over her shoulder.

"What..what's that you got there?"

Raska jumped, and then realized that it was just Layle. Annoyed, she tossed the object to her and said, "I dunno. Some glass thingamajig. Probably some kind of broken bottle or something."

Layle stared hard at the glass item, her forehead creasing more than usual as she bit down on her lip. Suddenly, her eyes widened and she laughed, "I know what this is!"

Raska quickly turned back to her. "What is it, then!? Is it valuable? Can we sell it?"

Layle shook her head. "This...is, to put it simply, it's a doorknob."

"A *what*?"

"A doorknob! It's an old invention that was supposed to make

opening doors easier,” and here she laughed, “But, seeing as how they were made out of glass, they never really took off. Oh, I suppose that this is where they were made. I always did wonder...”

As Layle reminisced, Raska slowly looked back at the map. A snort, and then she crumpled it up.

“Should have known better than to trust that old trader, at any rate,” she mumbled to herself. Well, at least there weren’t any giant flesh-eating birds this time. Suddenly, a shriek echoed through the woods. She looked up, and swore.

ELIZABETH LIFSEY

Found Object: wire apple

“A Lover For Sergio”

“My lady, are you enjoying the festivities?”

Olalla yawned and took a bite out of her apple. The princess was in a fairly unladylike position; her legs were haphazardly thrown over the side of her chair, her long pink robe was scrunched up to expose the long dark skin of her arms and legs, and her shoes were left discarded on the ground below her feet. She looked over at the man who had addressed her, then returned her view to the festivities.

The princess’s throne sat in a box close to the top of the arena, placed at the perfect position for her to look out over the penis and see all the competing athletes. The open window behind her looked out upon the city and the river, the city temple sitting by the banks and shining like the sun. Olalla yawned again. The city was nice, but the games were important.

“Yes,” she said, boredly. “But we’re between matches. No fun, really. I want to see the wrestlers.”

“Should I rush them?” he asked. She shrugged.

“Don’t bother,” she said. “They can have their rest. It’s necessary for their health.”

The man looked frustrated. “If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure,” she snapped. “Leave me to my own devices, please. Send for Cesc, perhaps.”

“The prince returned to the Capital early, my lady,” he said. “Should I speak with another?”

Olalla sighed and took another bite from her apple. “Fernando’s with him, I suppose,” she said. “I seem to have found a husband better

suiting for my younger brother than myself.” She laughs to herself, feeling amused, and looks out at the field again.

“If you--”

“Oh!” exclaims Olalla, cutting off the man before he can speak again. “The wrestlers are coming out! I wonder who will be chosen tonight.”

At that moment, there was a slight commotion at the opening of the box, and the man who had been speaking to her turned to the entryway with a nervous and fearful glance. It turned out to be a woman in blue with bright orange and yellow headfeathers, a sharp contrast to the aquamarine and violet plumage of Olalla’s own.

“What the--” Olalla started, turning, and a huge smile erupted on her face. “Nagore?”

The woman smiled and ran to embrace Olalla, who sat up from her spot on the throne to embrace her friend. “Oh, Olalla, it’s wonderful!” she exclaimed. “Did you enjoy the earlier games?”

Olalla nodded and waved a hand at the man. “Go fetch my companion a throne like mine,” she ordered. He nodded and ran off, and Olalla stood and walked to the edge of the box. The wrestlers stood at the edge of the circle; Olalla’s eyes drifted critically over each of them.

“I think that that Mesut boy would be a good conquest of our Sergio’s, don’t you agree?” Nagore suggested. Olalla smirked and looked over the boy in question; his head feathers were a solid red, red as blood, and he stared out across the arena with eyes that seemed a little too big for him.

“His eyes?” Olalla asked. “They’re almost endearing, really. He resembles a silkworm, with eyes like that.”

“His eyes?” Nagore asked. “You sound just like him, *honestly*, Olalla. You can’t be serious. Look at him! He’s definitely Sergio’s type.” Olalla grinned.

“He’s quite the looker, I will admit,” Olalla said. “But are we *really* trying to find Sergio a lover again? We all know how that worked out last time.”

“Oh, we know,” Nagore said with a laugh. “You ended up marrying him.”

Olalla remembered quite well how her relationship with her husband had begun. Sergio hadn’t spoken to her for months after *that* particular debacle.

“You won’t kill Fernando and marry the athlete if I bring him to the

palace, will you?" Nagore asked. Olalla rolled her eyes and bit a piece out of her apple.

"Only if he brings me apples all the time," she said through a mouthful of fruit. "Apples are delicious."

At that moment, the lots were drawn, and the first two competitors were selected. The Mesut boy remained on the sidelines, uncalled.

"This boy is talented," Nagore remarked. "His opponent is not quite as good. Marco, they called him?"

"Marco, yes," Olalla said. "Wouldn't he make a fine lover for our Nuri?"

"Nuri!" Nagore exclaimed. "Nuri with a lover? He is too innocent to have a lover."

The mindless chatter continued on through the first match, then the second, and even the third, when the man whose name Olalla never could remember returned with a chair for Nagore. The two sat and watched through the fourth before, finally, the boy called Mesut was called up to compete. Nagore looked excited.

"If he does well, we ask him to come to the Capital," she exclaimed. "And we offer him to Sergio, and you won't marry him like the last one." Olalla stuck her tongue out shamelessly.

"Our child is *precious*," she said. "You don't understand how important it is to have beautiful children here, because you just *happened* to end up with the most beautiful man in all of Aquila without any sort of effort."

Nagore raised an imaginary chalice in a toasting motion. "To beautiful men and beautiful children," she said. Olalla returned the toast and ate more of the apple, letting the core fall to the ground with a soft thud when it had no more fruit to offer.

"He is competing against that boy from the coast," said Nagore. "The one with the bad attitude and the oddly colored headfeathers? I think he's *died* them!"

"I hope Mesut wins easily," huffed Olalla. "Then we can bring Sergio a lover *and* see that coastal boy embarrassed."

"What do you have against the fishers?" Nagore asked. Olalla waved a hand.

"It's only in sport," she said. "I am for the traders' athletes, so I cheer against the fishers. It is purely a rivalry in sport."

Nagore nodded as if she understood, but her eyes still seemed confused. They both went silent as the match began, and in what seemed like no time at all Mesut was able to defeat his opponent. Nagore let out a gleeful shriek.

“So soon! A lover for Sergio!” she exclaimed. “We’ve found a lover for Sergio! Lionel, go fetch us the boy, will you?” The man who’d been tending to their needs, whose name was apparently Lionel, just nodded and left the room. Olalla laughed and bounced enthusiastically.

“We must tell Sergio to take care of him,” Olalla said, clapping her hands together. “We can’t have him unable to compete in the next round of the wrestling tournament tomorrow.”

She crossed the room to snatch an apple up from the table, and let it crunch under her teeth.

“I would see Sergio happy,” Olalla said. “But this boy is an athlete, not a noble. What is his background? What of his birth? Who are his *parents*? Can we get money from this boy in exchange for his hand, or will Sergio’s family have to pay off anyone? We can’t have that...”

Nagore stopped and stared at Olalla for a minute before raising an eyebrow to stare. Olalla was nodding happily to herself, imagining all the possibilities of a relationship between her dear friend and this adorable wrestler boy.

“We were speaking of a *lover* for Sergio, not a husband,” she said slowly, amused and surprised at Olalla’s sudden interest. “You seemed so opposed about his eyes earlier, what’s changed since then?”

Olalla ate more apple, looking contemplative.

“He is worthy, obviously,” she said. “And I think they should be married and adopt little farmer children to raise into proper nobles. I think they’ll be married in front of the entire kingdom, as well!”

Nagore laughed. “You’re certainly enthusiastic, I suppose,” she said. “Do you wish their relationship that badly? You haven’t even met the boy yet.”

Olalla shrugged. “Never mind that,” she said. “It’ll work out, I guarantee it.”

Nagore smirked. “You do?”

“Of course!” Olalla said, clapping her hands together. “I ship it!”

AUSTIN MCDUFFIE

Found Object: lamp shade

“Business”

The capital city was the heart of the empire. All of the trade, all of the commerce, all of the art and philosophy, it could all be traced back to this place. The royal family was at the head of the empire. The family could do as they pleased without consequence—and they did. The Aquilans, a race of creatures with both characteristics of humans and birds, were the richest in the all the land, and no one dared question their authority.

A few of the Aquilans had a way with the forge, and eventually grew to be skilled craftsmen. One of those craftsmen was an Aquilan by the name of Barner. Barner was a stocky, handsome man and a passionate blacksmith, with a love for the hammer and anvil. Many blacksmiths like himself also bought items that caught their eye, while of course selling most of their own.

One day, while pounding away at the forge, an oddly dressed merchant caught Barner's eye. The merchant, dressed in tight robes, was haggling at a jewelry stand across the street. The merchant held something, but Barner could not tell what. He watched as the strange figure boasted about the prices of the shop's items, claiming that he had been cheated. Barner did not understand why the merchant wanted the jewelry so badly, for he already had countless rings coiled around his clawed fingers.

After being shooed away by the salesman, the merchant turned around to catch Barner staring at him. Barner's eyes narrowed, and he

quickly returned to his work, hoping that the merchant would stray. The merchant instead approached Barner.

“Why you been staring at me, heh?” the merchant asked. “Whattaya want from me?”

Barner had a guilty look on his face. “Nothing,” he said. “It is just, you must be new here, for your face is not familiar.”

“You’re damn right it ain’t!” boasted the merchant. “Not to you, anyway. I’m somewhat of a *travelin’ salesman*, a merchant of the sort. I do trade mostly, but I’ll occasionally buy and sell. I’m always travelin’ the lands, in search of some fine loot.”

“And fine loot you found, I see.” Said Barner, eyeing the strange object the merchant held. “Say, what exactly *is* that thing you’ve got there? It looks like some sort of *hat*...”

“Why this ‘ere is me bread and butter, friend. A finely crafted piece of armor. Made to fit someone about *your size*, I reckon.”

“Oh, really? And are you looking to sell this *fine* piece of yours, perhaps?”

“No. Er, I don’t *plan on it*, if that’s what you mean. But, perhaps for the *right price*, I might just let you take it off my hands...whattaya say?” The piece of armor interested Barner. It was a shoulder piece, an oddly shaped one. But it looked valuable, even so.

“How much?” Barner asked.

“Let’s see ‘ere ... A hun’red and fifty coins!”

“One hundred and fifty!? You are out of your mind, merchant.”

“Alright, alright, I can see...*you ain’t as stupid as the rest of ‘em*. I tell you what, how about one hundred coins, *just for you*, my good boy.” Barner had no idea why, but he felt obligated to purchase the item. Although he had no real need for it, the piece seemed to *glow* in the sunlight. It seemed to *call to him*.

“Alright, one hundred coins it is!”

“Aye, good man!” the merchant shouted.

“I cannot *believe* that I am doing this,” Barner said, sighing as he handed the man a pouch of coins. “But here you go.”

“And here *you go*, friend!” the merchant shouted gleefully, before placing the item in Barner’s hands. He was giddy, Barner could tell, as he watched the merchant run hurriedly down the street.

Barner worked the rest of the day away in anticipation of attending a party to be held at his house. That night, his guests, one by one, made their way into Barner's home. Its stone walls were lined with gemstones, and its windows tinted with a hint of silver. The royal family granted all of the capital city's blacksmiths with deeds to fine houses. The business was booming throughout the land, and the more customers that Barner had, the more items he sold.

Barner had many friends, but his family had abandoned him as a child to travel the world together. His parents had never wanted a child, and so they simply left him when they had one. An elderly Aquilan took him in, and raised him as his own. The man had raised his own sons many years before, but most had ventured beyond the city's walls, and had never returned. The old man was a master craftsman, and taught Barner everything he knew. He told Barner that he had a talent for it, and that he ought to put it to use. On Barner's eighteenth birthday, he became a Blacksmith after years of training under his mentor's wing as an apprentice. The old man died soon after, leaving Barner with no family at all. All he had were friends. But he didn't mind it, he had always been somewhat of an introvert, but on occasion he became lonely, and invited his friends into his home. They were more than glad to eat his food, drink his wine, and laugh at his jokes, but when these things ran out, so did his friends' loyalty.

The partygoers ate, drank, laughed, and danced the night away before leaving the beautiful home in a mess. It annoyed Barner that the guests had left all of the cleaning to him. But Barner was used to it. The people of the capital city had class and manners by day, and a craving for alcohol and a lazy streak by night. As Barner finished cleaning, he heard the sound of glass breaking in the kitchen. Barner knew that it had to be a break-in because he lived alone in the house. He grabbed his sword and his shoulder guard, and ran for the kitchen. He suspected thieves, for there had been many reports of break-ins late at night in the city.

Barner burst into the kitchen, sword in hands. He had been right about the thieves. The man was dressed in dark leather from head to toe, and wore a hood over his head. It was too dark to see his face. The hooded figure pulled two curved daggers from his pockets, and

charged at Barner with one in each hand. The man swung to the left with his right hand, but Barner jumped back, dodging the blade, and swung his sword just as the thief had swung his. The blade ripped through the leather and pierced the skin. The man froze, looked down and saw the open wound in his stomach, and came at Barner with everything he had in a last-ditch effort. He swung the daggers rapidly in a desperate frenzy of rage. Barner dodged the man's attacks until he tired and finally came to a stop, then finished him off by slicing his throat open, as opposed to stabbing him.

Barner stood over the man's body and laughed, thinking of how stupid it was of the man to try to rob a man who forged weapons. But Barner's laughs soon turned to silent cries for help. Barner tried to scream as the blade went through his back. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Only blood. But did hear the merchant's voice before he died.

"Sorry, mate," he said. "It's nothing personal, it's just...Business..."

INDIGO SURKA

Found Object: Porcelain Egg

“The cold wind blows against my feathers that cover my body, and keeps me warm. Today is my liveday celebration. I am going to finally gain my 14th feather, for my 14th year. Tomorrow is the day that I am able to gain the knowledge as to how my people have come to this world. I have been left to figure this out all on my own, and formulate my own assumption as to how we have come. Along with this I am to find my supposed soul mate, with whom I will start a family and with whom to pass on my knowledge to a new generation. I just wish that my mum could be here; it’s supposed to be a mum and daughter kind of planning thing, but I have long lost my mum to the wrath of the world. My dad has been gone for a while now. He said he was going to come back in twenty minutes, but it’s been 5 years.”

There is a potent knock on my door, followed by “Harmony[1], let’s go! I don’t think that I can wait any longer!” I put down my journal, and jump to finish my talons. I untangle the leash to my bird, and set his saddle. My bird opens a wary eye, for it is already 23:35[2]. We have to leave home early in order to get to the city with all of the shops. I have been saving up for this since I was six, when I saw my sister have her liveday celebration. It is a 12-hour journey to the city, where the party will be held. I feel my heart’s cadence pumping warm blood through the cold air. I ready myself for my journey, and open the door. Abria[3] is waiting for me, with a smile from ear to ear. We leave for the city around 23:55. I personally have never been a big fan of dresses, but I know that it is what my mum would have wanted, so I must.

The spring air brushes against my caramel brown to blonde hair, as we ride off into the break of morning. We ride for what feels like

a Neptunian year, but is only 7 hours. We stop for a while to receive directions to the city, and to let our birds drink and eat. Though we would love to stay, we know that we must carry on if we want to get there in time for the biggest annual sales. The journey is a hard reminder for me; of the time that we went into the city for the forever prized first celebration dress buying. But that is the past; and this is the now. The spectacular now, and I need to live in the present.

We finally reach the shops, and the city has blossomed into a whole new place! The streets are paved, the shops are filled with Birdian people, and they are all getting along. I haven't come to the city since my sister's dress buy. The thought sends a chill down my spine, knowing that I am now literally following in my mum's footsteps. I am pulled from thought by the sound of my bird's claws coming to a sudden stop on the gravel. I realize that we have finally reached the city, we are right outside of the city gates. I hop down from the bird, and flutter over to the gate. There is an even larger Birdian standing at the gate. "Entrance reason please." He demands me. I swallow as I once again acknowledge his large muscles, and then I see that this is no ordinary animal, this is a guardian bird. One of the finest birds on this planet. His mother must have been a beauty bird; a queen of the beauty. Ten times more beautiful than anyone on this planet. I wish I was a beauty bird; I could obtain the most of a soulmate.

I catch a sparkle out of the corner of my eye. The most spectacular thing that I have ever seen! I don't even bother trying it on, I just buy it and leave. We are about 40 miles down the road, when I feel a sharp pain in my stomach. This isn't the first time that it has happened. It has been going on for a while now. We stop at a nearby pit stop, and let the birds drink. I go to the bathroom, my stomach cramping now more than ever. I walk to the sinks, and let the water soothe my worn hands. I look up to the mirror, and to my surprise, there is an egg. A white blue spotted egg... A BIRD EGG! It is a perfect bird egg! I take it, and I run!

[1] Harmony-female name meaning peaceful

[2] 23:35- 11:35pm

[3] Abria-female name meaning strong

JESSIE T. WATTS

Found Object: Brass Basket

The trees were so large in this part of the woods. Lory had never seen anything like them; their branches seemed to wrap up and around her, touching the sky to cage her in. Her tiny hands clenched the golden handle of her basket as she thought of the things these trees could be hiding. She gulped, walking faster down the dirt path, dust kicking up behind her as she tried to hurry. She kept her head to the ground, cloaked by her off-white hood that swung in the wind behind her. It seemed that the trees were closing in behind her, and the density of those around the road was so great that she couldn't see more than a few yards beyond the first tree line.

Lory gazed down into her basket, the shining red apples staring back at her, perfectly ripe. The shade of red made her feel better as it shone along with the gold that surrounded the fruit, matching the shade of red that painted her feathers. She reached up to take a handful of her feathers into her hand, running her palm over them and pruning them for a moment. They were small, not much of a headdress yet, but her grandmother told her that one day she would have the longest and brightest feathers of them all.

There was a sound in the woods, a faint but distinctive snap of a twig. Lory spun around, tightening her grip around the basket handle along with her feathers. Her knuckles turned white around the metal and she could feel a stinging pain from pulling on her feathers but she didn't care. Her amber eyes darted from side to side as she looked every tree, rock, bush from top to bottom. Her grip loosened as her nerves slowly fell to their normal levels.

"I guess it was just my imagination..." she said and shyly turned, returning to the path that stretched on in front of her.

“It’s not very smart to walk alone in the woods.” A voice greeted her as she completed her turn, before she ran into the chest of a very tall male Aquilan.

She gazed up at him, having to slightly crane her neck to actually see his eyes. He was light skinned, moles and freckled covered what little she could see of his face. She could see a mess of bright blue and lime green feathers, hanging in tangled locks out from under a hood, connected by a silver clasp to a long leather robe that almost completely covered his body. His hands were crossed behind his back as a grin smeared across his pimpled cheeks.

Lory was completely overcome with fear, her little taloned hands shaking from the sheer height of the male. But she didn’t let him see it. She narrowed her eyes and raised an eyebrow.

“Who are you to tell me what to do?” She snarked up at him, trying hard to mask the drainage of color from her face. The male gave a sly chuckle at her words, walking around her without ever turning his back. She followed him with her eyes, never once losing a sharp, icy stare.

Suddenly the male reached a clawed hand out towards her from behind, ripping the hood from her head, exposing her bright red and bronze headdress, and the small feathers waved just a little in the wind. She was so surprised she didn’t notice him reaching around her chest and neck before he pulled her into his grasp and held her tightly. His talons were unnaturally long and sickly stained, dulled down as if their owner chewed on them in the late hours of the night.

Apples spilt over the forest floor as her golden bucket rolled off into the grass “Who, you ask? The big bad wolf.”

ARIANA WINKLE

Found Object: Wooden Box

My name is Alastor Chen. I am twenty-six years old and in prison. I have never kept a journal before now, but my therapist has told me that going to another planet is going to put more than a dent in our patient-doctor relationship and to write out what's going on so I can keep everything straight. All he could tell me is we are going somewhere where if I don't keep my head on straight it'll be the end of me. If I slip up even once there's no way I can go home. So I'll write in here as often as I can, even if I'm not very good at this.

He told me to write everything.

Day 3

We've been on this spaceship for three days now and all of us prisoners have been chained since we got on. No one has been allowed to shower yet because there's too many of us. The guards promise we can when we get to the plant in four days, but I don't think they'll last that long. Even one of the nice guards who always gives me an extra slice of bread is covering her nose when she enters the prison quarters. I think the guards shower because they all smell identical; like mint and hair gel.

When the guards aren't around to watch us like hawks, some other prisoners like to play games. For the first day the ones closest to the windows played "I spy" as our old home disappeared from sight. After that the windows' metal shutters slid down and bathed us in darkness. They left us in the dark for hours, maybe even a full day. When they turned the lights back on the other nice guard, a mousy looking man who's more boy-sized than man-sized, found a body in a pool of blood fifteen people down from me. There was a lot of screaming that day

and they still haven't figured out who did it but moments afterwards we were all strip searched for weapons. They also took anything that could be used as weapons and even the shoelaces from our shoes. That's why this journal is crayon instead of pen.

Day 6

The nice guards came into a few minutes ago to tell us all we will be reaching our destination within a few hours. They didn't come around to check on each of us. All the guards, even the strictest ones, stopped doing that on Day 3 because the smell was so bad. It's even worse now. They finally sent someone in a white hazmat suit in to get the body and scrub the blood off the floor yesterday. The woman next to me tried to beg the suited being to get her out of there but he didn't reply. It was almost like he couldn't hear us because no human could ignore a plea that desperate. When it left with a black, zippered bag dragging behind it, she collapsed on the floor and only moves to eat. She has also managed to fashion a cloth to cover her mouth and her nose out of her shirt to filter the air a bit. Even with the body gone I can still smell death and bleach.

I don't know what to expect out of wherever we are going, or if we are even going somewhere. What's to stop these people from killing us all the way out here? We've definitely traveled far enough for Intergalactic Humanity Laws to no longer apply. I just want to stand on solid ground sometime soon and a meal that isn't freeze-dried.

Day 7

We have reached a planet the guards call Talön. We're on an island surrounded by crystal waters. It reminds me of the time my family went to this beach in the tropics. The only time the water was cloudy was right after someone jumped into the water, disrupting the sand. I doubt that would be the only thing clouding the water if someone decided to go for a dip here, though.

There are no fences, but guards patrol the beach with the largest guns I have ever seen. We don't have any sleeping quarters yet, either. The guards have a small hut with cracking walls and a port-a-potty. Even that looks luxurious compared to what they brought for the

prisoners. There are piles of burlap, string and plastic stakes for us to make tents and a list that puts four people in each tent. No one told us how we are supposed to get the stakes in the ground, but one guard told us “If someone tries anythin’ they’ll be shot; no questions asked”.

At least we’re supposed to get some of our belongings back tomorrow. Each prisoner was allowed to bring one bag. There were threats about bringing any weapons, drugs, etc. before they let us call our families to tell them what we needed. I managed to get my therapist to pack my bag with a photo of my family, my grandfather’s cigar box with the false bottom, clothes, a bible and he added this journal himself. I brought the bible because we were told a church had funded a majority of this in agreement the prisoners at least tried to attend church and “repent our sins”.

The priests that came with us are unlike any other priests I have ever seen or met or listened to, though. They don’t talk about a god or a devil, just right and wrong and occasionally salvation. They listen to us “repent” for our crimes with straight faces, but do not make us pray for forgiveness. Instead, these priests like to have us explain our motives and reactions so they can point out there’s none of that here. That there’s nothing to “trigger” us because there are no abusive partners, no drugs, no taunting voices and no guns. If anything these priests remind me of the cults I’ve seen on television with their idea that simplicity will save us for some sort of afterlife.

The guards are giving us thirty more minutes to manage to get these tents up and we don’t get our bags till we are done.

Day 10

I’m now afraid to sleep around these people. Three people went missing the first night and two the following one. I don’t know who’s killing who or why they would bring violence here. The bodies haven’t shown up and the scariest part is we don’t have any weapons so how are they doing this? *Why* are they doing this?

The guards have tried to assure us there are strange, new creatures on this planet and have been repeating it like a mantra. They look even more shaken than us, though. I don’t care if it’s a murderer or a giant whatever; I just want to be safe.

As an extra precaution I have begun keeping my journal and photos in the false bottom of the cigar box. I have filled the top part with sketches of the things we've seen so far. There are trees like the ones from where we're from with pineapples and berries I've never seen before in shades so bright I thought they were plastic beads. There are also a lot of new creatures. Giant spiders with no eyes and horses that run more like rabbits than horses. I don't think either of these animals have killed anyone, though.

During the day everything seems relatively safe and the guards have us going in groups with them to explore while others are building the new jail. Bit odd to trust prisoners to build their own prisons.

Yesterday my tent group was assigned to digging holes to be filled with cement for posts when the man next to me collapsed. He had the shakes and eyes of an addict going through withdrawal since the on the second day of the spaceship. He seemed better yesterday, like the detox was over and he could finally move without throwing up and cold sweat no longer coated his skin.

The guard with us checked his pulse and pronounced him dead. Since we don't have anywhere to put bodies and can't risk dumping them in the water the guard rolled him into the pit before pouring cement. Another prisoner started comparing this job to when the Great Wall was built and I can't help agreeing with them.

Day 27

I have not been able to write in many days. Things have gone from bad to much worse. We have discovered that flesh-eating birds the size of trees were the cause of missing people, and the guards are beginning to rush construction further, desperate to get a roof over all of our heads.

The whole colony is thinning out and we've even lost some guards to disease, animals and people attempting to flee. I don't even know where I would go if I could get out of here. It's not like I could hideout in an old friend's basement or tell my mom I'm on parole.

We are also running out of food and the guards are hesitant to let us eat even the familiar looking fruits. They're running out of ways to purify water as well. The seawater here isn't salty and tastes sweet like well-water. This has all led to stealing among the prisoners. No one

has managed to find this journal, but my spare clothes went missing and I saw a man much larger than me stretching out my sweatshirt. I didn't approach him about it. It's not worth an ass kicking, or worse.

Day 32

My name is Alastor Chen. I am twenty-six years old and I'm no longer an inmate on the prisoner colony of Talön. This will be my last journal entry for a long time. It will be dangerous to write in this journal because we are staying in large, open rooms made by stringing large leaves between trees. There are over fifty people in here with me. I am hoping not to get caught before I can finish.

By "they" I mean the priests. Last night, I was dragged from my bed by one of the younger ones I've talked to. He had me get on a boat with fifteen other people. Two of them were guards who looked unhappy and were tied up with their backs propped against the hull. When we arrived we were stripped of most of our belongings and given light-feeling, flowing clothes. They made me throw my drawings in a fire, but let me keep the cigar box as they thought it was empty.

I will not be returning to my home planet anytime soon, or possibly ever. My sentence on this planet is eternal. Because of this, there is no reason for me to continue to update my findings in here.

I did not get to tell my family I loved them or walk out of prison a free man. This journal will probably be lost and burned or trampled or get me in trouble, but I cannot risk discarding it, so I will be keeping it in my cigar box. One last time, I am Alastor Chen. I am twenty-six years old and this is goodbye.

SUEVAT PRIME / KONA

Suevat Prime, otherwise known as Kona by the native species, is a planet light years away from our solar system, orbited by floating continental bands and asteroids. In this universe, the Great Depression on Earth never occurred, meaning World War II did not happen either. This caused the space age to arrive twenty years earlier than it did in our world. Because of overpopulation and the need for economic advancement, the citizens of Earth sent out a fleet of spaceships to colonies new planets. One ship was set on a course for Suevat Prime, where it turned out there were humanoid creatures called the Jasm Ka already living.

The Jasm Ka branch off into two subspecies—the Ka Bakar and the Ka Phalia. The Ka Bakar live on the planet's surface while the Ka Phalia live on the floating continental plates surrounding Suevat Prime's atmosphere called the Bands. After they reached the planet, humans discovered a precious magnetic metal called mykonium that they began to mine on the Bands and the Stepping Stones (floating debris close to the surface). Though tensions were high between humans and the natives, the Jasm Ka allowed the humans to live among them in relative peace. The most prominent divergence between the species, as well as the one that has caused the most conflict, is the use of magic. There are microorganisms in Suevat Prime's water that infiltrate the chemical makeup of animal and plant life, including all Jasm Ka and a few select humans. If an animal's genes are compatible with the microorganisms then it gains a certain power based on its environment. People with the power are even considered magical by some humans.

On the surface, Suevat Prime is the ideal planet for humans to inhabit. But if you take a closer look, it's overflowing with discrimination between the three species. The introduction of human interstellar trade, especially with the booming mykonium mining industry, has turned Suevat Prime into a cutthroat, harsh world.

PEARSE ANDERSON

“The Warm Pop in the Back of the Skull”

I had never seen the outside of the place I work in, but I had been told it was an asteroid. We had been pushed into the dark side of the rock, close to the molten core. The heat warmed the folks at the back and melted the water cooler into an industrial cocoon.

The typewriters clicked; our cufflinks on the Formica accompanied the endless symphony. In the scheduled breaks I talked with Johnson about the newest pulp, the machines whirring behind us. I owed Johnson and we both knew it. His apartment compound received good radio, the stations we both liked, so he would record the detective stories and we'd listen to them at lunch over rice and cold chicken.

“I can't do this, Red. Not for what the quota's asking.” I knew he wanted me to take some. Bank notes, building permits, the regular slag of the government and their motions. The fat snake shedding another layer of taxes and censuses. I grabbed as much as I could and returned to my desk. I don't think I could've resisted if I wanted to. Another coworker threw in some essays. I forced a smile, and began the ordering.

The last time my father came up to visit me, he had told me how incredible it was that I had become acquaintances with all of my coworkers. We had walked through the passageways of my compound, the old man asking how I was and why every single one of these people is my acquaintance but not my friend. I dunno, I had thought of saying, I guess you just didn't raise me right, raise me strong, raise me into a man that made friends. Instead I had said something worse and felt the impact of hand on cheek and face onto the cold floor. Then the footfalls of the final departure of my father from this life. He had been the first

and the last person I intimately spoke with in my compound.

It came to mind when I shuffled through the letters, and when I found the ashtray. A small piece of greened metal, bands of needles and pine cones circling the rim. I must have taken it from Johnson's desk with the rest of the mail. Only small fits of coughing penetrated the choking fog of clicks, the thousands of metal and plastic cicadas seemingly erupting from our desks.

Economic plans. Filed. Liquor licenses. Filed and ordered. Educational applications. Filed.

A letter filed for the St. Dnedna Police, chief inspector. Not filed and ordered. I cannot pin down why I did not file and order the letter, but at least part of it was a sudden realization of what kind of person work had made me. What kind of person my family had made me, my father. What kind of person I had forced on myself. How great detective stories are, how much I needed to escape from the hive. All of this and more falling on my back and pressing down on my hand and snapping the letter down onto my lap.

The complex had stained bathrooms, but one stall door locked so I found myself inside it with the ashtray and the police letter. I fingered the ashtray, a soothing, slow caress like they were meditation balls, and with the other hand I held the letter as I ripped it open with my teeth. I could almost taste the pulpy noir as I spit out the bits of paper. Shit. I wouldn't be able to reseal it. I'd have to get my money's worth. I began reading.

Did she always do this?

Run away?

Yes.

Not like this.

What changed?

She would've packed. She always packed a little bag. There's something else too, in the air. I can sense it's different this time. Things smell different, winds blows strangely. This wasn't routine.

What did it smell like?

The air? I dunno. Something deep, something I've never smelled before.

And when did you realize your sister was missing?

Dinnertime, two nights ago. We share the same house and we meal together. When I came up from the basement, late, she wasn't there. Friends hadn't seen her, I called around.

What were you doing in the basement?

I have an isolation tank.

Elaborate.

It's a saline solution you can float in, enclosed in a metal box. Soundproof.

Who put you in the isolation tank?

I put myself in the tank. Ever wake in the night from your dreams and ooze between the dreamworld and the waking? Between the warm covers? Hours passes in these moments like nothing I've ever experienced. Black infinities, in both space and time. You're consumed.

How often do you...?

Every few days.

So you came out of your isolation tank at dinnertime and you weren't joined by your sister?

Correct.

What do you do other than this isolation therapy?

It's not therapeutic.

What else do you do for fun, ma'am?

Cook. Radio pulps. Feed what needs to be feed and clean. I like the silence.

Why were you not outside often?

Regular day people don't want to see me I guess.

But people wanted to see your sister outside?

You could say that. She was accepted, made friends as she walked down the street. Smoked and talked in Bendtown.

What changed between you and your sister that made people accept her and not you?

I'll let you take a wild guess on that one, detective inspector.

There was no more. I had no time to think, for perhaps my quarterly manager was inspecting my section and asking why I wasn't in my

place. I was a person of industry, service, not a thief. Probably fired if found out. My brain shouted to return so I followed suit.

My mind froze as soon as I left and only awoke as the doorbell rang to my apartment, hours later. Had I been fired? Why was the radio on static, and a throng of letters on the faux-oak table? Who was at the door?

"Hello?" Hesitantly I asked into eternal cold midnight No one answered. Closed the door and returned to whatever I had started. The letters, the radio, the ringing in my brain. The woman. I fell asleep going over the transcript, forgetting to check the letters of silence the radio.

Wake. Corn flakes, issued toothpaste. Cable car across the asteroids. Look through a newspaper, a headline with the words "FLEES COUNTRY" in bold. Arrive. File. Order. Water and chicken. Johnson. Linoleum. Cough. File. Type. Cough.

Then wake. Corn flakes, issued toothpaste. Pick at a scab. Headline reads "STARVATION". File. Order. Remember her, remember her words. Rice, beans. Type. Remember. Type.

Then wake. The transcript is on the mattress. Headline reads "ENDURANCE". File. Order. File. Order. File. Memorize her answers to the questions. Picture her laugh. File. Order.

Then wake. Ask Johnson for more mail, more police stuff. Remember the mail back at the apartment. Fill coat with new police stuff. Pretend to order, file, type. Her voice stuck in throat. Forget to pick up newspaper, repeat her words. Imagine what we'd talk about. File. Type. File. Cable car to apartment. Enter house, radio still on static. Her. The only one that understands me. The only one I can help.

I was on the edge. I pooled what I had left. Little: work-issued currency, vouchers, business cards. Then the letters. I could do it. I could find her, and I could help her. And so, at whatever hour it was in some nameless forever-month, I turned out my lights and planned my escape as the void encroached and swallowed me, and I felt like I had finally entered the same stomach as she was in, the great next plane of existence.

PHOENIX BAUR

Found Object: A cross shaped piece of metal with a curved top and bottom, holes being found on the curves, as well as a skinny rectangular hole in the center. Strung on a twine thread.

~*~

Two

His breathing and mind were uneven. Heart pounding like his feet upon the alleyway, he ran, feeling his cape being led in a dance with the wind. Violet oculi tried to untangle the spider web of streets, mind filled with calculations until he found the best route home.

Xenon was suddenly knocked to the ground, gravity's anxious arms pulling his body to the ground, but he still managed to turn to see his assailant. A whimper escaped past chapped lips, the young human-alien hybrid silently surveying the bulky boy in front of him. He was obviously a full human, rich as well by appearance. From just those two facts, he already found this male's motive to cause him pain.

It's in the basic human psyche to be afraid of what they don't understand. It's also in basic human psyche to oppress, to judge someone for something they can't control, to call something inhuman and treat it as such. On this planet, Suevat Prime, where it was common for humans to mock the hybrids, it seemed Xenon was in the wrong place and the wrong time. Anger spread across the built human's features, while in contrast, fear blossomed in the oppressed violet eyes of the youth, nimble fingers clutching his mother's necklace.

"What're you gonna do, half-breed? Hurt me with your silly 'magic'? Come on I dare you!" the teenager teased, giving a kick at Xenon's ribs. A cry of pain escaped ivory lips, their owner struggling to choke back a sob. Shaky hands only grasped the silver object tighter, finding comfort in its familiarity. "I-I mean you n-no harm... I d-don't wish

to u-use my magic to h-hurt others,” he stammered, his whole body visibly trembling. Fear flooded his body just like salt water flooded his eyes, earning another kick to the chest for his reply. Spit was dropped near his face, and he turned away quickly, violet hair falling into his eyes. “Pl-Please let me go h-home. I’ll give you any obj-ject I have!”

“...That necklace. I want that necklace!” the human shouted, chuckling for he knew the symbol well. It was common among the natives, and certainly a human wouldn’t acquire one. Xenon struggled to think, digits tracing the pattern, mindless patterns being made with his movements. He looked down at the object, the sacred necklace, and kissed it quickly before pulling it over his head and giving it to the boy. “Please j-just... let me go home... I’m sorry!”

“And exactly what is going on here?”

Both parties were frozen in time. The voice caused their heads to turn towards the monarch of the race native to the planet, the Jasm’ka, Xenon struggling to try and sit up so he could bow to her respectfully. Instead he continued to lay there, ribs sticking at odd angles as he coughed up blood, the color a pulchritudinous shade of aqua. Upon seeing her, the bulky boy had run off, leaving behind the necklace. The black haired queen picked up the object and smiled softly, sitting down next to Xenon as she placed it in his hands. “Tell me child, what is your name?”

“I-It’s Xenon, your royal m-majesty.” It was obvious he was in pain and engulfed with nervousness, but she ignored all that. Maternal instincts kicking in, she pulled the young boy into her arms and cradled him, a delicate purple hand sweeping his hair out of his face. “Y-Your highness, d-don’t waste your time on me.”

“Waste my time? Nonsense, Xenon, it’s my pleasure to help you. Can you walk? I suggest we go to a medical professional before I take you home,” she spoke, a slight accent to her voice due to it not being her native tongue. She smiled a little more brightly, causing Xenon to lighten up—even if by just a bit.

“I... I don’t have anywhere to live, your majesty. A-And no way to pay for bills... my p-parents were killed earlier this y-year when the famine hit...” he mumbled before seeing her smile fade into an ambivalent state. She placed the necklace around his neck once more,

oculi lighting up with an idea. Xenon was curious as to what she had thought of, but as soon as her soothing, calm voice reached his ears he grew anxious.

“Xenon, how would you like to live in a palace? And more importantly, how would you like to become a prince?”

ZOE CLOUD

Found Object: Wooden, long-handled, broad area at the end.

“First Day in the Mines”

Emilia picked up the wooden object. “What is it?” she asked.

Her new friend Araci, who spoke with a native Jasm Ka accent, said, “It’s a mining implement called a space pan. You reach out and grab bits of dust and minerals with it.”

Emilia observed it. It was had a long handle, and a flat wooden surface with a mesh net on top of it. “It doesn’t make sense. If it’s made for collecting stuff from space, it would be better fireproof. That way, you could catch small meteors that were on fire.”

“That’s true. But here in the rings, there’s plenty of dust and stuff in the atmosphere to catch. Here, let me show you.”

The two walked to the edge of the asteroid. Araci grabbed the space pan and scooped into the air. Xe pulled it back, and it appeared to magically fill with dust. Emilia gasped.

“Wow,” she said. “I heard you guys had magic, but I didn’t realize you could enchant technology.”

Araci giggled. “Yeah,” she said. “Most of this stuff is actually in the atmosphere, the magic just makes it easier to collect.” Xe returned to a more formal posture, more like a teacher than a friend. “The next thing we need to do is sort the dust, see what’s valuable and what’s not.”

Emilia held out a magnet to the dust, and most of it jumped onto the poles. "Sweet! Lots of iron here! I'll get my dad and he can smelt and refine it." She ran off.

Araci shouted, "Sounds good. I'll see if there's any other good stuff in here."

Emilia didn't know what happened next. Had she been careless and not looked where she was going? Whatever the case, she soon found herself falling from the asteroid that she had called home since she was born. She knew she couldn't possibly survive the fall, and she was terrified as the ground grew closer and closer. She heard Araci call out, and suddenly felt herself being lifted gently through the air.

"Oh my God," Emilia breathed. "That was awful. Thank you so much."

Araci murmured a shy thanks. Emilia continued, "I didn't know Jasm Ka had wings."

Araci replied, "Most of us don't. We Ka-Phalia started building mechanical wings for transportation. It was actually pretty common that someone would fall off an asteroid."

They alighted on the asteroid again. Emilia looked around and said, "Hey, where's the space pan?"

Araci groaned. "Oh no, I must have dropped it!"

"That's ok," said Emilia. "I'm sure we could buy another one just like it. And I still have all the iron from today's haul."

Araci still looked miserable. "Your father's going to kill me."

Emilia grinned. "After saving me? I'm sure he'd much rather give you a medal."

The two went back to Emilia's house laughing. Meanwhile, on the planet's surface, a Ka-Bakar gang member picked up the burnt space pan and hissed. He returned its remains to the leader of the gang.

"What have we here?" said the gang leader.

The scout said, "Sir, the Ka-Phallia gang marks territory by placing their technology on pieces of land. This is a space pan, a piece of Phallian technology. We need to prepare for war."

FRAZIER CRAWFORD

“An Exposition on Human and Alien Mourning”

A small, oddly shaped piece. The pentagonal base has a small, shallow protrusion, and is colored blue on the edge. Set to the back of the base, a half circle rises out of it, like half of a sphere's cross section. It has a valley in the center.

The xenos word for it is *tamen*. Among the human colonists of Suvat Prime it is called an incense burner. However, while the tradition of such an object is well documented in human history, the materials and rituals surrounding the *tamen* are unique to the newly settled planet. The base is refined, hardened porcelain, mined from the main continent. The glaze can be a personalized touch, but is typically mass produced as an azure blue. The actual holder for the incense however is a psychoreactive plastic of unknown manufacture, grown organically by some xenos means. This fact aside, many people, most notably those with East Asian ancestry, have readily adopted this particular facet of funeral mourning. When incense is placed in the burner, something about the heat awakens whatever kind of residual and reactive energy exists within the unique material. The plastic begins to glow in a soft, throbbing manner. Depending on the collective mood in the location, the throbbing will follow different patterns, different combinations of colors and rhythms set specifically to provide a calming atmosphere. While this technology, if that is what it is, is not understood, it has given

rise to a belief that it somehow channels the energy of spirits departed, ancestors from the beyond. People find this immensely comforting, as a family shrine to pray to, as a keepsake to hold memories by. This trinket has served as something of a common ground between the inhabitants of Suvat Prime. While shaman has such a negative connotation, a class of xenos that has a good understanding of such technology has been known to participate in certain funeral rituals. In regions and cultures more accepting of the Jasum Ka, these individuals are given a place of honor at somber ceremonies. They are invited to bring anti-grav caskets to transport the body in honor to its resting place. Rituals are spoken in native tongue before the family in condolences. Some shamans have even learned our tongue to smooth these passages.

While it could never really be said that friendships are formed in these short encounters, a kind of mutual understanding is formed. People have passed on from this world to something different, and we are all sad. To this end, some of the few Jasum establishments in human settlements are parlor homes, mortuaries, and sanctuaries. Medicine too, has hesitantly been making inroads from one culture to another. The same reactive material in the *tamen* is also utilized to find *asbein feiros*, which translated loosely to “ill spirits”, or wounded parts of a specimen that may not be easy to pin down with modern medical technology. Typically the wounds stem from psychological disorders, such as PTSD or Munchausen’s. Xenos science seems well adapted to responding to emotions. On the other end, vitamins and supplements are at high demand on the low gravity mining outposts of the Jasum, as a lack of natural sun and gravity wreaks a terrible toll on the body.

It is sobering to think that only in pain and death do we find common ground with our alien neighbors; and to be sure, this is the only common ground. While cultural unity of the Jasum Ka exerts a firm grip over foreign relations, and thank God for it, only the restraining hand of the prefect enforcers have prevented war from erupting. As it is there are fights, killings, murders. In human cities mostly, authorities wrestle every day with a sect of the populace that feels a particular patriotic fervor that demands violent action. In the Jasum ka it is notably less so. Much of Jasum society is built of amalgamated cultures. Where war failed their species, they turned to assimilation and

understanding, gradually changing opinions to work alongside those of their separate races. This is not to say that all Jasum Ka are of a single mind or philosophy. However, many Jasum Ka are more than willing to let border lines lie where they are, adapt to what they admire of ours and openly share what we desire. Humans, as always, are as belligerent here as we were in the cradle of humanity. With the crisis-psyche that permeates the colonists, domination of the surface is what dominates our thoughts. Industry was the primary goal of the colony fleets, and it is a hard mistress that works the earth. This, more than anything, is the most offensive to the sensibilities of the natives. Their organic architecture and way of life, while no stranger to mass production, is conducted with upmost respect for nature. The sheer output of smog and soot from Magnus and Felictio is a sore subject to the entire species. Several meetings between the two ruling bodies have taken place, but to little or no effect on policy and populace. Negotiations between a people with thousands of years of totally dissimilar government process do not easily bear fruit.

There has been talk of all-out war, but this is merely gossip from a malcontent to a busy body, and from them to a co-worker on up to a line manager, to his wife and her children in the school. Six generations have passed since we alighted on Suvat. No one in their right mind wants a war to decimate the colony at this stage. That being said, the super-complexes of Lemura have been fortified, and whole new subdivisions of industrial zones have been created and re-tasked to arms manufacture. I fear it is only a matter of time before these precautions send us into an unavoidable conflict.

JASPER FEREHAWK

“To the Sky”

The sight of Suevat Prime from the Belt always amazed Alen. The sight of the blue seas, green lands, and dusty deserts of the floating blue sphere which his ancestors had so revered from their home planet of Earth. It was a miracle that Alen's father still remembered the name of a planet that no one cared about anymore. All of Alen's coworkers were highly invested in not only their occupation, but also in the fact that the very survival of humanity of Suevat Prime depended on their job. The job itself was a hard one (at least that's what Alen thought), one that involved the threat of crashing ships coming in from the inner ring of space stations. The pressure was enormous for Alen and others, who had the fates of pilots and their cargo resting on their figurative shoulders and their literal arms. To put it bluntly, Alen was one of the men who waved down space-faring ships leaving or arriving at the Belt, either from the planet's surface or the closer asteroid belt. The asteroids were a precious location for mineral-seeking prospectors, a massive influx of which Alen had seen coming and going from the Belt in the last five years he had been serving as a guide for the masses of pilots. They lived a hard life, even harder than Alen's, mostly because their futures depended on the results of the scanning and mining of the asteroid and its even more precious minerals. Seeing as there was no home to head back to (at least according to all the parents, which in

turn came from their parents, and so on), there was little to no choice amongst the prospectors. Either they could return to the tense Jasin Ka-human situation planetside, or move to the dangerous near-planet Belt and space stations that dotted the asteroids. Both decisions were wrought with danger, with war tensions threatening to erupt at any time on Suevat Prime, and pirates, raiders, or the like threatening to destroy all that one had worked to build up in space. The choice was a hard one for many, but luckily there was no hard decision for Alen as a result of the family business that had been handed down from his father from his father's father, just like the old legends of Earth.

It was this old but familiar sight of the planet's surface, just like the fabled Terran planet, that never failed to excite Alen's mind and energy. His enthusiasm after seeing the grand sight of humanity's new home excited him with new vigor as his spacesuit visor lighted up with a notice which read: "*Incoming: Flight Ship 4LG57B*," with the ship's model underneath it in small lettering. Alen pushed himself up, which the gravity thankfully helped with, and floated over to the runway, which ran parallel to the Belt that encircled Suevat Prime. The suit gave him an enhanced view of the incoming starship and its projected path onto the pilot's promised landing location. Alen's father had given him a gun just in case of any sabotage, but such things were dangerous to speak of, especially in the volatile time that both Alen and his father lived in. Disregarding his father's lessons of self-defense, or the "soft spots" of a fighter, Alen took out the two handheld flashlights that were given to all personnel on the landing strips of the Belt and held them upward. He pushed the red button on top of the flashlight and the chrome cone that led to the light bulb ignited in blinding white light, extending all the way into the unseen stars of the infinite dark sky. Bringing both lights downwards, Alen signaled for the ship to land, and then guided it to the hangar to the left. The hangar in question was small, which made sense since the port was one of the smaller ones on the Belt and was colored with black, as if to fit the backdrop of the dark space skyline.

It was silent days like this which Alen took pleasure in, but this quiet, normal life was shattered in a second, as the flight director looked overhead to see the dreaded sight of rogue fighter ships. Their guns

erupted with red light and left burning scars on the landed starship. Alen's reflexes, borne from intense training with his father, took over and he grabbed the pistol that was holstered to his back waist. Raising the gun, he fired at the attacking vessels, his own weapon shining in red light as a thin beam came out from it. Having not fired a weapon in his entire time working on the flight-road, Alen held the trigger down for too long and extended the beam into the starry sky. With this mistake, the capacitor at the bottom of the gun sent heat throughout his arm, which in turn caused Alen to quickly take the magazine out and search the belt on his spacesuit for another one. Before he could grab another, more blood-red lights were fired on the ground of the landing strip where Alen stood, pushing him back as the explosion rocked the surface. Alen desperately tried to grab onto a ledge as he was sent flying off the edge of the Belt, his monitor lit up with more dreaded red as it showed his projected route onto the planet below.

UNITY HAQ

“Contact”

Farina wound her way through the marketplace, holding a bottle of flower oil. It was crowded for this early in the morning, and the street was completely jammed. After a great deal of struggle, she found her way to her stall and proceeded to place a skillet on the cast-iron stove. It was rusty, probably centuries old. She'd bought it from someone who had scavenged the wreckage of a human ship that had crashed into the trading port between two asteroids. Even after two months of living among them, she still hadn't been able to wrap her mind around the humans' existence. *An alien invasion.*

They claimed to have come in peace, though she didn't trust them. According to the rumors, they had to migrate since they completely destroyed their home planet. Who knew what they would do to Kona?

She furiously uncapped the bright green and yellow spray bottle, shaped like a bouquet. It was made of plastic, a new material that had only been introduced after the humans came. She then sprayed flower oil all over the surface of the skillet and poured pancake batter inside, all in a matter of seconds. She had performed these simple actions so many times that they were second nature. Careful not to burn her fingers, she switched on the flame. The pancake immediately started to brown.

While the first side cooked, she tied back her lilac hair in a cloth bandanna that had once belonged to an alien. It seemed like everything she owned had been gleaned from human junkyards these days. Farina

turned back to her work and was so preoccupied with flipping the pancake that she didn't notice the customer that had been standing in front of her for the last few minutes.

"Can I help you?" She met his eyes. It was a human. She instinctively drew back, and he seemed to notice. Farina blushed with guilt, her face becoming tinged with blue—but not too much. It was a foreigner after all. An alien.

The hired translator beside him echoed something in English, presumably what she had just said. The customer murmured something back, and the translator finally said, "He would like some pancakes."

"30 credits," she said. Actually, it was 20, but the foreigners didn't know that. She might as well make some extra money.

The alien raised an eyebrow, whispered something to the translator, who in turn said, "Isn't that a bit expensive?"

Farina shook her head. "It's normal here."

The man sighed and handed over 30 credits. She gratefully took them, biting her lip to keep from smiling. She didn't feel the slightest bit of remorse; the man was clearly wealthy judging by his perfectly creased suit and the fact that he could afford to have a translator. And Farina's family would definitely benefit. Maybe the invasion wasn't too bad; at least she could take advantage of the humans.

As she walked away, she remembered something that the educators had said when they came to tell her town about the invasion. Most of the humans wanted purified food that didn't contain any microorganisms so they wouldn't receive the survival powers that her race, the Jasm Ka, had. Farina wasn't sure why—the gift was pretty cool.

Farina hadn't remembered to use purified flower oil for the man's pancakes. But *he* was the one who hadn't specifically asked for it. If the next morning he woke up with laser vision, it would be entirely his fault. She nonchalantly flipped another pancake.

The next morning, she woke up and reached the market early. Most of her sales were in the morning, so she was usually one of the first people there. She had sold about five when the same man from yesterday stormed up to her stand and yelled something in English. *Of course*, Farina thought, *he has powers now and doesn't want them. His loss!*

"Did you put something in his pancakes yesterday?" the translator

stated politely. "By the time he got home, he was strong enough to lift up a hovercraft."

"They were ordinary Kona pancakes. Although, most of Kona's food contains microorganisms. That's probably what did it.... I forgot to purify them for him."

The translator sighed and said something of his own accord. "Humans don't like eating contaminated food. They don't *want* to have the gift."

"I told you, I forgot. He was lucky to have extra strength, anyway—everyone wants that as part of their gift, but not many people get it. I only got better hearing, which isn't particularly useful for a street cook."

The customer told something to the translator, who didn't seem all that happy to relay the message to Farina. "He regrets spending all that money to freeze himself to come here." Farina stifled a laugh. If he had been frozen for the journey, that meant he was an automatic political leader. And yet he was blundering enough to accidentally acquire the gift. "He thinks Suevat Prime was a waste of an expedition and he wants to go home."

She shook her head in disgust. *Suevat Prime*. Was that really what the invaders were calling Kona now?

The man said something, with a pleading, desperate look in his eyes. The translator said, "Is there anything he can do to make the results better?"

"Not really. The least he can do is make the most of the powers he has." She paused. "They're cool powers."

"He has one last question," the translator said. "What did he eat that had the bacteria in them?"

"It must have the flower oil," Farina said with a heavy sigh. The customer and his translator left, while she was left to make a new batch of pancakes. She had decided to buy a new bottle of purified flower oil. It would be an awful waste of money, but if she angered a significant amount of rich customers she might lose her market stall. As she handed over the extra ten credits she'd made, frustration boiled in her veins. The humans would probably continue to discriminate against the natives, introduce new plants that wouldn't coexist with Kona's flora and fauna, maybe even ultimately destroy the planet, and now she was spending ten credits on them.

As she flipped pancakes, she thought about it. And if she thought deeply and for long enough, it was sort of exciting to have contact with an extraterrestrial species. Still, all that had been undermined by the fact that every single one of them treated the Jasm Ka like dirt. Farina didn't think it was fair—it was *her* planet.

She came to the conclusion that she shouldn't take it for granted anymore. She would learn how to get along with the aliens, and stop scamming them. Maybe.

After all, they were going to be on Kona for a long time. Why not make the best of it?

MAYA HOMZIAK

Found Object: A flat bar with a hooked y-fork at one end and a bent hook-like protrusion at the other. The top of the bar has a thin band of metal that forms a hump that the axis of the turning mechanism passes through. There's a green wooden handle at one end of the turning mechanism, and at the other end there are two bent blades with holes in them.

“Coexistence”

Issa's mother thrust the small, shiny tool at her fork end first, telling her, “Go on! Everyone else is working already and we need another person on sifting.” The job of raking and sifting through crushed meteor rock for the magnetic ore that had started the Meteor Rush was an easy but boring job. If there was a way, Issa would cut work, but on an asteroid this size she'd be found and reprimanded in a heartbeat.

She took the sifter from her mother and set off toward the workstation, ignoring her mother's shouted reminders to “Be safe around the furnace, dear!” Other workers greeted her on her way towards her assigned job, but Issa only walked faster, determined to reach the relative peace of her workspace. The station was barely more than a hut, and she quickly ducked into the dark, sweltering heat inside.

As Issa stood in the doorway, she saw a bobbing pattern of bioluminescent lights in the dimness. Amalan had already arrived at work, and the Ka Bakar female hadn't bothered to turn on the light. Again. She was already heating the furnace for a load of ore with the abilities that were common in her species, and her violet skin shimmered with sweat. The surface of the furnace was beginning

to glow with heat as Issa flicked on the light switch, and she was reminded of just how different the two of them were. Someone had explained it to Issa when she was a little girl: the abilities came from something about symbiotic organisms and adaptations for survival, but her child's mind had called it "magic" and it had stuck. It made her nervous, but she and Amalan had always gotten along well and she supposed that she had no reason to worry.

Amalan hardly ever spoke, and was one of two system natives on the asteroid. She had been blinded in one eye accidentally as a child and refused to tell anyone the circumstances of the accident. She always kept her blind eye hidden behind a curtain of dark hair and styled the rest in a braid as practical as her plain clothing, with the exception being an armband which designated her as having a heat-related gift. Issa couldn't recall ever seeing her outside the sifting station, not even for meals. She was something of a local mystery.

Issa sat and began to turn the crank of her sifter as Amalan tossed a bucket of ore into the furnace to melt, where it would then run through the pipes to the molding station. Issa's tool clanked as a chunk of ore failed to pass through the hole in the blades, was picked up, and dropped into the now-empty bucket. Amalan produced a sifter tool and they sat in easy silence as they worked. As the morning passed they fell into a rhythm of sifting: rake the gravel, find the ore, fill the bucket, empty, repeat.

Amalan broke the silence first. "Do you like living here, Issa?"

Issa looked up, startled. "I guess I do; I've lived here since I was born."

Amalan paused, as if considering this, then said, "I wish I could return home, and that all humans were as accepting as the ones on this asteroid. It is beautiful here though, with the Kona and its bands filling so much of the sky..."

Now Issa was curious. "Why can't you go home?"

Amalan didn't answer, instead preferring to press her elongated hands against the furnace and ready it for another bucket of ore.

Eventually Amalan began to speak, calmly and with little feeling. "I was very young, and I lived in a place where your kind and my kind were intermixed. Now it is only home to humans. One day a fight broke out and it spread. I lost my eye trying to defend myself with my

gift in ways I was not yet ready for. I survived, and the instigators were arrested, but I still fled out of fear. First to the city, and then to this asteroid. I had heard that there was already a member of my species living here, and I decided I could feel safe here from this useless, quiet war of hate.”

She looked down at her violet hands and fiddled with the handle of her sifter aimlessly, waiting for Issa’s reaction.

Issa was unable to think of anything to say but a pathetic “I’m sorry. I wish it could have been different” that sounded painfully inadequate. Just then, the buzz that signaled the shift end sounded, and Issa slowly got up from the bench with her sifter in hand. “I might be asked to work a different job after lunch, but I could ask to be assigned back here if you want a friend to talk to...” She said, hesitating at the door.

Amalan looked up, and for the first time Issa could remember, smiled and said “I would be very happy if you would.”

JEFF KATZ

“The Tenderfoot”

The beating of the water streams from the showerhead ended abruptly, leaving her back tingling. The steam floated in the air like wasted perfume as she watched the grit that had been smeared across her face and arms swirl down the drain.

When the final drops had finally wandered down her skin to join the puddles on the white tile floor she stepped out of the stall, pulling a towel from a metal hook and wrapping it around herself. Walking between a long mirror and the line of shower stalls, all silent now, she turned her head to look at her reflection. Stringy orange hair swayed to her step, framing her square face. She wiped a smudge of dirt she had missed from her forehead, gave herself what she thought of as a dazzling smile, and strode into the locker room.

She dressed simply, comfortably: grey shorts, a black sleeveless tee. A rubber hair tie gathered her still-wet hair into a ponytail. Nothing would be dangling in her eyes tonight. No distractions.

She stretched. With every loosened muscle and cracked joint she felt the exhaustion of the day ebb away and the blood of the night flood in. With it came alertness, brightness now in her eyes and tightness now in her lips.

There was a knock at the door.

“Ready?”

Emerson smiled when she opened it. He still had dust from the mines all over his face and uniform.

She grinned right back at him. “I’ve been ready and raring since I woke up this morning.”

"C'mon, then! They're getting unbearable."

"God, are they all out there already?" she said as they began jogging down the hallway.

"Seems they only waited for us late shifters to be let out before crowding about the ring like children round a candy bowl. Enton says six-hundred marks collectively have already been wagered." They turned a corner.

"And who do they seem to favor?"

Emerson snorted. "Ness, when a shark and a minnow are put in the same tank, it's not exactly a mindbender to figure out which is going to still be there the next day."

"Even when this particular minnow has slammed three of the facility's best fighters?"

"Plankton. These miners have seen dozens of fighters come through this place over the years, and believe me, they know a champion when they see one. Hell, I bet you and the girls could give even a professional leaguer a run for their money."

She raised an eyebrow. "Glad to see you have such faith in me."

"It's less faith than logic."

They slowed down at the end of the hall where two double metal doors marked the exit out onto the asphalt lot.

"Seriously, though. You're gonna be great." Out of a satchel Emerson pulled Ness' girls, and handed them to her. She slid her hands around the grooved handles of the beloved fistshields, the worn, sanded wood like her oldest friends beneath her fingers. Though cracked and ancient, they had a strange strength, and she could never fight without them. The crowd would be disappointed if she did; they were as much her partners as her tools, in all her victories, including the past two championships.

"I know," she said, and shoved the doors open.

The night was dark and full of stars. Out on the asphalt, even under the heated, pressurized dome of the mining facility, the air was chilly and made Ness' breath visible. Above, beyond the crystal clear panes of engineered chitin, galaxies stirred milk into the coffee blackness of space. The ring had been set up across the lot, between the miners' apartment buildings and the shower building. Lights flooded the raised platform and the throng of people waiting around it.

Ness began to run towards the oasis of light, the cold nothing on her skin, and as the crowd noticed her approach there rose a roar of exhilaration. As she grew closer she saw friends she knew from her shift cheering along with grit-faced and uniform-clad late shifters, only just returned from their toil in the deeps. She even saw a few Ka Phalia in the back, their vestigial spots glowing on their faces. Unusual, considering most Ka she had met had seen boxing as an extremely strange way to blow off steam after a hard day's work.

The square wooden platform was raised about four feet from the ground, with stairs for the contenders on opposite sides. On a third side was Enton's betting stand, around which there was a jam of shouters slamming their credits on the table in a confusion of wagers. On the last side of the ring stood a wide board with the tournament bracket written hugely upon it, all the lines full except the champion's, which seemed to be waiting just as impatiently for her as the crowd.

She reached the edge of the pool of light and people. The mass parted, a sea of flushed, shouting faces, arms patting her back, brushing her shoulder. She climbed the steps and was suddenly the tallest in the mob.

Her opponent was still making her way through the cram of people. Finally, she climbed the steps and Ness could see her. She was the perfect image of a dark horse, she thought: slight, unsmiling, with long black hair that made a simple braid down her back. Her eyes were dark, with an almost disquieting intensity. Her fist guards were made with clear, hard plastic.

A loud clanging sounded from behind Ness, and the mass of people grew quiet. Enton stepped onto the platform, holding the brass bell that had made the sound.

"Welcome! Yes, welcome to the final, deciding match of this year's Ilurin Mines boxing championship!" The crowd gave a great roar. "Now, I know you're all eager to begin, so allow me to simply present our fighters and we'll get on with it. Firstly, a woman who needs no introduction, and our victor of the past two championships: *Vanessa Ros!*"

Ness threw her fists into the air as the wave of sound from the spectators washed over her, filling her up with their adoration. She gave a shout of her own, joining in with all the voices screaming their approval.

As the sound began to die, Enton spoke up again. "And her challenger, a fighter new this year, a tenderfoot with a hard fist: *Greta Verutis!*"

The sound was quieter, to be sure, but no less enthusiastic. Despite what Emerson had said, Verutis had her supporters.

Enton had retreated off of the platform at this point. "And now, my friends, as promised, I'll shut up, get out of the way..." He stepped behind the betting stand once again, "...and we'll *fight!*" He rang the bell.

And then for Ness, there was nothing real but Verutis, the ring, and her girls.

ALYSSA MAZZOLI

Found Object: My object is a tarnished metal spray bottle. It has a handle on one side, with a smaller handle/metal loop directly above the first one, but attached to the top instead of the bottle. The top is removable and kind of resembles a syringe; it has a moving part that I'm addicted to pushing.

"Heirlooms"

Margot Dauter skinned her palms on the pavement.

It wouldn't have happened if she hadn't thrown her arms out to break the fall—but how *else* was one to respond when shoved to the ground in such a violent manner? Margot stood and watched her bag slap the legs of a boy already fading into the distance. Losing her books and a few drops of blood was getting off lightly, and she knew it. Even the safe routes could get rough on occasion. As soon as the thief vanished from sight, she turned and went on her way.

The walk home was lined with posters screaming for attention, all saying the same thing. Margot tried to ignore them, but their loud colors and rich promises drew her in. Her head swam with thoughts of that marvelous-looking spacecraft, those bold words—

Be part of a glorious future—help settle Suevat Prime!

Margot's heart ached. Oh, if only she could board that ship! Imagine: flesh free of bruises, a belly full of bread. It would be wonderful, even if she never saw the planet—

Margot walked on.

She hid her hands in the arms of her jacket, but Father noticed the missing bag. He bandaged her wounds silently.

The next day a vase disappeared from the kitchen.

Weeks passed, and Margot got the sense that something was wrong. The changes were slight—furniture shifted around the house, the occasional item went missing, dark circles formed around her father's eyes—but they were there, and they set Margot's nerves on edge.

She found out by mistake.

Margot left home at noon. She clutched her book to her chest as she walked, taking care to swerve around the urchins in the street. She was halfway to the library when the fight broke out: two young men, gaunt and wary, scuffled in the street a few yards away. An overturned trashcan lay nearby, and as she watched, another boy snuck behind the others to pick over its contents.

Margot turned and ran, moving behind a building so as not to be noticed. She cursed under her breath—this was the only safe route that hadn't been compromised. She'd just have to read at home. She arrived at the back door just as Father pushed through it, a bag tucked under one arm.

"Oh, hey, I thought you were going to the library," he said, without meeting her eyes.

"And I thought you were staying at home." She gestured to the bag. "What's that?"

"Margot..." He stared past her. "I wanted it to be a surprise," he said, and nodded at something on the ground behind her. She spun around and followed his gaze to a grimy poster resting on the sidewalk. She recognized it instantly, but it couldn't be—

"We're going?" she asked, incredulous.

"I filled out the applications, and we've both been accepted—I've been assigned a job as ship medic. We leave in two weeks."

Had she heard him right? She thought—

"I thought you said volunteering wasn't worth it."

"I changed my mind." There was a pause.

"So what's the bag for?" Father cringed and pulled it closer. Margot

waited and watched, and after a few moments, he tentatively offered her the bundle. She handed him her book and took the bag. She rummaged inside and withdrew a medicine bottle with a built-in syringe-top.

"What are you doing with this?" she asked.

"I needed some cash—"

"You can't sell this!" The bottle had been passed down through the Dauter family for generations—it jumped from medic to medic, and though it was no longer functional, Margot knew it meant a lot to her father. "It was Granddad's."

"I thought you might react like this," Father said, his voice small. Margot tightened her hold on the heirloom.

"Look—we'll raise the money, okay? But this," she said, and held out the bottle, "is yours, and I can't let you give it up." Father nodded once, seriously, then broke into a grin and held out his arms. The tension fell away and Margot embraced him with a smile.

"Thank you," she whispered.

In the end, Father sold most of their possessions. He claimed the money was to repay old debts.

On their last night on Earth, the Dauters went to the library. It was one of the few places left in the town where one could truly be alone. Margot went there often to read. There weren't any books left in the building, so she brought her own from home. Father had never joined her before.

They sat with their backs against a shelf and talked for hours, carrying on the longest conversation they'd had in years.

They left in the morning with a single bag of necessities and a few items Margot refused to let her father sell. The boarding line was thick and long, splitting near the front to separate the normal volunteers from the ones who paid for cryo.

When they reached the point where the line divided, Father turned to Margot and opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it.

"Papers?" asked the guard. Father handed them over. The man regarded them coolly, and motioned for Margot to join the other line. She hesitated.

"There must be a mistake," she said. "We're not cryo-passengers."

"Margot Dauter is. Are you Margot Dauter?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then hurry up. You're holding up the line." Margot glanced behind her at the irritable masses, and moved to do as the guard instructed. She took a few steps forward, then stopped when she realized her father wasn't behind her. She turned to find him, and...

He was being herded into the other line.

No—that wasn't right. There had to be some kind of mistake. They were a team, and anyway, Father couldn't afford cryo—

The "debts".

"Father?" The people around Margot formed a river, and though she struggled, she couldn't help but be swept away by the current. "Father!"

But he was already gone...or maybe she was.

Margot spent her last waking hour in a daze.

Her one clear thought was of a story, her namesake. How that the cryo-chamber felt a lot like a closet, keeping her from her sunshine just one line away—

Let it rain—

Darkness.

"Margot Dauter?" called the crewmember as he pushed his way through the newly-woken cryo-passengers. Considering they'd been frozen for over two-hundred years, most of them looked pretty good, if shaky and a bit weak. He scanned the crowd for a girl matching his description, but he hadn't had any luck so far and the ship would be landing soon.

Wait. There, in the corner—

A teenage girl, all alone.

He approached her cautiously.

"Margot Dauter?" he asked, and she nodded. He pulled a tarnished metal medicine bottle from his bag. "Wow, someone really wanted you to have this..."

ANYA REGNIER

“The Client”

The silver begins to shimmer as I add the various fruits and nuts to the bowl that is being held up by this silver tray. A family heirloom that had at once seemed so useless on Earth has proven valuable on this new world called home by a pack of misfits, rug rats, and doomed politicians. Suevat Prime, what a crappy name for a planet.

“M’lady?” I turned around to see Jermi standing in the doorway of my office, with flushed cheeks and sweat beads budding on his forehead.

“Yes, Jermi. Is there something a matter?” He looks behind the partially open door and into the hallway on his right. Looking passed the doorframe and through the crack between the wood and its hinges, I notice the second presence.

“M’lady actually-”

“Tell Ser Ferah he may enter.” Jermi looks from me to Ferah, still behind the door, his wide eyes stricken with sheer confusion.

“M...m’lady wishes you in.”

“Boy, do run along.” The gruffness of a man not used to being polite, let alone in native Earth tongue, makes Ferah seem more intimidating than he actually is. Jermi glances to me for confirmation, and I nod. He opens the door, turns away from Ferah and makes haste down the hall. “My, my, what an interesting servant.” His cough-like chuckle almost blankets that last thought.

“Ser Ferah-”

“Please do drop the Ser; I tend to prefer to not use mere human formalities.”

"If I am not mistaken you do have human ancestry and nobility nonetheless, correct?"

"Well yes, but-"

"Then as I am human, and you are of a past nobleman, I request the right to use such formalities. And lest not we forget that you are in a predominantly human city and household."

"Since you have put it so bluntly, I will grant you your request, Lady Elika." His teeth seem to bite into those last two words. I gesture to the guest chair behind us, as I turn to make my way round to the back of my desk. Ferah nods, and politely sits down, now with 4ft of thick groak wood between us, my heartbeat slowed.

"Now Ferah, I would like to inquire as to the reason behind your visit. Only because we had not previously arranged this and it is quite a rarity for you to personally journey to a residence so far from the area of town you familiarize yourself with." Ferah decides to make eye contact with me, allowing me to see through them and almost into his mind as he too quickly formulates an answer.

"Ah, yes. Recently I have discovered that I may be losing that personal relationship that I so covet with my clients by only ever sending my associates. I fear that this may jeopardize continued business with said clients, especially you my dear Lady Elika." Ferah relaxes in the chair, the leather crinkling as he slowly eases back into it.

"So, Ser Ferah, you have visited to simply survey my feelings about customer service?" My eyebrows pop up at this last bit and Ferah makes notice of it, straightening his back attempting to enlarge his relaxed statured.

"Well, yes of course, and I do hope you are, so far, fully satisfied with the many services I have provided to-"

"I do believe only one such service has been provided"

"Yes, yes of course but as I was saying. I do hope you are satisfied and continue on as a client of mine. However, I also have another matter of which I would like to discuss with you." Finally, the truth behind this obnoxious visit. "I have obtained a particularly rich stock of products. One that has been assured to provide new genetic complications and mutations, allowing the consumers to, as you know, gain those abilities that you humans enjoy referring to as 'magic'. There is one

small complication, I fear that this stock may not be as potent as it is said to be,” Why in Earth’s name would Ferah make mention of any possible defects? “And I have heard from many of my close associates that you have a particular affinity for determining the quality and strength of products.”

“I wouldn’t quite use the word affinity to describe it.”

“If it is not a personal affinity, how would you say how you have managed to obtain this particular reputation?” Why is this bastard fishing? Does he know?

“I assume that I have offered such a high quality of products to my customers that they feel that some sort of capability must be used due to the fact that most suppliers can have bad stock and I never seem too.” My hands are slick against the leather arm of my chair as the sweat begins to gather.

“But is there any process?” Ferah is now leaning towards me, and the closer he gets the more frightening he seems. I still have the desk though, that nice four feet that even he can’t get across.

“Typically I will personally examine every piece of product just to try and gauge how well it may work. Some would call it a gut feeling.” Ferah is now reaching into his jacket pocket, after a few moments of digging he preceded in producing a small manila envelope.

“Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind using your ‘gut feelings’ to gauge how powerful these products are,” Ferah pours out what looked to be mushrooms and pukaberries, “You don’t mind, right?”

“No, not at all.” Taking them from Ferah’s hand, I proceed to roll them around with the tips of my fingers, seemingly to size up them up. I can feel his eyes on me as I stare at the pukaberries covered in a furry pink skin, and the mushrooms with thick white stems and a large flat aqua cap. I then place them calmly in the bowl to my right, glancing up at Ferah to see where his eyes travel. Their gaze now glued to not the products themselves, but the silver tray. It had faintly begun to glow, its silver sheen slowly becoming bluer. Before too long I remove them from the bowl, the blue coloring quickly dissipating from the tray. “The products are mediocre as far as giving capabilities go. Not bad, but not ‘rich’ at the same time. I would consider passing them on if you were to supply them

to me Ser Ferah.” I reach out my hand to Ferah to give back them back to him.

“Uh, yes, yes I would consider that. However, first I must return back to my office across town to harass my supplier. If you would excuse me, Lady Erika.” Ferah is quick in his response already up and to the door before he finishes, products in hand. I stand up and make the customary bow as he shut the door.

“Goodbye Ser Ferah.” I hit a call button under my desk.

“M’lady is everything alright? Ser Ferah just bolted out the door, grinning madly as he went. Not even caring that he knocked over Ms. Johannes.” Jermi’s voice was ragged and crackling.

“I am well, but please clear my schedule for the rest of today and increase security measures on the perimeters please.”

“Yes, M’lady. Anything else?”

“Have Ms. Johannes drink some tea, physical encounters with Ser Ferah can be quite taxing.”

“As you wish M’lady” I released the call button, and fall into the chair. Again my pulse slows and my breathing becomes less rapid.

“Dear Earth, that man knows how to exhaust a person.” I swivel around and glance at the silver tray. “He’s going to try and steal you. He knows what you can do...how you help keep my business going.” A sigh escapes my mouth. “And if he does, we’ll all be ruined.” I lean back; feet propped up on the hard groak desk and close my eyes.

LAINI SOHN

“A Present”

Being a half-breed was tough. Grace didn't have many friends. Everyone seemed to be scared of her magic. There was no way she could pretend to be normal with her pointy ears. It didn't help that her family was poor and that they lived in the slums. There was no heater, so her family practically froze every night. Leaning against her bedroom wall, she sighed. Why couldn't she have been born without those stupid powers? The dirty brown wall creaked a little, being made of cheap materials. The whole house could collapse at any moment. The only furniture in the room were a rusty metal bed with a fraying mattress and a dresser that looked like it had been in a fire. In her hands, she held a strange sheep bobble-head. It had an O shaped mouth with what appeared to be a blank screen inside.

“Why did this thing come in the mail?” the girl muttered. She didn't get much mail. Sometimes, there were death threats. Most of the time, she got junk. The light bulb hanging on the ceiling flickered on and off, making an irritating high-pitched sound. Grace dropped the strange sheep thing and covered her ears. The sheep bounced and landed on its feet. Somehow, a button on its head got pushed at the moment it hit the ground. The object made a loud beeping noise and started bouncing around the room erratically. Grace hid under her bed, just in case it was a bomb. The screen on the sheep flickered on to reveal the face of a baby.

Grace inched over to the sheep thing and looked the baby in the eye. Its strange smile made a chill run up her back.

"That was a nice nap! I think I need my diaper changed. Wait, I don't have a diaper. Never mind!" the sheep spoke in a saccharine voice. Grace contemplated disposing of the thing, but she didn't know if it was sentient or not. She did know that the thing annoyed her. Did it think it could pass off as a baby? "Who are you?! Why are you so ugly?" the thing asked. That was quick, Grace thought. Usually, it took a minute for her to be insulted. "Are you a half-breed?!" the sheep started lunging its tiny body at her. While it was true that she resembled her alien mother more than her human father, the comment was still rude.

"Yes, I am. What are you?" Grace said coldly. She picked the sheep up and started heading to its next destination: the trash can.

"I'm... umm," the sheep hesitated. Grace held it over the trash and slowly lifted her fingers. "Hey! What are doing?! Something as cute as me doesn't deserve this treatment!" Grace stayed silent as the sheep started slipping from her hand. "I'm sorry! Is that what you want? I don't like heights!" Grace silently put the sheep on the dresser. "Thank you! Now, can you get me a drink?" The half-breed responded by using her powers to freeze the sheep. She lost her balance momentarily.

I overdid it. No more spells for today, she mentally chided herself. She could only do so much before collapsing. At least the sheep couldn't speak anymore. If things went on any longer, she didn't know how long it would have taken for it to start insulting her again. However, she had a feeling that she overreacted a little bit. No wonder the others her age were scared of her. She was a monster. She got a dusty old book from the dresser and plopped onto the uncomfortable bed. She shut the cruel world out for a while and entered a better one. The sheep watched her with a flickering screen, still conscious.

SCINDO

Scindo is a world filled with turmoil, circling two suns in a precarious twirl. Its five races, amidst warring religions, struggle to survive in their own land masses while preventing invasion from the other species. The seemingly bottomless chasms that separate these spokes lead to the one fear shared by all: the prison Victrix. Break a law severe enough, and you'll never return to the life you once lived. If you survive the vicious weather, monstrous spiders, and deadly cyberwolves, you might uncover the question that has been hidden for a thousand millennia. Welcome to Scindo.

MARY HOPE BALLOU

Found Object: Wooden box, “Matches”

Archive Number 247

- Name: Pakri Container
- Classification: Household Object
- Approximate Age: 204
- Description: About 2 ½ human inches high, 2 human inches wide, and 1 ½ human inches long; brown with a short handle; shaped somewhat like a miniature chair; ancient etchings on the front; the material is wood-like, although a bit lighter
- Creator: Eryx-10010 (born Deo 63-1039; died Tene 30-1074)
- Current Location: Donolur House of Archives; Room 15; Section 46D, Aisle 3, Sub-section 10, Row 2, Box 247
- Special Characteristics: Unknown carvings on front; nicked edge; large hole at the back; ink pattern drawings on the side; the inner bottom is covered in soil; the normally short handle has been lengthened and also carved into a very intricate pattern
- Inspected by: The Central Donolur School of Scindonian Sciences and Technologies; Students and Instructor of Department of Rare Artifacts
- About: This object was found in the ruins of a Katharon house in an abandoned city at the edge of a canyon. The Katharon race is well-known for its fear of the dark, and so the use of this gadget is likely to have been to hold a light source. It was found amongst an overgrowth of Cudtu. The carvings on the front of the Pakri Container have yet to be deciphered, but they are considered to be one of the most ancient set of etchings

discovered on a Katharon artifact. Workers have continued to research these patterns, uncovering that at least one part says the name of Talden-146 and Ilragohn (ihl-rah-goehn), the supposed name of the city in which the small box was found.

- History: The Pakri Container was first invented when a Katharon worker called Talden-14600 who knew of no other way to keep light in the house. Every time he tried to contain fire in his home, it would burn down and he would have to rebuild it. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that he would never be able to contain fire, so he went to work creating a new light source. He found the chemical Xanthus (named for his father), an element that when added with water, gives off a natural glow. Talden-146 introduced Xanthus to the Kathoran society and it soon became an object found in every Katharon home. However, there was once again the obstacle of keeping Xanthus in place. A little box was then created to hold it, by another worker named Eryx-10010, who also gave it the name The Pakri Container. It too, quickly grew to be one of Nogdorth's best-selling objects to Katharon since the Melta Antium.
- Additional Information: This Pakri Container is a quite commonly found artifact, although this one in particular holds a large amount of uniqueness, due to its ancient carvings and ink-drawn patterns. This could have been a "special edition" of sorts, or the owner just took his own liberties on the design.
- Information Documented by: Valentia-117 of the Southern Division; The Central Donolur School of Scindonian Sciences and Technologies; The Department of Rare Artifacts; Room 309

PRIYA CHOKSHI

Found Object: Tapestry

Viriums' POV

The woven treasure, close to the Virium's hearts, is a beautiful piece of work. A duck and a tree are woven with intricate stitching, making it an unusual tapestry. The creator of Scindo bestowed this tapestry upon the Viriums, the political figures of Scindo who covered their eyes. It hangs high and tall in the walls of the building in Corinium, the city's capital.

The tapestry was passed down through many generations of the creator's family. His great-great-great-great grandmother made the tapestry. She wove a duck because it was the symbol of freedom and peacock feathers because they represent knowledge. Her son was going off to college so she gifted it to him. It was then passed on to his son, and so on as gifts during coming of age events. It was eventually passed down to the creator who had no sons or nephews, so when he created his virtual world of Scindo, he gifted it to the Viriums. He gave the tapestry to them to show that they were now free and they could do whatever they pleased without causing chaos. The Viriums were honored and they assured the creator that they would keep it safe.

Scindo turned out to be a very peaceful world and there were not many conflicts. However, the day a Virium went to check on the tapestry in the morning and it wasn't there, everything changed. The Viriums began to panic and tried to get in contact with the creator even though they had never talked to him after he left Scindo and crossed back into the real world. It didn't work, so they started freaking out even more. One of the higher ranks of the Viriums began to talk,

“We are better than this, we shouldn’t just sit here and worry about it; we need to find it! We must make them pay.”

Kathoran’s POV

‘Thank goodness this thing isn’t heavy,’ he thought. The beloved Virium’s tapestry was strung onto his bag as he ran bag towards Kan Lodar. They don’t deserve it. Why did the creator give them the tapestry and not the Kathorans? The Viriums think they are better than everyone, but it isn’t true. After a while, he reached Cappadocia where the other four were waiting.

The other four cyborgs were more than excited to see the tapestry. They decided to hang it up in their “secret room” that the five Kathorans had. They felt quite proud stealing the prized possession of the Viriums. The Kathorans were the better ones now.

Viriums’ POV

They had finished making their plans to figure out who stole our tapestry by mid-day. The Viriums had sent about five men to each spoke. When the Viriums arrived at Nogdorth, Therngalor, and Faldur, they searched almost the whole land mass. It took almost seven months, but nothing was found. That left Kan Lodar, which they waited to search last, for they believed that the Kathorans had the tapestry.

Kathoran’s POV

The Viriums asked the Kathoran’s to let them through so that they could search the Kathorans’ spoke. They told them that they didn’t have the tapestry and that the Viriums didn’t need to search Kan Lodar. The Viriums were persistent and eventually the Kathorans stubbornly gave in. Six months later, the five Viriums came back with very angry looks on their faces and a square black box in which they pulled out the tapestry from. One of them stepped forward and yelled, “I thought you didn’t have the tapestry?” The Kathorans replied simultaneously, “We didn’t know about any of this, we didn’t steal it!” The five Viriums stormed away in the direction of Corinium.

Virium's POV

When they returned back to Corinium, they went straight to the building where the tapestry hung. They returned their prized possession back on the wall and then went to the highest rank Virium. The shortest one stepped forward and whispered, "Sir we found the ta-ta-tapestry in Kan Lodar." The Virium replied, "I can't hear you!" He said, "Sir we found the tapestry in Kan Lodar." The Virium's facial expression changed faster than you could snap your fingers. "WHAT?" he screamed, "I knew they had it, this must not go unnoticed!" His furrowed brow and scowling face changed into a vengeful smirk.

Kathoran's POV

The Kathorans were beyond confused. No one could figure out how the tapestry got there. They were infuriated. They had already tried to explain to the Virium that they had not stolen it, but they would not listen to the Kathorans. The Kathorans didn't want to be well-mannered anymore. They wanted war.

Virium's POV

The Virium managed to stay civilized and thought nothing of war because they were supposed to keep peace. The other Virium's however wanted revenge along with the highest ranking Virium. He was itching for vengeance. The Viriums who wanted revenge declared war on the Kathorans the same day all of the Kathorans declared war on the Viriums.

Narrator POV

It was a stalemate. Neither of them made much progress. The Kathorans were strong but not very limber while the Viriums were nimble and strategic. They continued to wage on. What they didn't know was that the creator was watching their silly disagreement the whole time. He decided to wait if it worked itself out, but the war waged on and he decided to intervene. However by the time he decided to intervene, there had already been a fallout.

Both species were almost completely extinct. The creator came and demanded that they stop. He told them that they were fighting for

really no reason. The tapestry was back in its rightful in Corinium where all species could see it and admire it. So why should they be fighting if it's for everyone and not only the Virium to admire.

The two species had become almost barbaric and they would not stop fighting. They forgot their morals and who they actually were. They fought until the extinction of their species because of the hand woven tapestry that was passed down from generation to generation.

JONAH CROSBY

Found Object: “In Soviet Russia, hats wear you.”

“Alexei!” my mother called as we were walking to the terminal. I was too busy staring at a giant furry hat on a rack in one of the kiosks. I grabbed it when the clerk wasn’t looking and ran to my mother before stuffing it into my bag. Mom gave me a dirty look and opened her mouth to say something but my dad came hollering from the terminal for us to get a move on. We rushed to the opening in anticipation of our trip to Scindo, a digital world filled with rustic living and amazing views to please the eye. We had been planning a trip to the place for a while now, so when we walked through those doors to the uploader, I could hardly contain my excitement and was gripping my little brothers hand tightly in anticipation of the journey. We were unburdened with luggage; it was to be uploaded to our first hotel. The attendant checked our names, filed us through, and rang the inspector.

“Name” he said to my father. “Dmitry Annikov” my father replied
“Occupation.”

“Lawyer”

“Reason for upload”

“Vacation”

With a nod of his head the inspector filed us all through asking our names and writing them down on a tablet. We walked forward and saw a few tube-looking things with men in stark white suits mashing buttons of all colors with a quiet whirl in the background. A pretty woman in a blue suit and an interesting hat stepped forward. I thought she was beautiful at the time, and as she was explaining what our family was going to go through, I let go of my brother’s hand to reach into my Mickey Mouse backpack to grab my hat. When she bent down to talk to my brother and me, I handed her the hat and,

in typical five year old fashion, ran behind my mother's legs to hide. When I peeked out she was walking away with a smile on her face, hat in hand. After she left the men in white suits stepped forward to take us by the arms and guide us to the tubes. I hung on to my mother's leg for dear life, but eventually my father pried me off and the white suits took my backpack. He carried me over his shoulder to the tube next to my brother and sister. I would have screamed but the terror had silenced me.

My anxiety from before had "flown the keep" so to speak. I was strapped into a strange seat and closed in behind a steel door. Out a view port to my side I saw one of the men in suits waving his hand and muttering words as another was tapping furiously to his left. I suddenly felt a tingle in my toes. I looked down with some difficulty to see them start to disappear. Then went my feet, then my legs, and suddenly I was out of view. The process was strangely silent. Again, a scream should have ripped from me, but just as I opened my mouth, it disappeared. My nose went and suddenly I couldn't breathe! My eyes must have been wide as dinner plates by the time they disappeared. Suddenly I was in another tube, strapped down just like the first with my nose reappearing, my mouth coming in just in time for a deep breath. I watched in fascination as the rest of me reappeared.

There was no view port in this tube, but that was the only difference between this and the first tube. My door slid open revealing more white suited men. One stepped forward and unstrapped me. I found I couldn't walk as I took a step forward. I dropped hard to the ground and hit my head. At that I finally started crying. Mom ran from her tube and picked me up quietly singing to me in Russian while rocking me back and forth as Dad tended to my other siblings. I took such comfort in those slender, soft arms. When I had recovered my composure, I let myself slide down her body to the cold stone floor.

We all gathered ourselves in the center of the room and hugged and kissed like every family would in such a situation as this; tears abounded from my mother, me, and my siblings. My father, being a man of strength, simply repeated our names to himself over and over again. The white suits gave us a minute to collect our thoughts and pushed us out the door faster than we had run to make it to the tubes

in the first place. Walking down a hallway we followed signs pointing us to a pair of elevators. Being the older brother, I conceded to let my little brother push the down button and my little sister the floor button. That is, as long as I got to be in the front.

We rode in silence for a few minutes and finally my father spoke. "We are in a strange world here. Should anything happen, remember that in every city is a way back, and in every city there are other humans willing to assist their fellows. Should we get separated in a city, head towards the tallest building, Da?" "Da" we all replied in unison as the elevator started to slow. I had quickly recovered from my earlier terror and was almost literally bouncing off the walls, my dark hair getting in my eyes. I bounced. The elevator stopped. I bounced. The door began to open. I bounced. I flew backward with a searing pain in my forehead and hit the back of the elevator. I bounced. I started falling to the floor, but the floor was gone; replaced by an endless black. I bounced.

SARAH DONNELLY

Found Object: Strange block of wood on a metal pole.

She'd never been to the forested spoke herself, so she could only imagine the towering trees and solitary privarian encampments dotting the land. But, oh, imagine it she could: the warm green of the Cudtu leaves; the faint, ever-present buzz of the birds. And the people—oh, the people! The Privarian themselves were surely a sight to behold, with their sleek bodies and elegant green-and-brown faces and quiet words and solemn attitudes.

No, this Aecilim had never been to the forested spoke. Her mother had, for all that the mysterious woman she'd seen maybe once or twice could be qualified as a “mother” in the ways she'd once heard whispers of amongst peers and travelers. Her mother, too, had whispers, had stories, grand tales of hunts and adventures and friends. She doubted some of them were true, but she wanted so badly to believe. Besides, the woman had brought gifts, relics. A piece of wood, brown and grained and worn away by the temahi it had spent gliding below the girl's fingers.

Her name was Ankita, and the wood from the great forest lay beside her bed within the sandy dome that was the building where she, and so many others, had spent her childhood. Many nights, she stared at it as she fell asleep, secretly dreaming of tall trees and dense jungles. A part of her knew, guiltily, that her peers were dreaming of the vast caverns of the Aecilim.

She shifted in her sleep, her stubby, dark wings rubbing against the dried grass of the mattress. To say that she had never dreamed of caverns would be untrue; but so, too, would be saying that they were the same caverns that her friends surely thought of. The caves in her

head were full of bright lights and crystals, or other nights they were small and wet and lonely. And the other landscapes—they, too were alternately bright and lonely. Empty deserts far hotter and larger than the one she lived in, great frozen glaciers, chirping, marshy swamps, and so many more. Landscapes she'd never seen, landscapes and biomes that didn't exist—couldn't possibly exist—and yet somehow there were words for them.

When Ankita awoke, she was able to remember only vague images of the places she'd traversed while she slept. But even these were enough. She longed to talk about them, to let the pictures roll off her tongue as easily as they rolled through her head, and yet whenever she opened her mouth to explain to someone—the caretaker, her peers, her parents—the words got stuck somewhere between her heart and her throat.

But this time, this time she lay awake long after she should have been asleep, as the darkness finally rolled over the landscape. She knew that proper nightfall came late and left early this time of *derdha*. As darkness drifted in and the stars began to appear in the flattened sky, she sat up carefully in her bed. She watched her closest peer, his breathing regular. She did not know this boy well, but she knew him well enough to know he was only days away from transitioning from the desert to the main cities. He was about to come of age.

Her gaze drifted to her cut of *cudtu* wood, and in that moment, she knew. She stood slowly, stretching her wings out behind her and blinking in the faint light. Her eyes, conditioned for both the boiling desert sun and the dark of the caverns, adjusted quickly to the starlight. The winged being grabbed hold of the metal perch the wood was drilled into with a single, swift movement of her hand.

The piece was not made for traveling; it was far too awkwardly shaped to fit in any bag. Yet it made no difference, in the end, as she had no bags to put it in. Instead, Ankita crept towards the door and out into the relative light of this time of night, and watched the distant objects in the sky reflect on the yellowed grains of sand.

She unfurled her wings even further, praying she wasn't too early, too young. Then the dark-skinned girl began the climb to the top of the closest dune. Her feet sank awkwardly with each step in the heavy sand. After a handful of long, fretful minutes, she had traversed the

yards to the top. And there she stood there, taking in the warmth and the light, relishing this little bit of darkness.

She took one last breath, and jumped.

She didn't have very far to fall, and for a split-second Ankita worried that she'd collapse into the sand and be discovered immediately. But she flapped her wings, and she glided a few feet, and then, flew. She took off into the sky, and had to stop herself from laughing aloud. She spread her arms wide to catch what breeze she could find as she soared up, up, up, clutching desperately to the wood with her right hand.

It took—hours? Minutes? Days?—her sense of time became fuzzy. But she reached the edge, the great drop-off into the canyon-oceans. She could see, far below, vague shapes. Whether it was some sort of monster or simply sand that had dripped off the edge of the spoke, she did not yet know. A gust of wind flew by, colder than anything she could remember within her short, young life. She held tight to her keepsake as she steered herself towards the forest of the Privarian.

More wind came by, harsh and freezing, toppling Ankita over for a moment; and she began to fall, staggering downwards into the abyss. She let out an indecipherable cry of panic. Her short, curly hair ruffled just slightly in the wind. She attempted vainly to right herself, teetering just slightly sideways as she attempted to catch any proper updrafts.

Wind rushed past her one more time, and the familiar object began to slip from her hands. Slowly, it began to move, as she lost her grip, and then in one sudden moment, it was gone. In a flash of instinct, she tucked in her wings and let herself drop, tearing after the metal-and-wood souvenir. Another gust of wind pushed at her wings, and she let them fill out again, her whole body overcome with unvoicable sobs.

Behind her, as she flew, she heard shouts, familiar voices calling her back. How people had gotten there so fast she had no idea. She pulled up, and in that time knew that the wood was beyond her reach. It was just gone. She hovered there, with much effort, and for a second, she considered. She could still hear the shouts of her companions. Ankita could keep going, out, out into the terrifying, thrilling unknown; or she could go, become a aclim prison guard one day, make her family proud of her for once.

It was hardly a choice at all.

ARIANA GNAS

Found Object: Smallish gold/bronze
cone thing with scared people.

“Bridging the Gap”

When my grandmother was fifteen, she volunteered to cross the gap between the worlds. She didn't have much, her family was dead (killed in an accident, apparently), and 'Scindo' was her parent's life work. So when they offered to take the families of the scientists across the gap, she readily agreed.

She would tell me how nervous she was when the departure day came. Her eyes would twinkle with fondness, and she spoke of meeting the other colonists and getting prepared at the center, where her life would change.

“Everyone was shaking,” she would say, a small smile creasing the lines in her face. “You could almost feel the nervousness and fear. I wanted to hold my breath so I wouldn't catch it, almost like a disease.” Her eyes would grow sad then, and four-year-old me would climb up onto her lap, and bounce about, begging for her to finish the story. She would smile then, and wrap a frail arm around my shoulders, and begin describing the gap.

“It was so cold. I felt as if I couldn't move; I was freezing my bata gada off!” I would then shush her, telling her that “butt” was a bad word, and you can't say that. She would laugh and pull me closer, already talking again.

“But all of a sudden, there was a bright light, and I couldn't see anything! Everyone was moaning and hiding their heads from the

light. But I," she would wave her free hand in the air excitedly, "I got loose from my restraints and stumbled out of the gap. And the first thing I saw—"

"Was Grandpa!" I would squeal, squirming around excitedly.

She would smile and shake her head, "No," then she would sigh and stare off into the distance, "It was the two suns."

I would scrunch up my nose, frowning at her, "What is so great about the blue and yellow? They're just... there!"

"But we only had one sun back on Earth," she would tell me, and my eyes would grow wide, but any exclamation would be halted by one of her fingers on my lips. "I know honey, but don't you want to know the ending?" I would nod and curl up, arms wrapped around my knees as I balanced precariously on her bony legs.

"After," she would emphasize, "that's when I saw Grandpa." She would then stare off into the distance, a fond expression on her face. I would giggle; she would always do that when she talked about meeting Grandpa.

"Was he pretty?" I would continue to giggle, as I waited for her to answer.

"He was pretty handsome," she would sigh.

I would get very excited and ask, "Was he kind and chivalrous, like one of the knights from your stories?"

She would scrunch up her face all weird and silly whenever I asked her that. "You could... say that."

50 Years Earlier

As my eyes adjusted to the bright light of the dual suns, I was able to take a step back. Unfortunately, that caused me to back into something that felt like... skin? I quickly turned around and had a look at what I had just backed into. And that thing was mohawked, around six feet tall, wearing no shirt, and his bare chest was covered in swirling black tattoos. A slightly glowing blue gemstone was... embedded in his collarbone?

"Hickety heck..." I trailed off, taking a step back, only for more of them to appear and step forward. The guy that I backed into stepped forward, holding a bronze, cone thing in his hand...

And then a glowing, blue-fire-looking thing flew from it and bound my hands together. I yelped in surprise and stumbled back; only to be grabbed roughly by two armor-clad, dark skinned men with... dear god, did they have wings?

"Take her to Corinium." I jumped when the first man spoke. He didn't acknowledge my surprise as he handed the creepy cone to one of my captors. "Secure her in a holding Victrix; the rest of us can collect the other invaders."

"Wait, what?" was the only thing that I could say before one of my captors quickly hefted me over his shoulder, driving the air from my lungs with an 'omph'. He took off into the sky, me screaming curses at the 'tattooed freak' who was 'gonna pay for this' as I flew off to my doom.

"We had, instant... erm..." she paused, searching for a word as I watched eagerly. "he really made my heart soar, sweetie."

My escorts turned a corner, and the first thing I registered was the face of the guy that had had me arrested.

"You!" I hissed as I escaped from my guards and dashed down the hall. The guy looked up only a moment before my blue encased hands connected with his face. His head whipped to the side with a smack, and before I knew it, those same guards had that cone out again, and stabbed it into my bindings.

I felt a pain shooting through my body, and collapsed to the floor, completely limp as darkness overtook my vision. The last thing I saw were the scared faces engraved on the bronze cone, as it fell to the ground, glinting in the light.

"But it all worked out honey," she would say, after snapping out of a daze of memories, "and we lived happily ever after."

“Forever and ever?” I would smile, starting to beg for her to tell it again, tugging on her arm excitedly. But she would just shake her head with that small smile of hers, and gently set me back on the ground.

“Forever and ever, dear one.” I would squeal and race around the room, wishing that I could see the world for the first time, to go on an adventure just like my grandmother had.

“What is that?” The tattooed man looked down at me when I spoke. “That blue glow, what is it?” I leaned up against the wall, rubbing my wrists as the blue bindings were sucked back into the cone.

“Do you not know magic when you see it?” he said scornfully, narrowing his eyes in disgust.

I leaned forward quickly, “You guys have magic?” I exclaimed. The man raised an eyebrow as I continued, “We don’t have magic on Earth! Is it hard to do? Does it hurt? What’s that cone thing that you guys keep hurting me with?”

“Magic is sacred to my people. I cannot answer your questions. You are a prisoner...” he bit out.

There was a bit of silence before he spoke again. “The napir is a power conduit,” I looked up to see him holding the cone, “It channels magic.”

“Oh, thanks..”

“It was no problem. You are no threat at the moment, nor smart enough to be considered one,” he interjected smoothly.

“Thanks.” I mumbled. Once the comment registered I jerked my head up, did he just say that?

Back then I wanted to grow up to be just like her and have great adventures. But now I have adventures of my own, and my story has just begun.

SAVANNAH HALL

Found Object: Creepy Puppet

I strolled around the ruins of the old house while attempting to hide a smile of glee. The charred wood and blackened furniture called joyful thoughts into my mind. I saw my father's old chair—it had been burnt to a crisp by the fire that had ravaged the horrid place. The air had weight to it; the sky had turned gray, as if weeping for the loss of my father. The scent of sulfur hung in the air. I looked to my right, where my room used to be, when I saw a puppet. Red hair, pink shirt, blue tie. Eyes, that when the light hit them just right, looked as if there was a plan being thought out behind them.

This doll recalled horrific remembrance to my conscience. My father, David Green, had given it to me when I was six, after my mother had died. The man did not truly care about his daughter at the time, but when he found free toys at the store, he would take them and give them to me, in order to fulfill the illusion of love.

Not long after this, around age seven, was when the abuse started. Sexually, physically, verbally, and, of course, mentally. I never truly knew what brought around this pain he seemed determined to deliver to me. All throughout my adolescent doharas, my heart would claim he was stressed, he didn't mean it. He was Virium, very political in his work, so of course he was stressed. The band he wore over his eyes disguised it, until he spoke. But then I remembered this puppet that he had given me. How cheap the meaning was, how he tossed it at me without so much as a glance. I kept that puppet as a reminder of just how much he didn't care. And every time I held that puppet, put my fingers into its arms—I would remember, in great detail, what he had done to me.

Now, sitting here among the ruins, these memories sprinted into my mind.

“Qaeda, your father—he is over here...” said one of the firemen. I jogged over, anxious to see the brute. I looked down at his withering body, scarred by the black that would forever cover his pasty white skin. The eye band that he had adorned all throughout my childhood had burned in several places. I suddenly felt a yearning to see behind that mask. To see my father’s eyes for the first time, even though they didn’t have life or spirit underneath them. I bent downward.

“Qaeda, don’t. This will just hurt you.” I turned toward the fireman.

“You obviously know nothing about my relationship with my father, then. Now, please. Leave me to this.” He hesitated, bowed his head respectfully, and walked away.

“Alright, daddy.” I said after I had turned and bent back down. I reached for the cloth. Soft yet rugged. Unlike my father, who was as rugged as could be. The royal blue color of his station had burned to black. I slowly removed it from his head. His eyes were like nothing I had seen before. They had depth, they had a story. Behind the color dyed into his irises, there was feeling trapped. What feeling, I could not tell.

A voice from my fifteen-dohara-old self screamed into my head. He still loves you, even as he was burning, he thought of you. But then my memories recalled a certain scene: him, standing above me, hitting me with his belt, telling me he would never love me, I was a mistake, and the only thing he could ever like was my body; and how he didn’t understand why I made him beat me in this manner. I threw the band down and thrust the doll in his lifeless face.

“You see this? This made me think of my past, something I have tried desperately to avoid. The substance abuse, the cutting, and the attempts at suicide—that was to avoid this.” I pointed to the doll, as if to make him understand. “You will stay out of my life from here on out. For political purposes, I will go to your funeral. After that, you are gone.” I got up, taking the puppet with me. I walked to the nearest canyon, only a mile from the ruins. I turned the doll toward me.

“I never named you. Fine, you are Steve. Steve, I have nothing against you; I have something against my father. Memories, past,

they are tied to you. He is tied to you. I don't know why you weren't burned all that much, maybe it was the magical forces that animated this world that kept you safe. But I cannot keep you. You fostered my hate, and I think of that as an amazing resource. But this fire stole my revenge. Throwing away this last memory will dispel him from my life." I cocked my arm and threw it into the canyon as hard as I could. "Take that, you pig."

After I had returned to my hotel, I went to sleep. Feeding and carrying this hate takes energy; something I was often in short supply of these days. I had nightmares of Steve, him rising out of the canyon. My father, tossing it to me, as if I was still six, and not one minute had passed. And that morning, or this morning, as I should say it, I realized that these memories will stay with me. I have nothing but these memories. My world—it is that abuse.

Of course, there are those people that will claim that there is more for everybody. Success, a job, a spouse, all that jazz. But I will not trust in what I don't know. However, I will also not trust what I know. This suicide letter... It has droned on for long enough.

Sincerely,
 Qaeda

CARTER LIEBMAN

Found Object: A magnifying glass made of silver metal

It was a silver object, one which caught the light of a hanging bulb quite fetchingly. The surface was visibly scratched and tarnished, but not in such a way a good polishing wouldn't reverse the damage. It had a sliver of refracted glass caught in its bevel. This object had no real purpose at this point in history, but for the fact that it shook with the scene that lay before it.

A winged guardian slammed a dark fist into the flesh of a twisted being, one whose skin had the appearance of raw meat and eyes of a pig for slaughter. The sound did not resemble those in cinema, but had a ringing quality that bespoke of steel. This being was no longer man, but Kathoran.

The torrent of damaging impacts stilled for a moment. Dust settled back into its place. The Kathoran let out a deep breath, shuddering with tears fighting to be shed. He didn't let them spill, a small victory indeed. His inability to catch a breath was in his favor, for one cannot scream without air. The adversary barked orders at him, speaking of lies and treacheries and falsehoods the accused had committed. Spittle leapt from thin lips and dotted across the glass surface of the item. The beaten man did not speak a word of contention nor one of defeat. His ability to abstain from speech was, again, a minute victory.

The room the pair was in was a small one, occupied only by a table, a chair, a light, and cursed beings. The winged beast had left, had been absent for an indefinite length of time. Now the temperature was unbearably hot. The surface of the table had heated to a dull red glow. The lens upon it was not touched by it. The glass had fogged up by now, breath and sweat and blood steaming and settling like a film. The Kathoran's breath became labored at the humidity far above

his tolerance level, his lifeblood beginning to evaporate within the synthetic arteries leading to artificial lungs. The metal architecture beneath the surface of manufactured skin was rated to a temperature of twice the boiling point of liquid. The fluid in his body was not. And so he began to roast from the inside.

The punisher returned hours later, only determined through auditory sensors not yet melted. His optic nerve had been overloaded along with any of his external skin. The sight that would lay before anyone would have been a frightful automaton with no semblance of humanity. It was a mechanical miracle the neural net hadn't been compromised. He was being beaten again, but relief had come with a lack of nerve endings. The gyroscope deep in his steel skull told him he had been lain horizontally by impacts detected through the vibration sensors. The screaming had begun, horrid screeches of pain and frustration and loss that came from somewhere, and he wasn't sure it was him.

The once-Kathoran was alone again, with just his thoughts to relieve the boredom. His body had long since deteriorated to nothing. All that remained were the chips and mesh of his mind. No outside input could be taken in without his sensors. And thus he was alone. Probes were probably deep within his tissue, he pondered. But he was soon beyond conscious thought. He was too far gone to notice when those sensory organs were reattached, or when he was carefully placed in a new skeleton. He was too far gone to see the lights and hear sounds again. His mind was far too lost to notice the object placed in front of him, its glass lens showing his conception and his parents and the transition to steel. At the very least he had the opportunity to attend the funeral for a young boy lost.

RILEIGH PACK

Found Object: A wooden shoe base

“The Mojocka”

“Elder Sheeka! Elder Sheeka!” the young ones cried, “We found... something.” Sheeka curiously turned her head towards them, wondering what they could have possibly found. Was it another dead animal? They had found PLENTY of those while wandering around the village. What they did find, however, was much more interesting.

“Well, do you know what it is?” Arman, the younger of the two, inquired. “Of course I know what it is,” Sheeka responded, smiling faintly. Saunda, the older one, sighed impatiently. “Can you explain what it is, then?” “If you would stop attacking me with questions, I would have been done telling you the Mojoka’s history by now.” The elder sighed. “The Mojocka?” asked Arman curiously, his bright cerulean, cat-like eyes gleaming with excitement. Sheeka grinned “Yes, the Mojocka, the first toy instrument created on this world. Shall I tell the story behind it?” “Yes!” the children simultaneously agreed.

“Long ago, in some of the first days of our world, there was a man who had seven children. As these children had nothing to do all day except chase each other around and beat up one another, the father, Amok, came up with an idea. Now, Amok was a musician who loved to play his Mojack, a wooden instrument that was in two parts connected by a thin piece of silver. The top part was a lever that the player used to hit the second and bottom part, which was a bigger piece of carved wood that had ten medium-sized slits cut through it. These were made so that when you rub your fingers across them, the slits make a charming, sort of twinkling sound.

Amok's children loved his Mojack very much. They asked him all the time if they could try and play one of the slits, and he would have gladly obliged. But they were all too little to play it. So Amok decided to make a smaller version, which his children could all play. The children readily agreed, and so they set out to create the smaller instrument. While their father was hunting with the other Privarian, the children would gather pieces of wood and metal scattered around the village. When Amok returned, he would sort out the best pieces of wood and start carving. Much to Amok's dismay, his children were very persistent. They would bother him to no end about when the smaller instrument would be completed." Sheeka pointedly narrowed her golden (also cat-like) eyes at the young children sitting across from her. "I wonder who that sounds like," she pondered sarcastically, but with a hint of amusement. Saunda looked at the younger child sitting next to her. "She's obviously talking to *you*, if you didn't catch on already, Arman." "Actually, that was directed at you both." Sheeka acclaimed, "Now, may I continue?" the children nodded quietly, Arman giggling slightly. "As I was saying, his children were very persistent about questioning Amok about when their instruments would be completed. But after an entire eke, they were finished.

And the seven children loved the instruments (which they decided to name the Mojock) dearly; life was good. Until one day. On that one day, a fire came swooping through the entire village. Everyone in the village, except Amok, perished. While searching through the charred remains, Amok found an unburned Mojock. This of course reminded him of his children, and he cried profusely. But he had to move on.

On the way to another village that Amok knew would give him shelter for the time being, he buried the Mojock in hope that another child might come across it one day, and that it'd give them joy." Sheeka smiled "It looks like you two have found it. Cherish it, alright?" The children nodded. "Good. Now leave me be." Saunda and Arman huffed, "Yes, Elder Sheeka", and they lightly stomped off to master the new treasure.

NITTU PATEL

Found Object: Silver Bell

“The Chymmer”

The Chymmer was made by the Trevions and gifted to the Kathoran, ending their rivalry with the creation of Corinium. It started their mutually beneficial alliance in which the Kathorans stop targeting high ranking Trevions. In return the Chymmer, which was given to the Kathoran, was infused with enough Trevion magic to power their technology for years to come, as long as the Trevions keep recharging the Chymmer on a bimonthly basis, ensuring that both parties follow the terms of their agreement since the Trevions would not recharge the Chymmer if the Kathorans were targeting the Trevions.

Prior to the Chymmer, the Kathorans had to use solar energy to power themselves, causing them to freeze up during the nighttime until day came around. The Chymmer to them was a blessing due to the shocking number of Kathorans' that froze during times of war. The Kathorans were able to recharge when the sun rose again the following day, but during their frozen state the Kathorans are at their weakest and most susceptible to sabotage. During the final battle between the Trevions and the Kathorans, which lead to both the creation of Corinium and put an end to the bitter rivalry between the two races, the Trevions put a curse on the Kathorans locked in their vulnerable states causing them to turn on their own. The number of casualties in this war was disastrous for the Kathorans, and as an act of retribution the Kathorans started to targeted the high ranking Trevions, laying the foundation that led to peace on Scindo.

The magic infused in the Chymmer is of the most powerful kind, which only the eldest of the Trevions know how to control. It is the extremely unstable and could be potentially harmful to the Trevions, not that the Kathorans would ever know since it is a well-kept of the elders of Trevions. If the Chymmer were to fall into the wrong hands, it could potentially go from giving power to the Kathorans to taking away the very magic that the Trevions rely on, essentially killing them. The Trevions gave this potentially dangerous object to the Kathorans because having this magic out in the world balances out the magic that the Trevions used to bring order to Scindo. Knowing that the Kathorans would guard the Chymmer with their lives, since it was their most reliable power source, the elders of the believed that the Kathorans were the best people to protect the Chymmer.

In Nogdorth, located at the very edge of Kathoran, the Chymmer is hung from the top of the wall separating it from Corinium. During sunset, the Chymmer is rung and the Kathorans are immediately recharged by its majestic sound. It sends a burst of energy through the air into their circuits, allowing them to function for the rest of the day until the sun rose again the next day. The energy infused into the Chymmer manages to sustain itself for as long as possible by limiting its reach at the borders of Nogdorth.

KAT SOKOL

Found Object: A blue hollow oval with a hole in the top.

Privarians are not meant to be impulsive. These hunters of the world of Scindo were strong, quiet, intelligent, and maybe that was why Eldrain never fit in with his class, even as they approached the age of maturity. As it had been for hundreds of years, these young trainees ventured out on their first hunting trip, supervised only by two adult hunters. They watched the adults intently, the quiet conversations dying away as they attempted to mimic the lithe, flowing movements of the silent predators. It was something of a wonder watching the adult Privarians hunt. They appeared to melt into the trees, blending in with the damp, earthy world around them. And it was not long before the children would see them in real action. They observed with intense concentration as the two crouched low to the ground, their sensitive ears perked. A hand gesture behind the back of the male adult signaled for the youths to follow. They huddled together in excitement, stalking slowly as the adults made their way ahead. As the runt of the litter, it was not long before the small boy Eldrain found himself having difficulty keeping up with the rest of the party. The adults began to move faster and faster, not quite abandoning the children, but forcing them to sprint through the trees. Eldrain was falling behind, and as he struggled to quicken his pace, he made one of the biggest mistakes a Privarian could make. He tripped. As he tumbled to the ground, he threw his hands in front of him, digging into the moist, cool earth, and instinctively tucked in his body, launching himself into a roll. He landed in a crouch, and took a deep breath, before springing up to continue running. However, in this slight delay, this small stall in his movement, he noticed something. Something the older Privarians had trained themselves to ignore as they hunted. In the woods, about

fifteen feet from himself, loomed a huge, breathing monstrosity. It stood at the height of most adult hunters, with a gleaming horn above its eyes. The sliver spots on its tan coat gleamed through the trees, and the small wings buzzing on its back held it just barely a half a foot off the ground. Eldrain had heard stories of this magnificent beast, also known as the Urhangai. He knew that this creature was incredibly rare, and he simply couldn't help but notice the nest lying just two feet from where he sat. Twelve tantalizingly bright, blue eggs stood together, packed tightly in between the walls of the woven nursery. He acted. It was a split second decision, hardly even conscious, and certainly not thought through.

The female adult touched down next to him just as Eldrain closed his rucksack around the egg. The adult looked up at the huge creature, and picked up the child, pulling him away in one swift movement. Setting him down a safe distance from the creature, she looked over Eldrain, checking to make sure he had not been harmed. And when it seemed she had decided that Eldrain was in no apparent danger, she nodded at him, and leapt off into the woods, leaving Eldrain to follow in her wake.

The heavy scent of wood smoke, and moss seeped in through the cracks in the clay walls of Eldrain's home. He drew closed the curtain that separated his bedroom from the entrance room, and took a deep breath. A peek inside his rucksack revealed that his fear was confirmed. He had actually done it. Gingerly, he held the bright blue egg in his hand. A pulsing warmth led him to believe that the embryo inside still lived, and it was at that moment that the shock of what he had done settled in on him. The Urhangai was an endangered species, protected by the government. It wasn't as if he intended to kill the creature, but he knew that it would have a better chance of surviving and going on to expand the species again if it were born and raised in the wild. But what could he do? There was no way he would be able to venture out on his own. The exits of Alverton were guarded for the very purpose of keeping underage Privarians from going out unsupervised. He knew he couldn't tell anyone; while he was too young to be held fully accountable, he knew the consequences that would fall upon the adults who had led his first hunt. He was young,

but he knew how the Privarian Code worked. A child made a mistake, and an adult took the blame. While the child was reprimanded, it was nothing compared to how the adult would be punished, for it was in the Code, that one should look after another's child before his own. Thus, Eldrain decided that the egg must remain a secret, and he wrapped it in a winter cloak before stowing it under his bed.

Over the span of the next week, Eldrain spent a considerable amount of time observing the egg, searching for any sign of life beneath the shell, and he was not disappointed. At the end of the week, cracks began to form around the top of the egg, but it wasn't until well into the second week that anything truly eventful happened.

Eldrain had returned home from one of his many training sessions, to find the cloak spread out across the floor, and the egg toppled on to its side. A smooth oval hole seemed to be cut out from the top. It was a moment before the boy realized what had happened. The Urhangai was gone. Eldrain searched frantically around his house, desperately trying to catch some sign of the small, purple critter. Deciding that it must have found its way out into the village, he ran out the door, and took off down the streets, scouring every alley and path. His head was filled with worries. What if he were caught? Would he be intimidated into telling the truth? Would he be able to come up with a believable cover story? But every thought vanished from his mind, when he saw a little purple beast running towards a garden of some unexpected Privarian. The little monster was ravaging every Kuatu tree it could find, stripping bare the branches of their juicy, green leaves. He channeled everything he had been taught and stalked up behind the Urhangai. The wind was to his advantage, and before he knew what he was doing, he launched himself onto the creature, pinning it down beneath him where it squirmed violently in attempts to free itself. He felt elated. He had done it! But as soon as the bubble of excitement swelled in his chest, it burst. For as he looked at the ground in front of him, he saw something that made his insides chill. Two large feet were standing right in front of him. He looked up, and up, and up, to see an Elder Privarian, staring down in shock and anger at both Eldrain and the struggling Urhangai below him.

KRISSA STEWART

Found Object: Small brown suitcase

Doctor Ramsey Marcel was an unassuming man. He was normal looking, with short brown hair, hazel eyes, and an all in all average face. He looked just like any other average worker on his way back to his office after lunch hour. He walked with the urgency of a man who had a big, possibly life changing project due today. They were right in some ways, what they didn't realize was how extraordinary his project truly was.

Ramsey Marcel pushed his way up to one of the many skyscrapers, this one labeled with blue neon letters spelling out Capacitance Science. Marcel swiped his ID badge at the front door as always, making a beeline for the elevator. Marcel was carrying a small brown case with a pale yellow front and back, each side adorned with a single green triangle in the center. He unconsciously gripped the wooden handle of the small carrying case tighter in his hand, as if he was trying to protect whatever might be inside. He asked the person nearest to the buttons to press the button for the 31st floor. Then stood in silence as the elevator moved upward. Marcel felt impatience bubbling up in the pit of his stomach as the elevator stopped on what seemed to be every floor between the ground floor and his own.

When the elevator finally reached the 31st floor, Marcel pushed his way past the people still inside the elevator, swiped his card outside the lab he had been working in for five years now, and walked inside. He pulled on this lab coat and walked into the lab area, where his coworkers were working.

Izumi Nakano, a middle aged Japanese woman who'd moved to America from Japan to work on this project, was the first to see him

enter. Her eyes flew to the small suitcase, a glimmer of pure, unbridled excitement flashing through her eyes. The pure science of it all was what captivated her attention; it's what she signed on to this project for.

The project itself was supposed to be proactive, as way of escape in case something did happen, but also just to see if they could. It was obviously still in testing and would probably require many more years before it was actually usable, but this, this could be the turning point and they all knew it.

Marcel's other two coworkers, Daniel Gambell and Caleb Oakley, saw him and produced similar reactions to Nakano's. Slowly, they laid down whatever they had been working on and moved to a small circle near the other two, looking at Marcel's case curiously. They all knew what was inside, but for some reason, they couldn't seem to believe it.

"Is that it?" Nakano asked softly. Marcel simply nodded in confirmation, causing his coworkers to light up in excitement.

"Well?" Gambell said, grinning like a child on Christmas morning. "Let's see it!"

Marcel set the small case down on one of the shiny steel counters, and flicked open the bronze latch. He pulled out a small orb, made out of glass and copper. It was pulsing with the strangest light, some odd combination of gold, blue, silver, and rose. They had all known about magic for some time now, but they had never seen it in its pure, concentrated form.

They all stared at the orb in awe. Nakano reached out and brushed her fingertips across the glass. Oakley plucked it out of Marcel's hand and moved over to one of the many large computer consoles. He stood for a few moments staring up at the screens viewing different scenes from the world they had created. Oakley was staring at his race in particular. The Privarian, a race of hunters. Nakano glanced at her winged Aeclim. Gambell's eyes darted up at his magic based Trevion. Even Marcel looked up at his Virium.

"If we do this, if we make it so humans will be more than just more codes in this, what will happen to them?" Nakano asked softly.

"The only way to know is to find out," Marcel reasoned after a few seconds.

With that Oakley placed the ball into its designated place on the machine. The magical light flowed through the circuits, adding a strange new power to the advanced technology. What the team of four scientists didn't realize was that the people they had created were changing with the power of pure magic.

They were becoming sentient.

GARAI TORRENCE

Found Object: Tall wooden statue object with a house on top and a long smooth carved bottom.

In the virtual world of Scindo the spoke of the Aecilim have a holy weapon that is used for the Victrix to keep order. Every four hours if you're in the presence of the holy weapon then you will feel the worst pain you can imagine until you are dead. It is called the vexil. All other species know about it and want to obtain it but are scared to go inside the caverns because they can't see the Aecilim because that is their territory and the Aecilim have promised to enslave any and all other species who choose to go into their territory. Because of this the other species despite their differences decide to take the holy weapon by choice. They believe it can be used to repel all intruders but the Aecilim are completely against it. Even though everyone decided on taking it everyone has their own agenda. The Privarian want it as a hunting weapon to use as a trap for the aqua dragons and giant fireflies. The Kathoran on the other hand want it to increase their technology and to evolve further. The Trevion want it to increase their magical power and become the top. The Virium want it for complete and total control of scindo they entitled to the weapon because they already control all trade. None of the other species know about the others true agenda and are all in it for themselves. The plan to steal the holy weapon was set the plan was to use a huge strike force as a distraction while a second team went in to steal the weapon which was located in the middle of the victrix the but each species had a plan of their own to get the weapon. The Privarian were going to slay all the others to get it. The Kathoran planned to get the layout and ditch the rest of the group to be lost in the caves while it gets in and out. The Trevion

plan was to freeze everyone with magic then make them forget. The Virium had a plan to sabotage both teams at the same time as a third force came in to take it. The day came and in the end everyone's plan failed and the entire force was enslaved in that there was a global war. The cyborgs attacked the wizards the hunters attacked the political people and the Aecilim stood back and watched as the war raged on. In the war there was death caused by an unneeded war and in that the few that were left in each race and in the time of sorrow the Aecilim thought it best to instill the holy weapon on the world and in turn Scindo was destroyed but the weapons hidden power is to rebuild worlds and after the explosion the planet Scindo the world came back together and the creators came back to recreate the world essentially turned back time with no holy weapon, and everything and everyone forgot about it.

BEASTIARIES

Marianna Allen

There is a small creature that hides in the shadows of an ever changing world. No one knows what it's called because the creature has never spoken its name. For the creature to share its name would mean they trust you, and this fickle creature does not trust easily. Many people don't realize it, but the small creature knows all their secrets. No one knows what it really looks like because it can change its shape and can become anything it wants. Except for itself. It's been so long since the creature didn't have a disguise that it has forgotten what it looks like.

Pearse Anderson

Pearse fits inside the stomach of a dried out road kill, waiting for an adventure to start. It stares at nature and eats whatever it can. Sometimes people poke him and say it has nice eyes. One day the road kill will become a cocoon and it will dissolve into a new mystery.

Emma Antonio

I am the anankis, a lupine and serpentine beast. I am a wolf with pitch fur and green snake scales along my nose, ears, legs, back, and tails. My two tails allow for maximum balance and my six eyes for optimal vision. I am generally a solitary animal, but occasionally I spend time with more of my kind. I may be silent in the day, but I howl loudly through the night.

Mia Ballingrud

I am half-lion, half-giraffe. I am shy until I know I can trust you, and when I do you are like my family. I am often under stress but I can always figure out a way to survive. I can be strong and kind.

Mary Hope Ballou

She is an Uxor; an enormous creature to which the Earth-native dinosaur is dwarfed. She has a pale, bioluminescent, dragon-like body and four large

brown, cat-like eyes. There are tentacles at the tip of her snout, useful for bringing prey to her mouth. She tends to stay in the shadows, unless her company is proved to be friendly. Then she springs out of her shell and becomes quite a social animal.

Marcus Bamberger

The Arden is a small mammal with speckled brown-and-black fur. It remains motionless to find food or watch for predators, searching with all its senses. Once it determines the presence of danger or sustenance, it hurries off, darting from cover to cover. It can be distinguished from a squirrel in three ways: Lack of a tail, inability to climb trees, and ability to eat meat.

Phoenix Bauer

The phoenix is a large blue bird, engulfed in blue flames that disappear when it soars into space and dances with the stars. It has an addiction to attention and love, and as such developed its indigo feathers, which mask the pale shade of Prussian blue that engulfs its true body. The phoenix's calls often are unheard by other creatures, so it favors to let its true voice remain mute, fearing the miniscule rejection it often faces.

Laura Bell

The Maccerdia is a small cave dwelling creature, almost a foot in size. The mammal wakes early to see the mornings and only rests when the third moon has risen, showing off how it can work on little sleep. A Maccerdia covers the coral walls in color, swimming in other-worldly designs just an inch from the wall itself. With the Maccerdia's own body's paint being excreted onto the short yellow hairs, the Maccerdia turns into art itself. This little mammal's call is quiet and so it is not usually seen as a large part of the beauty of the world, where most would be wrong.

Caitlin Childers

The Childers is a rabbit, but unlike normal rabbits this one is loud. Its trusting nature gains it many friends and unfortunately a few enemies. It often trips over its very long, very awkward feet. The most noticeable things about the Childers is its red spots and green eyes.

Priya Chokshi

The Lucari is a wolf like creature with a sleek body that runs as fast as a cheetah. They are mostly carnivores, but also have a craving for fruits and

berries every so often. Its silver fur is adorned with royal blue spots and its face is gifted with sly but curious hazel eyes. The Lucari is quite friendly and rambunctious and enjoys noise, howling, and barking. It is often seen in noisy, loud cities howling and “dancing” to street music.

Zoe Cloud

The Cloud is a small but strong feline mammal found in temperate climates. It is pale blue with white spots, and has short but thick fur. It eats a wide variety of meats and some plants, and appears to enjoy onions with a passion. When searching one out, keep an eye out for messy dens and cave areas. The Cloud, while intelligent, is energetic and disorganized by nature, and the messes are likely caused by one trying to make a home.

Frazier Crawford

The Crawford. A small, awkward creature, this creature’s intellect is its best weapon. Blunt teeth, small, wriggly body and sluggish tendencies make it hard for this animal to fight off predators. Instead, it uses its cunning to skirt around conflicts, finding the best places to hide, the hidden food sources and water-holes.

Jonah Crosby

The wild Jonah is a handsome beast prone to breaking hearts and being awesome. He lives in the southern part of many worlds surrounded by swooning ladies and his closest bros.

Aaron Dianda

The Nemy-Macka is an elusive animal that spends most of its time cowering from the outside world inside its den. Essentially a tall, slender cat that writes in the dirt inside its den using its claws. The Nemy-Macka also enjoys stealing electronics from humans and using them to play various games, mostly free roam games.

Sarah Donnelly

This animal is a mammalian beast about the size of a small house cat, with a bushy tail reminiscent of that of a fox, and large, bat-like wings. It has thick, soft fur that is primarily silvery-gray in color, with black-and-white markings on the wings, tail, and the lighter-furred underbelly. Its ears are pointed, upright, and very large, and its eyes are catlike and pale violet in color. The creature is rarely seen, and is very quiet vocally, only known to communicate

in its soft chirps when amongst its own, small pack. Despite this, it can, on rare occasions, be quite territorial, and is rather loyal to said pack.

Nick D'Onofrio

Nikion is a nightmarish creature that has no mouth, red skin, and big ears. It always seeks guidance from others. When it finds people, it follows them. Remaining silent as it hides its true appearance. When it finally decides to reveal itself it is often met with terror. It has knives for hands.

Audric Donald

The kurloki: this animal has a split personality that can change on the flip of a coin. So be gracious, for your life could depend on it.

Kaitlyn Dubey

The Kaitlyn is a small creature, native to the northern deciduous forests. It is a bear-like creature with thick burgundy fur that hibernates during the winter and awakens ravenous for the spring. Rarely found in groups larger than two or three, it burrows deep into the warm earth, often near natural crops of barley or wheat. Its time is mostly spent tucked away in its burrow, comforted by melodic, lyrical sounds and the smell of old books.

Seth Etchells

The Etchells is a foreign creature that rarely visits these lands. Dieting mostly on herbs and other things it finds in the undergrowth but supplements it's diet with fish. It moves from place to place using its pale coat to camouflage itself from predators.

Taylor Feld

The Lorf is a common creature. There are thousands of them. They are literally all over the place, and it's getting a little annoying. Look! There's one on your shoe! Quick, get it, get it!

Jasper Ferehawk

The Jasper is an awkward animal, one that eats whatever is set before it with little to no preference. It is highly organized and will scream when another animal changes the configuration of its nest or daily schedule pattern. When in groups, it will change from being awkward to being a very loud animal.

Tara Games

The Nyxara is small and intelligent; little is known of this bird with a fan of red and black feathers and instead of body feathers a coating of midnight black and gunmetal colored scales. She subsists solely on the emotions of others, basking in the happiness, anger, etc. She prefers to be a lone bird, awake and thinking at night and sleeping very little. Sometimes she finds other animals she bonds with and protects them at cost of her life. She enjoys moonlight, flying over the ocean and mountains, traveling, singing, flying as fast as possible, learning, and quietly observing other animals.

Amy Gardiner-Parks

In the depths of the forest concealed by the darkness of green crystal caves, hides a strange little beast. Only about four inches high, the viqatt resembles a fox. The biggest difference, besides its small stature, is the two bat-like wings that sprout from the creature's furry back. The viqatt is nocturnal and spends most of the day hanging onto the ceiling of a small cave. But at night viqatts are quite active. So if you ever find yourself walking through a forest at night keep an eye out, you might be lucky.

Ariana Gnäs

The Gnasty is a rare and elusive creature. Nothing is known of the creature's physical features beside its blood red fur, chilling laugh and mocking smile with glowing sharp teeth. It is a nocturnal creature and relies on its speed to get from its den to its destination, when it actually moves.

Savannah Hall

It has black wings tipped with white, and round head containing orange eyes along with a gray beak. The bird has a wingspan of ten feet. A rare sight, often only seen by people it deems are safe. It watches the outside world, plotting its next move; it never sleeps, never rests. It is always watching.

Unity Haq

The Haq is a miniature cat with feathered wings, which spends most of the daytime dreaming. It is usually seen among books and art, and only comes out to dance in the twilight hours due to nocturnal tendencies.

Allison Haswell

The Haswell is an animal that is very rare. It is rumored to have the face of a monkey with hawk ears. It has the body of a panda bear as well as their

appetite. The wings are ginormous, see through, backward three appendages. They like to soar high above the clouds so they can see everything.

Robin Holcomb

The Orange Cliffs of Adrahene house an odd beast to behold—the Holcomb hides in their ancient, labyrinthine halls, skulking among the ornate statuary and interesting clutter it happens to find laying around. It hides its freakishly pale frame under some sort of baggy drapery or another, tending towards thin, breathable fibers printed with some kind of colorful floral design. Elaborate illusions are weaved by the Holcomb to pass the time—images of distant lands, always more interesting and dangerous than the place it currently is. Its limbs are long and frail, and a mat of shaggy hair hangs from its scalp. It often seeks to spend time with other creatures it has been acquainted with, but tends not to leave its home.

Maya Homziak

The *Felis macularis*, more commonly known as the Spotted Cat-gecko, is found in habitats all over the world. Until recently it was thought to be a myth due to its reclusive habits and nocturnal lifestyle. Its front half is catlike and bears fur, which thin out to scales bearing a distinctive spotted pattern and lizard-like hindquarters. It can appear frightening to those unfamiliar with the species, but they are actually shy creatures that will befriend other species if given time. The majority of its time is spent feeding and watching other animals, and it can spend up to 12 hours sleeping per day.

Rilee Horowitz

The Horrorwitz is a sly, elusive creature. They can live on land or in the water, and have slits in their throats that allow them to take in oxygen from liquids. Their fur can be extremely varied but it is most commonly seen as a long flowing mane. The Horrorwitz will kill on sight.

Meredith Jones

The Meredith is an odd, nocturnal animal that mainly sleeps during the day and entertains and feeds itself at night. It likes to be taken care of rather than to take on personal responsibility, and likes to be alone most of the time; it is typically very selective of whom it chooses to befriend, but is friendly to strangers and distant acquaintances. The Meredith is easily distracted and appreciates art and creating her own form of it. It cannot fly—though it sometimes wishes that it could—but, it is an exceptional

hider. The Meredith can speak; it is usually quiet, with sparse commentary, but when it comes to certain topics the Meredith is very spirited and an excellent candidate when it comes to debates. The Meredith has a small frame and a small face, and likes to climb and explore places in its life, small, personal spaces, and milk.

Morgan Jones

The Morgan is an awkward creature that spends most of its time sleeping. It has eyes the color of which none have ever managed to guess, and lives in the deepest of catacombs. Be wary of the Morgan, for it has quite a temper when something it reads isn't to its liking.

Kramer Kas

Perhaps in the pale predawn you may see a footprint in the soft loam, a glimpse of a pale blue-gray eye, or a flash of silver scales, slipping amongst the beautiful northeastern forests or winging overhead towards her day roost. These are all marks of Kazael, a highly magical draconic creature of unknowable age which dwells in the trees and highlands in solitude, but frequently leaves her home in search of company or to fly in severe weather. One never knows what to expect from her, for sometimes she is as mild as an early autumn morning, and other times as fierce as a summer thunderstorm. Approach her if you can; if you are kind, she will reward you. But if you threaten her or anything she holds dear, prepare to flee... for the wrath of a dragon is not something to incite.

Jeff Katz

The sea creatures known as Katzes, funnily enough, are not related to felines in any way. These enormous cephalopods, though well-intentioned, often end up sinking ships when they rise from the depths of the ocean due to their gargantuan size. If you listen very closely, you will probably hear it whispering, "Oh my god, I am so sorry, frick, frick, oh god, I'm sorry, oh god, I'll just, I'll just go," before it sinks back to the icy ocean floor.

Jake Keim

I am a lion with hues of red and blue within its fur and mane. I do not care for status or power, yet my personal pride remains. I may be kind and peaceful to those that pose no threat, but those that do, must be forever cautious. For I may not be the strongest, but I'm infinitely cunning and always thinking. To underestimate me is to spell one's downfall.

Chris Kunin

By day the Kunin bears the exact resemblance of mountain goat. However by night the Kunin will change shape into a large lion like creature with bright green eyes.

Maddy Lee

The Rurah, having four eyes and a hide that reflects sunlight, is a perplexing and odd creature, prone to racing ahead of or falling behind the pack. Though it possesses a set of hairless wings, it often chooses to climb or crawl through the undergrowth of its habitat instead. It has no pack, and therefore when it desires companions, it dances in the dust or soil in order to create markings. Oftentimes, however, it is so thoroughly amused by the practice that it erases them and carries on its merry way of solitude. Oddly enough, photographic evidence shows the Rurah carrying a particular stick wherever it goes, whether it uses the stick or not—a source of comfort perhaps?

Carter Liebman

The garvana is a large, majestic avian creature with blue eyes and an ochre coat of feathers. Curiously, it has one eye cast in a perpetual wink. This creature isn't afraid to break the boundaries of the nests of others.

Elizabeth Lifsey

The Castilian Panther is an all-white mountain lion with bright green eyes and rich golden claws. She is a possessive mother, loving of her cubs, and she desires attention; her heart is big, but she is quick to anger and will harm anyone who threatens her loved ones.

Alyssa Mazzoli

The AlyKat is a small feline known for its peculiar diet and random outbursts of odd sounds. It has terrible eyesight and fur that always seems just a bit too long. The AlyKat is a social animal—it loves to be around others of its kind, and is fiercely loyal to those it considers friends. Though its claws are clipped and it is peaceful by nature, it will lash out at any creature it perceives as a threat to its wellbeing, or the wellbeing of its various companions. The AlyKat inhabits many worlds—primarily Serenitus and Suevat Prime—and is expected to spread to others in the future.

Austin McDuffie

The Duffie is a long, striped snake with sharp white fangs and blood-red eyes. Its bite is poisonous, but the end of its tail is very soft, and it eats only the cleanest of mice.

Blake Osborne

The minex, the head of a bull and the body of a phoenix, is a rare and majestic creature. The minex feasts on grass and herbs but never eats human flesh, although if seen the minex will growl and prepare to pounce but never will. The minex lives in a cave on the island of Bali and only comes to feast or drink from the Crystal Lake nearby. At the end of the minex's life its body will erupt in flames and from the ashes a new minex will arise. The max lifespan of a minex is five to six centuries.

Rileigh Pack

The Ann-Ipsum is a small, pale, lemur-like creature with large, leathery wings and hazel eyes. She usually lives in solitude, as she is very shy. But after a while, if she warms up to you, she becomes quite talkative. But beware, for she can be extremely moody. The Ann-Ipsum's eyesight is quite horrendous as well, so she relies on echolocation to help guide the way. Preferring a tremendously cold climate, she lives deep within the mountains. Her favorite smells are mint, old books and hot tea. She is an herbivore.

Nittu Patel

The Nitroo bird is a creature that loves rain but does not like getting very wet. It is an herbivore but isn't afraid to eat something it hasn't tried before, as long as it is inside of its eating restrictions. It hates the cold even though it lives in a place that is known for being cold, yet this bird rarely goes far from home.

Rhyan Paul

The Rhyan is a reclusive woodland creature that avoids direct sunlight. It is a brown long haired chubby animal. It can be found in small groups of four or five creatures but is not overly social. This creature can be loud at times, especially in their small gatherings.

Anya Regnier

The Anie is a small four legged creature with long ears, russet fur, and emerald eyes. She usually stays sleeping but the ingestion of tea leaves and sugary

delights sudden bouts of hyperness will ensue. However even with the happy hyper bouncing, the Anie has her dark moments of condescending behavior.

Zachary Sadow

The trumpet tiger is a majestic creature. The tiger looks like a normal tiger but in the open light it has a golden glow to its fur. When it is frightened it will emit a sound that is like a very loud trumpet playing in your ear which will try to quickly attract other trumpet tigers and eventually they will call at most three other trumpet tigers and then they will all attack you with razor sharp claws. Once the tigers have scared you away they will go their separate ways.

Anderson Scull

The Scull is a rather large subspecies of fox with a deep red coat and a particularly long tail. Though capable of forming close bonds with other individuals regardless of species, it tends to flee or become withdrawn when encountering a large group. It gets its name from the familial passing down of long oar-like sticks used as tools for trapping prey or manipulating far-away objects.

Laini Sohn

The Laini is a quiet animal who prefers to follow others. It resembles a mouse with ears the size of dinner plates. It may appear to follow orders, but it will betray you when you're not looking. Anyone who encounters this rare being is advised to bring some air freshener.

Kat Sokol

The Jampol is a small armadillo like creature with bright green eyes and a tough golden shell, which protects the soft dark skin beneath. It avoids small spaces and prefers to reside near the ocean. A Jampol will try to mimic other creatures, but never quite pulls off the transformation, and is better off remaining with the golden shell. It has a shy nature, but with some dedication, will be a loyal companion to the end.

Krissa Stewart

Krissa is a peach colored imp, barely three apples tall. She has wide eyes and is always watching to learn new things. She is easily startled, but can be coaxed out of hiding with the promise of a large French fry. If you met her, be kind, for she has a soft heart.

Indigo Surka

I whip my head around as I hear the crunch of the leaves just around the corner. I peer around the bend to find myself at the foot of a bird person. But this isn't just any bird person. This is my best mate, and my trainer James. I have never been to the Capital City, or the Sport Centre. This will be my first Polo match. Should I be worried? No, I can't let myself back out now. I can't find the words to describe the beautiful city that has taken me under its wing.

Garai Torrence

A giant lion with the legs of a griffon, the wings of an angel, and the tail of a dragon.

Jacob Walter

The Jacobbird is a small songbird native to the northeastern United States. Its plumage on its torso is a lilac purple, with a bright yellow curl of feathers extending from its head. They fly in small but close-knit flocks to which they are very loyal. In general, the Jacobbird is very cheery, and loves to chirp and sing. Occasionally these birds are known to, for fun, pick up twigs from the forest floor and fence together with them.

Lindsay Ward

A shining fish traverses the galaxies. Its colorful scales attract attention as it shoots across foreign skies, sometimes mistaken as a comet. Its diet consists of various forms of energy... The space fish is often found with an ally of sorts, as it rarely does anything worthy of having enemies. Deep below sea level, the fish's real body swims, while its dreaming conscience continues to explore the stars.

Jessie Watts

If not found amongst others, the Jacklrat can be seen in its nest which is kept messy and unorganized. The thin but energetic rodent is slim in shape and slender in stature with dark brown fur and a long pale, pink tail. Most other animals find this creature to be not only intriguing but off-putting, but once they find that she is more "bark" than she is bite they warm up.

Ariana Winkle

Ariana is a small, blue mouse with a megaphone for a mouth.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Major thanks to Boyce Lawton III and Wofford College for making Shared Worlds possible—as well as everyone who participated in Shared Worlds, from the students, staff, and guest writers to the sponsors who contributed in some way. Additional thanks to the great people in the Wofford cafeteria.

Thanks to Jeremy Zerfoss for designing the book and to Jackie Gitlin, Aimee Hyndman, and Ann VanderMeer for compiling, copyediting and proofreading this book.

SPONSORS

A huge thank you to Amazon.com for supporting us with a substantial arts grant that made scholarships available to students with need. Thank you also to Warren Lapine of Wilder Publications and Sherri M. Nichols for their contributions, and to all of the publishers who sent free books for the students. Special thanks as well to websites such as SF Signal, io9, and Omnivoracious, who generously allowed Shared Worlds to get the word out regarding registration and provided valuable online resources.

For more information on Shared Worlds, visit our website:
<http://www.wofford.edu/sharedworlds>

ABOUT SHARED WORLDS

For those who aren't familiar with Shared Worlds, here are the particulars...

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

In the first week, the students form groups of ten to twelve and create their own fantasy or science fiction world from scratch. They build its topography, its cultures, its history, its underlying biology, and more. They debate every major element of that world's essence and come to consensus. Experts on these subjects from Wofford's faculty give lectures on the subject while they also receive guidance and focus from their classroom teachers, teaching assistants, and guests as diverse in expertise as Amazon.com writer in residence Karen Lord, NYT bestseller Holly Black, and Will Hindmarch, a gaming expert provided as an additional resource. Skype sessions have been added, too—this year the students had a chance to experience Jake von Slatt's Steampunk Workshop and to get a tour of *Publishers Weekly* with editor Rose Fox. During their off-time, an extremely able group of RAs supervise down-time and activities.

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

In the second week, each student writes a story set in that world. They have the opportunity to immerse themselves in their fiction. Guest writers are assigned to each classroom, available to answer questions or

read drafts-in-progress. These writers provide a professional critique of the story, along with a one-on-one session to discuss the story.

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

Part of the prep for that second-week story includes giving the students imaginative writing exercises the first week—anything to help spark ideas for them. One of those exercises we call “The Found Image” exercise, and it nudges them to exercise their imagination in finding ways to embed things from the real world in the context of their made-up worlds. Another exercise is really just for fun, but also provides another opportunity to stretch their imaginations and share something about themselves: writing about themselves as if they were some fantastical animal. Both of those exercises are included in this book: a fine testament to the creativity, talent, drive, and imagination of our students that also gives you a glimpse into the worlds they created while at the camp.

