

10,000 DAWNS MONSTERS AMONG US



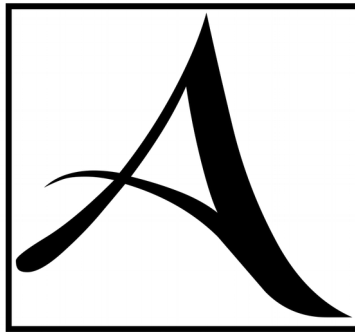
2020 HALLOWEEN SPECIAL
ED. LAINE FERIO

Dedication:

To all the monsters out there looking for life or love or for a place to belong

Acknowledgements:

I want to thank James Wylder and Arcbeatle Press for the opportunity to edit and write for this anthology, all the authors for their wonderful stories (written in a short amount of time, but with much heart), and for the 10,000 Dawns universe, which is an absolute joy to play in.



*Monsters Among Us is Copyright 2020 Arcbeatle Press and James Wylder. All rights reserved.
Any resemblance to persons living or dead, fictional or real, or events past or present is either purely
coincidental or done firmly within the grounds of loving parody. Stories within this collection that
parody existing figures, characters, or events claim no ownership over what they parody.*

Cover design by James Wylder. Dawn Logo by Annie Zhu

Editor: Laine Ferio

Publisher: James Wylder

Arcbeatle Press is located in beautiful Elkhart Indiana.

Arcbeatlepress.com

Table of Contents:

1	All In A Days Work by Laine Ferio	pg. 3
2	Lights, Cavern, Action! By Daisy McLain	pg. 14
3	Don't Hate the Player by Dillon O'Hara	pg. 31
4	Sewer Pipes and Spatial Rifts Lupan Evezan	pg. 42
5	Oopsie-Daisy by James Wylder	pg. 64
6	Monsters Under the Bed by Andrew Davis	pg. 75
7	Yorktown by Laine Ferio	pg. 91



1. All In A Day's Work

by Laine Ferio

F-1526--better known as Fizz--hated strategic planning.

Well, *hated* was a strong word; Fizz severely disliked it. Once a year, Theo Bushytail (their Squirrel negotiator) would spring into the office--too early for Min's first cup of Italian coffee, and halfway through Jesslyn's granola bars--and announce, "Today's the day!" and Fizz's internal gears would strain under the stress of him not groaning aloud. It always meant a day stuck in the office, talking to each other about what they wanted to accomplish as an Odd Other-Dimensional Pickup Squad, about what their goals were. There just wasn't enough *poetry* in strategic planning.

Now, he couldn't blame Theo for it, nor anybody else on the team, not even their fearless leader, Minerva Caputo. This was something that Dawn's leadership--however remote from the day-to-day workings of their team--demanded that all of their operatives do. It even made a modicum of sense for some teams to do; one wouldn't want the Public Relations teams or the Special Ops teams to not know what they were doing. But *their* job? It was straightforward: answer calls for relocation, and deal with whatever the situation was. Occasionally there were several stops between answering a call and successfully concluding a mission, but that's just how it worked. Fizz knew what the team did, and they did brilliantly.

So when Theo had lightly hopped his way into the office, his tail swishing in excitement (apparently it was bad form to tell a squirrel out loud that their tail was telegraphing their emotional state; he'd learned that one the hard way), and proclaimed "Today's the day!", Fizz had sighed and reminded himself that his off switch was not to be used for getting out of office work.

"Well, before that," Min said, "we've got a request from Leadership."

"They never ask us anything," Theo said. "At least, not anything we can use."

“Well, they do send us small requests,” said Jesslyn Swift, their archivist, throwing one of her granola bar wrappers in the trash can. “It’s what piles up on my desk when we’re out in the field. If I were here to deal with it...”

“Mail from Headquarters won’t get you out of field work, Jess,” Min said. “There’s not enough of us working here to keep you riding a desk.”

Jesslyn sighed. “I know. It’s just. . . safer in the office.”

“Not always,” Theo said. “That’s why we put safety protocols on the--”

“Oh, right! There was that time that an eldritch abomination from outside the Dawns materialized in the stacks,” Fizz supplied, happy to keep Theo from mentioning the ‘plan’. Nothing ever *went* to plan on their missions, so why have a plan to begin with? “And I actually had to wrestle the being to make it listen to us.” He flexed one mechanical arm. “Left a hole in the stacks ceiling for weeks.”

“Months, actually,” Jesslyn said. “Very bad for the preservation of the materials in the stacks.” She didn’t mention that it had been bad for the previous archivist, who’d been training her, but Fizz knew she was trying to do her best not to bring up bad memories.

“Months are made up of weeks,” Fizz said in his most teasing tone. She grinned, then stuck out her tongue at him. Jesslyn was all right, as far as humans went.

“You’re both right,” Min said. “But this is a big request. It’s to move directly to the top of our queue. Sorry, Jesslyn, I know you’ve sorted the requests by urgency.”

“Not a problem,” Jesslyn said. “The sorting priorities are always a bit flexible. What is it?”

“Whatever it is, bring it on,” Fizz said, his internal gears beginning to vibrate with anticipation. “We can handle it.”

“You say that now,” Jesslyn said.

“I will always say it,” he responded. *Especially if it gets us out of planning.*

“Yes, but sometimes we end up in sewer pipes,” she answered. “And Dawn’s cleaning service adds an extra fee to our paychecks.”

“That’s not because we can’t handle it,” put in Theo. “It’s just sometimes what happens.”

“Focus,” Min said. “This request was routed to us by the Head; it’s got their time signature on it, anyway. We’re to go to Dawn 555 and work with some folks astray from that recent Firmament action. Apparently the locals are *pissed*.”

“They’re constantly urinating?” Fizz asked.

“No.”

“Drunk, then?”

“No,” Min said. “Colloquial for *angry*.”

“That was the next one on the list. Got it. Angry locals. Pitchforks?”

“No idea. We’re just supposed to sort it out.”

“What sort of details *are* in the request?” Theo asked. “It’s always good to know more about the situation before we pop into it.”

“The call from Dawn 555 is from a binary system,” Jesslyn said, scrolling through her tablet. “Main inhabitants on both planets are...”

“Are what?”

“Limbians. Forest-dwelling--oh, great, another forest--humanoids.” Jesslyn flipped her tablet’s screen to show the rest of the team the image. “Probable inspiration for the similar creatures in Earth legends, or in the *Star Wars* movies. Contact with system outsiders has been fairly limited, though they have a representative to the Council. But otherwise, Dawn files on them are pretty sparse.”

“Bigfoot?” Fizz asked. “Are you talking about Bigfoot?”

“Not really. It’s just a conjecture that some Limbian wandered through a gate or a rift and ended up on Earth and inspired the legends. That’s just based on this photo, however.”

“Okay, so Limbians are angry that there’s outsiders on their planet, but we don’t know anything about the outsiders?”

“No,” Min said. “Guess we’ll have to find that out the hard way. Gear up, everybody.”

Fizz grinned. A mission and no strategic planning? It was the best day ever.

* * *

“They appeared out of a rift a month or so ago,” Axel, the Limbian representative, said. “Started talking nonsense about reality-eating monsters, and then didn’t listen to us when we told them not to set up camp in the Grand Clearing. I sent a request for them to be removed *weeks* ago.”

“We’re sorry it’s taken some time for us to get here,” Theo said, ignoring the fact that Axel was wrong about reality-eating monsters being *nonsense*. (One of his best friends’ favorite foods was a bowl full of atom particles with steak sauce poured onto it. The steak sauce apparently heightened the entire flavor profile of the entire dish.) “There have been more than several requests regarding similar situations.”

“I don’t know or care about those situations,” Axel answered. “I just want *this* situation dealt with.”

“And it will be,” Min said. “That’s why we’re here. Now, please tell me a little about these newcomers.”

“They’re monsters,” Axel said, emphasizing his response with a swing of his long arm, smacking a fist into the palm of his other hand. “They set up camp in the Grand Clearing, and we told them not to! And they won’t leave!”

“You’ve mentioned that,” Min said gently. “Was there no other place from them to go?”

“They said they weren’t moving, just in case the rift opened again. What nonsense. They have shuttles, they can go anywhere, and they need to go anywhere but here!”

“What’s the purpose of the Grand Clearing?” Theo asked. “As long as it’s not forbidden for us to know.”

Axel sighed. “It’s where the clans meet each year for the Moot. It’s where they make decisions--crop rotations, land disputes, spaceship lane allocations, tree maintenance schedules. And everyone has a historic space within the Grand Clearing--each space has been kept by each clan for generations. And these newcomers are *trespassing*. They’ve refrained from cutting down any trees, thank the leaves, but if they’re not out before the Moot, it’s not going to be bloodless. I have kept the local clan from taking action, but those who travel from the other side of the planet will be less than pleased if their sections have been disturbed. People are due to start arriving for the Moot within two weeks.”

“I understand,” Theo said. “I come from a forest family myself. Thank you for sharing this information.”

Axel nodded in his direction. “I don’t want there to be bloodshed; I understand that it’s not their fault that they’ve ended up on Limbia One. They’re so *small*. And practically hairless! But they can’t stay in the Grand Clearing, either.”

“Can you point us in their direction?” Jesslyn asked. “We’ll need to talk to them before we can find the best solution for them and for you.”

“I’ll do you one better,” Axel said. “I’ll have one of my people escort you there so you don’t get lost.”

* * *

The vehicle curved gracefully through the trees along its track as their escort, Rute, steered it. They whizzed under the Limbian buildings, a tangle of wood and vine and glass that stretched up and up into the sky. Theo kept pointing out foliage he recognized (some types of plants and trees were the same across universes), and Fizz contemplated tree trigonometry (how exactly did you determine how much of a load a wall made mostly of vines could bear?).

Soon they slid to a stop. “I’ll wait here for you,” Ruta said. “The intruders are just beyond this stop’s gate.”

“Thank you for the smooth ride,” Jesslyn said, and Ruta smiled.

The squad made their way through the station, a long building that encircled the Grand Clearing, and onto the walkway that ran along its edge. The Grand Clearing was indeed *grand*, obviously at least several miles across; Fizz could clearly see across to the other side, and that was only with the aid of his enhanced optical lenses, so it was unlikely his teammates could see the other stations gleaming in the sunlight filtering through the opening in the trees. He always got a bit of a charge from sunlight, so it felt nice to be out from under the leaves.

“There’s the camp,” Min said, pointing to tents clustered around several metallic capsules, no bigger than old-fashioned automobiles. What looked like a line of drying laundry fluttered in the breeze.

“Here’s the stairs down to the clearing’s floor,” Jesslyn said. “It’s helpful that there’s so many signs.”

“Well, it’s their meeting place,” Theo said. “Makes sense for there to be good signage.”

“Those don’t look like shuttles,” Fizz observed. “They’ve not got the right components to work in this atmosphere.”

“I noticed that, too,” Min said. “Maybe that’s why they can’t leave.” She led the team all the way down and toward the campsite. Several feet from the closest capsule, she called out, “Hello!”

A head popped out from a tent. The head belonged to a small humanoid; they had curly brown hair, and their eyes widened in surprise. “A human!” they cried, and ducked back into the tent.

“Hello,” Min said. “We’ve come to talk.”

“Just a minute!”

The tent rustled for a moment, and then the small humanoid popped out of the tent, pulling a larger humanoid who looked to be about fifteen standard years old behind it. “See, Hael, some humans!”

“Everybody stay inside, I’ll handle this,” Hael called out toward the other tents, though the younger child stayed near him despite his words.

“Looks like they’re just kids,” Jesslyn whispered.

“These two are, anyway,” Min answered, keeping an eye on the other tents and on the shuttles.

Hael stepped in front of the smaller child. “If we’re hallucinating...”

“Not a hallucination,” Min said. “I’m Min Caputo, and we’re the OOPS squad.”

The smaller one giggled. “Oops?”

“It means Odd Other-Dimensional Pickup Squad,” Theo said from his perch on Fizz’s shoulder. “When people need help, we come to do exactly that.”

“So you say *squad* twice?”

“We weren’t the ones who named the team,” Jesslyn said.

“Look, I don’t really care. And I don’t know you guys,” Hael said. “Why are you here?”

“Well, the Limbians don’t want you to be camped here,” Min said.

“The monsters who told us to leave? They’re called Limbians?”

“They’re not monsters,” Theo said. “They’re the inhabitants of the planet you’re on, Limbia One. Limbia Two is the planet you’ve probably been seeing in the sky at night.”

“It’s very pretty,” the smaller kid said. “Are you a squirrel?”

“I’m sure it is very pretty,” Theo said. “And yes. My name is Theo.”

“Cool. There’s a talking squirrel!”

“Don’t be rude,” Hael said. He looked back at the team. “Mom said if we got separated, we were supposed to wait,” Hael said. “And this is where we ended up, and none of the capsules with adults on them were here. So we’re waiting until they get here. Or until the rift opens again and we can go home.”

“How many of you are there?” Min asked. “What are your ages?”

“Twenty. I’m the oldest. The youngest is Del here. They’re six.”

“You can’t stay here,” Min said.

Hael shrugged. “Why not? It’s open space. And Mom said to wait.”

“Every piece of ground in this clearing is claimed by a Limbian clan,” Theo said patiently. “And they will do *anything* to maintain their claim.”

Hael seemed to understand what *anything* meant. The hard look on his face softened. “But Mom told us to wait. That’s what she said to do. And we’ve been waiting.”

“Hael, can I call you Hael?” Min asked. At his nod, she continued, “Hael, it’s likely that your parents don’t know where you’ve ended up. We’ve been dealing with situations like this for the past three months, and nobody had any control about where they came through.”

“So they can’t find us?” Del asked, their voice wavering. “Not ever?”

“I didn’t say that,” Min said. “But they’re not going to find you *here*. Not any time soon, anyway. It’s a big multiverse.”

Hael nodded. “That’s what they said in school, before the monsters started eating everything, before we had to leave.”

“They ate the *planet*,” Del whispered, their eyes huge and round and sad. “You could see it out the window!”

“So what we do,” Theo said, “is help people find new homes, if they need them, and, when we need to, help them find each other.”

“You can help us find our parents?”

“Absolutely,” Theo said. “And while it could take some time, you won’t have to live in these tents while you wait. Jesslyn here will set you up with temporary housing and food and lessons and can help you search for your parents on the dimensionet. If we’ve helped relocate your family or families since the rifts opened, we’ll have a way to contact them.”

Hael looked down at Del, then back at the team. “That sounds good,” he said. “I wouldn’t want *anything* to happen to these kids. And the food is starting to run low...”

“You’ve done a great job taking care of them since you got here,” Min said. “Now let us take care of you *and* them.”

Hael smiled, his shoulders dropping in visible relief. “I like the sound of that.”

* * *

“Axel was very happy that we were able to relocate them,” Theo said as they stepped back into their office and he hopped up onto his desk. “Told me that he hadn’t realized they were frightened human children, or else they wouldn’t have been so harsh in telling them they needed to get out.”

“Well, that’s why we try to approach strangers with welcome and not suspicion,” Min answered.

“I didn’t get to punch anything,” Fizz said.

“You did, however, get to hoist those broken capsules onto that equivalent to a dump truck,” Jesslyn pointed out. “Those looked pretty heavy.”

Fizz flexed. “Yeah, and it was a great workout. Still not as great as punching!”

“So will the boss be pleased with these results?” Jesslyn asked. “Most of the kids are back with their parents, and those who aren’t are with people they know, and they’ve all been successfully relocated.”

“Axel said he was going to send a glowing report to the Council,” Theo said. “Maybe that will mean more funding!”

Min laughed. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“Okay, I’m posting the latest request to the internal notice board,” Jesslyn said. “These are the ones I’ll be adding to the queue today. If y’all take a look at them.” Even in a job that involved dimensional travel, there wasn’t enough time in the universe to get through the queue in any amount of time that was reasonable. Fizz knew they did their best, though.

There was a moment of silence while they read through the newest requests.

“It’s the fifth call this week from Dawn 450--they don’t care what we said last time. Or the time before that. Or the time before that. They want the Dryads out,” Theo said, barely visible behind the piles of paperwork and books on his desk. “That’s very frustrating.”

“We’ll make them listen, right?” Jesslyn asked. “Dawn 450 is full of forests, of course the Dryads like it there. The forests, on the other hand...”

“I have ways of making them listen,” Fizz said, flexing his other arm. Maybe he’d get to punch something this time.

Min shook her head. “As appealing as that option is, Fizz, there’s only punching trees in Minecraft, and that isn’t Dawn 450 but Dawn 365. We’ll set out in an hour and do our best to help them see eye to eye.”

“Well, eye to leaf,” Theo said. “Or limb to roots.” Min shot him a glance and his eyes brightened. “Eye to eye works just as well as a metaphor in this case.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Fizz said.

“Wait,” cried Theo. “We haven’t gotten to do our strategic planning today!”

“What a *shame*,” Fizz said, and Jesslyn laughed.

2. Lights, Cavern, Action!

By Daisy McLain

“There’s a monster in the woods.”

The little gelatinous, semi-transparent humanoid said it with such gravity, such conviction, that Minerva was almost inclined to believe them.

One half of the Odd Other-dimensional Pickup Squad stood in the middle of town hall, a building that was old but lovingly cared for. The dark and polished hardwood floor stood as a stark contrast to the whitewashed walls, ornately decorated with blue and yellow edgings and accents. Mayor Vibo’s office was on the far wall, but the mayor himself stood in front of the team, a grave look on their face.

Also, there was a big, jagged hole in the wall and part of the roof, and a metal tower was in the process of being lifted out of it. The noise made the mayor a little hard to hear.

“What kind of monster?” Minerva asked, hoping for some clarification. They’d done jobs with less information, but it usually ended up being a huge waste of time.

“It only comes out at night, so it’s hard to make out the details, but—it’s huge, and completely black, and covered in fur. It has big round eyes protruding from its head so it can see in all directions at once. And, it has these giant wings that can block out the light,” Mayor Vibo said, leaning forward conspiratorially. “It can fly, and it’s impossibly fast. Most of the people who see it just see a blur. Every time it appears, our broadcast systems cut out. We can’t even call for help!”

Jesslyn cleared her throat. She was taking furious notes, which was exactly why Minerva had had her come. "Hi, excuse me. That's surprisingly detailed. Have you seen the monster yourself?" she asked. Vibo bristled a little at that. "I saw it flying," they said. "But my assistant saw it up close."

As if on cue, another Laoan poked their head in from a side door opposite the gaping hole.

"Did you need something, Mayor?" they asked.

Mayor Vibo gestured them inside. "Tell them about when you saw the monster, Tira," they urged.

"Oh! Of course!" they said, and strode into the room. Every step they took left a faint trace of gelatinous residue behind. Minerva didn't understand how the Laoans kept anything clean. "It was terrifying! I was out on the green having dinner, and it was just after the sun set so the lights were all on. It's really beautiful here after dark, with all the lights, I hope you're able to see it once the tower gets fixed—"

"Tira," Mayor Vibo interrupts.

"Sorry! I was just finishing my meal when this huge shadow came and blocked out the light of the central tower for a few seconds! The next thing I knew, there it was on the green," they explained hastily. "It was so close to me! It was looking all around, and then it saw me, and put out its hands—I just knew it was going to grab me and eat me, so I ran. And so did everyone else! I think we confused it, with everyone running here and everywhere."

"And then?" Minerva prompted.

"Well, then it knocked over the tower," Tira said sadly. "I heard a terrible noise, and then I saw it run into the tower, and the next thing you know it was crashing to the ground. I don't know if it was mad because it couldn't catch one of us to eat or something else, but... things just haven't been the same since the central tower is gone. No one has really felt safe going out in the dark."

“Great, thank you,” Minerva said, wanting to cut Tira off before they could stray into non-monster-related topics. She looked to Jesslyn. “You got all that?”

Jesslyn nodded, still scribbling away. “Has it ever... hurt anyone? Directly?” she asked distractedly.

Vibo looked flabbergasted. “It knocked our tower over! And collapsed a building just last week!” they said.

That was not an answer, but Minerva didn’t want to get into an argument. The Laoans were clearly emotional about these incidents. “This is all very unfortunate, but what makes you think this monster is other-dimensional?” she asked. “Lots of planets have unusual creatures.”

“We’ve been living in these woods for centuries. We know what lives here. We don’t have any stories or recorded sightings of anything like this,” Vibo said. “And, it only showed up for the first time after we saw a big green rift in the sky.”

Well, that was pretty convincing.

“Do you have any idea where this creature might live?” Jesslyn asked. She brought up a holographic map of the region she’d managed to dig up before their arrival here. In the town, you could see simplistic buildings arranged around the perfectly concentric circles representing roads and intersecting roads that all met in the middle, at the green. The map also showed where the central tower had, until recently, stood tall in the exact center. Thick wires connected it to smaller towers stationed at each intersection of roads, each with a bright electric light at the top.

Outside the town was just trees—many, many trees.

“The rift in the sky was in this direction,” Mayor Vibo said, pointing to the northeast section of the map. “We haven’t gone looking, though. We don’t stand a chance against that thing.”

Minerva nodded. “We’ll conduct an investigation and report back as soon as we know something.”

“Thank you for coming out here,” Vibo said gravely. “I know this isn’t a very big town, but we need to end the destruction being caused by this monster.” Next to them, Tira waved them off cheerfully.

Minerva and Jesslyn walked out onto the front steps of town hall and turned to watch the central tower extraction effort, which was currently being aided by Fizz and Theo. Fizz was beneath the metal structure, lifting it up and attempting to follow Theo’s instructions to finangle it into unsticking from the building. A group of Laoans were operating a small crane that was straining over the full weight of the metal tower.

As they watched, Fizz shifted the tower to the right and finally unhooked it from an exposed pipe that was keeping it pinned. With the help of the crane, he was able to swing it away from the town hall and lay it down on the blocked off road. Cheers erupted from the Laoan spectators who had been watching the whole thing with rapt attention.

Theo hopped down from the building to land gracefully at Minerva’s feet, and Fizz ambled over to join them, shaking out his mechanical arms with a satisfied look on his face.

“We’re going into the woods,” Minerva announced. “We don’t have a lot to go on, but whatever we’re looking for only comes out at night and maybe comes from the northeast.”

“Is it big and scary?” Fizz asked hopefully. Moving the tower hadn’t been enough of a show of strength to satisfy him, clearly.

“That’s what the mayor said, but compared to the Laoans I’m sure most creatures look fairly big,” Jesslyn pointed out. The vast majority of them only came up to Fizz’s waist. Jesslyn turned to Minerva. “I’d like to spend some time comparing the descriptions we got with what’s in our database. Maybe I can find more information about what we’re looking for, and even where they came from.”

The unspoken request was obvious, and one Minerva had heard many times before—she wanted to stay behind. “This is primarily a fact-finding mission. I don’t expect to find this so-called monster on our first try, and I would prefer you be there to record everything for us,” Minerva said. “Besides, you

can look through the database while we're out there. We're probably going to be in the woods for some time."

"Cool," Theo grinned, having a distinct advantage in that terrain, even while Fizz groaned. His reaction matched more closely with how Minerva felt about the whole thing, but duty called.

They loaded Fizz up with their heaviest handheld tracking equipment and went on their way. Minerva kept an eye on her handheld screen, hoping for some sign of other-dimensional energy and getting a whole lot of nothing. Theo stuck to the trees, leaping from branch to branch and covering a lot more ground than the rest of them would ever have been able to do alone, but even that didn't bring up much.

"None of these pings are going anywhere," Minerva frowned. She occasionally got a sign of something, but it disappeared moments later, only to reappear for another few moments somewhere else entirely. "Are you finding anything, Jesslyn?"

"Too much," Jesslyn sighed. "Big, dark and with wings is a pretty common set of descriptors. I'm trying to narrow it down, but it might take a while."

"Well, we'd better come up with something soon," Theo called from the tops of the trees. "It's getting dark."

It was hard to tell the difference—the tree covering was so strong it wasn't easy to see even in broad daylight. "Mayor Vibo did say the creature had only been spotted at night," she observed.

"Are we sure we want to be out here in the dark when we don't know what else could be running around in the woods?" Jesslyn asked hesitantly. "We've been looking for this other-dimensional being, but... there could also be bears."

Fizz puffed up his chest with pride. "Just stay behind me," he instructed. "I'll keep everyone safe." Jesslyn took a step closer to him, seeming inclined to do just that.

As they were rapidly losing visibility, they pulled out another piece of equipment from Fizz's pack—this one a superpowered flashlight. The orb of light mounted on a pole that fixed to his bag, and illuminated the forest a ways around them from above. It came with the distinct drawback that they couldn't see a thing beyond, and the shadows of the trees as they passed shifted quickly and dramatically around them. The whole group was on their guard, paying attention to every rustle of leaves and snap of a twig.

It seemed to go on for ages, and nothing popped up.

"Do you think maybe we should try again tomorrow, Min?" Theo asked sleepily. He'd given up on running through the branches, and was now hitching a ride curled up on Fizz's pack, but the bright light and tense atmosphere were keeping him from taking a nap. "I'm diurnal, you know."

Minerva opened her mouth to respond when the screen in her hand started to make a strange static noise.

All eyes—and optic sensors—landed on Minerva as she watched her screen flicker and then die out, silent.

"What was that?" Theo asked, his voice hushed.

"The mayor said their monster knocked out their communication broadcasts," Jesslyn whispered, inching even closer to Fizz and the center of the light source.

It was completely silent as the four of them strained their ears—or audial receptors—to make out something, anything, beyond where the light ended and darkness took its place. All they could hear were the sounds of their own heartbeats—or whirring internal machinery—and the sounds of their teammates breathing.

A sudden whoosh was the only warning they got before a big, black blur slammed into Fizz from behind and knocked him to the ground. The movement of the light and shadows as it, too, crashed to the ground, made it hard to make out just what was happening or what had come to assault them.

“Fizz!” Jesslyn gasped, having just barely stepped out of the way to avoid being crushed underneath him. Theo, too, had scrambled off his shoulder just in time to avoid hitting the ground.

Fizz tried desperately to reach back and dislodge the thing from his back, but his joints didn’t allow his arms to bend back far enough. He was stuck. Minerva couldn’t make out any details of the assailant—they were huge and looked almost formless, and they were covering up most of the light, which made it hard to see anything, but... they didn’t seem to be attacking, Minerva realized. She could make out two hands grasping at the orb of light, and a face leaning in close.

Whatever it was, Minerva wasn’t going to just let them continue assaulting one of her teammates. She dropped her shoulder and ran right at it, tackling it off Fizz and crashing the both of them to the ground. It gave Fizz the space he needed to get on his hands and knees and then back on his feet.

Minerva rolled away just as Fizz placed a hand in the rough area of the creature’s shoulder, keeping it pressed to the ground. “You wanna try that again?” he demanded.

The creature’s hands instinctively rose up in surrender. “Please don’t hurt me,” it pleaded, its voice wispy and quiet.

Now, with the light positioned right above the two of them, the team could clearly make out its features—bulging, round, red eyes took over much of their face, while most of the rest of their body was black or gray and distinctly fuzzy. Two wings protruded from their back, flared out and pressed flat against the ground now, which showed off the black, gray and brown pattern adorning them. All in all, an unmistakably bug-like humanoid, which at this size and in the dark was distinctly unsettling.

“Who are you, and why did you attack us?” Minerva demanded, walking around the creature’s wings to stand over their head.

There was no perceptible movement with the being’s eyes. They could probably already see in all directions. “My name is Daniel,” he said hesitantly. “I didn’t mean to attack you, I promise—I saw the light, and... I guess I got carried away.”

Theo climbed up to Fizz's shoulder and gave Daniel a good, hard look. "Let him up, Fizz," he said. "I don't think he's going to hurt us."

Fizz did as he was told, standing up straight and letting Daniel sit up. He readjusted his wings to trail out behind him. "I'm so sorry for bothering you," he said. "I'll go."

"You don't have to go just yet. Let's talk," Theo said warmly, and he hopped back down from Fizz's shoulder to be closer to eye level. "You're the one who keeps showing up at the Laoan settlement, aren't you?"

Daniel tensed. "Are you here to make me leave?" he asked, worry clouding his voice.

"Of course not—we just want to understand what's going on," Theo assured him. He looked up at his teammates and patted the ground. "Come on, guys, have a seat."

Minerva and the rest of the team listened to him and took a seat. Minerva's pulse was still ramped up after the scare, but she wouldn't let that rule her decisions. This was what Theo was good at. Shortly, the five of them sat in a circle on the ground, in the middle of the woods in the middle of the night.

"Would you be more comfortable if we turned this off?" Theo asked, gesturing to the light that was still poking out of Fizz's pack.

"No," Daniel said quickly. "I... actually, could I see it?"

Fizz shrugged and removed the glowing orb from its mount. He rolled it over in Daniel's direction, and Daniel snatched it up immediately and brought it up to his face, just staring at it like before.

"So, where are you from, Daniel?" Theo asked.

“Oh... Well, originally I came from Dawn 92. There are a group of us there, a family line that has lived there forever. But we hop around a lot. It’s a little crowded in that Dawn, and... we don’t do well in crowds,” Daniel said a bit distractedly. He leaned his cheek against the orb and looked out at the team. “I’ve visited a few different Dawns in the last few years. This place seemed like a good place to settle down. There aren’t many people in this area, and I thought if I stayed in the woods, nobody would notice and I wouldn’t bother anyone.”

“But you ended up going to the Laoan settlement anyway,” Minerva completed for him. “Why?”

Daniel sighed wistfully, rubbing his cheek against the orb. “Have you seen their town at night? It’s beautiful. And the Laoans, too—they have the whole place lit up, and the light shines through their bodies and makes it look like they’re glowing,” he said. “I thought maybe I could appreciate it from a distance, but I got too close, and I started... seeing things.”

“What kind of things?” Jesslyn asked, her pen frozen in the air above her notepad.

Daniel’s wings sagged. “It’s the reason we don’t do well in crowds,” he said. “I can... see things, before they happen. Always bad things. Natural disasters, or accidents. All I wanted to do was warn them, but they never listen.”

“The Laoans think you caused those accidents to happen,” Minerva said, understanding dawning on her.

“They always do,” he said sadly. “This happens every time. All I do is scare people. I should know better, but... I can’t stand the thought of letting someone get hurt when I could do something about it.

“That sounds frustrating,” Theo said encouragingly. “Have you thought about going to introduce yourself to them during the day? Before you have a vision?”

Daniel shook his head. “I can’t go in the daytime, it’s too much. When I go at night, they’re just scared of me. And when I see the lights, I... I lose myself a little,” Daniel admitted. “I should just stay away. If I get far enough, maybe the visions will stop happening.”

Jesslyn snapped her fingers suddenly. “Mothman! You’re a Mothman!” she said, holding up the database on her screen. She lowered it again when she realized everyone was staring at her. “Sorry, I just... I just figured it out. We had one on Earth some time ago; that event fits all these same descriptors.”

“We’re known to wander,” he said. “I appreciate you all talking to me and not hurting me, even after I scared you. But this is something my people have had to deal with since the very beginning. I don’t think there is a solution.”

“I’ve never come up against a problem like this that doesn’t have a solution,” Theo said confidently. “Daniel, we do this kind of thing all the time. Our whole job is to meet with people like you and people like the Laoans, and try to come up with a workable solution for you both. We can set up a meeting with the mayor so you can talk. Once they realize you aren’t a threat—”

Daniel left to his feet suddenly, dropping the orb of light. He looked up, staring straight into the trees above.

“Daniel?” Minerva asked.

“It’s happening again,” Daniel said, his voice suddenly quiet and distant. “It’s not—I—I can’t. I can’t just—”

“It’s alright, Daniel. What are you seeing?” Theo asked. He hopped back up on Fizz’s shoulder to be taller and better able to see as the rest of the team rose to their feet.

“It’s going to cave in, I can’t—” Daniel shook his head rapidly. “I can’t let it happen again.

His wings spread out, and Daniel shot into the sky, disappearing through a gap in tree branches. One moment he was there, the next he was gone.

“We have to follow him,” Minerva ordered. “Whatever is about to happen, maybe we can stop it.”

“I can get there fastest,” Theo said.

“Go,” Minerva nodded. “We’ll catch up.”

Theo grabbed a headlamp from Fizz’s pack and leapt into the trees, disappearing in moments. The rest of them had to continue on foot. It was slow going, with only the light of their glowing orb to see by.

By the time they reached the clearing where the town was, it was a miracle everyone had made it without spraining an ankle. They dashed through the streets lit up by the lights on the towers, and the closer they got to the center, the more chaos they found.

There were Laoans everywhere, crying out in terror and scrambling this way and that. Some ran into houses and slammed the doors shut behind them, and some ran out of houses just to join the frantic crowds. Over the din, they could hear a loud, low groan that told Minerva they were going in the right direction.

Once they arrived at the center green, they could see what the problem was. Another two towers in the first ring of roads were starting to lean over, getting dangerously close to tipping. On top of that, the green seemed to be sinking—parts of it were clearly starting to develop holes and collapse into them.

In the middle of it all, Daniel was standing there with his arms outstretched, desperately trying to find someone who would listen to him. Nobody seemed to be buying it. The Laoans seemed just as panicked by his presence as they were by the leaning towers.

Minerva heard Theo’s voice shout above the crowd, and she searched for him until she found him on a rooftop. “Guys!” he called. “There’s someone in that hole!”

She looked where he was pointing, and saw that he was right—in one of the nearby sinkholes, Minerva could just see the semi-transparent hand of a Laoan, waving around for help.

“Fizz, with me,” she barked, and took off for it. They stopped before getting too close—as unsteady as the ground was here, they could easily get trapped themselves if they weren’t careful. She held out her hand to Fizz, who grabbed it and planted his feet, and she took a careful step forward so that she could see over the edge of the hole.

“Here,” she called to the Laoan, who thankfully had the presence of mind to notice her outstretched hand and grabbed it. As soon as she had a good grip on the Laoan, she pulled back, and Fizz pulled her back, until they had the Laoan out of the hole.

Still terrorized, the Laoan didn’t even stop—they just took off running for somewhere safer. Minerva didn’t blame them. Momentarily, she was distracted by the gelatinous residue that had been left on her hand, and made a face as she wiped it off on her pants.

Theo was back on the ground by the time they returned to steadier ground, and Jesslyn watched them return through cracks in her fingers. “What’s the situation?” Minerva asked.

“Well, Daniel was right, no one is ever going to listen to him right now,” Theo said. “I don’t think there’s much we can do about the sinking of the green, and the towers have just started leaning more since I got here.”

“So what we need is damage control,” Minerva concluded. The wheels in her mind were turning. If these towers came down now, it would be chaos. There was no telling exactly where they would land, and there were Laoans everywhere. If they could figure out which houses were safe, maybe then they could direct people into them...

She looked over at Daniel, and the answer came.

Minerva ran over to him, her team following close behind. He turned to look at them, his expression distraught.

“This always happens. Every time. I’ve just made it worse!” he said, his arms now hanging limply at his side.

“This is not the time to give up,” Minerva said firmly. “We can still stop people from getting hurt if we work together. We just need your help. You can tell us which of these buildings are safe and which ones need to be evacuated, right?”

Daniel stared at her for a moment, before nodding slowly. “Yes, I—you’re right,” he said. “I’ll do anything I can to help.”

He started pointing places out, and OOPS jumped to work. Jesslyn and Fizz started funneling people into the safe buildings, grabbing them off the street and pushing them through doorways as needed, while Minerva, Theo and Daniel went to the ones that were in danger and started to evacuate them. They didn’t let anyone stop to grab anything. Daniel was the most effective at this. All he had to do was enter a building and walk to one side, and the Laoans would funnel out the other side in a frenzy. He clearly didn’t like scaring them this way, but at a time like this, it came in handy.

Just as they finished evacuating the last marked building, the loud groan filled the air again, and Minerva looked up just in time to see one of the towers fall. It felt like it was going in slow motion as it went down, and the ground shook the moment it hit the ground. Just as it did, the green started to cave in even more, and the holes were getting dangerously close to the road and the first ring of buildings.

Daniel winced. “The next one is going to hit the town hall,” he said with certainty.

“Isn’t there anything we can do? This is going to take ages for them to recover from,” Theo said.

“Well, what about that?” Jesslyn asked, pointing to the other side of the green. There, sitting right at the edge of one of the holes, was the crane the Laoans had been using to move the central tower. It was also on the same side as the remaining leaning tower. It would probably be heavy enough to keep the tower upright, but...

“It’s about to fall in,” Fizz said.

“I think I can drive it away safely, I just need to get over there,” Theo said urgently. “Fizz, throw me.”

Fizz didn’t even question him, and picked him up with ease.

Minerva had a bad feeling about the stunt, but it was the only way they were going to get the crane to safety. “You’d better hope he doesn’t miss, Theo,” she said.

“I won’t miss!” Fizz assured them all. He reared back and launched Theo into the air. With bated breath, Minerva watched his arc as he flew.

Theo stumbled a little on the landing, but he did land on solid ground, just a few yards away from the crane. He scrambled up to it and put it in reverse.

“Did he make it?” Jesslyn squeaked, hands covering her eyes.

“He made it,” Minerva confirmed, and Jesslyn uncovered her face just in time to watch him drive the crane away from the brink. “We’re still going to have to help him get it attached—come on.”

The rest of them ran around to the other side of the green, giving it a wide berth to avoid any holes. Once there, Daniel flew up and grabbed the hook and wrapped it around the tower a couple of times, making sure it was hooked on securely before moving back. As he did that, Minerva looked around, making sure the streets stayed clear and none of the Laoans had left the safe houses. She caught movement in the corner of her eye, and turned to look at the town hall building.

She saw the mayor and Tira peering out the front window, twin looks of terror on their faces. If this didn’t work, they were going to be crushed.

Of course, then was when the tower started to groan. Theo shifted the crane into reverse and used all the power in the little thing to pull the tower back. For a few moments it looked like it would be enough, but then a hole appeared just in front of the tower, and it started to drag the crane forward.

It wasn't going to be enough. That much was clear. "Daniel! The mayor is still inside!" Minerva yelled.

Immediately, Daniel ran right into the tower and pushed. For one heart-stopping moment, it didn't seem like it would be enough, but as the tower tipped forward, it also tipped to the side. Theo leapt out of the crane just as it was jerked into the air, and the tower came crashing to the ground—just in front of the town hall's front steps.

After a few moments of eery silence, the front door of the town center opened, and the mayor and Tira poked their heads out, surveying the damage with dazed looks on their face.

"Hello, mayor. We found your monster," Minerva called, approaching carefully. "He saved your life just now."

Eyes wide, the mayor looked from Minerva to the mothman. They stumbled out the door, looking unsure what to say or do. It was kind of a huge mess, in their defense.

At an encouraging prod from Theo, Daniel shuffled forward, standing just behind and to the right of Minerva. "Uh. Hello," he said. "My name is Daniel. Sorry for all the trouble."

"You didn't do this?" the mayor asked, incredulous.

Daniel shook his head frantically. "No, I would never!"

"We'll have a talk about it later, once everyone's had some sleep, I think," Minerva said. "Long story short, he's just been trying to help this whole time."

"...huh," the mayor said eloquently, and that was all they could really say on the matter.

There would be no cleanup that night. Minerva's team was exhausted, and it was almost dawn, meaning Daniel was in a rush to get home. He promised to come back the next evening so he and the

Laoans could properly explain themselves to each other. The mayor was kind enough to offer the four of them lodging, and they passed out almost immediately even in the tiny beds.

When they awoke, it was to a crowd of Laoans milling about the streets once again, but this time they were far more organized as they began the long and arduous process of putting their town back together. The green was almost entirely gone, lost in a big hole that was deeper than any of their towers were tall. Apparently the cavern had been there the whole time, and over the years of strain from construction and recent rains, its structural integrity had finally given way. OOPS pitched in where they could, and once night fell again, Minerva oversaw the meeting Theo facilitated between Daniel and the mayor. It went well—she had a good feeling about the future of this place, in spite of the destruction, and Theo seemed to agree.

“As accident-prone as this place seems to be, it’ll be nice having someone like Daniel around,” he commented as he left the two of them to talk.

“Hopefully it stays that way and we won’t get any more requests from this place,” Minerva sighed.

As soon as they walked out of town hall, they were flagged down by Jesslyn, who looked excited. “I’ve been helping the rebuilding committee with their plans,” she said, unable to keep the smile off her face. “They have things well in hand, really, I just pulled up some architectural ideas for them to look at. Take a look at what they’ve come up with!”

The holographic model she pulled up on her tablet didn’t look radically different from the way the town always looked. The outer rings and towers were the same. The center, though, had been modified—that first ringed road had been shored up with support beams connecting it to the bottom of the underground cavern. There was another central tower, this one starting at the bottom of the cavern and rising up to an even greater height than the original, and it had multiple lights at the top, sparkling and shining even in the hologram. Around it, instead of a green, there was a metal platform attached to the tower, and a handful of walking bridges connected it to the road.

The most eye-catching thing about it was the rough-looking model of a statue on the platform. It was crude, but clearly the form of Daniel and a Laoan, hand-in-hand. Clearly the story of his deeds had traveled quickly, even before the official meeting with the mayor.

Fizz leaned over Minerva's head to get a good look at it, having just wandered over. "It's beautiful," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

Minerva didn't even try to fight a small smile off her face. "I like it," she agreed. She had hope Theo was right—it seemed like everything here was going to work out just fine.

3. Don't Hate the Player

by Dillon O'Hara

This place was a dump. Abandoned foodstuff had attracted rodents and maggots to the office. A remarkably slapdash and rushed disappearance for the most part, and yet there wasn't a single scrap of paper left, not so much as a receipt from the corner shop. Nothing that could tell Fizz what had happened here. Jesslyn had told him that there was a breach to another reality here - something about energy patterns. But how?

Oddly, they had left the computers. Mustn't have had time to take them away. And what was this purple crust on one of the keyboards? He wasn't about to go poking at it to find out.

The metal plates of Fizz's palm moved away, a USB jack extended outward, and he plugged himself in. Detective work wasn't his specialty, but any android has a more intuitive sense of computers than humans. Whoever used to work here probably tried to wipe the hard drives. Time to see how bad a job they'd done.

* * *

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me, dummy," Mai scoffed as she slapped Haruka on the shoulder, leaving a damp patch of purple slime on the strap of her black dress.

Haruka gasped in indignation. "I absolutely cannot believe you. I told you not to mess up my outfit." She hmph'd and harrumphed and carried on as she cast an enchantment with a wave of her hand and disappeared the slime.

Mai sighed. “What’s the problem if you can just—”

“It’s effort.”

She smirked. Haruka always was a short fuse. “Okay, so,” she said. “I’ll keep my distance.”

That got a coy smile. “Hopefully not too much.”

They had been carrying on like this for . . . Mai wasn’t even sure how long. It had never materialised into anything defined, which suited Mai just fine.

“Anyway,” she said, “you were telling me about your dumbass scavenger hunt for losers.”

“My *very important* scavenger hunt for *geniuses*,” said Mai as she lay back recumbent on the couch, completely sliming the leather, “is the only way to get initiated into my sorority. That can open up a lot of doors for me, career-wise. So, for the first item, I need someone’s expired credit card.”

“There’s no way you can get that off someone. You don’t know anyone else here.”

“It’s an expired credit card. I couldn’t do anything shady with one. It’ll be easy.”

“Nobody’s gonna take that risk.”

“Not even,” Mai flipped her gelatinous purple hair and gave Haruka the seductive eyes, “my very best friend?”

“Not a chance,” said Haruka. She was trying to seem unflappable, but Mai knew her tells. Pulling her dyed-purple hair out from under her witch’s hat to fidget with it . . . she was already halfway convinced.

“You sure about that?” Mai pressed. “I’d really appreciate it.”

Haruka averted her gaze and looked down at her lap. “I’m still on my first card anyway.”

Mai hummed and mulled this over. “Well, an intelligent lady such as yourself . . . I’m sure you could hustle something for me, right? You have such a way with—”

This, apparently, earned Mai a slap across the face completely out of nowhere. Haruka was already teary-eyed. “You always try to screw me around like this!” she said, her voice breaking. “There’s always something! There’s always—”

“Hun, c’mon,” said Mai, but she couldn’t hide her impatience. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Haruka sniffed and tilted her head up proudly. “I’ll see you later.”

“Haruka.”

“See you,” she said, “later.” And she prowled out.

Mai stared up at the ceiling. What the hell was she supposed to do with that? It wasn’t the first time Haruka had flown off the handle over the tiniest provocation. It was basically her *modus operandi* for getting everything she wanted. But also, it seemed like her generic reaction to anything and everything. It just didn’t make sense.

Sitting around wouldn’t get anything done. She needed to get into that sorority, or she’d never find a decent job to pay rent, and she’d be dead by 30, probably. With an almighty sigh of exasperation, she pulled herself up off the (ruined) couch and squelched off toward the rest of the party in the hopes of tricking someone out of their old credit card. Heck, maybe there really would be a way to get some money out of one...?

At the foot of the stairs outside the lounge stood an awkward-looking human guy in a polo shirt with a few day’s growth of scrabble on his face and a plastic cup of cider in his hand. She was pretty sure this was the host - she hadn’t actually met him before, as she’d just bummed to this party along

with Haruka and hoped for the best. So she sidled up beside him and hit him with a “Hey dude, thanks for letting me stick around, you’re too kind.” Brazen it out as always.

For his part, he didn’t even seem surprised to see her. “Yeah, sure. Name’s Devin,” he said briskly. “What you up to tonight?”

“Crazy story,” Mai said as innocently as she could. “I’m on a very important and noble quest to join a sorority, and—”

“Oh, do you want some help with that?”

“Yeah, definitely, that’d be--”

“Great. What’s the first item?”

“It’s a, uh--”

“What is it?”

Mai exhaled. This guy was being weird. But he seemed to be harmless-oblivious weird rather than slip-something-in-your-drink weird. And he was being useful, so she’d make use of him. “Like I was trying to say,” she continued, “the first item is an expired credit card. And it can’t be one of mine. I don’t suppose you’d have one lying around here?”

“No, doesn’t work like that. We have to get one from my brother.” For the first time, he relaxed a little and gave a hint of a smile. “The plan is simple,” he said slyly. “Follow me.”

And so she did. The living room was milling with bodies: vampires, werewolves, skeletons, every type of monster you could think of. Devin made a beeline through the crowd to a knight who had his jack-o-lantern head tucked under the crook of his arm. “How’s it goin’, Matt?”

“Brah,” said Matt with a metric ton of vocal fry, “I’m schwasted. Just shot up. I’m, like, totally headless!”

Mai sighed. That wasn’t even a thing that people said.

“Wow, that’s wacky,” said Devin, who seemed half-clocked-out of the conversation already. “Do you have any left for a buddy?”

“Nah, I’m all out.”

“Well,” said Devin, “a little birdie told me there’s a big bag of weed lying unattended upstairs. You’d better get it back to its rightful owner.”

Matt smiled and conspiratorially tapped his nose, which was a triangular hole in a pumpkin tucked under his arm. “I’ll handle that, brah. Thanks.” And he stumbled off.

“Very slick,” said Mai. “How is your brother a headless horseman anyway?”

“He’s adopted,” said Devin as he opened a nearby drawer and retrieved a little plastic card. “Here’s the bastard. Now follow me.” He grabbed Mai by the wrist and dragged her toward the staircase.

“Dude,” Mai said sharply, “what the hell are you--”

“You’ll see.” He led her upstairs, shunting partygoers out of his way. Mai was feeling less and less sure about this guy, especially when he headed into his bedroom. She didn’t want to get in trouble or anything. If she was using her better judgement, she wouldn’t have followed him in, but she did. It just seemed vaguely important.

In the en suite bathroom, Devin opened a press to reveal a safe, where he briskly punched in a four-digit pin. “There, got it.”

“I am,” said Mai, “so confused. The card is for *my* scavenger hunt. What are you doing here?”

“The card is useful for more than one thing. The PIN to the safe is the last four digits of the card number,” Devin said briskly as he routed around inside.

“But you barely even looked at the card,” said Mai. “Are you trying to defraud your brother or something?”

Devin stopped what he was doing and looked around at Mai, as if he’d just noticed for the first time that she was standing there. “You’re very perceptive,” he muttered. His tone wasn’t unkind, but it was uneasy - creeped out, even. Then he shook his head. “It’s probably nothing.”

“What’s probably nothing?”

“You. Here it is.” He pulled a key out from the safe. “This should really be the only thing in the safe.” He slotted the key into one of the drawers below, pulled it out, and retrieved a little plastic condom packet. “Da-da-daaaa,” he imitated a fanfare, a little bored as he handed it to Mai. “Got your thing.”

Mai stared at the condom in her hand, then looked back up at Devin.

“Why,” she said, “did you just hand me a condom.”

“It’s the next thing on your scavenger list.”

“But I didn’t *tell* you that.”

“Sure you did. How else would you know? Now, can you put in a good word with Haruka for me?”

Mai threw the condom in his face (not as dramatically as she’d hoped). “What the fuck is up with you?” Whatever had compelled her to follow Devin around for a few minutes was only so strong; she didn’t have all the patience in the world.

Devin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay, something’s wrong here. This is meant to be the Haruka path.” He took out his phone and started typing something.

“If you want to ask Haruka out, you can just ask her out,” Mai insisted. “You don’t need to do this whole song and dance.”

“Would that it were,” Devin chuckled. “In the meantime, I guess I’d better, uh…”

He stopped short, eyed Mai suspiciously, then pushed past her and walked away as if they hadn’t been talking at all. What a dick! Unbelievable.

Haruka. Where was Haruka? She had to warn him away from this dude.

Mai made her way to the spare room - a bunk bed, a basket of dusty toys, and scuffed floorboards marked with crayon that wouldn’t wash out. Sure enough, Haruka had come here to curl up on the couch, just like after every other argument they’d had in this house. Her expression was stony, but her arms were wrapped around her legs. Clearly upset. Clearly in need of some apologizing.

Mai didn’t approach her. Not right away. She knew Haruka wouldn’t react well to that. Better to talk about something else. She shut the door gently behind her, went over to the old basket, and pulled out one of the dolls. “Do you remember what we used to subject these poor bastards to?”

Haruka looked levelly at the empty doorway, poker-faced. “Mm-hmm.”

She pulled out a blonde one with an ‘X’ scratched into her forehead. “Here she is,” Mai smiled. “Our valiant hero, Barbie X.”

Despite herself, Haruka laughed. “Don’t remind me.”

“Why not? You took the mythos of Barbie X very seriously.”

Haruka pulled her hat down over her face, but Mai could tell it was good embarrassment. Fun embarrassment.

“Do you remember putting Barbie X on trial for her many crimes?” Mai carried on. “We threw her into the Hell Pit.” She tossed Barbie X back into the basket, then picked it up, brought it over, and shook the basket right in her face. “Look out, Hawuka! All the people in Hell are scweaming! Oh nyo!”

Haruka was smiling properly now. “Dumbass.”

“Dumbass enough to tell everyone at this party about eight-year-old Haruka’s worldbuilding bible for Barbie X.”

“Omigod *no*.”

This had Haruka in full flustered mode. Mission complete - that was her cutest. Satisfied, Mai dropped the basket to the floor and threw herself onto the couch beside her. Very close, very cozy. “All of this is obviously to say,” she said, a little softer, “that I’m sorry for twisting your arm on the credit card thing. I think I got too in my head about the sorority, thinking I’ll end up unemployed and homeless otherwise.”

“I’m not gonna let you be homeless.”

“You’re not exactly flush yourself.”

“We’ll hustle something,” Haruka said, gripping Mai’s arm even as she was too blushy to meet her gaze. “I’m not gonna let you get hurt.”

That reminded Mai. “Yeah, uh. The other thing I wanted to alert you to is this guy that’s been—”

Just then, Devin performed a simultaneous knocking and opening of the door, a classic move of gossip lovers and weirdos everywhere. This man seemed to have a supernatural ability to cut her off mid-sentence. He looked at the basket of dolls. “Uh. What are you two doing?”

“They’re just from when we were kids,” Haruka said quickly.

“And they are extremely cool,” said Mai. “The lore of Barbie X is extremely deep.”

“Riiight,” Devin drawled. He shifted his gaze to Haruka. “We haven’t really spoken yet. Time we got to know each other better, huh?”

Haruka grimaced. “Maybe not, guy.”

Devin didn’t seem to be paying full attention, not that this was a change. He jabbed his fingers around weirdly in mid-air for a few moments as if pointing at something. Then he looked back at Haruka. “Okay, let’s go to the master bedroom.”

“Okay, hot stuff!” Haruka replied with entirely uncharacteristic sunniness and an American twang. Mai laughed, assuming she was joking - but no, she was following him now.

Mai grabbed her arm. “Uh, dude, are you for real?”

Haruka pulled free and wiped the sludge off her arm. “Gross!” Her eyes seemed the slightest bit glossed over.

Something was definitely amiss. Mai leapt to her feet and grabbed Devin by the shirt. “Okay, did you slip something in her drink?”

“She doesn’t even have a drink.”

“You did a thing! I know you did! Fuck you!” She looked round - the basket of toys behind her. Time for the dolls to rise out of Hell. She grabbed the basket, rose it high, and dumped its population over Haruka’s head. Plastic battered her, and a cloud of dust rose up. Coughing and confused, Haruka looked round. “What just—”

“Never you mind,” Devin snapped. “We have to go.” He reached for Haruka’s arm, but she pulled away and tried to push past him.

Something occurred to Mai. She reached out to touch the air that Devin had just been prodding at until she felt pressure. It was as if there was something there pushing back against her, even though it was only thin air. It was cool and smooth to the touch, oddly unpretentious for something so impossible. “Haruka, I think there’s something here.”

Haruka was backed up against a wall now. “Can you stop whatever it is you’re doing and give me a little *help* here?!” She pushed Devin back and he tripped over the toys and fell spread-eagled onto his back.

“No, I’m telling you,” Mai insisted, pressing down on it, “there really—”

With a sickening series of squelches and cracks and odors, Devin melted into the floorboards, becoming a mural, only a 2D representation of life--

* * *

Fizz found very little. No portal to another world, nothing directing him to a culprit or a next step. But he did find the data ghosts of two messages.

The first was an error message:

Clutter! ‘Clutter’ is an error that typically arises when a stray line of code generates more activity than the game can handle, such as a character model with too high of a polygon count or consciousness. Please identify and remove the issue, check the equipment, and start again. Thank you!

And the second:

Game just kicked me out. Seems to be crossing over again. Sorry to say this, but whatever updates were made in the last 48 hours need to be walked back. The Mai and Haruka characters are corrupted and could compromise the whole project. Of course, my design goal from the start was to make the girls feel 'alive,' but giving them too much autonomy isn't user-friendly. Inconvenient for the player. Whittle them down to scripted lines, delete all their AI.

4. Sewer Pipes and Spatial Rifts

by Lupan Evezan

As the sun cast its first early morning rays across the metropolis of Gylchester, the beating heart of a prosperous planet in Dawn 690, a motley group of four strolled down one of the city's side streets. Each had an air of purpose about them, and also, less glamorously, a distinct air of annoyance.

"That was a tedious amount of paperwork even for *me*, and I *love* paperwork!" Jesslyn remarked. "If I have to sign my name one more time today, I swear, my hand is going to mutiny against me."

"I told you we should have found an alternate way in!" exclaimed Fizz. The ever-excitabile android gestured wildly as he spoke. "I just know I could have gotten that hatch at the sewage treatment plant back in Puarving open if you'd just given me a tad longer, and from there it would have been a short trip through – "

"I don't know about you lot," a voice from his shoulder interrupted. "But I personally prefer an admittedly ludicrous amount of official authorization to crawling through several miles of sewer pipe." Theo flicked his tail, as if to rid himself of the very thought.

"Agreed." Minerva Caputo, the head of the small band, nodded. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, Fizz, but, in addition to being averse to sewer crawling, we have to go about this professionally. Jump through all the necessary legal hoops, get the authorization we need, that kind of thing. Well, at first, anyway. You know we'll turn to you and your boundless willingness to, shall we say, take things into your own hands as soon as something goes terribly wrong."

"Speaking of things going terribly wrong," Theo began, "what are we dealing with this time, anyway? I've been so inundated with blank forms that I haven't had the chance to ask."

Jesslyn pulled out her clipboard. “We’ve received a request-for-relocation from a stranded eldritch entity – eldritch in the sense that it comes from outside the Dawns; it’s probably not the world-destroying type of thing. Hopefully.” Jesslyn glanced at the file again. “Looks like it fell through a dimensional rift and ended up here.”

“It’s always dimensional rifts these days, isn’t it?” Theo remarked. “Not so long ago, most of our assignments were just dimension-hoppers that got lost on the way to the bus stop and the like. Now, there are rifts everywhere. Someone had ought to do something about this or all of reality’s going to fall apart like a moth-eaten sweater.”

“That may be,” Min replied, “But our concern isn’t the dimensional rifts that the monsters fall out of it. It’s the monsters that fall out of the dimensional rifts.”

“Well, at least the request comes from the entity itself,” Jesslyn noted. “Which means that we shouldn’t have to get into any arguments or fistfights this time. Not like that time with the woman who wanted the fifty-foot monster to get off of her house and the fifty-foot monster who said that the house was the most comfortable chair he’d ever found.”

“Aw, but fistfights are my specialty!” Fizz complained. “I *am* the wrangler, after all.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll still need your particular skills nonetheless. Even on the easiest assignments, there’s always *something* unexpected,” Theo said. “Remember the time we transported those three mischievous little sprites back to their home after someone captured them in a jar, only to find out that the atmosphere of their natural habitat granted them surprisingly destructive capabilities?”

“Don’t even mention that.” Jesslyn groaned. “I still haven’t managed to get that frosting stain out of my favourite shirt.”

“Well, let’s hope for a more positive outcome this time, shall we?” Min suggested. They all nodded as they turned a corner and found themselves on a busy street full of vendors.

“According to the report, the being is located in that facility,” Jesslyn said, pointing toward a large, domed building a few blocks away.

“Right.” Min nodded. “Alright, OOPS – everybody ready?”

Everybody nodded again as they set off down the street.

In sharp contrast to the relative quiet of the previous, this street was filled with the joyous shouts and sounds of merchants and customers, performers and musicians, children and tourists. At one stall, an old woman was displaying lily-white, braided loaves of bread to interested passersby, many of whom were drawn by the delicious but indescribable smell emanating from the baked goods to purchase several with glistening, triangular coins. Surrounded by a small crowd, a man dressed in elaborate robes performed a magic show, levitating small items and passing them through hoops to a smattering of applause. A girl with a large, unfamiliar string instrument played an intricate melody that captivated all who heard it.

Despite the various wonders of the street, the Odd Other-dimensional Pickup Squad had no time to stop and peruse the wares or watch a performance. The monster was waiting, and each of them knew all too well that one should never keep a monster waiting. Pulling themselves away from the various splendors, they turned into yet another street, cut through an alleyway, and soon found themselves outside the large dome that Jesslyn had pointed out. The building was, like most domes that one was likely to encounter in their day-to-day life, made up of interlocking hexagons. These were constructed out of some sort of opaque glass. A small doorway at the base of the dome was guarded by a woman wearing armor and carrying a large weapon.

“What is this place, anyway? Some kind of greenhouse?” Fizz asked.

“A research center, according to my notes,” Jesslyn answered.

“You don’t suppose there’ll be more paperwork, do you?”

“I hope not.”

They approached the door. The woman there turned and looked at them harshly. “Who are you?”

Min stepped forward. “We are the Odd Other-dimensional Pickup Squad, an agency dedicated to the safe relocation of stranded extradimensional monsters.” She flashed her ID card. “We’ve received a distress call from this location.”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “I’ve been given no information about a monster relocation squad.”

“Well, we received the call from the monster itself – it’s entirely possible that your organization knows nothing about it. If we could just speak with someone inside –”

The woman produced a handheld communication device from her pocket and spoke into it. “This is Captain Lynn Raeli at Entry Port A. There’s a squad who claim to be... “monster rescuers” here.” She glanced at the OOPS team. “Two are human, one’s an android, and they have a pet squirrel.”

Theo cleared his throat. “Ah, no, actually. I’m the team’s negotiator.”

Lynn Raeli’s eyes widened. “Scratch that. Sapient, anthropomorphic squirrel. Yes, that’s right. Yes, I’ll ask them.” She lowered the walkie-talkie. “Are you lot... not from around here? Off-planet, perhaps?”

“You could say that.”

“Do you... come from another universe?”

Minerva nodded. “Yes, that’s right. You’ve had experience meeting people from other Dawns, then?”

“You could say that.” Lynn spoke into the walkie-talkie again. “Yes, they are. Yes, right away.” Lynn put the device back into her pocket and nodded. “You’ve been given official authorization to enter.”

“Great!” Fizz exclaimed.

Lynn Raeli entered a passcode on the door, which opened automatically. She gestured inside.

“Stay on your guard,” Min whispered as they entered.

Fizz displayed his fists. “Don’t worry! I’ve got this covered.”

Min pushed his fists down again. “Good, but not yet. Odds are this is a perfectly trustworthy institution. We just need to keep alert, is all. It’s like Theo said – you never know what’s going to happen.”

Raeli led the OOPS squad down a very long, dark corridor before stopping at another, larger door. “The central research hub is just beyond.”

“Wait a moment.” Min said. “Why don’t you tell us what this place *is*. What kind of research takes place here?”

“I’ll let Dr. York explain that to you. She’s far more qualified than I – she’s the head of the sort of research that goes on here, after all.”

Lynn Raeli input another passcode, and the doors slid open. The group stepped through, and found themselves in what must have been the exact center of the dome. At the top, a hexagonal skylight illuminated the bustle of researchers moving between the doors positioned in a circle around the room, each of which no doubt led to a different branch of the facility. The room itself was a vast, open space, with only a map of the institute on one wall and a hovering fountain in the center.

Jesslyn looked at the later with interest. “So you’ve discovered levitation here, then? Actual levitation? How does it work? Controlled defiance of gravity? Manipulation of a magnetic field?”

“Something like that. I told you, I’m not a scientist. Speaking of which – here’s Dr. York now.”

A woman, probably in her early forties and wearing a white lab coat, strolled over to them. “Thank you for escorting them inside, Lynn. You may return to your post.” Lynn nodded and left, as the doctor gave the group a warm smile and extended her hand to Min, who shook it. “Nice to meet you. I’m Dr. Kara York.”

“Minerva Caputo. This is Jesslyn Swift, our archivist, F-1526, our wrangler, and Theodore Bushytail, our negotiator. We’re with the Odd Other-dimensional Pickup Squad.”

Dr. York nodded. “Lynn informed me of that, yes. You’re here about the extra-dimensional entity which recently entered our facility, I gather?”

“Yes – you know about it, then?” Theo asked. “Extradimensional entities can be remarkably sneaky when they want to be.”

“Of course – I’ll take you to it at once. But first, let me tell you about this organization.” “Please do.”

“We are IBW, or the Institute for a Better World. We work diligently to improve the lives of everyone on the planet. It was we who discovered the secret of levitation, for example – you may have seen the floating fountain, and the street performers outside using it to do tricks. But it has practical applications, as well – our method uses completely costless and emissions-free technology, so it allows for free and safe transportation. A network of floating trains spans the eastern side of the city, and we plan to expand it to the rest of the world.”

“But how’s it done?” Jesslyn asked, still curious. “What is your method?”

“We’ll get to that – all in due time. Now, as for your monster – follow me.” Dr. York began walking towards one of the room’s many doorways, and the OOPS team followed her. They found themselves in yet another corridor, this one better lit than the last. “Lynn informed me that you hail from another dimension. Is that true?”

“Yes – we’re not from Dawn 690, although there’s probably a version of us here somewhere.” Jesslyn answered. “Have you had experience with that sort of thing before? People from other universes, I mean.”

“Oh, yes, certainly. Plenty of times.” Dr. York rounded a corner. “Here we are – our own personal transport system.”

In front of them was a docking area with a few floating train cars, of the sort that the doctor had mentioned before. “These corridors are positively labyrinthine – we’ll navigate in one of these.”

The doctor entered one of the cars, and the OOPS team followed. Dr. York flipped a switch on the car’s console, and, with a hum of energy, it turned on.

“To the Central Testing Laboratory, please.” Dr. York spoke. The car began to move at once, without so much as a lurch.

“Voice activated?” Jesslyn asked.

“In a sense.”

“You keep saying things like that,” Min observed, “And I must say, it’s doing a wonderful job of making you look suspicious.”

“Suspicious? Of doing what?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it. I hope you intend to take us directly to the monster.”

“With just a quick stop on the way.”

“Stop?” Minerva crossed her arms.

“I just want to show you some of the wondrous innovations that we at IBW are currently testing. We have to walk through the Testing Center anyway.”

Min said nothing, but kept her arms crossed. The doctor, satisfied with the response (or lack thereof), continued along the course she had set through the corridors, which were indeed, the OOPS team could see, quite labyrinthine.

After winding through many halls, the car finally came to a silent stop in another vast room. This one was full of locked doors into testing rooms, and large, reinforced glass windows which allowed observers to see into them.

“Take a look around!” Dr. York exclaimed. “We have many tests in progress right now, and each of them is going to improve the world!”

Min, Jesslyn, Theo, and Fizz wandered about, taking in the various tests that they were witnessing. In one room, a man donned a belt that radiated a white-green aura and stepped straight through a wall, to the applause of the other researchers monitoring it. In another, a woman wearing a simple diving suit with no oxygen tank was submerged in a large aquarium. A counter nearby indicated that she had been there for thirty straight minutes, and she showed no sign of distress as she swam delightedly around the tank. Elsewhere, a researcher dripped a small quantity of liquid onto a half dead houseplant. It instantly sprang to life, and began growing unstoppably until its roots burst out of the pot and began burrowing into the floor. It thrashed about as several scientists tried to restrain it.

The OOPS team was amazed as they looked around at the various innovations. A researcher wearing a specialized outfit morphed into a pineapple and back again. Another, stepping through a beam emitted from a large machine, was turned invisible. In one room, a large battery was applied to what was apparently a cadaver, which suddenly sat up and asked for a cup of tea.

“This is...” Min began.

“Amazing,” Jesslyn put in.

“Impossible,” Theo added.

“Very cool,” Fizz suggested.

“Creepy,” Min finished. “Morphing people into fruit? Turning them invisible? Bringing dead people back to life? It all seems... ethically dubious.”

“Don’t worry! All of these people were willing participants in the experiments – even the newly resurrected Dr. Gareth gave his consent premortem,” Dr. York said.

“Don’t be so paranoid, Min!” Fizz whispered. “This all seems perfectly well-intentioned.”

“Something’s off about all of this. And well-intentioned isn’t the same thing as harmless.”

“Now, then!” Dr. York exclaimed. “I’m sure you’re eager to get to your monster.”

“Right. I’m sure you’ll be taking us there now?”

“Certainly! Follow me.” The doctor led them down another hall, then stopped. “Ah! Would you look at this! Another in-progress test of one of our latest innovations – set rather further away from the others due to its nature. Do come see.”

The OOPS team followed her, and found that the corridor branched off two ways. One path led, they presumed, to the monster that they sought, while the other was short and led to a small testing room, where a person in some sort of hazmat suit with an IBW logo on it stood, surrounded by researchers wearing body armor.

“Oh, hello, Dr. York.” one of the researchers, a young man with dark hair and glasses, greeted her. “We were just about to begin testing for Project LDSS.”

“Wonderful! I was just giving our visitors here a little tour. Proceed!”

The man nodded, and hooked a tube emerging from a machine on the wall up to the back of the hazmat suit. “Ready?”

The person in the suit nodded, and the young man pulled a lever. A burst of energy crackled through the tube, and the suited person collapsed to the ground.

Theo gasped, and Min stepped forward.

“No, no, this is all very routine.” Dr. York assured them. “Such a shock to the system inevitably induces a collapse at first. Just watch.”

As they looked on, the person rose. Rather than pulling themselves to their full height, they remained hunched over. A growl emanated from the area of the mask, and the person ripped it off, revealing sharp teeth and bloodshot eyes. With a pained howl, they rushed at one of the researchers.

“Shut it down!” the young man called. One of the researchers pulled the lever again, and the machine switched off. The tube became lifeless, and the test subject dropped to the ground.

“Darn. Not diluted enough. We’ll re-process it and try again.” The man glanced at the test subject. “Take them to the medical ward.” Someone else nodded, and the test subject was whisked away. “Sorry, Dr. York. Rather disappointing result, eh?”

“Don’t worry about it. It was to be expected, the very first time. Be glad it wasn’t worse.”

Minerva rounded on her. “What do you mean, “don’t worry about it”? That was terribly dangerous! That person was obviously hurt!”

Dr. York shrugged sheepishly. “Some sacrifices have to be made in the name of innovation. Not everything can go perfectly the first time.”

“‘Not go perfectly’, sure! But that was just reckless!” Min glared at the doctor. “Take us to the monster *immediately* – no more distractions!”

“As you wish. Come along, it’s just down this way.” The OOPS team followed Dr. York down the other path of the corridor, which ended at yet another locked door. York did a retina scan, and it opened.

Stepping inside, the OOPS team was horrified by what they saw. The monster – an eldritch being that resembled a five-tailed eel surrounded by concentric rings of fiery eyes, pretty standard stuff as far as

eldritch beings went – was imprisoned in a glass orb hooked up to hundreds of wires. It writhed as researchers adjusted various dials on a nearby machine, extracting samples of the beings’ eldritch powers.

“What are you doing to it?” Min shouted, grabbing Dr. York by the shoulder.

“A very routine inspection, my dear. Gauging its power levels and all of that. You can’t expect us to just let a being such as this go loose in the city. We have to keep it harmlessly contained until the... *proper authorities* arrive.”

“Well, here we are. We’ll be relocating it to its home universe at once. Step aside.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“You misunderstand me. We have no intention of letting the so-called proper authorities do as they please. We have other plans for you.”

“What are you talking about? This creature has requested relocation – you have no right to refuse that!”

“Let me handle this,” Theo whispered. He cleared his throat. “Now, I’m sure we can work something out. This creature wishes to leave – you wish it to stay. Rather unusual dynamic, I’ll admit.

Now, you must understand – this isn't just a beast, something to be kept and studied. This is a living thing – maybe even a person, in its home world. Surely, you, people of science, whose goal is to improve this world – surely you can understand that.”

Dr. York raised her eyebrows. “My, my, my. *What* an interesting situation. A monster defending the personhood of another monster.”

“Wh – a monster? But I'm not a monster!”

“How so? You're a talking squirrel from another dimension. Surely you can't claim that you're less of a monster than this thing is?” Dr. York sneered. “Your companions are monsters, too, of course – they may look like us, like humans, but they're not from our Dawn. They're not from the reality that we live in. They're crude mockeries of us – they're *monsters*.”

“Are you seriously suggesting that *everything* originating in a universe other than this one is a monster? That's – that's absurd!”

“How so? How do *you* classify a monster, then? You call the things you relocate monsters, don't you?. But surely, they aren't considered such in their home worlds! You've called this thing a monster plenty of times – but you said yourself that in its own universe, it may be considered a person! Seems to me that a monster is anything that isn't supposed to belong in this reality – and monsters aren't people. But they can help people – yes, they can help people immensely!”

“What are you talking about?” Theo asked, as Fizz prepared for a fight.

“Our innovations – our wondrous innovations. They all derive from *horrible* monsters that have ended up in our institution by way of having fallen through a rift. Every monster has some sort of undeserved ability that can be used to improve the lives of people – and I'm sure that you four are no exception.” York snapped her fingers, and a team of guards descended upon OOPS.

“I knew there was something weird about this place.” Min muttered.

* * *

Min gazed around the cell that she now shared with Jesslyn, Theo, and Fizz in one of the lowest levels of the IBW dome – the floor which contained the prison in which every monster exploited by the institution was kept. In addition to various eldritch beings, now including the one that had sent the distress message, there was a werewolf, a ghost, a gill-creature, a witch, a monstrous venus flytrap, a resurrected mummy, and several other creatures. Min also recognized Treyek the Thrice Damned, a cosmic being whom the OOPS team had once rescued from an angry crowd after the entity had accidentally gone to the wrong Dawn, entered a human poetry competition instead of the cosmic one they had been aiming for, and ended up raising the dead with their poem by mistake. Every cell was specialized to the creature it contained; even Treyek was unable to get free.

The OOPS team's own cell was sparsely furnished with only a toilet and a small bench. They sat on it, trying to think of a way out of the predicament.

"You know, this reminds me of that time we were kidnapped by those mutant camels and imprisoned while trying to rescue that minor demon that they had imprisoned so as to study it," Theo remarked. "They studied us, too, of course – I've never met anyone so thorough in their questioning of my entire life story than they were."

"It reminds me of the time those cyborg gorillas imprisoned us after we responded to a distress call from one of the multidimensional captives that they were forcing to fight in an arena," Jesslyn said.

"Oh, that was fun!" Fizz exclaimed.

"Was it?" Jesslyn asked. "I'm pretty sure it was those two missions that finally convinced us to stop accepting missions from outside the Dawns. Not that that's stopped us being thrown into horrible prisons, evidently."

"And I get the feeling that IBW is a lot less incompetent than both of those fine organizations were," Min added. "After all, they put us in the same cell. Still, there *has* to be some way out of here."

Fizz walked over to the reinforced pane of glass that acted as the only window into the cell and punched it, as if it might have been softened up by the first fifteen times he tried it. Unfortunately, it had not.

“We have to think of something – some kind of clever plan.” Theo mused. “Anyone have anything?”

“Nothing,” Jesslyn responded. “I’m stumped. If only there was something in here that we could use – but even then, it’d have to be a very sneaky escape plan if we wanted to avoid attracting the attention of the guards.”

Fizz looked around at the cell. At the very few things located in the cell. Suddenly, he had an idea. A very bad idea. But brilliantly so. He looked at the OOPS team.

They looked at him.

He looked at the toilet.

They shook their heads.

He smiled deviously, then strolled over to the porcelain utility, and, giving it a strong pull, ripped it out of the floor, revealing a large hole leading down into the city’s sewer system. “Anyone up for a crawl?”

Theo groaned in despair.

* * *

After several long and very unpleasant minutes, Fizz twisted a maintenance hatch off the top of a pipe and peeked out. A room filled with pipes, wires, circuit boxes, and various controls met his eyes. “Just where I wanted to be – the central maintenance and control room, if my mechanical knowledge doesn’t fail me. Which it shouldn’t – I am, after all, a mechanical man.”

The OOPS team happily climbed out of the pipe, vowing to never again speak of the experience.

“So, what now?” Theo asked. “We still have to free that being. All of the captives, actually, I should think.”

“Right! And this is the control room, so something in here should – ah! There we go!” Fizz pointed to a board of switches labelled “Cell Block Controls – Authorized Personnel Only”.

“This seems too easy.” Min pointed out. “Maybe we should – “

“Oh, Min – always paranoid!” Fizz replied.

“Yeah, and I was *right*, wasn’t I?”

Fizz, not listening, reached for the switches. An previously unseen camera suddenly scanned him, pronounced him unauthorized, and sent up an alarm. “Ah. That’s not good.”

Minerva rolled her eyes. “How odd – seems like you should have listened to what I said. It’s almost as if I’m the leader of the squad for a *reason*.”

“I’m starting to think so, yes.”

The door to the room was flung open, and Dr. York burst in, flanked by two guards. “I knew I’d find you here! We’ve been searching the whole dome for you. Never has a group of monsters given us such trouble – well, not since the 100-foot rhinoceros kaiju. Seize them!”

Fizz, still standing next to the panel of switches, flipped them all. Another alarm began, and, taking advantage of the brief distraction, the squad, moving as fast as they ever had, jumped back into the pipe.

“Are you sure this is better?” Theo asked.

“No,” Minerva answered. “But let’s not think about it now.”

Moving quickly through the pipes, the squad could hear the guards around them – although whether they were following the route of the pipes above ground, or in the pipes themselves, they couldn't be sure.

“Where are we heading to this time?” Jesslyn asked.

“Back to the prison block, if I can find it!” Fizz answered.

“Are you sure that's a good idea?” Theo asked.

“Sure – I just released all of the prisoners! It's the safest place to hide from the guards, no doubt!” After a few minutes more, Fizz heaved against the top of the rusty pipe as hard as he could, and it crumbled. Prying out the tiles above it, they emerged into the center of the prison block, where something that could only be described as a miniature apocalypse was occurring. The monsters were free from their cells, and they were wasting no time in getting their revenge by soundly fighting off every guard that had made their way in.

The werewolf spotted the OOPS team as they emerged from the floor, and growled: “*Humans!*”

A group of monsters began to make their way towards the squad.

Jesslyn waved a hand in greeting. “No, no, we're not with IBW! We're here to help!”

“*Liars!*” The werewolf rushed at them, but Treyek suddenly appeared between them.

“BREKKEK KEKKEK KEKKEK KEKKEK! KOAX KOAX KOAX!”

The werewolf paused. “*Oh. Oh, I see. Thanks for letting me know. Nearly made a big mistake there.*” The werewolf extended a paw. “*Quite sorry. Name's Larry. Nice to meet you.*”

“You as well.” Theo replied. “Care to follow us back into those horrible sewage pipes? I think they lead out of here, eventually.”

The werewolf shook his head. *“We can’t leave yet.”*

“Why? Is there another cell block?”

“No. But more monsters will end up here. It’s not a coincidence that so many have already. You may have noticed the proliferation of rifts throughout the universes of late?”

“Yes.”

“Well, IBW has taken advantage of it – they’ve set up a machine which forces any rifts that appear in the fabric of this Dawn to relocate themselves to a special room right in this dome. I’ve seen it – we all have, when we first fell through and found ourselves here.”

“But – they’ll be destroyed, eventually! So many rifts in one small area of space will tear this place apart!” Jesslyn exclaimed.

“Well, they must not know that – or maybe they think it’s worth it for innovation,” Larry replied. *“Either way, we have to shut it down if we want to stop them.”*

“Where is it?” Fizz asked.

“Very near – they put it close to the prison cell for easy transport once the victims arrive.” Larry glanced around the room and saw that the first wave of guards had been dispatched. *“Now’s our chance.”* He addressed the assembled monsters: *“Everybody – follow me! We must destroy the Rifts Attractor and escape this awful place before it’s too late!”*

The monsters and the OOPS squad dashed out of the prison block, and, after navigating several corridors, raced down a set of steps leading to the very lowest floor of the institute – the one which

contained the chamber of the Rifts Attractor. The floor was entirely dark, with not a single light to illuminate it.

“The machine is down here somewhere – but it’s in the center of a labyrinth. And I mean a literal one, not just some confusing hallways like they have upstairs,” Larry said.

The motley assemblage made their way into the maze, creeping slowly around corners and down passageways. About halfway in, Fizz heard a strange, echoing thump in the distance. “What is that?” he asked.

Larry listened for a moment. His eyes widened. *“The guards. They’re in here. We have to hurry.”*

The group walked faster now, panicked. As they rounded a corner, a dark shape darted in front of them.

“They’re onto us!” Theo exclaimed.

“Hurry!” Min urged.

They shuffled down another path, hoping that they were getting closer. Another guard darted past behind them. It was eerily quiet except for a low hum.

“That must be the machine!” Jesslyn realized. Larry nodded, and they set off in the direction of the hum.

As they arrived in the room before the chamber, Min sensed that something was wrong. “Wait a second – there’s something here.”

Everyone stopped. It was true, they realized – there was a presence lurking.

As they all turned, slowly, towards the unknown thing in the dark, it suddenly burst out of the shadows, startling them all. It was Dr. York, wielding a blaster of some sort which she pointed at the group. “Thought you could escape, *monsters*?” she spat. “Trying to get out of helping people – contributing to my innovations? Well, you horrible beasts – you’ll never get out of here. Because I’ll never let monsters like you run loose in the world.”

York backed the group into the Rifts Attractor room, where the OOPS team saw the large, powerful machine with their own eyes. As its mechanisms spun quickly around, generating energy, it tore open small rifts in the fabric of reality, which would soon become large enough to allow ever more extra-dimensional beings to fall through. Reality itself seemed thin and warped here, like it might collapse around them at any moment – which it honestly might, Min thought.

“Of course, I can’t destroy all of you myself – but that’s why I have them,” York said as a band of guards entered the room, also wielding weapons. “These blasters are our latest innovations – they can destroy even the most arcane of the eldritch beings – and they can certainly destroy you.” They leveled their weapons at OOPS and their new friends.

Larry stepped forward. “*You can’t defeat us that easily. You’ve been exploiting our unique abilities for years, York – and now we’re going to put them to our own use. Right?*” The prisoner group shouted their assent. “*Attack!*”

The prisoners and the guards rushed at each other, as the OOPS team got to work trying to shut down the Rifts Attractor.

A guard rushed at Larry, who tackled him to the ground with his superior strength and held him there. The witch pointed her finger at another guard, who was instantly levitated into the air and whisked away through the labyrinth. A guard tried to sneak up on the witch, but was snuck up upon by the Invisible Man, who incapacitated the guard. Treyek gestured at a guard, who split apart into cubes which spun away into static. A shapeshifter and the gill-creature teamed up to launch an attack, while the monstrous venus flytrap grabbed three guards with its tendrils and unceremoniously ate them. A vampire turned into a swarm of bats and swooped. The mummy summoned a swarm of scarab beetles which carried a guard away, and the ghost used its ethereal powers to trap a guard in the form of a Jack O’Lantern for all eternity. A circle of eldritch abominations formed around the remaining guards and transfigured them into strange arrays of non-euclidean shapes.

“No, no, no!” Dr. York exclaimed. “You *monsters* can’t win!”

Meanwhile, over at the Rifts Attractor, the OOPs team were having some trouble figuring out how to shut down the machine, and had resorted to having Fizz pull out various parts that Jesslyn pointed out as probably important based on what she knew about rifts. It seemed to be working; the moving parts were slowing down and no new rifts had torn open in the area for a few minutes now. Jesslyn examined the machine again. “All right – if I’m not mistaken, that wire right there is the last thing funneling power to the machine. Rip that out and it’s done.”

“No! Stop!” Dr. York rushed towards them, but was held back by the prisoners, who managed to take her blaster. “You can’t! You monsters can’t do this!”

“You were right about one thing, York,” Theo said, as Fizz began pulling up the wire. “We aren’t any less monsters than these people are. But they aren’t monsters, either. No, the only monsters here are people like you.”

“No!” York made a final effort to free herself, but the witch pointed at her, and she found herself floating helplessly in the air.

With a final tug, assisted by his teammates, Fizz pulled the wire completely away from the machine. It sputtered, made a grinding sound, and stopped.

Everything was still for a moment.

Then, the remaining, tiny rifts, having lost what little stabilization they had, collapsed into one point.

With a horrendous tearing sound, they formed into one enormous rift, which quickly began to grow.

“I don’t think this place is going to last much longer!” Min shouted.

The witch dropped York, and everyone in the institution--former prisoners, researchers, guards, and

OOPS members alike--rushed for the exit. They got there with the rapidly expanding tear in reality just behind them, then hurried from the dome as quickly as they could.

York attempted to follow, but was too far behind. As the rift continued to expand, she was pulled into the shimmering tear and disappeared. The rift consumed the entire dome of the IBW, leaving an empty space in the middle of the city. No longer supported by even the residual energy that had been emanating from the institute, the particularly unstable rift collapsed in on itself and vanished.

The group just stared for a moment.

“So... what do you think happened to York?” Fizz asked.

“Well, that was a rift, so she’ll have been transported into a different Dawn, or maybe even someplace outside the Dawns,” Min answered. “Funny – by her own definition, she’s a monster now.”

“Let’s hope no one calls us in to deal with her,” Theo said as he chuckled. “I’d rather not have to deal with her again.”

“Oh, I don’t know – I wouldn’t be surprised if we haven’t seen the last of her,” Min told him. “Still, I think we can put her out of our mind for the time being.” She turned to the crowd. “So... does anyone want to be returned to their home dimensions?”

Larry scratched his chin. “*Certainly – but what of this world? And... all of these IBW researchers? Won’t they probably try something like this again?*”

“Probably – unfortunately, I’m not really sure what we can do about it.”

The five-tailed eel abomination raised one of its tails. “Er – pardon me, but I may have a solution. Aside from the now-defunct institute, I rather like this place – and, now that they haven’t got any of their specialized devices, they can’t defeat me. So what if I were to just sort of... hang around and

make sure they don't get up to any of this sort of thing again. I've been told that I come off as quite intimidating in this world."

Min thought about this for a moment. Then she shrugged. "Yeah, okay, sure. That works."

"Great!"

The abomination rounded on the remaining IBW employees. "Now *scram!* Go home and do something productive, like a crossword or something!"

They didn't have to be told twice.

The five-tailed eel abomination's ring of eyes flashed with amusement. "I'll see if I can convince them that people from other dimensions aren't monsters, too, while I'm at it. I'm a pretty good persuasive speaker, I think."

"Right. Good." Min turned to the rest of the OOPS team. "Ready, then, squad? We've got a lot of stranded extra-dimensional entities to return to their homes before this mission is over!"

"Then let's get started!" Theo exclaimed as Jesslyn and Fizz nodded.

Waving good-bye to the eel abomination, they set off through the city, ready to face plenty more paperwork before their mission was done, and possibly some adventure, if there was time.

And so, with the crowd of former IBW captives in tow, the OOPS team set off on a brand new journey through the 10,000 Dawns.

5. Oopsie-Daisy

by James Wylder

Jesslyn Swift's Adventure log

Entry 1: I've determined that my time with OOPS, while documented with a nice trail of paperwork would be better served by a more personal record of my adventures, especially considering the events of today, which if you'll be patient I will narrate shortly.

This is also partially inspired by spite, because the last time I turned in my very detailed report to our ever virtuous head-honcho, warlord, leader, etc Kinan Jans, they just took one glance at it, looked up at me, and said in their eternal monotone, "I literally never asked you to take notes like this."

So now I'm doing this for me. Just like the self-help books told me. Not that they've, you know, helped a lot. I'm still 30, single, and unable to parse exactly how I got to the point I got to today where I was holding my breath under a table while the slimy drool of an eyeless white creature dribbled down from its razor sharp teeth and forked tongue--you know I'm getting ahead of myself.

"This is why no one goes on dates with you," my mom would probably say. I mean, she has literally said that to eighty things I've done. If I was allowed to tell her I worked for what amounts to the animal control unit of an inter-universal paramilitary group, maybe she'd be prouder of me. . . . no she'd probably just say that's why no one goes on dates with me. Scrap that idea even if I get permission.

Not that that's even true. After all, I had a date last week. Not that it went particularly well. I'd decided to try out a new dating app, hooks you up with other interdimensional singles. After rejecting about ten of those buff blonde clone guys (I mean, he's attractive, but you can only date another version of the same guy so many times before you gotta admit that maybe none of them are going to work) I saw a profile for a lady with the one word name of "Retina" who looked right up my alley. The black hair, black eyepatch, and black outfit might have been a little much, but it still seemed like it was a

better match than any other others I had, so I messaged her and we agreed to meet up. The date went fine at first, till, you know, we started talking about work.

“So what do you do?”

“Well, I'm between jobs at the moment...”

"What did you used to do?"

Her phone beeped. She sighed.

"Something up?"

She rubbed her one eye, "Yeah...well, legally obligated to inform you I was a member of Dusk till not that long ago."

For a long moment, I said nothing. Then, "Dusk. The interdimensional terrorist group that no longer exists because the founder of the group got convinced to not ever start it due to time travel?"

Retina nodded, stirring her coke with her straw. "That's the one. None of us committed any crimes, of course, since nothing we did technically happened...but there's still a leash on a lot of us," she said.

I narrowed my eyes. "Hold up, if the group doesn't exist anymore, how come you didn't like..."

"Stop existing? Easy. Once you time travel enough, the version of yourself that's been traveling burns off the hook to your past self. You can change your own past, but you don't just stop existing. There's just now another version of you on a different path. I'm actually a gardener at an orchard, apparently. Not that I ever was interested in that in my own life."

I nodded slowly, "Uh, so, not really sure this is going to work."

She sipped her coke, then said, "Figured . . . Well, we already ordered the pizza so I'm eating. Any questions about my deviant lifestyle?"

I pointed at the eyepatch. "Alright, since we're already past social decorum, what happened there?"

She lifted the patch up, revealing a glowing eye carved from blue and white crystal. Just as quickly as she revealed it, she slapped it back down, pressing her palm over it like it hurt.

"Uh, you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"That was Firmament Crystal. The same kind we grind to dust to make portals to other realities, and they make their ships out of to travel with."

She nodded. "That's right. I thought it'd be real cool to carve myself an eye, pull mine out of my head, and like. . . see all things."

Pursing my lips for a moment, with a shake of my head, I sort of breathed out my reply, "It doesn't work that way."

"So I learned! Now all I see are uncomfortable truths when I pull my eyepatch up. So. . . I usually try not to."

I nodded. We ate our pizza and parted ways. She was cute, but a former interdimensional terrorist? Not exactly someone I'd introduce to mom. I can't even imagine what she'd say to that.

* * *

Entry 2: Right so, today. We got called up to visit a house, not super unusual, except that this house existed in every universe simultaneously.

"Not just the Dawns!" the owner bragged, "Well, not every universe outside the Dawns. But all the ones with the best marketing potential."

My boss, Minerva, seemed to be growing circles under her eyes just listening to our guide show us her cabinets ("did you know that the natural color of Cherry Wood has this kind of luster if you don't stain it?") and her collection of commemorative Great Cosmic Bake Off spatulas. She even claimed to have something called a "Quantum Cutlery" but both Fizz and Minerva were sure it was fake. Upon inspection, I determined it wasn't even a good fake.

"So what do you think of the house?" The Resident said--that's her name. *The Resident*. What is with immortals and just being like "I am a noun now?"--hands on her hips, side ponytail bouncing as she pushed her chin up proudly.

"I'm thinking," Theo said, "that you said there was a monster here?"

"Oh right, that," she said with disinterest, and led us to the yard, where a Golden Retriever was barking at a long eyeless semi-humanoid creature, its skin moist and white. It only had two arms in the front, the rest of its body continuing behind it, not narrowing at all until just before it stopped, though that did come to a tip.

"Jason and the Golden Retriever!" The Resident yelled, "come boy!" She looked at us as though we'd asked about the dog's name. "See, he's named Jason and the Golden Retriever like--"

"Jason and the Golden Fleece, yeah I got it."

She grinned as her dog ran up to her and she ruffled his ears and baby-talked about how he was a good boy. The thing in the yard let out a long slow hiss. "So uh, think you can remove it? I'm kind of worried it will eat one of my pets."

"You know, that's fair," Fizz noted. "So uh, what exactly has it done since it arrived?"

"And how did it arrive!" I chimed in, happy to be useful.

"Well, it just sort of popped out of a portal."

"Not a rift?" Minerva asked.

"No, definitely a portal. I know what I'm about."

Minerva looked at Fizz, "Well. . .would have been convenient if it fit the pattern."

He just shrugged.

"Any idea where this thing is even from?" Theo asked, skittering around on the coffee table.

"None, and I'm not actually sure how we track it...awkward," Minerva said.

"Fantastic team you guys are," The Resident deadpanned.

"Hold up, would you say then that this thing's origin is...an uncomfortable truth?" I asked, struck with an uncomfortable truth of my own.

Theo tilted his head to the side, then said, "I mean, semantically, sure?"

I perked up, "Then I know a girl!"

"Who?" Fizz asked.

"Oh uh, just this girl I went on a date with. She has a magic eye though."

"Your ex girlfriend?" Theo said, with a little too much excitement.

"She's not my girlfriend! We went on one date! Anyway, she used to be a terrorist or something so--"

"Theo stop teasing Jess about her lesbian terrorist ex-girlfriend with a magic eye. Jess, call her."

Well, my day was about to get a lot weirder.

* * *

I got a ping from my phone, and saw the message on the lockscreen that she was here. Welp, here goes nothing. I'd gone to the bathroom and gotten my hair fixed up (cue "ooooOOOO"s from Theo) and I at least got the pleasure of her pleasant surprise when I opened the door and she saw my face.

"Thank you so much for coming on such short notice, Retina."

She stepped inside, she was wearing a black knee length peacoat, black pants, black boots, a black turtleneck, and had her black hair in a nice french braid draped over one shoulder. I both thought the look was lazy and extremely alluring in equal measure, a thought which gave me a nice chaser of annoyance.

"So you say there's a monster in the yard?" She looked around the living room. "Is this your house, it's really nice."

I cringed, my own living space was better described as a controlled mess, "No, this is an immortal called The Resident's house."

Her face fell. "Oh. Isn't she like..." She gestured at the 'Live. Laugh. Love' cross stitch on the wall, then at the wine rack, then at the undetonated black-hole generator on the countertop.

"Yes," I said, 50% sure I understood what she meant, and led her out to the yard. The thing was still there, staring at the petunias, saliva dripping from its mouth.

"So, if you take a look at that thing, you'll see an uncomfortable truth about it, like where it's from, yeah?"

She nodded. "Sure can. So, uh. . .not *totally* averse to seeing me again then?"

I could feel my face flushing, so I looked away. "Nah, just needed your help with work is all. . . don't read too much into it."

"Right, okay. Sorry to presume," she said, the disappointment in her voice stinging in a way that had my brain spinning around like a towel in a drier.

I looked back, and watched as she lifted her eyepatch. Her swirling eye glowed, and her face went from disappointment, to shock, to horror. "What--What is it?"

"Remember at dinner I said that uh. . . everything we did at Dusk vanished?"

"Yeah?"

"And that uh...if you time travel enough you don't disappear if your past is changed?"

I felt like things were about to get extra uncomfortable, which, well, made sense. "Yes?"

"That's my old partner from Dusk. I messed with my eye. He. . . also tried putting alien technology in his body without checking what it did. I didn't...realize he'd kept going."

The creature's face shot to face us, mouth widening as it let out a gasping hiss.

"Can you understand what he's--"

"RUN."

He bounded at us, pulling himself forward with his arms, the rest of him dragging and bouncing as he moved. I shut the glass door to the yard, and at first he slapped against it like a confused bird--but then he reared back and smashed through it.

I screamed, diving under the coffee table. I tried to control my breathing. It couldn't see after all, right? There were no eyes on that smooth white face. It crawled over the table, and through the glass surface I could see it sliding over the table, rows of sharp teeth dripping drool as it crawled.

I closed my eyes. Please, just don't let this be the end.

"L...Lionel?" I heard Retina say.

The thing stopped, its labored breathing slowing above me.

"Hey, it's me. Remember me? Retina? It's alright. Just, just hold in there. We can take care of you."

Lionel, apparently, gave a stuttered guttural growl.

"Do you understand me?"

"YES," he said.

Oh, okay. Alright. That was new. And loud.

"I didn't recognize you," she said. "You look so different. . . no eyes--"

"ALL THE BETTER TO SMELL YOU, MY DEAR."

"R...Right. I'm just glad I found you. I thought you were dead."

"I'VE BEEN SEARCHING TO FIND YOU, MY DEAR."

"Okay. Uh...your...your teeth..."

"ALL THE BETTER TO EAT YOU WITH, MY DEAR." I heard Retina scramble back, and he reared back, ready to launch himself forward like he'd done in the yard.

I am not particularly strong, but I do have one handy trick up my sleeve: I'm a Dawn agent. And while I specialize more in research than field work, I still have a big bag of our crystal portal dust. It's easy to use, you just spin it in a circle, and activate it with a touch, and poof! Magic portal. It's how we got to--and away from--every call we got.

So when I swirled it then, it wasn't the most elegant swirl ever, but it did make a nice white disk appear right above my nose, and I could hear the top of the table and Lionel drop right into it. I lay there, breathing hard, until Retina pulled me out from under the portal.

"You okay?" she panted.

I clutched her, not really caring whether or not she was takehomeable to Mom. "Yeah...yeah I'm alright."

"What happened to Lionel?"

"Oh, I just dropped him into the containment tank. We don't like using it, but well, occasionally a monster does try to eat someone and you need to stop it real quick. Fizz will give me lots of shit for it, but he'll live."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "I was worried he was dead..."

I raised my chin proudly. "That's not exactly how we do things at OOPS." I suddenly realized I had, in trying to look proud, raised my face to be eye to eye with hers. I could feel her breath. She looked down at my lips.

And being that we'd both almost been eaten--why the hell not? I met her lips, and we lost our balance, dropping awkwardly in a tangle on the couch, giggling together.

"Oopsy-daisy," I said grinning.

"Well I'm not complaining--"

"Well I am!" The Resident said, gesturing at the ruined coffee table, and then us making out on her couch. "Really?"

* * *

Entry 3: Minerva looked over my report as she flicked peanuts into Theo's mouth across the room without looking. She'd somehow mastered the art.

"Wellllll. . . the client was not actually very pleased with your conduct at the end of the mission."

I flushed. "I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"Not exactly the sort of report you'd send home to your family," Minerva said. I cringed, but she continued, "but it's fine. The Resident is too excited to have another dinner party story to be too mad. Lionel has been seeing physical and psychological therapists on Spiral and they seem to believe he has a good chance of rehabilitation so he won't eat people. Retina stopped by to see him."

"I'm glad he's doing alright."

"Which leads to the most important question," Minerva said as she lowered the report. "Did you ask her on a second date?"

I waved both hands in front of my chest. "No way! She may be a reformed criminal but like. . .wasn't she a monster once upon a time?"

Minerva shrugged, and looked over at Theo, who chittered a cough, and chimed in, "If you can't get over that, then you can't. But do you think she's a good person *now*? Do you think she did anything that was unforgivable, that being better couldn't change?"

I was silent.

"Not everyone is a monster forever. Even Lionel doesn't want to eat people anymore. I can't decide anything for you, but you need to decide what's really holding you back."

They left the room, and I sat there thinking before pulling my phone out, and bringing up the app. There was her profile pic, wearing too much black as always.

"*Hey! Me again!*" I pathetically started typing. "*How do you like Italian food?*"

I let out a deep breath, and to my horror saw the notification she was typing.

"*Would it terrify you to learn I've never been to an Italian restaurant?*"

I laughed, and felt the tension flow from my shoulders. "*Well then, I guess I'll just have to show you what they're like, you monster ;).*"

6. Monsters Under the Bed

by Andrew Davis

There was a monster under Gem's bed. At twenty-six years old, she had hoped her monster-under-the-bed days were behind her, but this monster was quite persistent, and unlike her previous monsters, it insisted on being utterly real.

The clock read 11:45. Less than two minutes to go. At thirteen minutes to midnight, every night for the past week, the monster had come out.

11:46. One minute now.

The first time, as it scratched and clawed at her floor, dragged itself into her room, stood, hunched over so that it didn't hit the ceiling, and unfurled its wings, she had screamed. Who wouldn't?

But it just stood there, watching her, and she watched it. Its eyes glowed a fierce red. A feather fell to the ground.

11:47.

The familiar green glow returned, spreading across the room, bathing the space in its sickly light.

Gem leapt off her bed, and pressed the side of her head to the carpet. The green glow came from what she could only describe as some sort of portal, a gap in the floor that her downstairs neighbors didn't seem to know anything about (that had been an awkward introductory conversation).

Claws emerged. A beak followed. Now sitting up, back against the wall, Gem watched as the monster pulled itself through in full, shaking the bed as it stood.

“So how was your day?”

The monster tilted its head to the side.

“Same as usual, then? Didn’t have to deal with Brian today, so mine was better than most,” said Gem.

It didn’t seem like the monster could talk, but its gestures, like the occasional flapping of its wings and the inclinations of its head, suggested it could hear her. Gem felt bad about the one-sided nature of their conversations, now a part of her daily routine. She wondered if the monster resented her pouring her grievances and fears out at it. But she talked, and it listened.

* * *

Gem shut the door and stepped into an outside that bit right through her. Lifting her collar to ward off the cold, she crossed the street, the glare of the morning sun making her squint as she did so.

As she crossed the street, she noted the black van, and the two women leaning against it, one middle aged, one younger. They were still here, and as far as Gem could tell, they hadn’t moved since they arrived. Her skin pricked as she passed them.

Then, as she stepped onto the next street and continued on her way to work, she forgot.

* * *

“Break’s over now, Gem, back to work.”

Gem's back tensed and her stomach dropped at the sound of Brian's voice. Why couldn't he have taken two days off? He was pale and visibly clammy, and clearly needed another sick day, but the man had a pathological need to be here as often as possible. He loved the call center when no one else even liked it, but it was a parasitic relationship: it took everything he had, and he gave without question.

"I said, back to work."

"Yes, Brian."

Gem *had* been working. But the little finger in her right hand was beginning to twitch and cramp from the endless typing, and she'd been taking ten seconds to breathe in and out after the stream of abuse she'd gotten from her last call.

Brian stood there, his gaze lingering on her a little too long. Finally, he spoke. "And as you have so much time, I do have some extra tasks you could get done..."

* * *

Later that night, as Gem spoke to the monster, instead of standing, it mimicked her seating position, arching its back to pull its knees up to its chin, wings embracing its legs.

"... and thanks to Brian's extra tasks, I got home *an hour* late," finished Gem.

She sighed, and silence filled the room. The monster tilted its head to the left.

"I'm just... tired of dealing with his bullshit."

Gem drew breath. They were building up, the things she'd been wanting to say for so long, and were tumbling out in a rush now she finally knew how to put them into words. "But I don't know where else to go. I could retrain for an actual good job, but I don't have the time or the money to do it on my own, and going back to Mum and Dad is *not* happening. I was watching a YouTube video, with this guy who packed it all in, left the nine to five, followed his dream and became a freelance artist.

And he seems happy. Actually, properly happy. And that would be great. But I don't want to be an artist. I don't have a *dream*, I just don't want to do *this* for the rest of my life."

The words hung in the air, a truth Gem had finally let out into the world. They were terrible.

But they were free.

"So what do I do? Where do I go from here?"

Unfurling its wings, the monster stretched out its right arm towards Gem. It opened up its claw, talons razor sharp.

Gem reached forwards, and took the claw in her hand.

* * *

Light. So much light. Too much light, shifting in colour and texture as they stepped through the portal.

This place was change and newness and impossible to get a grip on: Gem wasn't sure if she was falling, or flying, or standing still on solid ground.

But one thing was constant: a song, carried through the winds that billowed around them as they flew or fell or ran, Gem couldn't tell which, and passing through her ears. And the song was the monster, no, not just the monster, the song was *them*, and at last, they understood each other.

A name. The monster had a name. Luma, she was called Luma, and she was alone here, in this nether-space, alone with the song, so alone she didn't even know what *alone* meant, until a tear in the fabric around her opened up, and Luma heard Gem's own song, and heard herself, her alone, in Gem's alone.

And now they were *here*, and their songs were together.

Tracks of tears raced down Gem's cheeks, as she thought, as she knew, that this was what it meant to be heard.

Taller. Luma had towered over her only seconds before, but now they were at the same eye level, Gem's spine twisting and stretching. There was a prickling sensation in her right arm, and feathers started to sprout, the nails at the end of her hand extending into talons.

It was this place. Being in this place was changing her, and it, and she...

"What have you done to me?"

Luma tilted her head to the side, confused.

This is what you wanted.

"I, I can't, I've got to-"

Gem turned and ran, or flew, or fell, back the way they'd come. Luma didn't stop her. Instead, she stood, and watched, the red blaze of her eyes dimming to yellow.

* * *

Now in her room, Gem was back to normal. Her arm had shed its feathers, her claws were just nails. She curled up on the floor, and stared at the peeling beige wallpaper.

* * *

The monitor glared at Gem. Gem glared back. The faint outline of her reflection was just visible against the dark blue background of the screen.

Something was nagging at her...

The women. The two women with the van, opposite her block of flats. They'd been there for days, but every day before today, she'd forgotten them as soon as they were out of eyesight. Why was she remembering them now?

And there had been something different about them today: they'd been quiet and still before, but today they were frantic, gesticulating wildly at a weird device with a myriad of buttons and a rapidly spinning dish the older woman was holding, and talking in hushed, hurried whispers as they did so.

But why did it matter? Two women with their own stories were living their lives, just like everyone on Gem's street. Stuff about them didn't make sense, but other people's lives didn't have to make sense to Gem. It had nothing to do with her.

Except.

Except.

They'd arrived on the street the morning after Luma first came through the portal.

"Are you with us, Gem?"

He'd caught her off guard, he always did, but the familiar prickling sensation didn't run up Gem's spine.

"There's work to be done," said Brian, "and as always, I find you sat here daydreami-"

"Oh, fuck off."

Brian made a face that gave the distinct impression he'd just swallowed a fly. "Excuse me?"

His hand crashed into the desk, inches from her own. She stayed quite still, when usually she would have flinched. People in the nearest cubicles pointedly looked away. Brian was visibly shaking with rage now. "I will not be spoken to like this!"

“THEN FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIFE, MIND HOW YOU SPEAK TO OTHER PEOPLE!” Gem was on her feet now. She was shaking too. This was new. This was good. For a moment, she thought she saw feathers sprouting from her arm. “For *years*, I’ve put up with your bullshit. The extra jobs, the negging, the threats. I don’t want to sleep with you, get over it.”

His eyes flashed with fear as, for a second, he recognised himself in her words. Then, gritting his teeth, he growled, “You’ve always been a total bitch.”

Gem’s hand curled into a fist. As she did so, her arm seemed to turn into a wing, her knuckles into talons. Throwing her full weight into one fluid movement, she slammed her fist, or her talons, into Brian’s face. He flew across the aisle, careening into the wall of the opposite cubicle.

Heads were poking out across the office now. Gem inspected her arm, which was, indeed, just an arm, and not a wing. Brian staggered to his feet.

“You crazy bitch. You’re done now. You’re done with this company.”

Gem looked him up and down. She stepped forwards, and he shrank beneath her.

“Good.”

* * *

11:46.

Gem lay on her bed, watching the hand she'd hit Brian with as she repeatedly curled it into a fist, before uncurling it once more. It throbbed faintly: she'd never hit anyone before, and she hadn't been ready for her own hand to hurt afterwards. But she really hadn't been ready for how she'd *feel*.

11:48.

That couldn't be right. She'd gotten lost in her thoughts, but Luma wasn't here yet. Maybe she was late? She'd never been late before.

11:49.

She stared at the clock, daring it to continue defying her.

11:50.

A pit opened up in Gem's stomach, a yawning chasm that her whole life seemed to be falling through.

Leaping up, she grabbed onto the bedframe and started to drag it back. Grunting with exertion, she continued, bedposts making an irritating scratching noise against the carpet until the portal was visible. It swirled beneath her, a green glowing mass of terrifying possibility.

She stepped forward, and fell through.

Everything was empty, and alone, and Gem felt like she could hardly breathe, but she summoned up every breath she had left to scream as loud as she could.

“Luma!”

Nothingness swirled around her, not even a blank void, just glass with nothing behind the glass to give the world color and light.

“LUMA!”

Faintly at first, she heard the sound of wings beating in the distance, getting louder and louder as Luma flew towards her, gathering pace with each beat of her wings. She was getting faster and faster, and closer and closer until-

She stopped, inches from Gem. The red blaze of her eyes had turned to a dim blue. Her song had gone quiet. She opened her beak, and let out a guttural screech.

Gem stood firm. “I-I’m sorry I ran away.”

Luma remained still, impassive. Her talons glinted.

“I was scared. Changing like that, it made me scared. But not of what I was turning into. It made me scared of who I’d been.”

The cool blue glow in Luma’s eyes began to shift, to turn yellow. The waves of mutual understanding that Gem was best able to call Luma’s voice flooded her mind.

Explain.

“I hit Brian today. He finally went too far, and I snapped, sent him flying. His nose was bleeding, he had one hell of a black eye. I didn’t know I could do that to someone.”

And that realisation scared you?

“No. I was scared that I hadn’t done it sooner. Scared that I’d put up with him treating me that way for so long, all because I wanted to keep my place in a world where . . . where I was miserable. Where I didn’t fit.”

She took Luma’s claw in both of her hands, her arm beginning to sprout feathers as she did so.

“I fit here. I wasn’t ready to accept it yesterday, but-”

Luma’s eyes once again blazed their fierce, joyous red. *But you are now.*

“Yes.”

Again, her spine began to twist and stretch as she grew taller, but this time, it felt *good*: the cracking and scraping of her bones made her heart race. The joints in her legs began to snap and bend, and she felt real, more real than she'd ever been.

Then Gem saw Luma's face, her red eyes blazing with a terrible anger, as she let out a desperate screech. Gem began to turn, but before she finished, she felt arms folding around her. She tried to beat her wings, but they weren't yet fully grown.

"I got you!" yelled a muffled voice behind her.

And suddenly, her stomach lurched as she was pulled backwards, faster than Luma could follow, and there was a blinding flash of light.

* * *

The bedroom, at first a swimming, hazy blur, slowly pulled itself into focus as Gem opened her eyes. She was lying on her bed, under the covers, fully dressed. She was even wearing her shoes.

But there were two women in her room. The two women from the van. The younger woman, who noticed her waking just as she saw them, said, "Min, we've got trouble."

"Shit," said the older woman. "Hoped to be out of here before she got up."

"What are you doing--" began Gem, but the older woman cut her off.

"It's alright," she said. "I'm Min, and this is Jesslyn. We're here to help, it's our job."

"It's her job," said Jesslyn. "I'm just the Archivist, field work's her area."

"I needed backup out here. You're the only squad member who doesn't stand out like a sore thumb on twenty-first century earth. The memory shield we placed around the van wouldn't have worked if people had seen Theo or Fizz. No one in this time forgets a talking squirrel or a big smashy android after they see them."

“Memory shield?” said Gem. She remembered how she’d forgotten these women every time she’d passed them. Until today. Until she’d been through the portal. Had going into Luma’s world changed something about her, meant she didn’t forget them any more?

As these thoughts raced through Gem’s brain, there was a “ding” sound. Min pulled the strange looking gadget she’d been holding outside the van earlier that day out of her pocket, and pressed a few buttons, before a contented expression passed across her face.

“There, helping’s done. Your place of residence is now safe,” said Min.

“Safe? Safe from what?” asked Gem. A gnawing, stabbing sensation was taking root in the pit of her stomach.

“The big old tear in the fabric of reality,” answered Min. “Green, glowing, I doubt you missed it. Especially since you’d fallen through.”

“This isn’t our normal line of work,” said Jesslyn. “But we were passing by, picked up some readings on our sci-fi bullshit detector--” She waved at the gadget in Min’s hand.

“It has a name,” said Min.

“It’s a sci-fi bullshit detector. And it showed that the tear in reality threatened to . . . well, to blink the next millenium out of existence. And even when we haven’t been contracted to stop it, that’s the sort of thing we’re kind of invested in stopping.”

The words these women were saying had some kind of meaning, but it was entirely washing over Gem, who’d already forgotten everything they’d said, and had just one question in response.

“What have you done?”

“We sealed the tear,” said Min happily.

Now, Gem understood the reason behind the gnawing sensation in her stomach: the portal had gone. She'd been too out of it to realize until now, but her carpet was just a normal carpet: there was no swirling green mass in the centre of it.

“Why?”

Min blinked. “What do you mean, ‘why’? Jesslyn told you, it was about to blink the next millenium out of existence.”

Gem clenched and unclenched her fists. “I’m not asking why you closed it, I’m asking why you took me back first.”

“Uh, because you were in danger - you do realise you were turning into a giant bird-monster, right?”

“I know! I knew that going in, I wanted to change!” yelled Gem, her voice cracking.

A vast, terrible silence swallowed the room whole.

“Oh,” Jesslyn faltered, after far too long. “Shit.”

“Will I be able to go back?”

“N-No,” stammered Min apologetically. “It’s shut for good now. We don’t have the equipment to bring it back, and even if we did, we couldn’t, it’d be too risky.”

Gem breathed in, and she breathed out. Then, throwing back her head, she let out a feral scream. Jesslyn flinched. Min briefly held out her arm to comfort Gem, but stopped halfway through the gesture, thinking better of it.

Collapsing to the floor, Gem started to cry, heavy, ugly tears.

Min looked down at the woman sobbing on the floor, and ran her hands over her hair.

"Boss, what've we done?" said Jesslyn, in horror.

"We've screwed up," said Min. "We tried to do a good thing, something we hadn't been contracted to do, but by doing that, we failed our day job: getting people where they need to go."

Gem didn't hear any of this. Instead, she repeatedly slammed her fist into the floor. "I don't want to be here," she sobbed. "I want to be with her, I want to be *me*."

These people, whoever they were, and whatever their intentions, had taken away her chance to be herself. And she hated them for that.

Except they weren't people. They were prey. They were prey, shrinking as she grew, ready to be sliced by the talons that ripped from her knuckles, to be torn apart by the beak that grew out from her mouth. The world was tinted in a cool, washed out blue. Fully extending her wings so that they brushed the walls of the room, she let out a wild screech.

"Min? She's a giant bird person," said Jesslyn.

"I can see that!" yelled Min in response.

"Well, how's that possible?" said Jesslyn, dodging a swipe of Gem's claws. "I thought she could only do that in the alternate dimension."

"She must have carried some of that place inside her after passing through the portal. It activated when she realised she couldn't go back, and voila! Giant bird woman."

Gem swiped at them again, and Min parried the swipe with the bedside lamp, which shattered into tiny pieces all over the floor.

There was a wild beeping sound.

“Sci-fi bullshit detector's going off the charts!” yelled Jesslyn, grabbing it and taking readings while a distracted Min continued to ward off Gem, now using a quickly shredded pillow as a shield.

“What's it telling you?”

“There's instability in the portal! It's partially open!”

Throwing books at Gem to fend her off, Min spoke as she put two and two together.

“She's in two places at once, it's pulling both dimensions back together - there's a big bang coming if we don't stop it.”

“So we need to get her back through the portal?”

“We need to get the giant bird woman back through the portal.”

At that moment, Gem seized Min in both of her claws. Min struggled, but couldn't do anything to free herself as she was dragged towards the open beak. She could see tonsils, teeth, and spit, and they were far too close.

Min used the one thing she had left: her voice.

“Wait! Just wait,” she said. “Before you eat me, hear me out.”

Gem shut her beak.

“You're still in there, that's good,” began Min. “I'm sorry, we messed up, but we can put it right. The portal's starting to open again, you can go back through.”

“You kinda need to,” said Jesslyn, “Else things'll get real bad real quick.”

“That too,” said Min.

Gem set Min down, her eyes turning from blue to yellow.

“Trust us,” said Jesslyn. “Go on!”

Min and Jesslyn pressed themselves against separate walls as Gem shuffled towards the space where the portal had previously been. As she stepped forwards, the space started to glow green upon contact with her foot, and slowly, then all at once, she fell through, feathers, beak and claws disappearing through the carpet. Once she’d fallen through, the portal vanished for good, and the carpet was just an ordinary carpet again.

“I think we did it,” said Jesslyn. “Whatever ‘it’ is.”

“We did,” replied Min.

“Boss?”

“Yes?”

“Our job is really fucking weird.”

* * *

She was back, she knew that, but back *where*? Something was missing, something important.

Luma was there, racing towards her, and she heard her song, getting louder as she flew closer, but it was as if she couldn’t quite sing in tune. With a great effort, she responded to the song.

Luma, I don’t...

Luma tilted her head to the side.

You don't what?

She bowed her head, dropped her wings to her side.

I don't know who I am.

Luma stepped forwards, folded her wings around her, and pressed their foreheads together.

Then let me help you remember.

It was like she could hear the sound of a tuning fork, the faltering metallic echo guiding her towards the wavelength of Luma's song, until finally, she could sing in tune.

I'm Gem.

Gem lifted her head, and her eyes blazed a fierce red. Luma's eyes blazed back.

You are Gem. And you are home.

7. Yorktown

by Laine Ferio

Jesslyn groaned as she read the newest request for relocation. “*Just* what we needed.”

“Is something wrong?” asked Theo. He pushed aside the legal tome he’d been reading. “Is the request incomplete?”

“Yeah, your tone would indicate that it’s *not* something we need,” Fizz said.

Jesslyn frowned. “Yeah, it’s not, Fizz. Hey, Boss?” she called.

Min stuck her head into the squad’s main room. “Yes?”

“You’d better hear this, too.”

Min leaned against her desk, her empty coffee cup dangling from one hand. “Shoot.”

“We’ve got a request for relocation from a Dr. Karra Yorrk.”

“That mean woman from Dawn 690?” Fizz asked.

“Not exactly,” Jesslyn said. “Y’see, this Dr. Yorrk’s name isn’t spelled the same way as the Dr. York we encountered a while back. I saw the name badge she had on her lab coat and it’s not the same.”

“An extra R?” Theo said.

“Yeah, it’s barely imperceptible, but if you’re listening, you can hear it,” Jesslyn answered.

“So what’s the catch?” Min said. “There’s clearly a catch.”

“That’s just it, it only has a meeting location in a specific Dawn, and the request for relocation, no other details,” Jesslyn said. “It’s not *incomplete*, as far as requests go, but I assume there’s something weird about this. I’ve just got a feeling about it.”

“Understood,” Min said. “Well, team, let’s gear up and head to this meeting, and let’s be prepared that things might get weird.”

“They kinda always do,” Fizz said.

“Well, then, we’re already halfway to being prepared for that eventuality then,” Min said. “Let’s just hope Dr. Yorrk is a better person than Dr. York.”

* * *

Min whacked the sci-fi bullshit detector with one hand; the screen came back on, with little arrows pointing to the specified location from the request. The light from the screen was the only illumination beyond Fizz’s optical sensors and Jesslyn’s flashlight. This place was, well, *creepy*. Dark, quiet (*too* quiet?), the soft sounds of water dripping somewhere off in the distance, a feeling of vast openness and yet a sensation of cloying closeness was nearly palpable. The team moved forward cautiously.

“I’ve gotten accustomed to field work to a degree,” Jesslyn whispered. “But I kinda hate this place.”

“You and me both,” Min replied, as Theo nervously laughed in clear tones of agreement.

“It’s too wet here,” Fizz said. “I also don’t like it.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Min asked.

“Yeah, everything’s compensating all right. It’s worse than a sewer, better than the ocean,” he answered.

“Okay, if it gets worse, you let me know,” Min ordered, and Fizz nodded in acknowledgment.

They reached the place indicated by the detector. “Hello?” Min ventured.

“Oh, thank god, you’ve come,” came a woman’s voice.

Jesslyn swung her flashlight up and to the side. There, leaning on a rock, was a woman in jeans and a dark brown cardigan. Her hair was up in a messy ponytail, and her face was smudged with dirt. “Karra Yorrk?”

“Yes, that’s me.” Karra squinted at them. “Are you the people I called for help?”

“We are,” Min said. “OOPS, here to relocate you.”

“How did you end up in such an awful place?” Jesslyn asked. “Surely this isn’t where you’re from.”

Karra shook her head. “It’s not,” she said. “I was *brought* here, pulled through a rift that just. . . opened up in my office one day. I don’t even know what this place *is*. But *she* said it was some sort of in-between place. Not quite a Dawn, but not quite outside the Dawns, either. Whatever it is, I don’t like it.”

Min had a bad feeling about this. “She?”

“Yeah, the woman with *my* face, and probably the same name,” Karra said. “I don’t know what her deal is, but she just basically teleported in through the rift, grabbed me without any fanfare, and then we were in this wide open space where there were *a bunch* of us.”

“Us?”

“Taller, shorter, thinner, wider, humanoid, not humanoid, all types, all sorts, all me,” Karra said. “I knew there were versions of me out there in the multiverse. Never dreamed I’d meet so many. And never expected to get *kidnapped* by one!”

“How’d you get away from her?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Karra answered. “The room she put us in had access to the air vents, and I was able to unscrew the cover. Vent was big enough for me to wiggle through. It’s not like she’d figured out some way to track us all.”

“How’d you unscrew the cover?” Min asked.

Karra reached into her pocket and pulled out a small device. “I always carry a multitool on me,” she said. “Not a ton of help usually in my line of work, but very helpful in this situation.” Her face brightened as she looked at them hopefully. “So when do we leave?”

“You don’t want to rescue the other kidnapped Karas and Karras?” Theo asked.

“How would we do that?” Karra asked. “We’d need, like, an army or something to rescue that many people.”

“I’m classified as an army in several Dawns,” Fizz said, flexing one of his arms. “We got this.”

“Besides, apparently Dr. York hasn’t learned her lesson about kidnapping people and holding them in cells,” Min said. “There are consequences for that sort of thing.”

“She’s done this before?” Karra said.

“Well, not with versions of herself, that’s new,” Min answered. “She was keeping anybody not from her Dawn in captivity and then extracting what was different about them to benefit her people.”

Karra wrapped her arms around herself. “That’s horrendous!”

“Exactly, and that’s why we need to stop her. You can come with us to help, or wait here until we get back; either way we’ll relocate you in line with your request, but it’ll be useful for you to at least point us in the right direction of this building she had you all in,” Min said.

Karra shook her head. “Better if I just led you there,” she said. “This place is creepy. Besides, she’s giving a bad name to us, I can’t let that stand. What she’s been doing is wrong, and if you think the five of us can stop her, then I’m game. Let’s go.”

Min grinned. “Let’s go.”

* * *

“The building’s down in this, I don’t know, valley,” Karra said, indicating a large building that they could just make out in the murk.

Fizz focused his eyes onto it and magnified. “The sign over the door says, ‘Yorktown’,” he read.

“That would be funny, in different circumstances,” Theo said.

“The air vent I came out of emerged over here,” Karra said, pointing to the team’s left. “As far as I can tell, this place was abandoned before she took it over. Maybe it was a mining facility, though I don’t know what they’d be mining here. Darkness?” She shook her head and shivered. “I just came out here and then hurried away to where I thought I’d be safe and could call for help. Nobody seemed to follow me.”

“And there were no guards when you escaped?” Min asked. “Nobody who would be watching us come in?”

“I don’t know if she discovered my exit or not,” Karra said. “But, no, it’s just versions of me. I’d hope there’s more like me than there are of her, but who knows? Quantum physics is *not* my area of expertise.”

“What are you a doctor of, anyway?” Jesslyn asked.

“History,” Dr. Yorrk said. “Similar to quantum physics in some ways but not in as many as you’d like when dealing with, you know, multiple universes and versions of yourself. This is very weird.”

“Weird is what we do,” Min answered.

They lowered themselves into the vent and began the trip into the building, encountering nothing to bar their way or keep them from leaving. From ahead of them, low voices could be heard, and a dim light filtered into the vent.

Karra cupped a hand around her mouth and whispered into the vent cover. “Is she out there?”

“Karra, is that you?” another voice--this one higher, squeakier--asked. “No, no, she’s not in here.”

The vent cover tilted to one side, then lifted off into the dark. Min could make out several forms in the dim light--a few humanoid, but most not. Someone--a slightly larger-than-normal chipmunk--hopped onto the ledge in front of them.

“Why did you come--oh, new people,” she said. “I’m Kar’a, of the Tallest Trees.”

“Tallest Trees? I knew a Kar’a from Tallest Trees when I was in university,” Theo said.

“Theo?!” Kar’a shifted to peer past Karra and Min. “It’s really you! I heard you went to work for--”

“As much as I’d love for you to continue this conversation,” Min said, “I’d like to make sure we aren’t caught while in an air vent.”

“Oh, right,” Kar’a said. “Come on out.”

The team plus Karra clambered out into the room. It was very non-descript, and the only light source was a single glowrod slowly pulsating high above their heads. Soon they were addressing all of the people in the room--there were about forty versions of Dr. York in the room, not counting Kar’a or Karra.

“We’re here to help you all escape,” Min said, and to this there was a general murmur of excitement.

“And to make her pay for kidnapping us,” Karra said, to which there was even more excitement.

“Well, ‘making her pay’ carries rather strong connotations,” Theo said. “We do have a Judiciary Team that we can turn her over to.”

“Turn who over to?” came the voice of Dr. Kara York.

Everyone turned, basically in unison, to the door of the room, where she stood, outlined in a flickery coruscation. York’s eyes narrowed. “You four, *again*. I can’t have you messing up my plans like last time.”

Min shrugged. “Look, I’m not thrilled to be seeing you again, either, but we got a call and we come to help. That’s what we *do*. It’s not our fault that you keep setting yourself in opposition to what we do.”

“This is between me, myself, and I,” York said. “You OOPSy doodles don’t come into it.”

“Did she try to make a pun?” Jesslyn asked, and Fizz snickered.

York glared at them. “I will not be *mocked*,” she said, the flicker of white light around her growing stronger. “I found all the versions of myself I could so that I could measure myself against them and

find out whether or not I was *superior*. These--” she waved an arm at the others in the room “--*monstrous* versions of myself will see that I am *better* than them. Stronger. Faster. Smarter.”

“And how are you going to prove that?” said Kar’a.

“You can’t even figure out how to get yourself back to Dawn 690,” someone else in the crowd.

“Oh, shut *up*,” York said. “*You* weren’t empowered by the cosmic forces of the multiverse to render judgment.”

“You weren’t, either!”

York’s outline grew brighter. “I’m afraid you’re wrong about that,” she said, grinning much wider than she should have been able to. She raised one hand, studied it for a moment, then looked at the crowd. “When I was ripped away from my beloved Dawn--”

“By an unstable rift you were trying to harness,” Jesslyn said.

“*Ripped* away from my beloved Dawn,” York continued, “I was lost between dimensions. Out of time, out of time, out--”

“Of sight? Of mind?” Theo suggested.

“Out among the cosmic forces, buffeted by my own sense of self and strong will, *imbued* with power, with the ability to move where I willed.”

“And you ended up *here*?” Karra asked.

“And once here, I decided that I would prove to the multiverse that I was *worthy* of the gifts it had bestowed. I focused and tore a rift and pulled myself in. Again and again and again, till all were here.”

“There’s way more Dawns than 42,” Kar’a said. “Are you actually a scientist with a grasp on the metaphysics and quantum physics you’re dealing with here?”

The ground shook under their feet. “I am all powerful,” York yelled. “I deserve to be the only version of myself in the multiverse. I will destroy you all with the power of the multiverse!” She cast a bolt of light from her hand into the floor, and her grin grew wider. “You, my foes, and you, the inferior versions of me, pitiful, small, *sad*, I will obliterate you from the multiverse.”

“Even if that *were* true--which it’s not--you can’t just kidnap versions of yourself and hold them captive,” Min said. “There’s laws against that sort of thing.”

“Looks like I’ve been doing just that, so what laws can keep me constrained? Who’s going to *stop* me?”

“Was that ‘you and what army’?” Fizz asked excitedly. “I love it when they say that.”

Min nodded, and Fizz took a step forward. But before he could do one of the things he did best, Karra pushed past him and punched York, who dropped to the floor. Karra looked back at the group. “I was *really* tired of her talking,” she said.

“What are you a historian *of*?” Jesslyn said.

Karra smiled. “Martial arts and their role in broader cultures. I took some classes to get a feel for some of them.”

The groundshaking worsened as Fizz clamped a device over York’s wrist that would keep her from tearing rifts in reality and spacetime (hopefully). The air felt hot, as if something had been stirred up from the depths below.

“We need to get out of here,” Kar’a squeaked. “I’ve finally figured out what this place is, and with York out of commission, it’s falling apart.”

“A manifestation?” Min asked. That was the worst-case scenario--a physical representation of York herself, held together by her thoughts and ideas. Fine when conscious, or sleeping, but defeated? Unexpectedly knocked out? It made the whole thing unstable.

Kar’a nodded. “Yes! Can you get us all out of here at once?”

“Yes. Everybody, hang on to each other!”

* * *

Back in the office, Jesslyn began typing up their mission report. In the Observations field, she wrote:

Monstrous. Late Middle English. Meaning, strange or unnatural. Alternatively, something extremely large or daunting. Alternatively, having the ugly or frightening appearance of a monster. Alternatively, inhumanly or outrageously evil or wicked. A subjective description.

What makes a creature monstrous? Is it a creature’s circumstances? Its appearance(s)? Its behavior(s)?

Or its choices?

About the Contributors

Laine Ferio is a writer and editor who is based in the United States. She likes found families, historical records, and space, and can be found occasionally tweeting as @LaineFerio.

Daisy McLain is a writer and veterinary technician living on the east coast of the United States. Her interests include giant robots, bread baking, and early US history. (Really, though, it's mostly robots.)

Dillon O'Hara is a writer, editor, and composer based in Ireland. Their critical work can be found in *Imperica*, *Strange Horizons*, and *The Sundaes*. They also co-wrote a novella-length story for *Cwej: Down the Middle* and are currently organising the 10,000 Dawns Winter Special. You can find them online at marklaherty.wordpress.com.

Lupan Evezan is a writer from the United States. He is a fan of Doctor Who and Duck comics, and is the co-creator of the *Crew of the Copper-Colored Cupids* fictional universe.

James Wylder is an author from Elkhart Indiana, USA. When they're not writing, editing, or doing something else related to publishing, they enjoy long walks with their dog and playing Xbox. You can find more about them at jameswylder.com or on twitter at @arcbeatle.

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.

**Available now from Arcbeatle Press: A
Brand New Series Of Adventure in Space,
Time, and Other Realities. Its...**

