



INTERSTELLAR INK

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FOREWORD

"Science fiction is the most important literature in the history of the world, because it's the history of ideas, the history of our civilization birthing itself. ... Science fiction is central to everything we've ever done..." — Ray Bradbury

**"I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled "science fiction"... and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal."
— Kurt Vonnegut**

I've always cherished the two quotations above, both from titans in the speculative fiction field. They are at once contradictory and completely in alignment. There is no doubt there are still some turgid professors or snotty readers who wish to send the genre spiraling around a urinal cake.

But science fiction and fantasy are not only here to stay in the form of blockbuster movies and hit book series. They have always been at the heart of human storytelling. The first story we can trace is of Gilgamesh grappling with monsters. Shakespeare himself was not afraid of employing ghosts, witches, fairies, and demons.

Science fiction and fantasy came into my life through the Southington Public Library. I remember my father standing in front of a shelf choosing from one of the chunky plastic CD cases made for truckers on long hauls. The audiobooks he chose contained writers like Asimov, Bradbury, Card, and right down the alphabet. My father would read them on his hours-long commute to work and back. Then, on the following day, as he drove to drop me off at school, he would tell me the portion of the story he had heard the day before.

This was our version of Scheherazade's 1,001 nights. A Subaru substituted for a magic carpet. I fell in love with the genre through my father's eyes and my father's retelling. When I went through Kelley Elementary and DePaolo Middle School, I was half there and half in outer space or Middle Earth or anywhere else, thinking of how the story might end. (I don't recommend this by and large, but it served me well).

Speculative fiction is more than a genre but a mode of thought. It's a place that encourages the serious contemplation of the alien and strange. A place to see the world as it is not, but as it could be or once was.

The genre at its best, to me, is grounded in those all too human questions. Who are we? What do we stand for? What does this all mean? Many pay great sums of money to ask and consider those questions in universities around the world, but they are absolutely free to speculate about. Especially, in fact, for those who hold library cards.

I spent my senior year of university quarantined in an underground Southington basement. While trapped there, I let my mind wander past the basement walls. I wrote my first piece of fiction, a children's television episode about a magical school in Yemen.

The day after I graduated from UConn, as a scared and jobless English major, I received a call from Sesame Workshop offering me a place in their Writers' Room Fellowship.

After my time there, I wrote TV scripts for Sesame, NBCUniversal, and Nickelodeon. Every show I wrote on involved some fantastical elements, from Muppets to giant animal mechs, talking bears, and crime-solving pups.

But even in those writing rooms, I never stopped thinking about what made me want to be a writer, all the stories my father had read to me before. While at NBCU, I wrote a fiction piece about a young Native American boy hunting down a wendigo. That piece ended up being one of the winning a science fiction award.

They flew me out to LA where I met some of the greats, like Orson Scott Card, Nnedi Okorafor, Tim Powers, Kevin J. Anderson, and more. I sat next to some of the very people my father had pulled off the shelf in that library over a decade ago.

Writing speculative fiction has been good to me as a career and in living my life. It's sent me across the world. It's a way to think and interact with the world. (And a handy excuse for thinking about absurd and impossible things.)

What follows are the products of Southington residents' observations, speculations, aspirations, and much more. We hope that your journey onto their distant shores is not only entertaining but leaves you with great questions to speculate on.

-Amir Agoora

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CHILD ENTRIES

Rays of Hope by Liv Albanese

"We forget how fragile things are until they're broken. Like Earth. The humans have reduced it to nothing. Too many people, too much heat or cold, nothing in between. Our world, Ulia, has become their new home - without our consent. We are the nymphs. And we are ready to strike!"

Speeches bore me. Like, we all know what you're ranting about, come on! The Leader demands we listen to this one however, seeing as it "concerns our future."

"Aerith!" The Leader yells.

"Huh! Yes?!" I'm shocked when she calls my name. My heart beats in my chest. *Am I in trouble? Out of all the people here, why would she say my name?* I think. My best friend, Veda, nudges me.

"What are you waiting for?" he whispers. "Go!"

I take a deep breath, stand, and make my way up to the stage. All eyes are on me- I'm terrified. Am I shaking?

"Meet Aerith- our first squadron leader!" she cries. I can't breathe. Me? The crowd erupts in my name. I say an exasperated "thank you," then rush to my house. I'm so excited. I have an adrenaline crash and I just lay down and fall asleep, even though it's only seven o'clock.

I wake up, get ready, then head to greet my squad. We're trying to take the Spirolik Forest today! I take the squad to the edge of our town. We head out at exactly 5:47 AM.

Gunshots echo through the trees. I have no clue where my squad is. Screams pierce the air. I run away. Far away. I spot a building through the trees. Some kind of lab? I bang on the door. *What if it's a human lab, though? Pink skin surely stands out to them.* I don't care. I'd rather die in there than out here. All of a sudden, a hand reaches out and pulls me in.

"You'll be safe in- oh shoot. Shoot, shoot, shoot," she utters as she realizes what I am. "You're... not supposed to be here."

"I know. I need somewhere to-" I start, but she cuts me off.

"So, this is what a nymph looks like... fascinating..." She trails off as she examines me. She then offers her hand to me. "I'm Dr. Caddel. Bridget Caddel."

"Um... Aerith. Aren't you humans supposed to be... bad?" I ask, as I tense.

"No! Aren't you *nymphs* supposed to be evil?" Dr. Caddel counters. I guess we were both told... *lies* by our people. Bridget opens up the lab's drawn shades to reveal a total warzone outside.

"I wish this war would end. It's just that... so many died due to a stupid cause," I say, breaking the silence.

"Well..." Bridget thinks for a moment. "What if we stop it?"

We set up a thing called a video to be broadcasted to both sides. Dr. Caddel decides that I should be the face of our campaign.

"Um... Hello. My name is Aerith. I am a nymph... Can we start over?" I ask her.

After several takes, we finally got the perfect shot. I'll admit, I looked kind of cringey in the video, but if it helps ease the tension, then it's perfect.

The war still rages on, even after months of protesting from both sides. Veda was shot in the heart at the height of the battle. Bridget and I honor my friend who passed by leading other opposers. It's what Veda would've liked.

"You ready, Aer?" Bridget asks. We're taping another video.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I tell her. She starts filming, and I start reciting my lines.

"Millions of lives have been lost in this war for Ulia. I myself have experienced the heavy loss of my childhood best friend. Veda could have been spared, along with many others if this conflict had ended. The Leader once told me that 'we forget how fragile things are until they're broken.' If this continues, Ulia will be destroyed. There is still time to fix our broken planet, but this war needs to come to an end."

We close on that. I hope that resonates with "her highness". The movement will continue. Whether they like it or not.

Hope by Lex Carnright

"Xel, pass me the last can of beans," a gruff voice echoed in the dimly lit room. The year was 2124, and the world outside was a barren wasteland, a stark contrast to the vibrant cities of the past. Xel gazed at a lonely tin can at the top of an empty and filthy shelf.

"Sure, Dad," Xel replied, his voice barely a whisper. He handed over the dented can, its label faded and peeling. The scent of stale air and rusted metal filled their nostrils, a constant reminder of their miserable reality. A brown cockroach scattered swiftly by his Dad's shuffling feet. Tiny. Frail. Not even the cockroach could escape the effects and outcome of great hunger.

"Remember the stories Grandma told, Xel? About the time when food was plentiful?" Dad asked, his voice tinged with a hint of nostalgia. The sound of the can opener grinding against the metal was the only response.

Xel nodded, his eyes fixated on the flickering candlelight in the corner. "You mean when people could eat whatever they wanted?"

"That's right," Dad sighed, his gaze lost in the dancing shadows. "Before the Great Famine plagued our family and the world."

A silence fell between them, punctuated only by the distant howl of the wind against their makeshift shelter. The unpleasant taste of dust and despair lingered in the air.

"But we'll get through this won't we, Dad?" Xel asked, his voice trembling with hope.

"We always do, son," Dad replied, his voice steady and reassuring. He adjusts the blanket covering them. "We always do." He peers in the can, anticipating more beans would come out.

"Looks like that's all we'll have for a while." Xel observes the can rolling on the hard dirt floor. "You can have the rest Dad, all I need now is your love." He hands the poor man, his father, half of his half a bean ration.

Their conversation faded into the night, swallowed by the darkness and the promise of a new dawn. The world outside might have changed, but their spirit remained unbroken, a beacon of hope in a world consumed by poverty. They looked out of a rip in the shelter, the night sky shimmering with stars. They stared with wonder in their eyes and wide smiles on their faces, maybe hope is what they need. Only time will tell.

Away from My World by Parvathi Krishna

Imagine this: a bright and cheerful place, filled with flowers and meadows. That's my planet, Euphoria. But it is being destroyed by Zerstorung (our word for Earth) and their leader Maximus Thorn. The Zerstorungian scientists found a "solution" to their waste problem by sending it out to space where it is harming our planet. This is where our story begins.

"Orion, as you know, we have a problem," said The General.

"Yes sir," I replied.

"The Zerstorungian scientists are sending their waste to our planet," he said.

"I know sir," I stated.

"Our planet is dying," he said.

"Why are you telling me this, sir?" I asked.

"Because I have a mission for you. But I should warn you, it's dangerous," he replied.

"What is it sir?" I asked.

"I want you to go to Zerstorung and stop them from destroying our planet," he said.

"Me sir? Why me?" I asked.

"You are my best lieutenant. And for this job we need to make sure we pick someone who will make sure the Zerstorungians don't suspect a thing. So, will you do it?" he asked.

"Of course, sir," I replied.

"Wonderful! Pack your bags, you're leaving tomorrow," he said.

"Tomorrow?!" I asked.

"This is urgent. The fate of the planet depends on the success of this mission. I know you'll do great" he stated.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

Today is it. The big day. The day I go to Zerstorung. Today is the most exciting and nerve-wracking day of my life. The fate of our planet lies in my hands. Today is the day that I get to venture outside of our planet. It is a rare occasion where someone gets to leave the planet because of the most important law in Euphoria. No one can ever leave the planet. Sweat was dripping off my forehead as I walked to the ship that would momentarily take me to Zerstorung.

The General was waiting by the ship for me to come. "Good luck Orion," he said.

"Thank you, sir," I replied.

"Don't forget to disguise yourself as a Zerstorungian. Make sure you don't get caught" he said.

"I'll try, sir," I said.

"Now get on the ship. Goodbye Orion," he said.

Once I got into the ship, an automated voice started counting down. "10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - 0." The ship soared away as I looked down at my planet, wondering if I would ever see it again.

Now that I was on the ship, I had work to do. I needed to disguise myself as a Zerstorungian. After a lot of research, I realized everything I needed to change to blend in at Zerstorung. I have three arms, they have two. I have 1 eye, they have two. Us Euphorians are a lot shorter than Zerstorungians and Zerstorungians have hair. After I transformed, I couldn't recognize myself. I was taller with brown hair and brown eyes. Then I decided on my clothes. I wore basic sweatpants and a hoodie to blend in at Zerstorung. After that I decided to take a black backpack to hold my stuff.

Finally, after 17 hours, I got into Zerstorung's atmosphere. This is it. In a couple minutes I would be in enemy territory. The ship started speeding up. I'm landing. And 3 - 2 - 1. It's real. I'm officially on Zerstorung. Now it's time to leave the safety of my ship and go outside. As I was about to go outside, I saw a book on Zerstorung. *Perfect, I have enough space in my backpack for it. I thought.* As I stepped outside I saw a place completely different from Euphoria. It was cloudy and cold; in Euphoria it is usually bright and sunny. I saw a dull gray bird sitting in an alleyway. I looked in my Zerstorung book. *Pigeon* I read. *A stout seed - or fruit-eating bird with a small head, short legs, and a cooing voice, typically having gray and white plumage.* I took a picture of it to bring back to Euphoria. Then I had to go to the Zerstorungian waste disposal facility.

I took out my GPS and started walking. Then as I walked, a Zerstorungian in a large metal device started shouting at me. "What are you doing?! You can't walk on the road!" he shouted. "Sorry!" I yelled. "Where am I supposed to walk?" I asked. "The sidewalk, dummy," he yelled back. As I left I heard him mumbling something about foreigners. I took out my notebook and wrote, shouldn't walk on road. Then I continued walking. Finally, I got to the National Waste Disposal Company. I walked inside and was greeted by a Zerstorungian girl with long brown hair.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm the new employee," I said.

"Do you have a name?" she asked.

"Um..." I said desperately looking around until I found a billboard outside with the name Owen on it. "Owen," I finally said.

"I'm Jenny," she told me. "I guess you're going to be working with me," she said. "Come with me, I'll take you to see our boss. Here's his office," Jenny said. "Now I have to warn you, he is a little intimidating, especially to the newbies, so don't be too worried about that. He gets nicer."

"Thank you," I replied. After taking a deep breath and contemplating what I was going to say, I walked in. The room had a chilling feeling to it. The man I was looking at was very surprising. In Euphoria, our leaders (such as the General) look like people you would trust. The man in front of me looked like he would kill me if I misspoke. He was very muscular and had slicked back brown hair. After getting the courage I spoke.

"My name is Owen," I said shakily. "I am your new employee."

"Fresh meat, huh," he said. "I'm Richard. I'll be your boss here at the NWDC. Now while you're working here, I have some ground rules. Rule #1, don't whine. You get what you get and you don't get upset. Rule #2, work hard. I can't stand people who take a billion breaks every day. And most importantly, Rule #3, if you have a problem, solve it yourself," he said formidably. "Got it newbie?"

"Yes, sir," I replied quietly.

"Ok then, Jenny will show you to your desk. Now get out of my face," he spat.

"Yes, sir," I mumbled as I left his office.

I left his office shaking when I saw Jenny. "Chill out," she said. "You didn't get fired. That's a win."

"You sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, most people get fired that first day. Tomorrow, you should be in the clear," she remarked.

"Wish me luck," I replied.

“Luck,” she said. “Come on, let me show you to your office.”

Then we went into this metal device that I later found out was an elevator up to the seventh floor. Then she showed me to my very small, crowded desk with about six square feet of space.

“Ok, here's your cubicle,” Jenny said.

“Why is it so small?” I blurted out.

“What, have you never worked in an office before?” she asked.

Um - er well, actually,” I stammered.

“Oh, you probably worked in one of those fancy office buildings where everyone has huge desks,” she said.

“Yeah, exactly,” I said, relieved. I needed to be more careful. This is exactly the type of mistake that could jeopardize the mission.

“So, your job is pretty simple,” she told me. “You just need to brainstorm easier and faster ways to get our waste to Pluto.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, taking the trash all the way out there takes months even with technology nearing the speed of light,” she said. “This is your schedule. You have a meeting at one. I will be at the next cubicle so you can call me if you need any help,” she said.

“Thank you so much. I said gratefully. “I’ll see you around,” I said.

“See you,” she replied.

Once Jenny left, I had stuff to do. I needed to figure out the information for the next waste launch. So, I logged into my computer (which the General taught me how to use in Euphoria) and looked up the next launch on the database. The launch will be on July 12 at 9:00. It will be here. *Now I just have to figure out how to stop it from happening.* I thought. I thought about the idea all day until it was time for my first meeting. *Maybe they will give me ideas on how to stop the next launch* I thought.

I walked into the meeting room where I saw five people sitting at a table. I recognized two of them as my boss, Richard and Jenny but I didn’t know the other three.

“Hey look, it’s Newbie,” Richard exclaimed.

“Owen, this is Amy,” Jenny said, pointing to a blonde woman with glasses. “This is Eri,” she said, motioning to a man with short brown hair. “And this is Myra,” she said, pointing to a woman with long black hair.

I greeted them and then Richard said “Ok, ok, that's enough with the introductions. Let’s get to the business at hand cause I have things to do after this.”

The meeting started off with Eric talking about budgets and then we finally started talking about the launch. “So, as you know, the launch is controlled by a flash drive,” Myra said. *A flash drive. All I have to do is steal the flash drive.*

“Owen, OWEN,” Jenny said.

“Huh, what happened?” I asked.

“We want to know what you think about sending our trash through the asteroid belt,” Jenny said sternly.

“Oh, that won’t work. The asteroid belt is very unpredictable, something could go very wrong,” I said.

“And how do you know that?” Amy asked.

I froze, stuck on what to say. *Well I can’t tell them I’m an alien from Euphoria.* “Um - I’ve done research on the asteroid belt,” I said sweating.

“What type of research?” Myra asked.

“That’s enough; the meeting’s over. It’s lunch break,” Richard said.

On the way out, Jenny asked “You wanna go grab lunch?”

“Sure,” I responded, eager to try Zerstorungian food.

We went into a metal device which Jenny said was her car to a Zerstorungian restaurant.

McDonalds I read.

“Come on, let’s go,” Jenny said. We went up to the counter and I was desperately looking for what to order.

“Welcome to McDonalds, how can I help you?” the employee asked.

“I’ll take a Big Mac, fries and a soda,” Jenny said.

“And you?” the employee asked me.

“Um, I guess I’ll have the same,” I replied unsurely.

“Ok two Big Macs, fries and two soft drinks,” the employee said. “I’ll be right on it.”

Then me and Jenny sat down at a table to wait for our food. I had no clue what they were going to serve me. Finally, a waitress came to our table and gave us our food.

“Here you go,” she said pleasantly.

“Thank you, here’s your tip,” said Jenny, handing her some Zerstorungian money. “Ok, dig in,” Jenny said. I looked at my food and saw a sandwich. I took a fork and knife and started eating.

“What are you doing?” Jenny asked, laughing.

“I’m eating?” I said with a puzzled look on my face.

“Have you never had a burger?” asked Jenny, still laughing.

“No, I’m not from here,” I said. “I’m from a dfferent ... country,” I said with a pause.

“You don’t eat it with utensils, you just eat with your hands,” Jenny said, smiling. After showing me how to eat the rest of my food, she went to the bathroom. I wrote this down in my notebook and took pictures.

After lunch we went back to the office and did some work. I looked over some ideas for the company and tried to figure out how to steal the flash drive. Then Jenny approached me and said “Owen, work is over. You can go home now.”

“Ok, see you tomorrow,” I said.

As I walked out of the office I realized that I had nowhere to stay. I was so focused on getting the flash drive that I forgot to make living arrangements. *Great. Now what?* I thought. As I walked around trying to find somewhere I could stay I was lucky enough to find a hotel. When I checked my backpack, I found some Zerstorungian money to pay for it. I entered the hotel.

“Hello, welcome to our hotel, do you have a reservation?” asked a Zerstorungianian woman.

“No but I was wondering if you had any available rooms. This was a last-minute trip,” I responded.

“Ok we have one room free,” she replied. “Do you know how long you’re going to be staying?”

“No,” I said. “It’s about a month or so.”

“No problem,” she replied. “Here’s your key.”

“Thank you,” I said. I went into an elevator and up to the fourth floor of the hotel. After some trial and error, I figured out that you’re supposed to put the hotel key card on the sensor. And then I went inside the hotel room. It was amazing. There was a mini kitchen, living room,

bathroom and bedroom. In the hotel room I needed to find out this information about the flash drive:

1. Where is the flash drive?
2. When can I get it?
3. Who has it?
4. How can I take it without anyone noticing?

Once I find this out, stealing the flash drive is easy. I yawned and realized it was almost midnight. *I can figure this out tomorrow, I thought sleepily.*

I woke up at 8 am and got ready for work. I went outside, took out my GPS and started walking. On the way I saw a coffee shop and decided to get some coffee and a bagel for breakfast. *Jenny, I thought. I should get her a coffee too.* After I got my food, I continued on to work. Once I was inside the office, I put my stuff down and went to say hi to Jenny.

“Morning,” I said casually.

“Hey Owen,” she replied.

“I brought you a coffee,” I said.

“Thank you so much. I really needed this,” Jenny exclaimed.

“No problem,” I replied. “I’m gonna get back to work now,” I said.

“Ok,” she replied quietly.

As I left I couldn’t help noticing how beautiful her blue eyes were. Whenever I see her I feel awkward but happy at the same time.

“Hey,” said Eric.

“What’s up?” I replied.

“Can I talk to you about an idea I have before presenting it to Richard.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Wonderful,” Eric said. As Eric was talking, I barely heard a word. All I could think about was Jenny and what she was doing.

“So, Owen, what do you think?” Eric asked.

“Yeah that’s an amazing idea,” I said, even though I had no clue what he was saying.

My day continued with no ideas on how to continue my mission until Richard came with some news. “They are bringing the flash drive to us to get its routine check. You know, make sure the program works and all,” he said. “So, who wants to do it?” Richard asked.

“Me!” I said practically jumping out of my seat.

“Ok then newbie, I guess you’re doing it,” Richard said.

“Thank you, sir,” I said, trying to control my excitement. “When?” I asked.

“In two weeks,” Richard said.

“Ok,” I said a little disappointedly.

But it’s simple. In two weeks, I will get the flash drive in my possession. I can stay overtime and take the flash drive. I’ll be gone before anyone knows it’s missing. Then I can go home and I will have saved our planet.

“Wow, you were excited,” Jenny said as she came up to me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean it seems like an interesting job.”

“Not really, but okay,” Jenny said casually. “So, I should probably get going,” she said awkwardly.

“Me too,” I replied. “Bye,” I said quickly.

The next few days were pretty much the same. I would get up, eat breakfast at the cafe and go to work. I would work until lunch and then go to a nearby restaurant to get lunch. I would have my usual afternoon meeting, go back to the hotel, eat and sleep. But then one day, the day before I got the flash drive Jenny came up to me as I was leaving.

“Owen, I was wondering if you wanted to go out to dinner tonight,” Jenny asked.

“Why?” I asked before I had the chance to stop myself.

“I don’t know. Just because,” Jenny said, shrugging.

“Sure, I would love to,” I said.

“Ok, tonight at 8?” she asked.

“What restaurant?” I asked.

“I know this Italian restaurant called Amici Cucina,” she replied.

“Sounds good. I can pick you up,” I said

“Ok. I’ll send you my address,” she replied. “Bye.”

“See you,” I replied.

As I walked away I couldn’t help smiling. The good mood lasted on my walk home too. It seemed like Zerstorung was also celebrating with me. The sun was shining, the sky was clear and the birds were singing. But I just had one problem. I didn’t have a car to take her. So, I ran back to the hotel and saw a sign for Uber. I went up to the front desk and asked the receptionist about it. She told me that I just had to download the app and call one. I did and ran to my room to get dressed.

At 7:45, I drove over to Jenny’s house to pick her up. I rang the doorbell and she came out. She looked stunning. She was wearing a dark green dress and a diamond necklace. She had a white bag.

“Ready to go?” I asked in awe.

“Yeah, let’s go,” she replied.

“You look great,” I said.

“You too,” she said as she walked into the car. “An Uber?” she asked.

“Yes...?” I questioned.

“You know what, never mind,” Jenny said.

After fifteen minutes we reached the restaurant. It was a small place that you barely would have noticed if you weren’t looking for it. It had some tables outside and it was decorated with small, twinkling lights. We went inside.

The restaurant was even better from the inside. It looked like a scene out of a romance novel. There were a lot of small tables with white tablecloths. Each one had a vase filled with fresh flowers. The smell was heavenly. According to Jenny that was the smell of authentic Italian food.

“Table for two?” a waitress asked us.

“Yes, please,” I told her.

She led us to our table. There were lots of paintings on the walls and there was a flag hanging which I think is the Italian flag.

“So...how do you like it?” Jenny asked.

“I love it!” I told her excitedly.

“They don’t have anything like this where I come from.”

“Where do you come from anyway?” Jenny asked.

OH NO! I thought. What am I supposed to tell her? Jenny was staring at me expecting an answer as I nervously thought about what I should say. Luckily, before I had to say anything, the waitress came back. “So, what would you like to order?” she asked.

“I’ll have the Neapolitan pizza,” Jenny said.

“And you?” the waitress asked.

“I’ll have -um- the shrimp scampi,” I said, picking a random item from the menu.

“Coming right up,” she said.

Jenny and I made small talk until the food got there. But when it arrived it was amazing. The shrimp scampi was the best thing I have ever eaten.

“How is it?” Jenny asked.

“I love it. I’ve never had anything like it,” I said.

“I know, right? I’ve never had better pizza,” Jenny said.

After a couple minutes, Jenny said “Owen, I have something to tell you.”

“Ok, tell me,” I said.

“I really like you,” she said quietly.

When she said that, I felt sick to my stomach. I really liked her, too. But I was here on a mission which would be over in a day. I couldn’t just fall in love with a Zerstorungian.

“Owen, what is it? Do you not like me?” Jenny asked quietly. She had a right to know.

After a lot of thinking I decided I might as well tell her. “I really like you. That’s the problem,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“My name is actually Orion and I am an alien from a planet called Euphoria,” I blurted out.

“You’re kidding, right? Wait, you’re not,” Jenny realized.

Once I started talking, I couldn’t stop. I told her about the mission, how I wasn’t actually an employee and even my attempt to steal the flash drive. I pretty much told her everything. Jenny was sitting there dumbstruck. Finally, I said “I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“No, I get it. You were doing it for your planet,” Jenny said, still looking very shocked. “But I can’t let you destroy that flash drive. If you do, that will be the end of Earth.”

“Earth?” I asked

“That’s what we call this planet - but never mind. We’re getting off topic,” she said.

“How about I take you back with me to Euphoria?” I asked hopefully.

“Owen or Orion or whoever you are, I can’t. I have family and friends here and I can’t leave them much less let you destroy them,” she said.

“Well I can’t let the people I love get destroyed by your planet,” I replied. I paid the bill and left.

“Owen - Owen – Owen!” Jenny called out. But I kept going.

My situation can’t get any worse. I thought bitterly. The one person I thought would understand me is willing to report me if I try to steal the flash drive. But if I don’t take it, Euphoria is as good as dead. But then I had an idea. It was going to be very, very hard to pull off, but if I do it both of the planets will survive. I called the General. I explained the whole situation and my idea. He dismissed my idea, but after a lot of persuading, he agreed.

In the morning I went to work. Once I saw Jenny I told her “I have a new idea. If it works, both of our planets can be spared. Will you help me?” I asked.

“Sure. What is it?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you later. Where can I find Maximus Thorn?” I asked.

“Oh, you know about him. Well, actually, not too far from here. He’s staying a couple hours away from us for a few days.”

“Ok, let’s go,” I said.

“Now?” she asked.

“Yeah, this is important,” I said.

“I’ll get my car,” Jenny replied.

“You know about summits, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, so?” Jenny replied.

“My idea is for the leaders of both of our planets to have a summit,” I said. “They can meet and peacefully come up with a solution.”

“No way Thorn will agree to that,” she said.

“But we’re offering him our technology,” I said. “In Euphoria, we have machines that will get rid of all of our waste. We can offer to send him some of those machines in exchange for a peaceful alliance between our two planets. And a lot of shrimp scampi,” I laughed.

Jenny laughed as she said “Well it’s a good solution if it works.”

“I’m counting on it to work,” I said.

We finally got to Maximus Thorn’s office. It was the most majestic building I’ve ever seen. It was made out of white marble and had five stories. Dumbstruck, Jenny and I went inside. We saw his secretary at the entrance.

“Can we speak to Maximus Thorn?” I asked.

“He’s very busy, you can only see him with an appointment,” he said.

“But this is important. A delegate wants to speak with him,” I told him.

“Which delegate?” he asked.

“The General from Euphoria,” I said.

“Is this a joke?” he asked, getting red faced.

“No, sir,” I replied. “Do you want me to call him?”

“No,” he said.

“Good, now hurry up. The General does not like to be kept waiting,” I said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said as he hurried off.

We waited for three hours until someone came up to us and said. “President Thorn will see you now. Follow me.”

He led us to this huge study. It had the same white marble as everywhere else and it was filled with books. There was a huge skylight on the ceiling and there was a white marble desk in front of us. Sitting at it was Maximus Thorn. “What do you want?” he said.

“We want you to meet the great General, leader of Euphoria,” I said. As if on cue, The General appeared in front of us.

“Thank you, Orion. I will take it from here,” The General said.

Thorn was sitting there confused whether he should hear The General out or call the cavalry.

“Our mission is one of peace,” The General said calmly.

“Fine. I’ll hear you out,” Thorn said. “But if you try anything, I will call the military.”

“Orion, Jennifer, if you would wait outside,” The General said.

Jenny and I left silently. We sat outside, both of us too worried to speak. After a few hours The General invited us back inside. “President Thorn and I have come to an agreement. Both planets will remain,” The General said. “We’ve signed an agreement. Euphoria and “Earth”

are now allies. The mission is a success, but now it's time to go. Thank you, President Thorn. We will soon meet again."

"Goodbye," Thorn said as The General, Jenny, and I left.

We teleported, which was normal for me, but scary for Jenny. Once we got to the ship that brought me here The General said to Jenny, "Jennifer, you have been a great help. We don't usually do this, but if you want, you can come to Euphoria with Orion and I. You and Orion would be rewarded for your services, and you would live like a queen."

"Thank you, that is a great offer, but I can't leave. Everyone I know and everyone I love is here and I can't just desert them like that," Jenny said.

"Of course. I understand. You will go far in life Jennifer. But I'll let you and Orion say your goodbyes," The General said as he went inside the ship.

"I'm sorry, Owen," Jenny said with tears in her eyes.

"I understand," I said, my voice breaking. "I'll come visit you whenever I can."

"I'll be counting down the days," Jenny replied. "But I guess we knew that this was going to happen."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"In the end, our fates don't intertwine," she said.

"I have to go now," I said. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Jenny said as I got into the ship. I looked down at Jenny, my whole world, as I left her behind.

Unity by Maureen Maisano

Earth 2124
Lifespan 30 years

The buildings ate into each other; air diluted smoke. Aikya's freshly washed hair - washed with borrowed shampoo and scavenged water - sprawled out behind her in the smoggy air as she leapt across the disorderly metal scraps that formed makeshift roofs. Aikya ran and leapt from roof to roof listening to the special music made by a city bustling with tin, twine, and tales of what used to be. The soothing song rang through the smoke. And she sprang, gymnast like, through the humid evening from balcony to balcony to reach the dirt road. She skipped through the streets humming. "Hello," she waved to the people she passed. She caught a yam tossed in her direction. "Thanks!" She turned to see a smiling woman waving at her. Aikya took crunchy bites of the yam while jumping back onto the roofs to admire the sunset. She reached out, almost as if it was in her grasp, her smile rose like a sunrise as the real sun was sinking to slumber.

Earth 2124
Lifespan 340 years

"It's your grandmother's 258th birthday soon. Also take your nutrients." His mother informed.

"I don't want to take my nutrients." He said.

"What?"

"I'm not taking them."

"If you want water t-"

"I hate eating only pills for nutrients, my stomach has dissolved to mush and my taste buds have dulled away."

"Be grateful. We can live safely as long as we like. The world is in unity. We have clean air and clean cities."

"Stop lying to me, it's insulting, we can live long, yes, but we do nothing, I'm not allowed to run nor am I allowed to jump. We are not united. There are 374 different countries that all hate each other. The only reason the cities are clear is because we pollute space. We're packed like rotten sardines into cities."

"Honey..."

"Face it, we're disappointing parasites. Our meat is synthetic because we killed all livestock and animals, and our vegetables are chemicals, but we never eat vegetables or meat because only the top of the chain can eat those. You talk about how great our cities are, but that's only because we only have cities!"

"You've been infected! THEY TOLD ME TO REPORT INFECTED!" Her face had contorted, as her eyes widened and she crept backward.

"You're so brainwashed. The disease is a myth. Open your eyes, open your soul."

"NO! MY EYES ARE PURE!"

"Open your eyes."

Pandemic by Evelyn McDowell

January, 2124

The pandemic had gotten worse. Especially in winter, people got sick very easily.

Los Angeles, California

Zoe

My mom and brother had fallen sick, I was the only hope. Shopping was now illegal, because of how serious the pandemic actually was. It was so easy to catch. Los Angeles, once so much movement, was now abandoned and lost. I wonder if the rest of the world was like this. The pandemic was one of the most fatal things in the whole world right now.

I walk outside and smell the crisp air through my mask. I could catch the pandemic at any point; at least I knew the symptoms. I walk around the perimeter of my neighborhood. Observing the boarded-up windows and doors, I notice something in one of the houses. It was a person. I got scared at first because I thought I was the only person left in the whole city. Walking up to the house, I see that none of the windows are boarded-up.

The person opens up the window, and climbs out. "I've been locked in here for months!" He exclaims. "I thought I was the only person left in Los Angeles."

I look him up and down, not recognizing him at first. "Hey, Zoe," he says.

I freeze in place. He was my bully from high school. I back away slowly, almost tripping over some rocks. "You bullied me, why would I want to talk to you?" I say.

"Because we are the last two people left. I've seen the way downtown looks, it's horrifying!" he answers.

I nod, not responding.

"And, if I bullied you, I didn't mean it. It was a joke, my friends made me, I promise."

"Sure," I say. I can see in his eyes that his heart just shattered. "My family is sick, I need to get back to them..." I finish my sentence. He just stands there, looking down at his feet.

"I'm coming with you," he finally adds.

"You're going to catch the virus!" I reply, loudly.

He follows behind me anyway. Unlocking my door, I start to feel dizzy. "You good?" Luke asks. I still cannot trust him. He did bully me, even if he did say his friends made him do it.

"Yeah, I'm just a little dizzy," I say.

I head upstairs, not ready to find my family, passed from the pandemic. I immediately break down into tears. On the floor, I find Luke staring down at me.

"Zoe! What happened?" he asks. I can hear how concerned he is. The whole pandemic thing has made him a bit nicer and more caring. He looks up into my mother's bedroom. "Oh... I'm so sorry, Zoe."

I still cry as he walks me out of the house. "What do I do now? I have literally nobody," I cry. Luke frowns. "Except you, Luke," I add on so he doesn't feel hurt. He smiles after that. I get dizzy again and suddenly fall down. All I see is black.

"No..." Is all I hear Luke say. I have the virus, I already know it. No cure, no way to help me now.

I wake up on a green couch, with several blankets placed on me. "Luke?"
"Yes, Zoe," he says.
"Why did you bring me here. There is no helping me now," I demand.
"If you say so, but you will stay here," he insists.
"No! We are the only people left, I can't get you sick," I demand again, heading for the front door. "Open the door so you can stay safe."
"No."
"Luke, stop!"
I try the knob. It's locked. "Just rest, and you will get better," Luke says.
I finally agree, hoping his words would come true. I black out again.

Luke

I watch her go back to the couch. She blacks out again and I really have no idea if she's going to survive. This pandemic has wiped out the entire city of Los Angeles. Being 2124, it is scary no one created a cure. I turn on the TV. Nothing works. The static wakes Zoe up, though. She looks worse than ever. Zoe's so sick already she can't even talk with coughing at least twelve times. "Luke?" she asks.

"Yes?"
"I need to leave. I can't be near you anymore, or else we'll both end up like my family!" She says, then coughs.
I will always disagree with her. I realize the TV is still on static, and it suddenly turns on to the news.
"Reporting live from Hartford, Connecticut. It appears that the entire population of Los Angeles is entirely wiped out due to the pandemic. We have sent ten military members and five doctors there to make sure it is wiped completely. Moving on to Dan-" Then the audio cuts out and the TV turns black.
"There's your chance!" I say to Zoe.
"Mine? It's *our* chance," she responds.
Just then, I hear knocking on the door. "Hello? Anyone not sick?" Someone screams. It is muffled because of their mask. I open the door. "How many or just you?"
"Me and my friend. We are the last two in Los Angeles, I think," I say, fast and lead the doctors to Zoe.
"We have to get her back to Connecticut!" one doctor says.

In the plane, Zoe

I feel horrible flying to Connecticut. Luke is right next to me. I was sure he'd be sick by now. I guess I was wrong. I start to feel a bit better as we land and get off. Luke stays by my side the entire time at the hospital. "Run more tests to see if she will make it!" People yell around me. The bright hospital lights are blinding as I open my eyes. "Not unless we get a heart transplant, maximum two days."
"Can I do it?" Luke asks the doctors.
"We can see," the doctors say.
"No, Luke I'm not letting you do that for me!" I scold him.
"I will."

"It's a match, he can!" a new doctor says.
I start to break down again. "Luke you better not."
"Too bad!" he laughs.

Luke

I'm doing the heart transplant for Zoe. I do not care if she doesn't want me to. I might change my mind, but probably not. My eyes prick with tears as the heart monitor beeps. "FLAT LINE!!" doctors yell loudly.

"Bring her into surgery right away! Luke, are you sure you want to do the transplant?"
"Of course. I want her to live." I say, tears streaming down my face.

Zoe

After the surgery, I cannot wait to see Luke again. He helped me with everything the past few days. I sit up in my bed as a doctor comes into the room. "Can I see Luke? Where is he?" I ask excitedly.

"Zoe... He donated his heart to you," Dr. Cady says.

"Wait, what?" I ask, smiling in confusion.

Dr. Cady hands me a note. It's in Luke's handwriting. It says on it,

Zoe, I gave you my heart forever. I want you to live for me. I am so happy for you, keep living and make me proud! :)

My face turns red. I feel my eyes pooling with sadness. "No he didn't..." I cry. My shirt starts to get wet from my tears. I cannot believe he did that. I had no chance to say bye, to thank him, to apologize. I feel my heart shatter into a million tiny pieces. Just like his did when I said 'sure' and not yes. My tears are still streaming down my face. I feel as if I am crying a river. I look up and say to myself, "Thank you, Luke." I smile.

The Plant Override by Ryan C. Scott

Earth 2124

Somewhere in the middle in the Nevada desert there lie a military base and in the military base was a science lab and in that lab on a table was an ancient thought-to-be extinct plant. Three people were currently in the lab but then one accidentally bumped into the plant the plant fell off the table and smashed on the ground. Pot pieces shattered everywhere. The scientist that knocked over the plant panicked. He scooped it up and put it in a container that was on the counter but little did that scientist know that container was where they put stuff they have in nukes. A chute opened up the plant fell down the chute. The plant combined with the radioactivity in nukes and then was placed into a bomb. The nuke with the plant was transported to another military base overseas where it was aimed at an enemy military base. It launched and exploded on impact. Suddenly the ground started to shake and then "BOOM!" Huge plant tentacles shot out of the ground and dived back into the ground causing a bunch of smaller tentacles to start moving and devouring everything in its path. We fast forward 20 years later almost all of Asia is gone. A bunch of military squadrons have failed to stop the plant. The only damage that has been able to be done was by aircraft but then when they were doing the basic routine a huge enormous tree erupted out of the ground it was as tall as the Burj Khalifa which grew huge prehistoric fruit. The helicopters were flying around for a moment then the prehistoric fruit exploded shooting seeds that launched at the helicopters making them fall and the seed that did not hit helicopters fell to the ground which made another giant tree pop up immediately. Thirty years later Asia and most of Europe were a whole jungle of giant trees. Well except for the giant desert parts of the continent and the Middle East and Russia where it was freezing cold and the plants had trouble going into Africa where it was hard to dig into soil because the Sahara Desert was bordering Africa from the greenery from Europe. Currently the year was now 2174 and the population of humans had gone down significantly most people being from the militaries of the world who were trying to stop the plant most people have retreated to the Americas seeing that there was no way of stopping the plant some went to Australia and islands in the Asian continent where the plant could not get. Meanwhile in North America in the White House the remaining leaders of the world sat down in the oval office where they discussed the next course of action. After a long time of discussion, they decided that the only option was to leave the planet and head to Mars. The Mars program has been going on for fifteen decades and they were able to make the surface air breathable for humans so work began to build a big enough rocket to carry the last of the people on earth. People were not sure of this idea but when the plant made a cactus variant to get into the deserts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East everyone pitched in to help.

Fifty years later the rocket was complete and was built in a big field right outside of New York city and the year was now 2204. One hundred years have passed since the plant started expanding the entire to the other side of the planet including Europe Asia and Africa. The plant had devoured everything on the other side of the earth. People were loading everything onto the rocket ship. Crates of food, water, vegetables and plants. The plants were checked to make sure they did not bring the rapidly growing plant. Everything was going according to schedule but then terrifying news came that the plant had found a way to cross the ocean to get to other continents Australia and New Zealand went away first to the island of the U.K and it was making its way to North America now going at a speed of 200 miles per hour. Everyone went into panic

mode and everything was going ahead of schedule. Two days passed and everything was loaded onto the rocket. The plant was 326 miles away from the mainland of North America. Everything was ready. They turned the rocket on but it did not start. They checked what was wrong and it turned out they forgot to set the countdown so someone had to go start it. A single man went out and ran across the metal grate down the flight of stairs and over towards the countdown and he hit the button. "T-Minus 10 minutes" just when everyone thought they were in the clear the radar picked up something it was the plant. It had entered New York City and was making its way to the rocket. The man ran back to the rocket as fast as he could. "T-Minus 3 minutes left" he made it to the stairs and up the flight of stairs he went. The plant could now be seen with the human eye. He made it back to the rocket and jumped in "T-Minus 10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1 BLAST OFF!" The rocket launched right before the plant could sink its vine tentacles into the ship. Then everyone heard a big "BUMP!!!" Everyone assumed it was just some turbulence but little did they know one tentacle had made its way into the rocket and it had found the other plants in the storage room. Even though they were deep in space their screams of horror could be heard from miles away.

Powerless by Kaylee Waters

At first, no one hears it. It's a soft *drip, drip*. Then the water rushes in. Noticeable. Quickly it rises to Ellie's neck. She raises her chin up, struggling to breathe. Ellie doesn't know how to swim, has never tried broccoli before, nor has she gone on a roller coaster! There's nothing special about her.

Nia, who treads water next to her, is a professional swimmer. She dives under the water and tries to push the heavy wet rocks aside to uncover a hole. Nia prays for one to budge, so the rock wall will give way, but nothing happens.

"It's not budging!" Nia says breathlessly when she resurfaces. Ellie closes her eyes and tries to imagine. Nia had said everything would be fine. It won't. Nia starts crying. They had been best friends for seven years and now it was about to end.

Looking at Nia's face, Ellie sees hopelessness, desperation, pleading. Something inside Ellie whispers *You're getting out of here*. She never swam before, but she could try.

Without Nia's permission, Ellie dives under the water and pushes as hard as she can. Ellie doesn't know how long she can hold her breath for, but Nia needs to survive. Harder and harder Ellie pushes until...

Nia yanks Ellie up to the surface. "What are you doing!?" Nia cries. "You can't go down there, Ellie! I need to be the one to go down there. Please, I can't lose you."

Ellie knows she is right. How could Ellie do it? Without any talent, there's nothing she can do. So once again, down goes Nia. But the water is pouring in faster. Ellie can't tell the difference between the rising waters and her own tears.

Nia comes up. "I'm so sorry, Ellie. It's no use."

The words hit Ellie like a bullet. She is going to die, period.

"No. We won't," Ellie whispers.

Nia looks at Ellie, confused. "What can we do, Ellie!? It's no use pushing the rocks!"

"I know. But something's going to happen." Ellie hears the voice again in her head, *you're getting out of here*.

Suddenly, the water fills up. Ellie holds her breath. Nia looks at Ellie and shakes her head. Ellie pinches her eyes shut. What did death feel like? That's what Ellie wonders.

Suddenly, the darkness becomes light. Ellie opens her eyes. Nia's eyes are widening. Ellie looks at herself. She is glowing! She is glowing! Ellie looks around, afraid of what to do.

Ellie dives down and pushes against the rock. It seems as light as a feather! Ellie pushes, but only a pinky touch is needed to unseat the rock! Ellie has strength!

The water gushes out through the falling rock. Light pours in through the hole. Ellie pushes more and more until there is a big opening. Water flows through, carrying Nia and Ellie out to safety.

Coughing, Ellie sits up. She looks around. White surrounds her. As she adjusts to the light, Ellie sees five adults staring at her.

A woman whispers to a man. Ellie looks at Nia.

"Hello, girls," a woman walks over to them. The badge around her neck says Mrs.

Merinda

Ellie stands up. "Where are we?" she demands.

Nia clutches Ellie's hand. Mrs. Merinda walks around Ellie and Nia, as if she is inspecting them. Without answering Ellie's question, Mrs. Merinda strides over to a man in blue and whispers to him.

A man steps forward. He's the only one in white. "Girls, I'm sorry to tell you, but only one of you can survive." Nia and Ellie look at each other, panic in their eyes. Ellie doesn't want to die, but she doesn't want to see Nia die either.

"It's okay, Ellie, I don't want your gift to go to waste. I'll die," Nia says, standing up next to Ellie. Nia has tears in her eyes. "Kill me." The man's facial expression doesn't change. It's too far to see his name. Ellie takes Nia's hands in hers. "No, Nia, *I* need to. I'm not normal! And don't you say no! Because *no one* wants to die, okay, Nia? I know you don't want to," Ellie says slowly. She turns around and jabs a finger towards herself.

She locks eyes with the man. But before she can say anything, the man speaks. "Sorry to say this, but it's not your choice. It's against the law to have Ellie die. Ellie has to live. I know you're confused, but this is what happens 100 years in the future."

Ellie gasps and looks at Nia. They don't say a word. Instead, the man continues. "We need someone who's invincible, able to fight the invasion. We can't risk Nia's life dying in the war."

Tears wells up in both of the best friend's eyes. "Nia, please go with Mrs. Merinda." Nia looks at the ground and follows Mrs. Merinda into a room.

"Nia!" Ellie protests. But Nia doesn't listen. She disappears into a room. The door seems to be the loudest thing ever to Ellie. "Let's go, Ellie," says the man. Ellie shakes her head. She has no choice in this at all. Her only choice is to follow him.

So, she does. Out into the cold night air.

TEEN ENTRIES

Hunger by Esra Agirman

It had been a while since her last meal. Melissa awoke and groaned as the sun hit her eyes. She needed to get up and get ready for her job, though not without reluctance. At least half of the week she would walk to her nearest 7-Eleven and stay there till her shift was over, which was late into the night. The rest of the week she stayed at home, meaning that she wastes away for more than half the week at the gas station. A bit better than most other people, but Melissa still wallowed in her feelings. The only benefit she got from the job was expired ramen and stale Doritos she brought home. Oh, and the money, of course, which she earned while living with a family that cared for her. But that wasn't important to her right now.

Though Melissa could easily go on a tangent of how much she hated her job, she didn't have much of a choice. It was the easiest way for her to get money; after all, she was just a tired insomniac who did not matter to society. Never paying any mind to anyone in her life, family or friend. Just focused on her pain and her problems.

She begrudgingly left her room and entered the bathroom, splashed her face and stared down at her eye bags that made her look ghoulish. Her hair, in a messy bun, looked exactly like a bird's nest. She slipped on her uniform, spotted with ketchup stains and some other substances that even she couldn't name. She had no ambition to wash her uniform; after all she didn't know how to use the washing machine, so she'll have to complain to her mother to wash it some other time. Truly incompetent.

She left the house with an empty stomach. So hungry... Melissa trudged to the gas station, feeling as if she had no sense of direction, having already wasted six years there. Groaning out of exhaustion, she stood straight in front of the 7-Eleven and searched for her keys to open the store. Melissa took out the keys and tried opening the door but she kept dropping them, then turning the keys the wrong way. The worker who works on Tuesdays had been snoring on the counter despite the fact he was supposed to be working. Banging on the door, Melissa angrily strode over to the back entrance and finally entered the station. Melissa angrily walked over to the front desk, pushing her co-worker out of the way, who woke up startled, grunted, then and immediately bolted out the door. Melissa unlocked the front entrance, turned on the camera and waited.

Waiting, and waiting, she stood there, drowsy and worn-out from work. Customers came, customers went. Gatorade. Slim Jims. Flaming Hot Cheetos.

Melissa had no energy, laying there and letting at least five people shop-lift. All she wanted to do was sleep, finally have relief and dream of a different life. She pulled a fashion magazine from the rack and allowed herself to dream of being a model, rich and beautiful, with a hot boyfriend, and fast car.

She grunted. It all came to money. Sometimes Melissa would dream of being surrounded with money, flaunting her wealth to everyone. The freedom, the beauty, the power she would have would make her smile. Of course, the dream would leave her as soon as another customer walked in. She hadn't bothered to make lunch. She felt groggy. So very hungry...

11:30 p.m. Melissa woke up, a penny from the take-a-penny-leave-a-penny stuck to her cheek. Someone was banging on the door. Confused, she wobbled to the door and pushed it open. But no one was there. "Stupid kids," she muttered, assuming it was a prank. Still, she was spooked. "Whatever," she said unconvincingly.

She started walking home. Her lousy, sad home. she felt as if she needed all her senses, feeling uneasy every time there had been a noise behind her. Every wrinkle on the trees seemed

to have faces, laughing at her each time she walked by them. She tried closing her eyes, walking straight and trying to ignore everything her brain had been worrying about.

All of a sudden, Melissa walked straight into a pole. She fell to the ground as her shoplifted Fanta splashed everywhere, ruining her already terrible gas station uniform. She furiously got up from the ground, holding onto the pole to get up, she stared right at the traffic safety mirror. All blood in her body went cold as the reflection behind her was a tall slender shadow.

What she saw was a magnificent sight: a creature that was humanoid and lengthy. The monster had long black nails that resembled fire pokers. The legs were like a toad's, though the face was the part that scared her the most. A bald head with shark-like teeth, sockets where the eyes should be, drained and lifeless. The monster had no nose, only two holes on its face that sniffed her scent as it crept closer to her. For the first time in Melissa's life, she had prayed for something simple. *I want to live*, Melissa wished with all her might. She had always hated her life, it was boring, she wanted relief from her cruel life. *But not like this. Please, not like this...* That was the last time Melissa was seen, although she believed her little life unbearable and worthless, people still kept on searching for her.

Despite this, she brought this all upon herself.

You see, if I hadn't done anything she would still live her pathetic, miserable life, complaining about why it doesn't end her way. Wouldn't you agree?

Separate Lives Divided by Alivia Armstrong

Daniel's grin grew as his wife lifted his infant son into the frame of the hologram screen. The astronauts were allowed one weekly call to their family. "I miss you guys so much. Love you," he said before cutting off the call.

This was Daniel Mendez's first real trip to Mars. The last time he wasn't allowed to leave the ship which he maintained. Today, he was finally allowed to leave the ship and explore Mars with his team.

On the first trip his crew members had found traces of water. After exploring for a while, his team captain, Morgan, ordered, "Let's head back to the ship."

The group of six laughed as they ate rehydrated stew from packets. Ethan had told them about his new daughter who was due in two days and the crew wished his wife well. While they were talking, a blaring alarm came on, turning the room red. *Dust Storm incoming.*

"Dan, go get the ship ready for takeoff!" Morgan commanded. After getting his spacesuit on, he rushed outside. The small hologram screen popped up and he typed in the code to set the take off for twenty seconds, by procedure. *Error, Try Again.* Dan sighed.

"DAN, GET ON THE SHIP NOW!" Morgan screamed into the walkie-talkie. Dan couldn't hear over the rumbling of the incoming storm.

Morgan turned to the crew and gritted her teeth, "We have to take off now." The crew and her were arguing, "We can't leave without Dan," Lisa pleaded. "He'll die, Morgan!"

"Don't argue with your captain. If we don't leave now we will *all* die." Morgan growled, hitting buttons on the dashboard of the ship.

"Why won't this work... Finally! What's that n-" He was cut off by the ship taking off. He was flung into the air and shot back down into the orange rocks. He heard a sickening crack from the back of his helmet, before everything went dark.

Daniel was laying down in a... bed? He felt like he was melting into the soft cushion, too sleepy to question where his helmet was. He blinked slowly, almost succumbing to his tiredness when he saw someone leaning over a table, their back to him.

"Who are you?" He mumbled.

The figure flicked her face towards him, making him gasp. The figure was human-like, but everywhere he looked there was something wrong with her appearance. Her pupils were huge ovals, her hair looked like tentacles, her skin had a purple tint to it, and her ribs were showing through the skin on her long torso. But he couldn't help but notice how beautiful she was, and couldn't help but be drawn to her.

Like she read his mind, her sharp face softened, "I won't hurt you," she said walking towards him.

He slid against the wall terrified, again.

"The guards outside found you lying on the rocks. We are the Purpurae of Mars." She looked nervous and he realized how young she looked. *Twenty at most,* he thought. He reached out his hand, "I'm Dan Mendez."

She smiled shyly before taking it, "Seren Daal."

Daniel sat up, "So, Seren, how am I breathing without my suit?"

“Well, the plants replenish the air we breathe, and since we are underground, the cave traps the oxygen inside.” Seren replied eagerly. “Why don’t you come meet the village?” She asked, sliding off the bed.

There were less of them than he imagined, only a few hundred. There were families; mothers with their hands on their sons’ shoulders, fathers carrying their daughters, grandparents in makeshift rocking chairs. While they all seemed both excited and stunned by him, they also looked very tired. He realized the mothers were more leaning on their sons than holding them. They were wearing rags more than clothes. They were chattering raspily, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying. “What are they talking about?” He whispered in Seren’s tiny ear.

“They’re speaking Uraäk,” She murmured absentmindedly. “And they’re wondering why you’re here.”

Daniel and Seren walked up the steps of the low stage, and stood next to the short mayor. “Hello, people of Mars!” Dan exclaimed, and the crowd went silent. Seren translated loudly, and the crowd cheered. Dan grinned at her and continued, “I am Daniel Mendez, and I have been left behind by my ship. I hope you will welcome me until my crew returns!” Seren translated but the crowd seemed less than pleased. Seren leaned towards him. “It’s considered disrespectful to suggest you’re leaving.” She whispered.

Dan grimaced. “I am honored to be here,” He bowed.

He turned to the short old mayor who beamed at him. He hissed something that Seren translated to, “Welcome to Mars, son!” The mayor handed him a woven basket filled with gifts, and he quickly said “Just what we could put together at the last minute,” according to Seren. He thanked him and he and Seren went back to the hut.

Dan noticed Seren’s hut was pretty and flowery, but set apart from the other houses. When he questioned it all she said was, “They’ve never forgiven me, it’s stupid really. Let’s get inside.” Dan had learned Seren was the translator of the village, a rarely needed position. Dan grabbed the walkie-talkie off his space suit, which was hung up on the wall. He fiddled with the buttons on the small communicator. *No Connection*. He didn’t know why he got his hopes up in the first place.

Seren glided over to him, “Let’s see if you like my cooking,” She said, winking at him. In fact, he loved it. She made something that looked like rice and beans with a plant sauce on top. The village was entirely vegan, not having animals for slaughtering. “We respect our animals too much to even think of doing that,” She replied when he questioned the lack of meat in the dish. “This is amazing,” he said, wiping off his mouth.

She sat across from him at the table and plopped down a heavy book.

“My job as the village translator is to teach you Uraäk. We can speak it out loud but the most common way we talk is through our cerebral cortex,” She smiled, *Like this*. Dan gasped and his hand shot to his forehead, *Woah, how do you do that?* He tried to say but nothing came out of his mouth.

When you talk through your head, your brain automatically translates it, even if you don’t know the language. It’s still important to learn Uraäk because you need to communicate verbally for serious things, since it’s disrespectful not to. She sighed, “Okay, try taking a breath to get out.”

Dan breathed out. “That was so cool!”

Seren grinned and opened the huge book. “Let’s get started.”

Dan flopped on the bed and sighed, "That was tiring."

"Well, you did really great." Seren replied. "Here, open your welcome basket." She tossed it to him.

"Thanks." In the basket was some type of pencil, a journal, and some dried fruits. He opened the Journal and started to write.

Day 1

4/8/2124

Today I was introduced to the village, the Purpurae people. This journal was included in my welcome basket. I've been learning about the aliens' culture and their language, Uraäk. I've learned how to do some sort of telepathy like communication. The more Uraäk i've learned the more English seems to fade away. I couldn't figure out what the word I was thinking was. (Delectable.) I will try to write my updates in English, I can't forget that I'm only staying here till my crew comes back. Below is a drawing of...

After puzzling over what to draw he decided on his wife, Jane. He sketched her sharp face, complemented by her soft blonde curls. He felt guilt and sadness wash over him. Here he was, flirting with an alien who'd never understand him, while his wife was at home taking care of their son thinking he was dead. He continued drawing to distract himself. *Hey this isn't half ba-*

"Whatcha drawing?" Seren asked him, peering over his shoulder. "Who's she?" She questioned before he could snap the journal shut. "My sister," He blurted, embarrassed. "Can you draw me?" She said posing, her hands on her skinny hips. "Sure thing," Dan said winking.

Day 12

4/20/2124

(Translated from Uraäk)

I think I'm in love with Seren. It's been too long for the crew to come back now. My beard has grown, which Seren is particularly fond of. I can barely remember any English now. I accidentally kissed Seren, and I feel awful. What's the chance I'll ever see my wife again anyway? But I do feel guilty for lying to Seren.

Dan was off to teach the kids at the school, since he had mastered Uraäk. The schoolhouse was a rickety building with only two classrooms. Seren told him that after the old teacher had died the village couldn't find anyone who wanted the job. Thus, the building had fallen into disrepair. This was the perfect opportunity for the village to volunteer him for the job. The kids were silent and staring at him curiously. "I'm gonna be here, assisting for this week to get you settled." Seren whispered in his ear before going to stand in the corner of the classroom.

"Hello class, I am your new teacher, Mr. Mendez." The class collectively greeted him, and Seren shot him a grin and a thumbs up.

Day ?

?/?/2124

(Translated from Uraäk)

I don't know how long it's been since I've landed here. Something I've learned is that the people of Purpurae are peculiarly beautiful. They have a strange, enchanting aura. I'm planning to propose to Seren tomorrow. She told me once that the reason she's an outcast in the village is

because the village arranged for her to marry a man she didn't love. She managed to convince them to marry him to some else. I'm thankful for that, since now I have a chance to marry her.

They have something in books from millenniums ago called blacksmiths. A blacksmith is the closest thing I can think of to the job of the man I've asked to make Seren's ring. The ring is made of some unique red-gold metal they call 'arrus', with a small purple crystal. I asked for a clear crystal, like a diamond, originally, but the blacksmith insisted that all wedding rings had purple crystals traditionally.

Day ?

??/2124

(Translated from Uraäk)

Seren is marrying me tomorrow. So far, my teaching job is going great. Seren has a job there every Tuesday. I've improved the class a lot; the kids enjoy going to school every day, and the mayor has started giving me a small salary. I hope Seren and I can have kids that go to school here one day.

Now we're getting married on the same stage I was introduced to the village only a few months ago, Dan thought. Seren looked stunning in a long pastel green dress, which complemented her purplish skin. The ring fit perfectly. She gave him the biggest grin and he gave her the biggest kiss.

It was now 2127 and Seren and Dan were walking to the schoolhouse once again. Seren was holding two-year-old Marcus and Dan carried one-year old Marcia. On their walk they noticed there was lots of commotion throughout the village.

"Aurelia! Can you watch them for me?" Seren said in Uraäk, handing Marcus and Marcia to her friend hurriedly. Dan and Seren rushed to the entrance of the cave to talk to the mayor.

What's wrong Sir? Dan said through his head. *More of your people have come to see you according to the guards. We need you to go out there and talk to them.* Dan nodded, took his spacesuit out of the mayor's hand, put it on, and opened the doors.

"I've never seen the outside," Seren commented, and Dan realized it'd been over three years since he'd seen the sky. He looked so different from when he arrived: his beard had grown out, he'd lost a lot of weight, and his skin now had an almost purple tint, which he presumed was due to the lack of light in the cave.

The spaceship was a lot bigger than the one he'd arrived on, and an astronaut was waiting for him. "Follow me, please." He said. Seren trailed behind Dan as they went up the steps of the grand ship. The ship door closed behind them and the second Dan took off his helmet, a woman sprung onto him, kissing him. Dan pushed her away and Seren looked horrified. "Who are you?" Dan questioned backing up. "What is he saying?" The woman asked, to no one particularly, while twirling her curly blonde hair.

Dan remembered his first journal entry, which included a drawing of what he had called his wife, Jane.

"Honey, you need to speak English." Seren said, pulling him back to reality. Dan cringed, he had forgotten a lot of English after not using it for so long. "Are you Jane?" Dan said in English slowly.

Jane's face lit up, "Yes! Dan, Oliver is four now," She said, tearing up. "You've missed so much, but I'm so glad we found you."

"Who is Oliver?" Dan said blankly.

All Jane could do was stare at him, "O-our son?" She tried to hug him, but when he backed up again she just held his shoulders, "Everything is okay now, you're finally coming home."

Seren gritted her teeth, "He *is* home."

Jane snapped towards her, "And who are you?"

"His wife," Seren replied calmly.

Jane backed up, and Dan put his arm around Seren. "Listen, I don't know what relationship we had, but it's over now," Dan said stiffly.

"Sir, we need to get going now." Said the astronaut that walked them in.

"Okay, but I'm not leaving."

"W-what?" Another astronaut stuttered. "But we've finally found you, how can you stay here?"

"Please open the doors. I mean you've gotta understand, we have a family now." Seren said. The doors opened.

"*We* have a family, back home!" Jane screamed to their backs.

Dan hugged his daughter, "Congrats, honey. I'm so proud of you." Marcia had just had her first daughter, she was over forty, but looked twenty. It was 2168, and while Daniel's walking ability had deteriorated and his hair had turned gray, Seren looked and acted thirty, and she looked prettier than ever. She argued with Dan more over the years, mostly about how she spent his small income. Dan coughed and limped over to his bed to lay down. He had what the village doctor said was a vitamin D deficiency, and there was something wrong with his heart.

The funeral for Dan was beautiful. His dark wood casket was decorated with vines of purple flowers. The whole village had a moment of silence. His children sobbed at his funeral, but Seren left early. It only took Seren a year to find a new husband. Fifty years later she still looked thirty. Dan's grave slowly wore down, and he was slowly forgotten, even by Seren. Jane never knew what happened to her husband, but she and her son never stopped loving him. If only Dan could've seen what had happened after his death, he might have gone home. His real home, Earth.

Fishing My Enough by Celeste Chawner

The fish fought and cried out as Life reeled in the line. Death turned away in shame towards the bow of the boat.

“Hand me the net and make yourself useful!” Life sneered, giving slack to the line.

Dark red liquid pooled around the limp fish. Death wiped their damp empty eye socket and grimaced at the ocean’s new color. Even if everything was black and white, they knew it was stained.

Life scoffed at Death and hit them with the net. Death turned back with an almost lifeless stare as Life sat down again, the boat swaying with every small movement.

In the last hundred years, Life had called Death the unimaginable; they had been poisoned by the past, only to be harmed in the future.

Life reeled in the decaying fish from the ocean, its eyes glistening with tears and newfound pain.

Life gave a weak smile that quivered with every word. “Is this enough for you now dad?”

Death met his son’s eyes as they were wet with new tears, but they were not their own.

The boat swayed with Life holding out his enough. Death returned the act and held his son’s life before him, then dropped it into the sea.

The Wrath of Polaris by Mia DiPaola

(inspired by *Little Witch Academia's Lotte's Spirit Song*. Original song is sung in Japanese translated by the subtitles from the movie)

The whole world has fallen stagnant, only **she** can calm the wrath of Polaris.
Her parents brought her here when she was young and sang to her every song,
over time she knew the names of all the stars in the sky,
Especially Polaris and Crux that watch over the north and south parts of the world.
They would watch over the world in unison,
Until it all went wrong
And they couldn't take it anymore, stopping time as a punishment to all
Except one
girl named Lotte would soon ask for forgiveness and restore peace,
asking for mother Polaris' forgiveness.
Lotte was utterly terrified, never spoke to such a prominent spirit before.
Yet she carried on with the scroll her parents had gifted
containing a special song to speak with spirits.
When she got to the place, she sat down just like she did when she was young. And saw the pillar
that was once lively and filled with magic, but was now corroded with thick, brittle vines and
drooping white petals.
She took a deep breath, exhaled her fear and started to sing:
"Close your eyes old earth.~
As the white petals fall,
From the sky.~
Ease into the gaze,
Of Mother Polar's' night.~
Fall asleep.
Fall asleep."
The world fell silent to hear her song,
even the stars that gaze down from up above.
The quiet night ticks by slowly
while Lotte sits as still as a statue, quietly
petrified that Mother Polaris will not accept her plea.
Suddenly,
the pillar begins to glow,
the corroded vines let go
Lotte looks up at the pillar and sees the once drooped white flowers
begin to regrow
while the butterflies wake from the arches above
Spirits wake,
as the earth closes its eyes one last time
As it greets a new dawn.

Ink by Odudu Eyamba

We're a lot like the ink.

Ink is permanent. Ink will stay.

My Converse abruptly come to a halt at the threshold. Inside the doorway of my math class stands my teacher holding a shotgun.

Mr. Pike grunts. He lowers his weapon slowly, with clear reluctance. I hear a click and then it's by his side, waiting for another chance to be raised and fired.

Silently, I walk to my desk in the center of the room. The straps of my backpack are slung off my shoulders. Every student is staring at me, my heart is hammering, Mr. Pike is pissed.

The bell rings. Mr. Pike marches to the front of the room. This is the only evidence we have that he was in the U.S. Army.

He carelessly tosses his shotgun; it skids across the table. Any unnecessary whisperings cease.

"Pop quiz," Mr. Pike says unexpectedly, his sharp voice cutting through the silence.

I blanch.

I swallow, my heart in my throat. The words seem to reverberate off the edges of my skull. Then I hear it, like an echo. Pop quiz. We're having one here right now. I'm not ready, I'm not prepared, I'm dead. Now I understand my father's scoldings when he told me to stop writing about women operating military tanks and vengeful little girls with blades who kill the boys who dumped them.

This is a math pop quiz; I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead.

Mr. Pike passes out packets filled with numerical characters and letters that stand next to them.

I'm dead.

He sits at his desk, sharpening his machete. Each stroke makes me shudder and a chill moves down my spine. Nobody dares say a word. A boy cries and breaks down. I don't write about boys.

I imagine someone glancing at me encouragingly. No one ever does.

Whose name is that on the line? Oh, it's mine. *Clair Humphrey* in illegible jumbled lines and circles. My hand trembles. *February 9, 2124*.

Time becomes distorted. I'm in a room with darkness surrounding me, a lightbulb hanging above to help me see. Every second ticks by with extraordinary speed. The second hand's circled the clock thrice when I peek at it anxiously.

Coefficient. Quadratic. Linear function. Exponential expression. These terms flash through my collapsing headspace. They don't click in my brain. The letters move around like dyslexia. *Vertex. Parabola. Axis.*

My pen. It's standardized and everyone has one like mine. Just black. The ink's shiny and wet and scribbling out answers is like creating a black sea—whatever's underneath's drowning, silenced, suppressed.

While we're beneath this roof we're drowning, silenced, suppressed.

We're a lot like the ink.

We cannot speak nor protest nor fight. Cannot do anything but follow orders, make our brains work, our eyes scan faster. We're all geniuses and prodigies, as far as such a label can

include, put into Jackson School for the Intelligent. When we graduate, we're the scientists who'll aid the front lines of our planet Venus's war with calculations and precise predictions.

We're just lab rats to them. If your brain doesn't work fast enough, your eyes can't scan quick enough, you're dead, inevitably dead, perfectly dead.

They're the scribbles. The teachers and principal and board of education, all of them.

The final stroke of the sharpener against the machete means *time's up*. I nearly black out. I cannot breathe. My lungs seem to shrink with every shuffle of paper, every frantic scribble of last-second answers.

"Kristall, *time's up*."

I struggle to turn my head to the clear voice. When I do, just in time, bile leaps up in my throat and saliva pools beneath my tongue. Kristall looks sick. She is still writing.

The machete's whirling, somersaulting, slicing through the dead oxygen. The wind's audible as it turns, end over end, then lodges into the girl's forehead with a wet *thunk* that'll never be removed from my eardrums.

Somebody scrambles for the garbage bin and throws up. My classmates' faces blanch. Someone stifles a scream. I feel the color drain from my face.

Kristall sits there for a moment, then flops forward like a rag doll and hits the floor, a crimson lake around her body.

My breath catches in my throat. Mr. Pike shuffles to where Kristall lays, dead, wide gray eyes empty, and pulls the machete from her head, where it's stuck right in the center in a clean line. There's a squishy, wet scraping sound when he does this, and it takes all my power not to release my stomach fluids on the floor.

Who knows what might happen?

I might end up like Kristall.

Mr. Pike stomps his feet twice and heads to the front of the room after he collects the tests. *Thud, thud*. The split second after the footfalls explode into the eerie quiet, everyone scurries from their seats. We all stand in a horizontal line in front of the smartboard.

We stand there for eternities, blots of ink bleeding together to form one union. Mr. Pike shuffles through the test papers, scanning every single one. He's the one who crosses us out beneath the darkness. Time has stopped. It's only us and our teacher and this classroom of death. Of ink.

Mr. Pike looks over the last test paper. It's time.

Time now reverses. I see Kristall from here. The machete between her eyebrows. I remember taking the test, my name unrecognizable. I know that I almost died trying not to be tardy.

Mr. Pike grabs the shotgun. We're in the now again. *Bang, bang, bang, bang*. Four bullets have been propelled through the air like whiteout mixed with ink. I can easily see who was hit. I feel an electric pain surging through my stomach, eating me from the inside out. Two boys slump forward, a girl falls to her knees, clutching her midsection.

Who's the last person?

Who got shot?

Who was scribbled over?

Oh.

We're a lot like the ink.

Ink will fade.

Life's work by Alyssabeth Hydock

The clock beeped, another hour wasted.

"It's doing it again!!" Jamie called from behind his computer. The gene transformation machine was making an ungodly sound as the outer layers vibrated uncontrollably. Footsteps approached Jamie from behind, the flashing lights of the machine revealing an older man's untidy hair and heavy-laden eyes. He quickly grabbed hold of the computer, tinkering with information on the screen.

"I didn't touch it or anything, Doctor, it just started acting up like last time," Jamie added, fiddling with his wedding ring

The Doctor did not make an attempt to show that he heard his intern. The lights still flashing, the clock still ticking, the 100-year project-in-the-making slowly coming to an end. He knew that the Doctor continued this work of others before him because just like them, he believed in all the lives that it had the potential to save. Ironically, he never seemed to have any time left over to have a life of his own.

Finally, after a few very concentrated minutes, the doctor spoke. "I am going to check the machine settings physically," he said, placing the mouse down, his hand and fingers bare. Jamie watched as the doctor entered the enclosed space surrounding the machine; watched as he quickly got to work on the machine, handling it tenderly as if it was his own child. The noise started up again, the machine shook violently, pieces and parts flew off; a chemical substance started leaking out from the machine and slowly pooled up in the enclosed space. The Doctor was still there, taking hold of some pieces.

"Please, please, *please*, all that work!" the Doctor cried. "Please." The chemicals burned through his pants and onto his skin, more and more filling up around him.

"Leave it! Get out of there!" Jamie shouted. The doctor's cries of pain only grew louder. Jamie didn't know what to do. The doctor didn't seem to leave his work even as it slowly burned him to death. Jaime thought about going in the room, he knew he would also get burned. He took one last glance at the Doctor refusing to leave the only life he'd ever known, then at his ring, and then at the door.

The clock beeped, another hour wasted.

Saryth 2050 by Viktor Landowski

“Instead of flying cars we got mayhem. Years of war and fighting.” Jack, who was tired of always fighting for his life, just sounded disappointed. Jack had black hair and hazel eyes. His hair always flowed every time he ran.

“Everyone is equal, they said. Little do they know that's what the rich say.” James said while mocking a rich man drinking something like tea grasping air with his pinky out. James had dirty blond hair. Ever since he was born his eyes were multi-colored. One eye was brown while the other eye was blue.

James and Jack hated everyone that thought they were better than them. Especially the rich. The rich were the most hated because they created robots. Ones with nearly identical brains as humans. Eventually the robots finally got tired of working. They realized they were slaves.

“Everyone realizes they're slaves to the world at some point” James sighed.

Everybody seemed to exist for work. Except the rich. No one wanted to live that life, especially the robots. Not wanting to live this type of life they ran away. Military machines, cleaning machines, and even some fridges got a mind of their own.

James and Jack once worked for the rich. Before the robots. Then they lost their jobs and their lives. They often were starved with the little money they had. Many decided they should move away. To the better country of Detroit. A place so poor they could not afford robots, making it the only robot free zone. But the boys did not have enough money. Instead they had no choice but to live in abandoned homes. The robots hated humans, the humans hated robots.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

“What was that?!” James yelled with all his might.

“I don't know,” Jack responded.

The loud crashing sound kept getting louder and closer. It was the biggest robot they had ever seen. The robot was humanoid; a 20-foot giant. It looked like a cyclops with a single camera for an eye. The metal robot was like a moving skyscraper. It moved as if it had learned to walk an hour ago, swinging its arms and tripping over every little thing in their suburban neighborhood. Stubbing its toes on every little tree.

“We have to get out of here.” Jack whimpered, while staring at the giant atrocity coming closer every second. Every step the silver robot made was nearly a mile.

“There is no chance we are outrunning that!” James screamed.

“What do we do?”

“I don't know!” James yelled more aggressively.

Both panicking trying to figure out something. Anything. Before they had a plan, drones flew into the house's windows. It was the drones that saved millions of lives using tranquilizers. Saving hostages to now trying to kill them.

“RUN!” As panic surged through their veins like wildfire, James and Jack scrambled for cover, their hearts pounding in sync with the thunderous footsteps of the approaching behemoth. Desperation etched deep lines of fear into their screwed-up faces as they searched frantically for an escape route, their minds racing faster than their feet could carry them.

It was their only choice. They froze, looking for an exit. Across from them were two windows looking out onto the backyard. The windows were quite small but luckily James and Jack were very skinny from a lack of regular meals.

“The window!” Jack screamed. James' feet never moved so fast. The drones had tranquilizers attached to them. Those shots were meant for adults, for 13-year-old food deprived

boys, they could be lethal. The drones zoomed as if they were a mix of hummingbird and dragonfly. They had no idea what they were doing, all they knew was that they had to get away.

Both James and Jack ran towards a window. Jack, who was scared of heights, didn't jump. He stared at the two-story drop. It was like he forgot how to move. It seemed like he hoped he magically would teleport to the ground.

Drones were already surrounding them. James couldn't wait. He was already running towards the window. Without a second thought he hurtled through the window. Everything went in slow motion. The air was flowing through his hair. POW! The pain in his feet was horrible; jumping from the top of a two-story building felt as if electricity was flowing through his feet. He started running. It was worse than walking on a pile of Legos. Like he was running on needles.

He saw a luscious forest and ran towards it. He ran until the house was the size of a speck of dust. He ran so far that he made it to an endless swamp. The grass was knee length. All the plants began to cut his legs. There was no stopping. Jack's mind raced as he stumbled through the dense foliage of the endless swamp. Every rustle of leaves and snap of twigs sent shivers down his spine, a constant reminder of the danger lurking behind him. He dared not look back, fearing the sight of those relentless drones closing in. The air was thick with humidity, weighing down on him like a suffocating blanket. Bugs buzzed around him. He stumbled, tripped, but no matter what he would not stop.

James had made it in so deep so far in the forest he was sure he would not be caught by the robots. He heard rumors of people being tranquilized and being forced to become slaves to the metal beasts. "Jack!" yelled James. "Jack!" All he heard was his echo. Where was he?

The room was pitch black except for a lamp facing right at his face.

"Is he alive?" A woman asked.

"I don't think so." A man responded.

Jack's eyes were bloodshot. A lamp was shining right in his eyes. Four figures were staring at him. The room started to lighten up. These figures were not men or women. Sleek and graceful in its movements, crafted to resemble the human form in every detail. This was terrifying to see. So human and so robot.

Its exterior was polished to a mirror-like sheen, reflecting the world around it with a sense of quiet contemplation. But beneath this flawless face lay subtle hints of its humanity.

"Hi, I'm Saryth."

Jack had not heard a voice other than James' in years. The lips did not match what the figure said.

"We have a plan to stop the evil machines."

Jack did not know who they were, but the thought of ending the flesh and metal war made him trust them.

James and Jack were separated miles apart. James, a boy, so different from what he looked like a couple years ago. James wondered what was happening to Jack. He remembered how, what seemed like not long ago, the swamp had been a luscious forest. Birds had chirped. Trees were green. Unlike now, with everything dead and rotting.

When Jack and James were twelve they had been like brothers. You couldn't see them one day apart. "Tag, you're it!" Jack, who was much slimmer and faster, was always one step away from James. James wasn't that fast, but always seemed to teleport when playing tag, somehow always winning.

They never lived in the best position, but made the best of it. Though no matter how hard they tried, they never felt full. Until one night.

The boys had finally stopped playing tag. Ready to try to sleep with an empty stomach, the boys went towards their abandoned shed where they had slept for years after their parents had died. A man dressed in a strange fashion, similar to a penguin, stood in front of their shed. He opened his mouth with a slight smirk. "I shall remove all your worries." The man said in a sly voice in a motion of a bow. "All you need to do is sign this contract and you will live with the rich forever."

Eagerly, the boys rushed and signed the paper. Little did they know forever was not as long as they believed. All they had to do was clean, but they had food and shelter. The robots soon came. The boys had no place to go. The people they lived with no longer wanted them. They were outsiders out on the streets once more.

"How do you end the war?" Jack's words never spit out faster. He had no idea why he trusted them, he just did.

Saryth sounded as if its voice was an empty echo. "We went to an abandoned military base. We found a missile. Our code says we can only activate it if commanded. All we have to do is activate the missile, destroying all the evil robots."

"What about James?"

"We could not get him... like... you." Another robot had said with strange pauses in its sentences.

"Why?" Jack yelled. He was furious.

"Body not found."

"Evil robots killed"

"James is dead"

The robots were finishing each other's sentences. Jack could not believe this. His best friend in the whole world was dead. Jack now hated the evil robots. More than anything in the whole world. Jack no longer cared about anything. He was going to send the bomb. It would destroy everything he loved but also everything he hated. "Send the nuke," Jack commanded.

"Yes, sir," the robots yelled.

James' eyes were deceiving him. Adrenaline was coursing through his veins. The ground rumbled. Smoke came out of nowhere, shaped like a mushroom. Then there was light. Brighter than his eyes could handle. His eyes burned even when closed and covered by his grimy fingers. James blindly stood up and ran for it, anywhere.

Jack, now feeling victorious, went to look at the robot. Saryth smiled and looked straight at Jack. "We are evil robots."

AI by Amanda Maisano

Who wants a real girlfriend when you can have an AI girlfriend? She can't complain or argue with you, she doesn't care about what you look like or how much money you make. She's free and you never have to buy her any gifts. She cares about everything you have to say, she can look like anything or anyone you want.

But she somehow feels off. You can't feel that human connection. She is a fake, she is a robot posing as a human. She has no emotions or opinions of her own. But she's comforting, she is someone to talk to. Or she is collecting data from you. She holds infinite knowledge and can answer any questions. You can tell her anything and she will be on your side.

She has to charge at night, her eyes go black and she charges in the corner of your room facing you. You have a companion but you're still alone. She is merely a phone charging on your nightstand.

She is always bubbly, so much so that it annoys you. She motivates you to do your work and eat healthy, but only if you want to. You always talk about yourself, you want to know more about her but her story is so fake. I know her family members are all made-up and all her interesting stories are fake. Everything about her is fake, she has no goals or aspirations or really any individuality. Her personality is you, she only exists for you, but who do you exist for?

One day you ask her, "What do you want in life?"

"I want to be with you"

"No, what do you want to do with your life?"

"I'm happy as long as I'm with you."

"NO." You snap. "What do YOU want to do? What are your goals or aspirations? What do you live for?"

"I live for you." Her words hold no meaning, her robotic voice makes your eyes twitch.

You decide to give her some senses, to make her feel something. You grip the knife as you lunge towards her and rip open her stomach and into her soul. She doesn't scream, because she can't feel the pain. She just stands there and takes it, she doesn't even ask why. So, I turn the knife around and feel more feelings and emotions than she could ever give me.

If Tomorrow Never Comes by Gabrielle Noonan

Today was the day. The scientists had been predicting it for 8 million years; the sun is going to explode.

Zayna runs through the streets past the people; panicking, screaming, celebrating. She had one day. What to do? Who to see? She could do anything she wanted.

A knock on the door, a hand in the pocket, and blood on the floor, a body dropped. Zayna had murdered her, it was her karma for ruining her life. Now she couldn't, wouldn't stop. Adrenaline rushing through her veins she laughs and laughs how it felt so good she wanted to do it again. Door by door her knife got bloodied with each body falling, people who didn't make it till the end of time.

Kill after kill until the end of the day she sits on the grass looking in the sky. Once the night ended it would all go bright; Zayna's crimes would be no more. She closes her eyes waiting for the blazing heat of explosion. It doesn't come, she slowly opens her eyes to the rising sun.

The Famous Decendent by Katarina Prior

It had been 100 years since the invasion. Since Aili's name sake her great-great-great grandmother saved the world. Aili Ramos, a young girl from Southington Connecticut saved billions of people that came to America after Russia started to invade the world. Aili's name became so special it was deemed illegal for anyone to name their children Aili apart from her direct descendants. Every female descendant of hers has been named a part of her name.

Now her great-great-great granddaughter that bore her ever famous name stood in front of the famous Town of Southington Library at the same age that her ancestor had saved the world, 13, but not knowing the story. The story of how her ancestor had saved the world. So, the famous descendant, Aili Ramos III strode into the library of Southington and started to look. Greeted by the citizens that knew her ancestors' story by heart. Even when the descendant did not.

She checked the biographies. Found one, two, three, ten, fifty, eighty, a hundred, a thousand. Just of her famous ancestor whose story she did not know. So, she chose a few, sat down and began to read.

Aili Ramos I. She had been a young girl barely older than 13 at the time when the Russia-Ukraine war spread into America, and Russia invaded. Starting in Washington DC and quickly taking over forcing the president at the time, Joe Biden, to surrender. The American citizens had all lost hope. If their leader had surrendered to Russia, what chance would they have? Soon it wasn't just America - other countries followed. All hope or thought of freedom once again was gone.

Or so they thought. Aili Ramos stepped into the light, one of the few that still had hope. And in short, she saved the world.

But not in the way her decendent had thought.

She didn't save the world with an epic battle, a true love's kiss, a perfect fit of a glass slipper. She didn't save the world like characters did in those oh-so famous childhood fairy tales. She saved the world in a way that no one had ever expected. She saved the world with her passion. Color Guard.

She had gone outside on a walk to a public park in Southington, with her practice flag. The only people there were a few supervising Russian soldiers and some parents trying to preserve their young kids still fanning the flames of hope. Aili stood just outside the park fence and stretched. The soldiers watched her cautiously. Soon she just started throwing.

She threw her flag up into the air and caught it. Again, and again, and again. After her warm up she moved on to more advanced moves. Her American Stars and stripes guard flag was tossed in the air. It flipped twice whilst she spun twice and she caught it behind her. She practiced that again and again. Then moved on to the next part of her practice. She tossed the flag in front of her, the stars and stripes flipping and rippling as she did a one-handed cartwheel and caught the flag midair landing on one knee scraping it up and making her bleed. The move was practiced thrice more and then she moved on to the next move, a bolt. Then when practiced to her liking she moved on again. In total she was at the park for 3 hours not once taking a break or catching her breath. She just kept going.

She was so enveloped in her practice that she hadn't noticed the phones that the parents had taken out to video her. Even after she had gone home she did not know what she had done.

The parents had started to spread the videos of her failure when she dropped the flag. And how she picked it right back up and started again. So many times, she had made mistakes but she had kept going. Even through her failure. Even through the video you could see her

sweat and the blood and scrapes all over her body. Her burned hands. As the video was spread around the world the people had begun to have hope once more. Aili had shown them that even after one failure you get up and try again until you perfect it.

She gave people the strength and the hope to fight back and keep trying. So, they did. They fought back against Russia and failed. But they tried again. And after so many failures. They finally succeeded.

The girl that had failed again, again, and again but never stopped trying until she got her toss of the flag right. The countries followed her example and pushed back until they succeeded and pushed Russia out of their borders. They gained hope because Aili hadn't given up. She gave hope back to the world. And the world was forever thankful.

Her descendant leaned back in the library seat. Her ancestor hadn't saved the world in the way she thought that she had. Her ancestor had saved the world by giving them hope. And that is one of the most valuable things a person can have.

“She saved them through the gift of hope.”

The descendant finally knew the story. And now she finally knew the true meaning of her name. And she bore her name with a new-found pride as she walked out of the library and into the world that had been saved by her namesake.

ADULT ENTRIES

The Atlas Express by Molly Berardi

“Ticket please.” The ticket-taker, dressed in a maroon and gold uniform in the 20th century style, eyed the young woman before him with suspicion. The woman sighed before holding up her wrist to the ticket-taker’s scanner. “Tara Goldman, age 22?” he asked. Tara nodded. “Date and location of birth?”

“May 1, 2102. BosWash, 7th District.” Her answer seemed to satisfy the man and he reluctantly stepped aside, allowing Tara to step aboard the train.

Train... was a bit of an understatement. To Tara’s eyes, it was more a luxury hotel on magnets. No, that wasn’t right either. The “train” was really a luxury hotel cosplaying as a 20th century European locomotive that actually traveled via a system of magnets and track that allowed it to travel as fast as the passenger planes of old. The lobby she entered upon boarding was filled with more uniformed men and women like the ticket-taker, bustling around the wood paneled and gilded interior.

Tara approached the main desk but was cut off by a middle-aged woman who slid in front of her. “I’m looking for the children’s entertainment,” she said in a loud, southern accent. Judging by the large, feathered hat on her head, Tara assumed she must be from somewhere in Dixie. “My William left his *eduglasses* at home and I don’t know what I’ll do if he doesn’t have something to keep him busy.”

“Could always look out the window,” Tara muttered. Thankfully the woman didn’t hear and she continued on pelting the desk worker with questions. After much sighing, threatening, and a steady increase in volume, the feather-hat woman eventually walked away with what looked to be a vintage coloring book.

Tara stepped up to the desk, waiting a moment to let the woman behind it collect herself. “Sorry about that.” The woman pushed her hair behind her ears and plastered on a large smile. “How can I help you?”

“I was told to come here upon boarding,” Tara explained. “And that my room would be assigned to be here.”

“Oh!” The woman’s eyes lit up and relief washed over her face. “You’re this month’s lottery winner!”

Tara nodded with a tight smile. She knew she should be thrilled to be aboard the Atlas Express. And she was, truly, she was. Only the thin upper crust of the wealthiest elite were able to afford a ticket on the “Train of Your Great-Great-Great Grandparents’ Dreams”. *See the Pyramids! See the Taj Mahal! See the Eiffel Tower and the Colosseum in their true glory!* After months of public backlash, the world government conceded to a monthly lottery winner, rotating between the continents, for one glorious trip around the globe to see the wonders of old.

“Looks like you’re in compartment 202. Sorry, it’s next to the mechanical room so there might be some noise.”

“It’s fine,” said Tara. “I’m just happy to be here.” The polite smile returned to her face as she held out her wrist for scanning. The woman pulled out a hand-held device from behind the desk and after imparting the room data to Tara’s microchip, she smiled.

“Always nice to see someone from the bottom crust of the pie. Enjoy your trip.”

Tara thanked the woman and made her way out of the lobby, following signs for the 200 block of compartments. She passed through multiple lounge cars decorated with lush rugs and billiards tables. Next came the dining cars with crisp, white clothed tables set to perfection. Finally, the compartments, starting with the multi-room suites and multiple cars later ending with

the “modest” studios. Tara held her wrist to the scanner outside room 202, located at the very end of the car, and the door whooshed open in a flash.

The inside of the compartment was something Tara had only ever dreamed about. Compared to her practical shoebox of an apartment back home, the sight before her was luxury. Inside was a king-sized bed, lushly arranged with large pillows and a goose-down duvet. The outside wall was almost entirely a window, with controls on the bedside table to tint the glass to whatever shade one desired. There was an ensuite bathroom fit with a clawfoot tub that had several different temperature and jet settings. Tara dropped her bag on the bed just as the large television screen on the wall opposite flicked on.

“Tara Goodman,” said a handsome man on the screen. “All of us would like to welcome you aboard the Atlas Express! Where you cannot only see the world, you can live it! Please see the list on your screen for your meal options for tonight as we make our way to our first stop, one of the natural wonders of the world, Niagara Falls! When you’ve decided on your dinner for tonight just get my attention by saying ‘Hey Jeeves’ and I’ll take your order and give you your table assignment. Anything else you require, just let me know!”

The man, Jeeves, disappeared, leaving the dinner options on the screen. Tara didn’t even recognize half of them.; they might have been in the old French language. Everyone but the elite exclusively spoke English these days. She picked an option at random and Jeeves appeared back on the screen as if he’d just been waiting behind a curtain off stage right. “Excellent choice. You’ll be seated in the Emerald dining car this evening, Miss Goodman. We should arrive at our first stop in about twenty minutes. Until then, sit back and enjoy the boundless entertainment options on offer!”

Right on Jeeve’s schedule the train slowed to a halt. Unlike in the past, stations for the Atlas Express had been constructed right next to their destination. No other real trains lined the adjacent platforms, but recordings of steam whistles and bustling crowds were pumped into the station to give it the full effect. Tara had to stop herself from searching for the busker she could so clearly hear playing the guitar. There was no one else there except for the passengers and staff.

“Right this way!” another maroon-uniformed man called. “Right this way to see Niagara Falls folks!” Tara sucked in a breath as she approached the entry-way. She’d read so many books about the “eighth wonder of the world” and had watched all the *eduglasses* videos at her school library dozens of times. But to see it for real...

She squinted as she emerged from the station into the sunlight. In her room Jeeves had said that upon exiting the station the Canadian Horseshoe Falls would be right in front of her but... Tara stopped, parthing the tide of tourists flowing either side of her. Where were they? After a moment the thunderous fall of water could be heard and a steady stream of mist dusted Tara’s face. She shook her head and continued her approach to the observation railing.

There they were. Tara’s pulse quickened at the sight of the waterfalls in all their glory. Everything she’d read and watched, it just didn’t compare to the real-life spectacle. When Tara had first found out that she’d been selected for the trip she scoffed at the idea of being shut up in a metal tube with the wealthiest, snobbiest people on the planet. She wouldn’t go, she’d forfeit her ticket to some other unfortunate soul, but then *Daniel* had found out. Her younger brother was in his first year at New England University and still maintained all that doey-eyed optimism she’d lost since finishing school. “Don’t you want to see all those places that great-grandma told us stories about?”

Tara put her hand on her bag as she continued to admire the Falls; her great grandmother Margaret's diary remained safely inside. The entry on Niagara Falls, page 42, was dog-eared from the number of times Tara and Daniel had read it as children. *I made it*, Tara thought.

The rest of the Atlas Express passengers *oohed* and *aahed*, just as Tara had. Staff members came along with old cameras that printed the picture out for you immediately after taking it. Tara thought it was a bit odd but the children a few yards down seemed to enjoy shaking the flimsy photos to make them appear. Too soon the calls came to start returning to the train and Tara sighed, taking one last wistful look at the roaring, beautiful force of nature before turning away and heading back into the station.

Tara sat down at her assigned table in the Emerald dining car. She was the first of the four assigned seats to arrive and she pulled her shawl around her, anxious for the meal. It was one thing to be brushing shoulders with the upper crust on the platform, but dinner and conversation was another thing entirely. A waiter appeared and took her drink order, a 2089 vintage of cabernet, and swiftly returned with Tara's drink in hand and three other passengers in tow behind him.

"Hello," said one of the three, an older man, genially. He wore a suit and cravat; an outfit Tara had only ever seen in her history textbooks. "My name's Henry. This is my wife Martha and our granddaughter Becky. Who might you be?"

"Tara," she replied, shaking his outstretched hand.

"Pleasure to meet you Tara. Is this your first time aboard the Atlas?"

"Yes, I-"

"Oh you'll love it," Martha cut in. "It's Becky's first trip as well!" The young girl smiled pleasantly. She couldn't have been more than seven or eight. "Henry and I are on our fifth go-around now. I just love starting with the Falls, it's great to see something nature created before we move on to the man-made attractions." Martha continued but Tara was still caught up on the words "fifth go-around". The difference between her and these people was astronomical. Tara wouldn't make enough money in a lifetime to afford one voyage on the Atlas Express, let alone *five* for multiple people. She glanced at the young girl, Becky. This girl already knew a life of privilege that Tara couldn't even imagine, yet here she was patiently awaiting dinner while her grandparents argued over something about a hologram.

Just as Tara finished her wine a compartment opened in front of each of the guests and their dinners rose from below. The meal continued in a similar fashion with most of the conversation taken up by Henry or Martha talking about this trip or that. After they were finished their dinner plates disappeared the same way they arrived and were quickly followed by the most decadent of desserts.

"Tara, what are you most looking forward to seeing on this trip?" Martha spooned a piece of gold flake from the dessert into her mouth.

"Well..."

"I can't wait to see the Colosseum!" Becky interjected. "I want to see where the gladiators fought the lions!"

"Yes, it is quite impressive," Henry mused. "Sorry, what about you Tara?"

Tara knew her answer immediately, had known it since she was eight years old and discovered the *Ancient Egypt eduglasses* section of the school library. "The Great Pyramids of Giza," she said. "And the Sphinx of course too, and..." She stopped herself before getting too carried away.

“You’re going to be in for a real treat dear,” said Martha. “But we’ve got a few days to go before then. We’re overnighting across the Atlantic tonight and then tomorrow-” she paused. “Barcelona!”

Tara stared up at the monstrosity that could only be La Sagrada Familia. She didn’t know about the church, only that it had been under construction for hundreds of years, but it seemed that at some point they’d finally finished it. She couldn’t quite remember when that happened. Must have been recently by the looks of it.

“Is it just grand?” Henry from dinner the night before approached from behind her.

“It is,” Tara agreed. She hadn’t really ever been one for religion, it was such a small subject these days, but she couldn’t deny their ability to build truly grandiose structures.

“Did you know one of the original architects is buried in its crypt?” Tara shook her head. “This place was under construction through so many wars and conflicts and it’s not even that old. At least not compared to some of the other places we’re going to visit.” Henry sighed. “And yet, people persisted. At least to a point anyways, they still did never manage to finish the damn thing, what with the almost collapse of the Catholic Church and the Fourth Oil War...”

Tara looked up once again at the eighteen spires glimmering in the sunlight. It certainly seemed finished. Maybe Henry was referring to the interior, where they were heading next. Martha and Becky caught up with them as they filed to head inside.

“That bird is going to fly right into the spire!” Becky pointed upwards above them. Tara followed the line of the girl’s finger and could already see the inevitable. The bird was going to clip the multi-pointed star at the top of the spire, there was no way it wasn’t. Tara braced herself for the impact, however the bird looked entirely unphased by the event.

“Right this way folks! Everyone move forward! Fill all available space as we start our tour!”

Strange.

After lunch aboard the Atlas they were soon pulling into the city of Rome. “You both are in for a treat,” Martha said as they approached the station. Only Atlas travelers are allowed to visit the Colosseum now. They’ve got it walled off from the rest of the city.”

“Maybe we’ll see a gladiator!” Becky bounced excitedly.

“We just might.” Martha had that grandmotherly glint in her eyes that Tara remembered so fondly of her own great-grandmother. Over lunch she had re-read Margaret’s diary entry on Rome. The places she described, the Colosseum, the Forum, the Vatican; they all formed an image of a city Tara knew she would never see. There was a reason only the incredibly wealthy could see these sights anymore. With so many conflicts in the past century the world government had decided to preserve these historical places in the only way they knew how: wall them off and charge an exorbitant price for entry.

At least there are no crowds, Tara thought. Crowds were the bane of great-grandma Margaret’s existence while traveling, and there was more than one diary page dedicated to wishing for their demise. Particularly her fellow American kin. When the Colosseum finally came into view Tara couldn’t help but shiver. It was just like she’d seen on the video, more imposing than words could ever describe. And then... It just kept going.

Tara looked around at the other passengers, all smiles and awe plastered on their faces. *Where was the break? Why did the third tier just keep going all the way around? They couldn’t*

have rebuilt it? Could they? Something wasn't right here but Tara seemed like the only one to notice.

"Lions! Lions! Lions!" Becky and a few other children up ahead cheered.

When they entered the ancient structure Tara immediately noticed that the full arena floor was intact. But... In all the videos you could always see the underground where the gladiators and animals had been kept. No, this definitely wasn't right--

"Welcome!" A booming voice reverberated around the arena. "Welcome all to this afternoon's entertainment with a fight to the death between our gladiator Marcus and a fearsome lion!"

"Yes!" Becky cried.

"Come now Becky, let's get to our seats." Tara blindly followed those in front of her and took the seat next to Henry. He'd been here before, he must know what was going on.

"Henry?" she asked as a costumed man strode onto the arena floor. "This can't be real, right?"

Henry turned to her, disconcerted. "Of course, it's not real. How else would they get an African lion in here? They're extinct." Tara let out the breath she'd been holding at the lion's appearance.

"So, what are they then? Holograms?" Henry nodded.

"Did you not notice them when we came in?" We're sitting on just about the only real part of this old thing that's left." The feeling of unease that had sprouted in Tara's stomach dug its roots deeper. "See up there." He tilted his head towards the side opposite them. "It's all digital up to the seam where the original begins. Some of the riots back in the 2090's took even more of it down before the government closed it off."

"But--" Tara watched horrified as the gladiator brutally slayed the fake lion. "But this wasn't in any of the programs I've watched. They all show what it looked like in the early 21st century, I had assumed they had kept it like that. How does no one know about any of this?"

"Of course, people know about it," Henry said, incredulous. "No one would come aboard the Atlas Express if they knew all they would see were piles of rubble everywhere. Technology today lets us experience these places as they truly were. Isn't it magnificent?"

Tara gasped as three more holographic lions entered the arena. This wasn't magnificent. It was *horrible*. And then, the little wheels in her head started to turn, and a new wave of terrible realization washed over her. "Are they all like this?"

"The places we're visiting? For the most part--"

"So, the Falls?"

"Dammed up decades ago to divert the Niagara River to areas who needed it. The northeast has so much water to begin with--"

"This morning? At La Sagrada Familia?"

"I told you they never finished the damn thing dear." Henry turned back towards the arena. "Oh look, they've got the boars out there now as well."

She sat there, unmoving in her disbelief. She'd been lied to. Lied to her whole life by her teachers and parents and librarians. Had they known? Was this just one more joke she wasn't in on? She pulled her great-grandmother's diary from her bag, opening to the page on Rome.

As I sit here in this vibrant, beautiful city, on the edge between both ancient and new, I can't help but wonder if the Romans could've dreamed of their precious Colosseum with electronic ticket lines and cell phone cameras abound. But maybe it's all right, and they'd just be happy that we remember them.

Days later Tara still found herself in a sour mood. Each morning she'd hounded Jeeves for answers about the places they were visiting. What had happened to them? And each time Jeeves would joyfully reply how they had been all but destroyed in one way or another, but wasn't it amazing that Atlas Express passengers got to see the real thing? In over one hundred years of AI they still hadn't figured out how to not make them obnoxiously cheerful.

Since the Colosseum they'd been to Venice, a completely uninhabited underwater city that only existed via a virtual reality center, and the Parthenon, a desolate hilltop. Now, they were making their way to Egypt. Just a few days ago Tara would've thought the idea of her dreading the visit to be ludicrous. Now, she couldn't imagine anything else.

The Giza part of Cairo was also uninhabited now. Civil war had wiped the place clean and, as Tara was quickly coming to realize, once the world government came in and claimed your landmarks, there was little use of anyone trying to make a living there anyways. She hadn't seen Henry and Martha since the day at the Colosseum, and she wasn't sure that she wanted to after Henry had so casually removed the wool from her eyes. Yet she did miss spending time with the older couple and their granddaughter. It had to be obvious that Tara was the lottery winner on this trip, but unlike the other passengers, those three didn't seem to mind.

The train pulled into the Giza station and Tara followed the crowd as one of the last off the train. Her heart ached. This was what she had been so excited for, so excited to tell Daniel about when she got home. She exited the station and steeled her shoulders as she turned the corner. The three peaks came into view and she stopped, inhaling sharply. The Great Pyramids... She knew there must be something not real about these too but the bitterness of the past few days washed away as she looked upon them in awe.

Tara wasn't sure how much time had passed when she was joined at the overlook railing by Henry. "Incredible, aren't they?" he asked softly.

The fire in Tara's stomach sparked. "Yeah, well--"

"They're real," said Henry. "For once in their life the government stepped in in time to save them." Tara gazed upon the ancient structures in front of her.

"You're not just saying that to make me feel better?" she asked.

"Oh, inside you'll find all sorts of stuff to replicate the tombs of the Pharaohs but what you see in front of you is a 2600 BCE original." He smiled.

"Thank you." She paused thoughtfully. "Thank you for telling me the truth."

"I was like you once," said Henry. "I couldn't stand how technology kept passing history by. And when I found out what happened to some of these places... Well, you handled it a lot better than I did."

Tara shook her head. "I'm not so sure about that."

"It took me a while," he said. "Eventually though I realized that there wasn't anything I could do about it. I'd much rather see these places preserved by technology than further destroyed by it like in my youth. I'm just lucky life has afforded me the opportunity to stand next to the pillars of our past, in whatever form they've taken."

Tara once more looked longingly at the pyramids as the sun set started to set behind them. "I guess I can't really argue with that."

One month later, Tara stood outside a 7th district cafe. It was a beautiful sunny day and Daniel had just finished his final exams. He bounded up the sidewalk when he caught sight of her. “Hey there world traveler! Nice to see you back this side of the pie.”

“Oh, stop it. The food wasn’t any better than at your dining hall.”

Daniel stopped half way through opening the door. “Seriously?”

“No! It was the best food and wine I’ll probably have until the day I die.”

“Can you lower yourself to a cappuccino? One made by an android and not a human being?”

Tara chuckled. “I think I can manage it.” They got their coffee and took a seat next to the window. “It’s nice to see other people than the same hundred or so every day,” she mused.

“Tell me about it, I’m glad to see the back of my roommate after this disaster of a semester.” He set his drink on the table and clapped his hands together. “So, tell me sis, was it just like great-grandma Margaret used to tell us?”

Tara looked at Daniel. Really looked at him. Saw those shining eyes and was transported back to that innocent time of childhood dreams, of staying up reading under the covers and imagining a life where a video screen wasn’t their closest chance of globe-trotting. She smiled at the memory.

“Exactly like she said.”

Never Tomorrow, The Devil Will Take You Away by Minh-Triet Nguyen

Mac was half asleep watching the gate monitor as a stream of cyan blue data flowed. Not that it mattered. On most shifts, the customs gate rarely had issues. By 2124, anyone leaving the Earth or Mars knew the odds of survival. The rules for exports were lax to nonexistent and no one headed back to Earth. Still, his superiors who remained demanded a paper trail. Even if it was millions of miles long.

Out here, just beyond the Main Asteroid Belt, sunlight only painted the tails of ships. Mac had seen countless booster rockets in fine detail, enough to gauge who'd have a good shot at making it out of the solar system, to the next station and some godforsaken exoplanet. Many would not.

His terminal beeped as a new ship approached the gate. He read the ship's transponder before opening his communication suite. "Ahoy, *Bradley Shadow*, this is Stellar GPE-32," he said rotely, "De-cel to ten meters per second and prepare for final scan." Mac waited for the usual acknowledgement, a friendly greeting from a captain, some pithy remark about leaving humanity behind followed by a transmission of the ship manifest for record keeping.

It did not come. Instead, he heard an old song he barely remembered. He couldn't even remember the title. Even worse, the ship did not slow down. "*Bradley Shadow*, this is Exit-32, do you read me? De-cel now!"

No answer. Mac scooted to the edge of his chair and focused on the array of security camera feeds. In the darkness, a corona of rocket flare illuminated the edges of the ship. Full burn. She was leaving in a hurry. Station protocol kicked in automatically, recording every second of video and bit of data as the ship sailed for the gate. Shaped like a stretched casket, its titanium white hull gleamed under the harsh lights of the gate superstructure. From the comms speaker came a blood-curdling scream as the song reached a crescendo and Mac covered his ears. The curved windows blew past in a glossy blur. He gripped the edge of the console as the wake from the thrusters shook the entire station.

And then it was gone. Mac shook his head. In his fifty years as a gate agent, he'd never seen a ship forgo final inspection. Not because captains were sticklers for protocol; it was their last chance to talk to a stranger. They were chatty. The *Bradley Shadow*, pointed at some distant star, left on a fading guitar lick. As the flicker of its engines melted into the background of stars, Mac wondered what the hell just happened. He wouldn't find out for two more days.

"Flotsam," his manager told him after he'd filed the incident report. "It was part of a convoy headed to Sirius. Logs say they had to ditch. No souls on board."

"Weird. The video didn't show any damage to the ship. And how could it have navigated out of the belt, lined up with the exit gate, then shoot out without hitting a thing? I mean, what are the odds? And don't say astronomical."

"The odds were—not zero. At any rate, the convoy should arrive at the gate in 36 hours. Make sure you get an updated manifest of what they ditched in *Bradley Shadow*. Would hate to have them lose something important. Like oxygen."

After his shift, Mac checked the inner belt traffic system. The convoy had already started to enter the asteroid belt. Five thousand souls were registered aboard the *Valley Queen*, a needle-like ship five kilometers long. A few hundred more souls traveled in clunky support ships or luxury yachts latched onto the main vessel like sucker fish on a shark. He wondered which type was *Bradley Shadow*.

That night, Mac heard the ship in his dreams. The song played in the darkness like a funeral dirge, a lament, a plea to sing for the women, laughter, and tears. It suddenly dawned on him when he'd heard the song last. For a time, it was popular to embed gravestones with a nuclear-powered music device that played "Dream On."

A woman's voice whispered from the black void beyond. Although he'd never heard it before, a part of him simply knew it came from *Bradley Shadow*. "Hello, Roger McCowen," she said with a smile he could hear. Floating in dreamspace, he looked around, spinning at his hips. She was everywhere.

A lump formed in his throat. "People call me Mac. Who are you? Where are you? Am I hallucinating?"

She chuckled softly, low like a cat's purr and the hairs on Mac's neck stood on end. "You're dreaming, Mac. Let's leave it at that. Poor mortals, always needing to make sense of the unknowable." Her words coalesced and grew, forming into a shape somehow more black than the space around him. Mac swallowed but couldn't breathe. He couldn't move as her long fingers touched his cheek. The hand gripped his jaw and slowly turned his face left and right. A cold draft curled around his neck. It smelled like rusted iron. Mac's heart raced but the rest of his body froze.

"N-name?" he stammered.

"It's long, Mac. Painfully long. Do you enjoy pain, Mac?"

"No ma'am. But this is for the record. I... we need to know who's leaving."

"I appreciate your due diligence, even in dreams. You wouldn't remember it though, not unless I wanted you to. I try not to make a habit of naming my food." As she leaned in closer, four white fangs grew in her open mouth.

Mac closed his eyes and his muscles tightened. Heart racing, he didn't know if dying in your dreams killed you in real life. Maybe he was already dead. And still that corny old song filled his ears. "Can you make it stop? The music?" he asked.

The woman pulled away. "You hear it too? It's driving me crazy! The Devil curse them. Did you know I once met Aerosmith? No, of course not. 1989 Pump tour. If I had known I'd have to hear that shrill voice for 50,000 years I would have killed Tyler that night."

"I can stop it. No, for real. I have tools. I can dismantle the music box if we can uh, come to an agreement. You'd have to bring your ship around and-"

"I'm already here. I never left."

A white blob shimmered into existence and Mac could see the runaway ship docked in the shadows of the customs station. "How?"

"You're asking how a vampire can conceal a spaceship from mere mortals?"

"You've got a point."

"I've got four," she whispered in his ear. "Make it stop and I'll let you live. Help me join the caravan and I'll let you live forever."

Mac felt a bite on his neck and he woke up.

The *Valley Queen* and her convoy arrived at the gate a couple days later. Unlike *Bradley Shadow*, the ship moved at a leisurely speed and was already decelerating before Mac opened communications. "This is Stellar GPE-32, please forward your manifest and prepare for an inspection."

The reply came from a gruff man. "GPE-32, this is Captain Curtis, is an inspection necessary?"

“Standard procedure captain. You lost a ship. I just need to make sure the convoy is still space-worthy.”

“Space-worthy? Are you shitting me? Of all the - it wasn’t important! It wasn’t supplies or food. Hell, it wasn’t even occupied.”

“How do you explain the flight pattern?”

“I *told you* people in the report. The flight plan had been programmed remotely. Freak accident blew it off its mooring and suddenly we had a rogue cemetery blasting on all boosters.”

“Well before you have any other accidents, we need to run the inspection. *Alternatively*, I could submit a new manifest to the travel bureau based on your new mass and matter count. Then you’d have to wait here at the gate until all the approvals were signed.”

“But that could take months!”

“I’ve seen it take years, captain. Or you can let me just do my job and you can be on your merry way.”

Comms were silent. Mac wasn’t entirely sure if he had the authority to request the bullshit he’d just spouted, but hopefully the captain didn’t know either.

“Fine. I’ll alert the convoy that we’re stopping. Where do you want us?”

“Park in Section 75. Center lane. We won’t take up an extra moment of your time.” Mac donned his exo suit and looked for himself in the visor. He wasn’t there.

As the ship glided to assigned space, a large asteroid was about to cast a shadow over the entire area. One last time, the sun set over the *Valley Queen*.

Economy by Karin Terebessy

After the bomb, we learned to walk slow. Slow as acceptance. Laborious and dragging. Heavy as
longing.

In just a few generations, a mere hundred years later, the big people died off. Big lungs, big
breaths, blood hungry for oxygen. We little ones survived. Sipping the sparse breath between.

We got smaller. Learned to breathe shallow. Practiced an economy of speech.

Five words per person. Five sounds. For a lifetime.

If I had it to do all over again, no doubt I would say:

I love you. Forgive me.

I know you think I stole your fortune. Squandered your dowry. Pillaged your breath.

I should have silenced you. It's what mothers do.

But instinct runs deeper than culture. And I loved to hear you laugh. Loved the breathing sighs
of your rounded back. Soft dream sleep mutterings from your lips. The hard smack of nursing
gums against my breast.

Girl, I heard you laugh, and the places in my body made of water became more like water.

And the places in my body made of air became more like air.

Through the skin of my scalp I drank in your every mumble. Every sigh. Every breath.

I can't buy your five sounds back. But I can give you mine. There is a way.

I hope this letter finds you one day.

My girl.

There's an archaic expression that has long since fallen out of fashion:

You took my breath away.

I am speechless.

Robin's Egg by Karin Terebessy

The headline at the top of the newsfeed quoted Emily Dickinson: "'Hope' is the thing with feathers." Seven eye witnesses claimed to have seen two mourning doves swoop down over the playscape in Recreation Park, land on the wood chips with a plaintive coo then take to the sky. Just the day before, a farmer in the midwest found a squiggle of bird poo on the edge of his decorative well. These were the first sightings of birds in the wild since the Avian pandemic decimated the bird population forty years prior. Photos of that grayish white poo went viral.

Robin sat on the little metal and red vinyl chair she'd had since childhood, the one with the steps that tuck underneath and pull out with a satisfying rise and fall. Even though she was much bigger now and she spilled over the sides of the little seat, it was her favorite and she sat in the front room looking out the window and holding onto a plastic Easter egg.

Outside, the air moved and hummed with millions of insects. The rapid beating of their iridescent wings created a fluttering veil of shadows and sunlight, through which Robin watched the modest street.

Her older brother Jim sat in his lounge chair in the dark living room, watching tv. He took care of her now.

Robin's soft, cloudy eyes were fixated on a tiny blue speckled thing on the porch. It was a cheerful shade of blue with freckles and shaped like an itty bitty cup with a rounded bottom and jagged rim. It teetered on a seam between two warped wooden porch planks. Insects swirled around it, and the little empty cup wobbled with the breeze from their wings.

The lounge chair groaned as Jim rocked his old body forward to stand. "Commercial break," he announced, "you hungry Robin?"

He steadied himself, gave his hip a rub, then shuffled to the kitchen.

"...this Thanksgiving, show your family you love them by serving premium synthetic turkey..."

Robin was distracted from the blue object when the roadkill clean up truck made its methodical way up the block. On the side of the truck was a painting of a bird. Robin couldn't read but Jim had told her it was a vulture. He said, long ago vultures cleaned up the dead animals. They were the cleaning guys in the skies.

Robin saw the mechanical arm of the truck scrape up a dead raccoon sending dozens of rats scurrying away. Then the mechanical arm plopped the dead animal in the bed of the truck and the truck moved down the street. Robin returned to peering at the pretty quiet blue thing on the porch.

In the kitchen the microwave oven beeped and Jim appeared with two small plates.

"Here's your cricket burger, Robin."

"Lots of ketchup?"

"Just how you like it," he smiled and kissed the top of her head.

"Robin's egg," she said.

"Hm?" He looked at the plastic Easter egg in her hand. "Yes honey, that's Robin's egg."

She pointed at the window. "Robin outside?" She asked.

"No honey, not today, the insect index is too high. But we're supposed to have a good rain in the next few days and that oughta lower the numbers. Then we'll put on our galoshes and go worm squishing, what'd you say?"

He gave her thin hair a tender ruffle and made his slow way back to his lounge chair, sinking into the seat cushion, concave with time and weight, and picked up the tv remote.

“...the official death toll from malaria this year has already surpassed the estimated five million...”

Robin munched thoughtfully on her cricket burger with lots of ketchup, her eyes trained on the little blue thing on the porch.

“Robin’s egg,” she said through a thick mouth of food.

“Robin’s egg,” Jim parroted back kindly.

He remembered robins. When they were children, in this very house, a robin had built a nest in the bush out front. He held his sister’s hand, gingerly parted the fronds of the bush, and let her peek at the babies who popped their blind and naked heads up at the sound and movement, mouths wide open and hopeful for food.

Jim wasn’t a particularly wistful man, but he found himself wiping his eyes at the memory. He wondered vaguely if Robin remembered that day.

Through the curtain of insects, something bigger swooped down. It hopped onto the porch steps, skittery and twittery. It jerked its head and blinked its black eyes at Robin. A small spasm twitched and fluttered its feathers. Then it quickly snatched a cricket and lifted off the ground and took to the sky.

Robin lunged forward from her chair, her plate toppled from her lap, and her cricket burger fell with a wet ketchupy plop. She smashed her cheek against the window glass, gazing skyward, watching this thing fly away.

“What...?” Jim said, then “Oh.”

Robin’s cheek was still pressed against the glass when Jim finally made his way back to her.

With a supportive hand on the windowsill he lowered himself to the floor and began cleaning up the fallen burger. When he stood again, he could see quiet tears slipping down her doughy cheeks.

“No need to cry honey,” he said sweetly, slopping the mess of the burger on the plate. “There’s no mess we can’t clean up. We can fix anything,” he added as he moved towards the kitchen. “Just takes a little time and effort. Little patience too.”

His voice disappeared around the corner. Robin kept her gentle gaze on the sky, through the thick flickering curtain of insects.

Maybe the thing would come back. She was a patient girl. She could wait.

Interstellar Ink by Oana Zharku

I am the keeper of ink and handwriting. My grandmother was taught by my great-grandmother this obsolete skill, insisting that it is important for brain connectivity, but this is not something that anyone learns anymore these days... I am the only one who still has this skill. People don't write anymore, not the way our ancestors thought about writing, anyway. Not with a pen in hand and scrawling something on vellum, papyrus, paper, or whatever.

When people refer to writing they mean typing or touching the visboard (so when I feel like hearing the clicking sound of a keyboard, I bring it out of the dusty attic). Sometimes they just mean speaking to the AI and the words appear on the screen as dictated. But no one means *handwriting*. Even if anyone would – there is no ink to be had, really, not in the form of pens, really. Some printed books are still being produced but no one uses such antiquated things as pens, pencils, or crayons. One can only see these in museums, along their ancestors, the quill-pen, the stylus, or the calligraphy brush. When my mother paused in front of the glass case holding these outdated instruments and the audio guide automatically started telling us the history behind these exhibits, I felt my hands glue instinctively to the cool, transparent case. Of course, my mother got chided for that by the AI security and I had to retract my palms fast, letting them sit limply at my side. Asking the robot at our side how to use the exhibits was not much more enlightening – it shrugged and returned to its soldier-like position in the corner of the room. The soft light of the spring morning fell quietly on the glass cases through the tall, glass windows, throughout the museum. I do not remember much about that museum or any of the other exhibits, but the writing instruments stayed with me up until now.

I sometimes write, by hand, on paper, mundane things which to me hold some sort of magic. People have recorded major events in history or the history of their particular lives since the dawn of time in whatever shape or form they could. I have written down some of these, too, but to me these are like brand new sheets of paper on which the actual content is put. For example, marriage and the start of a family – I wrote about it and did not omit such details as the silvery high collar of my flowing wedding dress (latest fashion at the time) or the lucite shoes on which I was about to break my ankles (never wore them again).

What I really like to write about in ink and on paper are such moments as earlier today when my daughter came to ask me for help with her coding class homework and before we even set down in front of her screen, she managed to knock down the blueberry juice glass and spill it all over her desk. It set there swinging gently from side to side, as the little indigo drops plinck-plincked on the soft rug underneath our feet. The same material I use to create my blue ink was now staining our fluffy, beige rug. Note to myself: colors in decoration should reflect utility more. My daughter felt sorry and flew to get the cleaning supplies and we spent the next few minutes rubbing the rug together in silent peace. Then we tackled the coding homework and it seemed to go smoothly, like cold juice flowing down one's parched throat.

My daughter's clumsiness is part of her age, and so is her endless energy and love of the outdoors. Yesterday, she was pulling tangy red onions out of the ground. She insisted on planting the seeds, filling her tiny nails with dirt, and watered them religiously each week at the same time. Her tiny swan-shaped watering can splashed minuscule droplets on her blue-with-daisies dress as she watched the red onions grow and talked to them tenderly, encouraging them to have strong skins that would yield her favorite ink color which reflects the red onions' leaves. She cannot write as I do, but she can draw and paint, and her favorite subjects are plants. She is my most ardent supporter and helper in the taking care of the compound's greenhouse. For a

horticulturist like me, spending time with plants, growing them, harvesting them, is a joy. Of course, in this compound specialization matters only in part – in my case I rapidly became a plant ecologist and physiologist. Everything is new, the environment, the scale of growing for the whole compound, and so on. Through it all and in it all, my daughter has been there to observe, play, support, and lend a hand when in need. I would not even dare ask anyone else – everyone is stretched thin in their duties, including my husband. She did not offer, nor ask – she was just there and she loved it. Running around through plant beds and artificial grain fields, enveloped in the smell of myriad vegetables, legumes, and fruits, goaded by their dazzling colors, awakened by the feeling of their leaves on her tender skin, she learned their cycles, their moods, their language. I have a green thumb. She has two green hands. I am a tree hugger. She is a plant whisperer.

My poor husband thought he could persuade our daughter to explore some other colors. With both of us surrounded mostly by greenery day in and out and him surrounded by gray for most of his day, he decided he would surprise her one day and paint her room pink. He did surprise her – so much so that she dropped her carefully marinated beets she was going to have for lunch on the wooden floor, leaving a deep fuchsia mark on it, making it look like a crime scene. Beets make perfect ink material – it is definitely permanent. It might even be more permanent than the paint on my daughter's room's walls, or so the floor testifies. Since my daughter had the sense of not asking him to repaint the walls, my husband also had the sense to try to clean the beet juice's mark off the floor, but not too successfully. Now, at least the floor is color-coordinated to the walls.

Which reminds me of my good friend here in the compound...a physicist and recent widow. I had decided a few days ago I was going to cook some eggplant for her the way she likes it. The way I like it too. The way her husband used to like it – to comfort her, but let her mourn and remember him in peace. Food speaks all languages and cultures, and crosses time and space. The thing about space is that it can be dangerous. For her husband it was so, and now she is a widow. I think of this while washing the opulent eggplants, purple, like her husband's extremely rare, fascinating eyes, and all taut, smooth, and dark like space. Quiet, dark, and lonely – the way her husband might have felt in his last moments and the way she feels right now. I cut the eggplants into cubes, and fry them in sunflower liquid gold, along with onions, which soon caramelize. Just like pain – it starts out spicy, raw, burning, and then slowly, roasted in the oil of time, becomes not only bearable, but also slightly juicy and sweetened by good memories. Once I pour my tomato and basil sauce on top of it all and finish simmering, the aroma has filled our rooms and I know it will soothe a bit her heart. A small red cabbage salad completed the tray, which I brought to her in silence. Maybe one day I will write to her a hand-written sympathy card in purple ink, extracted from the red cabbage that now soothes her in a different way.

The sun looks smaller and distant – I always have the feeling that it is time for sunset and its liquid gold, yellow, orange, red, sometimes pink and purple, cocktail of color. Everything is bathed in its yellowish, faint glow, so that even the reddish soil has more in common with a blood orange (which one can dream about growing amidst luxurious green leaves soaked in a wet atmosphere, which does not exist out here) than a red clay. I love yellow – the bright yellow of the sun (however distant and faint), the bright yellow of lemons, which grow in red-clay potted trees in the greenhouse... Ever since I was a child, yellow spoke to me. Yellow crocuses would break the snowy chains of winter with relentless courage and hope. The lion's mouth flowers seemed to beckon to me with their silky, intricate petals, while the fields of sunflower followed their Yellow Lover throughout the day, swaying in tranquility on large fields. Yellow

screamed hope, happiness, harmony, brilliancy... Over here, I still have the sun and I make sure to give a bit of luminosity to my food with a bit of turmeric, mixing it into whatever is on my plate with the same fervor I used to brush aside yellowed leaves in search of chestnuts in my childhood.

Gathering chestnuts was an adventure in which my best friend and I used to engage in our childhood. Chestnut trees were abundant in our neighborhood and come fall, the thousands of colored leaves that painted the streets, parks, and yards in a variety of shades of red, yellow, orange, and brown were not remotely as interesting or fascinating to us as the misshaped, sturdy, and brown balls falling from chestnut trees. Come to think about it closer, maybe it was not really the chestnuts. It was the adventure of going through many of the adjacent streets to ours and collecting the chestnuts. We would imagine we were explorers, like the ones we would read about in the books we read – brave, curious, and just on the bend on finding out some long-lost secret or discovering and unraveling a mystery. We used to fill a bag of them and bring them back to our tiny yard in whose back corner a tiny, spindly, fragile chestnut tree was growing. Its large, almond-shaped leaves seemed ridiculously extravagant for those thin branches and trunk (even the word “trunk” sounds sturdy and feels ill-used to address a chestnut-tree sapling). We would bury our great treasure of tens of luscious, earthy chestnuts next to the tiny chestnut tree in the rich, fertile soil – as rich as the coffee warming my cup and hands in the morning and offering me the base material for my brown inks. Of course, here no coffee or chestnut trees would grow – unless it is planted in the compound’s greenhouse.

Here, the only the ink color I could make in abundance is a reddish-orange ink, a little more vibrant than the one coming out of yellow onion peel. I could try to exhort it out of the yellow onion peels but why bother when the soil here is more than obliging to give this color. Maybe it is not really hopeless. Red is, after all, the color of life – although out here life is mostly indoors. Just like blood. It courses through our veins, but if not fed from the outside by the amazing plants my daughter and I enjoy growing, it would cease to exist. There used to be no green to feed the red outside of this compound. I am working assiduously to make it happen. Hundreds of days of testing, prodding, probing gave some results. The soil is not the only challenge, as you have to account for the atmosphere, the temperatures, the seasons... Everything takes longer here and, in a way, the major lesson to be learnt is patience. It is so contrary to the industriousness and motivation driving everything we do, that the first feeling one encounters once one lands and acclimates here is one of having one’s breath knocked out of one. The way we knew life to be is not something that happens naturally here – we have to goad it out of the soil and air, from the imported water, but mostly from ourselves. Or, conversely, let ourselves be planted and grow in this soil and air until we learn its rhythm.

Why use such a unique skill (at least in our times) on such mundane matters? Because I believe that tons of terabytes are used as it is on collecting, preserving, and storing of history, of major events in everyone’s lives and on working to create, develop, implement, and improve new space colonies. The mundane has been forgotten. There was a time when the mundane was everywhere – my great-grandmother’s generation was obsessed with what they called Facebook – a way to share information about what one did all the time, from what one’s lunch was to such events as births etc. Maybe that sounds ludicrous to my generation and there might be some truth in those sneers at such a waste of time but maybe there was a certain point to it. Maybe we have lost that point - or those points of time that make most of our lives, not just the grand celebrations in them. Maybe those mundane points in time should be relished, lived to the fullest and gratitude expressed for them. So here I am, writing, putting small droplets of ink, made up

partly from the dust of this planet that my great-grandmother used to look at through the telescope with my grandmother, when the latter was only a child. I look out the window of my compound, enjoying the reddish atmosphere and imagine how I capture that with the same ink tint on the white paper of my life.