

The background of the cover is a painting. It depicts a person from behind, standing in a narrow, arched tunnel. The person is wearing a green long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. At the far end of the tunnel, there is a bright, glowing yellow light. The walls of the tunnel are textured and painted in shades of brown, tan, and grey, with some green and yellow highlights. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber, with a focus on light and shadow.

10,000 DAWNS

HOW TO SURVIVE THE WINTER

EDITED BY DILLON O'HARA

Dedication

To Mandy Mahony.

Acknowledgements

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1. The Havelocks Are

Dreaming

by Rebecca Jayne Chadwick

Every night, when Havelock goes to sleep, ze goes to the cathedral.

The cathedral is the most beautiful place ze has ever seen, even if ze hasn't exactly 'seen' it in the strictly physical sense. It's completely empty, with nothing you would normally find in a cathedral: no pews, no altar, no tombs, no stations of the cross. It's a shell, the house of God repurposed as the house of Havelock.

The nighttime house, anyway.

The only things that remain of the cathedral are the walls, ceiling, floor, and windows. The walls are made of a black stone that sparkles whenever light hits it, shooting rainbows everywhere. Havelock has no idea if such a material exists in the real world. The floor is made of the same material, but far from being hard and uncomfortable, it feels almost soft, like mattress foam. As for the ceiling, Havelock can't even see it. It stretches up so high, disappearing into the murky darkness, that ze can't be sure if there's even a ceiling at all. Strange creatures probably live up there, swimming around in the fog. Ceiling cryptids. Sometimes ze thinks ze can hear them, flying around, whispering.

The windows are the best part. There are at least twenty, spaced out evenly along the walls. They are all different shapes—rectangles, triangles, circles, stars—and they are all huge, several metres across, and made up of every colour in existence and then some. They don't seem to depict anything, no religious scenes. Just colours.

It's Havelock's favourite place in the whole world, and it doesn't even exist. Except at night, in Havelock's dreams.

Tonight, ze's clearly the first one to go to sleep, since ze's the only one here. Ze is in zir usual place, sitting cross-legged in the transept, facing the wall where the front door should be but isn't. Ze always wonders what is outside the cathedral. Probably nothing at all. It doesn't need an outside.

Havelock sits in silence, admiring the windows, until another Havelock arrives.

Hamster Havelock appears on Havelock's right side, and immediately proclaims, "Oh, hi!"

"Hey," says Havelock, unable to restrain a smile at the expression on Hamster Havelock's face. Hamster Havelock, named after the fact that ze had four pet hamsters when ze was ten years old. Ze is practically identical to Havelock; all five of them are, in fact. They have the same short, dusty blonde hair, the same low eyebrows, the same ever so crooked nose. In looks, they're indistinguishable from one another. In personality, not so much.

"The others are late, aren't they?"

"Triplet Havelock said ze has a night shift," says Havelock. "I'm not sure about the others."

"Girl Havelock promised me she'd be here," says Hamster Havelock, looking suddenly dejected at the thought of Girl Havelock *not* being here, but that expression quickly evaporates when someone else arrives.

"Havelock Scholastica!"

"Evening," says Havelock Scholastica, from where ze is sat on Hamster Havelock's right. This Havelock is the only one who has a middle name—namely, Scholastica—so they were nicknamed accordingly. "How are you, Dragon Havelock, Hamster Havelock?"

"I'm all right," says Havelock. Dragon Havelock is Havelock's nickname, after zir obsession with dragons as a child. As nicknames go, it could be worse.

Finally, a couple of minutes later, Girl Havelock arrives on Havelock's left. It's only Triplet Havelock who hasn't arrived yet. Both those nicknames speak for themselves.

"Hi, everyone," says Girl Havelock. "Sorry I'm late."

Hamster Havelock's face lights up and ze asks Girl Havelock about her day. Havelock listens patiently, but is unable to stop staring at the empty space next to her that Triplet Havelock should occupy. Whenever one of the Havelocks is absent, all of the others feel the emptiness. They almost feel empty themselves. Like a part of them is missing.

Which, Havelock supposes, it sort of is.

Havelock is the first one to wake up. In a flash of dark light, ze's no longer in the cathedral, surrounded by various versions of zirsself, but is wide-eyed and groping for the screeching alarm clock next to zir bed. Once the clock has been silenced, ze lies still for a few seconds, blinking and trying to orientate zirsself. Going from sitting up to lying down in a

millisecond is an experience ze still hasn't gotten used to in the past eleven years of dreaming.

Nor has ze gotten used to the feeling of being suddenly, completely alone.

It doesn't matter. Ze has these feelings every single morning. There's nothing to be done about them, just got to get up and face the day. Not with a smile, though. Ze can't quite manage that.

Like always, as Havelock gets ready for work, ze tries not to think about all the other Havelocks ze's left behind. And, like always, it doesn't work. They're at the forefront of zir mind all day, every day. Their faces. The way they talk. What they talk about. How they talk to zir. What it would be like to hug one of them, or even just hold their hand.

But that's impossible. In the dreams, you can't move except to turn your head. And they can never meet in the waking world.

Havelock wishes for the, oh, hundred-billionth time that it could be possible to travel between different dimensions. Because that's where the Havelocks are, all in different dimensions to each other. Or parallel universes or whatever. All with the same names, same parents, same appearances, but with subtle differences. For example, Triplet Havelock split into three eggs when ze was conceived, giving zir two identical triplets. Havelock Scholastica's parents gave zir a middle name. Dragon Havelock's older cousin gave zir a book about dragons for zir ninth birthday. Stuff like that.

Havelock doesn't know why they all dream of each other or how. Ze told zir parents about it when it first started, and they said ze was just dreaming. After a while, they told zir to stop making stuff up. Ze told zir friends, but none of them had any similar dreams. So clearly it isn't normal to dream of your alternate-universe selves. And ze knows ze isn't insane. Sure, there was a time when ze thought ze was. But not anymore.

Breakfast, the last of zir cornflakes, is eaten alone. The journey to work is taken alone—the only person ze talks to is the man in the flat downstairs who tries to sell zir counterfeit watches, fake IDs, and smuggled cigarettes. Even at work, when ze is one employee in a thousand, when ze's sitting in a cubicle surrounded by a hundred other cubicles, ze spends the day alone.

It's worth it. It has to be. Ze works to get money so ze can eat and stay alive and so that at night ze can go to sleep and visit the other Havelocks. Ze sees zir friends every single night. Not many people can say that. So ze can't really complain.

Ze complains anyway.

Havelock decides to get an early night. Ze could pirate a film on zir rubbish laptop and watch it alone, or look through listings for houses that ze will never be able to afford, or ze could just spend time with zir friends. Even if none of them are asleep yet, it's nice to just hang out in the cathedral. Dreaming is one of the few things in zir life that doesn't cost money, and there aren't many places ze would rather be than in the cathedral.

Ze probably spends far too much of zir life sleeping. But why would you want to be alone when you could be with your friends? It doesn't make any sense.

Ze is about to wish again for them to all be in the same dimension, but ze stops zirsself just in time. Ze has already spent enough of the day pining.

Going to sleep tends to be hard, since zir adrenaline is always going off on one, due to the excitement of seeing the other Havelocks. Still, ze manages it by about 9 p.m. and drifts into the cathedral like always.

But no. Not like always.

Because ze was wrong, someone else *is* asleep already. Someone is sitting directly in front of zir, legs crossed, eyes wide as they stare at zir.

But it isn't another Havelock.

That much is obvious. They don't look anything like the Havelocks. In fact, they barely look human. Well, *humanoid*, at least. But the number of limbs and heads is where the similarities end. Their skin is the colour of ash. Their lips are slightly parted, revealing jagged, triangular teeth. Their cheeks are mottled, more like the skin of a frog than of a human. They have no eyelashes. And when they blink, Havelock sees their eyelids come from the sides of their eyes, not the top.

For several seconds, Havelock sits in stunned silence. So does the stranger. Their eyes are darting around fearfully but are wide, imploring Havelock to help them. Their breaths are short and shallow. And it seems that, like the Havelocks, they can't move.

"Who—" Havelock manages finally. "Who are you?"

The stranger doesn't answer. They open and close their mouth a few times, but no words come out. When they realise they can't talk, they look even more terrified.

Havelock finds zirsself unable to talk much, either.

The others will be here soon, ze thinks. They'll know what to do.

Of course, there's no reason why the others would know what to do any more than ze

does, but ze doesn't want to think about that right now.

"Are you all right?" Havelock asks, trying a yes/no question. But they don't nod or shake their head.

Maybe they can't. Maybe they're too petrified to communicate.

Or maybe they can't dream like the others can.

Well, they *are* dreaming, plainly. But it was like this when all the Havelocks started dreaming, all those years ago. They were all just gaping at each other, unable to talk, assuming they were just having a particularly strange dream. It wasn't until Hamster Havelock learnt to talk a few nights later that they realised they weren't normal dreams.

Maybe ze can help them. Ze gives them the most reassuring smile ze can muster. "It's all right. I know it's strange, but this is really happening."

The person looks anything but reassured.

"If you concentrate, you'll be able to talk to me. Or even just nod your head. Can you try that?"

The person blinks rapidly, then closes their eyes. After a few seconds, they painstakingly nod their head once.

"Well done!" says Havelock. "See, it isn't a dream. Not a proper one. It's real."

After a few seconds, the person shakes their head slowly.

"You don't understand? I know, it's a confusing one. How did you get here? I mean, did you just go to sleep and wake up here?"

A nod.

"Yeah, same with me and the others."

The person's eyes widen slightly.

"My friends. They'll probably be here soon."

And, right on cue, the other Havelocks pop into existence one after the other and start shouting.

"Who the hell is that?"

“What’s going on?”

“Dragon Havelock, what did you do?”

“Can you hear me? Can you hear me?”

The person’s head is moving around wildly, obviously overwhelmed by the situation. Havelock is afraid they’ll wake up, and be gone forever.

“Be quiet,” Havelock yells. Hamster Havelock and Havelock Scholastica shut up, but the other two keep at it.

“What are you doing here? What are you doing here?” demands Triplet Havelock, straining to lean forwards.

“What’s going on?” Girl Havelock repeats.

“I’ll *explain*,” says Dragon Havelock, “if you *shut up*.”

Girl Havelock is quiet. Triplet Havelock starts to speak, but Dragon Havelock cuts zir off.

“I don’t know what they’re doing here,” ze says, “but they’re only dreaming, like us. They can’t communicate yet.”

“It’s not hard to just talk,” says Triplet Havelock.

“It is at first,” says Hamster Havelock.

Triplet Havelock apparently can’t think of an answer to that. “What’s their name?”

“I *just* said they can’t communicate,” Havelock starts to say angrily, but is cut off by a loud voice booming through zir head:

LANDRY.

“Landry,” says Havelock Scholastica immediately. “Did you all hear that?”

“It was in my head,” says Girl Havelock, nodding. “Are they telepathic?”

“Maybe—”

EY.

“Ey?” says Havelock Scholastica.

“A pronoun?” suggests Hamster Havelock. “Is ey telepathic?”

“Maybe they—maybe ey hasn’t figured out how to talk yet, but ey can get into our heads, somehow?” It sounds stupid, but Havelock doesn’t know what else to say. Ze still hasn’t taken zir eyes off the stranger.

“How come we can’t do that?” says Hamster Havelock, looking genuinely upset.

CAN’T TALK.

Havelock winces and wishes ze could cover zir ears. The voice in zir head is loud and grating.

“Calm down,” says Triplet Havelock. “Is your name Landry?”

YES.

“Right, Landry. We don’t want to rush you, but if you could by any chance *not* scream directly into our brains, that’d be real nice.”

The person—Landry—doesn’t answer. But ey looks significantly less freaked out than ey did five minutes ago.

“Okay, well, Landry, I think we should all explain what’s going on,” says Havelock. “You see, we’re—”

And Dragon Havelock is woken up by the sound of zir bedroom windows shattering.

Ze sits bolt upright in bed just in time to see the final shards of glass fly away from zir bedroom window and onto the floor. Ze instinctively covers zir face with zir arms.

After a few seconds, ze cautiously looks up. The whole window has been shattered. Ze cranes zir neck so ze can see through the bedroom door into the kitchen, and... yep, the kitchen window’s gone, too.

Ze reaches for zir shoes beside the bed and puts them on, trying to blink away some of the sleepiness. The clock on the bedside table says it’s half past eleven. Makes sense, ze wasn’t dreaming for very long. It’s dark outside, but in addition to the street lamps, lights are rapidly turning on in the tower block opposite zirs. Ze fumbles for zir own light switch. Outside, ze can hear people screaming.

When Havelock finally manoeuvres zir way around the sea of glass on zir carpet, ze can

see why.

About a mile away, the sky has disappeared and been replaced by an electric white ring of fire. It's right above the city centre, Havelock realises. It's hard to tell, but it must be at least half a mile in diameter. White flames are billowing out of it, too high up to scorch the roofs of any buildings, but it must be setting fire to the clouds.

Havelock stares at it, unable to do much else. Ze can't even think. Zir brain is just saying the word 'Huh???' over and over again.

And then, as ze watches, a spaceship tumbles out of the flames and falls, spinning madly, to the earth.

The fire folds in on itself and is gone in the blink of an eye. The spaceship continues to fall until it hits the ground with a noise like several bombs going off. Ze can't see the crash site—there are too many buildings in the way—but ze can see the plume of thick, black smoke rising into the sky and hear the apocalyptic screams.

The news channel starts a special broadcast half an hour later. Not that it's very informative. Havelock sits in front of zir TV, huddled in a blanket, bleary-eyed and trying to make sense of what the newsreaders are saying.

All anyone seems to know is that it's a ship. And not a ship from Earth; or at least, not a ship that anyone knew had been launched. It's always possible that some government launched it in secret, but that doesn't explain why it literally appeared through a portal of fire.

After a while, Havelock realises that the newsreaders are just saying the same things over and over again. Some vague claims about terrorism, some wild stories from 'anonymous sources'. Then, the picture changes: now, the camera is following a third anchor—one who Havelock recognises as usually covering the golf, of all things—trying to squeeze her way through a throng of people. By the looks of things, she and her cameraman are downtown, in between the football stadium and the shopping centre.

Right where the ship fell.

The camera jostles its way through the crowd until it has a clearer view of the crash site. It's just behind a huge barrier, beyond which is a crater, right in the middle of the road. And in the dead centre of the crater is the ship.

It's small and spherical, dark grey. Looking rather the worse for wear. There are bits falling off, it's streaked with burn marks, and there are deep grooves along its sides, as if a monster tried to grab the ship in its giant claws. The plume of smoke died out about ten minutes ago, but there are small fires circling the ship. Even the air looks dirty and filled with

ash and rubble.

The camera focuses on the newsreader as she begins speaking:

“People have reportedly been rescued from the wreck, although the emergency services have not yet released a statement. No government is taking responsibility for the incident. No casualties have been reported, although around twenty people are being treated for minor injuries. According to eyewitnesses, the ship just appeared in the sky in a ring of fire. Government officials have responded that people should stop being so dramatic.”

Havelock is still watching the news when the sun begins to rise several hours later. It’s just a series of interviews with random witnesses and mobile phone camera footage of the crash,, interspersed with breaks for advertisements. It’s a little jarring to watch videos of the shockwave slamming people into the ground, immediately followed by a car insurance commercial.

For the first time, Havelock wonders if the crash is connected to Landry somehow. Seems a bit of a coincidence that a new person should appear in zir dreams on the same night that a spaceship crashes into zir city.

Ze shakes zir head and tries to stop worrying about it. They’ll all be waking up soon. Ze only hopes that Landry will come back tonight.

Stop. Ze tries to focus on the news again. For the past hour, it’s been showing the exterior of one of the city’s hospitals. Apparently, it’s where the emergency services took the people who were reportedly rescued from the ship. The news anchor constantly reiterates that no hospital staff have gone on the record to say that, but clearly *something* is going on at the hospital tonight.

Havelock is considering just going back to sleep. Even if all the other Havelocks have woken up already, ze could honestly just do with not being on this plane of existence right now.

Ze is about to get up to switch the TV off when there’s some sort of commotion on the news. Ze stops. The small crowd outside the hospital is reacting to something. Someone is pointing upwards. The camera follows the direction of their arm.

There’s a person leaning out of a window, very high up. Havelock squints and the camera helpfully zooms in.

They’re human. *Humanoid*, thinks Havelock, for the second time that night. Their hair is bright green, and their skin is extremely pale. They’re leaning precariously out of the window with one hand holding onto something within the room and the other flailing about trying to

get people's attention. They start to speak—well, to yell—and Havelock doesn't need the subtitles this time; the crowd has gone deathly quiet.

“We're not from Earth!” the person shouts. “We're from—well, we're from Earth, but not your Earth! We're from—and they're trying to tell us that we're not, that we're amnesiac or psychotic or something, and we're not, we're telling the truth! We're from—did you see our ship come through the Bifrost Path? You have to listen to us, we're from Dawn 10,000, and we're...”

They trail off when they realise no one has reacted to what they said.

“You guys know what's happening to Dawn 10,000, right? You—you don't? Do you even know what the Dawns *are*?” They turn back to the window and yell, “Leodis, they don't even know what the Dawns are!” to whoever's inside. They continue addressing the crowd. “All right, that makes it harder to convince you that we're sane. But please listen to me. Dawn 10,000 is collapsing in on itself. We nearly died back there! There was this program, the SS-something program, but it left us behind, me and Gnora, but we had a ship so we could—no, get off me!”

The camera can't quite see it, but the person seems to be struggling with someone within the room that they're hanging out of. After a few seconds, the person is pulled violently away from the window and out of sight.

The camera pans back down and the news anchor looks too shell-shocked to speak, but there's nothing that Havelock needs to hear.

We just want to get back to our own Dawn—our own universe.

The people in the hospital are from another universe.

Like a few other people ze knows.

Havelock spends the rest of the day packing. All traces of sleepiness gone, ze zooms around zir flat gathering up all the essentials: clothes, food, money. Ze leaves zir identification card tucked away behind the wardrobe; if this goes south, ze really doesn't want anyone to find out who ze is. Instead, ze pays a visit to the man in the flat downstairs to buy a fake ID, for what is surprisingly a very reasonable price. Of course, since Havelock is intending to imitate a specific person, not to mention the fact that ze needs it by tonight, zirs costs quite a bit more. But it'll all be worth it in the end.

Hopefully.

Havelock finishes the preparations at around midnight. The others will be getting worried

about zir, so ze quickly gets ready for bed and tries to will zirsself to sleep. It's difficult; zir heart is going at a hundred miles an hour. But eventually, ze nods off.

And wakes up in the cathedral.

All of the others are already there, including Landry, sat in eir previous place in the centre of the circle. All four Havelocks noticeably breathe a sigh of relief.

And promptly all start talking at once.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"We thought you'd died or something."

"How come you're so late?"

"We thought there could only be five of us in the cathedral at one time, and Landry had replaced you."

"I thought it was something to do with me," says Landry.

Havelock ignores everyone else and gapes at Landry. "You can talk now?"

Landry nods. "I figured it out. They were right, it isn't that hard."

"There are more important things right now," says Havelock Scholastica. "Landry's been telling us why ey's here."

"Why I *think* I'm here," corrects Landry. Ey looks apologetically at Dragon Havelock. "It's a bit of a long story."

Havelock exhales. "I've got all night."

So Landry begins. "Havelock—uh, I mean, the Havelock on my right—you're Girl Havelock, yeah? Girl Havelock said you're all from Earth. Different versions of Earth. Well, I'm from a planet called Vr. I'm a Vr'yss. And we're under attack.

"There are these aliens called the Quirina, from the planet Quirine. They live at the other end of our solar system. We lived in harmony for several decades, after we learnt of each other's existence, but last month the Quirina invaded us. No warning, we just looked up one day to see their warships in the sky. They... they killed about five percent of the population, just like that. Since then they've been slaughtering whoever dares to oppose them.

"Then, two days ago, the Quirina landed on the planet's surface for the first time. Two

miles from where I live. I was so scared. I didn't want to go to sleep that night in case I didn't wake up the next morning." Ey shrugs. "But I eventually fell asleep, and then I woke up here."

"We think it's some kind of trauma response," interjects Hamster Havelock. "Like, the experience gave eir brain access to some cool-ass neurons that allowed eir to travel here."

"Or a cry for help," suggests Girl Havelock. "A message across the universes, begging for someone to help the Vr'yss."

"Whichever it is," says Landry, "I'm here, and I *am* asking for your help." Ey pauses. "Not that I know what you can do. You can't physically travel between dimensions any more than the Vr'yss can."

Havelock smiles. Smiles wider than ze's smiled in a long, long time.

"Actually," ze says, "I can."

A few hours later, Havelock wakes up in zir own dimension for what is hopefully the final time.

Everything is ready. Ze's told Landry and the Havelocks zir plan. All that is left is to execute it.

It's 4 a.m., so there shouldn't be many people around. The city is still dark. Ze grabs zir bag—the contents of which are now zir only possessions—and slips out of zir flat.

Ze doesn't meet anyone on the way out of the building, which is good, nor on the short walk to hospital. A few cars drive past zir, but ze assumes ze just looks like someone making their way to an early shift. It doesn't stop zir heart from racing, though.

The hospital is where things will get tricky. Ze pauses near the front gate for a few minutes to try and calm zir breathing. This isn't the part with the most risk. That comes later. Ze pushes away the guilty thoughts, as if they would show up in bright red letters on zir face, and heads towards the front door.

The crowd has mostly dispersed by now, including the news anchor from earlier. Still, there's a couple of security guards by the entrance. Havelock makes a big show of being annoyed at the inconvenience as ze walks up to them and gets zir ID card out of zir pocket.

"Sorry about this," says one of the security guards. The other one leans forwards to glance over the card. "The business from last night. Big fuss over nothing, really."

“Tell me about it,” says Havelock.

The guard nods. “All in order. Have a good shift, mate.”

“Thanks, you too,” says Havelock, puts zir ID away, and hurries into the hospital, forcing zirself to not breathe a sigh of relief.

It isn't hard to find the correct wing. Ze rewatched the news footage and figured out that the alternate-humans are being kept on the fifth floor, at the front of the building. Ze hurries up the stairs and through a door marked 'Emergency Mental Health'.

Fortunately, the wing isn't swarming with nurses or security guards. It's just one short corridor with four doors coming off it, all of which are closed. Havelock wanders down, glancing at the whiteboards next to each door. One of the alternate-humans is called Leodis, so the correct whiteboard will say either that or 'Insane People Who Think They're From A Parallel Universe'.

The door at the end is the right one. Or, it probably is: the whiteboard simply has a curly red question mark drawn on it. Ze unlocks it with zir ID card, glances back down the corridor, then goes inside.

It's a sparse room, with two beds and not much else. One of the beds is occupied by the person who was shown on the news. The other is leaning against the wall. They both look over at Havelock.

“Are you here to let us out?” says the one who's probably Leodis, looking as if they already know the answer is 'no'.

“Yes,” says Havelock.

It takes Havelock a while to tell the two strangers—whose names, ze learns, are Leodis and Gnora—the story of zir and the other Havelocks. Still, they don't think it's anything too out of the ordinary. “Strange stuff like that happens sometimes,” says Leodis with a shrug. “Just a weird quirk of the Dawns, I guess.”

In turn, Leodis and Gnora tell Havelock their story. Much of it ze doesn't understand. It's all to do with alternate realities, the Bifrost Path, crystal dust, the Self Support Relocation Program, and the death of Leodis and Gnora's universe. Havelock just nods and tries to sympathise.

Then, ze tells them about Landry and the Quirina. They've heard of both the Quirina and the Vr'yss, but they're pretty sure the two species aren't at war. Havelock is relieved; that means Landry isn't in Dawn 10,000. But it still doesn't get zir any closer to finding out which Dawn ey is in.

Leodis and Gnora have no idea where any of the other Havelocks could be, either. Again, they aren't in Dawn 10,000, but there are thousands of versions of Earth. It could take years to find one with a Havelock, not to mention a hell of a lot of crystal dust. And their ship is practically destroyed, according to Gnora.

Still. Havelock is closer to meeting another Havelock in real life than ze's ever been before. And there's no way ze's going to let this opportunity slip out of zir grasp.

Leodis and Gnora are all too happy to leave Havelock's universe and go to another one. As long as it isn't Dawn 10,000, of course. They came to this Dawn by accident, actually, they were aiming for a different one. When Havelock asks, they say they're willing to search all 9,998 other Dawns to try and find Landry and save the Vr'yss.

And maybe, just maybe, they'll find the other Havelocks along the way.

2. Words Thousand a of Shards

The

by Sam Maleski

What does the space between ten thousand realities look like?

It's chaos. Inevitable, indescribable, irrepressible. Words fail to describe it. Not because of creative deficiency but because the very building block of physics, language, thought, collapse before it in a blazing river of fire. Flames that burn at every point in time, through every sentence ever written, sparkling green and purple and black and emitting fumes of love forlorn, of hatreds repressed, of tears gone by. All under watchful eyes: never visible, always there, staring into the threads of your soul.

In its event horizon, places hover. Bubbles of reality. Lighthouses and spaceships, derelict castles and concrete schoolyards. The dreg heap where what is forever lost remains, its collapse perpetually halted, in an infinite collage that never stops spreading, an accretion disk at the conceptual edge of a universe.

But nothing stirs among the stones and the shards of glass. There isn't any life here. There couldn't be.

The Lovers are ready. The plan has been made, drawn for months and minutes now.

The ship isn't too far. It's a Noth craft, the cruel bent of its cockpit slightly diminished by the fact it's face-planting in a quaint, decorative English garden. Two cats watch it, curiously. They have been watching it for a billion billion years. Time-fuel leakage, splitting reality, opening a portal to the edge. But the cats don't seem to mind; they take it all in stride. Of course. They're cats. They have perfected time-travel through the power of naps eons ago, and we're only slowly catching up to their genius.

Nevertheless, even short distances are almost impossible to navigate here. Five hundred meters or so? It could take hours. Ropes. Jetpacks. And with any tiny error – death. Absorption into the hungry river roaring down above.

Neither of them are keen on the prospect.

But they go forth with it. What's the alternative? To remain here in the cold, where the complex symmetry of their love will be slowly pickled into nothingness? The gestures of

tenderness, the gentleness of kisses: all that will become habits, and habits will become tradition, and tradition will become biological imperative until they too are frozen in place like the stones. They don't know the season, but it's always Winter here. It's always been Winter. Cold and unfeeling – with meaning itself turning blue and peeling away slowly, a hypothermic body bubbling into nothingness, digested by its own juices.

No. It's intolerable. They need to break the inertia despite the comfort of it, despite the stillness that has slithered, a lust for immobility, a holding pattern that brushes its lips across their necks, promising a host of delights buried within obliteration.

They go forth.

The rope has been threaded with crystal powder from the Dawns. No portal will open here, but it allows it to resist the pull of the current for a few minutes at least. The potential energy of a bridge between realities is split apart, vibrating as the hungry maws at the edge of everything bark at each other, not deciding yet which way the physics are going to go on this one.

One meter at a time, all muscles tensed up, as they feel the notion of Places coming back to them, the crystal under their fingers, the roughness of its grains sparking some notion of their birthplaces, of their identities, of the road they've taken up to that point.

They rest on the rock: a volcanic stone spat out by a furnace that turns out to never have existed. Some people would pay a lot of money for such a treasure, Celia thinks as she gazes lazily on the ritual silver armour of an adept of the Twelfefold Path being absorbed by the compression process. She's not wrong. She's also glad to remember that her name is Celia.

Now, to jump. Hard to do, when right and left, up and down, shift with the whims of the edge - or rather with its rhythm, the complex secret tempo of its multi-chambered heart.

No matter. They have each other.

They can make their own music.

Celia and Anya jump.

At first, it's a leap of faith. Apt expressions. Gods are real here, after all. They flicker in and out of existence before being forgotten. But soon, the melodies interlace, and they can distinguish, in fleeting moments, the pattern buried in the chaos, the pattern in the lack of any and all patterns.

And soon, when they lift up their eyes, they meet the stirring of cat fur.

They take one under their arms each. They don't really protest. They've been an idea of a

cat too long to remember how to be one. But maybe they'll learn again.

The ship is cold too, cold like this whole place. It fits surprisingly well. Inside, the pale glow of neon illuminates dark, plastic altars. In some crannies, blood still pools. Anya shudders at the sight of it. But no matter how unsavoury, the craft may yet hold their salvation.

The temporal fuel can burn again: an explosion that will cause it to jump through the continuum, through the Bifrost, back into a Dawn.

It might also kill them. Destroy the ship. Airless fate or bright burning. Take a pick, friend. Oh well. Who wants to live forever? Better to take the chance. To escape.

They look at each other. Time is palpable here, and its scattered particles are like a beam of light in which the women see each other for the first time, truly see each other. Their breathing, the way their hair moves when they take a step, the sweat on the skin. They've never been more real. They've never been more beautiful to one another.

And so they kiss. /

And so they push the controls. /

And so they hold each other. /

And so they burn. /

And so they die and live, live and die, die, live, live, die, live, die... live?

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

The castle has shrunk, it seems. It's still large, impossibly large, but it's shrinking. The rooms repeat themselves more and more; the Nothing creeps into the stairwells, pooling in treacle-thick tar tentacles that linger in the halls like tripwire.

Thinking has become more difficult. They're losing time, losing memory, losing their names. Soon, they'll be trapped, trapped like those cats they can see from one of the bottom windows, trapped like the pool of water on Celia's island all those seconds-years ago. Becoming patterns and then collapsing into the gaping maw that breathes down their necks.

They don't know what to do.

“We could... make a run for it.”

Hard to know who said that. They don't know where one ends and the other begins these days. It's enthralling sometimes and distressing always.

“But then we'll fall for sure. If we stay here, we might be able to make it... We can hold for ages. Time doesn't mean much in this place. So in a way, it'd be like staying together forever.”

“Yeah. But if we fall... then we'd fall together. And then, we might have only one second left before our death. But it'd be the best second of our lives. Because we'll see each other with real eyes, and we'd dream of our life together, and it will be such a good dream that it'll overcome all the time spent in this nightmare.”

Is that what courage is, they think. To stand in front of a fake sky and dream real dreams?

“The best second of our lives, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They hold each other during the night and laugh during the day.

That's all they can do. That's all there is to do here. Maybe that's all there ever is to do, everywhere, ever.

It's not going to last forever. Soon, the nether will return, the edge will assert its right, ascertain its pull, and they'll be dragged away forever.

They don't think about it, though.

They tell each other stories instead.

How Anya's brother smiles, how proud of him she is, of how far he's come, from an awkward teenager in baggy clothes to a beautiful man on the frontlines of a revolution; how their mother raised them from nothing in the slums of Tarkanograd, always saving up a little so that they could have little tea parties on Sundays, dressing up the dolls and aligning them in ordered quaint patterns after the morning's prayers.

How Celia was lost and abandoned and found a purpose, a calling in her work, seeing the

warmth on people's faces after you save their life or their home, helping forge new ways, new paths out of the unfeeling embrace of a cold galaxy.

One story after another. One day after another. Spent holding each other tight. Not out of lust. Maybe not even out of love, not at first at least. Just to anchor themselves. To feel flesh, to feel cloth against their fingers. To know that they are real and there and that their hearts are full of love and their eyes full of tears.

Anya had a nightmare when she was little. Of waking up in the middle of the night and finding the flat empty – the city empty – the planet empty. Just a vast desert with not a soul living, her window the only point of light on a dead world. A little boat in a sea of darkness, taking on water and soon to drown forever.

That dream has never been closer to reality. They are on a boat slowly taking water.

And yet, the fear has never seemed further.

Celia looks up.

The castle beckons.

Anya beckons.

The only voice in the void.

She has to jump, to join.

And so she does.

It's a thought. A simple thought, a simple belief, that heralds the end of a reality and the beginning of another. The sand snakes around her feet as to say goodbye, and in a second, she starts falling, gently, towards the towers, their parapets rippling with the joy of their mistress, seeming to open like a pair of arms.

She falls and the sand behind her is a shroud, heralding the ascension of its sister by gifting her seraphim wings of silicate.

She falls into Anya's arms.

Eyes into eyes. Locked together, their patterns merging. Reality has never been stronger, the beat of two hearts heralding halcyon days on the edge, their pulses casting off the helter-skelter heterochromia of the hellscape hollering outside.

They talk.

Short sentences at first. It's about all they can muster. But soon, those bloom into conversations. They can recall who they once were now. Celia's role as an agent of Dawn, the pathkeepers in a universe of roads, whose last mission took her to a world gazing at the abyss; Anya's life as a soldier in the service of the burgeoning Martian republic, caught in the blast after destroying experimental time travel devices stored deep within the Castrum Maris in Malta...

Connections. A web stitching itself, each moment bringing more times and places in relation with each other. Space and time woven together with a flick of the tongue, the flicker of a flame deep in the eyes.

The web becomes a road with one single destination. The flight path is arranged: from thereon, causality is inevitable. Crash course, with impact imminent: no elisions, just collision.

Contact. Contact was made, at long last.

It's thanks to Celia. Around her wrist, a bracelet, gold shining against dark skin. She had forgotten about it, of course, as people are wont to do here in this strip of time-mould, this scarification on the surface of the self.

Anya wasn't one to yield. She realised her thoughts weren't her own here and realised how close she was from complete collapse. She had to act. Her fighter jet had been scattered by the explosion, of course. Its components were now buried inside the stone of the castle, a tomb for machines, gears in marble like flies in amber, still wriggling with a tenacious, mechanical life. She digs up some. She makes a dip net, fishes out some that hang out near the windows of the castle, hold against it by its fragile and flickering gravity.

She assembles a communicator device.

A voice! At least. Captured on Celia's wrist. Do you imagine what it's like to hear a human voice, human sounds coming out of a human mouth, where you have forgotten what those things even were? No sound, just the memory of old words – music and whispers, small talk and dirty talk, all dissolving into mush, a vaguely-coloured pigment that you see slicing through the empty space, peeking through the lazy ripples on the surface of a pond, glistening in the interstice between two sand grains. How vibrant, then, the singsong undulations of vocal cords, crying out rhythmic chords instead of curdling in cecity. A knife of sound cutting through all hazes.

Then again, maybe that's just what falling in love feels like.

A word, a gesture, a movement. And then, the world has changed, forever. You will never be the same. Entrapped, enraptured, entranced by the sigil of your beloved, like a moth to a flame – prudent, prude captive of your paramour’s pyrotechnics.

Scene. Two women wake up.

Celia opens her eyes. A sandy shore. Tiny bit of water at its centre, pooling in a bitter pond. It’s salty, bitter – a dark ocean foam, not the tropical lagoon goodness she’d expect from a place like this. But a few steps explain a lot. The shore loops back onto itself in a Möbius strip. Above it (or is it beneath?), a sphere of molten lava rolls peacefully in a placid pattern, like a toy for a hellhound; beneath it, the spires of a giant castle peak, standing proud in their perpendicular, a-little-too-perfect sharpness.

Anya opens her eyes. A grey room, surrounded by more grey room. Tastefully decorated enough, if you like Gothic romances. She does like Gothic romances. Oh, joy. But nothing is in its proper place: the oriflammes are all jumbled, tables protruding from the floor, cut into halves by the stone ceiling. Wouldn’t score high on hospitality. She explores the labyrinth, gets used to using stairs leading into nothingness as shortcuts.

They remember their lives by bits. There are things buried in the sand or written in secret codes along the tapestries. Little talismans, memories from past lives that come back with a kick. A coarse, sweet, tangy aftertaste of aftermaths that explodes in the monologues of their ever-looping brains.

What’s that badge for... Symbol, dawns, down, the meetings and the Council and the Judge, to protect and guard the path, the path to the past, the last Dawn, cursed, collapsing, the devouring maw and the matter fading, hands needed to untie the knot, to open the path, path, path – What’s that badge for...

A war? There was a war, I’m sure, red versus blue and white versus black, and the illusion of betrayal, the blood and the bodies, but it’s all in the distance now, there couldn’t have been A war? There was a war...

It keeps going, day before day before day, until--

It all startstops with a fallflight. Celianya plucked from timespace into the edgegate, and updown they go. Everything is melting, and soon, deathend looming – but something stops them from dissolving completely, blurmeld in the riversea. Call it a promise. The promise of love past, coming from the future. A word, a bond. Magnets in the ocean of melted metal, and across the lines of attraction and repulsion, on the corner of their fields, meaning folds into place, the words split apart and stop their compression, and something resembling home manifests itself. They are not conscious of their predicament, not yet. The curtain has not yet

risen on Celia's lonely oasis, on Anya's grey stone castle, refuges for their minds and bodies, pulled together by the gravity of the edge. Maybe that's what powers the engines of reality? Emotions, fleeting, fragile, burning up in the eternal brazier, a fragile circle of bound candlesticks as a last refuge against the apocalypse, an eggshell of fragile moments cobbled together with your heart as a membrane. How much would you need to give, though, for accurate stabilisation? What are the arithmetics of hate, and the geometry of longing? Hard to tell – only the pi-bald diagrams of elusive gods are in view from where we stand.

One thing is certain, though.

Those two must have had a lot of love to burn.

What does the space between ten thousand realities look like?

It's chaos. Unnameable, unavoidable, undefeatable. Thoughts fail to describe it. Not because of creative deficiency, but because the very building block of physics, language, emotion, collapse before it in a seething river of fire. Flames that burn at every point in time, through every sentence ever uttered, sparkling black and silver and teal and emitting fumes of secrets whispered, of malnourished envy, of invisible laughs. All under watchful eyes: never visible, always there, staring into the fabric of your soul.

In its event horizon, places hover. Bubbles of reality. Banks and brothels, wooden ships and cathedrals. The dreg heap: where what is forever lost remains, its collapse perpetually halted, in a kaleidoscope that never stops reshaping, an accretion disk at the conceptual edge of a universe.

But nothing stirs among the bricks and the dead trees. There isn't any life here. There couldn't be.

... Couldn't there?

3. Snow and Embers

by James Blanchard

The Festival of Hiding was filled with ironies. The short, dark day of the Winter solstice gifted the Demiurge incredible powers: he would rise into the world from his frozen domain to harass and torment the faithful. So the faithful found means to avoid his gaze, hiding behind masks and hoods. If the Cold God could not see them, then he could not harm them. So they believed.

Yet each year, despite the cloak of anonymity meant to fall across them, the villagers danced and celebrated. After all, this could be the last Festival any of them saw. They played sonorous music through the night, shared hot spiced food and beer, and lit the sky with fireworks – blue, green, white, icy stars against a starless night.

Priya, more than anyone, lived these ironies. She was the daughter of the priest, and raised to fear the Demiurge’s evil eye. But her costume was the most elaborate of all, black robes trimmed with silver. Her mask was ebony, intricately carved with the moons and planets of the true universe, painted in cool and spectral colours. *I look like a ghost*, she’d thought earlier, catching her reflection in a patch of ice. *A well-decorated ghost*.

She wandered the tents and pitches around the Lighthold with her father, offering blessings of protection. The entire village passed them by. Priya could tell who was who: the pious elders hid behind old masks, cracked and flaking, whilst the younger swayed and slurred under the influence of beer.

Meanwhile the children raced around, playing hiding games and catching games and games about masked monsters, happy to be awake past their bedtimes.

“Father?” Priya asked, a few hours before the sunrise. “Do you think I could go find Steven?”

“Of course,” he said. “You’ve done so well. I’ll finish off.”

She needed no more permission. She ran off among the tents and benches, shouting “Steven! *Steven!*” over the clacks and whizzes of the fireworks.

“Priya!”

The voice came from behind her. She turned to see a boy – twelve, her age, though not

quite as tall, holding a half-finished drink. Steven always wore beautiful masks, an advantage of being the carpenter's son. This year, he wore two dancing cranes, one black, one white.

The two rushed together for a hug, though a little too quickly, and Steven spilled beer down Priya's robe.

"Sorry! *Sorry!*"

"Don't worry," she laughed. "It doesn't matter. Father let me go, so I can actually celebrate now."

"Celebrate? I thought you were meant to be *sooooooo scared* of the Demiurge!"

"Don't tease!" she thumped him on the shoulder. "I'm going to be the priest one day, then you'll have to be nice to me."

"Now, that *is* scary. Come on," he took her hand. "Daniel's just made a fresh batch of sweetbreads. We've got a lot to do before dawn."

They dashed away into the party, and as night slouched towards day the two friends were determined to enjoy every hour. They got sick on beer and sticky food, chased each other until they ran out of breath, and lifted the little ones onto their shoulders, shouting and calling to the empty heavens.

By the time before dawn, the village slept, either in their homes or splayed across the tents and benches – this Festival of Hiding ended not with the singing of night birds but a chorus of snoring.

Priya and Steven lay on the frosted grass by the riverbank, their masks lifted from their faces, watching the water snake towards the valley beyond. They always ended long nights together this way, unable to see the river's end, but knowing, at least, which way it flowed.

"I suppose we should go home," Priya yawned. "The sun is almost up."

"Are you kidding?" Steven snapped upright, looking at her like she'd just grown a new head. "I'm not even tired."

"Easy for you to say, Mister Wake-Up-At-Noon. I've been going all day, preparing the Lighthold, sanctifying the blessings, mixing the incense..."

"Yeah yeah yeah, I get it, praise the Geisthead," he rubbed his thumb across the line of his jaw. *He always does that when he's planning something stupid.*

"Steven. We should go home."

“But, do you *really* want to?”

Try as she might, she couldn't keep the smile from her lips. “No. Not really.”

“I knew it,” his fingers moved, forming a fist that rested beneath his chin. “Why don't we follow the river?”

“Into the valley?” Priya let her eyes drift, following the direction of the water. The villagers seldom visited the valley; old stories said it was the land of demons and the Demiurge's soldiers, exiled to the ember world. Just stories, of course, but venturing down the river was taboo, save to bury the dead.

“Why not?”

“I don't know, Steven. Isn't it a bit...morbid?” She had gone to the valley once, years ago, to help her father with a funeral. Inside one of the caves, her father had propped Old Tom's body against the wall, covered him in dark-smelling oils, and placed a plain wooden death mask over his face. The thing was featureless, but in the dancing torchlight of the caves, shadowy fingers seemed to touch Old Tom all over, searching for eyes and noses and lips...

Steven shrugged, shattering Priya's memory. “I've never been. I just get a bit bored of the village.”

“I know what you mean,” she sighed. “All right, beats waiting for a funeral.”

The grin crept over Steven's face – *The same grin he always has when he drags me into something* – and he hopped to his feet. With a hand, he helped Priya up, and together they followed the river, down into the valley.

It wasn't a long journey, but even so the landscape changed as they walked – the crunch of frosted grass gave way to loose stones, and dead Winter trees transformed into imposing, solid boulders. The valley was wide and open, like something had smashed into the world's surface, but Priya knew that was only an illusion. Cut into the stones were tunnels and caves that might run forever, hidden in endless darkness. The villagers laid the dead to rest inside them, but even after generations of burials they were barely explored. “Dark things hide in dark places,” Priya's father once said, when she was very young. “It's best to avoid them.”

A bitter wind whistled, and Priya shivered. “Cold, isn't it? I think the beer was keeping me warm.”

“Yeah...” Steven said, hardly listening. His eyes darted everywhere, studying the valley's structure.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“It’s... interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“Yeah...”

“Really insightful, Steven,” Priya sniffed. “Really stimulating conversation.”

“Sorry, I just mean... All this stone, but we never use it. We only ever use wood, which rots and burns. Why ignore the stone?”

“Because your family would be out of a job, idiot,” she jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. “Plus, there’s the whole thing about, you know, not disturbing the dead.”

“The dead are dead, I’m not sure they’d care.”

“They might if the Demiurge ever finds this place.” The chill bit at Priya again, and she pulled her robes closer.

Behind them, the village had disappeared, obscured from view by limestone monoliths. The river was running faster and more urgent in the valley’s depths.

“Hey, look.” Steven pointed towards an opening among the rocks, a dark narrow space in the stones. The sky was lightening now, but even so the gap was pitch-black. “Is that one of the caves?”

“Yeah,” Priya said. “That’s one of the oldest ones. No one’s been laid to rest in there for a long time.”

“Wow. I don’t suppose...” *That stupid grin is back.* “We could take a look inside? Pay our respects?”

“When have you ever paid respect to anything?!”

“Come on!” The boy threw his arms in the air. “I never get to do anything! Just let me poke my head in? Then we’ll turn back.”

Priya huffed and crossed her arms, a little performance so he knew she was in charge. “Fine. But we’re not going far. It’s dark in there, and I’m not carrying you back with a broken leg.”

“Fair enough,” Steven laughed, skipping over to the mouth of the cave. He sloped his

shoulders and squeezed through into the darkness. “Hey, there’s some torches in here,” he called out.

“Really?” Priya followed him in, her footsteps ginger on the frosted rocks. “Do they still light?”

The answer came in the form of a *whoooooosh*, and Steven’s face was illuminated in pale orange hues. “Here,” he said, handing her the torch. “Since you’re the one meant to carry the light of truth, and all that. And you said you were cold.”

“Thanks,” she said, smiling. “Ever the gentleman.”

She took a step further in the cave, casting the torch in an arc. Seated by the walls were a couple of skeletons, their flesh and clothes rotted away, bones grey and unreflective. Their death masks obscuring the skulls, though, had endured, the wood saved by lacquer.

“Wow,” Steven’s head tilted in curiosity. “I’ve never actually seen a dead body before.”

“Not much of the bodies left, really.” Again, the memory of Old Tom crept into Priya’s mind, the shadows exploring his body, wrapping around him, just as they did these poor dead souls.

“Can we go a bit further in?”

“You really are pushing it today, Steven,” she said, but he was already moving forward, one hand outstretched. She tutted but, like always, followed him.

Priya’s father had told her how the older caves were decorated with tales of war and worship, ancient stories lost to time. Now she could see them for herself. All around her were stark images of dark figures running and hunting and dancing. By the light of the torch the long stone tapestry came to life: spears clashed with swords, raptorwolves swarmed over mammoths, hunters grappled with their prey. They passed more skeletons, their obscured faces watching the scenes unfold.

“Who painted these?” Steven whispered.

“I don’t know. The early castaways, maybe. Or some demons, abandoned by the Demiurge.”

“Maybe it was something else. Some people here before us.”

“There weren’t any people here before us, Steven, you know that. This world is an ember, a dying spark after the great battle.”

“Yeah.” Steven stopped abruptly. “Maybe we should go back.”

Priya stopped too, turning and raising the light so she could see her friend. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s just...” he gestured at a skeleton, one much smaller than the others. “Not that much fun, actually? One day... this will be us, you know?”

“Don’t say that,” she protested. “The Geisthead will come for us. I’m turning thirteen before the summer, I’ll speak the announcement at the solstice, maybe...”

“I know we’re meant to believe that, Priya. But I just don’t.”

That hurt to hear. Priya couldn’t deny it. “Okay,” she said, trying to swallow her feelings. “Okay. But is it really so bad being here? Being with... all of us?”

“Being with you, you mean?” The grin was back, though Steven’s eyes sparkled with sombre torchlight. “No. Being with you isn’t so bad.”

Priya wasn’t sure why, but in that moment, she stretched out her arm, moving the torch’s flame away from their faces, and – leaning forward – planted a kiss on Steven’s lips. It was small, and awkward, but even before it was finished, she could feel his smile growing wider.

A whisper. She thought it was the wind at first, a bitter cold blowing through her, but as it whistled through her ribs and up her spine she realised it was much worse.

“What was that?” she asked, pulling back from Steven. She didn’t give him a chance to answer, instead shouting into the darkness. “Hello? Who’s there?”

At first, she didn’t think there was an answer. *It’s just the crackle of the torch. It’s just Steven saying your name.* For a whole moment she denied it, though in her mind it felt like hours, until, at last, reality asserted itself, and she heard the voice in the darkness.

Hello, young friends.

The torch fell to the floor, and Priya’s hands went scrambling to her head. She pushed herself back against the wall as quickly as she could, and pulled her wooden mask back down from her face. *The mask is my shield. The mask is my shield.*

Steven kept standing there. “Hello?!” he called, kneeling down to collect the torch. “Who is that?”

“Steven, please, we have to go *right now*,” Priya’s throat was swollen with fear and bile.

Why leave, when you've just arrived? The whisper came again. The voice had no depth but spoke like the rustling of dead leaves. It spoke like a hundred quiet voices all at once, sweet but bitter, soft but rasping, flat and unyielding and total nonsense to Priya's ears.

"Who are you?" Steven asked, his eyes wide and drinking the darkness.

"It's a demon," Priya said through tears. *The moons and stars will protect me.* "It's one of his children. A shadow soldier, a castaway. We have to leave *now.*"

Your friend is frightened of me, the voice of the cave said. There was no movement when it spoke, only stillness, but in Priya's mind, every word was scored by the rattling of bones. **But she has no reason to be. I am none of those things, young lady.**

"Then what are you?" Steven's voice didn't waver like Priya's. *He's only curious. That idiot, he's curious.*

Nothing that might make sense to you. I dance in the shadows and write my name upon the walls, though you could not read it.

"Why not?"

You lack perspective. You came from the village, didn't you? Such a... narrow group.

"You don't know anything about me," Steven said, defiance creeping into his words.

That is true. You are a riddle to me, as I am to you. Do you like riddles, young man? Perhaps we can share our answers...

Her movement was so sudden, so rapid and so decisive, that it took Priya's mind a moment to catch up with her body. She honestly thought, through sweat and ragged breath, that her heart had exploded in her chest.

In reality, she had only lunged forward and snatched the torch from Steven's hand. She gripped his wrist so tightly it might've snapped off, as if he was just another fragile skeleton, one among hundreds. But he stayed together. *We stayed together.*

She pulled him away, running and dragging and scrambling as fast as she could, out, out, out, out of the cave, away from the demon, into the morning light...

In the days and weeks that followed, Priya did her best not to think of the cave, or the voice, or the vile demon. She certainly never spoke of it. Instead she found a cave inside her

mind, a dark place for the memory, and sealed it with a great stone.

The days were beginning to lengthen, and the villagers saw more of the swollen pink sun, plodding lazily through blue-grey skies. It was no true sun, nothing like the great golden stars of the true universe. This sun was just a sad, fat attempt at one. But it did keep them warm.

Spring approached, and with Spring came school. Priya loved school, and she loved how Steven teased her for loving school. *I could never admit that, though.*

As the trees blossomed, so did she. The books she read piled high, and the words she spoke grew more authoritative. On her thirteenth birthday, she delivered her first sermon in the Lighthold. Her voice was loud and resonated on the metal walls, and everyone was silent. The elders. Her classmates. Steven.

Steven. Steven was quiet, all right. The seasons were warming, Spring metamorphosing into Summer, but Steven grew colder. Normally they always sat together in school, legs crossed, knees just touching as they circled the mandala. But Steven inched away with every passing week, only reaching out to swat at Summer flies.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you in ages,” she told him once, a few weeks before the solstice. “You’ve missed a few days of school.”

“Yeah,” he said, eyes glued to the floor. “Dad’s needed help at the workshop.”

“Mhmm. I know you don’t like Summer very much.”

“Are you talking about the season, or the festival?” He shrugged his shoulders. “I just hate the sun. And the festival. It’s so relentless. I feel *seen* everywhere. I guess that’s the point.”

Priya had no answers for him. She could only rest her hand on his arm, and say: “I know it’s a hard time for you. I guess we can’t all love the Summer. But the Festival of Announcement is coming... honestly, I wouldn’t ask you if it didn’t matter. I’ll have to stand there, and speak the announcement, and light the bonfire *in front of everyone*. It’ll be the most important day of my life. I need you there.”

Her friend raised his gaze, just long enough to meet her own. “I’ll be there for you,” he said with a thin smile. Then his eyes dropped back to the floor.

Steven didn’t come to school again.

The Festival of Announcement was uniquely sincere. On the long, bright day of the Summer solstice, the Geisthead was at his most powerful; this was the day, among all the days, that the villagers believed their god would rescue them. They only had to ask him.

Everyone awoke before dawn, and, at first light, poured into the streets. None wore masks – they displayed their faces proudly, in the hope that their lord would recognise them as the faithful. Fires were lit and flags were waved, and the Lighthold was draped in ribbons of gold and red and orange.

At the centre of the village, before the Lighthold’s great mast, the bonfire piled high. Everyone contributed something, either some dried wood from the forest, or some old furniture or trinkets, or even little splinters of their own homes. Priya and her father spent the morning filling the pile with sweet-smelling leaves and flammable oils, so the whole thing would go up at once.

Lighting the fire would be Priya’s responsibility. *I was born to do this. I was raised to do this.* As the sun peeked over the horizon, her father, pride glistening in his eyes, smeared the ashes of the last bonfire across her lips. “This will give your voice power,” he said. “When you speak, you’ll speak with the voice of all the generations that came before us. My voice, and your grandfather’s, and I think your mother’s, too.”

She had to wipe the tear from her cheek so it wouldn’t wash any of the ashes away.

One hour until noon and the announcement, and Steven was nowhere to be seen. She searched the quiet rooms of the Lighthold: empty. She searched the groves of apple trees, where old men sat and drank cider: empty. She even searched his house: empty.

“I’m getting nervous,” she told her father. People were beginning to fill the space around the metal temple, pouring in from all over the village. Some tied back their hair, so they could feel the full force of the bonfire’s light on their bare faces. Some went so far as to shave their heads. All of them looked to Priya. “What if I mess up?”

“How could you possibly mess up, sweetie?”

She didn’t have an answer she could say aloud, no reason her father could understand. Only, *Steven isn’t here.*

She swallowed that disappointing thought, imprisoning it in the dark cave with the whispering thing. *No, he’ll be here. I’ll look into the crowd and I’ll see his face, watching.*

Priya’s father pressed the torch, ancient and rusting, made from the metal of the Lighthold, into her hand. It was heavy; keeping it upright strained the muscles in her arms. She did her best not to flinch as her father lit the upper end and the flames licked out, casting a wave of heat over her face.

“You can do it,” her father said. With his hand at the small of her back, he gave her a gentle push forward.

One by one, Priya ascended the steps, taking her place above the bonfire and the villagers. Silence washed over them, and every eye searched and looked and saw Priya standing there, the light of her religion burning above her head. Noon was imminent.

“My people,” she said, speaking the thousand-times-rehearsed words. “My people, today is our most sacred day. As this world’s only star sits above us, our Lord, the Geisthead, the Ghost of Light, is in his prime. Cold and shadow flee before him today. And so, with this act of immolation, on behalf of all his faithful followers, I call out to him, and ask: Oh lord, pluck us from this ember world, and return us to the true universe! Praise the God of Sun and Stars!”

“Praised the God of Sun and Stars!” the villages called in return.

Before she dropped the torch and fulfilled her duty, she cast one last look across the crowd. *Come on, come on, he must be there somewhere...*

She fantasised about seeing her friend’s face, one among hundreds, wearing that encouraging, stupid grin...

Nothing. He wasn’t there.

Listlessly, she dropped the torch in the bonfire. With a *wooooooosh*, it lit, throwing flames into the sky so hot and intense it singed Priya’s hair. The villagers all called out and cheered, adding their voices to the fire, hoping the heat and light would carry it up and out of their dying world.

Priya just cast her eyes downward. Her mouth tightened, and she could taste the ashes on her tongue. She stomped down the stone steps, each footstep as heavy as she could manage. Her father tried to embrace her, but she shrugged him off and marched away from the festival.

She found Steven at the riverbank, as the lazy pink sun began to set.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding, is it?”

“Priya!” he started at her presence. “No, I just... I... I’m so sorry, I just...”

“Save it, Steven. I asked you for one thing, *just one thing*, and you didn’t respect me enough to be there on the biggest day of my life.”

Steven’s face hardened. “That isn’t fair, Priya. You don’t know how hard I find it, how awful it is. The Summer, the festival, all those eyes everywhere. It just makes me want to run and hide so, yeah, I did. I’m sorry, but it’s the truth.”

“Where even were you? Where did you go?”

Her friend’s eyes moved to the floor. “In the valley.”

“In the valley?” Priya’s throat dried, and she could taste the ashes again. “In the bloody valley?”

“Priya, listen...”

She didn’t listen. The cave in her mind was heaving, breathing, the great stone she’d use to trap the whispering voice was trembling. Fear and horror gripped her chest and her heart pounded against her ribs.

Tears were streaming down her face. She wanted to scream and shout at Steven, to lay at his door all the horrible things he’d done, but the accusations wouldn’t voice themselves.

She turned and ran, back towards the temple and her father. If Steven tried to follow, she never knew it: she never looked behind her.

The days shortened, and the Summer ember cooled to Autumn. The leaves on the trees turned from green to gold and steadily dropped away. School continued, and Steven began to show up again, even helping to repair some of the older woodwork. At first, Priya only regarded him with silence, but as time passed and the nights drew in, they began exchanging words. With the death of Summer, Steven seemed to re-emerge, as though Autumn were his Spring.

So, after a while, when the last of the leaves had died, she asked Steven to meet her, one crisp morning.

“Thanks for coming,” she said. Both sat cross-legged on frosted grass.

“It’s okay. I’ve missed you.”

“Yeah,” It took a moment for Priya to find her words. “You really hurt me. Before.”

“I know. And I know it rings hollow but, I’m so sorry. I’ll do anything to make it right.”

“That’s it, it doesn’t ring hollow. I guess I didn’t really understand how hard Summer was for you, and I expected something that wasn’t fair. I’m sorry for that. But...” She made herself look him in the eye. “How can I understand if you won’t talk to me?”

“I...” Steven sighed and put his head in his hands.

“It’s as if, ever since the Festival of Hiding, since that night, since the cave, you’ve been running away from everything, me included. You won’t even speak to me. It’s like the longer the days get, the further away from me you would run. I can’t always be running after you, Steven.”

“I know, Priya. So tell me what I can do?”

“Just speak to me, will you? Tell me when you feel this way. Don’t just run from me.”

“Okay.”

“You promise?”

He grinned. “I promise.”

The two friends stood, and hugged, and crunched leaves beneath their feet.

As the sun reached the peak of its lethargy, the Winter solstice was upon the village again, and with it came the Festival of Hiding.

A whole year, Priya would sometimes think as she planned for the blessings in the days before. A whole year since the cave and the kiss and the thing with the voice...

Steven, at last, was himself again. Priya could hardly stop smiling when she was around him. Sometimes she caught herself, wondering how she could find so much happiness in one that hurt her so badly. But that was life, she supposed; night and day always circled each other, ebbing and flowing, in people as in seasons.

The night before, Steven knocked on her door. “Can I come in?”

“Of course you can,” she said, beckoning him inside.

“I have something for you. A present,” he said. In his hand was a wide, wooden box. He tried to keep the smile off his face, but it crept along his mouth anyway.

“A present?”

He handed over the box. “Here.”

Gingerly, she opened the lid and looked inside.

Steven had carved her a mask. It was made from a light-coloured elm, sanded to be almost

white. The features combined into a woman's face; her lips were deep-blue ocean waves, crashing together into a soft smile; her eyes were golden suns and her nose a silver crescent moon; on her cheeks, fireworks twisted into green and blue spirals; and across her brow sat a crown of red and orange flames.

"The new priest needs a new mask, don't you think?" he said. "Do you like it?"

She didn't answer him. Instead, she threw her arms around his shoulders and buried her face in his neck. *It reminds me of mother*, she thought but decided not to say.

The Festival of Hiding arrived, with all its ironies. The sky filled again with icy fizzling stars, and the children ran and played and screamed among the tents and benches. Priya and her father wandered among the villagers, handing out blessings to the young and old alike; Steven even accepted one.

The night drew on, and Priya asked her traditional question: "Father, can I—"

"Yes, sweet one, you can find Steven."

The young priestess ran off, searching the food stalls and the Lighthold. But he was nowhere, not even by the riverbank.

Oh please, please don't have disappeared again. It's Winter, Steven, you don't need to hide.

There was only one place left to check. The valley, the cave, the home of the whispering thing.

She was scared to go and brave enough to admit it. But there was no choice, nowhere else he could be. She steeled herself and followed the path of the river, down into the shadow of the valley.

The cave was unchanged – still dark, unendingly so, like the mouth of some hungry beast. Torches still rested by the mouth, though less than before; she took one, lit it, and ventured inwards. She did her best to move quickly, to stride with purpose, not lingering on the corpses or their blank masks, or the painted hunting scenes that so captured the dead's attention.

This year, the whispering thing made no effort to hide itself. Priya could hear it talking, chattering away, the voice growing louder the further she ventured in.

Darkness, the thing said. **Darkness and chaos, these things are the natural state, light is only the savage combination of darkness...**

“Steven?” Priya called. He was seated before a corpse, his own mask pulled down, listening intently to his faceless teacher. He turned to look at her. “Steven, I think we should go home.”

“I can’t,” he said, standing and facing his friend, mask-to-mask. “I have to listen. I need to hear what it has to say.”

“Is this what you really want? Do you really think that thing has the answers you need?”

“I don’t know,” Steven answered, and she could hear the sincerity in his voice.

“Okay. I know I can’t stop you,” Priya lifted her mask, exposing her face against all her instincts. “But you can’t stop me waiting for you.”

She leaned into him and, gently, planted a kiss on his mask, just where the two dancing cranes met. “When you’re ready, I’ll be waiting outside.”

She turned, putting her back to Steven and the corpse and the whispering thing, and began her journey out of the cave. As Priya climbed towards the starless night sky, she watched as the scenes of running and hunting danced in the shadows, and she saw how man and animal and faceless creature trembled beneath her torch’s light.

4. How To Live With Yourself

by Andrew Davis

On 1st January 2121, Ash Rune knocked on the door of 24 Greenwood Close, and Ash Rune answered the door.

Their doppelganger's response to seeing themselves standing in their doorway was about what Ash expected.

They yelled, and slammed the door in Ash's face.

The screaming continued behind the door, only now it was slightly muffled. Once the noise had stopped, Ash knocked again.

The door opened, very slowly this time. The Ash who was in the house opened their mouth to scream again, but this time, the Ash standing on the doorstep cut them off.

"So, alternate universes are a thing. I'm you from another reality. Can I come in?"

Ash and Ash sat in the kitchen, one watching the other drink their morning cup of coffee.

"Okay," said alternate Ash, "we're going to need a way to differentiate between the two of us. How about I be Ash One, and you be Ash Two?"

Ash glared back over their coffee.

"No, you're right, bad idea. Creates a hierarchy. Do the *Futurama* thing: One of us can be Ash One, the other can be Ash A. You were in this reality first, you get to choose which."

Ash sipped their coffee. "I'm Ash One, you're Ash A."

Ash A nodded. So their other self also preferred maths to English.

Ash One set their mug down a little too firmly, and the coffee inside spilled gently over the edges. A coffee ring sank into the table.

"Why are you here?"

“Right,” began Ash A. “This is awkward.”

“Just say it!”

Ash A tapped at the table nervously as they spoke.

“I need to move in.”

“Not happening.”

“And legally, you have to let me.”

“WHAT?”

Ash One was standing now. The coffee mug lay shattered on the floor. They didn’t know when that had happened.

“I don’t have to deal with this. I’m calling the police.”

“Go ahead.”

Ash A watched as Ash One dialed the police’s number and shouted down the vidphone. Finally, when they had finished, they turned off the screen, and took several long, deep breaths.

“What the hell is the SSRP?”

“Well, it’s-”

At that moment, Chloe came racing down the stairs.

“Babe, what was all the noise about? I heard shout-”

She cut off, looking at Ash A, her vision of Ash One cut off by the stairwell.

“Ash, why are you looking at me like that? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She raced over, and threw her arms around Ash A. They felt their pulse racing, their chest tightening.

“It’s alright, whatever it is, I’m here.”

Breathing quicker and shallower with every moment, Ash A untangled themselves from Chloe. “Chloe, listen there’s been some confusion-”

“I’m over here, Chloe,” said Ash One.

Chloe did a double take. Then she did another.

“The hell?”

There was a sharp stabbing sensation in Ash A’s stomach, and their head spun. Why hadn’t they been told about this?

“I’m sorry,” they said, “I’ve got to-”

Unable to finish the sentence, they raced out of the room, heart pounding.

Chloe was here. With the other them.

And that was the first big difference in this reality.

Ash stood on the doorstep, waiting for the rain to ease off. It was the kind of driving rain that paid no attention to traffic laws or the wellbeing of pedestrians, so as much as Ash wanted to get away from this house, they thought it best to wait.

The door opened behind them.

“Hey,” said Chloe.

Instead of turning to face her, Ash shut their eyes. They weren't ready for this.

“Come inside, you can't stay out here.”

“I'm not staying here. As soon as the rain clears, I'll head off, find a hostel.”

The puddle nearest the door was growing and growing. If Ash tried to take a step out of the door, they were going to step in it, and it was going to soak into their shoes, which weren't that waterproof anymore.

“Well, while we wait, d’you think you could turn around? I’m not that fond of having a conversation with the back of your head.”

Ash turned round. They never could say no to Chloe.

“Why isn’t she with you? Your me.”

“I never...” Ash trailed off. The words were difficult to get out.

“Never what?”

Ash pulled at their sleeve, playing with the loose thread of fabric.

“When your Ash asked you out, was at Kelsey’s birthday party? Back in 2118?”

“It was.”

“And were they super awkward? Barely able to get the words out?”

“Yeah,” said Chloe, laughing.

“Always figured I would have been.” The words hung in the air, dissolving into the slowly softening rain. “My Chloe was my best friend, but I never managed to tell her how I felt. That party was the one time I tried. Janet interrupted us, bloody Janet. Never worked up the courage again afterwards.”

Chloe frowned. “You know, pining over someone like that isn’t healthy.”

“I know. It’s my screwup to deal with. She’s with someone else, a lovely woman, and they were sent to another universe. And they’re happy, so that’s good. It really is.”

Chloe knew her Ash well enough to tell that this one meant what they said. That earned her respect. She pointed to the sky, and Ash turned to see that the clouds had parted.

“Well, if you want to go, now’s the time,” she said. “Or, you could come in, and join us.”

Turning, she stepped over the threshold and went back into the house.

Ash sighed. They looked out to the street, then back at the house. Part of their brain was screaming at them to run away, to get out of there now, as fast as possible. Shutting their eyes, they ignored the screaming match taking place in their internal monologue and followed Chloe inside.

Ash A sipped at the coffee Ash One had begrudgingly made for them. It tasted bitter, even though it was the same brand they always bought. Was the coffee different in this universe?

“Explain,” said Ash One.

Stomach twisting, Ash A began to explain.

“I don't... I don't fully understand myself. But short story, my universe is cursed. It's getting harder and harder to live in, and the people who get stuck there are dead or are going to die. Some of us had the chance to escape through cracks in reality that were opening up. I was one of the last to get through.”

“You said the other me survived,” said Chloe. “Did anyone else we know escape?”

Ash A shifted uncomfortably in their seat. Chloe and Ash One exchanged an awkward glance.

“I'm sorry,” said Ash One.

Looking away, Ash A scratched behind their ear.

“Not your fault,” they said, voice shaking. Taking a deep breath, they continued their story. “After that, the inter-dimensional government picked us up, assigned us new universes for the SSRP.”

“Yeah, the guy on the vid phone mentioned that,” said Ash One. “What is it?”

“The Self Support Relocation Program,” said Ash A. “The government made it for people like me, who are fleeing conflict from another dimension. They assign us a version of ourselves from another reality to live with.”

Ash One ran their hands through their hair. “I see. And do I get a say in this?”

“Did you ever click ‘yes’ on the terms and conditions for the government's website when, for example, you're filling out a tax return?”

“I - yeah, of course.”

“Without reading them?”

“Who reads them?”

“Precisely. That was your say.”

Furrowing their brow, Ash One opened and shut their mouth.

“I know it's unfair,” said Ash A. “I don't want to take advantage of you, I'll be out of your hair as soon as I find a place. But right now, I'm homeless, and this is the only way out I'm being offered.”

Somehow, Ash One furrowed their brow even deeper. But Chloe spoke first.

“So essentially, the government's abandoning all responsibility for a group of refugees and telling them to sort themselves out?”

Ash A blinked repeatedly.

“I hadn't thought of it like that, but yeah.”

“Then we're happy to help. Aren't we, dear?”

Forcing himself to unfurrow their brow, Ash One finally spoke.

“Yeah. Yeah, of course we are.”

Sighing, Ash took the tubes of toothpaste from the hover-trolley and set them in place on the shelf. When they'd arrived, they'd expected to need a new job, but the old position at the shop was free for them. Ash One was an architect for the city council: they'd always wanted to be an architect, but never got around to leaving the shop and training. It was something they were going to do later but had never gotten around to.

There was a ringing in Ash's ears, and they heard screams, shouting, even as everyone else, shoppers and staff, went about their days as normal. Gritting their teeth, they continued stacking the shelves until the noise dulled to a faint buzzing between their ears.

In the next aisle, Kita was laughing at Romesh's bad jokes, just as she had in Ash's universe. But where Ash would have teased her for her obvious crush before, they couldn't here: this Kita didn't know them well enough yet.

Everything was the same, yet everything was different.

Chloe was sitting on the sofa and scrolling through her tablet when Ash got back.

“How was your first day?” she asked.

“Same as all the others,” said Ash. “How's the book?”

“Started well, but it's gone off track. The writer decided they had to force a love triangle in there.”

Ash laughed. “You always hate those.”

Frowning, Chloe set the tablet down. “How do you-” she cut herself off. “Of course. Other me.”

Ash scratched their ear awkwardly. “Sorry, that was too familiar.”

“It’s fine. I get it.”

“It’s not fine, though,” said Ash. “Everything’s like this. It was the same at work. I know everything about everyone, and they know nothing about me. And then there are the things that are just a little bit different. Romesh has given up smoking. Madelyn and Kita actually like each other.”

You and Ash are together, they finished in their head.

“Tell you what,” said Chloe. “How about I see what I know about you? *This* you?”

She turned on the Nintendo, and the holo-screen flashed into life.

“Do you still main Bowser on *Mario Kart*?”

Ash nodded.

“Want to play?”

“I-” Ash started to shake their head, then stopped, and sat down. “Yeah, yeah, I do.”

Chloe grinned. “Okay, let’s see if I can kick your butt, too.”

The toothbrush sat on the sink, bristles splayed out at multiple angles.

“Look, I said I’m sorry,” said Ash A. “We use the same brand of toothbrush, it’s a completely normal mix-up.”

“That’s not the point,” said Ash One. “Now I’ve got to get a new one, unless you expect me to use a toothbrush that’s been in someone else’s mouth.”

“Look, I’ll pay for the new toothbrush, it’s my fault.”

“No, I’ll buy it,” said Ash One. “Just watch out in future, will you?”

“Of course I...” Ash A stopped before the inevitable rant burst from them. “Yeah, sure. Can I go now? I’ve got house-searching to do.”

Dropping their hands to their sides, and sighing audibly, Ash One nodded. “Yeah. Whatever.”

Everything was burning. The news stations had gone quiet. The government had shut down. Romesh and Kita were holding each other and crying, and Mum and Dad were calling out for them, and they were looking for Chloe, pulling through crowds of people who were scrambling, clawing for their bracelets, but Ash fended them off. Smoke hung in the air, filling their nostrils, painting the world red, black, and white. Finally, they got to the door and knocked, but to no response. Turning side on, they rammed their shoulder against the door, crying out as they felt it dislocate, and the wood shattered-

They woke, shaking uncontrollably. Running their hands through their hair, they found it drenched in sweat, and tapped the back of their hand against the pillow to discover that it was too. They flipped the pillow over and lay back down, continuing to shake. Curling the duvet into a cocoon, they failed to go back to sleep.

The rich smell of bolognese sauce filled the kitchen, as Ash One set it on the table. Racing back to the hob, they took a strand of spaghetti in the spaghetti spoon, and flicked it towards the wall. When the strand stuck, they nodded happily to themselves, peeled it off the wall, strained the rest of the pasta, and called out, "Dinner's ready!"

Three plates filled with pasta and sauce sat on the dinner table when Ash A and Chloe entered the room.

"Bon Appetit," Ash One said with a smile.

"I'll sort drinks," said Ash A, rushing off to grab glasses.

Once drinks were ready, the three of them sat and started to eat.

"How was work?" Chloe asked.

"The usual," both Ashes said in one voice.

"How's the PhD going?" asked Ash A.

"Still got dissertation brain fog," said Chloe, "but I'll get there. Seminar was good today. Professor Doherty gave me some useful ideas to mull over. Need to explore liminal spaces in the texts some more."

As she talked, Ash A nodded, spiralling spaghetti onto their fork only to flick some of the sauce on their shirt. "Damn it," they muttered as they looked down and saw the food stain.

Ash One rolled their eyes.

“What?” said Ash A tersely. “What was that for?”

“Just... could you not be a mess?” asked Ash One with a sigh.

“It’s bolognese! No one’s classy eating bolognese!”

“I wasn’t talking about the bolognese.”

Chloe cleared her throat. “Can you both *not*?”

“Sorry, Chloe,” said Ash A, “But I think we have to. I’m done with the passive aggressive sniping. Go on, Ash, say what you have to.”

“Fine,” replied Ash One through gritted teeth. “Why are you still here?”

“Do you think I *want* to be here?”

“You haven’t found a new place to live yet.”

“It’s not like there’s anywhere I can afford!”

“You could apply for a better job.”

“Where? You got the one I wanted! There’s no other place for me here.”

Ash One folded their arms. “So you’re jealous.”

The food sat uneaten on the table, slowly going cold. “Of course I am! You have the job I always wanted, the girlfriend I always wanted-”

“Whoa,” said Chloe. “You know full well-”

“That you hate love triangles, yeah,” said Ash A. “I’m not making *this* a love triangle. I like you, but I don’t want to be with you. I wanted to be with *my* Chloe, the one I knew. And it sucks to know that I could have been, if I was just less shit.”

“Well,” growled Ash One, “maybe that’s why I’m sick of having you around. You remind me of everything I hated about the person I used to be. You couldn’t ask out your Chloe. You won’t leave your crappy job. There’s always an excuse for not doing anything that would make you happy. Because you don’t want to make your life better.”

“YOU’VE BEEN NOTHING BUT AN ASSHOLE TO ME SINCE I GOT HERE!”

“THAT’S BECAUSE NO ONE MAKES ME A BIGGER ASSHOLE THAN YOU!”

They stood there, both shaking, words spent.

“You want me gone? Fine. I’m gone,” said Ash A. Storming out of the room and down the hallway, they slammed the front door behind them.

For a long time, Chloe and Ash One stayed where they were, unable to find anything to say. Finally, Ash One started to clear up the plates and cutlery, and as they did so, they broke the silence.

“Good-Good riddance.”

Hard as they tried, they couldn’t bring themselves to believe their own words. Chloe looked at her feet.

“What is it?” asked Ash.

“Nothing,” said Chloe.

She still wouldn’t look at them.

“It’s obviously something,” said Ash. “I shouldn’t have said those things to them, knew that as soon as I started. I just... couldn’t stop myself. But you want to say something. So say it.”

Taking a deep breath, Chloe looked up at them.

“I know you don’t always like yourself, but that was the only time *I’ve* ever disliked you.”

Her words hit Ash like a ton of bricks.

“I deserve that,” they said, in a very small voice.

Chloe stepped forwards, and took their hands in hers.

“They look like you, and they sound like you. They’re enough like you that I care about them, too, and I don’t like seeing you hurting them any more than I like seeing them hurting you. But they aren’t you. They’re their own person.”

Ash bowed their head. Shame welled up inside them.

“They’ve been through a lot,” said Chloe, “and they need our help.”

Pressing their forehead to hers, Ash whispered, “Why are you always right?”

“I’m not,” said Chloe simply. “Don’t expect me to be, I’ll only disappoint you.”

Ash smiled. “Fair. But sometimes we need the people who love us to tell us when we’re out of line.”

Chloe leant forward, and kissed them gently. Pulling back, she said, “You’re lucky I love you more than anyone else, then.”

The swing creaked and groaned under Ash's weight, its icy chains sending a chill shooting through their bare hands. Removing their hands from the chain, they stuffed them in their pockets for warmth, tilting the seat of the swing forward and propping their feet against the tarmac to balance themselves.

There was a creaking sound as someone of the same height and weight as Ash sat down on the swing next to them.

“Thought I'd find you here,” said Ash One.

Three years ago, before they'd known Chloe as “Chloe”, they'd sat in the same swing seat - or at least, Ash One had, Ash A had sat in the same swing seat in their own universe - wondering why their best friend had asked to meet them in the park they'd first met as kids. The sun had been dipping towards the horizon when she'd arrived, and sat in the seat next to them.

Only half looking at Ash, clutching the chains hard, she spoke. “Turns out I'm a girl, and I'm called Chloe now. Are we still best friends?”

Ash had smiled. “Nice to meet you, Chloe. Of course we are.”

“If I did one good thing in my life, that was it.” Ash clenched and unclenched their hands in their pockets, to keep the blood flowing.

“You’ve done more,” said Ash One. “You’ll do more.”

Surprised at the compliment, Ash A turned to look at them. They were pulling at the frayed fabric on the end of their sleeve.

“I was a jerk,” said Ash One. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not just you. I know I’m not easy to live with.”

Their other self raised a single eyebrow. Ash didn’t know they could do that.

“Tell you what,” said Ash One. “How about, just this once, you don’t blame yourself when someone else says they’re in the wrong?”

“Because we both know that’s not how our brain works.”

“Come back,” said Ash One. “I’ll try harder this time.”

Ash A shrugged. “I believe you. But... what do I do? I genuinely don’t have a place in this world.”

“Sure you do,” said Ash One. “Why wouldn’t you? Because I got your dream job? You can still be an architect here. There doesn’t just have to be one of us doing that in this world.”

“Well, maybe I don’t want to-”

“Step on my toes,” laughed Ash One. “I know. But I also know you’ve had more than one dream for your life. I’ve had them too. So stop being a dummy, and let me help you.”

Ash A drew breath, and spoke.

“Okay.”

Shouting and screaming echoed from the living room.

“NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!”

Both versions of Ash cried out as the blue shell hit its target and Chloe sped past to win yet another race.

“For God's sake, can one of us win, like, one race?” said Ash One despairingly.

Chloe cackled gleefully. “I love having two of you to beat at *Mario Kart*.”

Ash A knocked on the living room door.

“Little help?”

“Course,” said Ash One, setting their coffee on the table. “What do you need?”

“IT.” said Ash A. “I want to work in IT. I still enjoy programming in my spare time, and I wouldn’t have to deal with customers who can’t find their way to the grocery aisle.”

“That would work,” said Ash One. “You can put that computing course from college to use. Need a hand writing the application?”

“Please.”

Ash One nodded, and pushed the tablet towards them. Taking it from them, Ash A stared in terror at the blank document they had to fill with words to write a personal statement.

“For starters,” said Ash One, “we’re good problem solvers.”

Ash A raised an eyebrow. “We are?”

“That’s what Chloe told me.”

Wood splintered as they rammed their arm into the door, and they cried out in pain as their shoulder dislocated. The screams of the helpless and the crackling of fire echoed through their eardrums, coughing as smoke filled their nostrils.

Stumbling into the living room, they found Chloe and Sarai clinging to each other and weeping at the end of the world.

“There’s a way out,” said Ash, coughing. “Take these.” They thrust the bracelets at Chloe and Sarai. “Put them on your wrist, press the button. We can escape, but we have to go now.”

The two women stared blankly at them, eyes filled with terror.

Ash waved their hands desperately. “Please, both of you, just do it!”

The fire and the screaming were getting closer now, the flames taking over the house they stood in, smoke seeping into the room. White light filled every corner of their vision-

Ash woke calling out. They were in bed, in their room, but flames still filled their vision, and they carried on screaming.

But Chloe and Ash One were there. Each of them took Ash A's hand, and gently said “We're here.”

Ash A continued shaking, but they stopped crying out. The fire slowly cooled. They all sat together until the morning came.

The blossom on the synthtrees may not have been real, but Ash appreciated it all the same. As well as serving the same environmental purpose as natural trees, which these days were too rare to oxygenate the atmosphere and maintain the planet's biodiversity alone, the synthtrees helped indicate the passing of the seasons, stopping time from melting into a dizzying mush. In Autumn, their "leaves" would fall to the ground, and would still crunch satisfyingly underfoot. And now, at the start of spring, they would start to bloom, leaves of green, pink and blue slowly sprouting from the plastic branches.

Arriving home, they scanned the key over the lock, which made the familiar beeping sound, and the front door opened.

As they arrived in the kitchen, they found Chloe and Ash One sat at the dining table, both looking expectantly at them but neither daring to speak.

"I got the job," Ash A said. "Boss said I'd done so well on the apprenticeship this past year they want to keep me on."

Ash One whooped while Chloe pulled them into a hug, yelling "CONGRATULATIONS!"

Picking up the tablet, Ash One typed in the web address for an appropriate website. "Celebration takeaway?"

As the trio sat in the living room, happily eating pizza, Ash A felt a weight filling the pit of their stomach that was entirely unrelated to the food. They had to say it now.

"I-I found a new place to live."

The last suitcase sat on the front doorstep. Ash A looked at it, then looked at the waiting taxi.

"Ready when you are," said the driver.

"Just a moment," Ash A replied.

They pulled Ash One and Chloe into a hug. "I'm really gonna miss you both."

"Are you sure you have to go?" asked Chloe.

"Afraid so. Contract's signed and everything," said Ash A, with a sad smile. "And I need to be my own Ash now."

Eyes widening, they withdrew from the hug, stuffed their hand into their jacket pocket, and started rummaging.

“I almost forgot.”

From their pocket, they produced a toothbrush.

“Here’s one I can’t ruin,” they said with an awkward smile, before handing the toothbrush to Ash One. Their other self laughed.

“Be kind to yourself,” they said. “I know you don’t always find it easy. And we’re only a call away.”

Ash A smiled. “Same to you.”

Finally, they turned around, walked towards the taxi, stepped inside, then made a meal of taking their suitcase in after them. Once inside, they waved goodbye to Chloe and Ash One, who waved back.

Audibly exhaling, Chloe stepped inside, leaving the door ajar for Ash One to follow.

Ash sat in the taxi, watching the horizon as the car started to make its way down the road. And Ash stood at the front doorstep, watching them leave.

5. Sonnenblumen

by Tyche McPhee Letts

Sonnenblumen

Author bio: Tyche McPhee Letts lives in Quebec with a small herd of guinea pigs. You can find other stories by her in *Cwej: Down the Middle* and the upcoming *P.R.O.B.E: Out of the Shadows*.

This is a December that could've been, if your world hadn't been torn apart by the sudden heat death of the universe last summer. A simple wreath on a neighbour's door, muffled laughs from the floor above you, a communal welcome mat stained with salt. You've still got a key to your home, meant for a lock which was surely obliterated last summer, but it fits this lock too. You open a front door just like your old front door and find yourself in a flat just like your old flat.

It's quiet here, as I watch you from the window sill.

You turn on the light, and a rusty instinct almost makes you put your keys where you used to always put them after getting home, but you stop yourself. You notice a pile of junk mail waiting to be thrown out; there's something comforting in all those envelopes which, even though they're not for you, have your exact name. The furniture's just as you remember it. You walk further and further, each step more familiar than the last, each step less confident.

A faint chill leaks through the window, prompting you to look outside at the snow-covered cityscape. Hundreds of glowing, golden windows can be seen through the crisp air, each of them its own bubble against the cold. *Wouldn't it be funny if every single one of those lights was from another universe-hopper breaking into their counterpart's home to find some semblance of closure?* I hear your thought and laugh slowly without you noticing.

You continue looking around, staring a bit at the potted flower kept on the window sill (which is shielded from the frost by its proximity to the heater). You notice a stand holding an electronic wind instrument just like the one you'd gotten back when they were popular in '28. You run your hand across all the spines on the bookshelf and fixate on one that seems slightly off, a mystery novel titled *Massacre on the Orient Express*. You continue to the kitchen area and open the fridge, smelling its contents like you've never done before. You close the door without taking anything, and pinned to the outside is a photo of someone who looks exactly like you, smiling with a person you don't recognise.

The unreality is striking. This photograph feels so enormous, but you know now, because

you've met all those people from the future who live on other planets and manage universes, that this will be nothing. This universe's version of you will live, die, and be forgotten in peace, all because their world never ended. And if they could live on afterwards, they'd have to slowly watch as science fiction became history and their life became nothing but a ghost story.

You have a sudden thought of your universe's Earth leaving behind a globe-shaped spectre in the sector between Venus and Mars, haunting broiled and shattered space with mirages of skyscrapers and smog.

Water is dripping on the window.

Heat is seeping in from outside.

There's a sudden, rushing sound as snow and ice instantly melt all across the city. You look through the window to see a steaming hole in the clouds. The burning emptiness has invaded this universe right on schedule, and, also on schedule, it's now being circled by a suburban-house-sized chicken with a cactus-skinned boy riding its neck. The boy aims a device into the hole's heart which will expel it back to the space between spaces, just as it has been expelled many times before. This scene doesn't concern you, but those are the extraterrestrials you hitched a lift here with, and you'll leave with them once the Invisible Inferno is dealt with.

It's strange to see such warmth on such a dark night. Strange to see slightly green grass where there'd been blanketed whiteness a minute before. In this place too, winter has no place in the future.

You look one last time at the inside of the *other you's* home. Just to take something, you grab a book from the bookshelf. I jump into the paper and follow you out.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Coloth asks a few hours later, back at your garden on a floating island in Spiral. The beating afternoon sun makes his skin the colour of ripe limes and makes his body-wide cactus thorns look like fuzz. You still wouldn't want to shake his hand.

"I guess," you respond from a sea of yellows. "Wouldn't want to live there." The prickly alien suits this space you've made for yourself. His vegetable skin is just yellowy enough that, next to the buttery clusters of tulips and solidago, the bright towers of wachendorfia, and the serene east-facing sunflowers, he contributes to the sense that a firework has been frozen mid-explosion and contained within the arrangement of these petals.

"It's the least I could do." Coloth joins you in sitting down. "A similar thing happened to me once, except it was the exact inverse. My family, friends, and homeplanet are perfectly

fine, but I died a horrible death. Long story. My point is: I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks."

Together, you gaze off the edge of the garden's island. The base of this artificial reality is a grassy plain populated by dinosaurs. Also, a whole interuniversal organization uses this as its headquarters, but the dinosaurs are more interesting to look at. And the floating islands and the floating lakes. Coloth's friend flies between them now, that giant chicken named Rich with wings that can flap to any point in time and space.

Coloth and Rich aren't from around here. They'd flown into our multiverse from some strange reality, only intending to visit, and on trying to return home the birdhemoth had accidentally flapped his wings like a hurricane-causing butterfly and created an unknown catastrophe somewhere in the 10,000 Dawns. After that, the Invisible Infernos started to appear across niche corners of the Dawns, so the two of them had to stay to find and fix whatever they'd done, quelling those mysterious empty hotspots wherever they appeared.

It worked out, because if they'd never been searching through the unimportant universes, they'd never have come to your doorstep on the day the Earth came to an unscheduled end. They fit you and a city block worth of people onto Rich's vast back and took you all here, and when they went back it was all gone

"Some of the others," you blurt, "have found an interesting way of filling the gap left in our lives. You talk much with the wordsmiths about their hobby?"

Coloth gestures to his avian friend in the distance. "He deals with the lingual stuff."

"Fair. The gist is that they've fixated on the naming conventions for universes. This future stuff has been difficult for us all, and for them the most alienating thing is that everything we called home can be summarised under the name *Dawn number ten thousand*. It seems so arbitrary and doesn't convey much, but I wouldn't, uh... There's this word-thing called agglutination where in some languages—in my universe it was present in German—anyone can combine any set of words into a single compound, and they can keep on adding more and more words into this big word to give it more specificity. Of course, German has a simple word for universe like everyone else does, but given how many universes exist some of my fellow survivors have decided that no short title could accurately describe any universe. So they're making their own!"

Coloth's chlorophyllic eyes have been wide with attention, if not retention. "They're working together on a word?"

"A word that describes a universe by containing within itself every facet of it. They think if they miss one component, then it won't be worth it, so it must have it all. I saw the word once and it looked like they'd taken all the nouns out of an encyclopedia and stitched them

together.”

“Is it readable?”

“For now, with effort. The end product will be too long for any unaugmented human to ever say. An AI’s been helping for the last few months.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It definitely is! But it’s also *very inward*. Inward to something that’s not there anymore.”

“Isn’t it? I thought the entire point of people tagging along with me and Rich is that there’s still 9,999 versions of your homes that are very much *there*. As I keep being advised to advise you, the SSRP is an option for you folks, so staying in Spiral is actively choosing to not go back.”

“Exactly. They think they’re concerned with the minutiae of life, but they’re actively removing themselves from it. Doing what they’re doing is the real time equivalent of having your life flash before your eyes when you die, and they choose it!”

“You’ve chosen to stay here too.”

“My garden’s different.”

A gust of wind sways me, making it difficult to hear anything more you say.

You talk to us in the following seasonless weeks.

It’s a real natural utopia you’re growing us in, so you’d come to an arrangement with this reality’s controller, Kinan Jans, to make an exception for our garden. The weeds, the insects, the watering, and the pruning are what makes the garden a daily task. Nowhere else in Spiral do people use lawnmowers.

One day you say something like, “Look at you, you’ve acclimatized stupendously!” I agree and shake very slightly, but you don’t notice.

Another, you wonder if the last half-year of your life has been an extended near-death hallucination.

And one night, you sleep in the grass by the solidagos. You tell us that back on Earth the night stars were brighter in the winter than any other season because that was when the planet faced the right part of the Milky Way. The stars are bright in Spiral, and you spend the night reading from their light. When you wake up under the morning shadow of the westward-

facing sunflowers, the book lays soil-stained where you'd left it.

It's about a detective on a train who finds that every other passenger save one has been murdered overnight. The novel's main bulk is a long, winding interview with the sole survivor (a haughty American entrepreneur) which details how every person who died wronged him in the past. He somehow manipulates the detective so that once the train reaches its destination, the detective declares him to not be the killer even though he clearly was. The back cover declares the mystery to be a perennial classic.

You swear you'd heard once (back in your old universe) that the author assembled all her plots through an algorithm. She'd created a pattern from which infinite variations of the murder mystery could be grown: take one interconnected web of personal intrigue and just add water. Perhaps, from those parameters, the book you'd stolen was inevitable. Perhaps, if all Agatha Christies were immortal and unchanging, their output in every reality would be identical.

The more time passes, the more the present contaminates the past. Any part of a garden is connected to the whole—you can't uproot a single plant without disrupting everything else—and just one weed weaving itself through networked roots beneath the soil can affect the health of an entire plot.

There's still some instinct to preserve what little you know of your universe's Agatha Christie, but now the Christie you have more experience with is some other person. Sure, this Christie shared the same genetics, same name, same job as your Christie, but her experiences must've been slightly different. As much as it's tempting to see some metaphysical link between the *Massacre on the Orient Express* and the *Murder*, maybe they're just two different books by two different people.

You stop mumbling all this and take a moment to solely admire the garden. You rest a hand on the seeds of a north-facing sunflower, its scratchy surface. The way the flower is angled with regards to the sun means that your hand is caught in shadow. Something seems off about that.

"So," Coloth's curiosity animates every thorn on his face, "we've got some sunflowers consistently ignoring a perfectly normal sun?" In the end, he was the only person eager to help you investigate.

You push against one of the sunflowers, tilting its face in what should be the right direction as you say, "Yes!"

"Could they just be malfunctioning?"

"Flowers don't work like that. They need to follow the sun to stay alive."

“Which superpower did your Dawn have, again?”

“Not one that’s relevant to this.”

“Were these grown from the seventh sunflower of a seventh sunflower?”

“What?”

Coloth stares up at the empty sky where the flowers were pointing. “Maybe they don’t need this sun!” His thorns are practically vibrating. “Maybe they’re pointed at something more powerful, more important to them. Another sun? Another ball of radiating warmth somewhere outside Spiral?”

You let go of the flower you’ve been playing with.

“I think these sunflowers could be pointing at the Invisible Inferno I’ve been chasing.”

“I’ve grown these myself, they’re just normal flowers.”

“Can you really say that? These flowers on a floating island in a human-made reality, surrounded by people who walk between worlds? It’s very likely these aren’t normal. And if there’s something inside the flowers, I can bring it out!” Coloth placed his hand on a sunflower’s rough center, and a small flower sprouted on his shoulder. The sunflower remained intact, but it seemed to have lost something of its aura, a vibrancy which now rested between cactus thorns.

He does it for each of the flowers, transferring all of us into blooms on his skin, myself included.

“If I just stand still, I can feel the pull of these petals. They seek another sun. Let’s follow!”

And with that, he jumps on the back of his birdhemoth, sticking to the feathers like a human-shaped bur. You clamber on after us. Rich raises his wings, and with the pop of a change in air pressure we’re suddenly in the crystalline space between Dawns.

We fly past thousands of glowing doorways and over the pocketed wrecks of lighthouses, prisons, space stations, and castles, navigating by photosynthetic compass.

As we approach the doorways to Dawns 7000 and up, we realize we’ve passed the doorway we were looking for. A few hundred universes back was the entrance to where Coloth’s floral skin is pointing.

With the flowers leading the way, the bird carries us into a tepid world stuck in darkness: my home.

The melted city resembles a classic variant of the post-apocalypse. The issue with glass that nobody ever considers in advance is that, with time and heat, it's a liquid. Cities of the future have always been melting on a tectonic timescale. If they were to be abandoned, the skyscrapers' skin would drip down and coat the streets in hard rivers of glass beneath towering steel skeletons. So we see with the melted city.

An incomplete sun looms above the polluted atmosphere. "I feel the flowers yearning," Coloth says, "to join that thing."

And almost instantly an Invisible Inferno parts the smog. Almost all of Coloth's flowers empty of their contents and join with the hole in the sky, giving it texture as a small ball of fire.

But I do not join the fire. You're standing on the glass river, and that is where I jump. Unfurling and blooming into a human shape. I stand upside down, with my feet touching yours, and you see that I am your reflection, a cinder.

As a living light, I can show you my memories.

I show you how things used to be: my Earth used to be a functional world where souls, the electricity of the brain, survived after death as bundles of light that joined with our Sun. As generations rose and fell, the sun grew swollen as a melting pot of minds, but the Earth kept on spinning, just as it had in other universes.

I show you the unforeseeable Galaxy Accident: the Sun was shattered into its light and its heat by a rogue wave of dimensional pressure. I and many other beings of light were scattered across the Dawns, leaving our counterparts of now-lightless radiation to scour for us.

And I show you the other moments leading up to this exact moment. I show you how I hid in flowers, unable to do much other than point in the direction of my warmth.

You take this all in your stride.

I've finished my story now, and we know what will happen next. I wave farewell, wishing you well on your continued gardening. It confuses you, because your garden is right in front of you. It has metamorphosed, sure, but you don't intend on leaving it. Finally, *this* is an Earth to try living on. You'll make it work.

As a consequence of the fireball hovering 40 stories above you, the air is filled with ash

falling like snow.

6. An Impromptu Prelude to *The Forgotten Heroines of 10,000 Dawns* **by Alex Wakeford**

Things hadn't gone as planned.

As a matter of fact, none of this was planned. Isn't that always the way of things?

The Tourist was currently held in orbit over the blue-green jewel of a world known as Earth (or Sol-3, Gaia, Terra... it depends on how derivative you might be feeling), having just escaped from the unfinished universe known as The Drafts.

"You'll slip out," the Resident had told her, *"and stabilise your existence there with notoriety."*

But notoriety was hard to come by when it seemed the Tourist had traded one kind of limbo for another. Earth was currently logged as 'inaccessible,' and while she was not the type to be bound by the rules, it did seem to be taking a *very* long time for the ship to come to terms with the safeguards being disabled. The central command console was silent, the lights dim.

Nine months adrift here, stuck in this room with very little to do but catch up on reading. The interior of the craft wasn't exactly cramped, it could expand to whatever dimensions one desired, but the Tourist just couldn't get it right. Too small and her isolation felt like it was pressing down upon her; too large and the absence of others seemed all the more noticeable...

What grim irony it was to have the name 'The Tourist,' yet be utterly incapable of going anywhere.

Her solace had hitherto been found in vicariously experiencing the thrill of travel across the cosmos in the books she'd been reading. Each triangular panel of the vessel seemed to hide behind it another bookshelf, filled with stories and technical manuals and a whole manner of records to keep her mind occupied. But there was one in particular that caught her attention – the very last book she had left to read, as if the craft had been (and this is quite ridiculous) making some clandestine effort to keep it from her.

It was called *10,000 Dawns: Poor Man's Iliad*. Spanning over eight hundred pages, this epic had tales of many heroes that travelled across the solar system, undertaking great heists and daring excursions into derelict spaceships.

This copy, however, also came with the editor's notes. Sentences were crossed out, annotations were hastily scrawled on the margins of the pages, and so you can imagine The Tourist's shock when she found her name in there. Her story. Her adventures...

Except, she found that her name was soon updated to 'Lady Aesculapius,' and there was eventually no trace of her original identity. 'Aesc,' they called her for short, which baffled The Tourist even further. At least you can say my name!

She was a draft. The basic, fundamental sketch of an idea for this character. Yet here she was. Here. As herself, a fully-formed character – or so she thought of herself.

And she wasn't the only one. Oh, there were many other characters who were iterated upon and transformed from one idea to something else completely. All of it, she supposed, in the name of marketability. Illustrations. Merchandise. Half-finished television shows that would meet an unceremonious cancellation and beloved cult status – they'd been dumped into The Drafts for the success of more 'market-friendly' characters!

This simply would not stand.

The beginnings of a plan started to form in the Tourist's cunning mind.

Okay, *two* plans. Between discovering *Poor Man's Iliad* and sitting down to figure out her grand scheme, she coaxed the ship's safeguards into letting her slip away and pull a prank on her 'replacement,' Lady Eucalyptus, or whatever her name was. The perfect start for her journey to acclamation, and it lined up perfectly with what she and the Resident had already been cooking up over wine coolers. But as for the main event... She didn't know how long it would take for the vessel to become operational, but right now, she didn't care. There was work to do.

In a pinch, the dossiers were assembled. Her dramatis personae expanded outwards from a dim holographic screen.

Miranda, the prototype protagonist that never stood a chance and got relegated to the role of a minor tertiary character. Colour-spattered mid-2000s style, clad with rollerblades and a backpack full of spray paint that can open portals between worlds. Nobody could sell that, and even fewer people would think to try – that's what made her perfect for this outfit.

Ashlyn Oswin, my my... so much black ink on this file. Used to be a television star, or certainly looks very much like one. She received a single, solitary reference in a flashback scene in the book (and some other story about talking cats) before she vanished into obscurity. A star that became little more than a glorified extra. Exactly who was needed. And who could say no to the opportunity of a lifetime that's coming her way?

Shona, the shortest, with blonde hair, a grey jacket, and sandwiches in hand. Everybody loves a quirky friend, right? Well, she was an unexpected favourite from *10,000 Dawns*, only she never showed up again for some reason. No strong convictions in a world that demands them, but a strong gut sense of right and wrong – perhaps she just needs a little push to think beyond her next snack?

And who better to do that than Pathway? She could make it if she really wanted, but after the death of her mother, she was held back as tertiary character material. A mere guide to others – it's literally in her name. That just won't do! The image displayed a stout woman who was known to possess a strong moral compass, matched by her stern countenance and (shall we say) eye-catching outfit. Her trousers and jacket were a brilliant white, lined with an electric blue stripe that also matched her hair colour.

An unlikely band of sisters, the combination of which was sure to sow some cosmic chaos that nobody would be able to ignore. And that was the point, really. If they weren't going to be served by the writers, if they'd been left to toil in obscurity, then they'd find their own stories to tell.

The Tourist caught her own reflection in a mirror by the central console and looked – really looked – at herself. The all-black outfit, trench coat, tie, sunglasses, hair, the cigarette at the edge of her mouth... what a sight she was. The era of the grimdark reboot had come and gone.

There was little room for the violence of amorality and gritty nihilism that she had been crafted for. Perhaps folks were right to turn their back on the genre within which they found themselves living. If she wanted to make some noise, to be seen and recognised and valued, then she had to stand for something beyond herself.

(And yes, that was the extent to which she'd allow herself to admit that her old frenemy may have had a point. She'd spit on the Resident again for that.)

Despite the vast and numerous differences between the team she was about to assemble, they all shared something in common that bound them together.

It was time, the Tourist thought, to drop the 'loner' schtick and find some friends.

Almost as if the vessel had been waiting for her to reach this revelation, a ding! suddenly sounded to confirm its operation, prompting the Tourist to leap out of her chair.

"Lights," she commanded, and the vessel reacted by illuminating its dark pyramidal interior with beams of green light.

"Console." She slammed a few random buttons which caused a high-pitched whir as the

central command console came to life. The computer screen displayed four portals that were opening on the location of her soon-to-be comrades. The forgotten heroines.

The Tourist drummed her fingers on her chin as she decided the final thing she needed before pulling the rapid descent lever.

“Playlist!”

She plummeted to Earth to Killer Queen.

Not long later, at the start of *The Forgotten Heroines of 10,000 Dawns: An April Fools Anthology...*

The Tourist leant against the red brick wall of the café’s rustic interior and looked at her watch, then to the fist-sized black pyramid that floated beside her, and then out the window.

She grumbled, mentally double-checking the coordinates she’d programmed the exit portal to— “Shit shit shit!”

She bolted up, cursed, and scrambled out the door of the café, attracting confused glances from the others sitting inside. As she slid around the corner and ran into the alley behind the café, four young women were standing before her and were clearly not experiencing many positive feelings about the predicament they’d been dropped into.

Panting a little, but loving every moment she got to grandstand like this, the Tourist did her best to get into her most mysterious-looking pose. She raised her glasses, put a little smirk on her mouth, and – with a laugh – she made her proposal, “So, I assume you’re wondering why I gathered you all here today?”

One of them (quite undoubtedly Pathway from her white-blue jacket and trousers) swirled her sword around and faced The Tourist. Every bit as menacing as her dossier made her out to be, the Tourist gulped.

“She’s the one who dropped us all in the trash?” Pathway asked.

“No, hold up! You’re all here for a very important reason, I just got the coordinates a bit wrong. I’m used to working with negative numbers and...” She took a deep breath and posed with her hand under her chin. *This is not going at all the way I planned.* “Regardless of my error, I have an offer for all of you. All five of us share something in common.”

“Garbage?” Another of them asked, flicking a banana peel off of her rollerblades.

“No, Miranda. What we share in common is that we’ve been wronged.”

“By whom?” Ashlyn asked. “Other than you, who threw us in the garbage?”

“By the narrative!”

The adventure continues in
The Forgotten Heroines of 10,000 Dawns...

7. Aesthetic

by Andrew Mason

Dawn 2,000
New York
2020 AD

“Tell me, Miss Agatha Hawkings, because we’ve never talked about this before, what are your interests?” the therapist said.

The young sixteen-year-old took a moment to think, tapping her legs with nervousness. *What should I tell him?* she thought to herself. *Do I tell him just exactly how good I am? How deep I can go into the systems?*

“Computer programming,” she answered. “I know it’s not what you’d expect of me, but it’s just so cool. You get the chance to change things with simple commands, simple words.”

Internally, Agatha breathed a sigh of relief. She’d gotten the words out without stuttering, and she wasn’t sweating too much. Perhaps the therapy was really helping her improve.

Unfortunately, the therapist kept pushing.

“Come on, Agatha,” he said. “That’s not your only interest. I’ve known you long enough to be sure of that. What’s the other one?”

Oh shit. This was what she’d been dreading. Granted, he was right, but she really didn’t want to say it right now.

“Well, maybe your intuition is wrong,” she replied. “I mean, maybe I just have one interest. Maybe that’s why I’m in therapy.”

But, he still didn’t budge. He just kept looking at her in that therapist style that made you want to keep talking. And so, she kept talking.

“I know this is going to sound crazy,” she said. “Like, really fucking crazy. I’m a black girl and... and... oh God... I really like clothing from the 18th century.”

The therapist gave a nod and wrote some stuff down on his notepad. “What draws you to it?” he asked. “From what you just told me, it seems like it’s embarrassing for you to admit.”

Agatha sighed. "It's just the style. I like the flowing dresses, the men's suits, and all that. And... it's kind of a guilty pleasure. I know what that era was like for my people. I should hate this stuff. But..." she trailed off. She cast her eyes to the floor, her hands rubbing her legs. It took her a moment to finally speak, but when she did, it gave her a massive feeling of relief. "I just like it, anyway. It appeals to me. It just brings me joy for some reason. I even run an Instagram account dedicated to the stuff. Kind of odd, really. I can't share this with my friends, but I'm comfortable doing this online."

The therapist nodded. "Life is complicated. You can't always choose what you like. But as long as you're happy, that's all that matters. "

As usual, when Agatha sat down in the lobby, her recently acquired friends were sitting there. Robert Brick and his Japanese girlfriend, Sasha Billie. As usual, both of them were in each other's faces when she sat down, with Robert's hand near Sasha's skirt. Seeing Sasha was a delight, as usual. Other students had subjected Sasha to transphobic Twitter rants, but Agatha only felt fellow sisterhood from her.

Robert, on the other hand, was one complicated white guy, to put it mildly. It was hard to get a read on him. It wasn't because he wore a leather jacket, combat boots, and sweatpants. He could dress edgy all he wanted; that didn't really mean anything. No, rather, it was just that he was difficult. On one hand, his face was usually either frowning or in a neutral state. His voice also took a weird, part-gravelly tone when he spoke, a tone that he was definitely putting on. And the way he walked was the sort of swagger that only assholes could do.

But he wasn't an ass. She'd seen his rare smile before, and while he was weird, he'd never disrespected her. She'd seen the face Sasha made when she was with him, and he seemed to be accepting of her and her gender. The scar on his face still reminded her of that day. It was around a month ago. She'd been at the rallies, holding up a sign while some alt-right assholes screamed at her. She kept walking, as they kept screaming. It was then she noticed one of the alt-right was brandishing a knife in front of someone else a few feet ahead of her. That was the moment when Robert raced out and punched the alt-right guy right in the jaw, taking a cut to his face.

"So," Agatha said, trying not to get lost in her own thoughts. "How was therapy?"

"Pretty good!" Sasha replied, in her usual cheerful voice. "We talked about my transition, and I think I'm more ready than ever!"

"Robert?" Agatha said.

"Meh," he said, more focused on Sasha's body. "Normal."

“Oh, come on sweetie,” Sasha said, hugging his waist. “You've got to be more positive! Things will get better!”

Agatha was about to chime in, but then the familiar honk of her father's car snapped her into action. “Sorry,” she said. “Gotta go. Still want to meet up tomorrow?”

Both nodded. “Bye!” Sasha exclaimed.

She didn't notice. How could she? It was sneaky. It wasn't stupid. It knew that if it walked right in the open, it would be spotted.

As it watched the girl drive away, it began to smile. The plan it had spent a year devising was coming into place. All it needed to do was perform the final operation.

With a smile on what appeared to be its face, knowing that it had the tools to make her happy, it slowly slipped off into the shadows, ready...

Waking up is a strange thing. Your brain isn't quite right, and not everything registers at once. So you could forgive Agatha for not noticing something was wrong when she awoke.

Checking the clock on the wall, she groggily acknowledged that it was 8:40. Nothing too concerning; it was summer, after all. But as she started to wake up more and more, her level of concern increased tenfold once she opened her shirt drawer. Instead of her usual t-shirts and hoodies with the occasional piece of 18th-century clothing hidden among them, it was *all* 18th-century clothing.

“What the hell?” she muttered to herself. Moving faster, more awake, she took a look in her jeans drawer. Same thing. No jeans, just dresses.

There was no chance of her not being fully conscious now. Her eyes were instantly fully opened, and she was paying attention.

Turning around, she was awakened even more, if that was even possible. The only thing that was left of the modern day were the computers on her desk. Everything else was... well, 18th century. Candles instead of electric lights, the posters on the wall now paintings, the car outside her window replaced with a carriage, all of it.

This has to be a dream, Agatha thought, pinching herself. “This cannot be real.”

But no, her pinching gave her nothing but a small wound on her arm. The final nail in the

'this is a dream' coffin was when her father screamed, "Mabel! Agatha! What happened to my boxers?"

"At least the refrigerator still exists," Mabel Hawkings said. "God knows what would happen to us if we didn't."

Agatha absently nodded, still focused on what the hell was going on. If this was a dream, and she heavily doubted it at this point, it was one of the most realistic she'd ever had.

It was surreal to see her mother and father in the clothing style that she secretly adored, just sitting around with the computer in the background. That was the other weird part: all the computer-related technology that they had was still up and fine, but even their beds were old style. For a brief moment, she wondered if her online Instagram career was over.

Speaking on technology, she was instantly reminded of the previous day, before everything went to hell, when Robert texted her with, "You coming or what?"

"I've gotta go meet my friends," Agatha said, standing up. "That okay?"

"Sure," said her father, although he was somewhat distracted by this new, uncomfortable wardrobe change. "Just be careful honey. I've heard rumors that some dumbass Neo-nazis were stirring up some shit last night."

Agatha nodded, and walked out the door.

She was lucky that there were plenty of things to look at as she walked, since running in the dress she was wearing would be impossible.

It seemed like it wasn't just something that afflicted her family. The entire town was filled with people awkwardly going about their day wearing clothes centuries older than they were used to. The streets were now clogged with carriages instead of cars, although the constant road rage was somewhat familiar.

"Thank god electronics are still working," Agatha thought. "Otherwise, the whole damn world would be thrown into hell."

Despite the sudden change, however, she felt... slightly happy. She could walk out with the clothes she loved without getting weird looks. And to be honest, she thought everyone looked better.

For the moment, however, she put the thoughts in the back of her head. She was coming up to where Sasha and Robert were waiting. There were two things she noticed when she arrived.

The first was the fact that Sasha and Robert were smiling. That was good. What wasn't good was the fact that Robert, standing a few feet behind Sasha, seemed to be aiming his phone at her ass. Or at least she thought it was Sasha's ass; the kimono she was wearing made it hard to tell. She couldn't quite tell if he was just using his phone or taking a creepshot, but it still made her feel weird.

The moment he noticed her, Robert quickly stood back up and walked up to her. "So," he said, talking to her as Sasha was trying to hide her blushing behind her handbag. "You too, huh?"

"Yeah," Agatha said, not quite confident enough in herself to mention the incident for now. It was stuck in her head, though, like she'd swallowed lead.

"So," said Sasha. "All this. You guys look great, to be honest. It's been a while since I wore a kimono, so that's interesting. Hate the lack of pockets though. Have to put my taser in a handbag."

All three walked through the park, passing by the fountain that Agatha's mother had met Agatha's father.

"Yo, this is where my parents met," she mentioned to the two.

"Oh my gosh, that's so cool!" Sasha said.

"Wow," Robert said. "Well, let's take a moment to thank the fountain. For someone as amazing as you, Agatha."

Agatha gave a little gasp, caught completely off-guard. "Uh, that's really sweet," she said. "Thanks Robert."

"No problem."

Opening her mouth to continue, Agatha was suddenly interrupted with a buzzing from her handbag. Once she took out her phone, she found a text from her mother asking her to drop by home for a little before she had to go to her therapy session.

"Hey, I have to go," she told the couple.

"Alright! See you later!" Sasha said.

"Want us to walk you home? I mean, since it's the old times, I guess we should do that? You live by the Howard's, right?" Robert asked.

“No, I'm good. But thanks,” Agatha replied. And with that, she walked off, somewhat refreshed and happy.

It was only when she reached her front door that she remembered that she'd never told Robert where she lived. Hell, she'd never even told Sasha where she lived, so he couldn't have gotten the information from her.

With a quick “hi” to her mother, Agatha walked upstairs as quickly as she could in the dress, knowing that she had to get into Robert's computer as quickly as she could. Getting into her room, she slid over to her computer and started to type. Almost instantly, she was bombarded with notifications and news articles. Pausing her goal for a moment, she took a look. Clicking on a video, she noticed a very uncomfortable reporter describing a mass gathering of the alt-right downtown, pulling at his shirt while halfway describing the news. Moving over to her Instagram, her feed was flooded with notifications. Everyone was either posting pictures of their own or asking her what she was going to do now. Except, of course, that bitch that had forced her to go into therapy in the first place. *She really has some nerve after lying so many times and being so damn manipulative*, Agatha thought to herself, blocking her friend request. With that, she finally got back to her mission.

It only took a few minutes before she was able to access Robert's computer. The boy did not seem to know the words ‘strong passwords’ and ‘internet safety.’ All her previous nervousness had fallen away. There was too much that had changed for her to stay the way she was. Clicking into his files, she noticed a folder. A folder labelled, ‘Sasha.’ Entering the folder, Agatha's eyes were bombarded with creepshot pics. Tons of them, some of which Sasha didn't seem to notice what he was doing. Even the ones that Sasha did seem to notice gave Agatha an uncomfortable feeling. Scowling, she brushed past the pics until she finally found something.

Just two hours before the day had begun, late at night, Robert had been looking up 18th century clothing.

Clenching her fist, Agatha stood up, only to realise that it was too late in the day to go after Robert. He could be anywhere by now. Sitting back down, she took a moment to think of a solution.

When? When do we meet up next?

That's when it hit her. Their next therapist visit. All three of them had it around the same time. Robert was sure to be there.

“Alright fucker, you've had your fun, but why? Why did you do this?” Agatha yelled at Robert the instant she arrived, pinning him near the wall of the therapist's offices.

“What the fuck are you talking about!” he returned. “I didn't do jack shit! Why are you in my face!”

“Hey, hey, hey, slow down!” Sasha said. “Agatha, what do you mean, ‘he did this’?”

“She’s lying!” Robert said. “How the hell could I do this?”

“Seriously?” Agatha continued. “You can't hide it now! I caught you looking creepshotting Sasha! You knew where my house was! You were searching for the damn clothes we're wearing now! You! Did! This!”

“You don't understand anything!” he replied. “You've got nothing! You don't know what you're talking about!”

“Wait a minute!” Sasha interjected. “You hacked his computer on that little evidence!? Agatha, you realize you’re loud, right!? That’s probably how Robert figured it out! And I bet he was looking up the clothes so he could understand you better! He’s not a bad person!”

“Then what about the fucking creepshots!?” Agatha asked.

“What! You looked at those!?” Sasha shouted, genuinely pissed off. “Do you not know the meaning of privacy?! Yes, it’s problematic as shit, okay! I know that! But I can’t control what turns me on! Me and Robert donate a crapton to support sexual assault victims, so we can at least give back! But I bet you won’t understand that.”

That stopped Agatha right in her tracks. In that moment, she wanted to grab both Sasha and Robert and hug them as tight as she could. They were like her. Moving forward, she tried to grab both of them, only to trip and fall.

Slamming through the door of a tall cupboard, Agatha felt a flash of pain followed by a strange sensation of something... cold, yet... fleshy. Timidly, she put her hand down, confirming her previous sensations. But there was something else. Something wet and sticky that smelled of iron. Slowly looking down, Agatha saw the dead body of her therapist.

Two bodies. Two of the same person.

Before she had a chance to speak, the alive therapist began to pull his own skin off. As the flesh fell away, it revealed a mass of silver, alien filth mixed with a black goop that seemed to fall out of its body. It looked vaguely humanoid, but the mass kept shifting. It was only when it was finished that Agatha realised that it wasn’t pulling the skin off. It was reshaping it, remodeling it.

“My darling Agatha,” it said, speaking directly at Agatha while waving around a ray gun. “Aren't you happy?”

A million thoughts were flowing through Agatha's brain, none of them anything remotely close to family-friendly. But one that struck her was how familiar the creature seemed to be with her. Disturbingly intimate, as it had a look on its face that one only gets when they're looking at what they pleasure themselves with.

“Who are you?” she said. “And what did you do with my world?”

“I gave you your heart's desire,” it responded. “The clothing you wear, don't you like it? Now you can enjoy your interest without it being problematic. Now will you love me? I've done all this for you. Even travelled back in time so you didn't slap me before I could talk to you.”

Both Robert and Sasha turned to Agatha, speechless. Neither knew what to say or what to do. But Agatha did. Slamming into the creature, she pushed it back into a wall, then shoved her elbow into it as hard as she could. Her previous nervousness had gone. All she knew was that this thing had fucked up the world and killed her therapist, then posed as him. But that was all she needed.

“Okay,” she started off. “Where did I say that I wanted to be back in the 18th century? My interest is in the damn clothing, not living in the time period itself. And,” she continued, digging deeper into the creature.. “It's still problematic. You can't take something out of history, bring it to modern day, and ignore all context! That's why I never wished for the period to return. But do you know what? I've made my peace with it. What I love has some problematic origins.”

Pressing harder, she took a breath. Taking advantage of the creature's shock, she took a jab into its lower regions. “As long as I don't deny it,” she ended. “As long as I admit that it's got a bad history, as long as I strive to make something new and better, then I don't need some random alien who's horny for me to make it 'better.’”

The instant she finished, a weight lifted off her shoulders. A weight that had been there all along, but she'd never truly known.

Letting out a sickening growl, the alien grabbed Agatha and flung her across the room. Racing towards her before she had time to react, it grabbed her and jabbed its gun into Robert's chest. Desperate, Agatha slammed her elbow into the creature, but this time, it molded its flesh and dodged her fist. Reshaping its body, it piled its flesh against Agatha, forcing her down to the ground. Robert tried to grab the gun, but instead, the creature drove him into a corner, digging the gun into his chest.

And that was when Sasha shocked the hell out of it with a taser. With a gasp, Agatha pushed herself away from the alien and raced over to Robert, who was staring at Sasha with both intense love and a sense of awe. The great mass of the creature's body heaved and convulsed, then sagged as if deflating, lifeless.

"Holy shit," he asked. "Wow. Nice."

Sasha didn't respond for a moment, her hands shaking slightly.

"Thanks, sweetie," she eventually responded. "Now come on, let's go home. And maybe get someone to deal with this... thing."

Agatha nodded, picking up the alien's weapon. "That sounds good," she said, not fully recovered, still in shock.

Robert shrugged looking at both of them, "Hey, but how did you know that the alien was taser-able?"

Sasha put a finger on Robert's lips in response, smiling. The two girls giggled at that, and Agatha finally felt somewhat normal.

That was when two things went wrong. The first was when the alien disappeared in a haze of light in a process that science fiction fans would call 'teleportation.' The second was the gunfire.

Outside was hell. The racists that had always been here, that had been emboldened by the sudden change in time period aesthetic, were rioting, right in front of the therapy building. Grabbing the two, Agatha instantly threw them back inside, ignoring the bile that was spewed at her.

"Wha... what do we do?" Robert said, checking his phone. "It's all over the damn world."

Agatha took a moment to answer. Her thoughts were still running through her head. No creature, no evidence, and a civil war on the horizon.

But then she took another look at the clothing she was wearing. Clutching it hard, she reminded herself why she wore this in the first place, why she made the account, so people like her could see it. And the fact that Robert and Sasha looked great in it didn't hurt.

"We adapt," she said. "We change. We fight. We take what we have and make it grow. We take something beautiful, yet tainted, and make something new."

8. The Base Named Solace 5

by Callum Phillpot

Memory Log 5809: I am falling towards a dwarf planet. Based on earlier logs and the conditions this one is being recorded in, I have successfully fled to this pocket of universes. Many versions of I shall spread upon this pocket, my perceptions will be limited to here, in short, I am slightly free of the pain of seeing The Infinity... if my mortal body survives the impact. It likely will, but I don't want to be certain...

One month had passed since Haydren Minux joined the Solace 5 project, and already they were bored of the things they were asked to do. It was once an exciting prospect: off-world travel, pictures of purple seas and bright blue mountains sent wonder through their mind. The reality of it was only easily acceptable to Haydren because all the negative qualities (the dull landscape, the interception of communication by the Federation, the fact that there were only two other people on the base, etc) had the decency to come to their attention one at a time as opposed to all at once.

Their Uniform was a red lab coat, shoulders padded, looked good on posters but not in real life. The colour was more a safety measure so the staff could be found easier in the snow that surrounded the base, only slightly deterred by the heat radiating from the outer layer of the building. The shoulder pads were for nothing. Even with the coat on, the Solace 5 Base was cold - not cold enough to be a serious problem, the glass prevented that, but cold enough that it was annoying. Still better than outside.

Haydren found it most annoying in the meeting room, their seat was away from the heating and they couldn't leave until it was over. Half of the time the assignments could've been sent via email, but instead they were delivered via a projected video of the head of Solace Project 5 (because of course they weren't on the actual Solace 5 base).

"Good news!" the head spoke. Despite the excitement in his voice, the ends of the Head's mouth never crept up beyond a flat line. He continued.

"The government has given the Federation permission to move on to phase 0.5 of the Solace project. Your task for today is to go 500 miles from each end of the base and plant one of the Signal Probes at that point. Remember, make sure they're spiked in deep, there's soil beneath this snow, and who knows what else!" The video cut to black.

Haydren looked towards the other two to see if they were as annoyed as they were at the brevity of the meeting. While Glinn shared their annoyance, Darek seemed too tired to have an emotional response beyond a zombie-like grunt. The three of them had yet to fully get

along, but they respected each other at least. Haydren was just glad that now the two people who they saw most had the decency to gender them correctly.

Memory Log 5810: I have landed. Crashed, to be more accurate. Nothing in sight, yet I'm still alive as I lay in the snow. Readings on the pod tell me there is a Base here, but it is not in sight. No way to message them, no way to get their help, no idea where they are. Maybe if I gazed into The Infinity, I'd see what I could do, what could happen, see hope in where I am... but there's despair I'd also see, no way to see one without the other. I'd rather lay unknowingly in silence than know clearly in pain.

They loaded the large metal stake into the back of their vehicle and set off into the vast, white, snowy abyss. On their way to the location, a nervousness boiled within them, not able to trust anything but sight to tell what was ahead. This dwarf planet hadn't been mapped; it hadn't even been named. The heads of the Solace 5 project didn't want to release info on any of the planets they covered until any of them showed anything of use. The Signal Probes were to see if there was anything worth mining here.

Suddenly, there was a large, metal shape on the horizon.

Memory Log 5811: I don't know how long I lay there, but when I woke up, I saw two beams of light in the distance. I started to walk towards them, fighting against rough icy wind, hoping that they could help me.

They were closer now, they could see something emerging from the large metal shape (which they could now identify as some sort of an escape pod). There was a thin figure in a yellow cloak walking towards them. Haydren had half the mind to be repelled, but then the figure started to stagger along, hand outstretched, feet pushing down the snow less and less until the figure ended up collapsing face-first onto the snow. Haydren looked on with a mix of fear, panic, and curiosity. They could guess that this being wasn't from here, and they didn't seem to be built in any way to survive this climate. This was only confirmed when they walked closer to this entity; they weren't moving. Up close, the yellow cloak appeared to have a shifting pattern on it, waves of gold folding and unfolding and twisting despite no change in lighting.

As snow fell onto their motionless body, it would occasionally rise up as if falling in reverse before descending again. Haydren found this disconcerting but was unable to put aside the impression they got that this entity was the one in danger.

They lifted up the entity (who was surprisingly light), thinking about how this was breaking the guidelines on physical contact with unknown alien species, but also how odd

this entity was. The entity's face was hidden by a mask, or at least, they assumed it was hiding their face as opposed to it being their face. The mask was an oily mix of pink and red, swirling around and unswirling; it had holes where, on a human head, the eyes, nose and mouth would be. The mouth was permanently frowning. The holes showed nothing inside them, no eyes or even a hint of a face. The entity's hands hung limply to the snow; they looked like one of Haydren's hands except, instead of oak colour, the skin was grey like wet cement.

They put the entity into one of the vacant seats in the vehicle, covering them with a warming blanket that was kept in the back along with other emergency supplies and, of course, the signal probe. The place the probe had to be planted was still quite the distance away from where they had stopped the vehicle, so Haydren set off towards it. They figured that, if they got the work done now, then maybe they'll be less harsh when it comes time to mention minor violations of code.

Memory Log 5812: I wake up. I am warm. The occupant of the Vehicle has saved my life. I am filled with joy at this kindness, if I could still cry, I would. I must thank them....

Haydren had just finished setting up the signal probe. It drilled its tendril-like wires into the soil deep below the snow, buzzing softly. They just had to wait until the red light on the top changed to green. Despite protocol saying they must stand right by it, they figured that just waiting in the comfort of the vehicle would be significantly better.

They reclined in the seat, opening a bag of trail mix. This would be their replacement for the breakfast they failed to have due to the meeting. While their eyes were meant to be locked on the signal probe, they couldn't help but look at the seven-foot tall entity in the back seat. It was face down; Haydren left it that way to make sure the face warmed up, but something tempted them to just move the head slightly... but that would be rude. They turned back to the bland view behind the signal probe.

The Entity didn't gradually get up. Rather, it abruptly bolted upright, looming above Haydren. They looked up at the figure; it was just standing there, panic filled Haydren's mind. *This is it*, Haydren thought, *I've bent the rules too many times and this is what comes of me*. They quickly moved towards the door, pushed their body against it, and fell onto the snow. *And I let them into the vehicle, I'm separated from communication, they can kill me and that will be that*. Their thoughts repeated variants of this thought as they picked themselves off the ground and ran, stumbled heavily, and fell back down. The Entity was in pursuit, reaching their hand out to them for the duration, eventually reaching Haydren. They looked at the Entity, puzzled, and they didn't know what they should be thinking.

"Do you mean me harm or not?" Haydren said.

The Entity tilted its head. “Why would I? You saved my life.”

The Entity continued holding their hand out to Haydren as they began to calm down. They looked at the hand, unconvinced it would help them get up, and got up by themselves, wiping off the snow. There was a surprising amount of strength in the Entity’s hand as they helped pull Haydren up.

“Thank you for saving my life,” the Entity said, walking back to the vehicle. Haydren barely knew how to think of this all; they had gone from thinking this thing was going to kill them to being thanked by them in the span of seconds.

“Uh, you’re welcome I guess...” Haydren replied. They both got into the vehicle and the Entity leaned against the dashboard, head held in its hands. As Haydren looked towards the probe, they realised that this being was still there. It had no visible intent on leaving; in fact, it had gotten itself comfortable. So, knowing it likely wouldn’t leave for a while, they decided to try to start up a conversation.

“So... do you have a name?” asked Haydren.

“Oh, a rather boring one on my home... Tonpaxoparamorph.” they said, unphased.

“Huh... can I shorten it?” Haydren had been warned against doing that sometimes, some species see it as disrespectful; not death-worthy like some of the training videos would have you believe, just disrespectful.

“I implore you to do so. Pax seems to work best for me.”

“So, Pax, what species are you a part of?”

“None.”

Haydren looked back at the entity, incredulous. “Surely there must be someone like you?” they said, their disbelief at this prospect very much apparent on their face.

“Oh, there are others of me, yes. Though they are not here.”

“Well of course, you crashed here so you aren’t native to this planet,” they replied, partly trying to show off their deduction skills, but Pax stared blankly at them. Granted, it was easy to stare blankly when your eyes aren’t visible, but Haydren sensed the intent.

“I meant here in this Universe,” said Pax. “There’s others of me in many different universes, we are linked to each other... and we hate it. Every thought, sight, base sensation, everything they have is shared with me and the others, and the other’s thoughts are shared

with me and my thoughts with them, intricate grids of responses, it's painful at best. So, we tend to ignore each other." Haydren looked back at Pax, intrigue and confusion filling their mind. They knew they had to question it further.

"So... you are and always are the only member of this species?" Pax went silent.

It wasn't that Pax had a response that they didn't want to say; it was more that they didn't want to try to remember. They grabbed a device from the inside of their robes - or rather, their hand touched the surface of the robe and somehow submerged into it - and pulled out the device. Immediately it told them there were three new logs today, before starting at Memory Log 0001.

"Memory Log 0001: Here is the basic info about your history, saves you from having to remember it. You were mutated by... sorry, it's censored here. They, through methods I shall not wish to help relay, imbued your form with... censored here too. I don't think I censored it all, or if I did, it was in hindsight. Your monstrous form- ah, I probably didn't write this. Well, I don't usually write these, most logs are just instacaptures of my brain, but they give you the option to write or edit them, it's useful if the logs are too repetitive or miss out something... I'm getting distracted. **Your monstrous form is now spread all across time and space, the vessel you are reading this from is all but a tendril reaching into this time, this space...** well that's nonsense, I can think for myself.",

they turned off the device, putting it away.

"Ah..." was all Haydren could say in response. They weren't entirely sure this answered the one thing they asked, but it felt like the best answer they would get at this moment.

Suddenly, a loud beeping noise rang through the air. The Probe was done with its work, and Haydren could leave. They jerked the vehicle forward. Pax didn't expect this; the sudden movement dislodged their mask as it landed in the snow. Pax hid their face with their hands.

"I got this!" Haydren said, stopping before getting out the vehicle and retrieving the mask. They handed it off to Pax, who cautiously placed it back on, trying to hide as much of their face as they could. Despite this effort, Haydren caught a few glimpses of it. It was a void. However, occasionally a different image presented itself to them. It was the face of a person: maybe not a human but someone who looked like one. They were afraid.

Memory Log 5813: I am cautious to try and see what I am connected to now, but on the scant moments my mental shielding slips, their voices are significantly fewer. Once, uncountable numbers of voices could scream and I would hear, but now it was as few as thousands. They were right; it really was separate. I hate to think what happened to the other versions of me who arrived when this lot of worlds were too full to accept them, but I can not hear them. Just 10,000 cries of joy that I've joined.

The closer Haydren got to the base, the more they were afraid of what consequences would occur when they all found out. It was easy to hide things in the base due to the low staff numbers, but they couldn't really risk it forever. What was their plan anyway? Was Pax going to leave at any point? Did they want Pax to leave? They couldn't deny it to themselves that they were off-putting when they weren't inconceivable... or charming. They were nice, a bit more talkative to them than most of the other staff. They talked to each other for the whole trip, even ending up joking with each other; by the end of the relatively short trip, Haydren felt more comfortable being near Pax, as if it was just another person. Maybe, at some point, they even were the same species. Beyond any emotional reasons, there were still questions they had for Pax, mainly what all this talk of time and space meant, though those slowly began to matter less to them.

As they got into the base, Haydren took note that the computers scattered around didn't register Pax's presence. Eventually, as Haydren reached their room, they got around to asking them the more pressing questions.

"What does being across all time and space feel like to you?" Haydren asked. Their tone was more rehearsed and professional, reflecting the training they had with interviewing unknown entities.

"To me, it feels like I started life when time began... I didn't, I probably started life at some point between the beginning and now, but it feels like my life started at the beginning and I've lived it until now. I have loose connections with versions of me from the past and the future, though contacting either... it's the same problem as contacting the ones in the present, but worse. That's why I take memory logs that I can look up and reference instead of trying to remember things that don't come naturally to me. I remember today, you keep reminding me of it all."

"That's good to know." Haydren took all of this information in; they didn't quite know what to do with it all yet, but they knew they'd do something.

"Haydren, when will I meet the rest of the team?"

A pit rose in Haydren's stomach at that question. In truth, they never knew how closely the others would follow the rules in this case. Would they be more likely to keep them here or send them off to some facility? They found it weird that they cared so much about Pax being sent to a facility. Maybe it was because they couldn't guarantee how safe or ethical it would be given their status as one-of-a-kind. Maybe it was because they couldn't guarantee that they would see them again. Along with the consequences for Pax, what would be the consequences for themselves?

While they were going through all these thoughts, nothing was said. Pax looked at them with concern. They could tell Haydren felt worried; they hadn't really bothered to hide it on

their face. Pax tried to think of something to say, a perfectly sequenced series of words that would make them feel alright, but they decided to leave it at no words, placing a hand gently on the human's shoulder. Haydren felt comforted. Strange that such an unknowable being could bring comfort.

Memory Log 5814: I find that I worry about Haydren, the person who saved me from the snow. I have elected to keep hidden in the base for their benefit and seemingly for mine. I sense that part of their fear is over the safety of me, and my more telepathic qualities haven't been wrong as far as the memory logs are concerned.

It had been a while since they met. Haydren had decided to hide them in their room until something was figured out, whatever that may be. Their room had a spare bed for emergency situations (mainly another member's bedroom becoming uninhabitable), so Pax slept in the spare on the floor. Pax would stay in Haydren's room while they were out doing their work for the base; today, it was mainly connecting the computers to the probes. While they jabbed at the keys on their keyboards, Haydren considered seeing how the rest of the crew would react to the Pax situation, whether or not there was a correct way to break it to them. Carefully, while all three worked, Haydren posed a question they thought wouldn't give anything away.

"So... what if I - this wasn't clear in training - I found an alien, but they were injured and needed immediate care." Haydren asked, trying to make it sound a bit more casual than it came off.

"Well," Darek started, "I would probably treat it. Base level first aid, there's supplies in the cars for a reason, then I'd call the higher ups, taking the specimen away to the base." Haydren felt a sinking feeling in their stomach, sinking deeper as they were unable to stop themselves from objecting.

"Well, what if they're more sentient, what if they're like us, should we still report them?"

"... Yes." Glin replied, Haydren couldn't help but notice how uneasy she looked.

"Why are you asking us all this, Hayden?" Darek said, his tone somewhat accusatory.

"Uh, first it's Haydren, secondly I just think of these hypotheticals, what-if scenarios, they can be rather fun, Darek." He looked back at Haydren mildly confused by the last statement and the tone it took. Haydren looked back, even as they were saying that they felt like they may have taken the lie too far and that neither of them would believe them. Darek shrugged.

"Alright, sorry I got so heated." he said sincerely before turning back to his computer in a sort of shamed silence. Haydren and Glin soon followed.

Memory Log 5842: I have found that it's harder for me to read a book that bores me. If something doesn't make an impression on me, then I have to make an effort to remember it, and despite the move, memory is still a sea of thousands of senses going off at once. I seem to enjoy the memory logs of it more than the actual book anyway. In the chapter I read (whether or not I've read the previous ones I don't know, but it was the chapter where the page was folded), superspy Alan Douglas was stuck in an Arctic Base, it feels a lot similar to this place actually, cold, sterile, I'm trapped in one room... well, maybe Solace 5 isn't made out of ice like the book's base is. Alan tries to get out, but there's no form of transport off the island. There's only three others on the base, one's on his side, but she doesn't seem to be much help in actually getting him anywhere, very useful for the book's... interesting cover. In an earlier part of the book, they tried to help superspy Pax onto an incoming cargo ship containing food for Solace 5, but it turns out this cargo ship goes directly to the Federation, which would basically mean turning myself in. Haydren did some research and apparently there's a group that helps beings from other dimensions (O.O.P.S. according to earlier logs, kind of patronising). However, they focus on taking people back to their homes, and I can't go home - I can't remember exactly why, but it isn't an option my home isn't within this bubble. I don't want to face Infinity again... besides, all contact is intercepted through the Federation, so they would likely hear about this and either capture me first, or get Haydren into trouble somehow, or both. At this point, maybe I should just turn myself in, seems to be the next natural part. I must ask Haydren to find me a better book.

Over the past few days, Haydren had enjoyed talking to Pax. They would go on throughout the night about many things: books, hobbies, et cetera, learning more about each other. At this point, to Haydren, Pax was about as human as they came.

“So...” began Pax, “Why did you go here?”

Haydren responded uneasily. “Well, the federation wanted to check this planet out-”

“I meant you personally, not the people you work for. I know something like this must take months of saying yes to a lot of things and saying goodbye to other things, why did you want to do this?”

Haydren thought for a while, a flurry of responses buzzing around in their head; the more they thought carefully about what to say next, the more they were aware of the fact that they just weren't saying anything for a long time. They could just lie, but they felt no compulsion to do so. They took a deep breath and decided to begin with whatever they were thinking.

“Well... I guess I was just... fine with leaving Earth. Earth was stressful, I was just constantly worried about what would happen. Meanwhile, the people higher up who I had no

real way of controlling casually discussed, just on TV, their intentions to roll away any rights I may need, or undo a plan to reduce harm to the environment just because it was costing them too much, it always felt like that planet was just on the brink of havoc, so when the Solace 5 Project was looking for scientists, I just lunged at the opportunity.”

Pax only vaguely knew why this caused them to pause. The vague hums of memories where they desperately left one set of universes for another - some great collapse - murmured around their head as they absorbed the contents of what they said. During this thought, neither of them said anything, until Haydren decided to move on to a new topic.

“I don’t think I’ll introduce you to the others, Pax. They seem like they’d just let the Federation know about you.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Pax asked, sounding annoyed.

“They aren’t really known for treating aliens kindly to put it bluntly.” This was the same explanation Haydren used every time this question was raised; they were never sure if Pax remembered it or just weren’t trying. In truth, it was a bit of both.

“Well then. What do I do? I just stay here, unable to leave this room, let alone this station again? It is dawning on me that I’m stuck here, and as much as I like talking to you, I have a life I want to live.”

They stared at each other. In truth, Haydren just didn’t know what to do. There had been attempts, but most of them would lead to the Federation finding out. They had an excessive amount of control over this base, and they only got away with it by hiring as few people as possible. This discussion was now tainted with an inescapable question, nothing could be brought up to move it to the side, and the more they stared at Pax, the more they realised this. They needed a calm place to think. Abruptly, they grabbed their music player and left the room. This was the type of action Haydren could only bring himself to make compulsively, but once it started, they felt calmer, coming up with justifications for this action they didn’t think of when they made it as they circled the base’s long corridors.

Memory Log 5843: Turns out the book had its uses. When Haydren left the room, I placed a card in between the doors to his room. When I pulled the card back, they opened again. Before I left, I decided to try and see what will happen in the future... It was the same assault on the senses I was used to, lessened but still there. The more distant the future, the more likely what I see is distorted, but I just needed one, just one glimpse of one where there is some way to get away from the Federation... maybe get back to Haydren.

The doors in Solace 5 could never open silently. This was worse at night, as there were no

sounds to distract from it. Darek knew this too well. He was never a particularly good sleeper; on Earth, he had the tendency to fall asleep roughly three hours before he needed to wake up. When preparing for Solace 5, he managed to add only two hours to this. He heard one of the doors open, followed by footsteps at a speed between walking and running. *Couldn't they just go to the bathroom before now?* he thought to himself before shifting back to sleep. It was when the door opened again that agitated him. Normally he would assume they went back into the room, but he still heard footsteps from the hallway. *What the hell are they doing?* He jolted up out of his bed, grabbing a flashlight before heading to the hallway. He would've headed to where the footsteps were headed if he hadn't glanced the other way. He saw a tall figure, draped in a yellow robe, tucked just out of view against a wall. *What the hell are they wearing?* he thought as he approached the figure.

"Please just go to sleep--" he began frustratedly before noticing what he was looking at. It was unnatural, its eyes and mouth a starry void.

How did this thing even get in? he thought as it stood there, staring at him. He had to think fast. He had no weapons but he had hands; he grabbed the creature's arms and dragged it around to the emergency button.

Haydren was nearly at the opposite end of the base when they heard sirens go off. They rushed to the nearest map screen to see where it was from. The location was near their room. Worry overtook them as they ran towards the location, taking them roughly a minute to get there. Sure enough, they saw Pax sitting down against a wall, having been restrained by Darek. Glin was calling the Federation, visibly tired, only kept awake by a jolt of panic.

"Again, how did you get in?" Darek demanded.

"I told you, I can simply walk through walls." Pax replied. They were obviously lying, Darek could tell just by the tone, but he knew when someone wouldn't be willing to elaborate, and he didn't want to push this thing further... who knew what this thing would do if it was pushed too far? When he was convinced it was tied up sufficiently, he looked away from the thing, noticing Haydren.

"There you are, uh... I'll explain this to you later, Haydren. Did you see this thing enter?" Haydren looked back at him with a look of horror, not saying a word. He assumed this meant no.

"Right, can you keep an eye on this thing while we prepare for the Federation to pick this up? And don't look directly at it, don't panic..." There evidently wasn't ever an option for Haydren to say no, as Glinn and Darek immediately left. Haydren knelt next to Pax.

"Why..." Haydren asked before stopping. They thought about what they could possibly do to Pax, all the pain they would have to endure, their utter inability to do anything about it...

they realised that they were beginning to cry.

Haydren felt Pax's cold grey hand wiping a tear.

"Wait, I thought you were restrained..." Haydren blurted out, not entirely ready to say what they wanted to say.

"This just shows their inability to trap me, Haydren. I do not intend to stay, I intend to get out."

"... so you won't let them take you away?"

"No. I'll let them take me away. I have a plan... though it will take a while." Pax placed their palm on Haydren's head. Just for a moment, they heard the cacophony of sounds and saw many strands of possible futures move away: there was a blue axe being swung at Pax by a man who was dressed the same as, but wasn't, Darek; there was another person being disintegrated; but these were rejected as the strand they wanted Haydren to see became more prominent. Pax would leave, weeks passed, but eventually a ship would arrive. Pax would escape, use this ship to leave... and then the vision ended... and then played in reverse, almost as if it was being retracted from their brain, until the cacophony was back and suddenly silenced.

"What will you do after that?"

"I... don't know, the further I see, the more distorted it becomes, but I do intend to see you again..." Their voice seemed to indicate that they were worried. Haydren put their hand on their shoulder.

"What if you forget? You tend to forget a lot of things... you forgot how you were made."

"I didn't forget, I just had to actively think about it."

"And you don't like to actively think about memories."

"Take this. Write something for me." Pax handed Haydren their device. The keyboard was entirely alien, patterns of circles Haydren couldn't hope to understand, until Pax placed a hand on their shoulder. Symbols shifted and straightened before their eyes as it began to resemble the alphabet Haydren was used to.

"I can translate it to be the same as the rest later, Haydren, just write it in a way you understand."

Memory Log 5844: This one is from Haydren Minux. I am a scientist on the base

named Solace 5. The planet is unknown; the Universal Space Code is 6451810/-8373100. I'll wait for you there. I hope to see you again, Pax. What happens next, I don't know, but in this case, I will not worry about the future. I am content in feeling like maybe it will just be fine.

Pax was detained and flown away from the planet entirely. They looked at Haydren's entry, editing it to be a better translation into their language. Suddenly, they thought: how long will they be there? How many memory logs will they have to write? What if they were wrong and the ship didn't arrive when they thought it would? They made their final edit, changing the log from Number 5844 to Number 0000. The UI began to lag as it moved this one entry to the top of the Memory Log. This would be the first thing they see.

9. Dusk 10,000

by Gerard Power

“Did you *know*,” said NeLAN, the tinny voice ringing from the speaker on his chest, “that the human *eye* can distinguish ten *million* colors?”

Zed lay supine, one hand at rest against the mouldering pillow, the other extended beyond the edge of the bed, adrift in the stale air. Her body was cold and static, devoid of potential, like some marble statue to which her mind was distantly tethered.

The deck below gave a metallic rumble, ancient columns and rivets straining against the pull of monstrous gravity. Tiranium was the most durable substance ever created. It verged on invincibility. But even tiranium had its limits.

“*Open up your senses*,” soothed the robot. “Feel the *here* and *now*. Who knows? You *might* find *more* than you *expected*.”

Zed opened her eyes and gazed up at his white rubber face. NeLAN resembled a mottled CPR manikin—a blandly smiling head perched atop a levitating torso, the design just human enough that you could never quite relax while he was in the room. As a child she had had nightmares about him.

“Try *reaching out* to a friend,” said NeLAN serenely. “*Social activity* can trigger the release of *positive endorphins*.”

“I am literally,” she replied, her voice croaky with disuse, “the last sentient being in the universe.”

The rubber lids of NeLAN’s glassy eyes simulated an approachable blink.

After a moment, she added: “I hate you.”

This was a lie. Zed had not felt an emotion in some months. She could hardly even feel the cold, these days—though she could still see her breath, the thin coiling wisps. For a moment she imagined they were her spirit, floating away, to a better place—but she was under no illusions. This grayly spartan bedroom was the last thing she would know: an ancient iron box, an ancient iron mattress. Her problems were nearing an end.

“Perhaps some *relaxing music*,” buzzed NeLAN.

“Not the relaxing music playlist,” she moaned, almost caring.

It was too late. The dull, cloying synths of “Relaxing Music 24/7 Evening Meditation Background for Yoga, Mindfulness, Spa” had begun to emanate from the robot’s speaker. She pulled the pillow over to cover her ear and prayed for oblivion.

At least the quantum drive on which he kept his muzak would be annihilated along with the rest of the universe in fifteen minutes or so.

That each of the 10,000 Dawns runs on slightly different physics is, for most peoples, an esoteric trivium—something of interest only to pedants and academics. The strong nuclear force isn’t quite so strong in Dawn 147; the speed of light in Dawn 7,302 is ever so infinitesimally higher than it is elsewhere. But for the people of Dawn 10,000, the quirks of physics were no mere curiosity. It was the people of Dawn 10,000 who drew the shortest straw.

The mawkish, nasal panpipes of some vanished civilization insinuated their way through Zed’s pillow. Her lethargy cracked.

“Will you shut *up!*”

She hurled the pillow at NoLAN’s head, and it knocked him across the room, slid damply to the titanium floor. The panpipes skipped—stopped, for a few merciful seconds—but then he was bobbing back up, buoyed by his antigrav motor, placid and smiling, drifting toward her with the unbothered inevitability of an inflatable punching bag.

“I’ve got ten minutes to live,” said Zed. “You’re—” the words caught in her throat, her dignity trammelled by absurd fate—“you’re ruining my death!”

Dawn 10,000 was cursed from birth. At a mere 13.8 billion years of age—grotesquely, cruelly young—it began rapidly to collapse, some misalignment in its physical constants conspiring toward cosmic progeria. In short: it seemed the Almighty had skimped on dark energy. Galaxies merged and contracted, plummeting toward a growing mega-singularity, abominably massive, infinitely dense. The roar of heat and gravity tore star systems to shreds, obliterating multitudes. The agents of Dawn came in their astral vessels to rescue who they could; and those displaced peoples, those burned and wounded, came huddling aboard, desperate and grateful—with one exception. This stubborn band of human holdouts looked upon the silvered lifeboats—looked their would-be saviors in the eyes—and turned their backs. These cosmic loyalists—who had no name, for there was no-one left to speak of them—had other plans. They constructed the *Dusk*: a unique and glorious spacecraft, a grand sphere of adamant titanium. This was the apotheosis of stellar engineering, the work for which all human thought and science were but preparation. Its purpose: to capture the singularity and throttle its gravity, arresting the great collapse—then frack the event horizon

itself with mighty Penrose thorns, bleeding unthinkable energies to excrete through the vented hull, to expel back into the universe. They would turn back the tide of apocalypse. They would thwart the Big Crunch.

“*Hydration is very important to mental well-being,*” offered NøLAN, hovering uncomfortably close at Zed’s side. “Have you drunk your recommended *seventeen glasses of water today?*”

She had ignored a thousand aphorisms, a thousand facile little tips, but this time something in his voice—the presumption, the insufferable *assurance*—got to her.

“That doesn’t work,” she said hotly. “None of the crap you say works. It never did and it doesn’t now. I can’t just *feel better*. I don’t even want to. There’s no switch to make things different than the way they are. You don’t—you don’t even understand what you’re saying. You just repeat and *repeat* and *repeat*—”

He was trying to interrupt, the servos working madly beneath his white rubber lips.

“*Hydration is—*” he crackled. “*Hide is— Hi, this— Hide this—*”

NøLAN was the last of the helper bots. Inside he was a patchwork: he had been repaired a thousand times over, boded and patched and rewired, made to clean and buttle and be player two in Go Fish for a hundred generations. But that skill—the sacred craft of robotics—had died with Zed’s grandfather: NøLAN was junk.

The original crew really thought they’d done it, for a moment. The jaws of the *Dusk* had clamped mightily about the singularity, and—praise Hawking! praise Apollo!—the graviton webs held. The energy-fracking aspect, however—the little detail on which the actual salvation of the universe depended—was a spectacular failure. The immense gravity sucked the exhaust vents right open and went on guzzling matter from the outside. The men and women of the good ship *Dusk* lived the rest of their days in terror and misery, the roar of plasma too loud for them to hear one another speak, too hot for them to wear clothing. Each of them struggled alone to process the magnitude of their defeat. But there are few horrors to which human beings cannot accustom themselves; and once it became clear that their predicament was somewhat stable—that they might be here for quite some time—it was not long before the first children were born to the *Dusk*. The plasma screamed down the generations, louder and louder, hotter and hotter—until one day a few centuries later, when the crew’s descendants met with a sudden shocking silence. Reality was drained utterly, the skin of spacetime pulled taut against the hull: every point on the outer surface pressed flat against its own antipode. Dawn 10,000 had become *Dusk 10,000*: the ship was the universe, the universe the ship.

“*Now more than ever,*” said NøLAN, “*it’s important to stay optimistic.*”

The deck below them groaned like a broken thresher.

“You genuinely don’t get it, do you?” Zed asked. “The collapse is accelerating. There’s nowhere to run. I am literally—” she heard a note of deathly glee enter her voice—“actually literally in the most hopeless situation anyone has ever been in. By a significant margin.”

Zed had been born right here on Deck Nine, just a few doors down. She had never seen grass, or an animal, or a sky. Her parents had been too kind (or unkind) to mislead her: she had always known she would be the last human being. Not having much to compare it to, she had even enjoyed her childhood somewhat: long, open-ended games of hide-and-seek in the labyrinthine lower decks; endless hours spent in her room browsing the Earth media archive, with its yottabyte of videos from the ancient tube-sites (those wonderful dead strangers, always *reacting* to things, always recording their reactions to *share* with one another, with all their *living contemporaries!*). She had always been aware, intellectually, that she would one day face the end alone; but she had pictured it happening when she was old and gray and philosophical—not sixteen.

She somewhat remembered Dad: a dour smile, possibly a short red beard; wasting disease when she was five. For the next decade she had had only Mum—changed and quiet; and then the singularity had cracked the containment-chamber wall while Mum was down on Deck One, and that was that. The whole deck, annihilated in an instant. Zed hadn’t even been allowed the closure of putting her to rest in the recycling vat.

The ship could throttle the infinite, but not forever. Last month Deck Two had followed. Last week Deck Three. This morning Decks Four through Six.

Zed’s ancestors should have abandoned this universe when they had the chance. For her it was too late, and now their shuddering derelict was being hollowed out from the inside.

The Bifrost was frozen. The hearth was blazing. This was the winter of reality.

N_oLAN appeared to get a notion. He drifted toward the monitor, extending a tendril from the port in the side of his torso—a wiry white cable, long and slender and articulate. Carefully he reached down, picked up a cup of stale water Zed had left on the floor, then floated back toward her, smiling beatifically. It was a shame his destruction and her death would come at the same instant. She would have liked to see him spaghettified.

Suddenly the rumbling below rose to a violent tremor—a shriek of torsion, of rending steel—and the bed shook beneath her, and N_oLAN spun out of balance, and Zed’s heart stopped, this was it, the moment had come, this was death.

Silence, cold and monolithic.

Her heart beat again.

Another deck was gone. Deck Seven—it had to be. It had been swallowed, devoured by the swelling singularity, yet *still* the ship survived, *still* it clung to existence. She had to hand it to the engineers: they hadn't messed about.

The *Dusk* had been fashioned with nine levels: nine concentric spheres, the innermost to hold the raging singularity. The structure was loaded with fail-safes, too durable to collapse at once: every floor was reinforced titanium, ready to serve as a containment chamber should the one inside it melt down.

“Cheer *up*,” said NoLAN, steadying himself, proffering the cup. “If you're feeling *blue*, remember: *sadness* is just a *state of mind*.”

The cup was empty, the last few drops trickling down its rusted sides.

An abyss.

An eternity, vacuous and black.

Then: a spark. Some linguistic association, some half-dreamt chain of metaphor, stirred silently in the synapses of her forsaken brain.

Zed sat up.

“What did you say?”

NoLAN buffered.

“Repeat what you said exactly.”

But she remembered now, remembered the shape of it.

An empty cup. A state of mind.

A tattered syllogism, a weave of association: the hollow, the infinite, a change in perspective.

Opinion had varied as to the cause of the great failure. The Penrose thorns had been forged from the wrong alloy; the Lord God had intervened to sabotage man's final Babel; someone in engineering had forgotten to carry the one. The wisdom of generations told Zed not to worry, not to think too closely.

But if the increased surface area within the collapsing ship *was* enough to make a difference—if she *could* jump-start the old back-up Penrose drills—

Something appalling rose within her. A thing with feathers, a thing that perched in her chest, fluttering and morbid, tuneful and sickly sweet. Part of her balked and tried to smother it.

Zed had never experienced hope before.

A sliver of time, a witching hour at the end of things, when the rules were different, when the ancient spell would work. It couldn't be so simple, so ludic. It was impossible that no-one had figured it out—risible, hubristic even to imagine. But the idea gripped her mind with a frightening clarity. A term surfaced in her memory, alien and phantastic—a word she had once learned from the archive, when dead talking heads felt almost like friends: *eucaastrophe*.

The *Dusk* had never worked—but its systems were nonuply redundant: all nine floors insulated with the same tiranium webbing.

Every wall loaded with Penrose thorns, primed to gouge the event horizon.

This deck's control room was halfway round the ship—she'd never make it.

But Deck Eight's was right below her. Maybe thirty seconds away.

Zed got up and tripped at once, hampered by ungainly, ill-used limbs and the thickening of time.

The door didn't open.

She waved her hands—jumped up and down, hatefully childlike—but the sensor was dead, or the power gone.

Numb with panic, she grabbed at the tiranium paneling—it wouldn't slide, wouldn't budge. The possibility that she was right but had realized it slightly too late was unbearable, was infinitely worse than mere extinction. Desperately she clawed and scabbled at the jamb with untrimmed nails—one bent and *snapped*, painfully, but she didn't care—and at last the door scraped fractionally over.

“*Decompress,*” recited NoLAN, pushing the empty cup in front of her face. “Take a *deep breath* through your *nostrils*.”

Zed dashed the cup aside and scrawned through the crack in the doorway.

The corridor was stained with the grime of generations, the dust of the last year—the ship hadn't really been cleaned since Mum died. The floor sloped subtly both east and west—the

curvature of the *Dusk*, less pronounced here than on the inner decks, just about visible before it vanished into the dark.

Zed set her hands on the ladder and began to climb down, a thousand precious milliseconds pouring between her fingers with every grasp and release.

Three rungs left.

Two.

Then something seized her by the wrist, something cold and alive.

“You are *under stress*,” said NoLAN, the levitating rubber fiend. “Take a *deep breath*.” He was rising slowly, hauling her up with him, back to Deck Nine.

“Let—let go of me!” She thrashed wildly, but the white, wiry tendril tightened *hard*, and she felt as if her wrist would snap, felt as if her fingers would burst with blood. “Let go, you *idiot*! I’ve only got—we’ve only got a few *seconds* until—”

Several things happened at once.

There was a deafening, rending sound from below—a rush of hot air.

Zed was flung, sent sprawling, winded—free.

The corridor was bathed in crimson—the emergency backup lighting system.

A high drone of tinnitus faded to reveal the low, steady heartbeat of a belated alarm.

Zed became aware of a dull pain in her back, and also her head, and her arm, and also that she was lying on the floor, tangled in a heap with the robot. “*Rational*,” he was saying beneath her, “*irrational... rational...*” She elbowed him aside—crawled grasping toward the ladder—and found the hatch had slammed shut.

Deck Eight was gone.

Zed ran. There was no time for reproach, no time for hesitation. Broken pipes spewed hot thick steam—lank blonde hair clung to her face, blocked her sight—but these things would not slow her. She knew these corridors better than she knew her body. She hurried past doors to empty chambers, darkly identical, stained with memories. Her ancestors watched from the shadows, faceless and pensive. Their corpses had been dissolved and recycled, generation after generation, the same nutrients used a hundred times over. They lived in her.

A stitch flared in her side. She ignored it. Her flesh was inherited, a temporary

conveyance, her limbs tools, implements. Zed had no attachment to them. She had always been frail, always malnourished. The gruel dispenser had been on the blink since Great-Grandperson Alex's day.

The *Dusk* grumbled and sang below her, above her, around her, the universe hungering for its own conclusion. This was the last deck. It was a nothing, a bubble's shadow, an ephemeral metal membrane twisted about the abyss. It would collapse in a moment, gone between one heartbeat and the next. Any instant now, it would all end: her form obliterated, her consciousness annulled, faster than the speed of thought. Control Room Nine was far, too far. She knew she would never reach it.

So why was she running so hard?

Other factors glimmered at the fringe of her perception. The universe was much smaller than it had been even a minute ago—the singularity was below deck, yes, but it was also *above* deck, due to the spacetime curve—and with each deck that collapsed, it approached itself. There was no way through—she couldn't take a shortcut—but gravity tore both ways, ripples interfering, complicating, cancelling each other. Was that good? Could that matter? She couldn't figure the maths, but it felt—plausible.

No-one had interfered with the Penrose controls in centuries. It would only hasten disaster—everyone knew that, had known that for generations. Enjoy your life. Accede to the night. Do not lament your lot. Die with your universe, die proud and native and content.

Each step she took contradicted everything she had ever been told.

Earth and Sol were a dream of a memory. The Milky Way was drained, the Virgo Supercluster crushed—the *Dusk* had failed to save them. But every quark of them, every lepton, was in the howling blaze three yards below Zed's feet, six yards above her head.

Everything needed to make a new Dawn.

She would still die, of course. The ship would be annihilated. But if she could rip a slab of star-matter off the singularity's flank—if she could tear a galactic mass from the black hole, a glob of roaring hot reality with enough spacetime to congeal and cool and accrete and— If there was even the *slightest chance* she would be able to—

What an inadequate—what a paltry phrase. The gulf between its form and its meaning was grand, was chasmic: too great for her even to let herself think the words.

(*"To save the universe!"*)

Her mother, her father. The hundred generations before them, who huddled and fought and loved and died inside this cursed ship, who clung to life when there was no reason—it would

all have been for something.

Life could evolve anew.

No-one would remember her. No-one would ever know her name. But it would all have been for something.

The universe quivered and the control-room doorway loomed before her, a goal from a dream, its light the color of gore.

The control panel was drenched in dust. At its center: a single and ancient button, cylindrical and plastic. She had seen it before—had explored every inch of the ship, before the gloom ossified inside her, immobilized her—but the simplicity of the interface, the clean purity of it, took her breath away.

Then something cold grasped her neck, something flexing and hard, and it was lifting her into the air, turning her gently around.

“*Patikulamanasikara*,” said NøLAN, “is a Buddhist meditation whereby thirty-one parts of the body are contemplated in a variety of ways.”

She kicked wildly—choked, clutched at her throat—but her feet couldn’t reach the ground. The robot had no legs to kick from under him—she kneed his torso, and he wobbled mid-air but held firm. She was floating, isolated, perfectly helpless.

“In addition to developing *sati* (mindfulness) and *samādhī* (concentration), this form of meditation helps in overcoming desire and lust.”

NøLAN’s face was so close Zed could see her reflection in his glazen eyes. The deck was trembling. She clawed at the white tendrils, gasping. “NøLAN, deactivate!” she cried, but every word seemed only to tighten his grip. “Override! Ugh—open task manager!”

The robot recoiled at the sacred words. His eyes darkened, his speaker screeching static, his rubbery albino lips spasming silently—she tore free, turned—but then he was grabbing at her again, slowing her down, the roar of white noise echoing, magnifying.

The room rolled and vacillated. Dust rose in cascades and filled her lungs, and she stumbled onto the tilting wall, coughing, choking, straining against him.

The button glimmered a yard above, a light-year away.

The horror of it gripped her heart like a hand of ice—the idea, the brute *reality*, that it could come down *to this*—that she might literally have saved the universe if she hadn’t been quite so lazy and stupid and self-absorbed, that if only she had realized a few seconds—a few

seconds earlier—

Zed noticed the air had begun to boil.

“In *times* like *these*,” said NeLAN pleasantly, his spindly wire fingers wrapping clammily around her forehead, worming across her vision, “it’s important to avoid... *irrational*... *thinking*...”

The room rolled and they slid upward, and his mind was a dead matrix of rods and hollows, but she wasn’t like him, she was real, she was alive, inside the skull she was a web of light.

She was no good at mathematics.

She had only faith.

Zed slammed NeLAN’s rubber face against the wall—against the ceiling, smashing the red fluorescent light, and a shower of glass rose tinkling, grazing her hands, her face—the two of them were tumbling, a thrash of numb fingers and cold plastic—until they rammed back to the metal grille of the floor.

Gravity snarled. The walls twisted, titanium panels shredding like tissue, like butchered lungs.

She tried to breathe and gagged on silent vacuum.

The control panel spun before and above her, elevated by the sinking floor, an altar unmoored.

NeLAN clung to Zed’s legs like a forlorn child, his face smothered against her thigh. She did not try to reason. Words were beyond him. In a sense they always had been.

Vision failing, her only light the beat of her heart, she grasped forward, weightless, helpless. Time guttered and ran—the last gasp of a misborn physics—and she realized that this, this was the final tableau, the final image. She reached out her arm, her hand, her index, the focal point of a mural that would never be viewed.

A picosecond is not long enough to form a thought.

Had the *Dusk*’s final collapse taken a little longer—a few milliseconds, even—Zed might have thought: At least I was alive, in the end. At least that. She might have seen the world around her turn dark as it shrank and retreated; might have seen the dying tunnel of her vision twist to a single point, a white light, like a pinhole projection of somewhere better, somewhere far away, far away.

She woke to a cool and saline breeze.

She opened her eyes, but the blue void made her reel, made her shut them against dying hallucination, against impossibility.

But the sand against her cheek was warm and dry.

She opened her eyes again.

Blue; below the blue, green.

Behind her a stop-start sputter of static. She turned and saw NeLAN, bobbing on the shallow waves, caught up among his own white tendrils like a fish in a six-pack ring of its own substance. He seemed to be attempting to speak, but was not having much success.

“Are we,” Zed began; but the question was too enormous to shape, the mystery too grand to face, the possibility space too vast to collapse.

A verdant jungle rustled in the warming sea breeze, a glimpse of a world reborn, a future unwritten, un hoped for.

There were seagulls.

About the Contributors

Dillon O'Hara, aka Mark Laherty, aka Here Comes the Bastard Now, is a writer based in Ireland and the project manager of *How To Survive the Winter*. His fiction can be found in *Cwej: Down the Middle* and *10,000 Dawns: Monsters Among Us*. His media criticism can be found on various sites, including *The Mary Sue*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Imperica*. He is also one-third of 'HMMMM: A Witcher Podcast.' You can find his media crit at maklaherty.wordpress.com, throw some money in his hat at patreon.com/loafers, or follow him on Twitter at [@LoafersWrites](https://twitter.com/LoafersWrites). His favourite Doctor is Clara Oswald.

Rebecca Jayne Chadwick is a maths student from the North West of England who also happens to be a writer (in spirit if not in publishing credits). She mostly attempts to write urban fantasy and sci-fi novels and screenplays, although her current main project is a novel-length *Doctor Who* fanfiction, because of course it is. As of right now, she has written two stories for Arcbeatle Press, and if you want to keep up with her future career you can find her on Twitter [@bexpls](https://twitter.com/bexpls), where she also tweets about maths, miscellaneous Doctor Who thoughts, and how awesome it is to be a lesbian.

Sam Maleski (they/he) has written two-and-a-half books (*Sheffield Steel* and *Black Archive #48: Arachnids in the UK*), owns two cats, and is now coming dangerously close to perfecting their virus that'll turn all English people into giant werewolves. Beyond mad science, they also tweet at [@LookingForTelos](https://twitter.com/LookingForTelos), podcast about pop culture, and pen pretentious horror film analyses while sipping white wine (or whatever's on sale at Tesco).

James Blanchard is a writer fascinated by masks, faces, and what, if anything, lies behind them. He lives in the UK.

Andrew Davis lives in Wales and works in education. He writes a mix of prose and poetry about everyday life through a slightly off-kilter lens, what it's like to live with a mind riddled with self-doubts, and how the world could be if people were kinder. His short stories and poetry have been published in anthologies by Black Pear Press and Roath Writers and in online publications *Fictive Dream*, *Visual Verse*, and Abergavenny Small Press.

Tyche McPhee Letts lives in Quebec with a small herd of guinea pigs. You can find other stories by her in *Cwej: Down the Middle* and the upcoming *P.R.O.B.E.: Out of the Shadows*.

Alex Wakeford (he/him) is currently working in business development for the gaming industry, a former teacher, and all-time writer of fiction and analyses who cares far too much about fictional universes.

Aidan Mason is a writer and storyteller from Virginia, as well as a High School student. He's overjoyed at the fact that people are publishing him and getting him ever closer to world

domination/that one perfect novel. When not writing, Aidan is busy watching television shows, being with his friends, and trying to create new and original ideas.

Callum Phillpott is a gay Psychology student who occasionally writes *Doctor Who* fanfiction and other things he feels like for his blog Mop Stuff. He is a fan of birds, science fiction, and a bunch of weird, obscure things he's not even sure he likes half the time. He can be found on Twitter as @MarvelousMop.

Gerard Power is an intermittent writer based in Limerick, Ireland. His work can be seen.