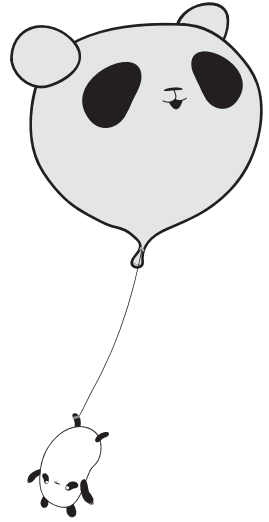


SHARED WORLDS 2011



Shared Worlds Summer Writing Camp
Wofford College, Spartanburg, South Carolina
Sponsored in part by a grant from Amazon.com

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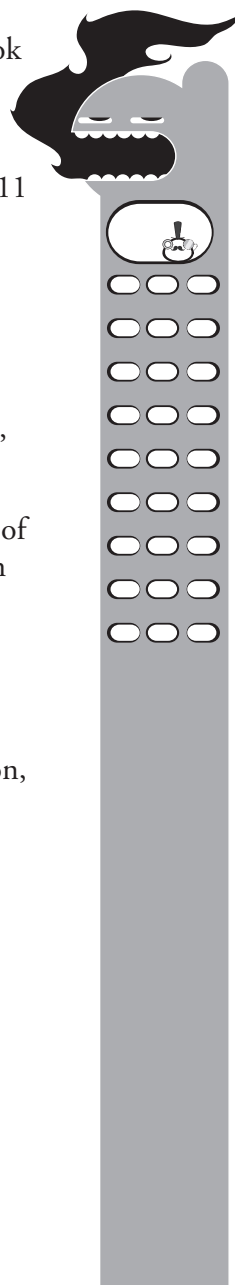
Copy-editing by Sean Whiteford

Direct all queries to : Shared Worlds,
c/o Cathy Connor, Wofford College.
429 North Church Street, Spartanburg,
SC 29303-3663

The Shared Worlds concept is a creation of
Jeremy L.C. Jones, with assistance from
Jeff VanderMeer and sponsorship
by Wofford College

For registration and donation information,
visit our website:

<http://www.wofford.edu/sharedworlds>



SHARED WORLDS 2011

STUDENT WRITINGS



Edited by the Alien Baby

with assistance from:

palm elephants

shamblers

tea cup pigs

&

The Guild of Magic Harvesters

*Dedicated to Cathy Connor,
for all she does behind the scenes*



To Jeremy Zerfoss, designer extraordinaire

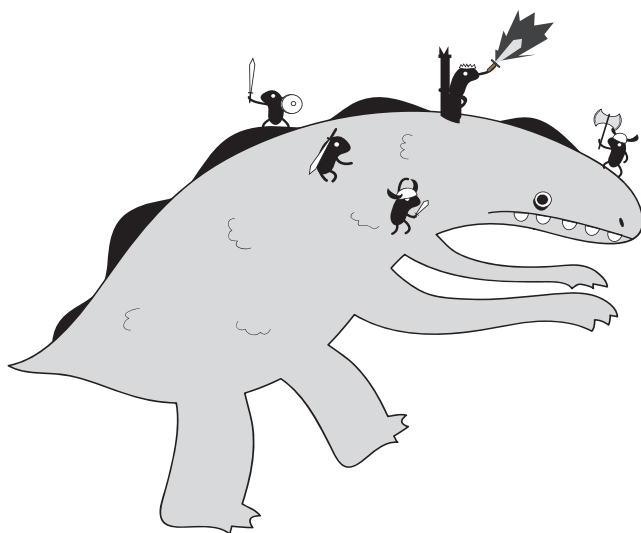


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INTRODUCTION:

SHARED WORLDS IS TALENT, PASSION, AND IMAGINATION



For two weeks every summer more than forty teen students come together at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, to participate in a unique 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. Some of them will even write their very first story at Shared Worlds.

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 visiting writer Nnedi Okorafor, a World Fantasy Award winner, and Will Hindmarch, a gaming expert embedded in the classes as an additional resource. 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 preparation for a video presentation 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 write for hours on end, immersed in their fiction. Panels on rough drafts and revision featuring some of the best writers in the world provide additional information. Guest writers ghost through the writing labs, available to answer questions or read drafts-in-progress. Students also get the chance to have a one-on-one session to talk about their writing with editors and writers with over twenty years of experience. One of

our several visiting professional writers then provides a critique of that story, to give the student something to work on after they go home.

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 purple 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 2011 students that also gives you a glimpse into the worlds they created while at the camp.

You hold in your hands one example of the creativity of the Shared Worlds 2011 students, but there are many more. Some already exist in the world and many more will exist in the future, brought to you by strong, unique voices. Shared Worlds does not create these great new talents, but we hope it emboldens and helps them on their journey.



GUESSING THE IMAGE

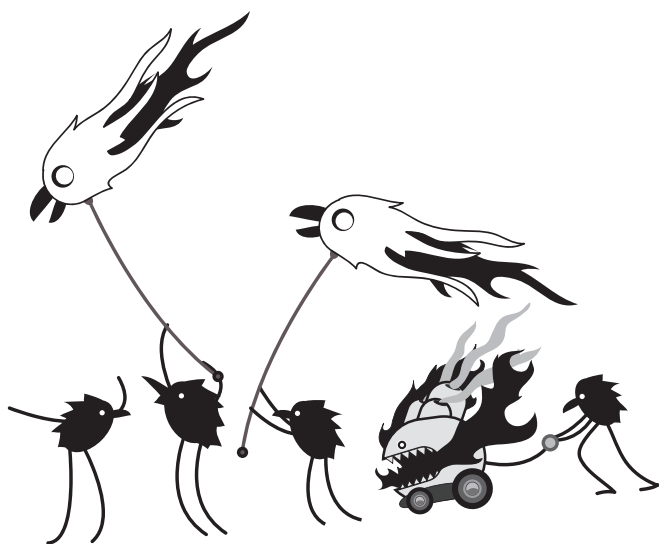
As the introduction suggests, and the exercise guidelines listed at the end of this book indicate, the 2011 Shared Worlds students received an image from the real world and had to repurpose it in the context of their own made-up world. These images consisted of photographs of places, objects, buildings, and art. Most all of the images came from our travels, art collection, or from artists we know. Some students listed their image number when turning in their assignment, and you can find that number with their story. Others didn't list the number, but below you will find each image listed by number in case you would like to guess the source material for a particular story. You can also find the images in this public flickr set: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/vanderworld/sets/72157627476017588/> . We have included all 63 images available to the students even though only 42 were used, in case readers of this book would like to do the writing exercise themselves.

– Ann & Jeff VanderMeer

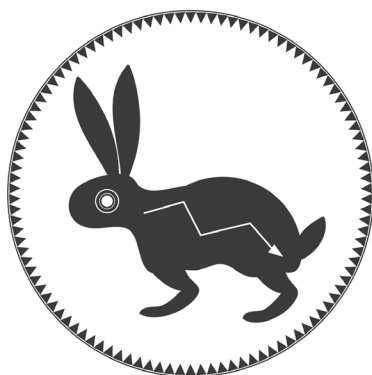
Image #	Description
1	Huge piece of white driftwood next to a salt marsh in North Florida
2	Detail of a fish gargoye on the corner of a house in Prague
3	House-front window in Amsterdam that included many tiny Earth globes
4	Detail of a space capsule's thruster system from NASA, Houston
5	Silver spoons made in the shape of leaves with long stems
6	Details of an intricate carpet design with chicken heads and helmets
7	Side of a gold-metal structure with what resemble port-holes embedded
8	Door from Dracula's Castle in Romania
9	Handbag of lizard skin, large lizard's head still attached, Amsterdam
10	Graffiti-strewn buildings in Lisbon, Portugal
11	Beetle-priest black-and-white illustration by Richard A. Kirk
12	Wrought-iron stalks topped with glass, resembling plants, Paris bridge
13	Black-and-white montage of grotesque creatures by Aeron Alfrey
14	Excavation in a Turku, Finland, museum showing the city's earliest levels

15 Black-and-white Richard A. Kirk illustration depicting a plant in a robe
 16 Jeweler Paulette Werger staring through a row of her knife-like tools
 17 Detail of a watery grotto from Sintra gardens outside of Lisbon, Portugal
 18 A shelf of strange little artifacts from the home of artist J.K. Potter
 19 A mecha-toad diagram by a Russian artist
 20 Detail from a made-up machine, a Positronic brain, by Jake von Slatt
 21 The tornado made of rulers in artist Scott Eagle's office, East Carolina U.
 22 Painting of a weird thing-in-a-jar by Aeron Alfrey
 23 Orange mask with long nails shooting from eyes in Scott Eagle's studio
 24 Horizontal view of Scott Eagle's art studio with row of masks
 25 Boat-shaped, frilled mini-iceberg with flecks of dirt, in a Finnish stream
 26 Huge papier-mache bunny ridden by a doll, East Carolina Univ. art dept.
 27 Curved wooden steps fringed with flowers leading to beach in Big Sur
 28 Shadowy print of a bee against a cross-stitched background
 29 A tree with vines abruptly cut away from lower part of trunk, Richmond
 30 Detail of white rock, barnacles, and sand from Tofino, Vancouver Island
 31 Lightbulb on a pedestal within a tiny wooden wagon, antique shop
 32 Paint-stained ceiling beams of farmhouse; location of art exhibit
 33 Page detail from the fabled indecipherable Voynich Manuscript
 34 Cup-shaped tiny fungi against a forest floor of old wooden chips
 35 Frame of gargoyles surrounding the centerpiece: a single block of wood
 36 Circular reproduction, a pool with a crystal in it, Japanese Gardens, Seattle
 37 Heirloom pipe with microfiche of Dutch resistance cell hidden inside
 38 A fungus curled like a nautilus, texture of a brain, translucent green
 39 Art installation by Dawn Andrews; a book burned to look like a door
 40 A made-up Steampunk machine by Jake von Slatt, Steampunk Workshop
 41 Phantasmagorical art of a family and a skull, by Myrtle von Damitz III
 42 Fiberglass, multi-colored sculpture by Frenchman, Alien-looking

43 Bright yellow stacked yellow fungus on a hill outside of Prague
44 Detail from Temple of the Fairies, the Grotto, Alabama
45 Another fiberglass sculpture by the Frenchman, in a long box
46 A human-made cave wall in Prague, Czech Republic
47 View of cave ceiling studded with stalagmites, the Grotto, Alabama
48 Paris shop window of many plastic and ceramic hands and arms
49 Prague archway blue-lit at night while film crew was shooting footage
50 Metal sculpture of shiny metal man, Tate Modern exhibit, London
51 Wide-shot of the temple of the fairies, the Grotto, Alabama
52 Prague night view from a boat, reflected water, and green wicker lantern
53 Oval skylight in domed roof of a Finnish library
54 Light-globes on robotic legs, art by Eric Orchard
55 A painted owl and cat sitting upright in the grass, by Eric Orchard
56 Girl with crown in globe of light with monster outside, Eric Orchard
57 Painting of night sky with a tentacled monster visible, Eric Orchard
58 Dim-seen obelisks in the night by Jeremy Zerfoss
59 Against a green background, a ghostly tree above a tree stump, Zerfoss
60 Two people in animal masks with words "Wish you were here" in front
61 A girl in a red hood walking through a ghostly forest, Jeremy Zerfoss
62 Painting of a surreal plant with blossoms like cinnamon rolls, Zerfoss



FOUND
OBJECT STORIES



THE WORLD OF HARTSEER

Hartseer is a post-apocalyptic land mass controlled by an unseen and ill-meaning “shadow” government, called The Pantheon, and overrun with rotting bodies genetically altered to instinctually move towards crowds of living humans. Only twenty percent of our world is composed of water, the other eighty percent is composed mostly of uninhabitable sulfuric desert or barren wasteland. Therefore, resources are extremely limited, and most of the inhabitants of our planet are destitute and oppressed, with a small number of the poor attempting to rebel against their situations and the government. Because of the threat of the outside world, in the form of the shamblers and dangerous flora and fauna, major cities have been domed, with figureheads following the orders of The Pantheon under threat of death. Although this world appears to be without hope, the inhabitants of our world find optimism in the presence of rebel groups, and mysterious rumors of the Aquí Populi.

LAUREN BAILEY

Image #37

At dusk the city was hauntingly pretty, Sebastian thought, like a corpse still freshly dead. He had lived in the city twenty years—perhaps longer, he supposed; the necessity of time was something society had come to shed as easily as an old winter coat. Before then, the innards of the city were spacious and clamored with a passionate frenzy that curled within itself and perished soon after its birth. In those years to come, buildings had budded like infectious sores from each boundary of the enclosure, eating up the earth's flesh greedily until they overtook their host and now pulsed with a life of their own: a sense of order and community dictated by a common feeling of necessity and that instinctual jab of hope. Streets ran like murky rivers through the thick civilization, and in the evening their calm surfaces danced with the touch of diverging shadows and the light of the sun, eclipsing behind a desiccated horizon.

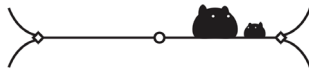
Sebastian thought of himself as a practical man. He had built his life about the tangible, casting his faith within objects able to be grasped, rather than the hollow words on conspirators' tongues or a bleached vision of a restored past. Therefore he did not know why he so intensely clung to time, or why such a superfluous matter even troubled him. Time was something that was lost in the folds of expansion: not an uncommon death for materials in a changing world. It was a persistent fact of life and even he had wholly discarded the notion of living by the robotic ticking of a clock—until he had become a lightician and so had been given a simple watch. It was nothing more than a plain white face on a metal band that shackled his wrist; it ticked soullessly and would illuminate and hum whenever he was to monitor the lights, to make sure they had lit or dimmed appropriately. The watch stirred within him a consciousness of how the entire city mutely ticked: how the shop doors would open and close without their keepers, how trams would roll into the stations without their conductors.

The lights he monitored were drilled into the rails that lined each road, each light an identically rusted tinny coloring and weathered by age. A thin wire drew across the grooves in their hilts and bound them to the spikes that protruded like metallic forked tails from the back of the fence. As he walked down the precise center of the street, the lights spread before him were nothing but dead husks: rustic objects clinging to their perch and arching subtly over the pathway. But posteriorly they sparked to life like beings moved from slumber, silently ticking within their robotic minds,

spheres of light cupped against their curved vanes and luminescent patterns scattering along the rutted road. They all lit perfectly, systematically: not once yet had he found a light that had not lit or had not dimmed or even one that flickered incessantly.

For the most part, Sebastian the lightician enjoyed his job; the allure of nighttime was not a particular of the occupation he had taken into consideration, though was one guilelessly he had become victim to regardless. In the young evening, the city's denizens hid within their homes, lulled to sleep by the voiceless ticking of the walls about them. Outside, the city was captured within a rare void of silence to which only he was privy. Its buildings were captivatingly reflected along the glass surface of the dome, obscuring the feral silhouettes that breathed and crawled in the expanse of darkness beyond. The dome did not trap its citizens, as everyone did know: it served to reversely trap the free world beyond its clutches. It shielded its people within cupped crystal hands, hiding them from the Shamblers within its ticking city. Walking through the domed, dusky town and its rows of lights incited within Sebastian a coalesced sense of awe and nausea: a feeling that blistered and swelled inside him as, with each passing day, the dim ticking seemed to drone louder, overwhelmingly raucous and throbbing despite the city that swirled with life around him.

The realization was needling him further with each whisper of the watch: no one but he could hear the ticking of the clock. They all danced upon its face but never saw its gears, making their homes within the gaps between its numbers, sanguinely gazing outwards and never looking below.



TAYLOR FELD (“Cult”)

The people call us a cult. Deranged fanatics. Witches and warlocks and psychopathic, rambling sibyls. They whisper cowardly lies when they think we are not listening. But we are listening. We are always listening.

Worst of all, these falsehoods are beginning to weaken the spirit of my brothers and sisters. They tire of living like filthy vagabonds, cast out by the general populace. Daily, I tell them the tales of our forbearers: legends passed down to me by my mother, who received them from her mother, and so on. I tell them tales of the great Oracles of many-times-ago and so-far-away, as well as the stories of the heroes Laocol, Ketting, and Sphynt.

Still they wane. They come to me with their sorrows, weaving tapestries of the hardships of poverty and isolation. It chills my soul. And at the end of each telling, after all horror and suffering has been exposed, they cry desperately to me. "A prophecy! Show us a prophecy, wise Oracle!"

I try; truly, I do, every night, when the light of the stars filters through the glass dome and again through the rubble of the slums. I cast my face upward towards the surviving specks and plead for a sign. A promise of better times to come. There has been no such promise, but that does not lessen my hope for one in the future. After all, did Maga, the first Oracle, not wait one hundred years of her life before receiving the first prophecy?

My brothers and sisters, however, are not so encouraged. I understand. It is hard to see the light when one must fight through layers of grime simply to get a fleeting glimpse. Yesterday, a young man by the name of Garrett entered my dwelling with furious eyes. Ones that glowed with anger yet masked true sadness.

"I'm beginning to think you've been feeding us crap all this time!" he proclaimed, bursting through the makeshift door.

Garrett's posture was ridged and his face stony, but I could see by the grey under his eyes that he had been taking late shifts at the factory to make ends meet. "Why don't you sit down, young one?" I gestured to one of the humble cushions.

"I didn't come here for small talk over tea," he fumed. "I will not sit down."

Wary, like he suspected me of trying to dodge his accusations. To be expected, almost. These people are perpetually tired and used to drowning in lies. "As you wish. Tell me what is troubling you."

"You know exactly what's troubling me. Troubling all of us! We think you're a fraud. You go on and on about the 'great Oracles' but have yet to spit out a single prediction. You just like the power you have over us lowly ones!"

It worried me that he had the nerve to speak for his brothers and sisters. Obviously he was exhausted and distraught, but there are lines one mustn't cross. "I see. Many of our people feel this way?"

"Well...enough do."

Garrett seemed to withdraw now that he had said his bold piece, like he was almost—but not quite—ashamed of his accusations. I collected my next words carefully. For words are wondrous, slippery things. They have power creative and destructive, marvelous and stinging.

“You are wise, young one...”

“Flattery won’t fool me,” he said indignantly.

“...and yet you have much to discover. Questioning the validity of those in power is a bold, risk-riddled step. It is also an essential one. But it is not my validity you should be questioning.”

This time, a flicker of confusion crossed the young man’s face.
“What? You seek to confound me yet again!”

“Think for a moment, Garrett Liomen. Think about the source of your, our, sorrow. Disbelieve the religious bumbblings of an old hag if you wish. But think before you attempt to stage something foolish. Think how your energy would be better spent.”

He hesitated and I sensed I should continue.

“Helping your brothers and sisters. Helping them keep hope alive, most of all. That is key at this point.”

“Why should I—” he began. Then he thought for a moment. Admirable. “...yes. I think you’re right. On this matter only, mind you. But yes. I do disagree with your beliefs, although I was lying about the others disagreeing.”

“Thank you for telling me. You are free to leave us, if you so wish. However you would be an asset to your brothers and sisters.”

“I’ll stay, Oracle,” Garrett said before turning to leave. His shoulders slumped as he ducked through the small door. A tired boy forced to grow up much too fast.

Now, as I stand here with my face to the stars, I feel something coming over me. I know it is a prophecy. But the warmth and joy that comes with good news is absent. Whatever our hardships are now, I know I’m about to learn of even worse ones to come.

I reach frantically for the ancient divining tools. To any outsider

they'd look like homely scraps of metal: ovals and rods and wisps. But we of the prophecy know. When cast and looked upon by an Oracle, they reveal things to come.

My hands close over them as the spirits take me.

The Oracle's prophecy: "The lost return. The living flee. The free ones imprisoned."



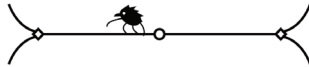
JASPER FEREHAWK

Image #29

This tree, with vines growing from a part of the trunk upwards, is a common tree in the island biomes of one of the inland lakes. Some interpret this tree as a metaphor for the life of the world on which their race lives. The vines, some interpret, are the government, choking out the life and purity and peacefulness of the planet. And as such, many people, religious and not, come to such islands to gaze in wonder and awe at these trees, a living example of life and state of their lives, and the world as a whole.

One such visitor to the Isle of Ulteri, an atoll on Lake Relim, describes the view of one such tree, called an Ealik Tree. "The sun glittered down like the sands to the south of the domed cities in which we lived. Some call these trees 'The Life of Urcvlei' for reasons unknown to me, but I am not of any such religion, and chose to call it, like most, the Ealik Tree. But I digress, for as the golden light of the sun above shone through the slips in the branches, and rained down on my standard cloth that the government had issued me, I saw the vines, gripped tight around the life of the tree, threatening to suck it out and destroy its free will. And though the dreaded government, for I am one who believes of their dark and malicious intentions—they will kill me or saying for these words—I believe this is a testament to the current state of affairs in this planet on which we stand. As one of my friends in the far-away city of Dome #5 Juliva, whom I had not spoke to in 20 years, once said to me, "The world is a tree, for thy must treat it with respect, lest it destroy and crumble underneath us, and tear asunder all that thou hast created in the purpose of retribution and greatness of Man." I feel those words echo through my mind as I thought of Checnov once more.

But as the government spreads its tendrils into the planet more and more to corrupt the young and powerful minds of the world, I fear for the safety of these trees. I hope the rebels will soon overthrow the dark and conspiratorial government that imposes its rule upon all. As the zombies of the desert bang on our doorstep, and the army promises to get rid of this threat to human survival, and as we hunger for water and are odds with the Aquatics, I only hope that these trees are not the current state of the world we stand on. Lest the powers of whatever lies beyond us smite us in your foolery.” - *From the book, “The World Trees of the Planet and their Effect on Man and the Planet”*



TYLER HAYES

“We shouldn’t be here...” I whispered. Even so the sound seemed to carry through the long corridor bouncing off the walls and ceiling, as if the very dome was repeating me. Telling us that we didn’t belong. Because we didn’t. This wasn’t a city for people anymore. Not since the Shamblers had claimed it.

Seam didn’t slow down, or even look at me he just kept walking holding his flashlight beneath his gun so that the light and the gun barrel pointed the same place. Seam was reckless but he wasn’t stupid, ill-conceived sense of fun aside.

The lowest level of the dome, the one we were on, had been a hovel. The streets were narrow and filled with trash, the windows all broken, and I was willing to bet that even in the dome’s best of days the majority of the street lights hadn’t worked. This was not one of its better days; the hovel hadn’t had a good day since the dome was breached.

I swallowed my fear and followed Seam. I can’t be afraid of the Shamblers. If I do that I’m playing right into their hands. They’re stupid and I know how to kill them. I mustn’t fear them. Fear is death. Seam was ahead of me now, almost too far away to be safe. I picked up the pace. So did my heart.

For a long time nothing happened. It seemed like there were no Shamblers, or if there were we were managing to keep from being noticed by them. *The dome doesn’t belong to them anymore. They’ve moved on, stop being afraid and*

do what you came here for. I slowed long enough to breathe deep and calm myself. When I exhaled I had a purpose. Find food, find weapons, find medicine. The others need it.

We weren't likely to find too much of use in the ruined hovel, but to ascend to any of the higher levels was tantamount to suicide. So I looked where we were—even the poorest of the poor would have had something useful; I just had to find it. Seam flashed his light on and off, the signal that he'd found something. I sighed from relief, if he'd found enough to signal me we might get enough to call it a day and leave the city to its dead.

What he'd found was a crime den. That meant weaponry for sure, and maybe medicine. We entered the building one at a time, and covered each other as we searched in the dead darkness for something we could salvage. It was as I was covering him that I saw the basement, and the doorway. The floor of the basement was tiled sparsely with flat rocks taken from the outside and dropped in mortar. The wall was faded stone part of it had broken and I could see through the hole into the room. The doorway itself was a narrow arch of bricks. The room pulsed as my light flashed signaling Seam.

Seam smiled and signaled that he would enter the basement first; I held my breath as he entered. "Shara we hit the jackpot! This place is loaded!" I laughed with relief Seam laughed too. But as I started down to help him I heard his laughter die. He swore, his voice filling with terror that froze me in my steps. "Shara run!" I did. When someone says run you do. No one, not even Seam, jokes about that.

From behind me there was a gunshot, but I was already in the hovels street. I wasn't alone. Too slow... There were shapes moving in the streets. Human shapes. The dome still belongs to the dead, to the past. We shouldn't have come there. Too late now. I dropped into a shooter's position as Seam joined me in the streets. By the look on his face he knew we were too slow, too far in. We'd never had a chance of getting out.

I struggled not to let the fear kill my aim. Relax, breathe. Do not fear. You can fight back. Fear is death. Too late now. "Seam... save a bullet for me." We started shooting.

TAYLOR LEWIS

“It’s impossible,” I say, defiant, unbelieving. I can’t believe she did this to me. Dragged me out here, out of the safety of my dome for the same kind of bull that I had run away from.

She smiles indulgently, nonchalantly curling a piece of vivid red hair between her calloused fingers. “Is it?” She speaks with the carefully controlled patience of one who talks to a small child or the sick.

I nod slowly, taking in my surroundings. Of course the members of government are deceitful scumbags, but they aren’t incompetent deceitful scumbags. They knew all, saw all, heard all, and possessed all. There was no way that they had been this blind. Not this long. Not when people were so desperate for escape they would’ve tried anything. People like me. “Of course it is. You’ve never lived there,” I say suddenly as her mouth twitches in suppressed laughter at my disbelief. “You don’t know what they’re like. Those ‘people,’” I throw my arm towards the mouth of the dripping cave we’re facing in agitation, “if they even exist at all, are dead, and have been for a long time if our lot got to them...”

I lose my train of thought as she suddenly beams at me, her bright blue eyes wild and excited. I follow the path her eyes make with my own as she looks around her, still smiling contentedly. My eyes adjust to the brightness of the place, while my ears adjust to the gentle sounds of splashing water, the musical cry of messenger birds, the frantic beating of my heart. It’s lush and green and peaceful here. Clear water laps against the rocks and a small stream trickles into the mouth of the cave, which opens into the darkness. I peer inside curiously and see vines tangled into rock crevices, gryskleurs jumping in and out of the slow moving waters, and indistinguishable shadows framed against the afternoon sun. “Decades of war, oppression, starvation and fear and you’re telling me that the answer lies in an urban legend? In a cleverly crafted fairytale? In merpeople?” I ask, gesturing wildly around me. I feel my eyes widen angrily as hers become serious and sorrowful. “Do you want to fight?” she asks. Her question catches me by surprise. I blink in surprise at her sudden change of character. “Yes.”

“Did you want to leave?”

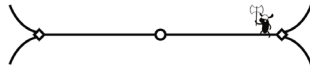
I’m angry again. “Of course!”

“Do you want to stand up to them?” Her eyes are hard and blazing

now. My mind races as I picture my father being carted away into the night, the choked sobs of my mother as we run out of the week's rations again, the cruelty of the police, zombies pushing their rotting bodies closer and closer to me through the glass dome, and I suddenly hear the smooth voice of the late night newscaster bloom into being within my memories as he booms into the still air that I am safe from the world around us as long as I am poor and dependent and meek and starved. I remembered the horrible trapped feeling of being caught in the middle, trying to keep it all together, trying to be everything that my father was and failing to be anything close to what he was to us because of them, because of what they did to people like me. The injustice of it leaves unwanted tears in my eyes and fire in my veins.

I straighten up and my head is clear and my heart is willing for the first time in my entire life. "Where are they?" I ask.

She really does laugh this time as she points towards the mouth of the cave tangled in vines. "Right under our noses, of course."



SHANE PARR ("Path to Freedom")

I, Aver, used to be a rich man. I also used to have no cares in the world, besides climbing to a higher (but more pointless) position on the social ladder. Then I got my dream, a government position.

One day I was walking down the bright, cheery Divitibus Street when a man stepped out from the shadows and asked me one simple question.

"Would you like to be in power?"

I blinked my eyes in surprise, and stuttered out, "I g-guess so..."

The mysterious man said nothing, but handed me an address and a time. I went to the address at the time specified and something horrifying happened. At that meeting place, my whole world was turned upside-down. Five other men were at the gathering, and I was briefed about the current situation of the government and the zombies currently assaulting the domed city we were in. And yes, domed, not doomed. Domed.

"Ever wondered how the zombies came to be? The truth is that the

government is behind it. They are designed to cause fear and uncertainty, which leads to a dependence on the government. Not the government everybody sees elected, but the ones who control the figureheads, behind the scenes. We rig the elections each year to have the top officials easily manipulated and controlled by us. We are called The Pantheon, and we want you.”

The man who spoke leaned back in his chair and watched me quietly. I was horrified. This went completely against my morals, and the general population would be outraged. However, I was a good actor so pretended to go along with it, like he just explained the daily news, not a horrible revelation.

“So...” I said, “Where do I fit in here?”

“We have a current rebellion going on in Dome 5, Spete. We need you to join, and destroy it from the inside.”

And here I am now, part of this rebellion. There was no way I was ever talking to the government again. Evil is the only word to describe them. I look out on the hardworking people of the rebellion, and feel a sense I can only describe as a feeling of belonging, as if this had been my home, my people for all of time. We are embarking on the path to freedom, a path choked with weeds on both sides, and a steep slope. The fight up the path was is and will be hard, but we will never give up until the end of the path is reached, when freedom in the domed cities is for everyone, and the Shambling threat is removed.



CLAIRE PILLBURY

“Never engage unless victory is ensured. Disobedience of a captain in order to engage is punishable by death. Any captain who orders his crew into an uncertain engagement will be subject to punishment that is to be decided by the admiral.”

“Very good.”

Voltar beams at the praise. Luiz reaches forward to soundlessly slap the back of his head while Captain Bulzack isn't looking.

“Karmye,” Bulzack says.

“Yes, sir?” she says politely. She’s biting her bottom lip and her eyes are discreetly looking over in Luiz’s and Voltar’s direction, telling me I wasn’t the only one to have seen that.

“The punishment for inappropriate behavior aboard the ship?” Bulzack has a funny way of asking these sorts of things—asking in a demanding way. Giving a wrong answer is the quickest way to punishment. Refusal to give an answer is the quickest way to injury.

“Punishment is determined by the acting captain.”

“The recommended punishment, then?”

“Exile, sir.”

“Right.” Bulzack takes a moment of pause to walk over to the door and pull it open. “Luiz, Voltar, get out.”

Our junior class is laughing now. Bulzack isn’t.

“I mean it. Get out.”

Immediately serious, Voltar and Luiz stand up and move towards the door with identical versions of rigid, military stride. I can’t help but feel sorry for them. Kicked out of the junior class towards the end of year? I know I wouldn’t be able to go home if that was the news I was bringing with me. After all, failure to pass the academy means that you can’t join a raiding ship. And what are raiders if we can’t join the raiding ships?

Bulzack shuts the door after them so calmly that I almost wish he had slammed it. At least then, I would have an idea of his emotion right now.

He turns back around to face the remainder of our class, back straight and stiff. So slowly that it’s almost painful, he lifts up a hand to point towards the very front of the class.

The table he points to only has one thing sitting on it: knives. Twenty; thirty; all glittering and metal; well kept; different sizes, lengths and thickness; capable of cutting through the bow of a sand-boat without any effort at all. They’re resting in a hand-carved wooden rack, waiting for us ever since the first day we walked into this school. The “Do Not Touch” policy

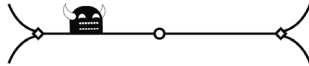
was implied, of course.

“The Scorched Falcon is ready for her maiden voyage. You all will constitute the main part of her crew.” He nods his head just the slightest bit in the direction of the table. “You’ll need one of those, more than likely.”

We stand and form a line up to the table. I feel my hands clenching and unclenching anxiously at my sides with every knife that gets taken away before I can reach the rack.

Finally, finally, it’s my turn. There’s one that has numbers etched onto the lower part of the blade, probably the identification number of whatever metal machine we ripped this steel off to make this knife. I probe the numbers with my fingertips, feeling the grooves and nooks in between each character. The knife feels powerful in my hold; strong and stable. Good balance, too.

I clutch it tightly in my hand as I walk away from the table. I’ve made the best choice. Bulzack gives me a nod as I pass him to get to the door. I’m ready, and he knows I’m ready.



LIZZY RABON

Image #52

I leave this behind for the memory of me...

My name is Tyler Dannegan, and in an undetermined expanse of time, I will raise the revelation flare.

Thirteen thousand people. Thirteen thousand people are counting on a small spark; a thin wicker balloon; a bright green emergency beacon. Thirteen thousand people need me to make a thousand-mile journey, face terrors, and tackle impossible odds. I am thirteen. Small for my age, and not an intelligible counter partner. I have never been to school. I cannot read a book, much less wield a sword in a formidable fashion. Our people have neither the resources nor the need to educate our young people in such dexterities.

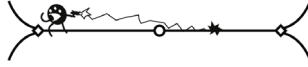
Fortunately, Oracle men do not travel alone. They are as mechanically organized as a covey of raptors. Where there is a need of one, the rest of the group falls into place. No one travels alone unless they leave the group and strike out on their own. Thus the interpreter, Donovan, has prepared a group for me. We will take shelter in the day and rest by night, in order to avoid the unimaginable terrors that lie just beyond our wooden palisades. The fierce bloodsucking leeches and vicious, aggressive reptiles that roam the forsaken soil are the least of our worries. The creatures that threaten us most are the unmentionables. These creatures travel in voracious hordes, and we are still not entirely certain how to destroy them. Our world is a sticky slum of unknowns. There are too many lies, shadowy conspiracies, rumors, and seemingly untrue secrets floating in the air. We cannot differentiate what has been created from what has never been created because of the smoggy confusion that grips all of us. Therefore our knowledge of the unmentionables is as threadbare as my weakest pair of blue jeans, and we are still not entirely sure what we are going to fight in the following months.

And in the end, we know very little. And it is with this very little that we must survive a one thousand-mile journey and battle every living horror that has long since occupied our nightmares. We are told that in the center of the Capital dome, there is a lake (of nonetheless hoarded freshwater), and in the southeast corner of this lake stands my coveted beacon. When we have traversed across miles of desolate waste and finally reached the domed city of the Capital officials, we will be willingly allowed into the city by the peacekeepers, who will believe that we want nothing more than to visit the city. However, there are specified areas of the Capital city in which Oracle worshippers are forbidden. The Capital cannot reveal every detail about their activity. There are some things that must be kept secret. Thus a thick, impenetrable wall of infantry separates us from the flare.

We have received our information about the whereabouts of the beacon in hushed whispers under a dark, foreboding moon. We cannot speak too loudly, lest we become snuffed. The utterance of one single, misled word may result in an unfortunate “accident” for one of us—Father says there are infiltrators within our own walls.

So tomorrow we will strike out, trusting mere whispers. It is our upmost desire that these whispers may possess more entitlement than simply “mere.” One might say we are a nation built on rumors, and such a statement may not entirely be false. We cannot sit upon pure truthfulness if there is no truth to be found in our world.

My name is Tyler Dannegan, and I will raise the revelation flare. Thirteen thousand people are striving for a glimmer of truth. Delivering it to them is worth sacrificing a life for.



ISAAC RADER (From Caddaway's *Distractions And Diversions of Westdown Dome*)

Image #18

The picture here is of an average junk shop for the lower-class in the undercity. The rich, as you

>>Don't believe the lies. The Revenants are the government's creation! FIGHT BACK! This shop is the key. We will give you guns, so you give us dead bodies with them. Security, Government, it matters not. For a free dooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo. There are thousands like us. You cannot stop us. We shall escape this nightmare on the wings of the Tall One. The Protectorate is a lie, and anyone who believes that they protect us completely is hopelessly deluded. We wish to free this world and escape, not destroy it. There is nothing for us here, that much is a guarantee. So why stay under the thumb of the fascists, believing that the Greentime was a time of sin and we are better off now? Legends tell of seas vast and full of fish, and we have records of those times. We know there was not only war, we know the outside world was habitable and we had once lived under the sun. So join us now, and let us create our Greentime in another place.

probably know, benefit our city immensely with their consumption and their ownership of firms which provide virtually every member of the city with employment. From the guns that civil servants possess, the food which you eat, the plentiful and near bottomless mines which grant you ore,

>>That is pure hogwash. The mines have been in use for hundreds of years now since the Smoky Age. Do you really think they'll last much longer, with the frenzied projects of the pigs in their ivory towers? I don't know what they're planning, but I don't like it.

minerals, oil, precious gems, to the trains which take you through our glorious dome and sometimes to the cursed outlands, and even the purified, sterilized, beautifully *safe* air which you breath, the rich own you. Why, this

junk shop survives on their sufferance. The low-class paleskins make works

>>Oh, quit acting like we like it. Some of you might, but our group does not. Just remember: the sun howls. The wolf shines in its light. Surely you've seen it around town, if you don't have the luxury of sunlight!

of art from the detritus of the rich, to decorate their spartan houses, which, although they have the finest luxuries of Westdown Dome, such as running water, a sewer system, a cleaning system, auto-servers, and holocinema, are quite bare of entertainment or any respectable culture. Why, some of

>>Again, this is a pack of lies. The lowquarter they show tourists and other visitors is a sickeningly gentrified place, its history emasculated and fetishized, to paraphrase the author of a book found in the ruins of an ancient city. We actually do have holocinema, but it's notoriously unreliable and we mostly just resort to flatvids. And no respectable culture? Really? That is not true.

our rich have even started emulating the culture of the undertowners, adapting their... recycled style of dress, carrying ceremonial weaponry and armor fashioned in the style of their "rathunters," which is laughably absurd as even though the average undertown may be a little grungy, they are not so bad

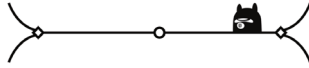
>>I felt violated the first time I saw a rich man dressed like that and trying to act cool in the midlevels. I threw up on him because I'd been drinking booze made from headchomper blood, then I beat him up and stole his gun. Also this is right on one score—the rats aren't the size of dogs, they're the size of horses. Also, we have giant enemy crabs, and you can attack their weak points for massive damage.

as to have rats the size of dogs. That would be roughly as silly as there being giant enemy crabs down there. If you see any junk shops, please support the workers there. Unlike everyone in undertown, they are unemployed and too unskilled to have a real job, so they are forced to scrape off the detritus

>>We are damn near all unemployed, and we all have to scrape off the detritus of the rich. I think this writer hates me.

of the rich. The undertowners are our friends, even if they do smell badly. They deserve our pity and our help. Junk shops can carry all sorts of useful things, such as antique phones, models, ceremonial swords, paintings,

clocks, sculptures, and charms which will supposedly protect you, so even if you don't want to support them for the sake of support, there is some quite interesting stuff to buy.



ANYA STOEHR (aka “Latias”)

Image #45

Unsevine jumped as Teeofor dumped a box on the floor behind him. Unsevine turned around, trying to rearrange himself to look menacing. “Teeofor, that was a *bit* uncalled for, don't you think?”

Teeofor chuckled evilly. Unsevine resisted the urge to roll his eyes; they were Pantheon, not B-movie villains. “Perhaps to you, but that isn't going to scare you nearly as much.”

As much as what? Unsevine didn't dare ask. Teeofor continued as if he had asked the question. “Why, as much as *this*!” Unsevine tore of the lid of the box grandly, looking quite proud. Unsevine ducked to avoid the spiraling wood, then jerked back up upon seeing the grotesque sight.

“What...is...*that*?”

Inside the box, which was finally revealed to be a coffin filled with bubble wrap and some horrible, grotesque creature. Unsevine had no doubt what it was before even looking at the number #14 tattooed on the side of the box.

Unsevine sighed, holding back the scream building in his chest. “Teeofor, we need human zombies, not weird bony things.”

Teeofor looked angry. “What else do you want? These things can infect, don't have a mind, and they can only be killed with headshots. They're zombies!”

Unsevine put his head in his hand. “Not in the traditional way. This is a skeleton with a few scraps of skin on it. We want *zombies*. You know, undead, infectious, rotting bodies. With blank eyes, gray skin, pus...”

Teeofor slammed the lid back on the box, causing a loud *bang* to resonate in the room, and a few of the other agents glanced at them. “Fine!

You want zombies? I'll *make them* give you zombies."

Teeofor grabbed the box and stalked out the room, Unsevine's gaze traveling after him. He didn't quite feel bad for the scientists, but he knew *how* they felt. Teeofor was one of the...*newer* arrivals. One of those the Pantheon had "rescued" from Drofheim. Teeofor wasn't one of the sickly scared men that were from there. No; instead, Teeofor's stay at Drofheim had made him vicious, just as the Pantheon wanted.

Unsevine marched over to the bar and slapped a few Harts on the desk. There was only one kind of drink in the base, but Aquissean knew he needed it. The bartender grabbed a glass from under the counter, and snatched the Hart before Unsevine could take it back.

Taking a deep drink, Unsevine sighed. As long as everything went according to plan everything would be alright. Everything would be alright. Everything would be—

"Is there a *problem*, Unsevine?" Unsevine halted in his tracks. He recognized that voice as Agent Nayno, one of the most vicious agents, rivaling Teeofor's madness.

Unsevine turned slowly, trying not to show fear. "Not at all, sir. I was taking a drink after giving my opinion on the scientists' newest...*creation*. It was grotesque, but it wasn't a zombie."

Agent Nayno nodded. "Well, get back to work. Don't want to have the Pantheon spend too much time relaxing. You know what would happen."

Unsevine swallowed back bile and rushed out of the room.

Nayno took a sip of the discarded alcohol on the bar, which of course the bartender didn't object to. The boy was a bit *too* smart for his own good, and not mean enough. Teeofor was a good Pantheon member; vicious, and cunning. No rebel would get past him without breaking a good sweat, or a bone.

Nayno chuckled. Who would know the difference, he thought, if Unsevine were to go back home to his family? And his family, of course, would think that he was working hard with the government.

Nayno smiled maliciously. Nobody would ever know.



THE WORLD OF KALIXIS

The world of Kalixis is composed of two halves—each set in a separate physical plane of existence—which mirror each other like a child looking into deep water. However, this was not always the case. History tells of a time when only one world existed, when only one plane of existence was inhabited and known. However, this world was filled with magic, and that proved to be its doom. There came upon the world a great cataclysm, shrouding the sun in shadow and dust. With the cities wrecked and the land slowly dying, the people of Kalixis made a desperate gambit, employing a form of magic which would replicate the form of their world as it was before its breaking. This magic created the world of New Kalixis, which reflected Kalixis in all its glory but a different physical plane. The cities in this new world would be whole, the lands verdant and rich, and the sun undimmed. Everything would be as it was before the apocalypse, save for the lack of sentient beings. And so the people of Kalixis undertook a great migration, populating their world's reflection. They found their homes intact, but backwards. East was now west and west was now east. What had been right was left and what was now right had been left.

Yet, the working which replicated the stricken world was not without more dire consequences. It warped the land of Old Kalixis further. The plants and animals became twisted and unpredictable, stranger and more bestial. So too were some of the people affected: turning them from their fellows, making them dangerous and unknown. Some were said to be more sinister still, imbued with the ability to shift forms. Magic was loosed in the world, wild and raw. However, the mirrored world was not perfect either. Though the land was whole and hale, it was wholly without magic. Rumor speaks of further errors found throughout New Kalixis—beasts with mutated forms; plants which hunger for more than sun and water; land that shifts and changes, denying the norms of nature—but rumor speaks of many things which might or might not be true.

KELSEY FUSON

Lyta scurried through the haze, eyes darting from side to side.

Where does it end?

All around her, for miles it seemed, was a dense purple haze. Shadows flitted around on the edges of her vision, but she had long since grown used to them.

At least, as much as she was able.

Lyta was nearing hyperventilation. She had thought that she would be alright, that she wouldn't be scared going through the violet fields. It was a harmless joke; she wouldn't go far enough in to get lost. Just step in and step back out.

But in the end, she mused, I'm just a stupid kid who went where they shouldn't.

Everyone knew the tales of the violet fields: people who went in, but never came back, strange beasts and even stranger people roaming the land on the other side, waiting for tasty morsels to devour.

Morsels like her.

Lyta tried to swallow around the lump in her throat.

With nothing better to do, and unwilling to stay still with the shadows running around her, Lyta kept stumbling forward, shivering as goose bumps continuously crept down her spine.

It wasn't until she suddenly found herself face-to-face with a bear-like beast that she realized that the purple haze was no longer in sight. She stared into a snarling face as fangs slipped down over its lips, porcupine quills in place of regular fur.

As she was screaming, a detached part of her mind was thinking that she wouldn't mind those purple hazy shadows right now.

She was still screaming as she turned to run back to the (relative) safety of the violet fields. However, all she saw was a cave wall. She was trapped. And she was bear-monster meat.

Except, the bear-monster didn't seem at all interested in eating her. In fact, the only thing it seemed to notice about her was how loud she was screaming, given how its giant paw-like extensions were flattening its ears.

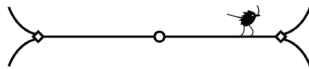
Lyta stopped screaming, feeling mildly embarrassed about her voice cracking, then feeling strange about her embarrassment when her only audience was a bear-monster. The bear-monster looked up, licking its lips (Oh damn, what if it decides to eat me now?) and lazily rolled on its back as though it was asking for a belly rub. Like a golden retriever.

Inching up to it, Lyta noticed that the fur on its belly seemed normal, soft and brown. Not entirely sure why she was doing it, she knelt down and rested her hand on its fur, relishing in the warmth that this strange world was lacking. She scratched it without thinking, because it seemed like the natural thing to do. Then she looked at its face.

And she ran away.

Because the ferocious face with the dripping fangs and the porcupine fur and the snarling lips had the eyes of a goddamn puppy. Innocence in a monster. And it was just not right, because those eyes did not belong with that face, and it filled her with a sense of wrongness that made her feel sick inside.

So she ran from the bear-monster with the puppy eyes, hoping that the rest of this world was less wrong. She didn't care if it was full of vicious monsters anymore, so long as she never felt that sickness again.



LUKE HAYES

Image #22

“And what is it?”

“Ermmmm, we’re not sure.”

“And where did it come from?”

“We’re Ermmm... We’re not sure about that, either.”

“And you’re showing me it... because...?”

“Erm...”

“Brilliant.”

He decided to look around the room, if for no other reason than to get away from his nonstop stammering. There were two guards at the door, though they were hardly guards.

Toward the back of the chamber stood the master. Deacon Varain was a bony man whose hands were as shift and indirect as his speech. He wore a long gown, a cyan version of the brown ones the acolytes at the door wore. Varain's shaved head held a wreath, a number of vines strung together, wrought in gold, signifying something

Next to the Deacon it stood. It floated in a sort of alchemical substance, inside a half cylinder of five-inch thick glass that was built into the back wall. A golden design was worked into the top and bottom.

“The chamber used to house a erm... an artifact.” Varain said, noticing him studying the gold work “It was the only suitable ermmm... place for it. We had to get it into the chemical before it erm, uh, before it—”

“I can see what it would be capable of.” The beast was a true monstrosity. Its head was one of a warped cow. The eye sockets were deep and the eyes themselves misaligned. The back of the head was too round and the snout too short. The singular horn was misplaced on the head, being several inches towards the neck. Beyond that, there were no more cow-like qualities. The body was that of a large, muscular man. As they floated in the chemical, its arms looked quite tube like, although he wasn't sure if they were actually like that. The legs were twisted and deformed, with feet like a bear at the bottom. There was no doubt that if this thing got angry, it could do some serious damage. He wasn't worried, though. In the room down the hall sat half a dozen of the Empire's most brilliant minds and greatest sword arms in the Empire. “Send them in.”

“Erm, who, sir?”

“My officers. I wish for them to see it.”

“Ah, well, sir, the thing is, you're the um, the only one wh—”

“Who's allowed to see it? Very well, I give them permission. Go send for them.”

“And don’t hmm... don’t touch anything” said the Deacon, a man of about eighty who wore a wreath on his smooth head, stating that he had succeeded in duplicating a plant. “Now, if you would please...”

The first thing I noticed was General Calvack Gordanian standing in the middle of the room. As always he commanded the room. He was wearing his tri-colored cloak, as all men of his rank did. The yellow stripe was completely covered by his massive shoulders and chest, though the Red and Purple ran down his shoulders, giving him the look of a regal aura. Of course, habit was also most likely a factor in why all the Captain’s eyes turned to him as soon as they entered the room.

Then I saw it. Despite only having looked at Gordanian for a second and a half I still scolded myself for not seeing it sooner. The creature was totally submerged, giving it a tinted look. “It’s just like the in the tomes.” Well, it was the same general idea. Several aspects of something jumbled together.

“That’s unnatural,” stated one of the men entering the room behind me.

“I thought it was a normal animal.”

“Well, it ain’t.”

“So what is it?” asked a different Captain.

“Well, umm... It’s a... hrmm.... It’s a crea—”

“It’s a mistake.” I said to stop him from his prattling. “Some stupid man tried to copy what I will assume was a cow. However, being stupid, as is the nature of stupid men, he lost concentration as he was duplicating it. His mind wandered, and this was born.”

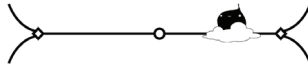
The sound of Gordanian’s voice silenced me. “We’re here because the Deacon asked for our help, though I’m not sure why at the moment.”

“Well, uhm.. I... it...” Any words that he might have gotten out were cut short by the crash. The catapult hit was followed by a horn, informing everyone of the attack.

“Hindeman, Sully. To the wall.” The two men filled out of the room to head to their commands. The rest stayed behind. “So do you have a reason for bringing us here or can we go make sure no one puts an axe in your head?”

“I—” He started, but the stone throwers seemed to hate his stammering. This rock crashed through the roof of the building and through the ceiling. It hit one of the guards at the door and skid across the floor and smashed into the far wall. That wasn’t the only thing it smashed into, unfortunately. As the fluid gushed onto the floor, the creature flowed out as well.

I heard the Deacon whimper as the beast awoke from its chemical daze, an evil look in its eye.



LONDON HU (“The Black Wonderland”)

The clouds slipped over the black wonderland, chilling the hearts of all the citizens. A single dash of color illuminated the shadow of a world that the cloud, wrapped leech-like about the universe, sank its teeth into, without the mercy to even allow light. This cloud did not provide rain. And the frightened people flocked to the sacred field of color for salvation, as if grasping the thread offered to lighten their world with hues, perhaps even bringing times of ease and water’s sweet embrace as it fell upon their parched lips.

And their hearts were swayed to the rhythm of chaos, and into the purple field they ran. The sacred plain which had deceived them with the hope of a life worth living, cursing them to fates that only corroded their souls. Thus, they ran! For life lost, for time’s unhealed wounds.

But it is said, on that night when the clouds finally thundered with lightning and the rain poured over the black wonderland, not an entity of rage remained. For on that night, all the people ventured into the purple haze. They saw a gateway that stood like door frames, side-by-side with the most beautiful purple roses crawling up their iron bodies. And the most peculiar thing occurred between the two rose plants that coiled about the gates. They locked vines desperately, and, clinging to each other in an effort to reach beyond the darkness, their blossoming petals glowed with the knowledge of the black wonderland, of the people’s trial and their failure to

realize that they'd only needed what the black wonderland had given them.

And so, the people sat, staring at the flowers, unbelievably amazing in their serenity and bliss, a tearful and successful light in the darkness, a thread of light that could not contain anything other than peace.

But the iron rusted and the bones crumbled as the clouds screamed, pitying the people of the black wonderland.

It was said that an entire civilization disappeared into the mist one night, captured in the eyes of hope. They blew as dust in the blackness, out from the sacred land, bringing the first tear to drop, silently and sweetly, embracing them with time-stopped, pitch-black hearts.



AIMEE HYNDMAN (“The Mutated Handbag”)

Image #9

The building was abandoned. No demonic creatures, no twisted animals. Just scattered belongings that littered the floor like trash. Grace was fine with that. She never wanted to see the nightmares she had just seen ever again. She welcomed the dusty old books and the rusting tools.

And she welcomed the silence.

Her footsteps creaked on the wooden floor as she walked slowly across the room. Absently she moved her hand in front of her face to brush away cobwebs. Her eyes ran over the titles on the books.

“They’re backwards.” She murmured. “Why is everything backwards here?”

She scanned the rest of the room. It had obviously gone without an owner for a long time. But not seven hundred years. Maybe someone had lived there at some time even after the apocalypse. Maybe someone like her who was just trying desperately to survive. What had happened to them? Had they become just as twisted as the monsters that lurked in the darkness of this ancient world. Had they died? Or had they found a way out?

Grace swallowed. The third option was much more comforting. She decided to hold onto it as tightly as possible. She would not stay here and

become a twisted monster. She did not want to be the subject of the warning tales that parents told their children when they did something wrong. She wanted to stay who she was.

But she didn't want to die either. And at the moment she couldn't decide which was worse.

The only pleasant option was escape.

Her eyes fell on a particularly strange object that sat across the room, hanging lopsided on a table. It was a bag; brown and with a texture that seemed almost...scaly. Slowly she moved forward to inspect it, reaching out a tentative hand as she did. Her fingers brushed against it and found that it was indeed made of hard, smooth scales. Slowly, she picked it up—only to drop it right away.

A hoarse scream almost fell from her mouth but she clamped a hand over her face to keep the noise in. She did not want to draw another mutant. But what she was looking at was almost a mutation in and of itself. The purse was not only scaly and brown but on one side it still bore the head of the animal that had died to create it. It was the head of a great lizard. Its eyes were glassy, black, and devoid of life but every other bit of it seemed alive. It made Grace shiver.

"Why," she whispered to herself. "Why is everything in this world so abnormal? How could New Kalixus...be created from a place like this?"

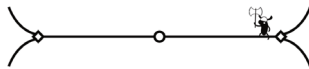


JAKE JOHNSON

I rose from my last prayer on my last day of conditioning to the cheers of my on-looking brothers. So great was the acclaim of those who were promoted to the rank of Traveler that the entire temple gathered for their initiation and first Journey. I strode forward confidently to the altar of the God In The Mist, where the High Priest stood with my purple stole; waiting I donned the garment to wordless silence. I was in awe of the High Priest who had Journeyed no fewer than four times. Without a word I ventured out of the temple for the first time in thirty-three years. I walked toward that cloud of purple on the horizon of the desert. I abandoned the temple's oasis only on faith, faith that the God In The Mist would sustain me in his holy embrace. The blindingly white sands stretched to the limit of my vision, heaped in

high dunes. After several hours of walking I stopped as swirls of violet clouds filled the air in front of me. I hesitated, literally faced with the greatest test of my faith imaginable. A moment of thought resolved my heart and confidently I stepped into the arms of my god.

Ghostly forms flitted through my perception, hideous beings of shadow and fire. It was, however, the first corporeal object that appeared to me that would determine my fate. The high priest had faced a monster so terrible the mist itself fled from its form. The high priest before him talked to the mist and it answered. Lost in thought I did not notice the object that had been sent to me. My foot caught on its edge and I fell on my face. I spun back to the cause of my fall. A small something sat on the ground. At first glance it was a pile of sticks covered in glyphs and runes all of equal size and shape. Certain of these sticks were shades never seen in wood: glass-like blues and reds and greens. I was immensely puzzled by it. The sticks were piled into a rounded column curving upward, like the trunk of a tree growing sideways. They did not menace me in anyway; therefore I assumed it was not to attack. I spoke to it, pleading for its wisdom with no response. I sat before it for a day and night pondering its purpose. With no answers I returned to the temple, praying to the High Priest who have the answers I desperately sought. Upon reciting my encounter to him I was met with only scorn. He laughed at my trail and derided my faith, for surely a true believer would have experienced something great and terrible in the presence of the God In The Mist. I was thrown from the temple in shame. Driven from the oasis, into the desert, I quickly was lost to insanity in my grief. The Temple Knights were sent to kill me like a maddened animal. They quickly succeeded.



CATHERINE LEWANSKI

Image #46

(Prologue)

Karan ignored the explicit orders of all who had debriefed him on the climate of Kalixis and threw off the armor he had that could not be easily removed while running. He knew that the most that these...savages got from killing the people who obtained the magic essence for New Kalixis, like him and his party, was the armor that kept them warm in the colder climate

created by the hazy cloud blocking the sun. As he threw down his helmet, he nearly ran over the edge of a steep and sudden cliff. Hearing the shapeshifters still following close behind, he wrenched all remaining metal from his person. Firmly clinging to the edge and ignoring the sickening wrench his stomach gave at the blackness before him, he swung his body over the edge. He kicked around for some kind of footing: a slit in the wall, a nearby ledge, anything!

Nothing.

Beads of sweat tickled his forehead as the sound of indistinct words and rustling came closer and closer. Offering up a pathetic and desperate prayer, he let go and fell into the darkness.

He knew he hadn't died when he woke up in worse pain than he had ever been in in his life. Groaning, he rolled over...and nearly fell off the ledge into the dense undergrowth below. Gripping the closest thing to his broken hand, he painfully pulled himself further away from the edge. His quickening breath came in clear white wisps as he scampered backwards into the wall of the cliff. Swallowing down the bile he felt crawling up his throat, he looked anywhere but down. Up seemed a good direction. Yes, he would look upwards. Glancing up, Karan saw that he was a little ways down from where he had let go earlier. He also saw something that nearly made him jump away from the wall and fall. A face set in stone, wearing a look of perfect terror. Karan fought his natural instincts that would have, this time, killed him. He searched the area around it, looking for a matching body... nothing, not even a head. There was just a face in the side of the cliff.

"Odd, isn't it, human?" Karan spun around, forgetting how high his perch was. A crow was rested on what looked like a stone hand nearby. It was smiling, making Karan back away as much as he could from the bird without falling over the edge. The bird laughed, "I'm not going to hurt you, human. You're just visiting your relations. I understand."

"W-w-what?" Karan stuttered.

"Your people. In the rock. Pity they couldn't run fast enough. If only they had the ability I have to fly!" And with this, it flew straight up into the air. Had Karan been back in New Kalixis, he would have had to squint from the sunlight to see the bird from his height. Then it dive-bombed straight down, and Karan forgot his fear of heights to watch its graceful avoidance

of the trees and vines that snapped and lashed out for it. Then Karan remembered his fear. He backed up quickly as the bird landed on the face, laughing.

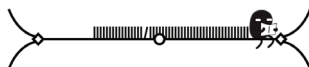
“You can stand the frozen stone bodies of your kinsmen, but you cannot deal with heights. You humans are so irrational,” it cackled, then morphed into a dove. Karan’s eyes widened. This thing was a shapeshifter! One of the people he was running from was here, cackling at him...but it wasn’t attacking him. For the moment anyway...

“How...how did they get like...like this?” Karan stuttered, fighting the urge to lean away. The dove smiled, showing sharp needle-like teeth. “You don’t know? Silly human. You have to know what you’re mourning for before you can shed tears over it. Very well,” it swooped into Karan’s face and landed back on the hand it originally was on, “I will tell you.”

“It’s really very simple. When people were running away from some rampant magic during the destructive days, they weren’t fast enough. Then they got turned into stone!” the dove gleefully screeched, performing a backwards dive before turning into a cockatoo and gliding elegantly away into the horizon.

Karan felt a stinging in his throat and chest. He let out the breath he had been holding for the duration of the strange bird’s story. He had survived a conversation with a shapeshifter. No one would believe him at home...that is, if he could get home. He was stuck on a ledge made of dead stone people, injured, no armor or warm clothing, and no one who knew where he was. Trying to make the best of a bad situation, Karan scanned the area around him, searching for some kind of food or water source.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the last smell he expected in either world drifted towards him. Perfume. Like the kind his Tariana wore. “I must be dying,” he muttered, turning towards where the scent had wafted from. Purple gaseous smoke was floating in space, as if pouring out of the stone face’s mouth. Karan stared, not believing his eyes or his luck. Not trusting himself to stand, he crawled towards it slowly, being wary of a trap. But with every inch he approached, the more he believed in its existence. Right before he went through, he paused, but not for too long...



ELENA MILIN

Image #8

“What is this thing?” she asked, running her hand along the diamond protruding from the cabinet. The suit she wore glowed in an unhealthy, metallic way. A black visor covered her face. The cabinet was leaning against a menacing tree.

“Careful, Thera,” said her father, who stood beside her. His suit was the same as hers. He took her shoulder roughly and pulled her out of range of the tree, whose roots had spread out into clutching, fingerlike shapes. They receded in a way Thera could only describe as shamefaced. “This is Kalixis, the true Kalixis, Thera. And Kalixis is wild. Nothing is safe. Think of it as an exotic but exquisite animal; you can look at it, but would you touch it?”

She stared at the cabinet warily, then at the roots of the tree, which were still quivering. “Dad, if it’s so horrid, why do we come here?”

“Do you see that violet haze around the cabinet? It might be a little hard to see in the dark, but if you squint, you can make it out.”

Thera squinted. She did indeed see a soft violet light coming from the cabinet. The light looked odd—it was eerie and cold. Her suit was heated, but she shivered anyway. She reached for her father’s hand and held it tightly.

“I see it, Daddy.”

“All right. Now look back down at your suit.”

Thera obeyed. Seeing that same violet, she panicked, giving a little shriek. “Get it off, get it off!” She started running about, scraping her arms against each other in an attempt to get rid of the haze.

“Thera, Thera!” He ran after her and grabbed her just as the roots of the tree in front of them were about to curl over her ankles. They fell into a gathering of shorter plants. They began to tremble and curl their leaves over father and daughter alike. They both jumped up hurriedly and backed away from the plants.

“Never run off like that again, Thera! Did I not tell you that everything on this planet is dangerous?” He sighed. “And there is nothing to

fear, my dear. That violet haze you saw is, in and of itself, harmless. It is the fuel that we use to power these suits. It powers everything, here and in New Kalixis both. That, dear, is why we come here.”

Thera frowned. “This isn’t in New Kalixis?”

“I’d have shown you.”

Thera sighed and stepped cautiously toward the tree. “Does the cabinet hold the purple stuff? Is that why we want it?”

“No, darling. The purple stuff you see there is just residue. The cabinet was probably enchanted once, but it isn’t anymore. Step back now.”

She obeyed. He crept towards it cautiously. The plants rustled and started towards him, but he ground several vines with his heel. They continued to come forward.

Her father looked at the plants carefully, calculating. Then he jumped, snatching the cabinet and running. He was almost, almost to the edge, but the plants were wrapped too thickly around his calves. He started to stumble and flail.

Thera lost her self-control. “Father! Father!” She cried. She ripped her knife from its sheath at her waist, slicing through the plants furiously. She heard his voice saying something but she couldn’t hear, too absorbed in eviscerating the plants. They were advancing upon her now. She was more of a threat. Her eyes were wide with fear, but she never allowed herself to stop moving, forcing her knife into sharp, quick, killing motions.

Suddenly she heard a noise so loud it seemed faint and far away. A blinding light flashed and she shut her eyes, yelling in pain. She felt her father’s arms around her chest, dragging her away from the plants, whose choking tendrils had suddenly disappeared. He sat her down before the cabinet.

“Look,” was all he said. She raised her eyes to the smoking doors, now flung open to reveal what looked like strange letters. She turned towards the plants and gasped.

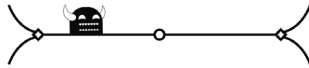
All that was left was a barren, blasted hole about five feet around. What leaves remained were black and crisp. The dirt was white with ash.

“Father, what...”

But he was standing, taking her up with him. “I think this thing is best left here,” he said gruffly. “That is the most powerful Old Kalixian weapon I have ever seen. Who knows what they’d do with it back home?” he continued, more to himself than to her.

She was still staring at the hole. Fire of some kind must have shot directly from the cabinet. She could have died. He could have died.

But then he called, “Come on, Thera.” He had his backpack on over his suit, and she could just make out his expectant eyes through the tinted visor. She sighed and followed her father back out into the dark.



SUSAN NICHOLS

Image #26

She panted as she ran desperately through the vegetation, hoping that none of the plants she was running past were carnivorous or hungry. She had already had a close encounter with some man-eating plants previously, and wasn't anxious to repeat it. A brief glance confirmed that the creature was still behind her, bouncing across the ground in great leaps that made it drive into the dirt, forcing it to get up again for the next jump. Its red eyes glared fiercely as it pursued her, pink nose twitching as it kept on her scent. She looked forward again, and saw the ruins of an old building that she could try and lose it in over to her left. She altered her course to head for the rubble.

There wasn't much in the ruins except for vine-covered stone and dirt, but there was a few random items lying around. She scooped up the first two items she could get her hands on: A piece of red cloth and a strange object made out of a foreign material that looked kind of like a baby. She stared at them as she continued running through the ruins. What good were these things? But she had no time to pick up anything else. She was already running out of the ruins and back into the forest.

She looked behind her again. Her trip through the ruins hadn't done much. The creature was still behind her. She turned forward once again, and almost stopped running in panic. She recognized the plants ahead of her. They were the ones who had tried to eat her earlier in the...day? Well, recently, at least. The sun was rarely out, and even when it was, the light was hard to see. As a last ditch effort, she threw the red cloth behind her,

hoping to blind the creature briefly or something, so that she could get away. It hit the creature as the jump carried it into the ground. Shoot. Well, now she was doomed. As she realized this, a vine wrapped around her middle and lifted her up into the air. She shrieked. As she dangled, she saw that the creature flinched at the high-pitched noise, twitching its grey ears. Inspired, she continued screeching. The creature started to convulse in pain. The plant that had wrapped its vine around her noticed this and went for the creature with the vine that had her in its grasp. She bounced off the hard surface of the creature with the vine, the baby-like object somehow attaching itself to the creature's long ear. The breath rushed out of her, stopping her screaming. The creature stilled, ears pointing straight up rigidly, the baby-like object and the red cloth somehow staying in place. The plant also stilled, losing its grip and allowing her to fall to the forest floor. She could hear the same thing that both the creature and the plant could hear: the distant roar that announced the approach of a windstorm. Not wasting any time, she got back up and raced off in the opposite direction, leaving the creature behind, sitting stiffly with a red cloth on its back and a baby-like object attached to its ear.



ANDY SCULL (“Select Journal Entries of an Inventor”)

Feb. 1, 763: Today, I made myself clean her room. And I put out the sign.

Monty and Lumina’s Innovative Inventing open for business.

A new era, whether welcome or not, starts now.

Feb. 5: A new job! Byron of the roofing firm stopped by today. Said that his night workers on high areas wanted light so that they didn’t have to walk on unstable beams and rafters to create. Asked me to create some sort of lightweight lantern which can move by itself. Accepted the job. Good advance. Now just need to develop an idea. It’s nice to have a job again. This is the first one since Lumina the end.

Febr. 8: I need to work. I must. This job is the only thing between me and the streets. I can’t lose it. Too much is lost already.

Febr. 9: Still have to start work. I have to, but I can’t seem to make myself. Why can’t I do it? Why?

Febr. 10: Lumina...

Febr. 13: I AM starting work today. No letting thoughts of her haunt me. She'd want me to carry on. I have to keep going.

Has it really been four months? It seems like yesterday. Every single time I enter her room, I think of her. Pale faced, her throat makes itself hoarse with the coughing. Blood soaks through her sheets. If I could touch her, I know her forehead would blaze hotter than a thousand suns.

I feel both the regular chill and a deeper one within that room. A deep chill that is almost the opposite of her burning. It chills the heart. Thinking of her.

But I mustn't think of her. I can't. Won't.

There's work to be done.

Febr. 18: My work continues. I have had the idea to create a variation on the basic lantern. A globe, in this case, may provide better illumination from up in the rafters and on the roof. The question remains on how to make it move by itself. The library is no help. It appears I am confined to inspiration from real life, which is bothersome.

Febr. 23: Maybe the globe should be extended on a short staff? The added height would provide a larger area of illumination...

There are wafts of great cold, even in the warmest of rooms. I may be snug under a blanket by a fire, and the freezing begins appearing, then disappearing after a few seconds. There's no draft, though it feels like a chill breeze. Maybe I'll re-insulate the house with some straw.

Febr. 27: The house is reinsulated, but the chill persists. Bother. Maybe I need to increase the general temperature.

Still drawing a blank on how to make the lantern move. I get the feeling the solution is simple. Too simple. I just need to keep working.

March 6: I have had an idea for how the lantern should move! It will rest on a well-balanced, thin cart. The cart shall have four wheels able to hold on tightly to the wood so it does not fall. The whole contraption, if done correctly, should not weigh more than a few pounds. ~~I think Lumina would be proud.~~ No, don't think of her. No.

March 10: One last addition. I've developed a powdered bit to be tied to a string and be put directly beneath the globe. All you have to do is pull the string for a powerful washing flash. Also useful for bringing the lantern back.

You've still got it, Monty. You've still got it.

That chill is worse in some places than others. I don't know why. It's always worse by ~~Lumina's room~~ the room on the east side of the top floor. That's all that place is. An empty room. Nothing more.

March 15: The prototype is done! Quite nice, if I dare say so. The wheels are a little rough, but it'll work. Or I hope so. Where to test it? And what to call it?

~~Dawn-Bringer~~ No.

~~Lightning Wheels~~ No.

~~Flashbulb~~ NO.

March 19: Been searching all over, but I can't find a proper testing area. Bother. Nothing on the name, either.

March 21: Inspiration has struck me. If I put down a beam in a hallway, I can test it without getting up in any rafters! I'll take some measurements. There'll be somewhere in the house I can do this. Still no name. Still those chills.

She'd have thought of one by now. It's not the same without her help.

I CAN manage. I must.

March 23: I've taken the measures. The only place in the house is the top floor hallway. It'll end in ~~Lumina's~~ the empty room at the end. This'll actually work better. It's more contained.

March 24: I SAW HER.

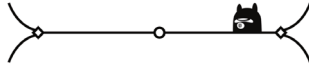
Don't know how, but I did. Testing prototype yesterday. Pulled flash. Saw it on the wall. A hand. The silhouette of a hand. Couldn't believe. Again, pulled flash. An arm. Flash, shoulder. Flash, head. Flash, flash, flash, all the body. The chill... Her. She watches. Always watching. The flash. The flash shows her. Lumina... Why?

I feel her now. I sense her. She's always there. Watching.

I have to leave. She'll haunt me forever if I don't. Tomorrow I'll be gone. The invention will stay here for Byron. He can keep his money.

I know its name now.

The Lumina.



TIM SCHULZ

The bleak November sky was weeping softly. The people were indifferent to the quiet patter as they drifted through the streets, flowing steadily, wearily onward. The patter of footsteps echoed the rain, falling quietly, resonating, dissipating. The people moved with the water, draining down the road, all the while murmuring and gurgling. The river broke as it struck an object in the street. It split, flowing around the island without care or pause. It continued on.

They paid no heed to the barrier, to the low circular wall, the glassy water, nor the subtle ripples thrown by each droplet, the soft reflections and patterns. They had no reason to. It had simply been there forever, that low stone wall, that glassy pool. The people had no purpose for it, nor did there seem to be any beauty in it. The wall was plain, an orange barrier of clay, and the water, though clear and unclouded, was only what collected there. No one filled the pool, no one cared to. No one knew who made it or why. No one even noticed it anymore.

A man smiled in the amber light cast by the burning lamp. The room was permeated by an earthy smell, and the man breathed a deep breath before shifting his large, circular glasses. He took a step back, wiped his hands on his stained smock, and quirked his head. He bit his lip thoughtfully, then glanced towards the sketches on the dark, wooden desk. The soft, golden light illuminated his stark white hair, combed and parted neatly. Old, worn hands traced the lines of the sketch, before he nodded to himself in satisfaction, and resumed his work.

His face held many lines, like old smiles. It was warm and friendly, silvery hair and short beard offset by the large, gold rimmed spectacles. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he worked, every motion accounted for, leathery hands moving with unexpected dexterity. As he worked, he smiled warmly.

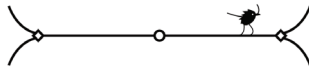
He again wiped his hands, leaving ten rusty streaks on his well worn smock. His gaze turned inward for a moment, his focus lost somewhere beyond the desks, the easels, the wooden walls. Awareness snapped back into his eyes and he retrieved from another room the final piece of his work. He placed the seemingly amorphous, carefully carved stone in its final resting place, consulted his sketches and measurements, and took a deep, long breath. So much effort, so much time, so many months...

He exhaled.

That's it then. All right. Only one last thing to do.

The sun was hidden behind the clouds as the man gestured to the location. He shifted his glasses anxiously as gently, very gently, the base was laid down. Water was poured into the basin and let settle, and then... they waited. The old man looked up at the sky, running an unsteady hand through his thinning white hair. A single droplet appeared in the skyward lens of his spectacles. Another. His focus shot to the now-full pool. A single ripple spread lazily through the still water. It bounced off of the clay wall, off of the stone island near the pool's center. A second droplet struck the water with a gentle "plink." Ripples slowly spread, bouncing and shifting until the drizzle became a soft, steady rain. The ripples were dancing now, pulsating and moving, forming intricate designs. Flowers bloomed and vanished, images flitted by, entire worlds, it seemed, if you only looked long enough, and close enough.

The November sky was weeping softly, and someone stopped walking. The current of pedestrians flowed around him as he looked for a moment, squinting, at the strange old pool in the center of the town. He gazed into it. The raindrops fell down.



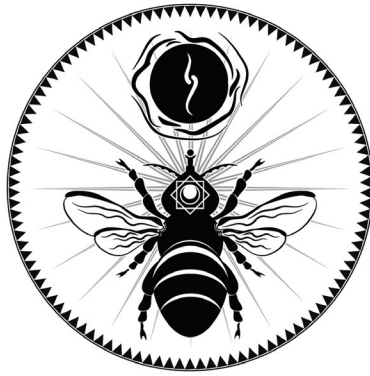
JADA THOMAS

Image #39

Kaie stood still before her enemy with her arms to her sides. Her father's knife was clutched in her right hand. She refrained from blinking and held her breath. The slightest move could easily lead to her death. The reflection in her golden-blue eyes showed the curled lips and sheer white teeth of a wild beast. Its fur coat glistened in the faint sunlight. The creature prowled

with a stunning pride; it firmly set each paw to the barren soil in a graceful yet intimidating way. Its tail moved freely. Obviously, the animal felt far from threatened. Kaie felt the same. At this point in time, Kaie had lived in Old Kalixis for three excruciating years. Living in Old Kalixis made her calloused to pain and discomfort. The frequent intense battles with beasts and shape-shifters made her extremely skilled. As the last wizard alive, it was her duty to do what her ancestors would have done several hundred years ago—a mission. *She must enter a portal to the new world. A door to a burned house leads the way to dangerous purple mist. Kaie must find this house and travel through the mist before it vanishes. A promise was made forcing Kaie to complete this mission. Whatever stands in her way of completing her mission must die.*

There was no escaping the bone-chilling wind of Old Kalixis; the beast's long mane swayed with each passing blast of cool air. Kaie lifted her knife above her head and breathed heavily as she waited for her opponent to attack. The sun quickly began to set. Kaie's eyes dilated to adjust to the pitch-black atmosphere. The beast snarled then leaped forward faster than any creature Kaie had ever battled before. Kaie could feel her heart pounding to a violent rhythm. The beast was within spitting distance in seconds. It lunged forward, aiming for Kaie's neck. Kaie swung her blade down with great force. The beast whined. It rested on its side, severely injured. Kaie pulled her blade out the beast's impaled lung. She wiped the knife on her dress. Kaie turned around to see two sets of eyes staring at her—two foolish challengers destined to die. Kaie raised her blade above her head. Yet another battle is to come.



THE WORLD OF RAFFALIRAKA

Many years ago, Raffaliraka existed in harmony. One vast empire spanned across this world of magic and wonder, connecting every being into one community. Beautiful buildings stretched up to the sky, and huge rolling plains provided lush farms and a surplus of food.

But soon, the beings became too powerful, wielding far too much magic for one small world to hold. On one fateful day, tremors rocked the world to its core. In a blinding flash of light, the single continent split apart, and the world, once considered a paradise, tore into two planes: one, called Yukikuro, with limited magic, and one, Tophatia, with no magic at all.

Now the two planes live in a constant state of deterioration, one consumed by disease and the other by giant insects. Only legends and Elders keep the Old World alive. Some believe that the split was caused by an angry god. Others believe that by reuniting the planes, they can reunite the Old World. But as the planes individually develop and change, many are losing hope that they can reach the old valor of Raffaliraka.

But would merging* the planes truly recreate the old world?

*The act of merging occurs when members of the two planes, a Yukikuran and a Tophatian, share the same physical body in Tophasia. When a Yukikuran travels from Yukikuro in aural form, they must choose a Tophatian with a matching aura to merge with. Once they have chosen a host, the two parties then draw up a list of rules, agree to it, and create a contract. They then merge, often for the rest of their lifetimes. Merged Tophatians are marked by their violet irises. Merging benefits the Tophatians in that they gain magical abilities, while the Yukikurans gain a strong physical body to use while they search for a cure to the plague. Opinions in Tophatia, as well as in Yukikuro, towards merging are divided as some tribes and groups consider it a great honor, while others believe it as a betrayal to their respective races. Following the Merge, Yukikurans can take their Tophatian partner to view Yukikuro through dreams. The Yukikuran and Tophatian cannot interact with the Yukikuro dimension, but they can observe their friends and family.

ERICA BRODERHAUSEN

Night. A young boy looked up at the small glimpse of moonlight emerging from its blanket of dark gray clouds. He shuffled his feet in the rocky soil and tugged slightly at his baggy clothes, anxiously awaiting the others. It was time for them to go. It was getting rather late, and since they hadn't shown up yet the young boy feared he would be forced to make his journey alone.

The task he was about to accomplish had been thrust onto him suddenly, and, in fact, not long before that night. Though he was rather young to go on this mission, he had to, seeing as the rest of his available family members had gotten the plague. The boy had been rather nervous when he first accepted the task. After all, he had heard countless stories of those who had never returned, those who had been infected and turned into hideous monsters, and even the ruthless beasts that ruled the many forests of his destination. But still, he had to be brave, not only for his family but for all of the Datorang who suffered from this horrific disease.

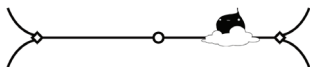
The boy shivered as the cold night air moved silently through his barren wasteland of a home, which they called Yukikuro. He heard a faint noise in the wind and looked towards the little town in the distance to see the rest of his group striding towards him. A wave of both excitement and nervousness passed over him as the small mass of Datorang reached him and he realized his quest had officially begun. With a few nods and exchanges of words, they began steadily making their way into the night, determined to find the gateway and end the growing sickness of their world.

Though they were fast on their feet, the young boy kept up, and his efforts finally paid off as they reached their point of interest. When the group came to a stop around a dimly lit object, the boy had to peer through the taller adults' bodies to see what they had gathered around. It was a rather large black mass, nearly impossible to see in the dark of the night except for its slightly luminous border. It was rectangular in shape, and stood tall, like an enormous doorway. This was it. This was the gateway to Leron.

The adults and the child all began to advance toward the portal at once, and leaped into it at nearly the same time. Once inside the portal, the boy experienced something like never before. He was sucked in by the constricting blackness, and felt himself bump into others even though he couldn't see them. As they sped through the vortex, flying downward, he could see their bodies begin to glow in an array of different colors. A rainbow of blue, gold, green, red, and brown lit up the dark as they reached the end

of their journey.

Suddenly, the young boy's body started to exit the gateway, his head being exposed to warm air and his eyes to dim shimmers of light. He soon found himself standing upright in the jungle world of Leron. To the natives here he would be nothing more than a sprit, a shimmer. But now his adventure had truly begun. He must find his aura and merge with him in order to go on his quest. He must find the cure to save his world.



JOE CAIN

The legend of the Clawing wood is an old one indeed, told among all of our world's tribes. Parents tell tales of it to scare naughty children. Soldiers shy away at mention of it, and terror rises in the hearts of all. Its birth came about during the time just after the great schism that separated the physical world Leon, from the Spiritual plane, Yukikuro. A powerful spirit, whose name time has forgotten, was tainted with the great plague that eats away at his people's powers, and tried to perform the ritual of merging with an ancient tree with branches that reached high into the heavens. With his power tainted by the plague, the spirit became trapped within the tree's trunks. For millennia he remained trapped, his psyche deteriorating until it became nothing more than an animalistic set of instincts. He had gone mad, and with the tree as his body, would claw at any living thing whether it slithers on its belly or it runs on swift flanked legs.

Time flowed, ages passed, and the Clawing wood found that its prey had grown wise to its tricks, and thus had slunk away from it far beyond its reach. So, with this in mind, the Wood set about expanding his reach, expanding his hunting ground. Beneath the earth its roots entwined themselves with those of the surrounding trees. Through them, the plague's taint was spread, and the other trees fell woefully under the Wood's spell. In time, they became part of the Wood, not just pawns but another limb on the same body. And now, so many years later, the entirety of the southern forest has become a single living being of hunger and mindless desire. Be wary, my fellow traveler. For all who stray too close to the Clawing Wood are pulled within, and no matter the power you wield, its is greater.

ZACH CLAY

Part 1: the image

Today the images will come. The same faces appear in every one of these images. I hear rumors of a different dimension in the same world... a spirit world. This world of magic, of dwarves, and... unknown creatures are... impossibly intriguing for me. I have dreams... dreams of horrible creatures... but I want to be a part of this spirit world.

The dreams are mostly the same. The main thing I'm confused about is the intentions of these dreams. They whisper about potential to merge with me. I haven't the slightest idea of what they mean by this. Whether they want this to do harm to me, or to help me, I can't tell. But I want to find out.

I know if these spirits are good, not all of them are. The image I most often see consists of a rather terrifying object sitting next to three rather silly objects that have a bit of eeriness to them. The first-and most terrifying- is a skull the size of a man's body. The other three objects have normal heads, with the body of a chicken. What's creepy about these, are the expressions on their faces.

The first is a small child closing his eyes and smiling in the direction of a small bird held in his hand. The second is a middle aged looking man shouting, either out of anger or joy. The third, I suspect, is a woman wearing a mask one might wear to a masquerade, emotionless and expressionless. The whispers came from the woods behind them.

Part 2: the dream

"Come with me David", the spirit told me.

"Where are you taking me?"

"It's time for our merging ceremony."

"Merging? I never agreed to this. I don't even know what merging is!"

"You'll find out. There is a contract for you to sign. I know you want this. You're compelled to us. When you find out the powers you will gain, you won't be able to turn us down."

"How do you know my thoughts?"

“I told you... we have unheard of powers to the likes of your puny race.”

“My puny race?! Aren’t you the one who wanted this whole ‘merging’ thing?”

“Quiet. We’re approaching the ceremony.”

“Good evening and welcome to the merging ceremony”, said a larger, wiser looking spirit.

“Excuse me... sir... but... What am I doing here?! What is merging?!” , I asked the older spirit.

“Have you not told him Jacques?”

“Yes... I mean... No. I haven’t... Sir.”

“Were you planning on doing this Jacques?”

“Well sir... you see... I looked into his thoughts and...”

“LOOKED INTO HIS THOUGHTS?! Are you mad? Have you forgotten our rules?”

“Well no sir but...”

“But nothing Jacques! I’m tired of treating you like a child. You’re a grown man with powers beyond most of our world, yet you’re not taken seriously by any! You must gain the respect of the rest of us. Convince this human to merge with you, maybe he can bring sense into that head of yours.”

“Thank you sir. I will do what I can. Come humanoid.”

“Alright... what was that Jacques? Oh, and what are you?”

“To humanoids, I am just a shimmer or a spirit. In my world, I am a dwarf with powers of magic. I need your help and you need mine. We’re both outcasts in our world, but merging would bring us fame. We would be the first successful merge to ever happen!”

“Wait. Hold. First successful merging?”

“Never mind that; we could do it. With your strength and my knowledge, we couldn’t fail.”

“Debatable”

“You would gain magic.”

“... Hey about that contract. Do you... happen to have a pen on you?”



KATE CLAYBORNE

Amphibios

Salutations, Dareamus:

I send you this letter to inform you, my oldest and most esteemed colleague, of my latest invention. For some time now, I have observed more and more insects actually entering my village area. Our current situation is such that there is even discussion about moving to a different area, possibly nearer to the shore. Aggressive bugs control most resources in the surrounding area so that groups must either travel a great distance to obtain certain types of food and timber or fight for the resources every time. A quarter of a generation ago, I resolved to develop a superior way to combat our enemies. Now, I believe I have succeeded. I present to you Amphibios, the largest biomecha in Leron thus far. The schematics for which are enclosed in this message, but I shall describe it here nonetheless. The toughest exoskeletons can be turned against the insects to form armor for Amphibios. In the form of a toad, it will tower fifteen feet high, twelve feet wide, and move across the ground with strong wooden wheels. Not only will it be able to spray toxic Webflower nectar, but it will also open its jaws to shoot a net similar to that of the Webflower. Captured insects will then be pulled inside the frog. Technicalities are explained in length in my schematics. Its fuel shall be magic; purple-eyed Tophatians—that is, those of us who merged with the magical Datorang—shall control it. This is a risky endeavor, I am aware, for many of us do not trust the Datorang. However, this is our best chance to crush the giant bugs. I implore you to travel to my village, to collaborate with me on this project, Dareamus, for it may just be our solution to these dark times. You and I both know our broken and scattered tribes cannot survive much longer like this. Send word of your decision to me, reposition your lab here, and we can change the course of Tophatian history. I ask you, not only for our tribes, our own lives, but for our children's as well.

From one biological engineer to another,

Zareed



SAVANNAH FINVER (“Merged”)

Image #49

I could tell immediately that I had lapsed into a dream, because I didn’t recognize anything I was seeing. The other members of my tribe weren’t anywhere to be found, and this dingy alley certainly wasn’t anything like the lush jungles of Leron. There was no vibrant color, no rustle of branches or screech of giant insects echoing through the night like there were in my tropical home.

As I glanced around the tunnel and shuffled my feet on the unsteady floor—which seemed to be made of stone, of all things—I realized with a pang that this wasn’t my dream at all.

It was Xavier’s.

Xavier and I had Merged almost a month ago, much to the dismay of my tribe leader, Carlan. He’d warned me against it, said others much stronger and wiser than me had attempted to Merge with the magic-wielders before, only to be completely consumed by their Datorangian partner. I was nervous, but when Xavier told me of his father’s illness, and his desperate search for a rare cure—which, inconveniently enough for him, existed only at the base of a certain insect-infested mountain in Leron—I felt obligated to help. Xavier was completely useless here without a Tophatian host; his body turned to mist when he crossed over to our world.

Of course, once Xavier and I had Merged, I began having second thoughts. Not only was knowing my soul was attached to his enough to make my head spin, but his nervous chatter in my ears was driving me insane.

In this dream, though, I was the “spirit” attached to Xavier’s body. I looked down at my feet—or his, I suppose—as a swarm of teenagers dashed through the tunnel to the stone archway at the end. I had to hide my eyes from them. When a Tophatian and a Datorang merge, their eyes change to

an unnatural swirl of purple and gray, and I didn't want any of these kids to notice. They were chattering in excited whispers about Zylon, who had apparently just returned from a very long journey. I watched them hover at the end of the alley, squinting against the harsh white light bleeding into the tunnel. Even though I was in Xavier's body, my eyes were used to the natural radiance of the jungle, not this strange fluorescent glow.

I stumbled as Xavier's short, stocky legs lurched forward. I still wasn't used to moving in his tiny, disproportionate body; I only ever visited his world in my dreams. As I neared the expanding group of kids, their babbling got louder. Even though it was a different tongue, Xavier's mind translated for me.

"I can't believe Zylon actually got to see Leron," said one boy excitedly.

"You idiot! He can't really see Leron! Didn't you hear Attacus when he came back? It all just looks like a blur to us. At least until we Merge."

"But Attacus said it looked like paradise. Warm, sunny, green..."

"Look! There's Zylon's aura! He's phasing back through the portal!"

As I awoke, I jerked forward, slamming my forehead against the jar of glowing lizards that hung above me and spilling head-first out of my hammock onto the floor. I jumped to my feet and spun around, disoriented and dazed from my experience in Xavier's body. Shaking my head to clear the fog, I tried to bring my surroundings back into focus. I looked down at my sturdy hands, my muscular legs, and my bronze skin. I was me again.

Would you be quiet? Xavier's voice echoed in the back of my mind. I'll bet the whole jungle heard you yelping like a lost hedgesog! Do you want giant spiders crawling into your tent? Because my magic can't kill giant spiders!

"Would you relax?" I huffed. "I can handle the giant spiders. And besides, I didn't yelp. I was just startled."

Zaaron, you are insufferable! Keep your voice down! I hate spiders!

"Oh please, the spiders are nothing compared to the scorpions." I chuckle as Xavier squeaks in protest. "What was that place anyway?"

It's the portal to your world. Magic based. You need a spell to get

through. That's why Tophatians can never cross over to Yukikuro without being Merged. Your kind has no magic.

"Seems kinda unfair doesn't it? That you all can get here, but we can't get to you."

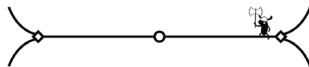
Don't ask me; it's not like I caused the Split. And would you please be quiet? You don't need to talk. I can hear your thoughts, you know.

"Thanks, Xavier. I don't need reminding." But the truth is, I was still getting used to the whole "having-another-sentient-being-in-my-head" thing.

Even if my contract with Xavier was till death do us part, I didn't think I'd ever really be comfortable knowing he was hovering in the back of my thoughts, and could even control my body if he wanted to. Knowing I was acting "for the greater good" didn't help any, either. Merging is a contract more binding than marriage.

Now there's a scary thought.

I lay back down on my hammock and closed my eyes, but almost as soon as my thoughts went blank, I was falling into another wild dream..."



NATHAN GOLDWAG

The village was burning. Three buildings were burning and flames engulfed a cluster of arboreal apartments. Wolf-riders galloped through the outskirts of the town, slashing down citizens with leafblades. Infantry followed them, armed with seedblasters and leachcannons. Here and there guardsmen made a stand, leaping from doorways to pump a magazine of poison spinners into a passing rider, or hurling buzz bombs from upstairs windows. But one after another, they all died, their chests punctured by a hundred seed fragments, a writhing leech wrapped around their throat. Finally, resistance collapsed. The few surviving guards broke and ran through the moonlit streets to the relative safety of the town square, the enemy hard on their heels. General Lantar of the Denapa nation frowned as he watched from a nearby hilltop. The Panatak tribe was weak, but this was too easy. There were only half as many guards as there should've been and they were making too many mistakes, too many foolish blunders to put down to chance.

As the guardsmen reached the square they threw themselves behind barriers and whirled to face the oncoming waves of enemies. Wolves howled as their Denapa riders spurred them forward, eager for victory. Then there was a yelp as a long arm shot out of a side street and impaled one of the canines. There was a minute of silence as everyone stopped and stared at the thrashing carcass of the creature as it bled to death on the street. There was a click as the long leg emerged from the alleyway, followed by another, and another, and another, until the whole creature stood out in the open. It was an insect, a huge yellow body supported by four long white legs. Someone screamed. Then all hell broke out. Panatak and Danapa scattered and fled, desperate to escape the monstrosity. But it was too late. Dozens of the creatures swarmed out of the jungle into the town, slaughtering indiscriminately. They rushed up the streets, chasing down fleeing soldiers; they scrambled on top of houses and plucked people from windows; they clambered up trees and leaped down upon terrified tophatians. General Lantar blanched as he watched his plan collapse into a bloodbath. And even as he watched, a group of insects began scrambling up the hill towards him. One of his aides cried out “Sir! What are we going to do?” Lantar drew his scorpion-claw sword from its scabbard. He turned to face his staff. “Do? Why, we’re going to die of course.”



MARY LIFESEY

A bloodcurdling scream echoed on the walls of the burning temple. Aiko, the high priestess, threw herself down upon the body of the man who had just sacrificed himself for her. Tears ran down her cheeks and shudders racked her body. She pulled desperately at the piece of wood that had pierced his chest, searching for his missing aura. Her fiancé was gone and she knew it, but she didn't want to admit it. The fire continued to eat away at her temple and destroy everything she had ever known. She could not bring back her beloved Takumi, and she wanted no part of life without him. She yearned for death and an escape from the loneliness that would come with the destruction of her beloved temple and the death of the man she had considered her soulmate.

The flames crackled in the background, burning through the wood and destroying the sacred meaning of Aoi Ten Tera. The orange and yellow flame dashed through the rafters and consumed the handcrafted wooden

beams. Her heart told her to let herself die, but her mind told her to get Takumi's body out of the temple. She didn't know who to listen to; her heart had guided her for her entire life and her mind had kept her strong since the beginning. She thought desperately for a way to listen to them both.

After a moment's hesitation her mind had been made up; the fire burning towards her caused her to quickly reach down and pull the spike of wood from his chest. Aiko clutched his body in her arms and planted a kiss on his cheek. She took a deep breath and lifted his corpse, then dashed towards the nearest exit to the temple. She didn't want her Takumi's body to burn. She wanted him at peace.

She burst through the smoke and out into the yard and lowered his body to the soft dirt. "Takumi," she said. Her voice was cracked and raspy from the smoke. "Takumi, I have to join you. I'm so sorry, Takumi." Her voice broke and she began to cry again. "Takumi, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

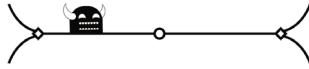
She reached up to her black and grey cat headdress and removed it from her head, letting her long silver hair flow to the middle of her back. Holding the piece in her hands, she snapped one of the ears off and ran one finger along the sharp edge. "Takumi, everything you did will be in vain now," she said. "But I cannot live without you." She hummed the tune to a song she knew well, letting the lyrics swim through her mind.

Silver-haired princess Aiko,
Grey wise-eyed Aiko of the dawn,
Silver-haired princess Aiko,
I would not live if you were gone.

"You wrote me this song when I was only a little girl, Takumi," she whispered. In one sudden movement she slashed the glass across her left arm, letting blood spill on the dry dirt. Before she lost feeling in her arm, she slashed the other wrist open as well. The song continued to play through her mind as her blood poured out.

Aiko, queen of the blue,
Aiko, singer of the sky,
Aiko, my love from heaven,
Aiko, without you I will die.

Aiko collapsed. She would be faithful to him. The little song he had written her all those years ago was fresh in her mind as she closed her eyes for the last time.



DONOVAN MACPHERSON

In Yukikuko, the main elder Datorang were known for their immense knowledge and wisdom. Yunari Hakuro was one of the well-known elders, known for her charisma and beauty, until the whispers of a disease spreading like the plague began spreading throughout the realm. Her main fear of this plague was not the loss of magic due to the sickness, but the horrifying disfigurements that ravaged the body. As the sickness spread across the land, Yunari began frantically searching for a cure throughout Yukikuro. The Datorang began worrying for their beloved elder and assisted her journey, but to no avail. Whispers of a cure in Leron, along with the religious beliefs that supported any merging with the Tophatians, led Yunari to place her hope in Leron. It wasn't that she wanted to travel to Leron. She needed to. She had become frantic to find a cure, for she felt so unsafe in her own home, unable to be comforted by her old friends for fear that they would accidentally infect her. She began to deteriorate further due to her paranoia and placed all her hopes in Leron. That was when she began to feel like there was a light at the end of the tunnel, and just the slightest bit more effort would lead to her safety. She was prepared for travel and, as an elder, was easily capable of the journey. Yunari put all her energy into forming a search party that would assist her in finding the cure for the sickness, even showing some of the previous charisma she had shown before her fears had taken over. She did make one mistake when making her group, for in her haste, she recruited the one thing she had been frantically avoiding.

She brought a friend who was infected but had yet to exhibit the major symptoms of the sickness. They continued her journey and entered Leron, where she and her companions began searching for the cure. The world was almost impossible to traverse and confusing to navigate. The main idea the group had was to merge with the Tophatians so they could better search for the cure. Only Yunari refused to merge, for she asserted that her beauty should not be tarnished by the Tophatians' inferiority. The journey had only just begun when Yunari's friend began acting oddly and began to show a guilt for something that the others couldn't understand. Eventually,

she started to show symptoms of the sickness; before anything could even be said about her situation, Yunari cried out and began to cry. Her friends saw their beloved elder cry and assumed that she was crying for her friend who would be lost in the prime of her life, but it was when her friends began to make out whispers among her sobs.

“I’ve lost everything,” she sobs. “Everything...everything. Ugly, I’ll be ugly...ugly...ugly.” She continued chanting her fears endlessly, but her friends felt her complete lack of feeling towards anyone but herself and felt no pity. They left her to deteriorate, for they searched on for a cure to prevent others from contracting the sickness. She was left alone, wallowing in her self-pity. Alone she wandered, for she had become a hunched creature that hardly resembled her previously beautiful form. She wandered through a maze of greenery where she yearned for solitude so that none could see her disgrace. Her search party did find a cure but never gave another thought to Yunari, only saying that she was a fallen elder that should be forgotten by the ages, the highest disgrace known to the Datorang people.



ELEANOR MCCELLION

The first time I saw it, I didn’t know what to think. It was like nothing I had ever seen before, monstrous and strange, yet elegant in a bizarre, other-worldly sense. I had heard the legends, but I had never, ever expected anything like this.

The day I came upon it was the day I was determined to prove myself as a dependable warrior of my tribe. I’d had a twisted foot, and I couldn’t stand the thought of staying in the village and becoming dead weight to my family when it came time to migrate somewhere else. Many went as far as to call me “Zojan the Useless” or “Baby Zojan” and I refused to succumb to the aid they would try to lend me. I decided I would go on a solitary mission to search for a myth passed down for generations, a creature that could quite possibly change my life for the better. I was ready to give up everything for the slim chance that this being actually existed.

No one knows for sure how it came to be. Many have said that a Datorang found its way into the life-force of a plant, infusing itself and its magic with the accelerated growth of the plant to create a guardian of sorts.

I discovered this creature that appeared to be made of plant matter, formed into a stalky mass of leaves and twigs, in a hollow tree. Its head was elongated and on its face were four tiny, violet eyes. It was building a nest with its twig-like arms, and had no hands or feet. The legs of it were long and thin.

What intrigued me the most was the light emanating from within. It shined through its leafy skin and gave it a luminescent green glow.

Was this what I was looking for? Was this the Otain, the rare creature spoken only in awed whispers on dark nights? Rumors were passed that told of its abilities, that it could heal wounds of the flesh and bone.

Seeing the creature ignited the longing I'd had since I was a boy, of walking through my camp without a limp, able to carry my role as a reliable defender of my tribe.

Cautiously, I approached it. I was acutely aware of how unstable my hopes were, dangling by a single thread of dependence on this abstract thing. It seemed to sense my presence and it turned, gazing at me with its piercing eyes. The forest around me went suddenly silent, as if holding its breath. It stepped out of the tree gracefully on all fours, and stood towering before me.

"Are you who I think you are?" I whispered, as if the world would shatter to pieces if I spoke any louder.

It stared for a moment longer, as if perplexed, and then it reached up a spindly arm and gestured first to the tree canopy above us, the vines spanning the forest, and finally the underbrush below. After this it gave a rattling hum, and to my surprise everything around me came to life with the sounds of the jungle.

"You are the warden of this forest? You are the Otain?"

The Otain hummed again in response.

My heart was rushing with the honor of meeting such a spiritual being. Without thinking I bowed my head in respect, but the Otain continued looking at me. With slow, deliberate movements it pointed down to my left foot, which was twisted at an odd angle.

"Can...can you heal these accursed bones?" I stammered in awe, lifting my head to meet the Otain's eyes.

The Otain continued to stare, as if it were looking into my very soul. Finally it rumbled, striding over to the tree once more and ducking into it, out of sight.

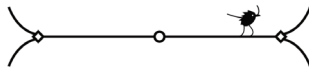
I waited for a moment, then hesitantly followed after it.

There was a course of events after that. I was sent into a dream-like state, where the Otain's true voice reverberated around me.

There was a sharp pain that seemed to radiate throughout my body, and my foot felt like it was burning in searing flames. Then, as soon as it began, it was over. A cool, soothing sensation came over me and I drifted into deep sleep. However, the Otain still had one last thing to say.

"I have healed your wounds of bone, young one, and in return I only ask that you refrain from speaking a word of what has transpired here. No one must know, else your people should attempt to take advantage of my abilities. Be well, Zojan, for I see great deeds in your future."

When I woke, the Otain was gone, and all traces of it vanished. With my healed, perfectly aligned foot, I walked home with the sounds of the forest cheering behind it, out of sight.



GRAYSON MOONEY

Sukarno picked up the quill and looked at the contract, his heart pounding. His hand was shaking slightly, but he knew that he couldn't back out now. The Merging was so near.

I'm glad you've decided to Merge. The words appeared in Sukarno's mind without warning. He still had to get used to the telepathic form of communication that the spirits used.

Don't worry, I'm signing now, we'll Merge soon enough. Nori made no reply and instead hovered, his aura glowing more brightly than usual, a clearly visible blue shimmer in the center of the room.

Sukarno signed briskly and set the quill back in its holder with several other battered writing utensils.

All right, your turn. He told Nori, the spirit drew closer to the

contract and began to acknowledge the document, as was required to make it binding.

The contract was well written, Sukarno had spent the better part of a week planning it out and finally had it down to a form that was near perfect. He had written down an introduction, a brief explanation of the Merging process, and the rules for Nori to follow once the Merging had commenced; all that was left to do was for Nori to acknowledge the contract, which made it magically binding and near impossible to break. The consequences of breaking a contract were severe: a spirit would be violently ejected from its host, and never allowed to Merge again.

But before Sukarno could think about the contract for too much longer, Nori began his acknowledgement.

I, Nori, hereby acknowledge this contract, which bears the signature of my host, and swear upon my ability to Merge that I will uphold and obey the standards that my host has written and decreed. I will do my host no harm.

The contract shimmered slightly as it became binding, and Nori drifted over to it. Sukarno looked at the spirit and nodded, it was time to begin the Merge. He lay down onto his cot and opened his eyes as wide as they would go.

It was customary for spirits to enter their hosts either through the eyes or the base of the skull. But the eyes were rumored to be quicker, so Sukarno held his eyelids opened and resisted the urge to blink as Nori moved towards him.

The spirit moved through Sukarno's eyes and the Merge began. For Sukarno it was a chaotic whirl of color, sense, and memories as his body tried to make sense of the new presence inside of him.

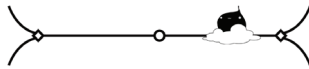
But amid his own senses and jumbled memories new ones began surfacing, and Sukarno realized that they were Nori's. He analyzed them quickly as they flashed past. A brief view of a barren plain. A square building marked REUNITE, and suddenly a black throne.

This memory was much more vivid than the others, but was by far the most puzzling. The throne was ornate and carved with images of leaves, vines, and tendrils of plants. But instead of holding a king or dignitary, the throne was empty. Then with a sudden wrenching sensation, Sukarno was

ripped from the Merging process and found himself on the floor; he had fallen out of his cot, and his elbow was bruised. He felt disoriented and sick, not at all spiritually enlightened. But that would likely come in time, after all he had to be patient. But the throne was puzzling him. What had that been?

We're Merged! Sukarno almost jumped at hearing Nori's telepathic voice, but then smiled. The spirit was right, no matter what the mysterious throne had been, he was merged, and that was the most important thing at the moment.

Yes. Merged for life. Sukarno smiled and stood up, he still felt dizzy and his elbow stung, but a new chapter in his existence had opened up, his life would never be the same again.



EBONY TAYLOR (“Bima and the Eight-Legged Terror”)

Image #38

Eight dark orbs looked down at Bima and he backed up, ripping through the sticky silk web that he had collided with. The eyes moved forward into the light, and Bima noticed a red tint inside of them. The hairy legs, the height of the boy, left a shadow and the boy ripped through the rest of the web and fell backwards down the small hill, knocking his head on a small stone. Bima stumbled up, gripping his head, and winced at the headache that had yet to come.

The “thing” continued forward until its full body waited proud beneath the face of the sun; a spider. Bima hated spiders, not because they stood ten feet, but because of the eight eyes. He grabbed the stone on which he had hit his head. This was not so easy.

Bima had ventured into the jungle, not out of choice, but because his father had commanded it. “Go into the jungle and bring back a glowing larva to light the house!” It was a simple enough task and Bima had done it many times with his father. This time; however, had been different; Bima had gone alone. His father had handed him an old gun that shot out diatomaceous earth, for protection, and sent him on his way. Bima was ten years old, after all, and in his family catching a glowing larva without assistance, and bringing it home, was a passage of manhood. Of course, Bima had always been a late bloomer, two full years late. Still, he had thought it

was going to be easy, ridiculous really. He had been wrong.

The boy gripped the rock tighter; he had lost his weapon somewhere on the ground before he had gotten stuck in the web. The spider moved closer and a trail of sweat traveled down the boy's skin. He was only five feet tall, scrawny for his age; he had a right to be afraid.

"Don't panic," he lectured himself. "Remember what dad said. Don't panic."

The situation, though, was not looking good. He had yet to find a larva to bring home, and his only weapon against the spider coming towards him was a stone. His only hope was that the arachnid would get stuck in its own web. But Bima had destroyed the web. It was impossible.

He ran. It did him little good. The tangled thicket before him only took him deeper into the jungle, and behind him the spider pursued. Each giant hairy leg crushed the leaves that Bima had to push through, and Bima knew it would be upon him in a few moments. The ten-year-old did not stop; however, not when the thing behind him had readied its pincers.

In the distance a larva rested on a tree branch. It was only about four feet, exactly what the boy needed.

"If I could just get to it..."

He gripped the stone tighter until he felt it cut through his palm, turned around, and threw it as the center eye. Bima did not wait to see if it had hit his target, even though he heard a noise. He reached a tree and climbed up until he was high enough to get the larva. Only then did he watch the spider retreat.

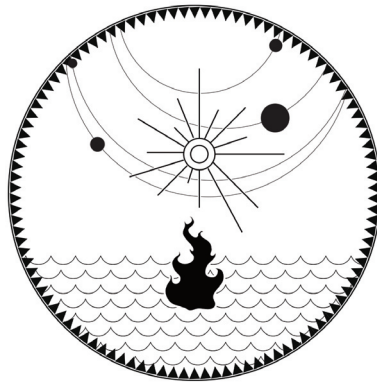
With no weapon and no rock, Bima stared down at his prize in defeat. It was a squishy, yellow-green creature that when the sun set would glow brightly and provide light. They hung from trees like chrysalises. The task was much more difficult than he had thought it would be. And even if he did come home with it his father would be disappointed. After all, Bima had lost the family's only weapon somewhere in the jungle. His father would have to go buy a new one.

"A branch!" The thought came at the same moment that Bima reached over to snap one off the tree. Once again, he wished he was stronger; then, instead of sawing, he could simply rip the larva down.

Taking the sharp tip of the branch, he began to poke at the thick, stem-like connection between the squishy larva and the tree branch. After much of this the larva finally fell to the ground. Bima looked down, checking for bugs, before he started to climb back down as well. It was more for personal comfort; if a bug wanted the scrawny Tophatian boy it could easily climb up the tree and get him.

Bima picked up the larva and, hoisting it over his shoulder, looked up at the sun. It was past midday. He did not have long now to get back to his home. The boy looked around, and, deciding the quickest way back was the way he had come, decided to chance the spider, hoping it was not waiting for him.

By the time he emerged from the jungle, the sun had just begun to set and Bima was covered in mud and slime. The larva was wrapped around his shoulders, and when Bima saw his house in the distance, a wide smile broke out on his face. Slowly, the door opened, and when the face of his father was revealed Bima felt like he was glowing. And due to the larva on his back, he was.



THE WORLD OF YSTAL

Ystal is a water-filled, ring-shaped planet that orbits around a still core of magma. The magma within Ystal warms the planet, making the islands within the innermost portion of the planet the hottest locations and the islands towards the edge colder. All water—called Devata’s Band—on Ystal is palatable and the currents flow in one constant direction. A nearby star marks time for the peoples of Ystal, whose days and nights have different lengths depending on their location on the planet. Two main species—the Atoir and the Humans—exist relatively peacefully on Ystal, and have colonized different areas of the planet to suit their needs. The Atoir are the original natives of Ystal. Large, dragon-like creatures with bio-combustion “after-burners” on their backs that make use of the naturally occurring particles in the air to power their flight. The Humans first came to Ystal from their Mother Planet and after a brief struggle with the Atoir, settled in different areas of the planet.

Above Ystal, past their atmosphere, exists a band of particles called the Ether. Little is known about the particles that make up this “realm of thought” except that they serve several purposes. They both power the Atoiri bio-combustion burners and provide a home for the gods of Ystal. These celestial beings are created by the thoughts of the masses, and can be controlled—at least partially—through continual, devoted thoughts of the religious. When individuals pass away in Ystal, they can either be absorbed into the being of the god they most resemble or stay as an imprint on the Ether (similar to a ghost). Although the Atoir and Humans alike worship the gods of the Ether, no two groups worship them in the same way. Each clan, tribe, or group has a different way of worshiping and a different representation of their gods although the gods are all essentially the same.

JEREMY BELL

Image #2

If one were to visit Ystal from a faraway planet, he, she, or it would not find anything particularly unusual about it. Of course said being would discover a plethora of fantastical creatures and sophisticated Humans that would not have existed in their home planet, but that is obviously to be expected for an inhabitable planet existing some light years away that has been left for millennia to its own devices.

However, if this visiting being was itself Human, or at least humanoid, and able to reproduce with the indigenous population, then after dozens of generations his or her offspring may start to experience something peculiar. These offspring, now almost identical to the indigenous Humans, may begin to feel a special something in the air. A tingling sensation perhaps, felt with a kind of sixth sense.

This so-called sixth sense resides in all sentient beings that have long inhabited Ystal. The nature of its cause involves extremely complex molecular science, as well as the inclusion of a secondary plane of existence in a sense overlapping the concrete world. This plane of existence can be made malleable by any sentient mind that has had the proper exposure to a certain molecule in existence on Ystal that serves as a connection between the two dimensions. This is why the Humans are now beginning to have the ability to influence the overlapping realm, and why the other sentient life form, the Atoiri, can instinctively manipulate it to project mental images and emotions to others.

The Atoiri, who have been residents in Ystal for millennia, have long since homogenized their culture and essentially believe in the same deities to explain their surroundings. This massive singular belief system has allowed the malleable plane to be shaped in a drastic way, and these deities have actually manifested themselves within through the sheer power of these recurring thought processes. These beings of thought, these gods, have the power to cross over to the physical realm and directly influence their surroundings, causing an increased concentration of the special molecule wherever they appear. All sorts of mystical events can and have happened as a result.

When the Humans came, some conflict arose between them and the Atoiri. Although the Atoiri are much larger, for the most part equally intelligent, and altogether more fearsome than Humans, they lost all the

advantage when it came to numbers and technology. Therefore, because of mutually assured destruction, the two groups came to an agreement and there was a tentative peace. This peace caused increased exposure between the sentient races, allowing for much blending of beliefs.

Before long a new god was created out of this blend and worshipped, both by the Atoiri and by many Humans. Often referred to as Dalis, he is known as the God of Duality and represents all interaction between any intelligent beings, for good or for worse. The first time this deity crossed over to the physical world he used his given power to create a unique species of fish. The intention being for the animal to become his symbol on the concrete aspect of Ystal, assuring that whenever it was seen, Humans and Atoiri would think of him and therefore keep him in existence forever.

This fish is commonly known as a Dual-tailed Devil, and like Dalis has two sides to its character. However, not only does it have a dual personality, but a dual form as well. Although one organism, its appearance is that of two slim, carnivorous fish stuck together by the head and upper body. The fish on the right is usually mild tempered, calmly enduring the thrashing of the hot-headed left fish. The left fish's job is to secure all the food for the organism, while the right fish's job is to steer the body away from danger, reproduce, and help with self-defense.

Since its creation, the Dual-tailed Devil has become a widely used symbol of religious devotion to Dalis. Commonly found as household decoration it is often seen adorning walls or mantelpieces as miniature stone or ceramic sculptures.



JOHN BELMONT (“The Tree of Eyes”)

The inhabitants of Krafna had really outdone themselves this time. Tralvus moved through the market as the Tree of Eyes looked downward at him and took a picture, the system not allowing anyone to escape its gaze. The largest eye twitched quickly, capturing all of the people moving through the trading outpost despite the smog surrounding it. Guards armed with crossbows and halberds manned the gates and mechs moved outside the Krafnan outpost with thundering steps. Tralvus didn't want to stay in this frigid world long.

In minutes he'd reached his trade tent with a young Atoir in hand,

and some brightly- colored eggs jostled in a crate. His wheelbarrow, weighed down with its contents, stopped in front of his tent. Whilst receiving looks of perhaps anticipation, Tralvus placed the young and its cage up on a presentation table, as it stuck out its tongue grasping for snowflakes. An elderly woman soon approached his stand.

“Don’t you know that the Tree sees all?”

Tralvus didn’t understand.

“Of course, isn’t that its purpose?”

“The Tree sees all, good and bad.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Tralvus replied, annoyed.

“The Tree of Eyes...” her voice tapered off as she hobbled away. Though the hood over her head concealed her face, she had felt familiar. However, Tralvus had never been to Krafna. However, he couldn’t shake the feeling he knew her somehow...

“Tralvus?”

Tralvus turned.

It was a man he’d never met before, but he was very clean cut and well-dressed despite the inclement weather. He extended his hand in greeting, and Tralvus returned it. He was uncertain of the man’s intentions. His smile was a bit peculiar, and impeccable. And how did he know his name?

“My name is Dajus,” he said, centering himself at the table. “I’m Nora’s associate.” Tralvus nodded. Nora’s Atoiri trading business had brought him to Krafna, and Nora had informed him that a business associate would be appearing, but Tralvus was expecting someone he knew. He had remembered a friend of Nora’s bringing him some Atoiri eggs, but what had happened to him? Tralvus hadn’t seen that guy since he visited the mushroom plantations in Virtulis. “May I see one of those eggs?”

“Of course,” Tralvus said, pleased with Dajus’ manners. This man seemed like the model business man—he made himself known to Tralvus and he’d presented a likeable personality. Tralvus liked him already.

“This is an amazing specimen,” Dajus said. “Where did you get it?”

“Well,” Tralvus said, “Nora and I met in Magom and, under a heavy fog, found it abandoned in a cave. The nature of our business required we take it.” The two men laughed, Tralvus’ deeper than Dajus’ throat chuckle. Dajus returned the egg to its crate.

“That story is so unbelievable, I’d think you bought it on the black market!” It was Dajus’ turn to laugh deeply. The conversation was soon over, and Dajus left his business card. “You meet me at the factory in a few hours, and bring those eggs. I’ve got some potential buyers.”

“Good,” Tralvus said, smiling. “Where do you operate out of?”

“Virtulis,” Dajus grinned. It was a surprising coincidence.

“I’ll see you after I get some sleep,” Tralvus called as Dajus walked away.

“With the eggs?”

“Naturally.”

Tralvus watched as Dajus grew farther and farther away until he disappeared into the thick snow growing outside the tent. He hoped Nora would be there to see this potential buyer. He hadn’t heard of any potential buyers from Nora. Tralvus packed up his things and found his bed. The small Atoir yawned and curled up. Tralvus pulled over the covers and was asleep in seconds.

When Tralvus woke up, he noticed the small Atoir was gone. Possibly Nora had asked Dajus to take it? Tralvus was feeling strange about today already. Strange about the elderly lady, strange about Dajus, strange about Nora. He took the crate, flung it over his back, and made his way towards the factory. If there was a potential buyer, then this is where he’d find him.

“Dajus? Nora?” Tralvus didn’t like the silence. And why where the window shades open? Nora was very particular about sunlight affecting the Atoiri eggs. Then he saw it; Nora was lying dead, a sword sticking out of his chest. Tralvus ran forward and dropped to his knees, his hand pushed against his boss’s chest, trying to stop the bleeding. Then he heard the Tree of Eyes click. He’d been caught with the body.

“Smile, you poor shmuck,” Dajus appeared, a wry smile on his face and the Atoir eggs in hand. Tralvus thought he heard the juvenile whimper from within a backpack nearby.

“You two-faced bastard!”

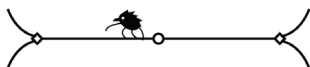
Dajus laughed, “It’s funny; you Atoiri merchants all fall for the same trick. I’ve been ripping off that poor fool for years.”

“You- you killed him! The man in Virtulis!”

“My first victim,” Dajus said with feigned pity.

“You sick, little...”

“Stop now, the Tree of Eyes is watching.” Dajus slipped out, Tralvus’ eggs and presumably the juvenile in tow. Why hadn’t he seen it? The elderly woman was one of the gods in disguise. Why hadn’t he seen it? Thinking quickly, he pulled the sword out of Nora’s body, smashed open the window, and leapt. The woman, or god, Tralvus was unsure, had been right. The Tree of Eyes sees all, good and bad.



HANNA (AXIE) CHURCHWELL (“The Lights in Ystal”)

The merchant ship Aruwathia was making its arduous journey to every region in Ystal with many artisan crafts in its hull, cold wind causing it to sway over-dramatically to either its left or right depending on the winds. Onboard, the captain, his nearly grown daughter, and the crew rolled around sickly trying to stumble up and change the sails. All their faces were scattered with regretful twitches in their eyes or lips, especially Eisa, who had never sailed before but was interested in her father’s profession.

“Eisa, go down to the hull if you’re just going to lay there clinging to the rail,” Captain Polei shouted from across the ship.

As soon as Eisa had run down the stairs, he called out at the crew, “Anyone see if you can contact some Atoiri! There must be one daredevil Atoir flying in a storm like this! This is Aruwathia’s last trip; I’m telling you like it is, men, she just can’t withstand this sort of storm!”

They maintained the sails and ran about the ship while trying to get a telepathic link with an Atoir. The boat spun around whipping back and forth and to all sides in the same spot for an amount of time no man could tell. Eisa wobbled up the stairs and fell onto the deck her hands shaking from

cold, her green eyes rotating quickly from the ship's jerky movement, and her hair darkened from being wet.

"The boat is filling with water! It's over my ankles in the hull!" She cried.

Captain Polei looked at the sky and then at the crew, "We have an hour..."

The boat rocked sharply to its right spilling Eisa and whatever crew members were in mid-run overboard.

The waves pushed Eisa down into the black water and then she began to rotate in a corkscrew movement under the water too numb to do anything. Shells, animal bones, masks, and treasures swirled continuously with her. Small jagged shells stabbed at her skin while bright white bones bumped into her; strange objects made of materials she'd never seen fascinated her.

She whispered into the water, "The knowledge down here is amazing. I'd like to stay here."

Her eyes were so overcome with cold that she shut them and could no longer see the oddities of past civilizations.

Black.

Light?

There was light.

A light that was glowing in her mind.



COLLIN DRUMMOND

"You mean to tell me that you nearly let the unlamre, those lesser beings, see the medicine without any need of them to do so?"

"Sir, you make us out to be malicious. We fully intended to finish the ritual before any unlamre arrived."

“You may have intended so, but clearly your actions do not reflect your full intentions.”

“That may be so, but know that we kept ysil in our minds throughout. We never meant ill towards the ysil.”

“Let me read your report to you again, to remind you of your actions. Then we can discuss whether you truly meant to please ysil.

“In the first hour of the day you arrived in Jala’s Redstone Inn. You bent the minds of its keeper to permit you access to the Inn’s third floor. You located the room of the object and transferred yourself through the door. Once you were at the object’s bedside, you began compiling the Baridian Leaves into our medicine. So I assume this means that you came unprepared?”

“No, sir, we—”

“You had the leaves, but you neglected to create the medicine in advance.”

“That is true, sir, but—”

“You need not say more. You have answered my question, and responding further would disrespect me. Meanwhile, you had begun compiling the leaves. You placed the leaves in their respective vials and dissolved them separately in their respective solvents. All this was as per protocol. However, your lack of planning came back to you as it was sure to have done. As soon as you had poured the components together, Ginnindra alerted you that someone was in the hallway. Determined to finish the ritual uninterrupted, you ignored her.”

“I weighed my options.”

“It seems your scale was imprecise. You waited for the medicine to become dissolved.

Once it was ready, you poured one drop on the forehead, one on each eyelid, one in the mouth, and placed the bowl on the person’s chest. After only thirty of the required seventy seconds had passed, the door opened. Is this correct as of yet?”

“Yes.”

“He grabbed Ginnindra around the neck and began yelling. You panicked and fallaciously cast a spell. Which spell was it, again?”

“It was a spell of darkness.”

“Clarify this for me. Which spell of darkness?”

“I...I’d rather not say.”

“Rather not say? You are in the presence of ysil. All truths must be revealed before it.”

“...It was the spell of poisoned darkness.”

“Ah, the spell of poisoned darkness. Your moment without proper judgment cost you dearly, then.”

“Sir, it was not cast with malicious intent. I cast it with good intent for ysil. In the end, no harm was done.”

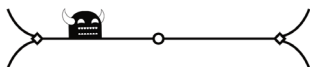
“Yes...no harm was done to the unlam. However, you have harmed yourself in a way. By demonstrating the first impulse of your mind the moment your judgment slips, you have shown much about yourself. Consider that in the future, you are assigned a similar mission. Consider that perhaps another unlam shows himself unexpectedly: I could only expect the same thing to happen. I have no evidence otherwise; and therefore, you are no longer trustworthy. All will be judged before ysil when their day comes, but in mortal hands judgment comes sooner. Your judgment has resulted, unfortunately, in your expulsion from the League of Ysim. However, you did complete your task, so perhaps there is indeed hope for you when you come before ysil.”

“Sir, I implore you—”

“You have been judged. Before ysil your final judgment will be only onefold, and so shall be your judgment here on Ystal. If you resist, you are only resisting ysil, so I recommend that you save your soul by leaving willfully.”

“Very well, sir. Thank you for your time.” Jaquinix held his head high, though he could scarcely keep his anger from manifesting itself in his speech. He told himself that the High Priest’s point had no basis. The High Priest could not be right because every inch of Jaquinix’s being told him so.

Every inch of his being told him that what he had done was noble. He had saved Ginnindra's life—what could be nobler than that?"



WILL HOLCOMB ("Wardenwold")

When strong men speak of the tree, they do so quietly. Weak men do not speak of the tree at all. Women of all sorts speak of the tree, but they have their reasons. This is not the story that is told to women of the tribe—they will hear it differently. This is your story, and that one is theirs. It begins with a legacy.

The tree, in its early times, was only a sapling—a tiny vestige of home's lost beauty. It held promise—with its maturation, we would taste the fruit that sustained our elders so many years ago. We tended to its every need. Gifts were laid at its roots, and in time an impromptu shrine emerged around it. It was only appropriate—the progression was natural.

As if to mock us, it matured, but bore no fruit. It grew tall, but not strong. Its body bent with preternatural age, twisting upon itself like a badly healed wound. Its body was pale, its bark dry, its leaves spare, its branches like the grasping hands of those so starved that all that they are is swallowed by their hunger. It was, on the whole, a creature of spite. Despite all the love we had given it, it turned upon us. Our ancestor's birthright was taken from us, without even another tribe to blame it upon.

Angry though we may have been, we weren't stupid about the situation. A barren tree may carry one fruit, and its production lies in the hands of humanity alone.

When Mauut and his Child's Army rose against the common order, we put his soldiers to the sword. Mauut himself earned the privilege of being the first to hang from the tree's branches—a consecration of the tree's sudden apotheosis from a symbol of bounty into a full-blown spirit of death. With each upstart, vagrant, and ne'er-do-well left hanging in its branches, the tree grew stronger and more perverse, its shadow longer, its angles easier to lose one's sight and sanity in. In time, it came to watch over the island—though before that point it is difficult to say whether or not it had sat on such high ground.

It was only a matter of time that it would accumulate worshippers. The rites began without announcement. Children came streaking down the hill, daubed in clay and dyes, half-screaming, and neither they nor anyone else could say which was which or why; besides that was how it had to happen. The wives of errant men would come and lie beneath its branches, seeking an exception from the harsh rulings of what had now come to be known as Wardenwold. From time to time, small items would disappear from the houses and the ale-halls, and the mad and over-imaginative would say that Wardenwold's charges were being allowed their parole, their loosed spirits backsliding from time to time into misdemeanor.

It wasn't a bad idea, not to begin with. It was a good way to pass the time. Things stopped being pleasant when She arrived. She knew the lore too well to be foreign, but nobody could safely say that they'd seen her before. She was beautiful, in an objective sense: fine skin, dark hair, amber eyes you could get lost in; but truthfully, there were few circumstances where that really mattered.

When the village slept, she would creep into the streets, twin gnarled branches gripped tightly in her hands, and she would beat out a one-woman funeral procession. A heavy footfall, and then the sharp clack of wood on wood. Another heavy footfall. Two clacks. Footfall. The thud of something heavy against the hard earth. Repeat.

As long as the beat wasn't interrupted, there was nothing to fear. The wind blew, the beat faded, and all was well.

Sometimes the beat would stop midway. Never for long—only just long enough for us to realize that an irregularity had emerged. The beat would start again, and it would fade in time.

The next day, without fail, someone died. Always that person had been up to bad business, but it had rarely been a true threat. I can count the true villains she killed on half a hand. The kill was simple, efficient. Other killers had prowled our streets, and when they killed they always killed for show, for attention. She killed to kill. Not to proclaim. Not out of hate. Not even out of fear. She killed what didn't belong, and that was all.

The only reason we ever suspected Wardenwold's involvement was the tiny cutting left at the victims' bedsides, like a tiny, withered brown banner pronouncing yet another victory.

Twelve people died, in total. Two children, four elders, a mother,

three young men, and two warriors. More would have died if she hadn't done the children.

There was no grand meeting, no screaming mob, no demagogue screaming back. The next time she walked into town, the town was there to meet her, as well as many feet of strong rope and as many torches as there were spare hands. We took her to her master, and Wardenwold would make his first true contribution.

Every witch needs kindling, after all.

The stump remains, as does the memory. Some say that since that day Wardenwold has returned, a ghostly messenger of a new and kinder dogma. Do not trust these people. They lie.



MEGAN JACKSON

The boat wasn't big enough to carry anything but a small child. The boy who was settled in was snug between his bag of clothes and his lunchbox. "Take the Atoir back," his mother told him, "And don't talk to strangers."

So the little boy kept his lips shut tight as he and his little boat sailed down Ystal's river to his grandmother's home island. As he came close the water became shallower, and he was soon grounded in the sand alongside several other boats. He sat still, opening the bag his mother gave him. Her pastries smiled up at him, round and sugared and delicious. After eating a few, he began to remember he was supposed to find his grandmother. He stepped out and saw an atoir lying by the station. It breathed slowly, but it was lean and obviously young.

The boy passed him, pausing to squat before the atoir's head. One large eye opened to see a proffered pastry, and a grin spread cross its lips. It lifted its head and gingerly took the treat in his teeth, gulping it before licking the sugar off the boy's fingers. A voice came from the station, "Polzi! Come over here!"

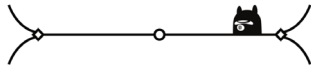
The boy listened to his grandmother lecture as they left, but he waved goodbye.

The atoir flapped his wings, and puffed a bit of smoke. Polzi heard in

the back of his mind a happy contented, “Thank you,” while an image of the pastry filled his mind.

After spending a week with his grandmother, the boy ran through the sand to the atoir, which perked its head up, rearing on its hind legs and opening its mouth wide. A fried doughball flew onto its tongue.

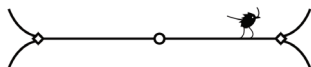
The boy was strapped into the saddle on the atoir, and once the boy was back in his bed, he couldn’t wait to go back to his grandmother’s.



AIDAN JARED

Image #57

This is a picture of An-eb the spirit of the dark cloud and the fiery maw. He is kept chained under the islands and when there is an opening An-eb bursts out of the ground and is stopped by the chain around his leg; he then opens his maw and lava, fire and smoke burst out and bring destruction. If Atoiri fly through the smoke they get blinded and suffocated and then fall into An-eb’s fiery maw. Even though he is just a minor spirit, he is still considered a threat, because when he emerges, An-eb destroys all life nearby besides the Ursurach that live above his escape holes. He is a being to be feared because no Atoiri survive the smoke and his maw. Legend states that An-eb was originally from the spirit world and escaped onto Ystal. On Ystal he burnt down many forests and suffocated many animals on Ystal; the only animals that survived were the Ursurach, being immune to smoke. After killing a few Atoiri, the Atoiri came up with a plan to take down An-eb. All of the Atoiri came together to fight An-eb. Knowing they couldn’t kill him, they tricked him into coming beneath the islands. When he was down there the Atoiri put an unbreakable chain around one of his legs and closed the entrance. No Atoiri have been down to his prison since this event. An-eb was a rare occurrence and was one of the last spirits to leave the spirit world. When humans came they didn’t know the story of An-eb and called the spirit volcano. They told the Atoiri that An-eb was not a spirit but a thing of nature. Some of the Atoiri believed them others didn’t. But no matter what it is it should be feared for its power.



TAYLOR LIVINGSTON

Image #12

I approached cautiously, remaining crouched and clinging tightly to the cool shade of the trees. My heart beat ferociously in as my senses spiked, every noise and movement making me restrain the wild instinct to run.

What I saw in front of me...simply should not be. I swallowed hard, wincing at the sound amplified in my ears.

A trap, I thought, halting and kneeling silently in a thicket of saplings.

The coquina chapel was vibrant, standing out dully against the luminous green of the forest. It was sparsely decorated in pastel pinks and bright blues, framed statuettes on either side of the door, which stood ajar.

I paused, grip tightening on the rifle laid across my knee.

"C'mon," I muttered through gritted teeth, either urging on my unseen enemies or myself, I couldn't be sure.

Something rustled at the bottom of the doorway and I jolted, putting the butt of the gun to my shoulder and taking precise aim.

A stairwell, I registered: it goes underground.

I could've remained there for years, and maybe I did, waiting for an ambush. An attack. Something! Nothing came, the luxurious, melodious sounds of the forest the only thing to set me on edge.

Finally, as I felt my arms go numb with lack of blood flow, a face appeared. Way below my aim. A child peeked around the door, her eyes huge, her dishwater blond hair a matted mass frayed about her head like a rag doll.

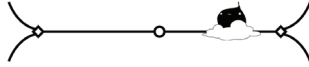
I drew a sharp, shallow breath, remaining in my aimed pose, staring down the little girl as she stared back, both of us waiting for the other to make a detrimental move. I swallowed hard around a knot in my throat.

"What is this?" I asked her loudly, voice carrying through the trees.

She remained silent, uncertain as she studied me warily. I finally let the gun fall away, holding it at rest at my side. She took a step around the

corner, pressing her back reassuringly against the wall behind her.

“Home.”



EMMA SAINSBURY

Image #15

Karta stepped through the open doors of the shop, cool island breezes pushing him through the doorway and into the shadows. The air smelt of musty scrolls, with dead fish filtering into the cramped space beyond the door. The old hag's hole-in-the-wall still hadn't changed since the first time his father had brought him to this place as a young boy twelve years ago. There were the dried herbs, the shells, and there in the courtyard the plant. The Cursed Man, screaming to the gods. The dried stalks of the leaves wilted and yellowed in the heat of the sun as the dark red of the vegetables within shone with a sickening likeness of blood through the worn, torn fabric of the strawman.

“Boy!” Karta turned away from the plant, his large, brown eyes swiveling to look at the shriveled, old woman to his right. Her thick, wiry hair sat knotted upon her head in grey tendrils. Those light blue eyes of ghosts glared out at the young man from Naokoon with wariness and thinly veiled suspicion. Nonetheless, she stalked over to him with her flat feet and thrust a package into his chest. “Another job, errand boy. Can't trust those damn fliers, then again I can barely trust you.”

The old woman shifted around, turning to face a doorway shrouded in gauzy fabrics. With a grunt she stomped through the curtain and Karta soon followed slowly after her. As he passed into an incense-laden room, the old woman spoke up.

“You'll take this next package to The Red Doclarn. There you'll find Atolian Dole. Give him the package.” She swiftly spun around once again to stare hard at him, pointing a crooked, wrinkled finger in his wide, tanned face. Her eyes shook with emotion. “Do you comprehend me, heathen?”

A heat rose up in his face at the term, but he bobbed a short nod before taking the next package the old woman handed to him and roughly stuffing it into his sack. With a dismissive wave from the old hag, Karta

navigated the shop quickly and escaped into the busy streets of Virtulis. The harsh, ever-present sunlight snapped at his face as he stepped further into the throngs of merchants and travelers, losing himself within the shuffle of limbs and many colored skins. His dark brown eyes glanced around the street ways, sneaking peeks at the dark skins of Magom accompanied by the pale undergrounders, the olive tans of Soorikians, and the mix of reds and browns that painted the skins of the few tree dwellers that ventured out of their steaming jungles.

The streets yelled out at him as he moved out into one of the many squares within Virtulis, shouting of the wonders their wares performed and excitedly asserting the wondrous prospects of working on a merchant ship or in one of the newly formed marine corps. A man oozing pompousness, dressed in a broad, decorative shirt, strutted along the center of commerce, surrounded on three sides by brutish men with gleaming swords. Karta noted briefly the armed men meandering about one of the alleys nearest the rich man, flexing and shaking themselves as if in preparation for a fight. Desiring an escape from the latest barrage of fighting soon to occur, the Arcan boy sprinted across the square and down a street to the docks.

“This city spills too much blood.” Karta spat on the cobbled street in disgust at the frivolous antics of the rich and the desperation that sat nearly tangibly over the poor.

The street stank of breweries, salt water, and excrement of various people and creatures, the scent sending the Arcan into his old practice of holding his breath and brushing through sea men and busy bodies. The dark green door of The Red Doclarn swung open to release two old, drunk Soorikians with a perfume of alcohol and sulfur following just behind them. The tanned face crept warily around them and through the door before it swung shut behind the duo. Scattered chairs and tables littered the room while a bar-master moved about cleaning areas.

“I’m here with a package for Atolian Dole. It’s from Bernollia Stroon.” A lazy eye looked out at the messenger from beneath a bush of hair before a bone straight finger pointed at a heavy blue door in the back of the building and, with a brief nod of thanks, Karta stepped around the maze of chairs and tables to the door and knocked.

“Come in.”

Karta opened the door and stepped into a large room where a young man stood in front of a map. The young man bore features of the Soorikians,

with their olive skin, but his hair appeared coarser than most among the isles.

“I have a package for Atolian Dole from Bernollia Stroon.”

“I am Atolian Dole, young man. Give it here.” The man held out his hand expectantly and Karta quickly obliged him, whipping out the package and placing it in the outstretched palm. Without looking at Karta again, the man tore at the paper hiding the innards of the package. In a few moments Atolian held a bone in his hands marked in only one repeating symbol. The pale, drawn look of the man unsettled something within Karta’s gut as the man spoke.

“And so it begins.”



MADDIE SWEENEY (“Runaway”)

Image #1

I live in the world called Ystal. My name is Sarny, but more importantly I am a warrior of the rebellion. A rebellion entrance was on all of the islands that make up Ystal. In the places cold and surrounded by shadows, and the warm bathed in light. Unlike other rebels I am only fourteen. I was forced to run away from home after I told my idiotic parents that I thought the government was vile and that they were stupid to follow it.

I ran for hours around my island trying to evade my parents; they would have turned me in. I ran into an Atoir and told him my thoughts on the government and he laughed. He gave me a ride to another planet. As I climbed off his back he told me that friends could be found if I wait where I stood. Atoirs have a different way of communicating they speak through thoughts and emotion. I saw a vision of me standing exactly where I stood and a man walking towards me, tied together with a feeling of joy and finality. Sure enough, a few minutes after he had left the same man appeared in the distance. He introduced himself as Harmel and told me he was thirty-five. He was balding and short like all humans. Harmel told me he was taking me to the rebellion. I was just glad to know that he hated them as much or maybe even more than I did.

A few hours of walking in pure darkness later he said here is the

entrance to the rebellion. It was a log. He looked at my face and began to laugh. This could not be the entrance it just couldn't be. Suddenly he stepped forward and pushed the log aside. Underneath it there was a hatch so well camouflaged you could barely see it.

"Do you like it" Harmel asked me still laughing

"Magnificent" I said as I slowly pressed my hand onto the hatch.

Harmel pushed my hand out of the way just before I touched it then he knocked three times and said "Atoir." The hatch opened and a woman peeked out and pulled us in as fast as anything.

"Welcome back Harmel, and you brought a guest," she said cheerfully but her piercing blue eyes looked slightly annoyed.

"One of the Atoiri left her at the drop point Canay; apparently she passed their test." Said Harmel

"Test," I asked quizzically, looking back and forth between Harmel and Canay

"Yes, you have to be as hateful towards the government as they are" Canay said pushing her blond hair out of her eyes. They said no more as we continued down the hallway. Then we stepped into a wooden lift and I almost puked as it rapidly headed lower and lower into the earth. I stepped into a room that I knew at once had to be a war room there were maps strewn about everywhere and off to one side lay a massive sword next to what was sure to be the armory. I heard shouting in the room across the hall, which was definitely the practice chamber. I realized that the source of light wasn't coming from real lanterns but strange glowing things hanging on the wall.

"What are those," I said in awe.

"Those are stars that the Atoiri bring us as they cross the void."

"They are so repugnant," I said

"You will sleep in that room down there" Canay said, and then immediately afterward turned and practically ran into the training room. Harmel began to look at a map and I decided to see my new room. I stepped in and all I felt was freedom for just a few seconds. Then all of the sudden a star in her room turned bright red and a strange high pitched noise was

coming from the opposite side of the bunker. I heard yelling from inside the training room. I stepped into the hallway and ran to find Harmel and Canay talking. He whispered something that sounded strangely like she is only a girl and she's not ready. Then Canaday turned, looked him in his eyes, and said *she's going to have to be* with finality and then walked away. Then all of a sudden he was barking orders at other members of the rebellion. He looked at me and with sadness in his eyes mouthed one sentence: *the governments coming—run*. I grabbed a few knives and hopped onto the lift when I got to the top and kept running into the never-ending night. It was so cold I hadn't thought to grab a jacket. The ground scraped my feet and I knew if I looked down there would be blood on my shoes. I hoped they wouldn't get infected. I shouted and stumbled in the night for hours maybe even days. I was dehydrated and hungry, I could barely walk.

I saw a large atoir about to kick off and I shouted for help. He nodded once. I hopped on and flew away. The next morning I woke up to the never-ending sunshine on a different island with a woman staring down at me. She had dark skin and pale green eyes. With a smirk and a nod she welcomed me into another rebellion.



ZOË WHITAKER

Image #48

Ever since I was born, there was a monument in our city square, of hands. They are hands reaching up for someone, the hands of one who is reaching out for someone to save them, for someone to grab on to them and pull them away from their death.

The monument never meant anything to me. It was always just there. That is, until he died.

He promised them he wouldn't. He promised that it would always be the five of us. Most importantly, he promised me he'd never leave me alone here.

I felt a mysterious pair of arms curl around my waist as I stood out in the street, sobbing.

“Don’t cry, beautiful.” The voice of a young man whispered. I turned to face him.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice shaking.

“They call me Alexander.” He said, moving in front of me.

“Who are they?”

“They are different. We see the Atoir as our friends, not pack animals. We believe we can learn to ride them...You may join us if you wish.”

“Oh, I do wish I could.”

“What is keeping you?”

“Nothing...”

“Then take my hand, and follow me.” He held his hand out to me.

I paused, then put my hand in his.

“Alexander?”

“Yes?”

“You may call me Astrid.”

Astrid was the girl he thought was beautiful. The girl he would take to look at the monument, just so he could stare at her reflection in the glass. Now, as I sit and stare at the monument, all I truly see is the face of the girl he left, the face of the girl who let him go, the face of the girl who didn’t help him when he needed her the most. I cannot believe I let him fall.

“I cannot believe we are actually riding Atoiri! Alexander, it is so beautiful up here!” I called out, raising my voice so that the others, especially Alexander, could hear me over the wind.

“You are so beautiful!” Alexander yelled back.

“Stop fooling, you two! Alexander, you are supposed to be our leader! Do not fall behind!” one of the others, a boy named Demitri, called.

“Shut up, Demitri!” I yelled.

That is when the horrible happened.

It was all an accident. I had been riding on the same Atoir as Alexander. I lost my footing when I turned to yell at Demitri. Alexander had turned to hold on to me...

And he slipped.

"ALEXANDER!" I screamed, and looked over the side of the Atoir, praying to the gods that he hadn't fallen too far.

I do not know whether it was fortunate or not, but he was hanging on to the Atoir with one hand, and reaching up at me with the other.

"Astrid! Help me! Grab my hand!"

I leaned slightly, reaching down toward him, but fear held me away from him.

"Astrid!" he called.

"I...I can't...Alexander, I just can't. I'm..."

"You're what?" he asked kindly and softly.

"Afraid."

I did not know which I feared most; falling, or losing him, but either way, I could not move.

"Astrid..." he said.

His fingers were slipping. "Yes?"

"Say my name. Just one more time."

"Why?"

"Because, I love you."

"Alexander, I love you too," I whispered, and lunged to grab his hand,

But I was too late. With a smile on his face, my Alexander had fallen.

"It will all get better in time, Astrid." Demitri said kindly, stepping up next to me.

“No, Dimitri. It won’t,” I said, turning away from him and running to the nearest Atoir. Climbing on and letting the beautiful creature fly away from the islands, all I could think was “Alexander, I love you too.”

When we reached the place that he had died, I slid off of the Atoir.

I noticed as I fell toward the water that I did not reach up for someone who could save me. The only one who could save me was already gone.



THE SHARED WORLDS STUDENT BESTIARY

(AS SELF DESCRIBED BY EACH STUDENT)

Lauren Bailey: The Lauren is a rodent-like creature covered completely in thin, fluffed fur, giving it the appearance of a ruddy dandelion. It lives solitarily and is a nomadic being, known to travel vast distances within the span of a single day. Because of its itinerant and curious nature, it will frequently wander into cities; however, it is skittish and particularly sensitive towards loud noises. It forages for its food, often seen scavenging leftovers other creatures have discarded or digging through garbage cans.

Jeremy Bell: Not because of a lack of creativity but because of genuine reasoning, I imagine myself as a Dual-tailed Devil for the fact that I am also two-sided in many ways. I am often compassionate, charismatic, charming, clever, and cool. However on occasion I lapse into a lesser version of myself and become cliché, conformist, and condescending. These two sides of me often scuffle for dominance. Fortunately, I always win.

John Belmont: The Belmont is a skittish rodent, constantly gnawing on something crunchy, and just out of sight. One does not see it away from a chair for long because of its diseased feet, but it is not to be underestimated, as it does not feel pain but instead emits pure rage. No one has ever seen the top of its head and lived to tell of it.

Erica Broderhausen: The Krezta is a tall, red-brown, wolf-like creature with long claws and poor eyesight. It is a very loud creature who enjoys being in a group, but also having solitary time to itself. It lives near mountains and appears mainly at night or during thunderstorms. Its howl brings great joy to some, but annoys others.

Joe Cain: The Gekkon are a species of small green lizards that inhabit the underbrush of Leron's many forests. What separates them from their reptilian brothers is their skin, which glows brightly in the presence of moonlight, or

whenever the sun is down. The tribes of Leron gather them during the day and use them to fill lanterns to use during the later hours of the evening. They are used as a substitute to fire, due to their lack of smoke, which would attract the hordes of beasts that stalk Leron.

Axie Churchwell: The Axie is a clumsy creature that speaks in verse but never rhymes and resembles a shark with flat teeth meant for chomping on fruits and vegetables. The top of its head can be removed, but the creature will shriek loud enough to be heard halfway around the world if someone is heartless enough to do so for it has such a deep love for the top of its head!

Zach Clay:

The Rinafi Tiger is best known for its purple stripes,
Mysterious animal really, restless in the nights,
A truly wild animal, though smaller than a bear,
Hardly a house pet, so tame it if you dare,
Because once you really know it, it's hardly any scare.

Kate Clayborne: The Kat resembles a bluish purple cat with feathery wings. Peculiar hazel eyes shine against the contrast of unusually dark lashes, only capable of focusing on one task at a time. A lighthearted creature, it selects allies by play-fighting and not-so-gentle teasing; it tends to gravitate toward males, other strange animals, and anything dark or fierce. It dines on some fruits, foods high in sugar, and most meat—with an aversion to fish and steak. Though it dreams of soaring high and far, the Kat most often allows itself to be tethered to the Earth within a safe distance of comrades; however, when set free, the Kat flies as far and for as long as possible, truly stretching its wings prouder than any other creature.

Collin Drummond: The Collin is a solitary creature that prefers familiar environments. There are a few other creatures with which it has close bonds, but in the presence of those creatures its behavior is unpredictable. It prefers solitude or near solitude, and becomes very quiet when part of a larger group.

Taylor Feld: The Lorf is a nocturnal animal resembling a horned owl that revels in mystery and curiosity. It coexists with other creatures well, but it will occasionally show its bossy, dominant size. The voice of the Lorf is unusually loud for a creature so small: no larger than a thumbnail.

Jasper Ferehawk: The Jasper is a wild animal, who dwells in the most wild and dangerous places imaginable. It lets itself get pushed around by the lesser beasts, but itself is a strong animal that is powerful in both strength and in

mind. Its imagination is only rivaled by its ability to piss everyone off, but it makes up for it in its timid attitude. All in all, the Jasper is a strong beast who can be a great opponent when provoked, which is extremely rare.

Savannah Finver: The Finver is a rare breed of light-blue humming bird. Quiet, petite, and often timid, the Finver is easily overlooked, but is always friendly when approached. She is diligent in her work, highly attentive, and always dedicated to her cause.

Kelsey Fuson: The platypus experiment v. 32—affectionately called 32 by its genetic engineers and visiting scientist friends—is a mostly loving and happy creature. It greatly enjoys being hugged and loves almost everyone it meets. Full of energy, 32 bounds around from one thing to the next, even when acting on little rest. Every once in a while, 32 will get in a bad mood and snap people's fingers off, but always feels bad afterwards and seems to ask forgiveness by attempting a hug.

Nathan Goldwag: The Nathedilgold is small creature the size of a house cat. It is half unicorn and half sun bear, though it also possesses wings and is capable of sustained flight. The Nathedilgold is quite shy, mainly due to that fact that entire species is rather paranoid. However, if you can convince a Nathedilgold that you have no plans to eat it, dunk it in boiling water, or poison it, it will become a loyal and delightful companion.

Luke Hayes: The Lucas is a creature who does not often show its face. When it does come out, it finds a group of people to observe it then observes them. When it has a grasp upon the situation, it either makes its opinion known or moves on to find more people. It will then wait in its lair for a while until it is ready for more observations.

Tyler Hayes: The Thayes is a tall slender semi-nocturnal hunter. It enjoys playing with its food, often batting it in the air from paw to paw for long periods of time. The Thayes sleeps in enclosed dark caves and has hearing that is less than that of a typical hunter.

Will Holcomb: The Holcomb is simultaneously endearing and revolting—adorable in its sheer repugnance. A hirsute, vaguely lupine head bobs on its thin neck, dwarfed only by the right side of its body. The beast is freakishly asymmetrical, with its left side effectively mummified and its right side freakishly swollen. Its demeanor alternates between confoundingly dull-witted and flighty and shockingly Machiavellian without warning many times in a given day.

London Hu: A particularly fluffy soul exists within the mysterious barracks of the Otaku manor. It is a ball no larger than a hand-held stress reliever. This ball has cotton-ball-like feet and a snout of subtle dew, spewing quaintly from its moist nose. This blonde monster has the eyes of a mischievous demon, is clothed in a bandana, so large that it covers one of its eyes. The pattern of the bandana is of a spider's web, and, not quite mature enough to stop flaunting the pride of its silver-tongue, it has a tendency to wiggle frequently. Bouncy and insane, the Rukia is a rare and terribly adorable (yet slightly disturbing) beast.

Aimee Hyndman: The Aimelan is a fierce black wolf-like creature with great wings that unfold from its back at first sight of danger. Its claws are sharp, as are its teeth, but to those who approach it cautiously and respectfully it will quickly become their friend. The Aimelan is very loyal to any friend it has. The Aimelan prefers its food in a creamy or liquid shape and is very partial to cheese and sugar.

Megan Jackson: The Meg is a dwarven giraffe with a sharp tongue that cuts others as often as it accidentally harms itself.

Aidan Jared: Ajnin is a quiet beast covered in thick hair that unless provoked is very calm. Not the fastest or the most limber, it has a high thinking brain that sees the layout of an area and can plan a way of attack. Eats anything and is highly territorial. Can learn and make very basic tools.

Jake Johnson: The Jake is a small scholarly mammal that uses intelligence to predict the habits of its predators to time feeding on plant life. It constructs intricate houses out of sticks using mud as cement. It eats certain plants during different seasons to combat common ailments.

Catherine Lewanski: The Kataszina is a legendary, mystical hummingbird, which was last sighted publicly during the Victorian Era, having several sightings around medieval ages as well. A bright pink, it can be heard humming recognizable tunes, mainly musicals and items such as Veggie Tales, although it touches on all genres of music. It enjoys roses more than any other flower, and can be tempted toward/away by something sweet and compliments that are meant. It is native to such areas as San Antonio, Texas, Durango, Colorado, Poland, and the area of and surrounding England, though it can be seen anywhere where the weather is chilly and snow is common.

Taylor Lewis: The Frotay is a brightly colored beetle-like insect born from the foams of the ocean. Extremely shy and small, it possess a formidable

temper, and when provoked will attempt to gouge out the eyes of its attacker. It eats only sea kelp and extremely ripe fruit.

Mary Lifsey: Mizuo Juushi is a shapeshifting cat capable of sentient thought and elemental ability. Its persona and abilities are represented by its five forms: the raven for darkness and wind; the wolf for sorrow and earth; the dolphin for energy and water; the serpent for cleverness and fire; and its natural form, the cat, for strong emotions and spirit. The cat has a strong spiritual presence but little interest in normal cats and other beings incapable of sentient thought. Mizuo Juushi's name comes from its affinity for water and its fourteen claws in cat form (four each on the front paws, three each on the back paws).

Taylor Livingston: The Living Stone is a small, shrew-like creature, fitting comfortably in one's palm. Its face is dominated by large absorbing eyes, which are always at work. It moves slowly, and has a long, flitting tail for balance, for it is unsteady and clumsy on its feet. The Living Stone is usually indecisive, but, once set on a decision, it is stubborn and hard to dissuade. It is also shy, remaining silent around strangers if not all ready hidden away. Once it has made one its friend, though, it will chatter in gruff, drawl quips, and, if it sees a friend approaching, it barks ceaselessly until it has the person's attention, at which time it remains quiet until sufficient conversation is started.

Donovan MacPherson: The Donimban is a large, cuddly cloud-like creature that is both kind and friendly. However, this creature can become enraged when it feels betrayed and attracts thunderstorms to its betrayer as its revenge. More likely behavior is floating along rather than linger too long in any one place, staying just long enough to give others a small respite from the hot sun.

Eleanor McClellion: The Halura is a small, shy animal somewhat resembling a fox in shape. This mute little creature prefers to roam in solitude, and tends to slink away quietly when around others. Though it is wary at first, it is not cruel or hateful and will, in time, become a loyal companion to anyone with the patience to overcome its guarded personality.

Elena Millin: The Elena is a large, bulbous worm that typically haunts old bookshelves. It usually flips through books or reads only their back covers, although it later experiences extreme guilt for not actually reading the books. Reading Internet comedy is one of its primary pastimes. But be warned—it will pass off information garnered from these comedy articles as fact without

checking it. It is largely nocturnal.

Grayson Mooney: The Mooney is a wolf like creature that combats threats with sarcasm.

Susan Nichols: The Doom is a slim, black and grey cat that can make itself turn invisible and tends to do so in overwhelming situations. Despite its name, the Doom often avoids confrontations, and prefers to just intimidate foes into backing down or to turn invisible. In non-hostile situations, the Doom is mostly friendly. The Doom likes collecting knowledge and shiny, fantastical objects. The Doom is an omnivore who prefers certain fruits, and tries to sleep at least nine hours each night, but not always with success.

Shane Parr: The Phoenix is a very rare and elusive fiery bird (there is only one, immortal Phoenix) that will strike back when provoked, but does not eat any other animals. It is very intelligent and has a versatile voice box, so it can learn multiple languages. Although it can, it will rarely socialize with other species. This leads to much mythology and mystery surrounding many aspects of it, including its origin.

Claire Pillsbury: The Pills Burrower is a palm-sized, green mole that resides within the undergrounds of most busy cities, for it hates the silence of the country. It rarely comes above ground, as it is very shy, but does so on rare occasions in order to avoid any creeping or crawling insects that it may encounter in its path. It is very much blind and does not have particularly good hearing, which it makes up for with an increased sense of smell and a good amount of commonsense.

Lizzy Rabon: The Fey is a sly, occasionally untruthful feline creature. It wears a unique pelt that resembles the pale yellow shade of a banana peel. It is a voraciously touchy eater, and only eats foods that are commonly consumed by the youthful members of neighboring species. It is a fairly solitary creature that enjoys silence and beautiful sounds.

Isaac Rader: The Rader is a doglike creature with an immense appetite, both for desserts and entertainment not made by talentless hacks. It enjoys ripping apart horrible works of fiction, and perhaps creating its own fiction, particularly involving werewolves. Also, never mention the name of Gloria Tesch or the movie CSA Confederate States of America, or it will explode.

Emma Sainsbury: The Sainsbury is a tan bear of medium height, with sharp claws and large, brown, observant eyes. Although it tends to keep to itself, when the Sainsbury does bumble out of its cave the bear tends to seek out

rambunctious companions. While this creature has a peaceful disposition, the Sainsbury enjoys rough-housing though it does not seek out fights. However, do not startle this bear; it will react with swinging arms and gnashing teeth.

Andy Scull: The Scull is a lengthy and intelligent feline with an affinity for the printed word. It can be seen in its native habitat of the Appalachian Mountains and is rumored to be fixated by animation. Its diet is omnivorous, with a focus on sour foods. On occasion, it has been witnessed to have a forepaw coated in dripping black.

Tim Shultz: The Timothy is an omnivorous rodent native to a single isolated island. It has large eyes, an inquisitive though generally cautious nature, and is very opportunistic in its behavior. Its inquisitive nature leads it to attempt many things, most of which yield no results, but occasionally it learns something useful to its survival, or simply its entertainment.

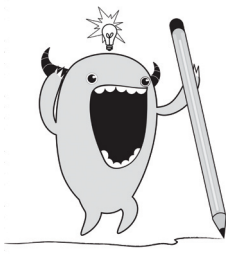
Anya Stoechr: The Latias is a tall, pale cat that hides in corners when meeting strangers. However, she is hard not to miss as her song and language separate her from the rest. If you can manage to get the Latias to speak to you, she will use intellectual phrases that none other understands.

Maddie Sweeney: The Dinex is a very quiet but intelligent creature. The Dinex is part dog and part phoenix. The Dinex does not travel in packs and they hate insufferable know-it-alls.

Ebony Taylor: The Taylor is a small brown dove, a rare specimen of the breed. It lives with three others atop a golden cross on a church steeple. It prefers flying alone, but enjoys pleasant company, and can always be found if one knows where to look.

Jada Thomas: With small kitten ears and a matching soft voice, this creature is known for its warming kindness and shy personality. It lives in the blazing heat and despises chilly winter nights. It is always seen creating something wonderful. This sweet creature is called a Shima. When you meet a Shima, you won't forget it.

Zoë Whitaker: The Whitaker is a quiet and very shy black-green owl, which eats little flesh, but feeds on dark green vegetation. It is a beautiful sight, for it has large wings on which to carry it away.



ORIGINAL WRITING EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS

“FOUND IMAGE” WRITING EXERCISE

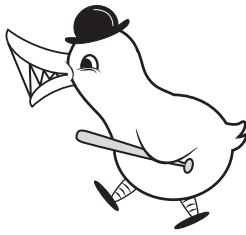
Task: Take an image you’re given that exists in our world and re-imagine it as existing in the world you will begin creating in your world-building groups. Write about that image in your imagined world. The results will be published as part of the Shared Worlds student writing book.

Length: 300 to 900 words, typed

Deadline: 3:45pm on Thursday, July 21 (turn in to your Teaching Assistant)

Tips: As your world-building progresses, think about how you would re-imagine the image as part of your group’s world.

- » If an object is pictured, think about who might have made it, owned it, gifted it in your world? Does it have a different purpose than in our world?
- » If a place is shown in the image, what kind of place or building is it? What is its function? What happened there?
- » What is the history behind what is shown in the image, in your world?
- » Is there a detail you want to pull out and write about? (You don’t have to use the whole image)
- » Do you want to write a scene with characters or a description of the image or use some other approach?



“BESTIARY” WRITING EXERCISE

Task: A bestiary has, since medieval times, meant a descriptive listing of animals, often imaginary animals. In modern times, writers have had fun reimagining themselves as animals. Write about yourself as if you were an imaginary animal. What characteristics would you have? What would you like to convey about yourself as a made-up creature? Take an image you’re given that exists in our world and re-imagine it as existing in the world you will begin creating in your world-building groups. Write about that image in your imagined world. The results will be published as your “author’s note” at the end of the Shared Worlds student writing book.

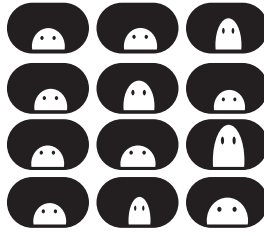
Length: No more than four to five sentences. No minimum length.

Deadline: 3:45pm on Thursday, July 21 (turn in to your Teaching Assistant as the last part of your typed up Found Image exercise)

Example: The great writer Franz Kafka was described by a friend in this way:

The Kafka is a magnificent and very rarely seen moon-blue mouse, which eats no flesh, but feeds on bitter herbs. It is a bewitching sight, for it has human eyes.

What was Kafka’s friend trying to say about him? Probably that Kafka was shy but that when people did encounter him they were impressed—or at least impressed by his writing. Kafka was a vegetarian, thus the reference to “eats no flesh.” Kafka was also Jewish, and “bitter herbs” may refer to the practice of eating horse radish during the Jewish Passover. Since Kafka’s writing was often strange, the entire description brings to mind a kind of wonderfully odd animal—one that is magical, not dangerous. The description is written with affection and a sense of humor.



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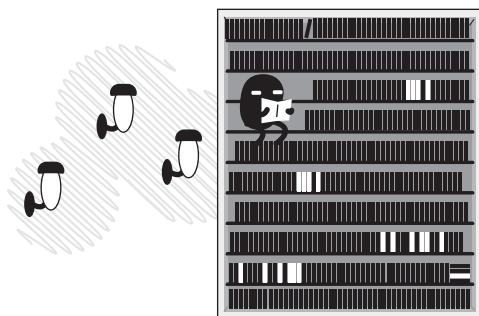
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