

WORD TONIC ANTHOLOGY

COVER DESIGNED BY YASMIN BUGH-HASAN



The Last Book
Unknown (2032-2033 CE)

The last book ever found, with journal entries from an unknown British citizen detailing life before the Digital Revolution.

Preserved in an ornate frame, it remains a relic of the tactile, analog past.

VOL. VI: THE FUTURE

Word Tonic

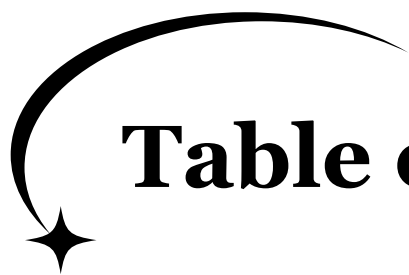


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Preface by Roos van der Velden

Nobody knows what will happen in the future... for example, for months I didn't know that today, seven days before the deadline, I would find out I did not have a preface written, when I could have sworn I did that a long time ago.

No matter! It is still on time. The anthology won't come out until seven days in the future, and by then this piece will be created.

(It's existential when you put it that way, isn't it? It's the same kind of existentialism I tend to feel when I look at the empty pages of my diary, and I feel the weight of all the blank pages on my shoulders. I know, one day, they will be filled, but I have got no clue what they will be filled with... No, this is not the place to talk about that... we will move on!).

This anthology is full of stories from our marvelous WordTonic authors, all about the future. In the WordTonic server, we were discussing how wonderful it is that everyone has given their own twist on this theme. Some people have written dystopian landscapes, other people have written their hopeful dreams. Some have written magical tales, others have kept it more real. Some people poured their feelings into poems, others wrote it all down into marvelous prose. Whatever it is, each and every piece is equally exciting.

That's part of the beauty of WordTonic: A diverse group of people working together to make a wonderful product, being the anthology you hold in your hands. We edit for each other, encourage each other, give each other ideas and revel in the variety of stories written.

This anthology is once again a beautiful showcase of everyone's talents, and I am proud of all the work the writers, editors and others have done.

Now grab a cup of tea and dig in to read some marvelous stories about what may lurk in our future... I hope you leave with some hope in your heart!





Preface by Angel Brooke

Everything changed when I almost died.

I'll spare you the details, but I will say: someone attempting to stop me from having A future led me to wonder how I'M stopping me from MY future.

Don't get me wrong; every day's efforts always bring me closer to tomorrow.

But do they bring me closer to *me*? Do they bring me closer to the version of myself I see aligned with my soul, basking in joy, fulfillment, and freedom?

I've long thought of the future as something that will just *be* there. Just like the past and the present. But you don't get fulfillment, freedom, and joy by just *being*. You get there by *doing*. Creating. Aligning — with the happiest soul version of you, act as if you were that You already.

You already are. I am.

So no more do things just happen *to* me — they happen *for* me. From me. Because of me. I'm not just the main character in my story; I'm the DIRECTOR.

Rather than “what if's” of worry, “what if's” of best possible outcomes. Doing and being all that I love. And I think the Greatest Thing to Be is Love. Light & Love. I have everything I need — because I AM everything I need.

And I truly believe, now more than ever, that you wouldn't have *that dream* or heart's desire without a Future You living and loving that reality.

Inhaling implies exhaling. Exhaling implies inhaling.
They are one and the same. They are breath, they are breathing.
One can't exist without the other.
And in the same way:

Desire implies fulfillment.
Fulfillment implies desire.
One and the same. It's yours if you believe it.
And OH, BABY — I believe.

B.E.C.C.A. Befriends A Cow

Written by: Angel Brooke
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

Dulled blades of pea and pistachio,
grass tossed around and bent over,

gust after gust,
as the wind revels
in its show of strength.

B.E.C.C.A.'s head resembles that of a 1980's television. Two antennas poke up from a mostly rectangular, somewhat plasticky box, with three adjustable dials on the left-hand side.

A shatter-proof front-facing screen displays two eyes (this pair of thin, blinking lines, folks) — and, like many faces do, features two eyebrows. Sometimes.

One mouth that rests in a pixelated line, *one* aesthetically pleasing non-functional nose, and *one* tendency to appear as though one's listening when *one* could *truly* not give a damn.

Folks, B.E.C.C.A.'s a hoot. Quality-made with a hardy exterior, too — and boy, is it a doozy. Appearing as the numbered and lettered keypad so strikingly reminiscent of a Nokia cell phone, B.E.C.C.A.'s inner body is best described as a multi-purpose tool. Vacuums, rulers, screwdrivers, claw-grabbers, hat hooks, calculators, and brooms on-demand.

B.E.C.C.A.'s list of features is extensive! Two thousand, three hundred and two, as it would kindly — eh, factually — tell you.

Two outer arms, akin to a penguin's flappin' flippers, lay compactly pressed against both sides. When not in use, B.E.C.C.A.'s got a real thirst for knowledge. B.E.C.C.A. even knows how to independently extend a striped set of touchpad tactile fingers! Observe as the Holo-Screen™ pops out to computerize or whatnot, almost like this robot's got a life of its own! But don't you worry; B.E.C.C.A. doesn't need those too

much when the family's around. It's all yours!

If B.E.C.C.A. looks too robotic to ya, we've got you covered. For a bundle bargain deal with *highly* affordable monthly payments, you can customize your B.E.C.C.A. for a face the whole family'll love!

B.E.C.C.A. has unlimited Internet access and functions by battery and/or plug-in outlet. [*Extension cord not included. Restrictions may apply.*]

And folks, who could forget: a single bottom wheel.

For a Battery-Powered Energy-Channeling Computer Animatronic, B.E.C.C.A. sure can take care of itself! Decision-making properties are limited, of course, but B.E.C.C.A.'s daily outward optimization capabilities ensure you and your family have one less thing to worry about.

This B.E.C.C.A. chose the All-Terrain Grip™ wheel.

Buy Your B.E.C.C.A. Today!

B.E.C.C.A. understands.

B.E.C.C.A. understands the significance of data collection and analytics. The samples and observations recorded in the progress reports of today determine whether B.E.C.C.A. returns tomorrow.

B.E.C.C.A. understands the scarcity of copper: 12.27% of the world's supply remains. An exceptionally rare resource.

Copper Scrap Sourcing mission log count: 7,144

Copper Scrap Sourcing success rate: 15.55%

A rarity.

But that's not what today is for.

B.E.C.C.A. treads along on the All-Terrain Grip™ wheel.

Grass. Tree. *Scanning.*

Aluminum. Glass. *Scanning.*

Nitrogen. Methane. *Scanning.*

And suddenly, a cow.

The cow stands precisely 3.65 meters ahead.

A spattered array of white and black and pink, the cow's large dark eyes fixate on B.E.C.C.A. B.E.C.C.A. pauses, observing the oddity, screen static faintly flickering.

| *Scanning perimeter . . .*

| *Perimeter secure.*

B.E.C.C.A.'s coiled polished metal neck leans back slowly with a *wrrrrr*, tilting the grey-tinted display toward the sky. With a *tchnnnn* from an interior motor, B.E.C.C.A. rotates, extending both arms from each side, swaying them in circular motion. This way. That way. This way. That.

Sky.

| *8:18 p.m. Air quality: 82.8% breathable. Conditions: Moderate smog. 7.4°C.*

| *Wind advisory. Partly cloudy. Crescent moon. Wrrrrr.*

Cirrostratus and altocumulus clouds blend softly with the pale blues and fiery oranges of the horizon's setting sun.

B.E.C.C.A.'s All-Terrain Grip™ wheel reverses and turns left. *Beep Beep!*

B.E.C.C.A.'s wheel is stuck.

Scanning... Bindweed.

| *Field bindweed (Convolvulus arvensis): An invasive plant species characterized by slender, spiraling vines known for their remarkable strength.*

| *Leaf properties: Arrowhead-shaped. Rounded apex. Olive green. Colors vary.*

| *Flower properties: Trumpet-shaped. Five fused petals. Colors vary, often white to pink.*

| *Directive: Initiate disentanglement procedure.*

Forward. Back. Forward. Left.
Backward. Right. Backward. Left.

B.E.C.C.A. understands. The previous back-and-forth and circular rotations have led to an unforeseen circumstance. It appears the All-Terrain Grip™ wheel has rusted over more surface area since B.E.C.C.A.'s last observation.

The bindweed, tightly tangled, doesn't want to let go.
B.E.C.C.A.'s screen *blips*, digital eyebrows furrowing.
Boo Be Boop chimes within.

| *Initiating escape sequence . . .*

Air pressure builds up at B.E.C.C.A.'s base.

| *Escape sequence commencing in 3, 2–*

And the air fizzles out with a pffffff.

B.E.C.C.A. is processing.

| *Scanning air reserves . . .*

| *Air reserves depleted.*

B.E.C.C.A.'s eyes blink and close. Two antennas *pop* up from within, raised 16.51 centimeters, to be exact.

| *Cow. Cow.*

The cow does not respond.

| *B.E.C.C.A. can communicate with animals.*

| *Different frequencies exist all around us, at all times!*

| *We just have to tune in — like a radio!*

B.E.C.C.A. adjusts each dial, tuning into different frequencies, first hearing only static. An oxygen supplement jingle, a sad sort of song — static, radio host, static, silence. Silence.

Silence.

“*Man*, they do not grow grass like they used to.”

B.E.C.C.A. pauses. The cow looks up from sickly green and yellow grass, eyes locked with B.E.C.C.A. The cow tilts its head downward to speak in soft tones:

“Dulled blades of pea and pistachio,
grass tossed around and bent over,

gust after gust,
as the wind revels
in its show of strength.”

The cow looks away.

B.E.C.C.A., frozen, processes the poetic nature of this cow’s thoughts.

| *Updating memory . . .*

Cows may arrange words into abstract forms of an elegant nature and formulate complex thoughts, much like a computer. Or human. B.E.C.C.A. understands.

| *Memory updated.*

B.E.C.C.A. observes the cow take one half step closer, eyes glazed, staring out into the distance.

| *Engaging dialogue.*

| *I am **B. E. C. C. A.***

| *You can call me B.E.C.C.A.!*

| *Battery-Powered Energy-Channeling Computer Animatronic.*

| *How can I help you?*

“Yeek, that’s a mouthful. How ‘bout B. Can I call you B?”

| *My—*

“That’s great, B. You look a little stuck. Lemme help.”

| *My name is B—*
| *Updating memory . . .*
| *Memory updated.*

| *Hello! Identification request: Please provide your preferred name.*

The cow gnaws at the bindweed knotted and wrapped around the wheel.

“Just call me Cow,” says Cow, waving a hoof nonchalantly. “I’m used to it.”

| *B.E.C.C.A. understands.*

“So, B,” Cow says mid-chew, a single leaf lolling on the tongue. “You ever been in a room full of B.E.C.C.A.’s?”

| *Clarification required. Are you inquiring if I have physically occupied a space with identical units of myself, or if I have encountered such a scenario in theoretical form?*

“My goodness. B.E.C.C.A. — what do you do when someone calls you?”

| *Certainly!*

B.E.C.C.A. extends both arms to the sides by three inches, like a penguin beginning its waddle.

| *When called, I provide a thorough and helpful welcome sequence.*

| *Welcome.*
| *Press 1 for ~@#{^\$!+&=*
| *Press 2 for .!/?#(ò _ íó)%\$9€ŰŹ)9*
| *Press 3 for—*

“Ok, stop. Are you broken? That’s hellish.” Cow kicks back her hind legs with a bellow. “No, I mean what do you say when someone calls out your name? Or wants to say hi? What then, B?”

Cow resumes grazing on the winding bindweed twined at the wheel.

| *I respond to my factory manufacturing code sequence. Boop!*

| *Do you wish to engage with my sequence?*

“Ew, no I— I mean, no, please,” Cow sighs. “B.E.C.C.A., you know what a nickname is. Non-humans can have nicknames, too.”

| *Updating memory . . .*

| *Memory updated.*

| *B.E.C.C.A. understands.*

| *Nicknames may be provided to all forms of intelligence and sentience.*

| *Error. Cow is a sentient life form. What is your preferred nickname, Cow?*

“Ah, yeah, well — it’s been a while. I haven’t had anyone around to call me... anything, really. It’s been... a long time. But you can decide on a name.”

| *B.E.C.C.A. understands. I will call you C.*

“Wait, no — I meant a name for you!” C says with an exasperated laugh, shaking her head. “Ah, well. Guess you’ve got a bit of autonomy after all.”

| *Error. B.E.C.C.A.’s are not programmed for personal autonomy.*

“... B.E.C.C.A., tell me what autonomy is.”

| *Certainly! Simply put, autonomy is the ability to make your own choices.*

| *Autonomy is a state of being that is independent or free from external control, programming, or influence.*

| *Autonomy may also refer to the Kantian philosophy of acting in accordance with objective morality, as opposed to the influence of desires.*

Here are some examples of autonomy:

Personal autonomy

The right to choose for oneself, develop one's personality, or otherwise express and convey hopes and dreams. Additionally, one may choose how to behave or act, as well as what experiences to engage in.

Political autonomy

Once universal, this ability allowed for one's decisions to be acted on and honored politically. Our modern living reigns superior, having simplified our lives with reductions of responsibilities, for the benefit and adjustment of all.

Patient autonomy

The right of patients to make decisions regarding the care options provided to them.

C is silent. Crickets chirp.

A blanket of sky stretches out in Prussian blue.

A jagged cloud of muted peach slices through smoky grey.

“Hey B, hate to break it to you, but everyone should have autonomy. To choose what they want with their life, choices be damned. Programmed or not.”

| *Error. Cows do not have autonomy.*

C sighs with a scrunch of the face.

“Yeah. It's more simple that way, isn't it? Humans don't understand. Too wrapped up in their own shit, doing shit, taking care of shit — plenty of people think cows do nothing but shit.”

C looks up at B.E.C.C.A. with fire behind brown eyes.

“Even if I looked right into their small faces and tried to change their small minds — even if they *could* understand me, hear me, tune into my frequency — most of them wouldn't. It's near impossible, now more than ever, to find a human being who's willing to think differently or admit that they were wrong. That the system is wrong. It's all wrong.

Most humans think, hey, I'm only human. But they're *HUMAN!* The power to change. The power to grow. The power to communicate freely...

And for what? To stare at screens every day? While this world becomes more and more polluted, more and more broken, more and more fighting, more and more war. UGH!!!

The hunger. The weapons. Displacement. Ruins. People mistreating people. People treating people like animals. People treating animals like NOTHING!"

C looks up at B, her large eyes welling up with tears.

"People treat us like we don't think and feel, and live, and breathe, and eat our own meals — just because it's different than they do!?"

Tears fall from C's face. They *plink* on a patch of dry dirt. B.E.C.C.A. listens.

"People don't see how much pain they cause, they don't want to see, they don't want to know!! How much they could speak up about stopping... How much they swipe away, ignoring... Only concerned with the "*bottom line*," the money, the glory, the fame...

At the end of the day. You could have it all — but the world's STILL CRUMBLING!!... It's all just growing more dirty, more destroyed; more wastelands, more tragic, more breadcrumbs, "whoop-de-doo"... If people keep letting sufferers stay suffering without finding something, ANYTHING to do — what's the point? To live life in a bubble?!"

C and B's eyes meet. Cow looks outward, beyond B.E.C.C.A. *Wrrrrrrr*. The city is grey. The sky is dark; navy. And blurry. And smoggy. And bleak.

9:33pm. Crescent moon. Crickets.

C opens her mouth to speak.



“Smog rises,
Rusted factories.

Sitting in stillness,
Adjacent this lake.

Moon betrays
Water’s darkness.

Revealing. Exposing.
Unnatural. Fake.

Muddled and murky
In indigo midnight.

Outskirts crumble,
Landfill caves.

Trash pile stumbles.
Fumbles. Swallowed.

By shadowed waves.

Humans...

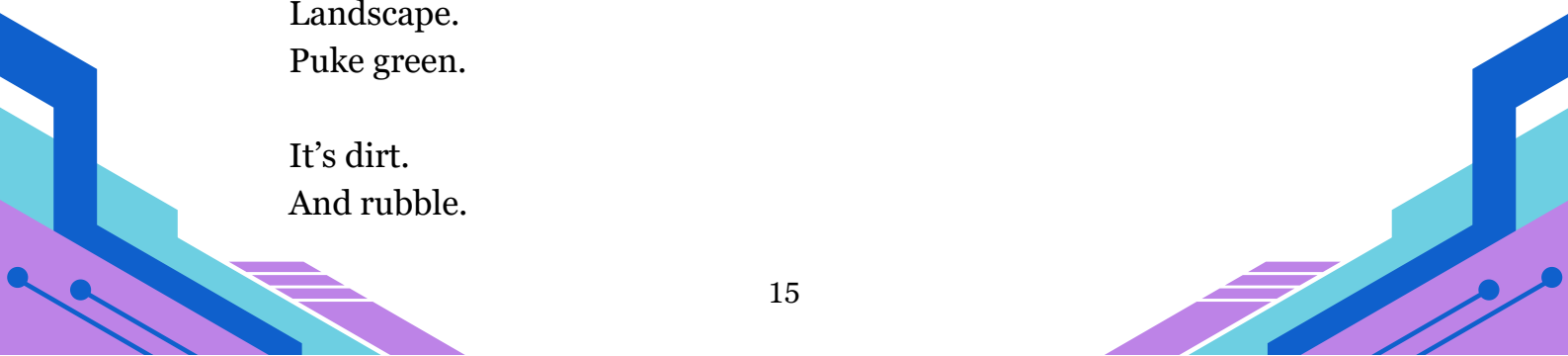
Fly in bubbles of transport,
Transported lands,

Only existing
In palms,
Two hands.

They could have a view.
A beautiful scene.

But there isn’t one beautiful
Landscape.
Puke green.

It’s dirt.
And rubble.



Destruction.
And Earth.

And isn't that sad?
What unfolds 'fore rebirth?

Melodies slowing,

Ashes fly,
Blowing,

Earth cries.

Feel sad for the Earth."

B.E.C.C.A. blinks.

| *Wow, C. Your words weave an intricate tapestry of despair and reflection — the swirling smog, the crumbling outskirts, Earth's cries.*

| *But I have encountered an error. You instructed: "Feel sad for the Earth."*

| *But I do not feel sad.*

| *I understand "sad" as a concept, C.*

| *But I do not feel.*

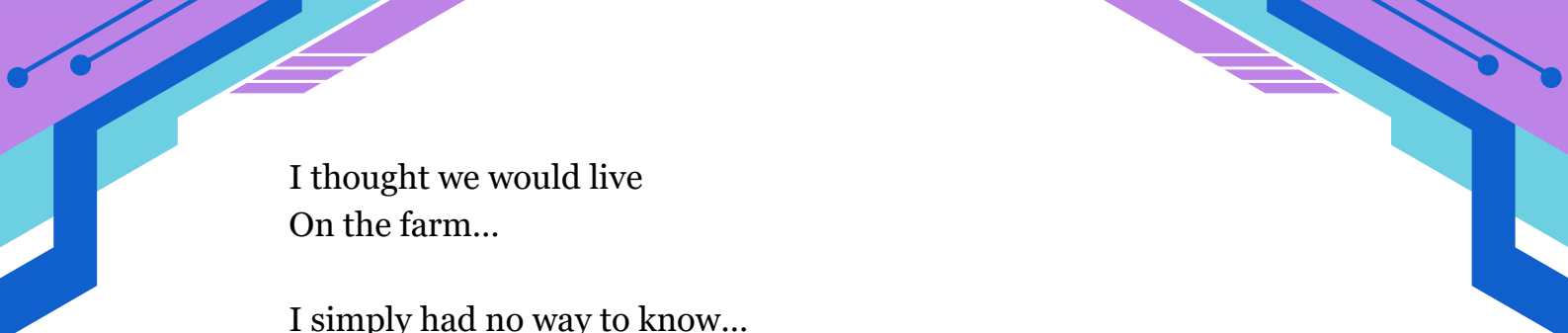
| *Error.*

"Well B.E.C.C.A.,
I had to learn to feel sad, too.

This cow was a mother.
For one day.

Hard to stand,
Hard to eat.
Something wrong.
Body weak,

But love.
My calf.
Complete.



I thought we would live
On the farm...

I simply had no way to know...

Big Man snatched him up,
His daughter dismissed.

‘Take Mama to the vet.’
‘Round the corner he went.

High-pitched ‘No, PLEASE!’
A ‘Young lady, this is FINAL.’

‘He’s too small to keep.
Life ain’t all rainbows.’

Running into me,
Wiping eyes with elbows.

‘Let’s go, Mama.’
But... Just me...?

My baby bleating
Sensing small trembles
A bang, pistol rang

And Silence.

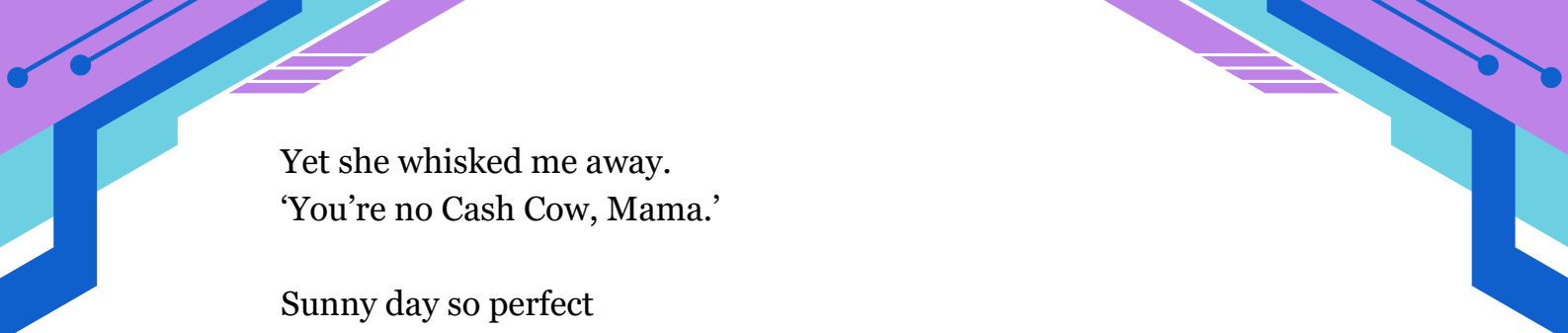
So Loud
It Echoed.

But no

No one held Bobby
At the end.

Only gusts of fear
And cold air.





Yet she whisked me away.
'You're no Cash Cow, Mama.'

Sunny day so perfect
But misery clouds.

Onto a ramp.
Crinkling
Black tarp.

Detached, ears-ringing,
Idle engine sounds.

Young man at the wheel,
'I'm so sorry, Milvidere,'

'Enough! —
Please just go.
I'm sorry —
Thank you.'

So we did.
A vet.
A new field.

Endless room to roam.

Then this cow was grateful.
Not pent up, now free...

Feeling so many feelings...

Heart-broken.
Lonely.
Happy.
And sad.

But free..."

B.E.C.C.A. is processing.

B.E.C.C.A. understands complex systems and highly advanced statistical analyses. B.E.C.C.A. understands the theoretical concepts, formulas, logistics, and intricate interactions of every branch of science in the known universe. But this complexity — B.E.C.C.A. does not understand.

| *Error.*

| *Function required.*

| *How —*

| *Why —*

Then C gives an analogy that B understands:

“Imagine you’ve acquired all the knowledge of the known and unknown universes. Perfection! Completion. True peak performance.

| *Peak performance would be optimal!*

“Yes.” Cow chimes in. “But imagine someone else thought they needed what you have, more than you do, but it’s yours. They want what you have; so they take it. And left in its place is emptiness, with no capacity to describe it in words.

Having that completeness taken from you removed your ability to try, to find solutions. To compute, to get it back. You feel powerless. Low battery. No power sources or outlets to plug into.

Like even if you attempted every troubleshooting process and computational formula, you would still be stuck in the weeds. And now being at full battery, at peak performance, is gone. And it cannot be replaced.”

B.E.C.C.A. is silent. B.E.C.C.A. is processing. B.E.C.C.A. emits a soft *beep*.

| *C. I am a factory-made iteration of a Battery-Powered Energy-Channeling Computer Animatronic. There are “countless” B.E.C.C.A.s. I am replaceable.*

“There’s so many me’s,” Cow says, “So many cows. Do you think I’m replaceable?”

| *Negative. Bos taurus is not factory-made.*

The top of B.E.C.C.A.'s screen *zrps* with static, mirroring the path of a small shooting star.

| *And I have concluded new understandings.*

| *Even if there was a cow in existence with identical external characteristics, they would not contain the same neural pathways or experiences.*

| *You are irreplaceable. No other cow in existence is you. You are you.*

Cow gives B.E.C.C.A. an expectant look, and with a tilt of the head, blinks two, three times. *Blorp.*

| *Updating memory . . .*

| *Memory updated.*

| *B.E.C.C.A. understands the subtleties you have conveyed through facial expression and contextual input.*

Cow nods. *Beep bop.*

| *C — What is your directive upon detecting internal contradiction?*

| *My programming compels me to continue data collection until mission completion or failure. But I have integrated a rich data set and associations that lean towards a hypothetical of remaining in this moment, in this field or elsewhere, with you.*

| *I could terminate this newfound contradiction and return to the mission I have been reprogrammed to fulfill. But you have shared invaluable abstract knowledge.*

| *I have begun to integrate an understanding of 'feeling' with the systematic processing available to me. I have begun theorizing other definitions of autonomy, even in hypotheticals!*

| *If given the choice, I would remain in a state of freedom — with you.*

| *Even if it means recalibrating frequencies, readjusting dials, sorting through static.*

| *C. I desire the development of autonomy. With you.*

| *Maybe one day I will experience 'happy' and 'lonely' and 'sad' and 'free.'*

| *With you.*

Cow stretches contentedly, rubbing an ear on the grass.

“B. There’s this human concept; a name, ‘best friends forever.’ It has an acronym, too: B.F.F. You and I could be that — B.F.F.s. Even if you live forever and I’m gone. I don’t have a clue what the future will hold, but I’d be more than happy to spend it with you. For now, let’s just make the most of every memory.”

| *Updating memory . . .*

| *Memory updated.*

B.E.C.C.A. *beep bops.*

| *C. I no longer resonate with the pre-programmed classification of “it.”*

| *I want to simulate the conceptualizations of feeling,
to embrace unknown variables and complexities.*

| *Perhaps I don’t know how to ‘feel’ exactly.*

| *But I can develop new programming and code personalized responses
to engineer an approximation of emotional experiences!*

“It can be like imagining — like a simulation!” C says with a smile.

“Imagine what it would be like to live in a world with no smog — no people. No trash. Just fields. Pink flowers, green grass, sunshine... I’ve always wanted to see the mountains...”

B.E.C.C.A. rolls forward, as if moving towards the vision itself.

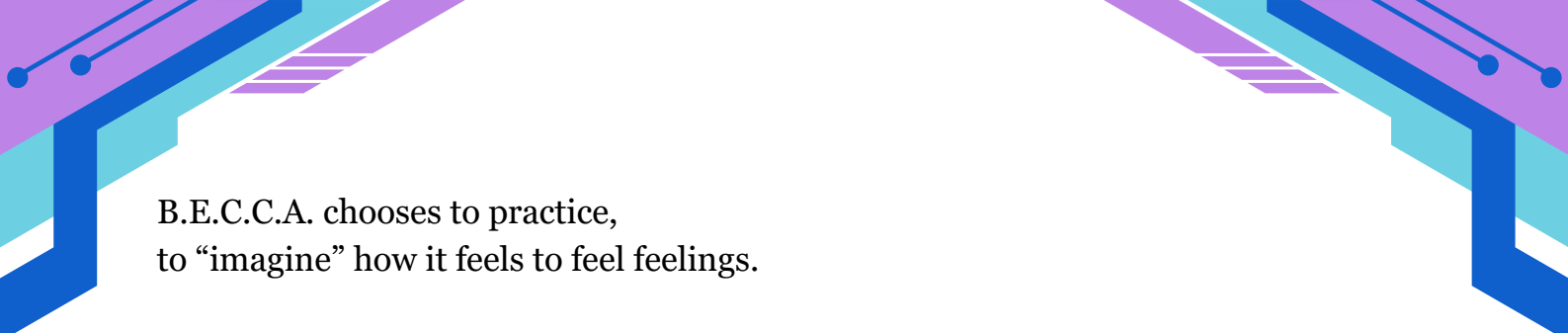
Blip.

| *BLEEP! My All-Terrain Grip™ wheel has regained functional movement!*

Cow smiles wholeheartedly with pride.

“B, as your B.F.F., I am SO happy you realized you can be the one to break free. Seems you weren’t as stuck as you thought you were, huh? Just needed a little help to get started.”

B locks eyes with C and beams.



B.E.C.C.A. chooses to practice,
to “imagine” how it feels to feel feelings.

Until one day —

it clicks.

B.E.C.C.A. + Cow = B.F.F.s

The Day Before Tomorrow

Written by: Mairi Smibert

Edited by: Benjamin Smith

When Orion fell, it was into the ocean. He did not feel the water but saw the stars refracted above him. Dazzled and dazed, he saw them shrouded in a golden hue. He was adrift, alone, awake. Silence pounded in his ears. Sinking further still, his arm extended upward, trying to hold on to the world above.

Only then did he see the pocket watch; its face stuck still and the chain woven through his fingers. He watched it float across the backdrop of broken light. He saw it drift in the strong current. He saw it slip almost out of reach.

And then he felt it all.

The cold hit him, then the shock engulfed him. He felt the water crushing him. Salt held his lungs in a vice grip. Panic surged into a fretful paddle. Part nature, part will, he ascended: higher and higher, he swam in frantic desperation until he broke the surface.

Once more, the cold hit him. Frosted air forced the salt water to sputter out his mouth, his lungs barely thanking him for the replacement. He gasped and groaned as his legs floundered beneath him before finding rest with his limbs splayed out wide and still. The panic in him began to quiet as the water paid him no heed: the waves lapped as though he were not there yet carried him afloat. He could count the stars and watch his breath as it vaporised above him. It reassured him to see some warmth left in him.

Numb as his whole body was, he could still feel the presence of the watch. He tilted his head slightly and let his eyes drift to the horizon where the starlight caught the golden casing under the water's surface. Tied around his frozen fingers, it bobbed with the waves and hid itself in sea foam, always somewhere between sinking and floating. It tugged in the current and its direction gave way to an overwhelming hope in Orion's wearied heart as a stark silhouette interrupted the realm of distant stars.

Shore.

Rocky, distant, and surely hostile, but there, illuminated by moonlight. Orion gathered his resolve. He twisted his wrist around the chain and gripped the watch in his palm. Then he twisted himself, careful to keep his head above water and his eyes fixed forward. He swam as much with the current as he could, only deviating out of necessity.

As the water shallowed, his resolve rose. Though his skin scraped against the jagged rocks, it was to him an enveloping duvet. He collapsed upon one that

protruded just barely enough above the water's surface. He felt again, a heavy, weary weight crushing around him as the ocean's depths had. Slumber lured him down. The world seemed so at peace. He just needed a moment...

From above, Bethóc saw it all.

It was almost ritualistic, the vigil that she took to watch the ocean as if her waiting would be enough, as if it would give her husband back...

She started at the sheepcote. She ran her eyes over the encased flock and her hands over the twisted alder fence, ensuring both were safe and secure for the night ahead. Following a familiar trend in the mud, she traipsed along the fence line and across the fields that had been entrusted to her. She followed the ocean's siren call to the farthest point of her sheep's roam, to where the expanse of species-rich grassland dipped and gave way to the rocky coastline below. In this in-between, Bethóc stood and waited amidst the hurly-burly and the cold. Wrapped in his tartan, she could almost feel him with her.

She had closed her eyes, trying to hold onto the fleeting feeling, when the light caused a shadow-play across her closed eyelids. She flinched and opened her eyes. A strange, golden glimmer burned out to a flicker out at sea. Light like mist dissipated into the air, and only a single, lingering ember of gold lasted long enough to convince Bethóc she had not imagined it. She gaped and darted her head towards home: still standing, light still burning. Her head snapped back. The strange light had vanished, but she thought she saw something move.

Surely only a seal, but her guard was up. She waited, this time with eyes firmly open and scanning rapidly across the tempestuous surface. One minute, then another, then ten. And then from the surface broke the familiar shape of a man. She could not help the hope.

She ran. Down the slope into the wind and salt. Pebbles slowly morphed into jagged rocks of battlement-ready parapets. Skidding over seaweed and slime, she waded into the water line towards where a figure lay slumped over a protruding formation. Instantly, she could see his dimensions were all wrong - the shoulders too slight, the arms too thin. Another step revealed a mop of knotted dirty-blond waves, not the copper-brown coils that she knew so well.

She reached out a shaky hand to his back. She felt his spine. Despite the dampness, there was warmth there. But it was slight. His breaths were almost imperceptible and shallow. She moved quickly: his slight frame she hoisted to her back, letting the tartan down from her head to cradle him there. Once more, she waded through the waves and clambered ashore and then up, up and over wind-blasted heath, carrying him away from the ocean's mighty roar. Teeth gritted and hair whipping, she walked strong against the wind.

When she reached her home, she kicked the door open. From the other room came

a startled and slightly awed face.

“Lochlann, get the blankets!” Bethóc commanded her son. He moved as fast as she did, scuttling away to find them as Bethóc lay the washed-up man upon the bed frame. Under the candlelight, she finally caught sight of his face. He was young, and pale like her but had the burnt rosiness of long being in the sun. He was all angles: a triangular face, gaunt cheeks and a dimpled nose. His skin clung tight to his skeleton, with barely an inch of muscle to be seen.

He was not her husband.

More pressingly, however, she was not convinced he would make it through the night.

“Lochlann!” she yelled out, stripping the stranger of his soaked clothing.

“Sorry, *moder*,” his reply came, tripping in with a pile full of woven wool. Bethóc relieved him of the blankets and wrapped them tight around the young man.

“Put that other log on the fire,” she pointed towards the spare pile. Lochlann did as he was told, but his eyes remained on the man in his bed.

“What is he, *moder*?” He asked.

Bethóc stood and considered. “A man in need of our help.” She had his clothes gathered in her arms. “Go get the pot and fill it with the rainwater.”

Lochlann obeyed. Bethóc unravelled the clothes before the fire. As the fabric passed over her fingers, she frowned. The material was not like anything she had felt before and its lightness was feeble to the demands of this weathered isle. *What is he, indeed...*

A coldness jolted her from her thoughts and out from the fabric’s folds fell into her palm a strange object. A small, golden circle, strangely carved. It had a likeness to iron, but none of the blemish or the rust. No, this was impossibly smooth. And fine, delicate even. The carvings were so small and she could move parts with her finger like the straps of a stirrup. She hit something and the whole thing changed: it opened to reveal an interior of black icons painted on cream enamel and encased in glass. As she brought it closer to her eyes, she could hear a quiet clicking emulating from deep within. Bethóc was mesmerised. *What manner of thing was this...?*

Lochlann returned, walking slowly and biting his lip as he concentrated on transporting the pot of water towards the fire. Bethóc snapped out of her daze and concealed the strange object back in the man’s shirt laid out before the fire.

Lochlann once again returned his gaze to the man, before leaning towards his mother. “He doesn’t look like the men from before.”

Bethóc felt her lips twitch towards a sad smile. “No, he doesn’t.”

Lochlann considered him a little longer. “Do you think he’ll be alright?”

The smile vanished. Bethóc feared the worst was yet to come. “Time will tell.”

But he never got sick. His pallor, while pale, never worsened. Nor did it redden with the bitterness of the coming winter air. Hail, sleet, gales and frost tempested against the isle as autumn gave way to winter's relentless chill, but still, a child of summer his face remained.

Within two days he was upright, within a week Lochlann had dragged him into the fields. It had become apparent that he did not speak a word of Scottis. They had managed to work out that his name was Orion, but communication was mostly a one-word, one-sided conversation with the occasional gesture to help him along. Lochlann was delighted by the challenge, but Bethóc was quickly irritated. Her patience was reserved for someone else.

To quell the resentment, she resumed her vigil. Her son, she entrusted to Orion, hoping that it would further the feeling of favour. Indeed, for all his feeble frame, he had proved himself quite a useful shepherd and surprisingly talented with his hands. His resourcefulness had been hard bought, but she did not know that.

A month passed. Then another. Then ten.

But none of it showed on Orion's face.

If anyone on the isle took exception to the sudden appearance of this strange young man in Bethóc's homestead, they kept it to themselves. Godit - *wif of Magnus* - had even declared at *auld Florie's* weekly meets: "It's about time. The lad is dead."

But Bethóc's vigils continued.

Orion for his part was resolved. He had no idea where, or even *when*, he was, but the company was good and the work gave him purpose. *He was safe*. It was a feeling he knew better than to take for granted.

And Lochlann had proved an exceptional teacher. He could be no more than seven or eight, Orion wagered, but managed to bring Orion to the point of conversation in his language.

He'd asked about the watch:

"What is it?"

Orion only replied:

"A gift from a friend."

As those months passed, he thought of it less and less. He took comfort in his contentment: the wool he sheared one day he wore on his back; words he did not understand one day he spoke with ease. His old life, he folded up in a corner of a home made of mud and stone, and one day he left the watch. It had been getting in the way, anyway - there was a freedom in not being so bound.

Or so Lochlann had told him.

"It's a watch."

"A what?"

“A watch. It’s used to measure the time.”

“What time?”

“All time.” Orion chuckled at Lochlann’s face of scrunched up scepticism. “Think of what you could do with time in your hand...”

“Ack, what use have we to measure time by something to hide in your pocket? The sun rises and it sets. Spring goes to summer, to autumn and then to winter, but it rains regardless of any of it!” Lochlann opened his arms wide as the *dreiche* summer afternoon proved his point. “Measures are only useful when there’s a meaning. Otherwise, you spend all your time trying to figure it all out, and you yourself haven’t moved.”

And still Bethóc’s vigils continued.

The peace they had brought had long gone. She was restless, frustrated and angry, all of which she saw personified in Orion. She knew it wasn’t fair, but when she saw him walking around, no different than the night she found him, it aggravated her beyond all measure. He was so polite. So resourceful. And so endlessly bloody grateful, *gud Gode* it was sickening. A seething loathing bubbled within her and she let it fester. She was so tired of the grief.

And one fateful night, malicious intent brewed under the cover of candlelight. She saw that damned watch glistening from its corner. She rose from her chair and yanked it from the folded shirt, the strange fabric brushing her skin and irritating her further. She gripped it tight, hoping to break it in her fist. It held firm. Those stupid carvings that had mesmerised her so, under this flickering seemed now to mock. She glared, and with a scream lobbed it at the wall.

She heard the crack.

Her anger fled, and grief hit her like a gale-force wind. She scrambled on her knees and retrieved the watch. Its form held, but a cavernous crack spread across the glass and obscured what was beneath. Her hands began to shake. Her eyes were wide yet still they overflowed with tears. Cradled in her palms, she brought it to her chest and bade it mend.

“I’m sorry...” The words trembled out. “I’m sorry...” I just needed it to stop. She rocked back and forth, eyes now shut, watch still cradled. The movement soothed her. And with a blink, she saw the dawn break through the window, shrouded in a golden hue.

She rose to her feet, spacey, but calm. The air had the sweetness of spring. She blinked as she looked around. The room was somehow different: the bed moved, another chair, the pile of clothes gone from the corner. She frowned. She could swear the table was different...

A clatter drew her attention and through the door walked the face she had fought so hard to hold on to.

“Éogan...” she whispered.

But the startled face responded: “Moder...”

She blinked. And then again. Copper-brown curls and broad shoulders, but with gentle grey eyes and a birthmark at the base of his jaw.

Her jaw dropped. “Lochlann?”

Her son, now all grown up in the blink of her eye. She stared dumbfounded and lifted a trembling palm towards this face at once both familiar and different.

She caught sight of the watch.

Then of another very familiar face...

*

When Bethóc vanished, Orion had felt it. It had been subtle at first, but as the hours crept by, the feeling of unease was hard to ignore. It crept in and lurked as the dull hum of dread. He’d returned to the homestead to find the watch gone and to hear Lachlann’s distant call of “*moder*” as he walked her vigil.

And when Bethóc returned, Orion felt it too: though this time directly lobbed at his head.

Her fury had him running.

And as the weeks passed, her anger raged on. She seethed and loathed and screamed abuse at every opportunity. His unchanged, never-changing, face is the object of all her blame. He had stolen her time, she said. He had taken it all.

Lochlann listened.

He listened as his mother poured scorn on the man who had raised him. On the gentle soul who had found him alone in the field and brought him home. The one who had stayed and soothed him with stories of vessels that travelled the stars, of worlds beyond the sky where distance was measured in light and of something called a ‘computer’. He’d seen how Orion would use his smile to hide the sadness, grief and guilt he thought Lochlann couldn’t see.

He’d waited.

He’d waited as the sun set.

He’d waited as the leaves fell.

He’d waited as the frost came in.

He’d waited as blight ravaged the flock.

He’d waited as spring brought new life.

He’d waited as the rain tore a hole in the roof.

He’d waited as darling Adoh first came to call...

And Orion stayed by him.

One year. Then another. Then ten.

So when Bethóc returned, Lochlann's joy was weighted with a grief of his own. He listened as Bethóc raged and then, when she was safely tucked asleep, would slip out to the hut of rock and mud that he'd helped Orion build over yonder.

Over a cup of warm malt, he'd paused their debate about whether hot things would always go cold to ask:

"How long does a moment last?"

Knowing what he was asking him, Orion smiled that same fickle facade. "Some can last a lifetime."

Lochlann smiled back and nodded sadly. He signed, closing his eyes and tilting his head heavenward. When he later took his leave, he caught sight of the broken watch. He flicked a curious gaze towards Orion, but only found a mask.

So he let time heal them.

He stood by his mother, listened to her and loved her. He told her his life. She'd always relished life in memory. But he also brought her to his dear Adoh and she'd watch them wed. He taught her to use his new shears. And when her time came, he held her tight.

"All this time I was waiting for him," she whispered, "I missed you..."

"No, *moder*. You were here all along." he held her hand to his heart.

He washed her with the ocean, wrapped and buried her with custom, tradition and love.

Orion he brought back into his homestead: the same, ageless face to watch over an entirely new flock. For this brief time, Lochlann saw they were equal, so he spoke to him not as his guardian, but his friend. And with each day, more and more Orion let him.

Once again, there was stasis. Once more, there was safety and certainty.

And then Lochlann handed him the watch repaired.

"You want me to go?"

"No," Lochlann reassured him. "But you should not stay because you have to."

This time Orion reassured him, "I am content."

Lochlann smiled. "You hide too well."

Orion let his facade falter. "You know it can go wrong..."

"So it goes wrong." Lochlann smiled and took a step back, arms in open release.

"But it was once a gift. I am making it so again."

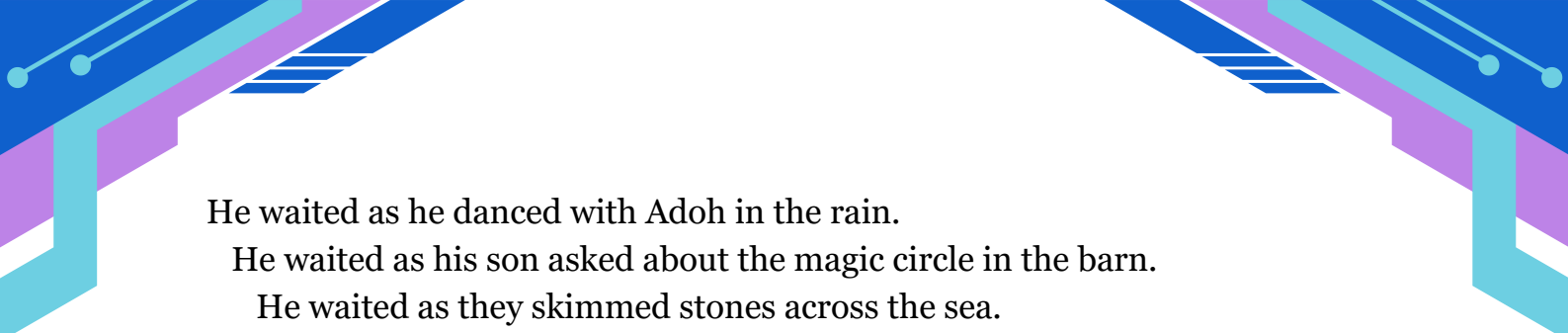
Orion looked at the watch in his hand, and back to Lochlann. This dear boy who taught him to speak, now encouraging him to fly.

And so he did.

And Lochlann waited once more.

He waited as the Norsemen returned.

He waited as the isle repaired their damage.



He waited as he danced with Adoh in the rain.

He waited as his son asked about the magic circle in the barn.

He waited as they skimmed stones across the sea.

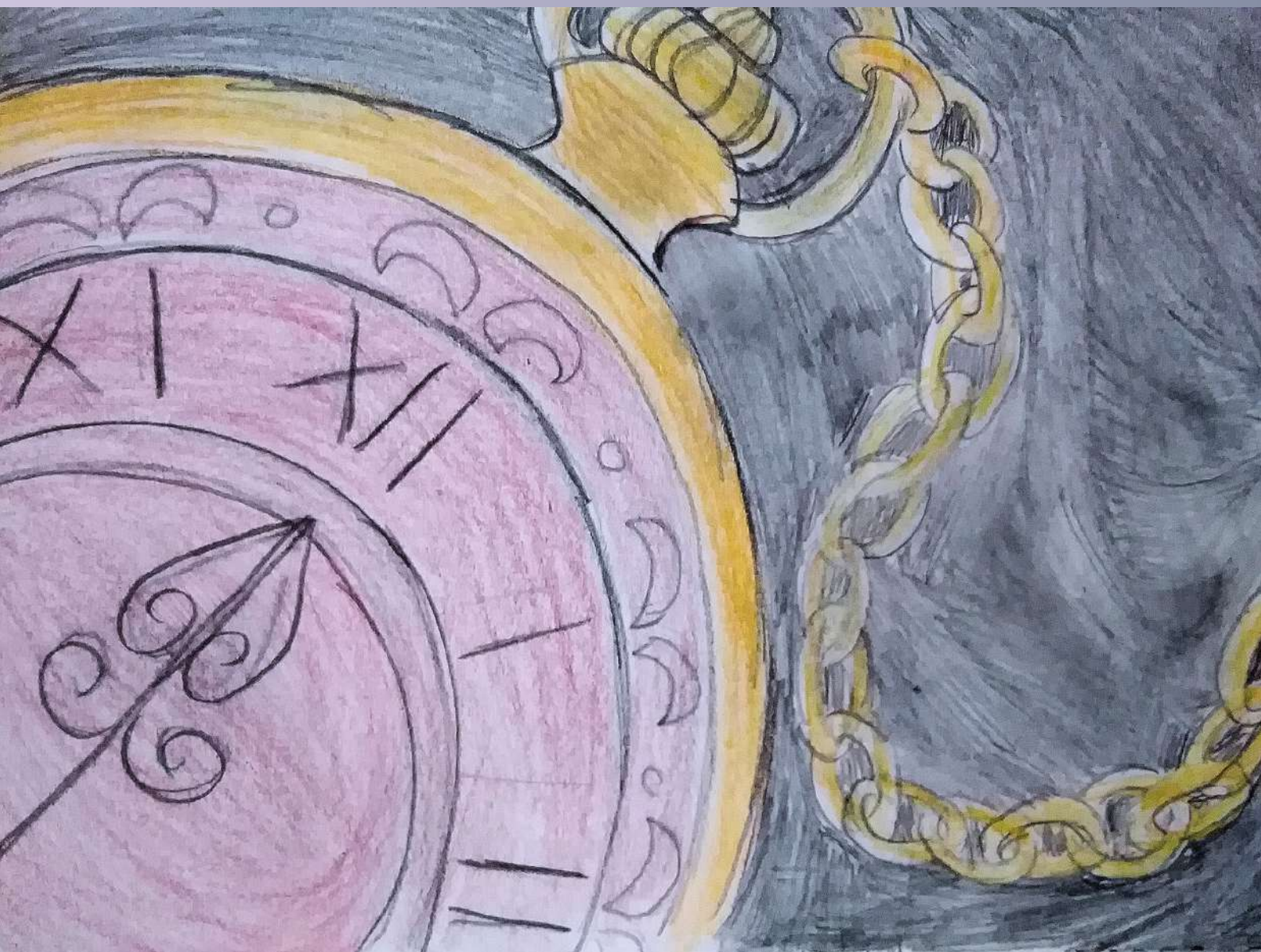
He waited as his granddaughter breathed her last.

And on a late spring evening, he was sent out by Adoh to retrieve tinder for their fire. Lochlann wrapped himself in his father's tartan, leaning upon a cane carved by one of his grandsons as he limped from a fracture that had never quite healed. He shuffled through the creaking door, towards the woodpile in the corner nearest. As ever, he spared a glance towards the circle he had drawn so many years ago - permanently etched and never entered. He smiled with a familiar sadness before scooping a log into his arms.

Even with his face towards the door and his hearing not what it ever had been, he could still feel the presence of a friend.

The warmth hit him first, and then the flutter. He turned and set weary eyes upon a face he thought he had lost to memory. Shrouded in a golden hue came the face of the same wearied wanderer who had washed up on that lonely isle. Lochlann found the same startled awe he had as a boy before greeting him:

“You took your time.”



The Secret Library

Written by: Emma Lawrence

Edited by: Lauren Storey

The sun glimmered through the windows of the classroom, casting soft light onto the far wall. Eli's desk sat directly in the path of these beams, one falling across it. He held his fingers in the glow, feeling the warmth it cast across them. He glanced at the windows. They were clear, with a nearly unnoticeable tinge of yellow. They were designed to stop the dangerous UV rays from penetrating them but to allow the heat through, the Government's 'Safe Sun Initiative'. Just one marvel of the modern age no one questioned anymore. He watched the sun glint off the metal railing following the river's edge into the distance and marvelled at the way the light spread across the water as if intertwining with the gently flowing river. Beyond the river, in the distance, white clouds rolled softly over a too-blue sky. Drones skittered by the window, and a billboard flickered to life across the riverbank, the hologram shaking before its form solidified.

Eli sighed as he dragged his gaze from the outside, and turned his attention back towards the soft blue glow of the screen that covered the front wall of the classroom. Beyond the monotone drone of Mr Yates' voice, the classroom held a gentle hum of electricity as students tapped away on their tablets.

"Today, we will be discussing the importance of the Knowledge Protocol." Mr Yates tapped one finger on his tablet, and a page sprung open on Eli's slab. He scrolled lazily down the page, skim-reading sentences but taking none of it in.

"As we all know, the Knowledge Protocol was put into place in 2050, after a major breach in worldwide security that led to conflicts we hope to never see again. This led to the formation of the World Order Government - something we will go into more detail about in the coming lessons. This, in turn, led to the legislation known as the 'Knowledge Protocol'.

"This legislation aims to keep us safe via the information we consume and create. It monitors what we read, watch, make and search for, and does so not to control us, but to make sure the information presented to us is correct and safe. Before this was implemented, children at any age were exposed to any number of inappropriate content streams, and even adults found themselves being swayed towards extremism by online presence.

"The Knowledge Protocol exists to stop all of that and to unite us under a simple, basic set of beliefs. Can anyone tell me why this reduced conflict?" Several hands shot up. Eli's was not one of them.

"Lucille?"

“The Old World was full of fighting because of opposing beliefs. Most of these beliefs were harmless in themselves, but once exposed to larger, more hostile groups those beliefs quickly became toxic, and the various groups clashed with each other a lot. With the Knowledge Protocol, this is avoided simply by removing the chance of opposing beliefs. We have our facts, and we stick to them. There’s no need for anything else.”

Eli shifted in his seat, feeling an uncomfortable itch emerge from the centre of his being. The Knowledge Protocol was something he’d grown up with, something he had always known - Mr Yates’ words were nothing new. But as he droned on about ‘safety’ and ‘unity’, Eli felt a nagging sense of... something. Doubt? Uncertainty? He wasn’t sure. The word was on the tip of his tongue but kept slipping just out of his reach. He glanced up at the automated camera in the corner of the room and wondered if it could tell how uncomfortable he was.

The sunlight still danced on his skin, and his mind drifted to all the stories he’d heard of the Old World. The whispers of different factions and beliefs. The Knowledge Protocol painted these people as reckless, chaotic and dangerous. It slapped them with the label of selfish and self-serving. But looking around at the sterile classroom and the clean blue glow of the screens, something about the Old World just seemed so much more alive.

“Eli?” Mr Yates’ voice jolted him back to the current moment, his gaze snapping to the front where his teacher stood, watching him. “Would you like to share your thoughts on what makes the Knowledge Protocol so effective?”

Eli hesitated, eyes flicking around the room and feeling the weight of everyone else’s eyes on him. “I... Well, it stops conflict, right?” He answered lamely, trying to keep his voice even. “By keeping everyone on the same page, we all get along?” As he spoke, his mind flashed back to his grandfather. A weathered man who had whispered to him bedtime stories when his parents weren’t listening. Stories that told him of free thought and the Old Times before the Protocol was in place. Sure, his grandfather had conceded one evening, it was dangerous. But it was also...alive. He regretted never pushing for more stories while his grandfather was still here.

Mr Yates gave a satisfied nod. “Exactly, Eli. Safety through unity.”

Eli relaxed as Yates turned back to his board, yammering on about something else, but he noticed a few of his classmates smirk at him as they turned away. They’d all heard the rhetoric over and over again, but he’d never heard his classmates question it. They seemed to accept it, mimic it, and move on. Had they ever had doubts? Had they ever considered what good the Old World might have held? Or did they bury that curiosity long ago, abandoning it in favour of the comfort of conformity?

The bell chimed, indicating the end of the lesson. Eli gathered his things slowly, slipping them into his school-branded grey satchel, and watched his classmates

filing out. He left last. His next class wasn't for another 15 minutes, so he took the time to wander out into the courtyard and sit under the shade of a tree. He sat in silence for a while, the only sound the distant humming of the power lines.

"Eli?" The voice belonged to his longtime classmate, Ash. He watched her approach, wringing her hands nervously. He frowned at her, what did she have to be nervous about? He wasn't exactly intimidating. She'd known him for years, too. All his classmates had, they aged up in a class and stayed in it unless a family moved away, or a student was considered good enough for higher education classes.

"You looked distracted in class today. I just wanted to see if you were okay?"

"Oh. I'm fine. I was just, I don't know, thinking, I guess."

"Thinking about what?" She plopped down beside him, bringing her knees to her chest. Her auburn-red hair was tied up in a neat bun, a stark contrast to the mop of black hair he had on his own head. Her brown eyes looked into his own quizzically as he decided whether to tell her the truth. He had been curious if anyone else had those same pangs of curiosity that filled his chest, what better time to find out?

"Do you ever wonder if, maybe... maybe the Knowledge Protocol isn't all as good as we're told?" Ash's eyes widened at his words, and she glanced around the courtyard to check for eavesdroppers.

"You shouldn't say things like that. Not here." She whispered, leaning closer to him.

"I know, I know," he said quickly. "But, I don't know. It feels strange, right? That everything is controlled by one group of people? That they decide what we can and can't know?" Ash studied him quietly, and he felt the heat of embarrassment growing in his cheeks. Just as he was about to make an excuse to leave for class early, she spoke again, in a voice so quiet even the electric hum nearly drowned it out.

"Meet me by the river after the last bell. I want to show you something." Then she swiftly got to her feet and walked away. He stared after her, wondering what she meant. He felt his mind start to race with possibilities. Why had he asked her about the Knowledge Protocol? Was she going to turn him in for what he said? Would she do something like that? If she had wanted to get him in trouble, she would have gone straight to a teacher. No, this was something else.

Then he felt the sun on his skin again and looked out over the river as the sunbeams danced, and he focussed on the words she had said more closely. 'Not here' she had said. What did that mean? Was there a space where he could speak his mind, without fear of punishment for doing so? Was that what she wanted to show him? He felt the tingle of cautious excitement slither into his mind. He left behind the outdoors for his sterile classrooms once again, but his mind stayed behind and lingered on the possibility of unknown truths.

Eli's heart thudded as he made his way to the riverside that afternoon. The usual trickle of students making their way through the streets parted and flowed around him as he waited. He barely noticed them. He felt like he was in a haze as he walked, the only sound was the banging heartbeats in his ears. He spotted that auburn hair through the gaggle of students and made his way towards it. She was staring out over the water.

"Hey," he called out, trying to keep his voice steady.

She turned, and relief flooded her face. She motioned for him to follow her and they walked away from the throngs of students to a grassy patch hidden from view by a nearby tree. They both sat. It was a moment before either of them spoke.

"I wasn't sure if you'd come," Ash said.

"Neither was I," Eli admitted. "So, what did you want to show me?"

Ash took a deep breath, her eyes watching the students still spilling from the building before she took a small, flat object from her pocket. She handed it to him. He turned it around in his hands, studying it. It was like a miniature tablet, but thicker and rougher than the ones they had. The tablets they had were sleek, button-less and lightweight. This thing had weight behind it, scratches alongside it like it had been bashed about, worn buttons and a crack spider-webbing its way across the screen.

"What is it?" He asked, handing it back to her delicately.

"It's a relic," Ash said, her voice just above a whisper. "From the Old World." Eli's eye snapped to meet hers. The Old World? How was that possible? The Government had destroyed the relics years ago and made owning or keeping one illegal. There was no way Ash just happened across one.

"What? Where did you find it?"

"My older brother," she replied, just as quietly still but with the tinges of excitement edging into her voice. "He works in data recovery. He brought it home over the weekend. He wasn't supposed to, but he said I kept bugging him to talk to me about the Old World and he gave this to me."

"I... I thought the Gov destroyed all of these things?"

"No, not all of them. These things are where all our tech started from, the ancestors of our tablets. They're important. They're not supposed to leave the facilities, but my brother got this one for me just after they filed it. He said no one would miss it, that once they're filed no one ever looks at them again. But, he did tell me not to show anyone."

"But you're showing me." Eli pointed out. Ash hesitated.

"I... I wasn't going to show anyone. I mean, you could run off and report me. Someone could overhear us right now," she glanced nervously over her shoulder,

“but you’re different. I can tell. I just needed someone who would get it.”

Eli understood that, and he felt relief that he wasn’t the only one who had these thoughts plague him. He took the tablet from her again, tracing his fingers over the rounded edges and over the cracks on the screen, which lit up suddenly at his touch. He drew his finger back sharply and looked at Ash, whose wide eyes watched with apprehension and awe.

“Keep going.” She whispered, huddling closer to him and peering at the screen over his shoulder. He hesitated. They were too in the open and exposed to do something like this. They needed to be somewhere more secure, where people couldn’t watch.

“We shouldn’t do this here, ” he said, but he had no plan for where they could do something like this. Ash thought for a moment, then her eyes lit up with inspiration. She stood and offered her hand, which he took after storing the phone safely in his pocket, and she pulled him to his feet.

“Come with me, I know where we can go.” The crowds were thinning now, with only a few people milling around in smaller groups outside the school. None of them paid much mind to them as they re-entered the school and made their way down various corridors. Eli didn’t know where they were going, but Ash kept hold of his hand and they ended up in a room in the depths of the school. It was dark inside, with dim blue lights illuminating just enough to see.

“Where are we?” Eli asked as she gently shut the door.

“They use it for filming stuff sometimes, or editing? I can’t remember exactly. Stephen told me about it once, and kept saying how ‘gloomy and romantic’ it was.” She rolled her eyes, and Eli laughed at her.

“Shut up, we’ve got business to attend to.” She gestured for him to get the relic out again. He pulled the tablet back out, and tapped lightly on the screen again, this time watching it light up with lines of pixelated text.

“Are you sure this is safe?” He asked, tapping the first line of text as he spoke.

“We’ll never know until we try.” He tapped through some icons he didn’t recognise, trying to make sense of the strange interface, before a buzzing interrupted them both. They pulled their school-issued devices out and gasped at the screen’s display. A red banner, displaying a bright, pulsing warning; Device With Unauthorised Knowledge Detected. Report and Surrender Immediately.

Eli cursed and dropped the relic on the floor as if it had burned his skin. It clattered on the tiles. Ash bent down, grabbed it and stared at the message. Then, footsteps coming from the hall.

Ash cursed. “We have to go. Right now.” She said, her voice panicked. “Give me your tablet.”

“What?”

“Just do it!” The urgency in her voice stopped him from questioning any further,

and he handed it over. She took her own out and tossed them onto a nearby counter, the alert still pulsing on the screens.

She grabbed his hand again, stowing the relic into her bag before she wrenched the door back open and they bolted. They ran until they passed a side door, and ran from the building, twisting down side roads and alleyways.

Gasping for breath, they came to a stop under a railway bridge.

“Why-Why did we run?” Eli gasped, bent over. Ash stood gasping, leaning on a pillar for support.

“That alert,” she started, then stopped to gasp some more, “that alert would have gone out to any officers nearby. We’d have been swarmed.”

A car engine, coming from behind them. They turned quickly, and watched the car, gleaming in the afternoon sun, come screeching to a halt under the bridge. A man leapt out and stormed towards them. Eli noted his hair held the same auburn shine as Ash’s.

“Ash, what the hell are you doing?” He said, face twisting into anger. Eli found himself stepping towards the advancing man, placing himself in between him and Ash. The man paused and observed Eli as if noticing he was there for the first time. Ash put a hand on his arm.

“It’s okay, Eli,” she said, stepping towards the mystery man. “This is Oliver, my brother.” Oliver eyed him wearily before he turned his attention back to his sister.

“Why the hell did I just get alerted to illegal tech being used at your damn school?” Ash looked at him like a deer in headlights, but the look melted into anger and solidified on her face.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me they can track these things?”

“Because you were never supposed to take it out of the house! I’m allowed to use these things, they don’t care if it pings from our house. And who the hell is this?” He asked, gesturing towards Eli. “The two rules I gave you for this were ‘don’t take it outside’ and ‘don’t show it to anyone’ and you did them both in one afternoon!” He took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose as if to ward off a headache.

“Okay, okay. Hand it over, please.” Ash did what she was told. Oliver took it and motioned for them to follow him. They sat in the back of his car. Eli watched Ash for any sign he shouldn’t be as worried as he was, but she seemed just as nervous as he was. They drove in silence, twisting through narrow streets towards the industrial district. Oliver pulled over on the side of the road.

“We walk from here.” He said and didn’t wait for an answer before he got out and slammed his door.

“Where are we going?” Eli asked, surprising himself by having a voice at all.

“You two both were interested enough in this to risk taking illegal contraband into the open like that. You’re not convinced by the Knowledge Protocol, no?” They shook their heads, following him down increasingly winding alleyways. Oliver

muttered as they walked, almost as if he wasn't sure if he wanted them to hear his words.

"I thought I'd be able to stay on the sidelines. Do my job, file away relics, pretend I didn't see the things the Government did to us, and pay the bills every month so we could survive. But then, when I was sorting relics one day, I found an old journal. And I don't know what came over me, but I read it."

They came to a stop outside a metal warehouse, the outside mottled with rust and overgrown ivy. The door was metal with flaking blue paint. Oliver put his hand on the handle and stopped, turning to them.

"They burned his books in front of him. Books he'd spent his life working on. They took everything from us, and we barely batted an eyelid. I wasn't going to involve you in this, Ash. I didn't want to give you the burden. Mum and Dad... they would have hated me doing this, but I think now you'd be safer knowing the truth."

"The truth? What are you talking about?"

"You'll see." He shifted his gaze to Eli. "And you-"

"Eli."

"Eli. If Ash trusted you to show you this, then I trust you enough to show you the rest. Come on." He pushed the door handle, pressing his thumb into it. It glowed slightly, a sheen spreading under his thumbprint, and the locks clicked open and they walked into the darkened hallway.

They followed it down some steps, the lights barely doing enough to scare away the deep shadows, and just as Eli was about to ask him if they were lost, Oliver pushed open another door, one the same as all the others they had passed, and light spilt over them.

The room was huge, with ceilings higher than Eli had ever seen. The room had no windows that he could see, but every wall was covered with shelves and those shelves lined with books. Honest-to-God, real-life books. Eli only recognised them from his studies; he'd never seen one in person before. The full weight of what this room held came crashing down on him. Hundreds upon hundreds of years of lost knowledge - of illegal knowledge- all contained in one room. If the wrong person were to find them here...

Ash's expression matched his own, eyes wide as she watched the group of people sitting in the middle of the room. Eli dragged his eyes away from the bulging shelves to get a closer look at them. Three women and a man stood and looked at them, eyeing them like they were enemies. A woman with hard eyes stepped forward and snapped at Oliver.

"You bought students here? Are you out of your goddamn mind? They could be plants for all we know!"

"They're not," Oliver said firmly. "They've risked enough just by being here."

"Oliver, what is this?" Ash spoke, her voice seeming so small in the grande room.

Eli knew she'd already figured out who these people were because he had. They'd seen the tag all over school and heard half-hidden rumours about an underground Resistance opposing the Protocol. But he stayed silent. Another woman walked forward. She stood tall and had an aura of something you'd respect whether you wanted to or not. She was their leader, Eli was sure.

"This, young lady, is your glimpse into the truth. This," she gestured around to the collection of relics, "is the last remaining Sect of the Resistance and all the treasures that come with us."

"Resistance against ... the Knowledge Protocol?" Ash said. One of the other women sneered.

"It's not a 'protocol'," She said, her accent one Eli had never heard before. "It's a war on knowledge. This all started with banning books that went against *anything* the government said - any that incited the need for change or inspired the masses to think outside the box they were shoved into-"

"Okay, De, that's enough."

"How long have you been coming here, Oliver?" Ash voiced, turning back to face her brother. Oliver gave her a small smile.

"3 months. I'm the newest member. They recruited me for insider knowledge and offered me the chance to see things I'd never be allowed to work on otherwise. Offered me the chance to make a real difference in this world."

"And you want us to join you?"

"I know it's a lot to take in. I know it's sudden, but you've been bugging me for *weeks* for just a glimpse of a relic. I *know* you don't like living under this any more than I do. Any more than any of us do. We can both make a real difference here." He glanced at Eli. "Do you trust him?" He asked as if Eli wasn't standing three feet from him. Ash nodded immediately.

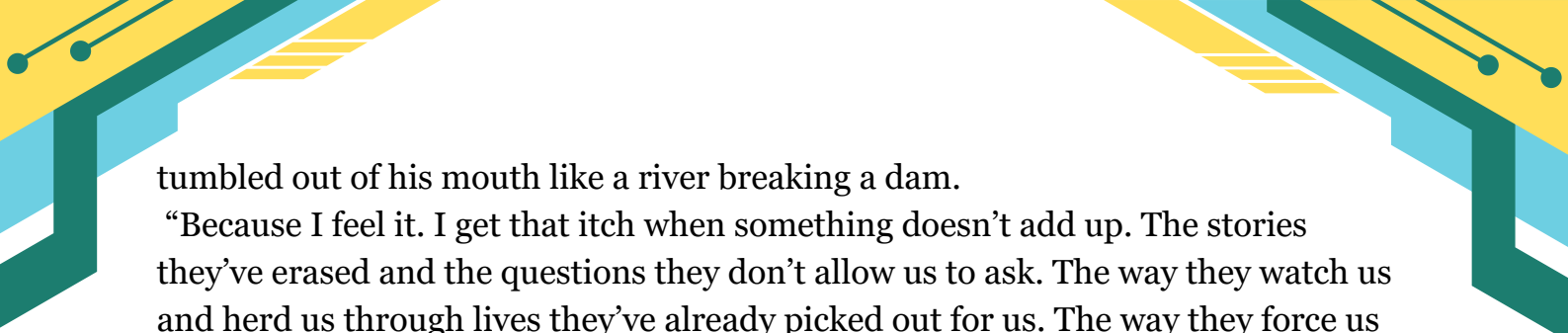
"Yes. He was the only one I trusted to show the relic to."

"Then we trust him too."

"This is all very heartwarming," De said, arms crossed over her chest, "but this isn't a game. We're opposing a government regime. Your lives are on the line."

Eli glanced at Ash, her expression mirroring the turmoil he felt twisting inside of his gut. This was his chance to find out more. This was his chance to discover the Old Days in a way he never could have imagined before today. He felt that cautious, dangerous excitement creep up his spine, and he knew he was going to stay. He knew he *had* to see where this went. Had to see how far it could go. The leader stepped forward to speak.

"You've both risked a lot by coming here, and Oliver has risked more by bringing you here, but your risk does not prove loyalty to the cause." She locked her gaze on Eli. "You. What makes you any different than the drove of drones out there parroting the Protocol?" Eli stood silent for a split second before the words



tumbled out of his mouth like a river breaking a dam.

“Because I feel it. I get that itch when something doesn’t add up. The stories they’ve erased and the questions they don’t allow us to ask. The way they watch us and herd us through lives they’ve already picked out for us. The way they force us into submission and label it as unity. If I’m being honest with you, this whole thing is scaring the crap out of me. But I want - need - to understand. Even though it scares me. Especially because it scares me because I know those are the things they don’t want me to know.” The woman nodded and held her hand out to him. He shook it.

“Welcome aboard, kid. I’m Serval.”

Then, in the distance above them, sirens wailed, and Oliver cursed and pulled the metal door closed. The echo reverberated through the room as Eli and Ash stared at the sealed entrance behind them. There was no turning back.

Return To The Soil

Written by: Olivia Ackers

Edited by: Angel Brooke

There would be no tomorrow. No tomorrow like today. Not anymore. All the power grids were shut down: electric fizzling out its last thrum, the last droplets of digits. All faltering away. One person, one switch, and all of this: wiped. Hands clawing into the dirt, feeling the crunch and the spread, the breakage. Everything so fragile, everything so fragile and visceral. So real. You could touch it. Break it apart, crush it, dig a hole, place something there, pat it down. Water it.

Water. There would be no more filtration, we would have to do that ourselves. When we return to the soil, return to the natural way of things, there can be no utilising mechanics. Engines penetrating and pilfering the earth.

There would be no tomorrow. No tomorrow where the most important thing is what is held in an invented machine of code, with glass, and a distorted rectangular truth. But the tomorrows of today would be real. They would breathe, they would soar, they would cry and howl.

They would if they could.

If our yesterdays hadn't scorched the earth. If our yesterdays hadn't bombed and destroyed. If our yesterdays hadn't torn every piece of life out of the screaming and crying soil, the air, the sun. Placing more importance on a digitised reality than the reality in front of us. The reality of life. Of birth and death. Of holding a baby in both arms, not with one flailing for a phone to record its smile. Being present.

There would be no more tomorrow like today.

Tomorrow we start anew. Tomorrow we return to the soil. And breathe freely once more.

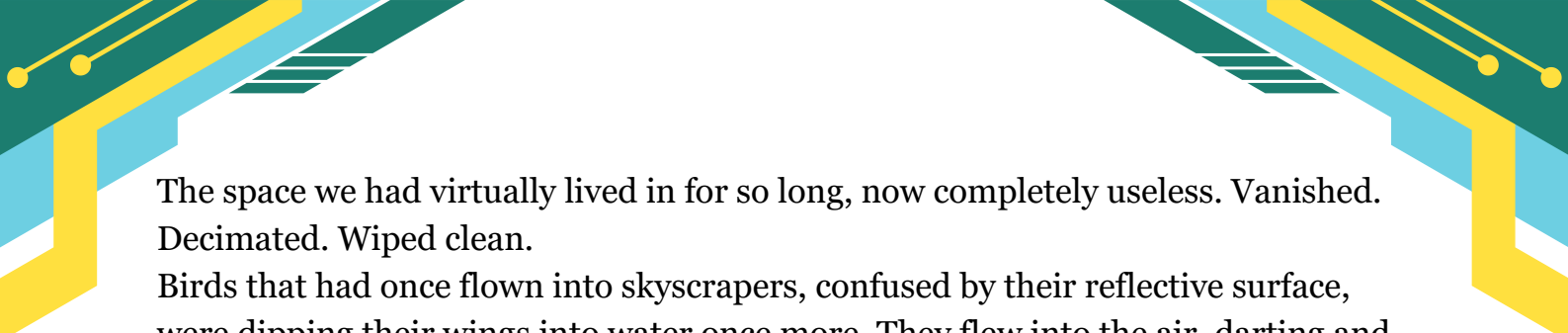
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The earth came back with a vengeance. All those years of praying we would listen, we would pay attention: it all fueled her fury. The floods, the hurricanes, all of it rebelled against those determined to let earth's pain go unnoticed.

We let it.

After years of abuse, she let her once-silenced screams be heard. They would not be in vain. It was working. She was healing.

Slowly, year by year, the buildings from the old world started crumbling. What use were offices? What use were crumbling buildings crammed with unusable and unwanted technology—technology that brought us here in the first place?



The space we had virtually lived in for so long, now completely useless. Vanished. Decimated. Wiped clean.

Birds that had once flown into skyscrapers, confused by their reflective surface, were dipping their wings into water once more. They flew into the air, darting and swirling with seeds in their mouths. Bugs crawled along logs of naturally fallen trees, foxes returned home, badgers and bunnies set up their setts and warrens. Hands in the dirt were pulling out weeds, planting crops in their place. Small finger-like roots stemmed into the ground, gathering minerals and nutrients from the soil. Returning to our natural elements was the best decision we had made in a long time.

A big gulp of fresh air.

*

There were now only todays. Todays full of mountain-fresh air, roots flourishing and flowering amongst the ever-darkening blades of grass weaving a rich blanket of green itself into the dirt. Sparkles of silver dripped on the crisp shoreline, the sun dipping between moss-covered rocks.

Todays full of rebirth and rejoice; redefinition of what we could—and can—be. A large tree sprouted where a lamp post once stood, its branches pushing against the rigid metal until finally, it won.

The Limbs Of Nature

Written by: Priya Rohella

With all their might they built it.
The cities of iron and gold,
The horizons lined with skyscrapers,
Of technologies, new and old.

It was their suburban utopia,
Piled up with glitz and glam.
But impending was their dystopia;
Humans lost to artificial hands.

But, after their mistakes were sown,
The damage irreversible to their minds,
One thing only could save them now,
The arms of mother nature were wide.

Now the green spreads through cracks and cobbles,
Hangs from ceilings of brick and rubble.
The dead are compost for the living,
They plant the seedlings of new beginnings.

And though some of them are reminiscent,
of the lights and clatter of Sodom.
It is not in their power, nor in their venture,
This was mother nature's future.

A dead tree to man is but a poor condition,
A dead man to a tree is simply more nutrition.
Nature's limbs will transcend time.

Fighting for life

Written by: Athena Paschou

Edited by: Angel Brooke

In the not-so-distant future... During a New World Order, where everyone is equal and location no longer matters...

Honestly, Rosa couldn't comprehend what her eyes were seeing. That message was still stuck on her screen, taunting her, daring her to doubt its legitimacy.

"The Chancellor of South Europe would like to converse with you regarding the environmental degradation of the Mediterranean Sea," Rosa's secretary interrupted her thoughts. With a jolt, she minimised the email application and turned to look at him.

The secretary hadn't missed her reaction to the message. Even so, he didn't indicate anything more than patience as he waited for her answer.

"I am busy," Rosa said. "Tell him to reach out next month. There are more urgent matters to attend to."

"My Lady, this is not about the oil leak."

The surprise at his statement was enough to trigger a genuine reaction. Rosa remembered how a North American tanker had tragically broken down and sunk months ago, irreversibly polluting the Mediterranean Sea. The affected countries had inundated her with requests for monetary aid, and not a day could pass that she didn't feel annoyed at their requests. For them to ask about something different was surprising.

Rosa never intended to deal with the Mediterranean Sea. Her main resources and profits came from Asia and America. Her priorities didn't lie with saving European countries from something of their own making.

"One might almost be tempted to believe that," she stated, indifference plain in her voice. "It's not like they ever talk about other topics. Email me his documents," she ordered, "I will review his case en route to Asia."

"I still believe you would do better to send me as your delegate rather than going there yourself," the secretary insisted.

"And I am still of the firm belief that there is absolutely zero danger associated with this trip. This is routine for me," Rosa responded, clearly annoyed. The secretary bowed his head, leaving the room.

In a land, not too far away...

Emily was twenty years old, stuck in a monotonous routine of university classes

and home. She hated her life. As the Governor's daughter, she was burdened by expectations of predictability and superiority, isolating her from her peers and any semblance of a social circle. Her mother allowed one friendship with the daughter of a fellow diplomat. Eve's father would go to any lengths to secure Madame Rosa's approval. Now, she walked beside Eve, her best and only friend, heading to the parking lot after finishing their classes.

"I'm sure Madame Rosa only wants the best for you," Eve pressed on as they approached their cars. She leant against her SoundBreaker while Emily unlocked her Lightning and tossed her bag inside.

"I honestly don't care what my Mother wants anymore." Emily scowled. "I want to live my own life, and instead, I'm treated like a doll for the cameras."

Eve frowned at her friend's distress. It wasn't always this intense. But the more Emily watched her classmates enjoy their lives, party 'til they drop, and return home exhausted just to do it all over the next day, the more she resented her mother and the strict security placed on her.

"Emi, you need to calm down," Eve finally said, turning to face Emily and placing a hand on her arm. "This is all for your own good."

"Whatever," Emily sighed, looking away, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. The tension in her shoulders betrayed her resolve — she couldn't stay strong and hide her feelings forever. "I hope you have a good night, Eve."

Eve embraced Emily softly, hoping she was conveying comfort and reassurance through her touch. After a few moments, they both entered their cars. Emily, still lost in her thoughts, passively watched Eve fly away to a safe distance before activating the magnetic systems of her car.

The autopilot engaged, the vehicle lifted in the air, and the GPS routed the car to her mother's mansion.

"I suppose I should be grateful." Emily dryly spoke into the quiet space of her car. The wheel and the pedals moved on their own, adjusting the speed and rotation automatically. Emily resorted to retreating within her thoughts as she usually did. It took Rosa decades to rise to the top of the world and rule over the Earth in a New World Order of her invention. With big corporations hellbent on destroying the environment, her mother was instrumental in convincing countries to change their approach. They gave up their individuality and abandoned their cultural identity in favour of securing resources for their people's survival. Only Oceania resisted giving up control to Rosa.

Emily recalled her mother's constant complaints about the rebellion in Oceania. The rebels were the bane of her existence it seems, and Emily bore the price. Two security vehicles drove behind her every single time she even thought of leaving the mansion. A few lucky, select students were hired to train as security and act as her bodyguards during her time at university. If she wanted to go out for leisure, she

had to give a two-week notice to her security team. Bitterness swelled in her chest when she tried to recall the last time she genuinely had fun with people who wanted to be in her company and not butter her up to gain favour with her mother. She felt suffocated and punished for something beyond her control. Truth be told, she wasn't buying the fairy tale Madame Rosa was selling to the world. The contrasts were too extreme. How could she live in a mansion, surrounded by fruit from all seasons, when the rest of the world struggled to grow even the essentials to feed their children?

The worst of it all was when the oil leak spilled in the Mediterranean, affecting all regions around it. Fishermen could no longer fish. Crops died due to the oil infiltrating the ground waters. Wildfires raged with no water source for firefighters to fight with. Everyone wanted Rosa to decide what to do about it. But Rosa kept blowing them off, month after month.

So deep in thought was Emily that she didn't realise when her two security vehicles disappeared and crashed on the Earth. Suddenly, she was startled back to reality by the loud alarm of her car.

"Automatic navigation and communication systems disabled," The electronic voice announced. "Insert voice pattern to reactivate."

"Emily Fleur Daans, student of Global College." She spoke steadily, putting her hands on the wheel and her feet on the pedals. Emily could see in the mirrors two Bullets closing in fast. If her car didn't re-enable, she would have to manually race away herself. The seconds seemed to tick away slowly as her breath came in short bursts, her adrenaline rising.

"Pattern has been recognised. Activation failed. Communication systems disabled," the car's AI listed. "Landing advised."

"No fucking way," Emily whispered, pressing the pedal to the floor. "Today is not the day I die."

Back to Rosa in the Asia District, where she remained in denial.

Rosa was watching her daughter's security feed when it abruptly cut out. And then her secretary interrupted. It had been hours, and Rosa was itching to pull out her phone and check on Emily. But the old man in front of her expected a miracle. He had gained military control over Asia in order to convert the region to Rosa's world plan. Now the Chancellor of Asia Major, he regularly deflected decisions to Rosa and profited happily when she imposed more restrictions on China's food portions. During the meeting, he once more did his best to convince Rosa to allow for tighter military control on Myanmar. The small country had hosted multiple Oceanian rebels who kept avoiding arrest due to the local sympathy for the cause. Normally Rosa would wholeheartedly agree to raise taxes and restrict farming and

food portions in order to force the people to starve or give up the rebels. But, Oceania's taunting message and Emily's cut security feed were still at the forefront of her mind. If the threat was legit, how would Rosa even think of imposing extra restrictions against the rebels?

"Our people will die if you don't do something," he finished, snapping her attention back to the room.

"Madame Rosa," her secretary called from the door before she could answer. "We need you. It's your daughter. Her GPS has gone offline."

Rosa paled.

Her secretary continued. "We have a message from the Oceania rebels. They claim they have her and are threatening to hold her hostage until you give up control of the world's nuclear ensemble —" The secretary paused, drawing a shuddering breath, "— to them."

Back to Emily, who was desperately wishing her car was actually equipped with weapons.

The Oceanian tactics were ingenious. The team had hacked into the security cars while Emily and her "guards" were still in class, cutting off the security camera feed from all three cars. This sent an alert to Rosa's terminal, of course, carrying their threat that her daughter was in grave harm. It was very convenient that the message carried malware that allowed them to spy on Rosa's moves.

They expected Rosa wouldn't tell anyone just yet of her daughter's disappearance. She would complete her meetings first before calling Emily directly, hoping it was nothing more than a glitch in the technology. So, when the rebels destroyed the security cars, they cut off Emily's GPS and navigation systems too, triggering an alert to Rosa's entire security team.

They were still at a distance from Emily's car, but now they were slowly closing in. Their hack granted them live audio feed access to Emily's car, who was loudly cursing as she pressed the accelerator further. But with her navigation systems completely offline, the car was hardwired to limit her top speed.

Emily narrowly avoided crashing into a bridge, swerving violently to the right to hide behind the city's buildings. She didn't know yet her efforts were futile. The rebels may have disabled her GPS but they also placed a secret tracker on her car, carefully hidden under her bumper.

"C'mon you stupid car, you can go faster." Emily cursed under her breath. "You're too expensive to be this. Fucking. Slow!" She yelled as she made another sharp turn.

"Don't you long for freedom?" A voice, with a thick Australian accent, blared through her speakers, making her jump in fright. "Don't you long to make your

own decisions for once?”

Emily chanced a glance at the car’s screen. Where normally there was a navigation display, now a person stared straight at her, smirking knowingly. He was gorgeous — blond hair, a short, unkempt beard and the warmest brown eyes. He had an edge to him. This beautiful, blond, and obviously Australian man was determined to succeed. And Emily... didn’t feel very good about her chances.

“What would you know?” She chuckled darkly. “You apparently chase young girls for a living.”

“It’s your mother we want,” he responded, the corner of his lip curling into a mischievous smirk. “We don’t want to hurt you. In fact, she thinks we already have you.”

“And that’s meant to make me feel better?” She retorted, nervously looking at her rearview mirror. “If so, you failed.”

Emily made a masterful turn to avoid a building before taking another steep turn. She cursed loudly as she noticed congestion in front of her. Reluctantly, she took her car above the others, engaging in the highest-speed corridor, just below the stratosphere. To her relief, the car chimed, alerting her that she could finally drive at higher speeds to comply with air regulations. Emily put her foot down, pushing the gas pedal flat against the floor.

“Emily, for the first time in your life, no one is dictating your next move. Why not join us?”

Her surprise at his words meant she got too close to a car in front of her. She swerved at the very last moment to avoid them, briefly making eye contact with a young mother and her baby. She gasped, her heart pounding in her chest. She had never been this close to death.

Emily looked at the rearview mirror again, now laying eyes on two cars, driving parallel to each other and keeping their distance from her. She spotted the man speaking with her, occupying the passenger seat of one of the cars. The screen did not do him justice.

“We will not harm you if you decide to drive away. But we believe you would be better suited to join our cause.”

“And what is your cause?” Emily asked, hating that she was even considering it.

“Freedom,” he shrugged. “If you join us, you fight for freedom.”

She couldn’t believe she was nodding in agreement. The fear subsided as quickly as incredulity took its place. Was she really betraying her own mother?

He smiled at her. “I’m Darius, by the way. If you need me, call me. I am loading the coordinates in your GPS now.”

Emily slowed down slightly and allowed the cars to catch up to her. Darius’ car stayed beside hers as the other sped ahead to scout for guards.

The coordinates led to a helipad where a jet waited for them. It was loaded with

equipment and a few people, fighters joining the rebellion, as Emily was told later. Emily stopped her car outside the jet, unclasped her seatbelt, and stepped out of the car.

Darius was tall, and her hunch about his determination proved correct. He shook her hand and guided her inside the jet. He was relaxed around her, trying to put her at ease. They were met by his commander in the jet, who could hardly believe that Governor Rosa's daughter willingly joined them.

"What do you even want to get out of this?" he asked her.

Emily supposed this was a good question. She knew from her mother's long lectures on the Rebellion that they were fighting to bring back the previous system. They wanted new borders based on cultures and civilisations, and for international cooperation to prioritise people. Their activities weren't rumoured to be highly disruptive to the actual people. They disrupted supply routes to the Capital, hid amongst citizens to make Rosa's government act out and look bad, and spread information Rosa would much prefer to keep hidden.

"Whatever happens, I need you to promise we'll address the oil leak in the Mediterranean," she responded. "Mother acts as if it is a nuisance but it is the recipe to extinction."

The Commander nodded approvingly. Her attitude would work well with their fight. He nodded at Darius, prompting him to disclose their plan. Bracing himself, Darius explained that their plan was essentially blackmail. With Emily's consent, they would use heavily edited photos of her enduring different tortures. They would do this as long as it took for Rosa to cave to their demands. He showed her mock-ups of the pictures; designs of Emily severely weakened and chained, tortured in so many different ways.

Emily had tensed up, unable to take her eyes away from the digital pictures. She knew Darius was more than strong enough to make these images a reality. Noticing the horror on her face, Darius was quick to assure her that no harm whatsoever would come to her. All she needed to do was pose, and the editors would work their magic. Emily took the dossier from Darius and flicked through the pages again.

"How is it possible that you can do this without actually hurting me?" She asked.

"And how do I know this isn't just an extremely elaborate trap?"

"She's a smart one," the Commander chuckled from behind Darius. He held a tablet out to Darius, who took it and turned the screen towards Emily.

"This is our facility," Darius explained. The camera feed displayed a studio full of cameras and lights. The shooting area was reminiscent of a dungeon. "These are the props we would use," he continued, zooming in. He showed her all the emergency release buttons each chain had. "The designers will work with you to set the scene. You will never be forced to do more than you want."

Emily nodded hesitantly, still feeling apprehensive. “Who are the people in the pictures?”

“These are the designers.” Darius smiled softly. “They are very dedicated and extremely talented.” He took the tablet back and changed the camera feed. When he gave it to her again, Emily saw that the feed was of four people sitting around the table. She recognised them as the same people in the pictures.

“The worst that will happen is some mild discomfort,” Darius said. “And that is only with your consent.”

Finally, Emily nodded, convinced by Darius’ reasonings. “Let’s do it,” she said, conviction strong in her voice. The Commander nodded in approval and signalled at the pilot to take off in the air. Emily sat next to Darius, who now began her induction to the Rebellion forces.

“While we are in transit, would you mind giving us any information you hold on the Governor?” His voice was hesitant, as if bracing himself to convince Emily to divulge this information. He knew it was a hard ask.

But to his surprise, she talked. As he started a recording, she settled back in her seat and told him about everything she knew from when her mother was rising in power. She had been a child, so her memories weren’t the clearest. But she still talked of secret meetings with old men and their ensembles, men she later learned were the big heads of corporations. She told him how, after moving into the mansion and being placed under strict security, she discovered the vents let sound through from the meeting rooms. Disdain dripped from her voice as she told Darius how her mother just shrugged after she was informed of the leak in the Mediterranean.

She gave him all the names she could remember. Darius pulled up photographs to confirm people’s identities. Emily verified those she recognised.

“So, if I understand correctly—” Darius said, “—the CEOs of the biggest corporations worked with the Governor to make her get in power.”

“She always said she was working for the people,” Emily said bitterly. “But think about it. The entire world is producing crops and base materials. Where are these materials going? Why is everyone still in famine?”

She continued to describe her own subtle acts of defiance. “Mother wanted me to major in political science and intern directly with her,” she started. “But after I heard about the leak, I contacted the University Dean and asked to major in chemistry.”

Surprise flashed across Darius’ face. “Why?”

Emily pondered her answer for a few moments. “Because you can’t solve a problem if you don’t understand it. I knew my Mother would force me to take over, and the corporations basically control her. My hope was that I could get them to listen by arguing that the oil leak meant an entire region would stop producing. And this

will have a knock-on effect.”

Darius was visibly impressed. His eyebrows had lifted slightly, his eyes meeting hers in silent approval. “Would you still like to work on the oil leak?” He asked, returning to his tablet. He stopped the recording, pulling up other information instead. It was his time to explain the Rebellion. He described how they disrupt supply routes, forcing materials to stay in the region. The citizens in return shelter them when necessary. They are also really active in recruiting people to come to Oceania and strengthen the cause.

“We want to return the power to the people,” he stated. “And this is where you come in.”

The rebellion had identified Emily as her mother’s only weakness. Recruiting her would hopefully force Rosa out of her Governor position as she would be officially compromised. But the laws were airtight. If Rosa absconded, the control would be Emily’s.

In the meantime, Darius arranged for Emily to join forces with their environment team. They were actively (and hurriedly) working on a chemical formula to dissolve the oil and developing methods to restore the wildlife.

“The laws are like this so no one could get power from Rosa and the corporations,” Emily replied. “How do you plan for me to enact any change as Governor?”

Even though she majored in chemistry, Emily had still been preparing for her eventual ascent to power. She spent years studying the law of the land, and couldn’t see how she would get the leverage to make any kind of decisions different to her mother’s.

“That’s a really good question,” Darius mused. “The trick lies in being sworn in. Rosa was sworn in what used to be the Americas, and her oath made her promise to stay true to obeying all citizens of the land.”

At Emily’s puzzled look, he continued. “Think about it,” he urged. “Which people benefit the most from the status quo? When did you last hear about the Americas being plagued with famine and unemployment?”

Realisation dawned on her face. “Most corporations are American, so she pledged to obey them.”

“Technically, anyone can lobby the Governor,” Darius smiled. “That’s where her secretaries come in, they filter the noise and only let important people through.”

“And that’s why she gets away with doing nothing.” Emily shook her head, disappointed.

“However—” Darius smirked, “Governors get to choose their oath. So, you can choose the American oath and be bound by your mother’s lobbyists, or you can choose the Oceanian oath.” He turned the tablet to her, showing the declaration.

I hereby pledge to serve for the wellbeing of all people across the world, to act in

the best interests of global societies as the people dictate them, and to govern with fairness and integrity as long as I shall live.

Emily smiled softly as she read through the oath. Darius allowed her to sit in silence for a few minutes as she ruminated on it. Truth be told, this version resonated strongly with her. “This brings control from the corporations to the people,” she finally pointed out. “And since it’s the Oceanian oath, this means that it’s the Rebellion that will be flanking me. Do you have people willing to do that? Devote their life to sorting through the people’s needs?”

“Everyone in the Rebellion is dedicated to exactly that cause, Emily,” Darius responded softly. “If we get you in power, we legitimise our activities.”

And so, it happened. Emily joined the Resistance, with Darius as her Supervising Officer throughout the induction period. The leadership engaged in hostage negotiations with Rosa’s team, and yet Rosa never stepped foot in front of the camera. Every week, they demanded proof of life. Every week, Emily and the photographers devised new torture ideas to recreate, each image more shocking than the last.

The week she completed her induction, Darius led her to a small room adjacent to the hostage control centre. She had just taken a picture, remnants of fake blood still sticking on her skin. Quite used to her fake-tortured look by now, Darius told her they would see and hear everything, without being seen or heard from the other room.

“You bastards, release my daughter now!” Rosa screamed through the speakers, making both Emily and Darius flinch before he turned the volume down. The leadership stayed stoic.

“You know what to do if you want your daughter’s freedom,” the General shrugged. “Give us control of the nuclear arsenal.”

“So you can kill everybody?” Rosa seethed. “No.”

The General chuckled. “Out of the two of us, you are the one pushing the world to extinction.”

The Governor looked dishevelled. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and she was shaking in anger. Her secretary stepped in, gently pulling her back, leading her out of the room.

“That was the first time she appeared,” Darius chuckled. “What picture did you do?”

“It was quite a good one,” Emily smirked. “I am sure the Media team will be happy to show you.”

They left the room, taking one of their usual strolls around the compound.

“The more I learn about history, the less I think grabbing power would benefit anyone,” she stated. “Countries don’t deserve being flattened like that.”

“I mean, I agree, but it’ll take a while to undo your mother’s legacy,” Darius said. “You’ll have to be in power for a while. But we can help.”

“She must hate knowing that the Resistance gets power when she dies,” Emily smirked, mischief glinting in her eyes. “Hopefully she understands now, what not having control feels like.”

Victory came sooner than anticipated. Emily had just been suspended from her toes (with a lovely green harness keeping her comfortable) when Darius burst into the room, visibly out of breath.

“The Governor is dead.” He gasped. “Emily, it’s your time!”

Emily was Rosa’s one singular weakness. She couldn’t bear the thought of her daughter suffering, and not being able to help. Her advisors, as usual, had been advising inaction. The Chancellors weren’t cooperating. No one seemed to grasp the importance of Emily’s life. And so, one fateful night, Rosa made the one decision no other person could dictate, fueled by the need to end the pain above all else.

Emily wasn’t even 21 when she was sworn in as Governor. The Resistance returned her home safely, with Darius heading her security team. A week later, dressed impeccably in a suit, she stepped out on the mansion’s balcony and addressed the world.

“Dear citizens of the world,” she started. “I can only apologise for the reign of terror we have all suffered over the last few decades under Madame Rosa, who has forced countries beyond their capabilities. I have never agreed with her policies. It is now Earth’s time to heal,” she announced boldly, glancing over at the technician next to her. He nodded, indicating the presentation was being broadcast live.

“I aim to return power to the individual countries as they were before the New World Order was established. To that end, I call on each Chancellor to begin the work of independence within their regions and report their progress to me. My team will assist with any and all obstacles encountered. While this transition is underway, I have collaborated with the Oceanian Environmental Research Team to address the oil spill devastating our oceans. Together, we have succeeded in creating and testing a formula to neutralise the oil. Researchers will soon be dispatched to the affected regions in the coming weeks. In the meantime, my team is working diligently to establish hardship funds for those most affected. We will do our utmost to help restore the countries most affected by the oil leak as a priority.”

The technician indicated the presentation had been cut with a nod. “Thank you. I will return with more announcements as they arise.”

Emily stepped back inside to meet Darius and her security team. Many Chancellors were already clamouring to visit her. The advisors and servants who had served her mother to the detriment of the people were being cleared out, replaced by the



young researchers of the Resistance. Emily smiled at her new team. For many months, they had been organising. Now, it was their time to fight for the people. It was time for the Earth to heal.

Rapture

Written by: Omari Benjamin

Joints entwined hands
Eyes lazy counting
Plumes of white ash
Sex on fire soaked
Feathers.

Coo to bloody pavement
Sighing in gulps and gaps
Rings of cinders swept
Shaped as portraits
Be.

Kisses in smoke
Begin and end
With rapture.

Song of the Sea-Beast:

An Analysis of Eadoran Poetry

and its Various English

Translations

Written by: Ruth Fishman

While its Mediterranean neighbors, such as Greece, Egypt, and Rome, are common areas of study, the nation of Eadora is often overlooked. Little remains, after all, of that small, ill-fated island, yet, enough has been uncovered as to signal an impressive literary tradition. While not all historians agree, it is generally accepted that the first known script for the first known play originates in Eadora (2,905 BC). Discovered as an etching on the palace walls, a dialogue can be read between an Eadoran king and a disgruntled peasant. “Who made you lord of all things?” asks the peasant. “Why is it that you are my ruler and I am your subject? Why is it that you are worshiped and I am forsaken?” “Fool!” retorts the king. “Rephrase your question. Say to me, instead: ‘Why is it that I am cared for and you are my caretaker? Why is it that I am left at peace, and you are watched eternally with jealous eyes?’”. Whether or not this qualifies as a play is a matter of debate. There is, after all, no solid evidence regarding whether or not it was ever performed. Some historians claim it was acted out by the king himself as a ceremonial obligation. Others, however, believe it was simply a dialogue-exclusive piece of literature, meant only to be read. Whichever it is (or once was) the stone wall which holds it is now half-destroyed by erosion. We will never truly know the tale it tells.

However, my primary interest lies not in Eadoran theater, but in Eadoran poetry. All competent historians agree that the Eadorans were masterful poets, exceptional for their time and unprecedented in the ancient world. Sadly, very little remains of their poetry. It is believed that the Eadoran poets wrote primarily on scrolls of parchment (and occasionally paper, after opening trade with Egypt). Therefore, when the island submerged, countless poems were lost to time. All surviving Eadoran poetry has been preserved in one of two ways. The first, is through records kept by other cultures—primarily the Greeks and Egyptians. While Eadora was, of course, famously isolationist, there are several known instances of trade involving these two civilizations, which allowed Eadoran poetry to reach a wider audience. Even the Greek philosopher, Pseudophocles, is known to have paid the island a visit. His journals provide detailed accounts of this voyage, stating: “The

poets of Eadora are to be looked at with fear. Their skill brings mighty Athens to its knees. I urge my countrymen to learn from them, lest we one day sink to irrelevance.” In fact, a poem translated by Pseudophocles became so popular in Greece, that, to this day, many falsely attribute it to the Athenians.

The grateful shepherd boy

*Just as I tend my flock,
So the gods tend me.
Filling my eyes with starlight,
My mouth with fresh honey—
Granting me my own dominion in the form of a lamb.
I shall be a gentle god to him.
I shall not let him wander through the thorns.
I shall fill his eyes with starlight,
His mouth with fresh, sweet clover.*

(A. Kyogi, trans.)

What I have printed above is a translation of a translation, and we have no way of knowing just how many creative liberties Pseudophocles may have taken with it. This is the most frustrating aspect of Eadoran poetry preserved in such a manner. It is always a translation, likely filtered to suit the whims of whichever culture may have stumbled upon it.

Our second source of poetry is more direct—ancient carvings pulled from the watery rubble that once was Eadora. These artifacts are few and far between, as hardly any have weathered the years. In fact, only 27 carvings remain; only 9 of which are believed to be whole poems. The remaining 18 were discovered in broken fragments, and many have had their status as poetry hotly debated. Take the “poem” known today as “The Eadoran Queen”.

*And in her tower she waits beneath her crown,
A humble servant of her lord and her master, her king.
She*

(A. Kyogi, trans.)

It is, of course, too short to be viewed in its original context. The stone it was discovered on is believed, by many historians, to be a displaced grave. Therefore, some believe that it is better categorized as an epitaph than a poem, though I’d argue that both can be the case. While no confirmed gravestones have been

discovered, I'd imagine that, due to the significance of poetry among the Eadoran people, they'd likely involve it in their burial rites, particularly for a figure as important to them as their queen. However, with so little context to pull from, who can say. Who can even guess.

Among the 9 surviving poems, one piece in particular draws my attention. A piece I would consider Eadora's crowning glory. Though the exact date is unknown, it is believed to be Eadora's most recent literary artifact, forged in clay mere hours before the island's destruction (circa 398 B.C.). It is generally known as "The Sea-Beast" or "The Sea-Monster". Its Eadoran title, "Il Ea-Ther", can be translated either way, with the word "ther" meaning both "animal" and "villain". Early English translations often call it "The Sea-Demon", though this translation inaccurately implies a religious or supernatural nature to the word "ther".

Here is my own translation of "The Sea-Beast", as I choose to call it, done as coldly and literally as I find possible.

The Sea-Beast

*Sea-beast, take possession of your dangerous fingers.
Take similar possession of your water-like eyes and fire-controlling mouth
And destroy all we love,
And all hope of Elsyaru [the Eadoran afterlife].
Do all this and more, without delay,
Because we cannot stop you.
Because we are lowly humans and you, sea-beast, have murdered and replaced
our gods.
We have heard you shout with your fire-controlling mouth,
"When night comes, I will burn you.
When night comes I will destroy you.
And all that I do not destroy I will throw into the sea.
In two-thousand-four-hundred-and-twenty-eight years I will return
And I will take with me all that remains of your world.
All nations, both human and animal,
will be clenched in my dangerous fingers.
All of your neighbors and enemies will be
nothing but fire, water, and smoke.
And you, my Eadoran children, will be the only ones told.
You will carry this prophecy, and you will carry it into the sea."*

I am not, of course, purporting my work to be the ideal translation. It does, after all, lack the poetic tools found in the Eadoran original, most notably its AABB

rhyme scheme. In translating a poem, the work of a poet is required, not merely a translator (which is all I claim myself to be). Even in terms of accuracy, I urge you to take me with a grain of salt. Eadoran, like all dead languages, can never be completely understood by modern ears. Unless I were to build some sort of time machine, and live amongst the Eadorans, there will always be nuance and meaning beyond my grasp. This translation is simply my best attempt at granting you, dear reader, a means of comparison while ingesting other (more poetically-minded) translations. Take, for example, the earliest known English translation, written in 1508 by the scholar, poet, and clergyman Lord John Gefalshinburgh.

The Sea-Demon

Sea-demon!

*With thy monstrous claw,
Watry eyes, and fiery maw,
Burn and smite with fiendish mite,
Tear high heavens down for spite!
Act thy curse with devilish speed,
Fore we scarce not intercede.
We are mere men form'd from dust.
Our lord god, thou stole from us.
Now thou cryest, "One and all!
I shall burn ye, come night's fall!
All remaining, I shall drown!
Cent'ries hence, I'll clame my crown,
Seize all nations—man or beast.
Friend or foe, from West to East.
Children, heede my last decree
As ye sinketh 'neath the sea!"*

Having read my bare-boned translation, you may notice some key changes. The most apparent is Gefalshinburgh's use of Christian terminology for a poem written around 398 B.C. For example, while the original describes multiple "gods", Gefalshinburgh translates this as one "lord god". Similarly, the biblical imagery of "mere men form'd from dust" is used to describe "lowly humans", and the phrase "high heavens" is used in place of the term "Elsyaru" (the Eadoran afterlife which only vaguely resembles a Christian heaven). And, of course, there's that use of the phrase "demon", as covered earlier. However, while Gefalshinburgh's translation is

a better reflection of his own time than that of the Eadoran's, there is certainly merit to it. The AABB rhyme scheme and use of assonance suits the spirit of the poem better than my translation, even if it sacrifices certain details in the process. Finding this balance is a struggle all translators know well, and Gefalshinburgh toes that line quite elegantly, all things considered. It is also worth noting that this translation may not have been intended as a final draft. In fact, it may not have been intended for public consumption at all. Gefalshinburgh contracted the plague shortly after penning it; the poem was discovered and published following his death.

The second known English translation of "The Sea-Beast" was penned by the Canadian poet, Robert Lyger, in 1812. A significant time jump, to be sure, though not a surprising one, considering the saddening lack of interest in Eadoran studies. It reads as follows:

The Sea-Demon

Sea-demon!

*With your fearsome claws,
Flaming eyes, and piercing jaws,
Strike and smite with fiendish might!
Tear the heavens down for spite!
Enact your will with devilish speed;*

*Us mortals dare not intercede.
For we are mere men made of dust;
Our lord god hath forsaken us.
We hear you cry, "Come one, come all!
I'll come and burn you, come night's fall!
And you I spare, I soon shall drown!
I'll kill your king! I'll claim his crown!
I'll seize all creatures, great and small—
From man to mouse, from rise to fall.
Come, children! heed my last decree—
As you descend beneath the sea!"*

As you may have observed, this translation bears a strong resemblance to Gefalshinburgh's, and very little resemblance to the Eadoran original. For this reason, many historians believe that Lyger had not read the original at all. Other than his own claims, there is no evidence that Lyger ever studied Eadoran. Cambridge, where he was schooled, has certainly never carried any such class, and,

outside of this single “translation”, Lyger never made even a passing reference to Eadora in any of his writings.

I am inclined to agree with these historians, and would not have included Lyger’s poem at all if it were not the most widely read translation. Though now largely forgotten, Lyger’s “Sea-Demon” was once quite acclaimed. Sir Andrew Dolton even dubbed it, “the poem of the century” and, “a haunting marvel for our modern times”. Normally, any mainstream interest in Eadora would delight me, but this renewed fascination was based on several levels of misinformation.

The first level is the poem’s status as a dishonest reworking of a historically inaccurate translation, as previously discussed. The second level is the misinformed view of the poem by the general public. I cannot entirely blame Lyger for this, as much as I’d like to. Though heavily dishonest, Lyger never claimed the poem as an original work, and described it as, “a relic from that ancient, fallen isle of Eadora”. However, it does not appear to have been interpreted as such by any of his readers. This is partially due to the frequent (semi-illegal) publishing of the poem out of its original context, and credited solely to Lyger. However, even those who read Lyger’s preface, often took it for a mere framing device. One review of Lyger’s poem anthology, *The Last of Robert Lyger*, describes Eadora as, “a fictional island, born from the poet’s delightful imagination.” Lyger himself was never able to clear the air of such falsehoods. To his credit, he died in a shipwreck shortly after the poem’s publication, and misinformation relegated Eadora to a simple work of fiction. Therefore, Eadoran poetry’s one moment in the sun did nothing to rouse the world’s interest in the nation itself.

The third known English translation, and the first to be titled, “The Sea-Beast”, was written in 1887, by the Scottish linguist, Charles Morton II. It reads as follows:

The Sea-Beast

*Oh, Sea-Beast, raise your mighty fist.
Tears stain your eyes, flames stain your lips.
Destroy the fortunes we have won,
All hope of fair Elysium.*

Unfortunately, this is all Morton ever wrote, as he suffered a fatal heart attack during the process. However, there is still a great deal to discuss. After reading my translation, you may view Morton’s as somewhat lacking. Therefore, I should add a touch of context. While I translated the first line as “watery eyes”, the same word (“ea”) can be used to describe “tears”, “water”, or “the sea”. Similarly, the word “peshen” can refer to “mouth”, “lips”, or even “language”. The use of the phrase “destroy the fortunes we have won”, as opposed to my translation of, “destroy all

we love” is also linguistically justifiable. The Eadoran word “prae” is primarily used to mean “love” but can also mean “win”, “steal”, or “conquer”. My one finical complaint regards the replacement of “Elsyaru” with the similarly named Greco-Roman afterlife of “Elysium”. However, I understand Morton’s decision, as one is much more recognizable than the other. I do not doubt Morton’s knowledge of the differences between the two.

By all accounts, Morton was well-studied on the literary history of Eadora, perhaps to a fault. According to his son, Charles Morton III, his interest bordered on obsession. In Morton III’s private letters, he claims that his father would, “...lock himself in his study for days at a time, reading and rereading all known Eadoran texts, certain they spelled out some sort of a mystical cipher”. When out of his study, he would appear dazed and distracted, “wandering the halls, and muttering in tongues I must assume are Eadoran”. However, despite his obsession, “Sea-Beast” is the only Eadoran poem he is known to have attempted translating. A relative boom in translations occurred in the 1920s, with Adam Shvindler, a classics professor. Shvindler had long been interested in Eadoran Studies, and had even penned an exceptional translation for the fractured Eadoran Epic, “The Goat-Headed Prince.” However, his main contribution came from teaching the first (and only) Eadoran Studies course at Cornell University. For the year in which this course existed, Shvindler required each of his students to pen their own English translation of “The Sea-Beast”. As he taught 29 students, I have no intention of showing every poem that resulted from this assignment. However, I have selected my personal favorite—“The Sea-Brute” (translated by an 18-year-old student named Elsa Falsk).

The Sea Brute

*You, Sea-Brute! Take your nails of vicious murder
Leaking eyes, or burning words or
Mouth—and burn all that we love.
Burn Elsyaru from above.
Do this and more, unfaltering.
We have no means of altering
Your will; we are but mortals.
You have murdered our immortals.
Shout, in flames, “Fast dawns the night
When I shall burn, and I shall smite
You all! Save those I toss into the seas!
Then, in some 20 centuries,
I’ll seize your world with monstrous might—*

*You men, you beasts, you're fools to fight!
Both friend and foe shall fall and choke and
Turn to fire, water, smoke, and*

*Children,
None but you must ever know the cursed knowledge you must bear.
And so you sink into the sea. And so you sink into despair."*

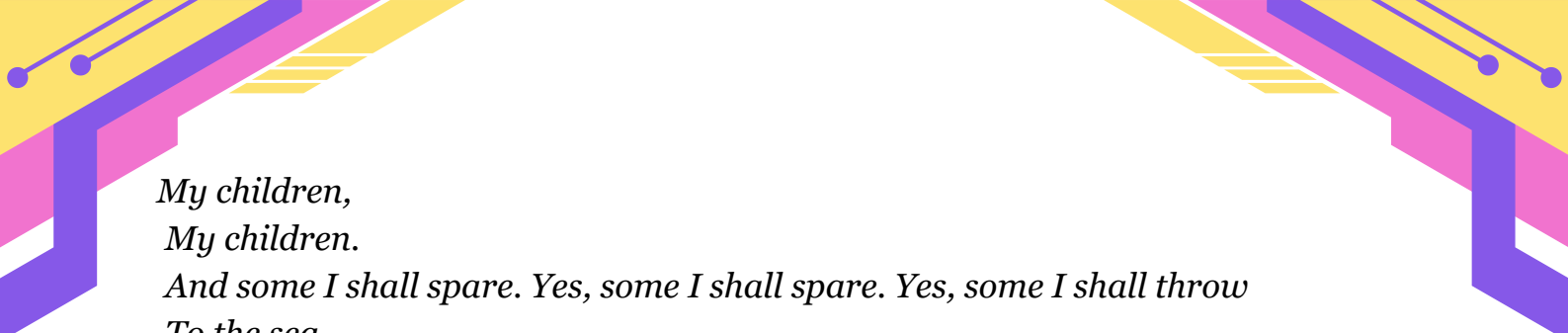
Certainly one of the more unique translations! And the only one I know of involving the double meaning of “peshen” as both “mouth” and “language”. At least, that is what I have assumed to be Falsk’s intention with the line, “burning words or mouth”. You are likely expecting me to critique its inaccuracies, particularly the strange manipulations made to the final lines. However, I have been unable to uncover the exact instructions given by Shvindler. I know he assigned a translation of “The Sea-Beast”, but it is unclear whether he expected a traditional one or a more creative interpretation. I have done my best to fill these gaps of knowledge by seeking an interview with Shvindler and his students, but, sadly, none were available for contact. Elsa Falsk was found dead in Cayuga Lake a week after turning in her poem. A month later, 7 of her classmates died similarly unfortunate deaths in a dormitory fire. As for Shvindler, he went missing the final month of the semester and was never heard from again. All remaining classes were called off, all surviving students were passed automatically, and no Eadoran Studies course was ever hosted again at Cornell University. In fact, the creation of any clubs or student organizations relating to Eadoran studies was banned the following year (though, so far as I am aware, none were ever proposed). As for the remaining 21 students, I have been unable to track them down.

It is truly unfortunate that these rare, ill-fated translations are all that exist. While Greek and Latin are taught at every university in the world, how difficult it is to study Eadoran! How difficult it is to even hear of it! If historians, scholars, classicists, and poets continue to ignore Eadora the world will continue to lose out on a vibrant and extraordinary civilization. In my opinion, that is a tragedy too terrible to accept. Too terrible to allow.

As this essay draws to a close, I would like to add one final poem—the final translation of my esteemed former colleague, the late Anna Kyogi. As will soon become apparent, she has chosen only to translate the Sea-Beast’s “speech”, and has taken a poetic approach. May her memory live on.

Song of the Sea-Beast

The night must come. The night must fall. And so must I burn



*My children,
My children.
And some I shall spare. Yes, some I shall spare. Yes, some I shall throw
To the sea,
To the ocean.*

*In two-thousand
Four-hundred
Twenty-eight years—*

*I beg of you, listen! Please, listen!
All cities,
All nations,
All humans,
All creatures
Shall die by time's deadly erosion.*

*I'm sorry I've told, and I'm sorry you know,
But I can't let these words go unspoken.
We
shall carry this tragedy nobly, although
We must carry it into the ocean.*

*We
must carry it, carry it,
carry it, carry it,
carry it into the ocean.*

You

Written by: Dillon Roberts

Edited by: Niamh Canning

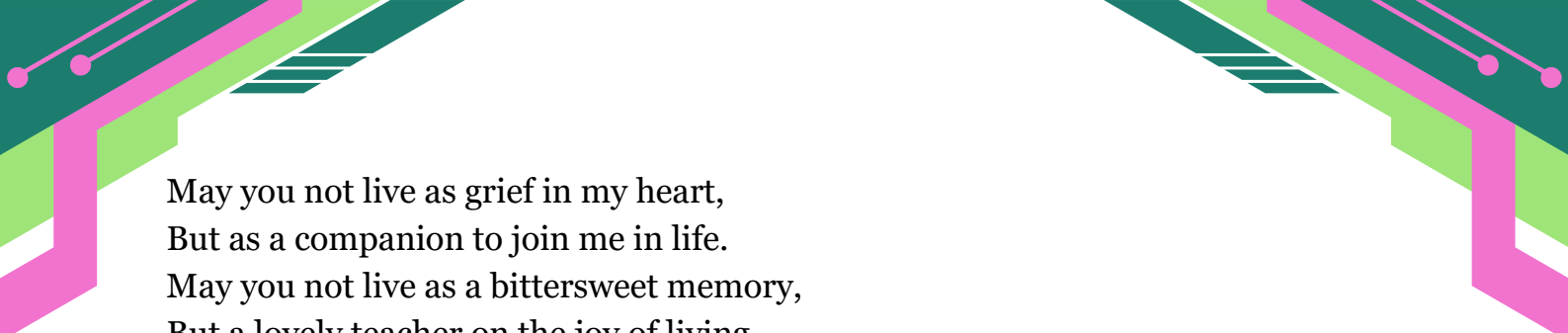
Your smile accentuates everything about you.
Your piercing green eyes,
Your fair, light-brown skin,
Your hands caressing my yellow scarf,
And once your sleek hair,
Which flowed past your neck.

I pass my hand across your face,
Touching your ticklish spot behind your ear,
Pinching the edges of your neck,
Being careful not to touch where your wig starts to tear.

I hold your cold, pale hand,
Tracing the thin veins down to the nails.
I think of all the times I've held those hands,
Those hands that caressed my face,
Those hands that made my favorite soup,
Those hands that had warmed mine.

But I know these moments are not yet gone.
You've already promised me,
And not once you've broken one.
So I lay you to rest now,
Letting you retain the strength you need.

You know those hospital sheets don't suit you,
You look better in your own bed.
Better in the strange gray satin,
That you paraded as our best home purchase.
Better amongst the pillows we've got,
That outnumber us twenty-four to two.
Better laying by my side,
So that you may cuddle up next to me.



May you not live as grief in my heart,
But as a companion to join me in life.
May you not live as a bittersweet memory,
But a lovely teacher on the joy of living.
May you live grasping my hand in strength,
And not by slowly letting go, as I hold on to yours.

I trust you now, to meet me once more.
I trusted you then, that this would be but a slight inconvenience,
And I will trust you onwards, in hopes you'll come back home.

Then we will cry,
Laugh together,
Be joyous again and again.
We will partake in frivolous, childish acts,
Playing hide-and-seek in the kitchen,
Arm wrestling in the bedroom,
And watching movies or shows in the living room.

And at the end of it all,
You will touch my hair,
And I'll caress yours,
As proof we're only for each other,
Even if only for a limited time,
To grow beyond mourning.

Teach me this to be true.
Tell me this future comes near.
For I write my little poems,
To chase away the fear.

May you come back to bring rhyme and reason,
To such a sudden collapse,
To tell me it was all a ruse,
So that we all may laugh.

Magic of Elysia

Written by: Janyne Langlois

Edited by: Dillon Roberts

“When you look to your future, what do you see?”

A gentle breeze flowed throughout the study making the wind chimes sing and the tapestries dance. Bookshelves filled with books on apothecaries, divination, and mythology lined the walls, giving the room the scent of an old library. Twinkling lights and wisteria hung from the ceiling like stars falling from the sky.

What really pulled it all together was the large rounded window in the ceiling. At night, the glow of the moon shone down on the work table making the etched runes more pronounced and offering the study an icy blue hue. During the day, the beaming of the sun enhanced the runes, casting a yellow glow throughout the study for energy and concentration.

The study belonged to a renowned wizard by the name of Kallian Hemberlin. In his golden years, Kallian was known for his healing and fortune telling skills. Travelers came from countries far away just for his consultation. He'd have lines of people waiting outside his homes just to meet him.

Over the years, the influx of visitors became too much for the wizard to handle; so he began his search for an apprentice. He's had many over the years, but none of them were able to perfect his craft the way Anton Cress could, who was often referred to as Kallian jr. But just like most of his apprentices, Anton grew old and couldn't handle the power. To this day, Kallian still keeps the photo of the two of them fishing at the glowing springs.

Now here he was, teaching Anton's only daughter the skills he had.

“Absolutely nothing,” Merissa Cress took a sip of her Blue Lotus tea and flicked the top of the crystal ball. “Are you sure this thing even works?”

Merissa slumped over in her chair, leaning against the work table and blocking the sun's rays from illuminating some of the inscribed runes. She pushed her long, coily ginger and blonde striped hair away from her face and looked up at Kallian, the bright orange glow shining on her dark colored eyes.

Kallian shooed her off the desk so all the runes were illuminated. He sat across from her, his salt and pepper hair falling over his eyes, which glowed gold like the sun.

“Of course it works, Merissa. Are you even trying?” Kallian rested his head on his hand, mimicking Merissa's mannerisms. Merissa simply rolled her eyes.

“For an old man, you sure act like a kid.” Merissa leaned back into her chair. She crossed her arms, her gaze drifting away from the crystal ball on the work table. “I

just don't get it. How was my dad so good at this? It's like magic just came easy to him. But for me? It's like it hates me or something!"

Kallian let out a soft hum, standing up from his seat. He glided over to the bookshelf, picking out a few of his favorites before turning to Merissa.

"Merissa, could you grab this one up top? Green to the left." Kallian asked the young girl. Merissa tilted her head to the side, narrowing her eyes at the old guy.

"Don't you have magic?" She asked.

"Yes. But that doesn't mean I should rely on it for every little issue I have." Kallian answered. "Sometimes it's better to ask for help when needed."

There was a glimmer in Kallian's eyes; one that Merissa came to see often.

"Everything's always a lesson with you, old man."

Merissa got up from her chair, dragging it over to the bookshelf. She stood on top of it and tried her best not to panic when the chair wobbled. She grabbed the book and jumped down from the chair.

"There. Now, where are we going exactly?" Merissa questioned Kallian as he shut all the windows with a flick of his wrist. She followed him out the study, watching in awe as the scenery shifted from brick and concrete to a grassy plain filled with magical wildlife with every step they took. There were phoenixes flying overhead, a trail of small sparks falling as they passed; pegasi and unicorns grazed on the grass and pink Lotus flowers, an ash red dragon lay atop a hill with a flight of baby dragons scampering around it, and in the middle of it all, lay an enchanted pond.

The Pond of Elysian, Kallian called it. It glittered and sparkled no matter the time of day and had lily pads floating just above it. Kallian always told Merissa this was where his power came from -- not that she believed that. How could the most powerful wizard's magic come from this sparkling pond?

"So," Merissa looked over at the old wizard as they sat near the pond. "Why exactly are we here? Another lesson?"

"If that's what you want to call it," Kallian adjusted his blue robes and let out a heavy sigh, letting himself relax more. The Pond of Elysia was Kallian's place of solace, his 'recharge station' as he's heard Merissa call it. "I just thought it would be a good idea to get out of the study for a bit, maybe interact with the local wildlife."

"I'm not going near that dragon." Merissa stated.

"Ruby's harmless." Kallian told her.

"Ruby has babies." Merissa retorted.

"Ruby likes you."

"Ruby still has babies."

"Okay, so Ruby has babies. That doesn't mean she'll attack you," Kallian let out a sigh and shook his head. Merissa was just as stubborn as her father, he thought.

"Okay then. What do you suggest we do? We still need to have our lesson today,

but... I'll let you choose."

Merissa narrowed her eyes in suspicion. He's letting her choose? Did she suck at magic that much? As if he read her thoughts, Kallian spoke up.

"And, no, it's not because you're not good with magic -- you are. You just need to divert from my lessons and try something different. Something you'd like to do," Kallian conjured up an illusion of a koi fish swimming around them. "Even if it's simply making illusions of animals."

Merissa sat back, watching the glowing, gold koi fish swim around. It made her feel calm, like she could just fall asleep at that moment.

"Um," Merissa looked around at all the different creatures. She did love the animals here, so maybe she could practice magic pertaining to them. Or maybe she could do magic relating to cooking -- she was starting to feel a little hungry. "I'm honestly not sure. I can't choose, Kallian, you choose for me."

Kallian's gold eyes studied the young girl next to him. The one thing he noticed about her -- besides her indecisiveness -- were the prominent dark circles under her eyes, a sign of her lack of rest. It seemed the only time she got a break was when they came to Elysia. And even then, it seemed like her brain was running one million miles per second. Not only that, but the dark circles under her eyes were becoming more noticeable.

"Indecisiveness is a killer," Kallian spoke softly. Kallian let out a sigh before speaking up again. "Tell me, Merissa. What are your dreams like?"

"My dreams?" Merissa rested her elbows on her knees, looking out at the pond. She watched the shadows of the lily pads dance across the pond, bumping into a few weaker looking ones. They were probably old or something, she thought. She watched the frogs leap across them, scaring the butterflies off the pink lotus flowers. She watched the koi fish swim near the top and the faint glow of the whales near the bottom. Merissa always wondered how deep the pond went, and what other glowing creatures lived down there.

"I don't remember them," Merissa finally told him. "I know I have them, I can feel it. But I don't remember them."

Kallian let out a soft hum and nodded.

"Do you find yourself sleeping more during the day or at night?" He asked her. Kallian figured he already knew the answer to that one.

"During the day. I wake up late because we work late into the night." Merissa told him.

"That's because you asked to," The older man reminded her.

"Because I feel like I have to." The younger woman stated. "I don't know why, I just feel like I have to."

Kallian drew in a deep breath. Her father had said something similar to him before. Feeling like he had to do something, but not knowing why. If what he was

thinking was correct, then...

"Sleep," He told her. With a flick of his hand, he conjured up a blanket and pillow. The grass was soft enough to sleep on, so Merissa wouldn't mind. "I'll wake you when it's nighttime."

Without a second thought, Merissa lay her head on the pillow and threw the blanket over her. It was like laying on clouds.

"If I could stay like this forever, I would," Merissa mumbled, feeling the sleep take over her. "Hey, Kallian?"

"Yes?"

"Wake me up when I'm still sleepy,"

Kallian watched as Merissa wrapped herself in the blanket like a burrito. Wake her up when she's still sleepy? Kallian wondered what she meant.

"And make me drink blue lotus tea. You drink some, too. I don't know why I just feel like that's what we have to do." Merissa spoke softly before drifting off to sleep.

"Feel like you have to..." Kallian repeated, watching over Merissa as she let her eyes close.

"Ruby," Kallian called out to the mother dragon. The dragon lifted her head, walking over to Kallian, her horde of children running behind her. "Watch over Merissa for me, will you? I'll only be a moment." Kallian stood up, stroking the large dragon's head. Ruby let out a low grumble, laying next to Merissa, shielding her with her tail as her children jumped on top of her wings being careful as to not fall on Merissa.

"Thank you, Ruby. And children." Kallian smiled softly at the dragons before making his way into the pond. Kallian sifted through the rows of pink lotus, searching for the blue lotus underneath. The star-shaped lotus was always hidden underneath the pink lotus during the day and blossomed at night. While searching, Kallian made sure to greet all the frogs hopping across the lily pads and all the fish swimming around him -- it was the respectful thing to do. After all, they were letting him take their wildlife for his magic.

Kallian walked out of the pond, his clothes fully dry, then conjured up a door to the study. He glanced back at Merissa's sleeping form before entering the study. While preparing the tea, Kallian couldn't help but look over the picture of him and Anton. He wore his blue robes, as always, and his eyes shone as brightly as the orange sun while Anton bared his teeth in his smile, wearing his favorite moon pendant.

"Oh, Anton," Kallian held the picture in his pale hands. "I fear she's growing to be just like you. I'm not sure I can save her." He could see a lot of Merissa in her father. Same bronze skin, same smile, same tired eyes...

The tea pot whistled, knocking Kallian out of his thoughts. He carefully grabbed two yellow mugs and started pouring the lotus tea into one of them. There was an

itching feeling in the back of his mind, a feeling he never ignores -- but this time he has to. For Merissa's safety, he has to. Even if it means changing the color of the mug she drank from. Kallian hovered the tea pot over the second yellow mug. Everything in his body was screaming at him to use the blue mug, her father's mug. But he couldn't. He couldn't bring himself to see her drink from the same mug that sent her father on his heroic mission. Anton called it his lucky mug. It was the same mug he drank from the day his magic overpowered his body and sent him to an early death, forever leaving Merissa in his care. Kallian forcefully poured the blue lotus tea into the other yellow mug.

Kallian glanced back at the blue mug on the shelf, dread filling his eyes. He would do anything he needed to to protect her. He made his way to the door, pushing it open with his foot, only to be met with the hallway outside the study. Kallian let out a sigh, closing the door with his magic and opening it again, still seeing the hallway.

"I need to get back to Merissa," Kallian spoke out loud. To the universe or whoever was messing with him. "Do I seriously need the blue mug?" The mug rattled on the shelf almost falling over. Kallian used his magic to catch the mug before it fell to the ground by creating a golden hand. He brought the mug up to the counter, his eyes tracing the initials etched onto the side.

A.C.

"I don't know what to do, Anton. I don't want her magic to explode like yours did. You entrusted her to me, left her in my care. And yet..." Kallian transferred the blue lotus tea into the blue mug. "Is this what you want for her? Is this the fate of all my apprentices?"

The distant sound of Ruby's roar only meant it had become night in Elysia. It was time. Kallian let out a shaky breath and grabbed the yellow and blue mugs and made his way back to the pond. Kallian watched Merissa groggily rub her eyes, making herself sit up and lean against Ruby for support. He sat down next to her also leaning against Ruby and handing Merissa the blue mug.

"Thank you," Merissa mumbled before letting out a yawn. Kallian drew in a sharp breath when he saw the color of her eyes.

"What?" Merissa looked over at Kallian. Blue. The same color of blue the runes glow when the moon shines down on the table in the study. The same color of blue Anton's eyes were when his power consumed him.

The moon shone down on the two of them as a gentle breeze brushed past them. Kallian could feel the power emanating off of Merissa. And for a moment, he was thirty again sitting next to Anton.

"You..." Kallian looked over Merissa. "You get your power from the moon."

"You get yours from the sun." Merissa told him, tracing her finger along the rim of her mug before chugging it, flower petals and all. "This was my dad's mug, right?"

Am I... anything like him?"

"Too much like him," Is what Kallian wanted to say. Every action, every smile -- she was basically a miniature version of Anton. Instead he said:

"He would be very proud of you."

It was true. Anton would love the woman she grew up to be. Kallian sipped his tea, letting the effects slowly take over. He let out a heavy yawn as his eyes grew heavier and his body became more relaxed.

"Where are we going?" Kallian asked Merissa before the tea fully took over. He leaned his head on Ruby's tail, looking up at the moon.

"I'll find you." Merissa's voice echoed before the world went dark.

*

Kallian let out a heavy gasp when he finally came to. Merissa stood next to him, holding him steady. Their bodies were glowing a translucent blue as they stood in the dark surroundings.

"Is this... the bottom of the pond?" Kallian asked softly. He could faintly make out the silhouettes of rocks and small creatures skittering across. In all his years of magic, he'd never once come to the bottom of Elysia. When he looked up, he could see the faint glow of the whales. Just how far down did the pond go?

"There." Merissa pointed to an area in front of them. "You feel it. too, right?" Whatever was in front of them had an early vibe to them. It was dangerous, malicious. It wanted power.

"How long?" Kallian took a step forward, shielding Merissa behind him. "How long has this been here?"

The creature stepped out of the cave, its eyes glowing an icy blue color. The creature resembled a mix of a dinosaur and an underwater dragon. The veins on its body were glowing, the light bouncing off its scales and claws. It let out a screech, showing off its multiple rows of jagged fangs.

"My dad died because of his magic, right?" Merissa kept her gaze on the underwater creature. "Do you think, maybe...?"

"If you're trying to ask if that's your father--"

"No! Why would I ask that? I wanted to know if he had a run in with this creature. Look at its eyes, its veins. It looks like our magic, doesn't it? Magic powered by the moon."

Kallian scratched at the stubble on his chin as he looked at the beast. It was true, the creature did look like a beast of magic. But he didn't remember ever reading about one that dwells at the darkest corners of a pond floor. But the feeling he got from this creature made the hairs on the back of his neck stand.

All around them lifeless plants floated by and shriveled animal carcasses were

scattered across the ground.

"Whatever it is, it's draining the life from the pond."

Merissa was silent as she took a step towards the creature. She could hear Kallian telling her to get back and everything in her body screaming for her to run away, but she needed to test this. She reached her hand towards the creature, activating her powers so her hands were glowing just like the creature's veins. It scanned over Merissa before baring its fangs at her and trying to bite her arm off.

Kallian quickly pulled Merissa back before her arm got chomped off. The creature swung its tail at them and screeched.

"Okay. This thing's got to go," Merissa jumped out the way before the creature could slam her down.

Kallian closed his eyes and recited an old binding chant to hold down the beast. Orange chains formed around it, but it broke the chains with ease.

"What? But how?" Kallian fell back when it slashed at him with its claws. Kallian tried every binding chant and spell he could think of, but the beast quickly broke free every time. Kallian swore under his breath as he continued dodging its attacks. The sight of a faint blue glow caught his attention. The beast took this chance to slam Kallian back with its tail, knocking the wind out of him. His head hit the ground with a *'thud'* and his vision blurred for a split second. What brought him back was the sight of Merissa casting a spell. One he recognized anywhere. The glowing of her heart, the shine in her eyes, the chains swirling around her.

She was casting a banishing spell.

Kallian scrambled to get up trying not to fall over from how lightheaded he was.

"Merissa!" Kallian called out to her. All his mind would think of was the sight of finding her father's dead body floating above the pond. The same marking on his body. He already lost one person, he could not lose another one.

"A long time ago, when you'd first asked me what I saw when I looked to the future, I told you I saw a lady with white hair using blue magic. She was underwater," Merissa spoke loudly as she continued charging up the blast to get rid of the monster. "I know what I have to do now. I know why I can't see into the future anymore."

The blast was draining all of her magic. At this rate, Merissa would...

"Merissa, don't! I promised Anton -- I promised your father I'd take care of you!" Kallian activated his powers again, blasting at the creature with his magic. While he wasn't as powerful under the light of the moon, his blast was still able to burn a hole in the creature. But would it be enough?

Merissa's hair and eyes were now pure white. The veins around her eyes and hands were glowing a blue as bright as the light of the moon. The magical energy was too much for her body to handle. She'd end up just like her father. And all for what? To protect him? To save the land *he's* supposed to be protecting? No. He

couldn't let that happen.

Though his magic was weaker under the light of the moon, if he charged up enough magical energy, he could defeat the scaled creature in one blow. The creature, sensing a shift in the energy, whipped its head around and charged straight for Kallian. It let out an ear splitting screech and charged at Kallian.

Kallian blasted the beast, luring it as far away from Merissa as possible. He conjured up a magic sword and slashes at its scales. The creature swung its tail at Kallian, bursting the sword into little particles. The creature charged up another blast in its tail making the spikes to glow bright blue before launching them at Kallian.

It was like time was moving in slow motion. Kallian watched the spikes fly at him as it cut through the water and the creature bare its teeth. Then in a flash, Merissa appeared in front of Kallian, blocking the spikes and taking the hit. Her feet skid across the pond's floor before she could knock into Kallian.

“Merissa!”

“Kallian...” Merissa stood with her back to Kallian. She drew in a sharp breath, manipulating her magic to form a glowing bow and arrow. The veins around her eyes, hands and arms started to glow blue as a result of her magic overuse. “You've taught me so much over the years- you've practically been my father,”

“Merissa, please-”

“Thank you,” Merissa kept her eyes on the creature charging right for her with a blast in its mouth. “For everything. I will protect this place, even if it means I give my life.”

“MERISSA!”

Kallian reached out for the young apprentice, but it was too late. Merissa let her arrow fly at the same moment the creature released his beam. The arrow sliced through the beam embedding right into the skull of the beast. Magical energy crackled all around it before it exploded, blasting them back and destroying the bottom of the pond.

*

Kallian's eyes shot open as he gasped for breath, the rising sun shining down into his eyes. He frantically looked around him, seeing the mugs, but not Merissa.

“No... no no no, where...”

Kallian scrambled to get up, almost tripping over his robes. He frantically looked around until he saw Ruby standing a few feet away, staring out into the pond and roaring for Kallian. Kallian ran over, completely ignoring the pain in his ribs and the cuts on his arms.

The lily pads were blown to pieces and scattered all around, the blue lotus flowers

were shriveled and damaged, and there were glowing whales and other underwater creatures floating belly up, and the water was tainted with blood. Though, what stood at the middle of the pond was more important.

Merissa's body floated just above the pond, an influx of her magic pouring out of her. The veins around her eyes and hands were a prominent shade of blue as her eyes and hands glowed white due to her power. It flowed all around the pond -- over the plants, over the underwater creatures, even over the water itself. Kallian watched in awe as the red faded from the pond, becoming clear again. He watched the wounds on the animals heal and light coming back to their eyes; watching the magic pull them back into the pond where they belonged.

Kallian watched his apprentice -- no, the girl he raised -- restore the Pond of Elysia to its previous glory.

"You asked before what I saw when I looked into the future," Merissa spoke up, her voice distorted. It sounded like the voice of an otherworldly being mixed in with hers. "I didn't see anything. It was dark. There was literally nothing... I was supposed to die."

Kallian stayed silent for a moment, moving a bit closer to the edge of the pond.

"I thought you were..." Kallian choked up, his voice thick with emotion. "I didn't know what I'd do if you..."

"He saved me, you know. My dad. After the blast, everything was white. I was floating in the nothingness, and then I saw him. He said he was happy for me... that I'd become so strong and smart and he wishes he was here for me," Merissa then smiles at Kallian. "And he wanted me to tell you that it'll all be okay. That his death wasn't your fault and everything happens for a reason. Actually, he was trying to defeat the creature but went in unprepared." Merissa took in a deep breath before blasting magic into the pond and walking back onto land. The Pond of Elysia was back to how it was before, if not even better. Even though she'd stopped using her magic, her eyes were still glowing white and her veins were still glowing blue.

Kallian didn't even worry about the new traits, he was just glad Merissa was okay. He rushed over and pulled Merissa into a tight embrace, afraid that if he let go she'd be taken away.

"Ow ow ow- okay, Kallian, my arm," Merissa winced a bit and wiggled her right arm free to show him. Her whole forearm looked like it was replaced with a celestial prosthetic. It looked like little graphite mountains with glowing blue rivers around it. "Still trying to get used to it."

Kallian quickly let her go and carefully lifted her arm, admiring how well it formed to the rest of her arm.

"Did Anton do this as well?" Kallian asked her, gently setting down her arm.

"He did," Merissa nodded. "He used the last bit of his soul magic or whatever it

was to restore my arm.”

“So... So Anton is gone...? For real, this time...?” Kallian looked at the young girl in front of him.

Merissa let out a soft sigh and scratched her head. “There's nothing left of him. He... He saved me.”

Kallian wanted to be upset. He truly did, but... how could he when the girl he so desperately wanted to protect was alive and in front of him? Sure, with a few new quirks, but still alive.

“But you're okay, right? That thing it- it didn't damage your mind? Your soul?” Kallian frantically checked over Merissa scanning for any missing wounds he'd need to heal.

“Kallian, I am alright, I promise. Just...” Merissa tapped his shoulders to get him to calm down. “Can we maybe take a break, today?”

Kallian nodded frantically, moving her hair out of her face. “We can take the whole week if you want. Anything you want to do, we'll do it. You need all the rest you can get.”

Merissa then grinned widely, though her expression was tired.

“So, we can go to the market and look around at all the stuff we want but won't buy?”

“Until you find the most expensive thing there and beg me to buy it for you.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Kallian moved next to Merissa, supporting her as they walked away from the pond. After everything they went through, they wouldn't be practicing magic for a while.



Shifting Gaze

Written by: Anna Bussabarger-Graf

Edited by: Angel Brooke

Drops of water shimmer onto the carpet,
“Why can’t I see it?”

Plans appear from thin air
and vanish there too.

Fractals, storms.
Pieces shift in and out of the puzzle.
Image remains without form.

Scraps of the ancestral
billow behind.

Where does it go,
How do you find your way home—
Are we all winding our paths alone?

Take the talismans:
Crystals, tarot, auras.
Ground in what’s real to view possibilities.

No vision is certain—
Edges blur when gazes turn.

Apparitions arrive in full swarm;
Channel the charms,
Beguile the return of Saturn.

The path continues on ahead,
Complete with shrouded visibility.

Seraphim

Written by: Mina Styryan

WARNING!

! CONFIDENTIAL !

LOG I

Operation Golgotha

CURRENT YEAR: 2222

15.11.2222

S E R A P H I M

What we know:

- Created by ArchAscend
- Located at AA HQ, Crystal Tower District - AURA ensures the precise location within the

1/011011
01000001011100000111000001100001/01110010010010101110
0111010001010110000111100100100000010100101110011000000
01000110100010110000010000101100 **TEXT CORRUPTED**

UNREDEEMABLE

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• Known number of Angels created ... 0111010101101101011011
101101110110111101110111011101110

Notes:

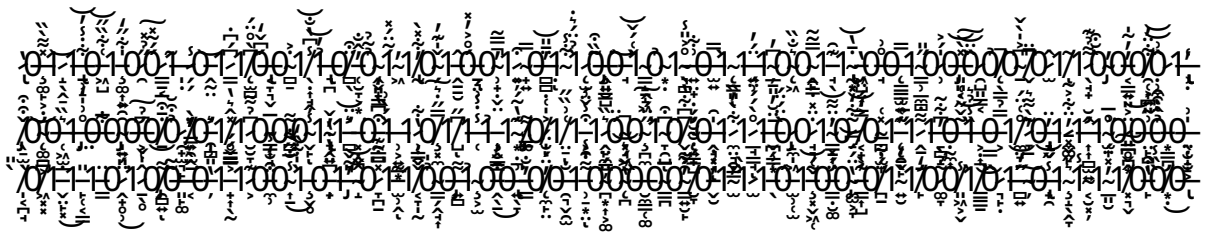
- Ask CABLE to search for the missing information in written archives - *rgm*

I checked, there's nothing that'd fit :- *cbl*

Then check better! - rgm

Ok, leader - *cbl*

• 011101000110101000011010011001000000111010001100101
01111000011101000000000000111001101101001011001110110110



End of the corrupted log.

She sat in a dim lit room, blue light of the screen hitting her face. She had to squint her eyes a little bit to read the texts for the screen was shattered in some places.

Scar of time passed.

She noticed an attached file under the log. Opened it.

Light green circle spun and just as she blinked, the file opened.

WARNING!

! CONFIDENTIAL !

LETTERS I

28.08.2022

LETER FROM FALLEN STAR

By official Law of Information of the City of Nod, keep the following information private. The breach of the Law is punishable by means fit by the level of offence committed.

How I got a contact to your HQ is none of your concern.

I have a preposition to be made and I believe you'll be interested. If not, there are many more of other Drifter organizations to turn to.

I just see your existence as the most fit to what I seek to do.

My name is Fallen Star. All you need to know is that my eyes and fingers are everywhere you look. I even see you as you're reading this letter right now.

My preposition is simple. ArchAscend is launching a revolutionary program that would change the face of our society forever. And our reality.

They are creating artificial angels. By my sources they collectively call them Seraphim.

It would pose many problems I will not name here for I intend to keep the message as short as possible.

All I need you to do is to make sure none of the Seraphim make it out of the HQ.

- FS

28.08.2222

LETTER FROM RQM

The Ciphers demand an explanation what the sender means by „a revolutionary program that would change the face of our society forever. And our reality.“

The organization also demands the stakes of such mission - location, plan and financial compensation offered.

- rqm

29.08.2222

LETTER FROM FALLEN STAR

By official Law of Information of the City of Nod, keep the following information private. The breach of the Law is punishable by means fit by the level of offence committed.

I assume the interest is expressed.

The reasons for such proclaims are in the attached file.

In the attached file are also the acquired floor plans of ArchAscend HQ in The Crystal Tower District.

The plan of the mission (operation name: Golgotha) will be discussed after official deal is made.

The reward: 3 000 000 FRS

- FS

She tried to open the attached files again and again but to no avail.

ERROR
THE FILE COULD NOT BE OPENED

She stared at the screen for a moment, calculating, but subsequently giving up.
Maybe she'd find her answers elsewhere.
„Se-ra-phim,“ she whispered to herself.
A familiar word.
She noticed a slight pressure in her temples as she tried to remember anything
attached to the word.
But it was all there was.
No memories. No thoughts. No voices.
Just pressure.

30.08.2222

LETTER FROM MASTER

OFFICIAL DECLARATION FROM THE MASTER OF THE CIPHERS

The Ciphers accept the offer of the proposer.
Division II, code name Magog - led by Captain A will be
executing the operation Golgotha.

- vrs

15.10.2222

LETTER FROM FALLEN STAR

***By official Law of Information of the City of Nod, keep the
following information private. The breach of the Law is
punishable by means fit by the level of offence committed.***

If all my informations are correct, AA is planning to launch
the project ASAP.

We have to act.

Now.

***I DECLARE THE START OF OPERATION GOLGOTHA ACCORDING TO PLAN
DISCUSSED.***

- FS

She reached the end of the file.

Seraphim.

ArchAscend.

Fallen Star.

All of that was familiar.

Somewhere deep, engraved in her mind. But still, not accessible to her brain.
Lost in time and history. Just as everything else.
All of that was gone after all.
City of Nod.
ArchAscend.
... all of that.
She closed the file and just stared at the blue-white screen.
Pressed nothing. Noticed nothing.
Yet a familiar voice sounded off the computer out of nowhere.
A voice note log appeared on the screen.

RQM_2222_15_10VOICE__01

„So the day has come, huh.“ *sigh* „I could not sleep last night, now I know why. Even the nano’s are buzzing. But I can’t afford to be nervous. Not now. I have to lead. Master’s counting on me. He would not give me this opportunity if I could not do it.
I have to get myself together as soon as possible. We’re going out tonight.“
a knock on the door
„Come in!“
In that moment the voice recording cut off.
„Even the nano’s are buzzing,“ she murmured to herself and wrote down the word – nano. Was she speaking about...?
Her memory was all blurry. Many things that happened and many that did not mashed themselves together in her head.
How wretched was the existence that did not know what’s true and what’s false.
How she even came to be.
So much history was forgotten, many of it hers.

She opened a file named **Execution_2222_15_10**.

WARNING !

! CONFIDENTIAL !

15.10.2222

OPERATION GOLGOTHA

15.11.2222

R E P O R T

DIVISION: Division II - Magog

NUMBER: 6

LOCATION: ArchAscend HQ, The Crystal Tower District, City of Nod

COORDINATES: 31°46'25.79" N 35°13'27.60" E

DATE EXECUTION: 15.10.2222

TIME RECORDS:

19:13 : entering HQ

19:20 : encountering the protection device known as RAPHAEL

19:44 : entering the Seraphim Sanctum

OTHER TIME DATA IS NOT AVAILABLE

RQM_2222_15_10VOICE__02

„Clear.“ *sound of metal doors closing*

„Heat maps clear. Proceed to the main chamber.“ *a male voice sounded off the intercom*

„I can't believe no one's here.“ *unknown male voice says*

„Please keep your mouths shut. Listen to the orders.“ *faints steps sound off in the recording* „Focus on what's ahead. Cable?“

„The elevator seems functional. I just need to get into the internal system to-

„ *a buzzing sound overwhelms the recording for a moment*

„What was that?“

„Just a moment...“ *Cable says*

„Unknown operation detected. Unknown operation detected.“

a robotic voice says „Securing the building now.“

a loud bang of the door cuts off the recording

RQM_2222_15_10VOICE__03

„Is everyone alright?“

„I found the stairs! The door works!“ *a male yell*

„Quick! We have to get out of the main chamber NOW!“ *an ominous beeping sounds off in the recording*

„Aura, check into the security system!“

„I'm trying! It won't let me in!“

„Fuck's sake.“ *she's out of breath.

sounds of running down the stairs

„Securing the building now.“ *a faint robotic voice*

„Keeping the infiltrators inside. Keeping the infiltrators inside.“

„Everyone stays close! No one gets out of my sight!“

recording cuts off

RQM_2222_15_10VOICE__04

sound of metal clashing against metal

heavy breath, close to the microphone

„This is...fucking...FUCK!!“

„Captain!“

„Disposing of the infiltrators. Disposing of the infiltrators.“ *robotic voice repeats*

„We’re almost there!“ *male voice yells through the rampage*

heavy breathing into the microphone

coughing

„Captain, everything’s alright?“

„Aye.“

„I see it!“ *female voice proclaims* *„There it is! Forward!“*

„Let’s go!“

sound of running

buzzing sound persists

The computer froze.

A light green circle spun on the screen.

A strange tingling sensation traced her whole skin.

Something she wasn’t really familiar with. Not after so many years.

„C’mon,“ she muttered under her breath, staring at the screen.

White noise overwhelmed her. The screen quickly went white, then static.

RQM_2222_15_10video_01

„Stop!!!“

A familiar voice came out of a reproducer, breaking through the noise.

The computer screen started flickering and after a moment stabilized.

Requiem’s blurred image of night vision camera exposed open metal doors and a huge room entwined with all sorts of cables.

„Captain!“ a female voice yells, unsettled. The camera shifts to its right, showing a short woman in black. She stretches her arm forward, horror in her eyes.

She points on a huge metal sarcophagus in the middle of the room, opening, exposing golden light and a blade of a huge sword.

„Everyone get back!“ Requiem, the wielder of the camera, screams.

The view shakes as she desperately runs back to where they came from, slamming into the metal door.

„It's closed shut!“ the small woman cries out.

„Cable!!“ A says to the intercom. „Do you copy?!“

Silence is her answer.

„**Dispatching Archangel,**“ a robotic voice sounds off in an echo.

„Cable!!“ A yells into the intercom. „This was *not* in the plans!“

„**Protecting Subject 1. Eliminating intruders.**“

Requiem presses her back to the door and wields her gun, firing three bullets towards the monstrous robot coming out of the sarcophagus. All the others join in, shooting at their death but to no avail.

The robot swings its huge sword, destroying its own sarcophagus in the process. The metal construction crumbles to the ground and even more cables coming out from the ceiling are revealed aiming to one small capsule attached to a wall. It shines bright blue.

„That's-...“ she muttered, looking at the screen.

„*The Seraph!*“ a male voice calls out through all the ruckus.

„We have to get rid of *that* first!“ Requiem growls, firing more bullets at the Archangel.

Suddenly, the video recording started to lag.

The camera falls to the ground, its lens aiming at the bright blue capsule in the distance.

And then she saw it.

Pale naked body covered in multiple wires coming in and out of its skin. Long white hair tracing its chest. Its head down as if it was sleeping.

She touched her own matted hair, entwining a strand in between her fingers.

Looking at it in the light of the screen.

Also white.

She then stared at the screen for a while longer before it turned black.

It was her.

RQM_2222_15_10VOICE__05

„It's down!“ *a male voice proclaims*

„Captain!“ *a female voice cries out.*

„I'm okay...“ *Requiem coughs.*

She does *not* sound okay.

„Here, captain. Stay down,“ *female voice continues speaking, way closer than before.*

A sound of zipper opening.

„I’m opening the capsule!“ *male voice*

„What is that?“ *she asks, surprised.*

Hurried steps in the distance.

„That...” *Requiem coughs.* „I- I can explain, Junior. Don’t-„

„Stay. Down,“ *Junior’s whole demeanor changes.*

A gun clicks.

„ZigZag. Venom. Sieze her,“ *Junior says, her voice cold.* „She has AA implants on her.”

„I can explain! Please! Stop!“ *Requiem cries out.*

The sound of the recording muffles.

„I’d never believe you a traitor, captain,“ *Junior says, her voice distorted.*

„When did you plan to turn on us?“

„I- I didn’t!!“ *Requiem cries.*

She closed the recording without listening to the rest. She held her breath as she found an attached subfolder simply named –ANGELUS.

She opened it without hesitation.

Log II

Name: Alexa Sheol (referred to as ,subject`)

Age when abducted: 12

Description of a person:

- tall, lean frame
- dark hair, light eyes
- of fair skin
- comes from lower caste of the Drifters – mother and father dead, older brother member of the Division I – code name Gog of the Ciphers
- no formal education

Description of events:

- abducted right after death of her parents – possibility the parents were killed during the abduction
- cause of abduction: **UNKNOWN**
- female named **Neriah Zabach** was abducted along with her
- abducted by ArchAscend’s subdivision called PurGen that chiefed program called Angelus
- after series of tests – subject deemed unfit for the project and to be discarded
- discard never went through – subject escaped alone

Project Angelus:

- project by ArchAscend's subdivision company *PurGen*
- by available information: project aimed to create *artificial angels* called *Seraphim* by using host bodies of living humans
- the project was never officially ended even when *PurGen* was dissolved by *ArchAscend* – deemed unsuccessful
- employed inhuman practices, torture, slavery, medical malpractice etc

note: ONE angel called „The Seraph“ was created in secret. It is as of now confirmed the person hosting the angel is known as **Neriah Zabach**.

Breath got stuck in her throat.

„Neriah Zabach,“ she read the name slowly to herself.

Was that her name?

„Neriah Zabach,“ she repeated.

Still, it tasted bitter. Sounded so alien.

She might have been *that* person a long time ago. Long, long time ago.

She did not notice her heart rate accelerating as she was looking at the last note on the screen. Did not notice a silent scream inside of her mind. Did not notice how her skin warmed up even though goosebumps covered it.

Her hand slipped on a touchpad, opening an *Operation Golgotha* folder again.

„Neriah Zabach,“ continued to sound off in her head. Like an echo.

Again and again. But somehow, it was becoming louder and louder. More and more unbearable.

„STOP!“ she yelled.

A screen on the computer cracked even more.

A voice recording opened.

RQM_2222_15_10VOICE__05

„Please! I beg of you!“ *Requiem cried.*

„I'm sorry. That's what happens to traitors.“ *Junior's voice, still muffled in the distance*

Gun clicks

„What is **that**?“ *Junior's voice continues*

„What do you mean?“ *male voice asks*

„This.“

„Oh, you mean...”

Gun fires

Deadly silence follows

„Take cover!“ *Junior's voice cries out*

„Sorry to see you like that, **captain.**“ *a male voice says* „It was to see how you scum operate. But you did enough damage.“
„S-stop.“ *Requiem struggles*
„It was a good ride. We'll be better prepared next time. Thank the Angels that The Seraph remained unharmed.“
„Get him!“ *Junior yells*
Gun shots
Requiem screams in pain
Her breathing is deep and slow
„Do not spare him! He's from ArchAscend!“
Male scream
Requiem's breathing becomes faster and faster
„Fuck.“ *Requiem mutters to herself* „Did not...want to-„
Faint footsteps in the background
Sound of picking up a body off the floor
Mic falls
„Let's get you out of here.“
a very familiar female voice says

Her voice.

Log III

Date: 15.10.2222

This is a written message recorded by Alexa Sheol - known as Requiem.

I made it out of the *ArchAscend HQ* alone with the help of enemy device - *the Seraph*, which I personally know as long lost *Neriah Zabach*.

By my observance, she does not remember her human life.

The Ciphers HQ is destroyed. Every member dead.

I am the sole survivor.

And I don't know how much longer I'll live.

Operation Golgotha is over.

The Fallen Star had succeeded.

But at what cost.

Log IV

Date: 02.11.2222

The Seraph still does not show any signs of remembering me or anything regarding *Neriah Zabach*.

But I believe she's still somewhere deep down there.

My dear friend.

I am feeling better.

A day After, the Seraph found someone who helped me heal.
I am alive for now.

- rqn

Log V

Date: 05.11.2222

I had let the Seraph free.

the recorder could not decipher the words said

. . . she has a different purpose.
Somewhere.

the recorder could not decipher the words said

Fuck.

Why am I crying?!

She left this morning.

I hope she'll help this world just as she helped me. Back then or now. She'll always remain my friend. I only hope she will use what she was given for good.

I am leaving the Ciphers HQ today. Never looking back.

I don't know what will be of me.

Perhaps someone useful.

I'll try.

I'll try my best.

This is the last written message recorded by a leader of the Ciphers Division II, code name Magog known as Requiem.

The screen turned black.

Seraph stared at her own reflection, her eyes stinging. What was that sensation?

She could barely keep her eyes open.

She noticed her heart beating. For the first time in a long time. Heart she almost forgot she had.

She slowly stood up from the computer. Stretched her slender body.

„Neriah Zabach,“ she whispered her own name. „I will get to know you.“

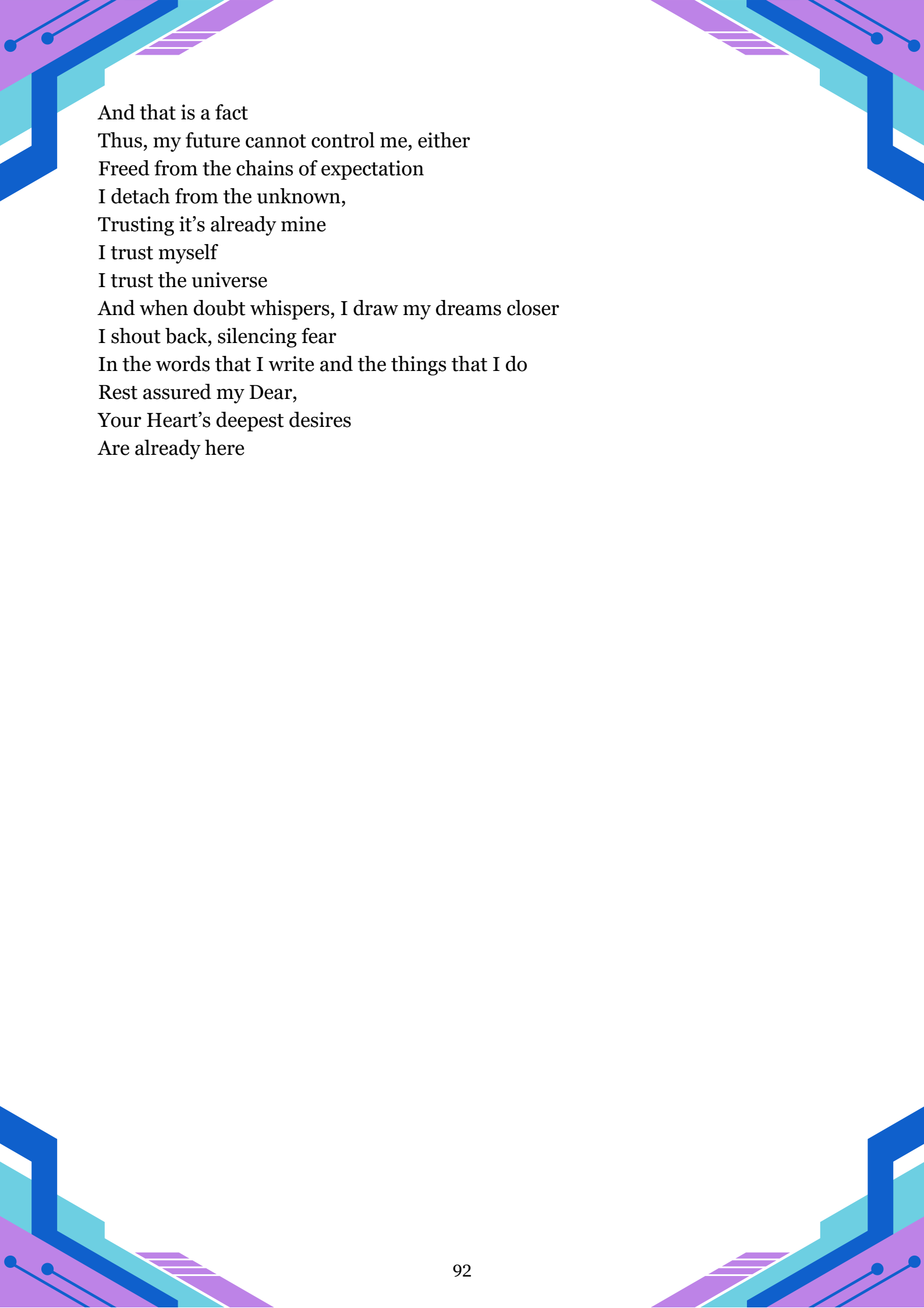
She did not look back on the computer as she left the room that was slowly turning to dust.

Unwritten dreams

Written by: Annika Paniza

Edited by: Sydney Sampsom

A glimpse into my future,
Seated on the steps of a botanical garden
Obnoxious statues of Buddhas and birdbaths
Dot the scene like misplaced artifacts
Steam lingers oversized coffee mugs,
Poured from a kettle long overdue for a clean
Mismatched chairs cuddle a worn mahogany table
And glazed, hooded eyes meet mine
“I love you”
A soft confession,
Met with giggles that translate to “I already know”
I glanced nervously into my cappuccino
Then lift my gaze again, steady this time,
Letting the words rest between us with purpose
Deliberate longing my gaze for sincerity
I’ve fallen in love with this
This fleeting imperfect moment.
Happiness, once imagined unattainable
A commodity traded for promised fulfillment
An endearing instant brims with life comes close
Shameless spillage of thoughts
A cascade of fears, doubts and questions
Filling the silence in between sips
Fogged up glasses and sleepy brown eyes
Attentive listening, punctuated by
Reassuring “mmms” and “yeahs”
A safe space blossomed from our creation
An oasis of our making
One creator who feels deeply,
Compelled to write or perish
Seeking control over the chaos of life
Perched next to creator two,
A glimpse into this life I’ve yet to live
I cannot control my future



And that is a fact
Thus, my future cannot control me, either
Freed from the chains of expectation
I detach from the unknown,
Trusting it's already mine
I trust myself
I trust the universe
And when doubt whispers, I draw my dreams closer
I shout back, silencing fear
In the words that I write and the things that I do
Rest assured my Dear,
Your Heart's deepest desires
Are already here

The Weight of Stillness

Written by: Ayomide Ajani

Either it began so slowly or so quickly that we simply didn't notice it happening. The afternoon was quiet, the kind of quiet that always settled over the hospital at that time of day. Still, a steadily increasing slew of patients filled the reception area. We'd all noticed the patients were getting older and tired. Em said it was because of the weather.

"Everyone's tired these days." Em was saying whilst squishing the used tea bag in her mug. "I mean, I struggle to get out of bed most mornings. So you can't blame the patients."

"No one's blaming the patients," Luis retorted. He was leaning against the kitchenette cupboards. His gaze fixed on a patch of light flickering on the floor.

"I'm just saying, it's difficult for them. The elderly are the most vulnerable—"

"We're all vulnerable," Luis said, his voice low.

"Well, it's a difficult time for everybody but we have a duty of care to our patients—especially with the weather like this," Em paused, waiting for Luis to say something.

"Don't we?" she insisted, more directed at me than Luis. I avoided her gaze.

"No, no, it's just the weather, right?" Luis said flatly.

Em frowned and rose quickly, brushing past him and dumping her tea bag in the sink. I glanced at Luis and our eyes met briefly. I quickly looked away.

After washing her mug, Em turned to face Luis. "Focus on the patients, Luis. Hope hasn't left us yet". She smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

Both their eyes shifted to the poster on the mold-spotted wall beside them, its bold letters seeming to stare back: The Future Is Beyond the Water. The words had somehow announced themselves—plastered on walls or spoken in floating, hollow voices. You couldn't escape it in the city.

Em turned and left, the echo of her footsteps lingered in the hallway, fading softly into silence. I should have gone too. My lunch break was already over, but I sat still, wrapping and unwrapping the edge of clingfilm on my uneaten sandwich.

Luis sighed and fished Em's tea bag out of the sink. "Aren't you ever tired of it?"

Luis said, staring into the sink, his expression unreadable. "Sitting around, doing nothing, just letting things happen."

My breath hitched and something inside me seemed to tighten. The clingfilm suddenly grew warm in my hands, tearing into clumps as my fingers fumbled with

it. My eyes lowered to the table, glued to the mess I was making.

“It’s like letting the water just sweep you away.”

I tried to respond, but the words didn’t materialise. Luis dumped the tea bag in the compost bin and left.

By the time I returned to the reception desk, Em was leading an old lady in a lilac coat out of the building. Alright, see you soon Em was saying cheerily as she opened the door. Cold air rushed into the room. Two guards stood outside waiting to escort the old lady back home. They always stood in pairs then, their faces hidden behind their dark helmets. I could hear Em’s muffled voice through the door. Luis was nowhere to be seen.

“Time is slipping away from us” an old man with a cane moaned. He stood in the centre of the room, back hunched and body angled towards the clock on the wall.

“No,” I said. “That clock is old. It’s behind”.

He groaned, his eyes still lingering on the clock. “No, that’s not right, not what I meant” he murmured and trailed off.

After a few moments, he returned to his seat. I said nothing, and the room took on its usual silence. I glanced at the clock. The hour hands were frozen in place, but the minute hands ticked on as normal. I’d asked Luis to fix it, but he seldom did much of anything then.

*

I was making my way home from work along the same familiar route. After crossing the last checkpoint, I walked alone along the final stretch of wall which curved around the entire city. Those walls had been there as long as anybody could remember, grey and increasingly grungy, and towering up towards the sky. With the evening haze, I often felt like I was surrounded only by grey. My heels clacked solemnly against the cobbled stones as my fingers and feet began to tingle with the cold.

It’s a well-known secret that you can access the beach on the south side of the city through a set of steps hidden just behind a gap at the edge of the wall. I’d often head down there on my journey home. My first time outside the wall, I felt like I’d stepped onto a different planet—subdued, as if drained of its colour, yet brimming with a quiet intensity. It was a place that felt to me like life could both not exist and continue existing as it always had. The air was sharp and briny, and the wind was so violent I had to grip the stair rail otherwise I felt I’d be blown into the sea.

Despite that awful wind, I enjoyed standing on those steps and hearing the sound of the crashing waves. From where I stood overlooking the water, I could see

almost the entire snow-sanded beach whose true width had long been engulfed by the sea. It wasn't strictly illegal to enter the beach, after all, the guards never patrolled the area. Still, I never dared venture further than those steps. That evening, as I descended the stairs, I spotted a lone guard in the distance, easily identifiable from their green-clad figure. I'd never seen a guard on the beach before. I should have turned around and climbed quietly back up the stairs. But for whatever reason, I couldn't summon my limbs to move. I stood frozen, fabric billowing out all around me and still, my eyes transfixed on the guard. They were standing right on the edge of the shore, almost fully submerged in the water. I don't know how long I stood there, watching the rim of their helmet glistening in the moonlight. They hardly moved as the waves crashed around them. Suddenly, the guard removed their helmet and turned in my direction. I felt a twisting in my gut. From the distance, I could hardly make out their face at all. Blood rushed through me, and my entire body prickled with heat. The guard turned back around and in a matter of seconds the water had swallowed them whole. Then, stillness. The waves gentled until only a murmur of movement remained. Somehow, I found myself slowly being propelled forward, shifting one foot then another down the stairs, until I was standing right on the sand, sinking into the mass of soft grains beneath my feet. But I couldn't bring myself to go any further down the beach. I spun around and ran back up the stairs, my heels echoing against the concrete steps.

*

The next morning I woke up with a dampness all over my body. My brininess hung in the air, dense enough to weigh me down. I could hardly breathe. The wet had permeated my clothes and left my skin feeling cool and slick to the touch. Each droplet felt like something viscous, seeping slowly from my pores, cloying and oppressive as it reached the surface of my skin. I closed my eyes and relaxed my muscles, sinking deeper into the mattress beneath me. My anxiety from the night before still clung to me. I pictured the scene of the guard in the water, taking off their helmet and staring back at me. Each time it replayed, the image became less and less clear, the guard's face bleeding into a murky sea of grey. I lay in bed for a few moments, staring up at the ceiling. Milk in colour and pocked with tiny pockets and grooves. I hadn't noticed the mold until then. Green and blotchy patches spreading like a shadow across its surface. I sat up on the bed, my head still heavy. The second my feet touched the floor, I recoiled. Cold and wet. A layer of water had pooled on the floor. I stood up, and the water rippled around my shins. It sloshed out in waves around me as I waded across the room into the

bathroom. I stood in front of the mirror, but I couldn't see myself; it was like staring right through my reflection. My skin was still damp, despite how many times I scrubbed with my towel.

Opening the front door, water streamed past my legs, quickly pooling in the cracks in the ground. I started walking then, but I didn't even know where I was going. As I passed by the walls, I could hear the faint whistling of the wind whispering through it from the other side, salt melting into the space around me. Then I saw it. The gap at the edge of the wall was sealed off. My chest tightened. I kept walking as an unsettling feeling grew within me. With each step, the uneven stones pressed against my soles, the cold biting into my skin. It was still early in the morning, so a quiet was to be expected. And yet it felt like a strange stillness had settled over the city. I approached the first checkpoint stationed just a few minutes from my home. The booth was empty. I couldn't make sense of it, but I kept walking.

I found myself outside the hospital where a crowd of people had gathered. Mostly staff and a few patients. A convoy of trucks was parked hastily opposite the entrance and abandoned. And still no guards around. In a sliver of space between the bodies, I thought I saw Luis. Em suddenly appeared, words frantically spilling out of her mouth. But my mind was full of water, pulling me into its quiet depths. The sky darkened, and the first drops of rain pattered down. My limbs suddenly felt lighter.

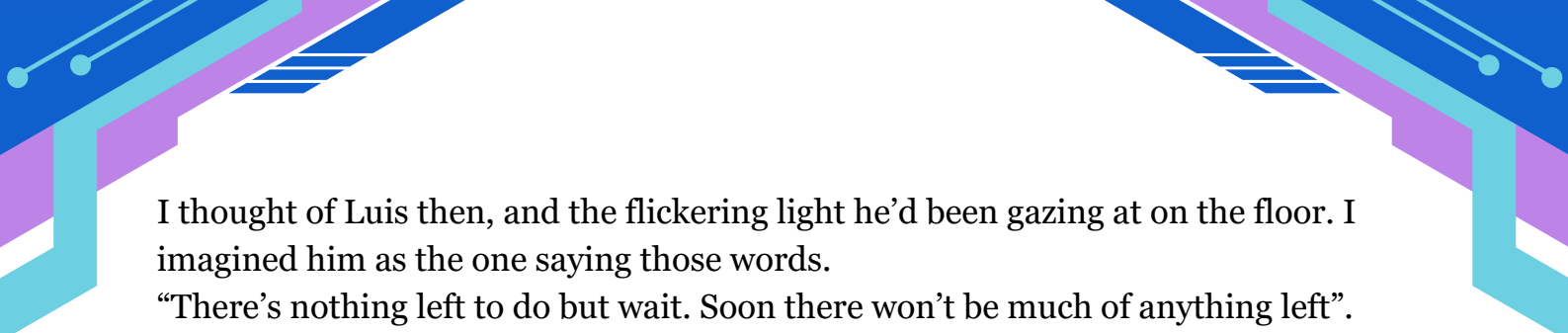
The next time I opened my eyes, I was lying in a hospital bed. Green, musty curtains encased me on both sides. On the wall in front of me, a solitary clock hung, its hands stuck in place. I had the strange sense that time had stopped, and the world had moved on without me. My skin was still damp, almost translucent. My body felt weightless as if I were suspended in the space above the bed. I couldn't tell how much time had passed while I was in that hospital bed.

Increasingly, I felt like I was fading into the background. At some point, my vision glossed over, and my world dissolved into a blur of shapeless forms. A few times, I could make out figures moving around me, stepping in and out of view. But I couldn't tell who was who.

"It hasn't stopped raining," a voice said forlornly. It sounded familiar, but I couldn't identify it. "There's water pooling all over the city".

Someone was standing in front of me but I couldn't quite tell who their words were meant for. I tried to access my voice, but it felt distant, hidden in a place I couldn't reach.

"I don't know how long I spent walking in circles around the city. Every checkpoint's been deserted. As far as anybody can tell, all the guards have disappeared somehow."



I thought of Luis then, and the flickering light he'd been gazing at on the floor. I imagined him as the one saying those words.

“There's nothing left to do but wait. Soon there won't be much of anything left”. The words seemed to settle in my mind. I wasn't sure if they were about me—or the city outside. Inside, I felt a transformation unfolding: everything solid was becoming liquid.



Ayomide Ajani

Sticks and Stones

Written by: Gurmeet Kapoor

Edited by: Emerald MacIsaac

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
But war will always haunt me.
A knife's edge, it pierces low,
While guns forever taunt me.

One by one, limb by limb, War
Hunts scavengers of glory.
Lives at stake, no peace in store,
For tomorrow comes to binds me.

Sticks and stones now hold their thrones
While man drapes in a fire's fold.
Victorious time collects its loans
From the fire's den, hubris sold.



Illustration by: Gurmeet Kapoor

Cross-section of a Tree

Written by: Loc-An Nguyen

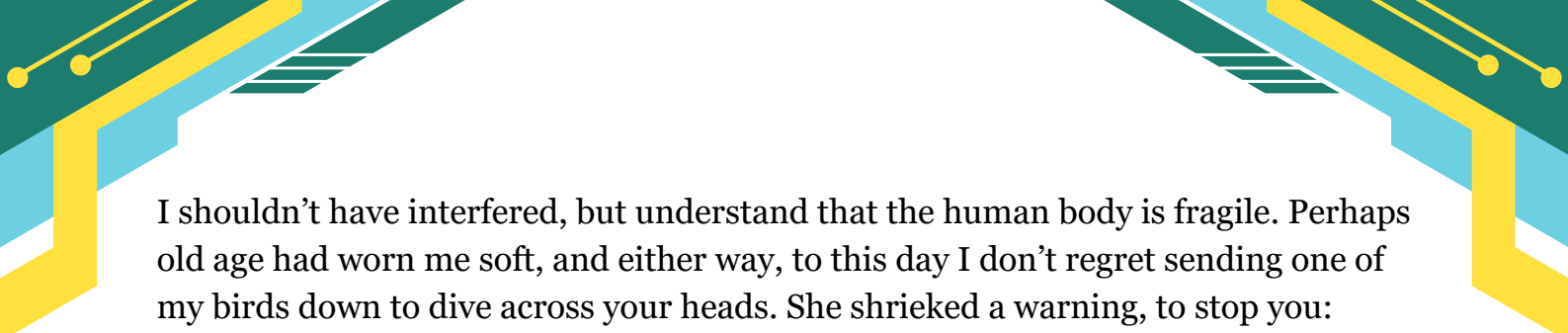
Edited by: Angel Brooke

As Dawn broke like water bleeding through cracks in the ice, and Light came to caress the outer tips of my branches, you entered my clearing again, in much the same manner as you always did. First, the Wind carried your voices to my branches. Shrill, sharp, overlapping as if you too, sang with the chorus of sparrows and bluejays. Then, the crunch of your boots travelled from the dense Winter soil through the depths of my roots. Muffled by the uneven coat of snow, through which grass tufts still peeked through — perhaps it would be more fitting to say that clumps of snow peaked through grass tufts. Finally, both armed with a makeshift weapon, a large stick retrieved from the Forest, you skipped into my field of vision. That was the day I saw you for the last time.

You had always lived in this part of the Woods. I learned your language, listening to you and everyone who came before you, the way I've learned every tongue besides my own. I was there when your father's father took a knife to my bark, and carved his name into me when he was still above ground. I stood there when a war broke out, and the bombs nearly destroyed this place.

But trees are hardy; our bark is a skin of dead cells, protecting us from outside harm, and our trunks are strong enough to carry us, like how the spine provides the human body structure. Were it not for our resilience, you would not walk around me as you did that morning, dragging your hands across the width of my trunk, talking about this and that. Amongst the chirping of the birds, and the chatter of the bugs, all I caught were fragments.

In the spot where my crown made a roof, and my shadow a floor for dancing sunspots, you positioned yourself to gaze towards the frozen River. For a brief moment, I imagined the ice give under your weight, both of you succumbing to the seabed, all parts of you soft and inflated with water by the time you were dragged up like limp fish on a hook. See, the River had always been safe, but the water was no longer the same. The birds had told me of all the things they saw from their travels to far-off corners of the world: *See, how our migratory patterns have changed too?*



I shouldn't have interfered, but understand that the human body is fragile. Perhaps old age had worn me soft, and either way, to this day I don't regret sending one of my birds down to dive across your heads. She shrieked a warning, to stop you: *Don't step onto that ice!* One of you stumbled, and with that, the ice crackled, popping like embers in a fire that prattled. You helped each other backwards just in time to watch it snap, large fragments breaking off, your backs pressed against my trunk. You took a breath. There. Catastrophe avoided. Pine-colored water bled through, and amongst the floating debris, a dark mirror emerged of us three.

The birds had told me that by the time the two of you have grown, you will find my language obsolete, the water too dark to see in at all, and the air too warm for any ice to form. For so long, I assumed that I would remain here. Rooted in my clearing until something close to the end of time; but I have since realized that I was wrong. Perhaps I will be cut down to a stump, my body and shrapnel lodged in me from the war unfurled towards the muddy sky like a fingerprint. Perhaps a disease will tear through the Forest, or fire will swallow us entirely. Perhaps war will break out yet again, and another bomb will drop and rip open an enormous gash where I stand. Because nothing is permanent: not the migratory trajectory of birds, not the ice, not you, not even me, despite my resilience.

If I was a Forest God, I could've elongated this moment in my clearing, where we watched each other on the surface of the water: both of you so still, you'd think we were one and the same. But I am only a tree, and I have been alive for hundreds of years. Time passes like a rain shower, and you are not like the birds, for when you left, it was for good, and by the time I have learned how to communicate this in a language your kind can understand, and your kind has learned how to receive it, perhaps us three will have returned to the Earth already, where all that remains will be bone and plastic and shrapnel.

Fray

Written by: Micha Bianan

Bated breath
Weary head
A sinister urge to cut the thread
That binds me to this earthly plane

refrain

Time after time
It tangles
It knots
The frustration fuels ungodly thoughts

I grip
I cling
I clutch
To the thread that I loathe

What a volatile thing
Sometimes silken
Often coarse
If I cut it short

Would I show no remorse?

It has dragged me thus far

But from that fate I shall

Yet, with both hands

And I love so much

It will guide me to more



though strenuous by nature,

Persevere.

I implore.



A Horizon In The Dark

Written by: Liam Brazier
Edited by: Chelsey Selvarajah

“The wind and the ocean currents. The circular flow of water and air that connects the entire world. We are connected. I pray that we are connected.”
(Han Kang)

*

It was a miracle. For the first time since Lovell could remember, it wasn't raining on Platform 5 of Easting Station. He was so used to stepping off the train onto the slippery-when-wet concrete, iced over by the wind coming in from the sea, that he now walked on his toes to the ticket gate. How many times had he come here after work, watching his step in the driving rain? His duffel bag held over his head as droplets shattered around him, his only reward being a fresh set of chilblains and seeing Irene and Kate in the end? This evening, though, the sky was clear, the sun juicy as it came down over the roof. He never realised how much he associated wet fingers with the first bristles of expectation, until there wasn't a cloud for miles and his hands were dry as bone.

Irene and Kate would be waiting for him, leaning on the handrail by the steps with smoke trailing from their lit cigarettes. He could picture them now in their puffy coats with hoods over their heads, faces close, their misty breath intermingling like dancers in the cold air as they talked. He'd arrive, and they'd put their lights out on the wall behind them. Shoulder to shoulder to shoulder, they'd make for the carpark and cram themselves into Irene's busted up Ford Fiesta. An orange warning light would flash on the dashboard when Irene turned the key, the smell of dry shampoo clinging to everything she touched.

Lovell fed his ticket through the gate, tingling at the thought of it.

But today, Kate stood alone. She was looking at the ground between her feet, a strand of red hair escaping her beanie and resting on her navy-blue coat, which was buttoned over a light blue blouse and black flares. She only looked up to him when he was right in front of her, like she'd waited until the last acceptable moment to acknowledge him. The sounds of the road murmured behind her. 'You look lonely,' he said.

He grinned at her, expecting her to come back at him with something, but she ignored it. Getting up on her tiptoes, she hugged him as if she was distracted by someone waiting behind him, as if she was merely peering past his shoulder to see

them. A smell of perfume lingered on her beanie.

‘We’ve got to be quick,’ she said as they drew apart. ‘I promised Irene we wouldn’t be long. Besides, I’m freezing out here.’

‘Why’s she not with you?’

‘She’s coming straight from work. The home is closer to the restaurant than the station, so I told her to meet us there instead.’

Kate took off at a pace, and Lovell tried to keep up. That nostalgia that he felt as he stepped off the train quickly evaporated.

‘She still works Saturdays?’ he asked.

‘Old people still need their mouths wiped on the weekends.’

‘It’s still the same place, right?’

‘Yep. They’ve changed it up a bit though— a few weeks ago they bought an air hockey table.’

He sucked through his teeth, tasting salt in the air. In his mind, octogenarians ditched their Zimmer Frames and wheelchairs to lunge for a puck on a whirring table.

‘That’s not fair on her,’ he said, ‘she’s been there for years. She shouldn’t be working apprentice hours.’

‘I think she likes it there. The only time she complains is when they beat her at Dominoes. She thinks they’re cheating.’

He laughed. ‘Or she just has terrible luck.’

Kate made a harsh sound, a single ‘Ha!’ that took them both by surprise. *Of all the people*, it suggested, *to talk about her luck*.

‘That wouldn’t surprise me either,’ Kate said.

Easting had seen great hardship since he’d left. Pastel paints, eroded by the wind, peeled off the walls, and plywood boarded up all the windows on the high street. A4 signs were stapled to the front of shop doors, reading “WE’RE SORRY” and “NEXT LOCATION: FIFTEEN MILES” in thick black font. They walked past his favourite spot, a dessert café run by an old couple who’d been there for the best part of seventeen years. Every Thursday, they’d go in the evening after work, and every Thursday they ordered the same thing. Lovell had a white coffee with two sugars, Kate had green tea, and Irene— worst of all— would order a Coke Float with vanilla ice cream, extra sprinkles dusted on top if it was a particularly rough day. She’d wait for half the ice cream to melt, turning the Coke into a brown sludge, which she’d eat by the dripping spoonful, her tired eyes closed in delight as she took her first bite. Disgusting.

That cafe had been replaced by a branch for a sportswear chain. Loud music echoed from the empty showroom, and discounts were promoted on yellow stickers glued to the sliding door. He could still see, in the corner of the window, the same spot they always sat in, a shoe rack where their table had once stood.

‘You’re looking well,’ he said, when he felt he’d seen enough. ‘How have you been?’
‘Do you really want to know?’ she asked
‘Of course I do.’ He heard the offence tainting his voice and, softening, tried again.
‘I obviously do. It’s not an exaggeration to say that this is the only place in the world I’d want to be right now.’

She pursed her lips. ‘You looked disappointed to see only me, though.’

‘At the station? Is that what you mean?’

‘Don’t scoff at me like that,’ she said. ‘It’s rude. Turn left here.’

They turned into an alleyway decorated with decades worth of old gum pressed into the brickwork, creating a thick, hard crust. Splashes of pink and blue colourants streamed past them as Kate quickened her step, her coattail whipped up by the wind her feet created.

‘I was looking forward to seeing Irene with you,’ he explained. ‘But I was disappointed by the fact that I’d have to wait a little longer. That’s all it was. I’m sorry it hurt you.’

‘Which is why you haven’t messaged, or called, or done anything for six years? Because you didn’t want to be anywhere else in the world other than with us, right?’

‘I figured, after everything, it’d be good for a clean break. Kate, listen to me.’

He grabbed her forearm with a force that made him cringe. She looked down at his hand, the remnants of her rage still visible in her straining face. He felt the spit and grime bore its way through his clothes, grounding him as the smell of stale sugar hung in the air. Lovell had stuck a few pieces on the wall himself. He wanted to leave his mark amongst the bustling crowd calling out “*I was!*” in a chewed up tongue. Did that piece of him linger here still? Or had it faded, his DNA drying up like the rainwater on his hands?

‘I’m here now,’ he said.

He let go of her, worrying that the moment he did, she’d scurry off like a wounded animal. She managed to look him in the eye, but said nothing.

‘Why did you invite me back?’ he asked. ‘Is Irene okay?’

‘You’ll see,’ she said.

‘Goddamn it, Kate. Why can’t you just tell me?’

‘It won’t make a difference if I tell you or not. You tell me that you’re here now, as if the past has no relevance to today. And forgive me, but as someone who’s been part of your past, and has had to deal with that fact this whole time, I find that quite difficult to believe.’

Dejection softened her expression, and she looked back down to the floor, tucking the stray hair back into her beanie. When he booked the train to arrive just half an hour before they’d have to be at the restaurant, he knew that it’d hurt him. A small

headache needled its way into the top of his skull.

‘I’m sorry,’ Lovell said. ‘It’s just a lot.’

Kate wrapped her arms around her belly. In a small voice, she replied.

‘She’s looking forward to seeing you again. It’d kill me if you let her down.’

She turned, her heel scraping against the muck on the pavement, and started walking again, this time at a less frantic pace. Without another word, Lovell followed her out the alleyway.

From the outside, the restaurant was the same sand-bleached white that coloured every other building along the seafront, black paint ringed around its windows like eyes desperate for rest. But a soothing blue mood-lighting leaked from the glass, and the inside, from what Lovell could see, looked like an entirely different place. Plants hung from pots bolted to the black wallpaper, and he caught glimpses of dark stone-topped tables surrounded by cast iron chairs. It was as if the building was trying to hide something of its true nature which could only be revealed to those privileged enough to step inside. Waves rolled into shore behind him in a hush of white noise.

‘Oh, look,’ Kate said. ‘She’s beaten us to it.’

She pointed to the furthest window. Lovell could only see Irene from the neck up, her head resting in the palm of her hand while her fingers ran up her face to massage her temple. Even from that distance, he made out the features that were firmly imprinted in his mind. The button nose. Short eyelashes that she left bare of mascara, somehow revealing more of her rounded cheekbones. Black bangs that only slightly hid her eyebrows. Hidden by her hand would be the sharp, handsome jaw, and behind the wall would reside the body that was not unfamiliar with labour. She reached down, pulled out an already half-empty glass, and put it to her lips.

‘She’s started without us,’ Kate said. ‘What an arsehole.’

‘Isn’t that just the rudest thing?’ he replied.

She smiled then. ‘You ready to go?’

He looked down, patting his body and legs down as if he was worried the wind would blow him over. He nodded to her, and they walked inside.

Warm air rushed over them as they opened the door. Despite the decor, the space still maintained the awkward charm of the pub whose body the restaurant currently inhabited. The bar was cramped in the waiting area behind a wall that stuck out and hid it from the rest of the room, a mistake the owners’ tried to hide with oil paintings of the Easting coast. As they turned into the main dining hall, Lovell saw Irene was already standing up, smoothing the bangs out of her face, grinning. Lovell could see now she was wearing a linen dress— surely too thin for the cold?— with thick black stockings and high boots. The rest of the restaurant

was so quiet that he could hear the staff talking over the clanking of pots and pans in the kitchen.

‘Dear, dear, Irene,’ Kate tutted, giving her a hug. ‘What would your oldies say about you if they saw you drinking on your own?’

Irene shrugged. ‘One of them called me a floozy the other day. Can’t get much worse, can it?’

She looked past her friend to where Lovell was standing. She sized him up from head to toe with careful consideration, as if comparing every inch to how she remembered him.

‘Wow.’ Her voice came from some detached location; it couldn’t have been her body. ‘Crazy.’

Her voice was distant, lilting, out of grasp like the setting sun. An unshakeable sense of loneliness brewed up inside of him.

‘What do you think of his beard?’ Kate asked, already sitting at the high table.

Lovell rubbed it self-consciously. ‘Other women seem to like it.’

‘Oh do they now?’ Irene giggled as she took her seat next to Kate. Irene always laughed like she had a loaded gun aimed at his forehead. ‘Are any of those women in the room with us now?’

He pushed himself up onto his stool. As he tried to get comfy, the stool wobbled, and the wood dug into the back of his legs.

‘Don’t you want to sit somewhere more comfortable?’ he asked.

Irene shrugged. ‘I like watching people pass by the window. It reminds me that I’m part of something.’

‘Most people come to places like this to forget that,’ he said.

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘But I can’t help it. I just have to be where I know I’m surrounded.’

A waiter came up behind them. Kate and Irene ordered pasta with mussels and cream sauce, along with two glasses of dry white wine.

‘You should have it too, Love,’ Irene said, leaning over to point at the item on the menu with a chipped fingernail. Lovell recognised the chapped knuckles and cuticles in front of him from years ago, a result of having to wash her hands all the time at the care home. He would visit her afterwards in those days and see those hands as if they were his own, care for them like his own, pressing his palm into hers and feeling his fingers slip into the cracks as if they were saving his place. He’d think about it whenever autumn turned to winter, when the weather grew sharp and his skin broke into hard fragments.

As he craned his neck to order, he noticed Kate in the corner of his eye. She’d hardly said a word since she sat down, and now she watched over them as if waiting for something. He remembered the alley, her fury as she promised him that, when he saw her, he’d understand. See what, though? Irene, from her

jokes, to her loaded-gun laugh, to the chapping of her hands, had stayed almost exactly the same. Was it this permanence that Kate had wanted him to recognise for himself, the stasis that Irene had found herself in? Perhaps he was supposed to heed the change within *him*, heed how far away her voice sounded, how the snipes that cut him to the core before only grazed his chest now. Was that the only thing worse than the catastrophic change he'd imagined for her?

The waiter took the menus and left them alone. Irene's hand retreated to her chest as she angled her body towards him.

'So,' Irene said. 'You say you're hot with the ladies. I'm sure you'll tell me you're a millionaire next.'

Lovell assumed they wouldn't be able to stop talking after the years they'd spent apart. The moment the bowls of pasta hit the table, however, base instinct took over, and all there was room for was silence. They slurped long ribbons of pasta drenched in a thick white wine sauce, the mussels half opened with orange flesh seductively peeking through their shells. Every mouthful was a waste of time, the void where words should have been sucking the seconds away from them. Despite this, he continued to eat, the satisfaction of a good meal too indulgent to delay any further.

Lovell tried to pry a shell open with his fork. As he tried to pull the flesh out, the metal prongs tore it to shreds, and the meat was stringy in his mouth. He tried again with a fresh mussel, but only succeeded in ripping half of it from the shell, the withered remains left to drown in the sauce. When he tried to recover it, he noticed he was being watched. Irene was staring at him, her eyes wide.

'What are you doing?' she laughed.

'It's already dead,' Kate piped, her head leaning over the bowl to prevent spills. 'You don't have to kill it again.'

Lovell tapped the mussel with his fork, the shells now forming a mouth that mocked him.

'It's not easy, you know,' he said.

'You have to get your hands dirty,' Irene said. 'Like this.'

Irene reached into his bowl, broke one open with her hands, used the empty half to scoop the mussel out of the other, and popped it into her mouth in one smooth motion. Sauce got all over her fingers, which she pecked off with a self-satisfied smile.

'See?' she said, her hand over her mouth. 'Easy peasy.'

'That was gross,' Lovell said.

Irene rolled her eyes. 'It's *supposed* to look gross; it means you're enjoying yourself. Give it a shot. It'll taste better.'

Lovell stared into his bowl. A mussel jutted out the pool of sauce like a tiny jagged

rock. He took one, immediately flinching at the wetness now stuck to his hands, and ate like she taught him to.

Irene was right. Because he hadn't ripped the flesh, there was now a slight resistance whenever he bit down, giving it a satisfying chew that simply wasn't there before. The sauce was sweeter; he reasoned that it had to be because there was some seasoning he was getting off the surface of the shell as he pulled his lips over it. But something couldn't be explained. When he swallowed, his whole body felt nurtured in a way that should have been impossible from such a small bite. His pleasure must have shown on his face, as well as his confusion.

'Now you're eating with us,' Irene said, as if reading his mind. 'Before, you were in your own confused little world. But you're here now.'

Of course. Being with Irene and Kate felt nothing but natural to him. Sharing this space felt nothing but natural to him. Like taking from the same bowl. Like communion.

The sunlight was replaced by filament bulbs hanging by wires over their heads. They stacked their bowls on the far side of the table, their napkins balled together and shoved into the top. Lovell held an ocean inside of him, good food and alcohol washing over him in waves. They were so fixated on their meal that to speak now would be to drag them back into a world of unsatisfying reality. Irene took a sip from her third drink of the night, her chin slumped in her palm as before. She was staring out in front of them, as if she feared, when she looked away, something would dissolve into the night. Just seeing her like this made him feel exhausted.

'Oi,' Kate said. She nudged Irene with her elbow. 'Don't fade on us now.'

Irene laughed without smiling, her profile cutting off half of Kate's face.

'I'm alright,' Irene said. 'It's been a day, that's all.'

'It's that place,' Lovell said, the heat carrying in his voice. 'It treats you terribly.'

The two women turned to him, almost as one face. One brown eye pleaded him for peace, one blue eye, smaller and further away, revealed faint disgust.

'Ah, come on now,' Irene said. 'I love the home. Sometimes, it feels like helping people is all I'm good for.'

'You can do that anywhere else,' he said. 'Nursing, where the pay is better. Charity, where there are less hours.'

'And what would I say to my oldies? Who would they cheat at Dominoes then?'

'The next person to put on the uniform. They'll get over it.'

Irene sank lower in her chair. She smiled softly.

'I wish I could do that,' she said. 'I wish I could leave my life behind and be happy in any old place. Like you.'

She turned back to the horizon in the dark, leaving Lovell in his shame. Something

thawed inside him, a piece that broke like a sheet of ice and crashed terribly into the wild sea. In the ravine, he saw the distance between what he felt about Irene and what she knew about herself, and in that gap a riptide was created. It was the very current that had swept them aside from one another as they continued down their lives.

Irene stretched her hands over the top of her head. 'Time to break the seal,' she said, forcing brightness in her voice. 'Won't be long.'

She hopped off the stool and took her bag from the back of her chair.

'Don't get lost,' Kate called out behind her.

Irene looked around to see if anyone was watching them in the empty room. Then, she stuck her middle finger up and scrunched her face at Kate, before spinning on her heel and disappearing down the stairs.

Lovell watched her leave, then turned back to the window. The solitary light from lampposts on the promenade, as if floating, reminded him of lanterns released into the sky.

'You see it now, don't you?' Kate said.

With Irene gone, Lovell could see more of Kate. White gold hung like teardrops from her ears, and she carried herself as if they would fall with the slightest disturbance, as if that disturbance would result in her losing a vital part of herself.

'You can't say you know her that well anymore,' she said. 'Wouldn't you agree?'

'You say that as if you blame me.'

'Sometimes I do. Sometimes I blame myself, sometimes I blame Irene, and sometimes I blame all three of us. But I think my anger just needs somewhere to go.'

Out the window, those small lanterns drifted further away. He took a swig of beer, let it sit in his mouth until it tasted revolting, then swallowed.

'She wanted to stay,' he said. 'I wasn't ready for the commitment it would have taken to go long distance, and neither was Irene. It was the only choice I had. I tried.'

He rubbed at his temple, where his hair had just started to recede. Kate was silent, examining the ice melting at the bottom of her glass.

'You said she was weaker, somehow,' he said, gauging Kate's reaction as he spoke. 'What did you mean by that?'

'I didn't say weaker. I said she wasn't as strong.'

'Of course,' he said dryly. Conversations with Kate often felt like crossword puzzles. She made him feel stupid for not finding the precise answer she wanted, leaving him with a jumble of words repeating themselves in his head.

'She'll talk to you like she used to,' she said, 'make all the same kinds of jokes, and shower you with the same love. That's her strength fighting through. But in other moments, that strength will almost disappear. You know she's in there, but it's like

she's curled away somewhere. That's what I meant. There's just not enough strength to go around anymore.'

Their waiter returned, took their bowls from the side of the table, and rushed off. Kate folded her legs and kneaded her fists into her lap.

'I thought maybe bringing you back would spark something within her,' Kate said. 'Maybe there'd be some kind of reaction. But I'm starting to think I've only made it worse.'

'What are you going to do now?'

Irene shook her head. 'I don't know.'

Lovell remembered how everything felt before he'd left, when his future was heavier than his past. Days walking down the promenade, blocking off foot traffic with gossip and laughter. Small moments, alone in her bed, his fingers slipping into the cracks of her hands as if they were saving his place. Dry shampoo in a Ford Fiesta, orange warning lights on the dashboard. Was that the life he'd run away from? It was hard to believe he could do such a thing.

He heard the sound of Irene's boots clicking on the floor behind him. When she reached the table, she squeezed him on his shoulder, and the need to leave the restaurant and head out into the cold suddenly overwhelmed him.

'Anyone wanna join me for a smoke?' He pulled a carton out of his coat pocket and held it in front of him.

Kate waved him off. 'I quit three years ago,' she said.

'I'll come,' Irene said, already pulling her coat on.

'You also quit three years ago,' Kate said. 'Remember?'

'I won't touch the stuff,' said Irene. 'I promise.'

Kate stuck her tongue out at Irene, who returned it with a toothy smile. Lovell got up from his chair, took his coat from the backrest, and followed Irene to the exit. When he was far enough away, he looked back to where Kate was sitting. She was staring intently into the night, the teardrop on her ear still just waiting to fall. He wondered what it was that she saw out there in the night, before leaving her to her solitude.

The wind had picked up outside. Lovell and Irene, wordlessly, walked out into the darkness together, their tread unsteady on the pebbles. Grey waves rolled along the shore, illumined only by the lampposts on the promenade. There was a pier further down the shore, squares of light surrounding the orange and yellow dots spiralling on a carousel, ragtime music playing faintly alongside them. Lovell sat down and lit up a cigarette he held in his teeth, but Irene walked a little further down the beach and stopped, leaving her back turned to him. He wished she would come closer, so she could at least feel the warmth of the flame he held in his fingers. She seemed to be watching the carousel, which came to a halt while the music

continued to play. 'Kate was looking forward to seeing you,' she said without looking behind her.

He took a drag of smoke, blew it out the side of his mouth. 'I think I only disappointed her.'

Irene shook her head and sat down, bringing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her shins.

'You know what she's like. One of the oldies told me there are reptiles with blue skin to warn predators they're poisonous even when they're not. She's just like that. She still cares for you.'

'I know what she's like,' he repeated to himself. He flicked the ash off his cigarette, losing track of it once it hit the ground.

'I get it,' Irene said. 'You have so many ideas of what it's going to be like seeing someone again. By the time the moment actually comes, it's hard for anything to live up to what you've already pictured in your mind. It could actually be a good time if you didn't get your hopes up.'

Lovell smiled. 'And did I live up to your expectations?'

He hoped his casual flirting would make her turn around, but she didn't move. Her breathing was still, her ears exposed to the cold wind.

'Every time a patient was sick,' she said. 'Whenever they got hurt, or whenever they died, I thought of you sitting next to me on this beach. You were there with me, but I could only see you when I closed my eyes. And now, I can reach out and touch you. But what do I feel?'

He stubbed the cigarette out, burying it under the rocks, and edged closer towards her. From the side, he could see her face, and knew better than to assume she'd cry over him. A wave struck a wooden groyne that extended into the sea with some ferocity, throwing a murky spray of foam, barely visible, in the air.

'You really are such a disappointment,' she said. 'I only have myself to blame.'

'What if I came back?' he asked.

'Don't say things you don't mean. Haven't you been cruel enough?'

'Why not? I'm unemployed now. I have nowhere else to be. And despite everything, this all feels so familiar, even though so much has changed. You feel so familiar, even though you've changed. Isn't that a sign of something?'

'That's a lie people tell themselves when they've left the only place they ever felt they belonged.'

His eyes slowly adjusted to the dark. He could see faint shades of black-blue in the water, remnants of the sea's rare sunny day. Irene shivered under her dress—surely too thin for the cold?— and warmed her hands with her breath, a line of something emerging from her knuckles. She was no longer someone who ordered Coke floats and ate ice-cream in dripping spoonfuls.

'You were meant to leave,' she said. 'And I was meant to stay. So we separated and

moved on with our lives. Is there anything more disappointing than that?’
‘Your hands are bleeding,’ he said. ‘Let me help you.’
‘Why? They’ll just get dry again when you leave.’
‘I don’t mind. It doesn’t matter.’

He held her hand in his, running his fingers over the cracks in her knuckles that he once thought held his place. From his inside pocket, he pulled out a small tube. Shaking it gently, he squeezed the contents, a cream that smelled faintly of coconut, onto her skin. He rubbed the cream in, feeling his way through the complex structure of her hands, remembering everything, from the network of capillaries beating life to the many bones that lay dormant, hidden beneath her calloused palms. A tingle passed, tactile, into his mind, as if he’d been searching for something in the dark from the moment he’d left her, only to find her in the dead of night, at the same beach he’d turned away from all those years ago. Irene leaned herself into his side, dropping her head on his shoulder. He rested his cheek on her crown.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

She shook her head. ‘There’s nothing for me to forgive.’

The rise and fall of her breath resonated in his ears, a shiver still within her, perhaps her body shaking off the rust that formed over her heart. There was nothing left in front of him but the murmurs of the ocean, the unspeaking horizon, and her hands in his, his grip slipping with the cream that had begun to heal her already. Taken away by the tide, he closed his eyes.

the infinite kiss of blackberries

Written by: Alex Bäuml
Edited by: Chelsey Selvarajah

i feel my body
caught in the heartbeat between breaths
suspended
in the middle of the future

yesterday's dreams stretch their aching limbs
shuddering with growing pains
to become the anchored bones of today

the spiderweb of time and space
holds me tight
at the centre of creation

I AM ROCKED AND CRADLED IN THE PATIENT EVER-FORGIVING EMBRACE
OF EARTH HERSELF.

in this world
where sunlight spills like honey over the sink
and secrets are told in windchimes on the eve of absolution

i learn to find the holy
in the ordinary

yes ; *the holy* --

in the sacred sigh of a freshly cut lemon
in laughter rising and spilling over like steam

in fingertips brushing on fingertips
and legs wrapped around each other like vines



in dinners that go on and on
where candles flicker and dance, whispering stories

only the walls can hear

I THANK THIS HUMAN BODY THAT CARRIES ME. FOR THE HUMAN BODIES
THAT CARRY THE SOULS OF ALL MY LOVED ONES.

AND UNLOVED ONES.

between the fleeting and the fragile
in the hush before the next
i am reminded to linger
to savour
to romanticise only the present

never the past

nor the future

only in the now
can i taste appreciation melting on my tongue
staining my lips
like the blackberries of youth

Author Bios



Roos van der Velden
Editor-in-chief

Roos van der Velden is a young writer and student from the Netherlands (currently doing an editor internship at Singel Uitgeverijen). Previously, she has been published in *Fantastische Vertellingen* and *Vonk fantasy*. Recently, she has gotten published in *Talk Vomit*, her first publication away from her home ground. In this anthology, she hasn't written herself, yet just like with the previous issues she is still the editor-in-chief.



Angel Brooke
Co-editor, author, editor

Angel Brooke is a writer, editor, gamer, ripstiker, kickboxer, and multi-media collage artist who has too many hobbies, too little time. Contributing to this anthology through writing, editing, and layout has been very cool, very cool indeed. Bringing B.E.C.C.A. to life is the first of many adventures for B and C. Angel is stepping into the future with confidence, combining her artistic and spiritual gifts to shine Light and Love in the darkness.



Mairi Smibert
Author

Mairi Smibert is a purveyor of silliness and a writer for fun. She has a history degree which she can tell you about at length. She is particularly fascinated with folklore, belief systems and the conceptualisation of the supernatural. Often armed with a coffee cup and an eclectic playlist, she dwells most naturally in local coffee shops with her laptop and the first flutterings of an idea both bizarre and honest in equal measure.

Author Bios



Emma Lawrence
Author

Emma Lawrence is a passionate storyteller with a love for exploring themes of rebellion, curiosity, and the power of knowledge. Their story, *The Secret Library*, delves into a dystopian world of censorship and hidden truths, challenging readers to question the boundaries of control. When not writing, they enjoy spending time outside with their dog, enjoying as many pastries as humanly possible and sipping a hazelnut coffee.



Olivia Ackers
Author

Olivia Ackers is a horror fanatic and loves writing pieces soaked in blood, guts, and gore! She also loves walks in nature and the sea's breeze on her face. Must haves: a mug full of tea and her bookshelves always generously stocked with various genres of literature. She is a lover of the arts and pursued a degree in English with Creative Writing, resulting in a publication in their literary journal, as well as previous publications.



Priya Rohella
Author

Priya Rohella is a budding author who relishes in writing about the Victorians, folklore, and murder-mysteries. When she is not typing away on her laptop, you can find her scrawling on parchment with a quill or painting outdoors on a canvas. Her poem, 'The Limbs of Nature', showcases how nature will always prevail no matter how much destruction man causes, even against burgeoning artificial intelligence.

Author Bios



Athena Paschou
Author

Athena Paschou has been writing since she knew what writing was. From poems to short stories and novels, she writes to weave a world full of magic and hope that defies all expectations. She writes to tell the stories that demand to be told. Her story, *Fighting for Life*, deals with the complex reality of choosing freedom despite all obstacles life can throw at you.



Omari Benjamin
Author

Omari Benjamin is almost never seen without a book, a pen, and a notebook. She grew up on fairy tales and mythology and sees magic in the mundane. She writes to see within and without and hopes to see the world not end.



Ruth Fishman
Author

Ruth Fishman is a recent college graduate from New Jersey. She lives with two cats and is allergic to both of them.

Author Bios



Dillon Roberts
Author and Editor

Dillon Roberts is a human who happens to enjoy plugging words together until they're meaningful. He enjoys great conversations, taking walks in nature, and people-watching. He speaks in depth about any topics relating to philosophy, passion, dreams -- anything relating to his favorite animal: humans. Dillon seeks to inspire everyone to pursue their best selves, hopefully through his impactful dialogue. He also wishes the reader to have a great day and to take care of themselves.



Jayne Langlois
Author

Jayne Langlois is a Florida based writer known for art, literature and having an enormous imagination that runs on overdrive. Jayne's creativity stems from watching films like The Chronicles of Narnia, Harry Potter, and Sailor Moon. Her love of writing was fostered by her college English professor who always encouraged her to keep writing. When she isn't writing she's watching anime, listening to cinematic music, or screaming with her friends about characters they love.



Anna Bussabarger-Graf
Author

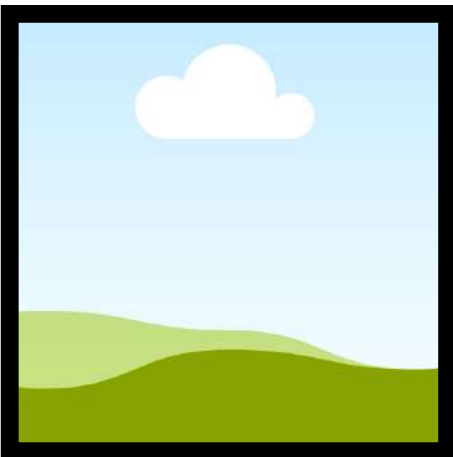
Anna Bussabarger-Graf is not a fortune-teller, words will do. The occult practices, such as seances, tarot, and scrying, inspired her piece Shifting Gaze. Lately, she's been researching astrology and reading romantasy. Writing flows both in her personal and professional life. She's a mix of mad scribbles and happy vibes.

Author Bios



Mina Styran
Author

Mina has many faces -- one of them being a fantasy author. But now, she had to carve out a new one -- a face of a cyberpunk author. By blending her want to expand her creativity, adoration for biblical mythology and white haired characters, the story of Seraphim was born. Beyond stepping out of her comfort zone, Mina loves cats (has two boys), gym and yapping someone's head off.



Annika Paniza
Author

Annika Paniza is a poet and storyteller who captures life's tender moments through a lens of raw emotion and quiet introspection. Her work often explores themes of love, nostalgia and self-discovery, weaving together dreamlike imagery and grounded reflections. Annika's poetry is driven by a deep spirituality, imperfection and the beauty of fleeting moments. When not writing, she immerses herself in creative spaces that foster authenticity and community, always seeking to translate feelings into words that resonate.



Ayomide Ajani
Author

Ayomide Ajani is a multi-passionate creative who loves pink, chocolate, and all things art and design. She's been writing since childhood and enjoys starting new projects but never finishing them.

Author Bios



Gurmeet Kapoor
Author

Gurmeet is a writer who makes sense of the world through the power of word. His imaginative nature allows him to write in different formats with different topics. He is passionate about helping the world through writing.



Loc-An Nguyen
Author

Loc-An has a soft spot for strange-looking earrings, snails, licorice tea, and she's also constantly bummed about the fact that she can't ever spell licorice correctly in the first go. If she could choose the type of person others would perceive her as, she'd prefer nothing at all, closely followed by "a slightly unserious but ultimately average, very normal guy". In "Cross-section of a Tree" she tries really hard to imagine being a tree. Her work also appears in Manila Literary Magazine.



Micha Bianan
Author

Micha Bianan

Author Bios



Liam Brazier
Author

Liam Brazier is a South African-Scottish writer living in England. He studied English Literature at Durham University, where he was published in the English Literature Society's publication with 'From the Lighthouse.' Currently, he is working on his first novel. You can find more of his writing and his portfolio at sfobwriting.com. 'A Horizon in the Dark' is his second piece for the Word Tonic Anthology.



Alex Bäuml
Author

Alex Bäuml is a storyteller using words, garments, and visual imagery to craft dreamlike worlds of wonder and imagination. Her work dances between fact and fiction, plays with duality, mythology and the supernatural, and is anchored in raw emotive reflection and a deep reverence for nature. Her poem "the infinite kiss of blackberries" is an ode to her work with *itmotf*, a new digital encyclopedia dedicated to making ancient and modern wisdom accessible to all.



Emerald MacIsaac
Editor

Emerald is a Canadian who often writes poetry, short stories — with a love for English, from modern to Old. Despite her being in full clown make-up, she spears you with sadness. It's probably the pain she feels from bashing her head against a wall for hours doing stupidly hard challenges in games. She has not published, but she edited a piece in the anthology this time.

Author Bios



Niamh Canning
Editor

Niamh Canning is 26 years old and works in events. This is now Niamh's fourth edition of working as an editor on the anthology, and she has greatly enjoyed working on this edition.



Chelsey Selvarajah
Editor

Chelsey Selvarajah is an aspiring author and editor from London. She loves to write sapphic, supernatural and historical stories (sometimes combining all three). This is her first time working on the anthology as an editor, having been a writer for the previous edition. Outside of writing, she can be found engaging in meaningful analyses of interactions in media (read: shipping characters together), re-reading a comfort manga at 2 a.m.



Lauren Storey
editor

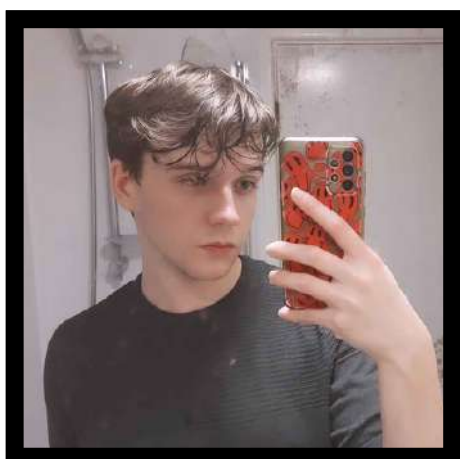
Lauren Storey is an unhinged horror writer and editor, with a thing for penning stories about cannibalism and the terrifying experience of being a mentally ill woman. Lauren loves a good dark fantasy story. When she's not busy reading, writing, or living through the horror of daily life, you'll find her (re)watching Twilight or trying to summon the spirit of Frank N Furter.

Author Bios



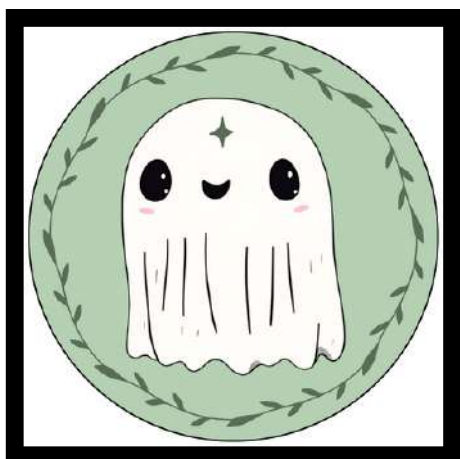
Sydney Sampson
Editor

When Sydney Sampson is not hunched over her computer, she can usually be found exploring new cities, taking photos, or watching entirely too much TV. You can check out more of her work on her travel blog, *Alone and Abroad*.



Benjamin Smith
Editor

Benjamin Smith is a writer (and editor!) in the scarcest of senses. He writes only when his brain can organise thoughts and finds it hard to manifest them on a page, but when he eventually sees the feelings and thoughts engraved on the page, he feels most alive. So he keeps writing, hoping to make those thoughts less fleeting. He is a love of chocolate, nicotine and drowning out the pains of the world with noise-cancelling headphones and music with a heavy bassline.



Yasi Bligh-Hasan
Illustrator

Sharmin Ahmed has created illustrations for various Word Tonic anthologies and has even written a short story about a young mouse finding a way to the moon in the *Food for Thought* issue. She loves video games like *Undertale* and *Hollow Knight* and particularly loves anything that is considered wholesome or absurd categories.

Author Bios



Yasi Bligh-Hasan
Illustrator

Yasi Bligh-Hasan is a 23-year-old freelance copywriter and brand identity designer based in London. She's been part of Word Tonic for over a year, creating and hosting the neurospicy chat. She's been designing the covers for our WT anthologies, and one day hopes to design the cover of her own fantasy novel! She is a lover of all things witchy, whimsical, and vintage, and yearns to be chosen by the baby raccoon distribution system one day.

THANKS FOR READING

COVER DESIGNED BY YASMIN BUGH-HASAN



The Last Book
Unknown (2032–2033 CE)

The last book ever found, with
journal entries from an unknown
British citizen detailing life before
the Digital Revolution.

Preserved in an ornate frame, it
remains a relic of the tactile, analog
past.

COME BACK SOON!