



Scribe Presents

Pondering Love and Time

MEMORY BOX



MACAULAY SCRIBE



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Love

By Angelina Lambros

Love is a thing that has wings,
That flutter with joy
And consideration.
It is an interested child so patient,
A friend so kind,
That looks out the window with hope,
And wonders of tranquility,
War no more.

It is a lamp that guides the way.
Its sovereign hand shall rest upon you.

It is a thing of compassion.

It wipes away all tears.

It is a light in the dark.

It is generous as a giver,
Yet doesn't ask for anything.

It is a diamond that sparkles,
That gleams with righteousness
And mercy and grace.

The thing that saves souls;
The thing that silences storms.

It warms the cold

And cools the hot,

The act of moderation.



It glimmers in the present.

The history of yesterday is gone
And the mysteries of tomorrow await.

When all things fade
And tremble in fear,

Love stands strong.

Brave in the still night.



Sometimes you look down
And you don't know why.
What is it that caused you,
Caused you to sigh?
Is it by your own design?
Of all the answers, we can't seem to find.

When no one asks if I suffer, if I cry,
Or cares to know the reason,
The reason as to why.
But it's alright, because it is clear as day,
That it doesn't really matter anyway.

Time is flying, passing us by,
Like a starry night that stays for a time.
Ever wonder how adventures come
So quick, like comets?

I've climbed life's mountains.
I've ridden its trains.
When the time has ended,
What is it that remains?

A photo that's black and white
Has been washed out
From its colors shining bright.
Just like hope, it can be restored,
Gazed upon and lovingly adored.



Time is Flying
by Angelina Lambros





Bittersweet by Tzippi Applebaum

Spring showers
Bitter rain
Blooming flowers
Skies aflame

Golden lights
Dark nights
Lies and fights
Then all's alright

The downs are debilitating
But the ups are awakening
Need the bad for the good
The only way it's understood

Traveling far
Staying near
Wanting to see the people
We hold dear

Running away
Back in a few days
Time is lost
But can't be found

Hope is lost
But love remains
A day gone by with you
Is one that is gained



By Maya Demchak-Gottlieb

Time

My face bunches together in a scowl. I can tell that my hands are starting to clench. I take a deep breath and crack my knuckles loudly.

He's standing in front of me now; so close it's like a taunt. His face is an unreadable slate gray.

What makes it even more unsettling is the blankness. He stares at me without anger or love.

Some think he's beautiful. Not me though, I don't think he's beautiful at all. In fact, it's him I'm fighting.

I glance down and see the swirling beams extending in every direction. I shiver. These beams are time space continuum.

"Go away!"

I'm trying so hard to be intimidating, but my voice just comes out as a whine. Or a plea.

He doesn't say anything, he doesn't flinch, and he definitely doesn't stop coming closer.

I try to retreat and find I'm rooted to the ground.

"I won't go, I won't get swept away," I say, my voice hoarse with emotion. "You can't make me move on."

His face flashes briefly, betraying a surprising mercy brewing beneath.

His hands arc around spinning faster and faster and faster, an endless spiral.

I flail helplessly. The tears are flowing freely now. I crumple, scared and grasping out at the universe.

He envelopes me. He's tall as he looms over me. Slowly I reach up, taking his hand.

I imagine myself punching and lashing out violently, but I can't bring myself to fight like I hoped.

I can't fight Time.

Instead he hugs me tight and we step forward together, into the future.

By Unknown

My Freshman Crush

"Sweat dripping off me, before I even knew her name, la-la~"

My first crush.

"Some girl is playing the guitar and singing. Her voice is so soft and pretty. I need to know her name."

My first year of high school, I did not know anyone. I feared middle school would repeat all over again - I would be all alone. And then you greeted me with a smile. You were so welcoming, so warm. You always have been. You still are now.

"I SPOKE TO HER. I just told her her singing was beautiful. She didn't believe me, and in the end she was like just go while still laughing. I love her smile."

I'd bump into you again and again. I began to enjoy your warming presence.

"She smiles and waves hi to me now. I think I can say we're friends now :))"

I began to think there was something between us. I'd smile and grin stupidly when I saw you. I'd fall asleep trying not to think about you and failing to do so. And I would wonder if you felt the same, or were you just being nice and friendly to me?

"I can't stop thinking about how she brushed my hair back when she complimented me today. She's so pretty."

And then you left as quickly as you came into my life.

"I'm so sad. I didn't get to talk to her. She was too busy talking to the other guy. And laughing. So I just said hi."

A part of me wishes you would come back, like you always used to. A part of me wishes you would go out of your way to break down the wall I had built up once again.

"I'm so sad. I texted her. She hasn't responded at all."

Now we have our own friends, living our own lives, as if we were strangers all over again. Sometimes I miss you and the friendship we had. I think about how I'd do anything to bring that back. But we have our own lives now. But the warmth and friendliness you gave me has never left. Thanks for making this world a less scary place

"You know I've dubbed her for the past week. NOT ON PURPOSE. I was so busy."
"How? Aren't you obsessed with her?"

I no longer need your warmth. After all, you were just a freshman crush.

Unrequited

I don't feel your love
I can't see your love
But you keep telling me
So it must be true.

I want to believe your heart and all that you've said
But I'm tired of running
Towards and away

I wish you would stop with your "ilysm"
And your "I miss you, let's hang out"
And your disappearing when convenient
Because then I'm altering our love
And love is not love that alters

So if you could stop and remember that I'm here
And the things that matter to me.
I would believe in you so just let me,
Please.

I don't want to hold on if you're not pulling tightly back
Because sometimes it feels
Like there's nothing there at all.

By Camille Tourdot

By Marina Shenouda

For the Love of Light

You brighten my day and warm my heart
The dazzling specks of gold that you
rain

Make me dread the time that we spend
apart

More radiant than any sun
I smile when I look at you,
Waiting for you to show your face
So I can bathe in your light
To know who I am
And to feel okay
To look forward to tomorrow
And to take in today

My sun
A star that I call my own
My sun
A star that I can hold

By Marina Shenouda

A thing of wisps

And those memories belonging to time
eternal
Past present and future
Shall be remembered on the brightest
summer day
As the light streams through in golden
hues
Rays of orange and pink against that
waning blue
And in nostalgia, may those memories
remain true
In your life and in mine
In the universe's eyes
And in all of time

When we have gone and the next tide
comes
Present will we be across that span
Of this world's history in no order
than
A simple wisp about its way
As you and I will become
Even then, I believe we'll meet again
Seeking you out at wisps do
Where upon finding each other,
Only happiness and peace are due

In One's Mind

by Tzippi Applebaum

"Housing Prices Rise and Fall"

"Since When Was It So Expensive to Pay for Gas?"

"Feeling Burned Out? Read This to Find Out Why!"

Ryan tossed the newspaper across the table, scoffing at its headlines. He didn't need to read why he was feeling burned out with life. Everything around him signaled why. From the broken clock on his kitchen wall to the cracks in the windows. He raised his regular daily morning coffee to his mouth, sipped its bitter taste, and slammed it back down where it splattered all over the table and floor. Sighing, he quickly cleaned the spill and leaned back against the hard kitchen chair. Yeah, he was burned out, but who could blame him-it was always the same routine every single day. Wake up, work, come home, sleep. Repeat. There was no joy, nothing that made him feel like a person, like he had a purpose.

He did have goals to achieve. All he had ever wanted to do was to own his own home. He had been saving up for five years, but there were always circumstances or expenses that came up that put his goals on hold. The company where he had previously worked had shut down and he had spent months searching for a new job. Then it was his mother's health beginning to fail, and as her health worsened, it was more expensive and time-consuming to care for her. Besides that, extra expenses always seemed to crop up like car repairs, extra bills, and of course taxes. For the first few years, he had been excited about his life and his goals, but now it was just a grind every day. At work, he was ordered around by his boss, and his co-workers would always bother him with office politics and comparisons about who worked harder. When he returned to his apartment at night, he would cringe at the cracks and dirt on the hallway floors and walls. Here, he could never truly be himself as his neighbors would knock on his door in annoyance whenever he played music or exercised. The neighbors were always around, getting into each other's business and gossiping. He just wanted his own space,



his own life, but no matter how hard he worked and saved, it was never enough.

Glancing at the broken clock and then at his watch, Ryan headed out of his apartment to travel to work. The sun met him as he walked out of the building, blinding his vision. He squinted through the glare as he walked to the subway station. It was dark, dusty, and dirty. Everyone was rushing here and there. No one talking or smiling, just push and shove.

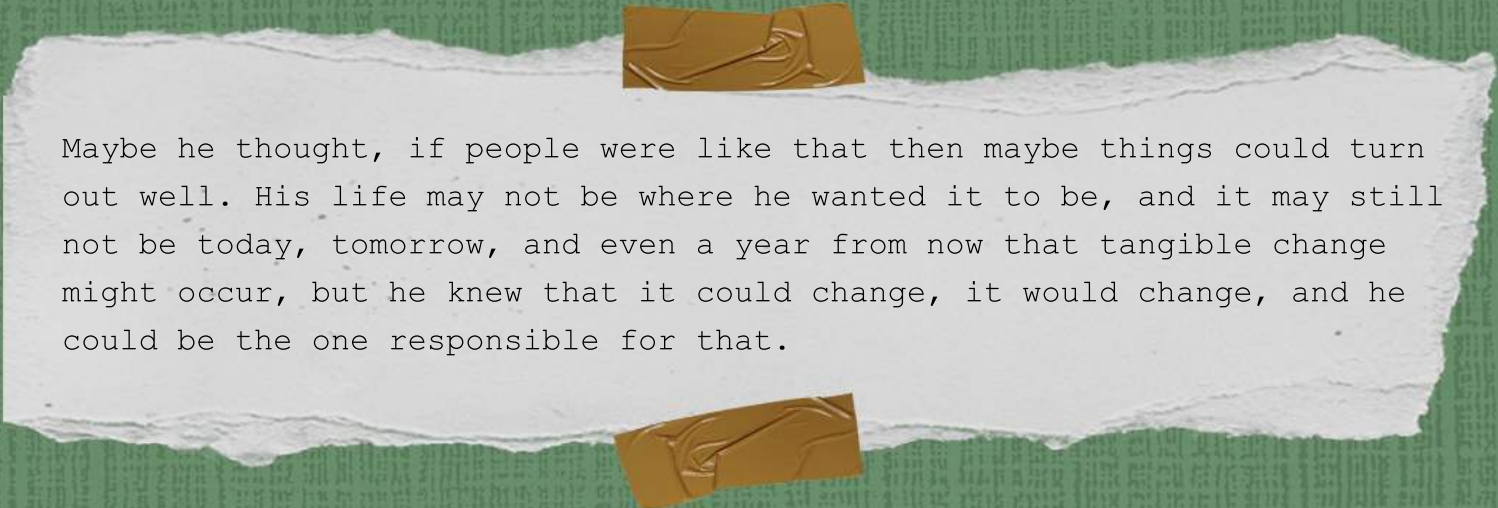
The subway doors closed and he leaned back against the cold seat. He sighed: when had everything become so depressing? When did it all become so hard?

The train suddenly jerked to a halt, pulling him out of his daze. He opened his eyes and saw that a girl fell down due to the abrupt stop, and a man's papers scattered across the dirty subway floor. A frazzled-looking mother was caring for two children who began to cry. He closed his eyes to shut out the world, to shut out his pain.

But as he opened his eyes, he saw a bunch of people helping out the others. Someone was helping the girl to stand up, and others were gathering the man's papers. A few women were helping the mother calm her children.

As everything was sorted out, Ryan watched as they all slowly settled into their original positions and places as if nothing ever happened. An announcement was made by the train operators, apologizing for the quick stop. Calm was restored.

As he got off the subway and climbed the steps to the outside, he was met again by the sun's blinding rays, but he didn't flinch this time. Instead, he walked amongst all the other people walking to their jobs or roles- employees, professionals, mothers with children, and teenagers walking to school. Each one alone in their own life with a different direction and destination. But, he realized, every person was just like him, striving and reaching for a better life and a better future. Amongst all the busyness, each one could still stop to lend a hand, to check if another was all right.



Maybe he thought, if people were like that then maybe things could turn out well. His life may not be where he wanted it to be, and it may still not be today, tomorrow, and even a year from now that tangible change might occur, but he knew that it could change, it would change, and he could be the one responsible for that.

Poisonous Daisies

She spent the past
Year picking out
White daisies scattered across
Hills of a chartreuse meadow
Like speckles of pixie dust
Covering stretches of
Oscillating earth -

"Are they facing the
Sunlight or the direction of the
Wind," she pondered and smiled
As she picked out three more
And skipped to the other side
Of the valley

Blinded by the ravishing noon sun
And the thick late summer air,
She sat down quietly by a turbulent
river
With the batch of daisies still in her
palm

Watching the rotting
White petals, she sighed,
"Am I wasting
My time again?"

She tossed the batch of daisies
Into the wicked river that hollered and
churned,
Swallowing the poisonous flowers
She had foolishly spent months picking

Relieved, she stretched herself by the
dull river
And looked up at a placid serene,
cloudless sky;
She chuckled and whispered,
"What a way of life" as she drifted
Into a heavy slumber

Sifting Through the Past

by Joseph Edelheit

Cedric slowly and carefully lit a match, and then used it to light his lantern, which he gingerly handed to Ostrung, who simply grunted disparagingly at this exertion.

"Rock does not burn." Ostrung said, but Cedric was no longer listening.

Instead he was focused entirely on the various engravings along the tunnel wall. These were surprisingly well-preserved, being so deep underground that they had dodged most environmental hazards. Cedric couldn't really decipher the pictograms, having only the most basic understanding of Esari script and its convoluted conjugations, but this was still an enormous find.

"Just pull the light a bit closer, I think there's something here." Cedric said, as Ostrung, standing at eight feet as he did, crouched and shimmied closer.

"They are squiggles," Ostrung said, "just like every other squiggle around."

"Interesting observation." Cedric said, removing his Journal of Ostrung Cephellon's Views on Archeology.

"No, stop that, what I say is not important to be put in books."

But Ostrung was wrong here, as Cedric was, while perhaps not the most skilled Carmonite explorer, still a die-hard believer in their endless quest for documentation.

"Yes but if I don't write it down, who will know your views on the subject?"

"I have no views."

"That is a view."

Ostrung sighed. He had long ago given up pulling Cedric from his path, though he still thought maybe, maybe, he was making progress. Since they had begun working together, Cedric had only completed a spatter of small works discussing the various breakfast tendencies of the denizens of Meldrosh and their discussions of the subject. How exactly someone could find something like this to be so important as to immortalize it in text, he still never knew, but supposedly the Carmonite Archliches had entire archives for these sorts of things, so the oddness did not start nor would it end with Cedric.

Cedric, meanwhile, had stopped scribbling in that particular journal, and returned it to his pack. While there, he removed a large piece of parchment, and placed it over the pictograms, carefully tracing the symbols with a carbon marker to create as exact a replica of them as he could. Expert translators would be able to pick at them, and perhaps expand upon the scant information that was known about the Esari.

"They'll surely like these, I don't know if there's been any fresh finds this big in quite a while."

"Yes and they will stare at the squiggles and say how amazing it is to see words no one speaks on parchment."

"This is important work!"

"You said the same when we dug up the rocks to look for pottery."

"That was important too!"

"The plate you ate lunch on is not and will not be a relic."

"I beg to differ."

"Yes but that is what you always say. How can one thing be important if all things are important? Then nothing is important."

"The various ways ceramics, and if even ceramic at all, or earthwork, or metal, is used to create dishes is an interesting point of diversity amongst the various cultures of Sathos and lets us better understand them through this lens."

"You have said words. Words do not mean you are right."

"How will we know, thousands of years from now, any item we have now could be vitally important to future generations' understanding of our existences."

"And if they are uninterested?"

"Then they are foolishly ignoring the history around them."

"You cannot go two feet without history getting on your shoes in Sathos. It is dirty, mucky, and makes you stuff yourself into small corridors looking through haunted tunnels."

"Those are superstitions."

Of course that did not really matter to the people of Meldrosh, the city these tunnels ran underneath. They were entirely convinced that these tunnels, which were what remained of an even older city that had existed in the same place, were infused with the restless, insane souls of the ancient Esari who had lived there.

This was, however, entirely unfounded. Some elements, like most superstitions, did have basis in reality, but it had snowballed far beyond those small breadcrumbs. It was true that long ago, the Esari had built a city. It was also true that they underwent massive physiological and metaphysical changes while residing in the city, and that these events caused them a great deal of pain, making some go mad. However, it had nothing to do with the city itself, as this was an experience shared by the entire species across Sathos, not just here. And beyond that, the Esari eventually ceased to exist as a singular species entirely. What they had done exactly, why they had done it, and if whatever they did could be replicated were all just a fraction of the questions that still hung around the Esari. However, what was known was that through some technique, technology, or ritual, the species as a whole bound themselves to core metaphysical concepts and philosophical ideologies, becoming true manifestations of those factors themselves. Or, in other words, they somehow transmogrified themselves on the species level into the very first angels, demons, and fey. What little was known about the Esari seemed to imply they had no cultural concept of spirits, and as such had nothing to do with haunting, and not even one report of Esari haunting within the city had ever been proven, in ages since the Esari disappeared.

The fact that so little was known about the Esari, in combination with a good sprinkling of curiosity into the origins of the world, and perhaps anxiety over the potential threats that lurked at the edges of history, made these tunnels a prime area of Carmonite archaeology. They were stewards of all knowledge, but purveyors of the obscure, and so continuously funded expeditions into these tunnels in the hopes of constructing a true historical record of this ancient people and perhaps elucidate some the Sathos's most primeval truths.

Cedric continued his work along the entire tunnel, copying down each and every pictogram and symbol on every side, as Ostrung simply waited for him to tire out, eventually ending at a very rusted portcullis.

This set off alarm bells in Ostrung's head. He wasn't particularly superstitious, believing solely in the things he could see. Granted as an orc he could see in the dark, so theoretically he actually could see more than a human could, but he wasn't one prone to argue over semantics. However, if ever there was a sign, beyond the actual signs that would say so, that one should not cross through an area, a mesh of metal around a doorway, no matter how flecked with rust, was as good as any in his book. And yet he also knew it's sole existence would likely send Cedric nosediving into whatever lay beyond it.

And then, as if on cue, Cedric scampered over to him.

"No."

"I haven't even asked the question yet."

"We do not know what lies behind that doorway, it could be traps, vile fiends, other traps, portals to various bad dimensions, there was a reason they put a door there and not anywhere else."

"But it also could be none of those things as well."

"And if it is nothing, someone will come later, maybe us, to look at it again. Maybe the squiggles will tell us."

"Scholarship takes risks."

"It does not."

"What would a little peek possibly risk?"

"Everything?"

"You already seem to think our work here is utterly meaningless, wouldn't you say finding out what is behind this gate possibly be something even more important?"

"Gates aren't built to let things pass."

"But they are, if there's a wall in the way. I mean you can see in the dark, why can't you just shimmy over there and try to look through the gate?"

Ostrung sighed very heavily.

"And you'll leave after?"

"Absolutely."

"If not I will drag you out."

"I believe you."

"I could drag you out now."

"You could try."

"This is a useless argument."

"Time wasted that we could be exploring what is behind that gate, I agree."

Ostrung considered his options. On one hand, even going so far as to look into whatever the gate blocked would just make Cedric more enthusiastic to open it, even if his promises claimed the contrary. On the other, he was much bigger and much stronger than Cedric, and could most definitely just drag him out. But that would be incredibly annoying, because Cedric would absolutely throw a fit. He was kind of like a puppy in that way, just Ostrung liked puppies far more. And maybe deep down, beyond his grizzled exterior, Ostrung was a little curious too. As much as he hated to admit it, this was very different than anything else they, or really anyone else had found since he at least had started working here, which was already quite a bit. Maybe he didn't think the pieces of old pottery or the stone tablets with poetry drafts were all that important, but clearly the Esari thought whatever was on the other side was important, which likely meant it still was.

So perhaps against his better judgment, he shimmied his way over, and peered through the gate's rusting bars. As he did so, Cedric let out a low, vocal cheer.

All he could see was darkness.

This was actually quite a surprise. He was used to seeing through the dark, not in color or really anything fancy, but at least vague outlines of objects; Orcish eyesight was simply better adapted to low-light environments than human eyesight was. However, not even bringing the lantern he held as close as he felt comfortable to the gate illuminated anything beyond it. Which of course meant one thing;

"Magic darkness." Ceric said, with a gasp.

This was an incredible discovery. Not the darkness itself, as there were entire categories of spells that could replicate the effect, simply deflecting light particles in a given area would shroud it in a manufactured night for as long as the spell could hold. Other even more advanced, and dangerously experimental spells could manipulate gravitic force and exert it on the light particulate, preventing their spread and thereby making an area invisible. But what was incredible was that this clearly was a

spell, and one that had remained active for millenia without seemingly any dedicated source of Ventomon, the particle-wave that all magic relied, in one way or another, on. This too was not impossible either, but those generally required vast Ventonom reserves, recycling systems to maintain their existence, or even just some way to passively maintain themselves, none of which Cedric could detect going on here. Additionally, this was the first ever discovery of Esari spellcraft, something that could have massive implications for who they were and the nature of their later metaphysical transformation.

"We need to open the gate." Cedric said, as imperiously as he could. He failed terribly at it, but the attempt could be respected. "I know you think it's dangerous, but this could absolutely change the world, Ostrung! Do you want to spend your life as security for an operation you clearly have no respect for? We document this and we could write our own tickets."

Ostrung did not like the position he was now in. He did not like the precedent that would be set agreeing with Cedric, but even he had to admit that something like this could change the world, and they'd also happen to be the ones who discovered it.

And so with a great heave, he pushed the gate open, not turning around as he did so, hoping to dodge Cedric's outburst of excitement. He failed in that regard, as Cedric practically barreled through him to get into the large room beyond.

And then the shadows faded away in an instant.

The walls, now illuminated by the torch, were entirely empty, forming a rough rectangle the room itself inhabited. At the furthest edge of the room was not stone but pristine glass.

Both Ostrung and Cedric walked towards the glass, finding themselves reflected in its surface.

"Is the glass tied to the spell?" Ostrung asked.

Cedric put his hand to the glass, focusing both his own mind and the tools he had brought with him on it. He tapped it several times with a very small hammer, taking great care to not crack the glass as he did so.

"I'm detecting ambient amounts of Ventomon but nothing on the level a permanent spell would require. Maybe the glass is the focus for whatever the spell is? Some sort of holding mechanism to then unleash or retract the spell when certain conditions are met? Maybe a container for the spell like an enchanted sword is?"

"Perhaps there is nothing."

"That isn't possible, this all had to lead to something."

"And it did." Ostrung pointed at the glass, but more specifically the reflections of himself and Cedric.

"So an ancient civilization wanted to show future archeologists that friendship was the real--"

And then the glass shattered.

Cedric was flung backwards by the concussive force that tore through the glass, not simply shattering it but shredding it down to tiny shards. Ostrung turned towards him, as a massive thing pulled its way out.

It was hard for Ostrung to explain what it actually was. It looked crab-like, in that it had two large arms that ended in pincers, but it had eight legs like a spider. It seemed to be made of metal, shining plates of what he assumed were steel, looking in too good a condition for having been stuffed in a cave for millenia, covering most of its body. Golden cogs spun and whirled at various junctions, for purposes he did not understand. And yet he would not describe it as metallic, if that were an option. Metal may not be organic in form, but there is still something natural to it. This however, was not simply lifeless, but somehow lacked even the vitality of an inanimate object.

It almost seemed to flow in a way, like it did not actually even have this form, and instead was something liquid; but even then with water forming the basis for most life, that comparison would be reductive.

Ostrung's eyes began to water and blood trickled from his nose as he tried to look at this thing, which began hauling itself towards them, its clawed hands tearing deep gouges into the ground, which seemed to seep away from the thing, being replaced by flat shapes that somehow twisted in ways Ostrung would not be able to explain. He closed his eyes, and dizzily tried to face the thing, unsheathing a pick and hoping his combat skills would suffice when facing a creature he very much did not want to look at. The thought that Cedric, who was still prone, and seemingly entirely unaware of what was happening to them, instead rambling on about pancakes, was far luckier in this situation, did not escape him.

He listened for the scraping and chittering, and then quickly smashed his pick downwards as the thing grew closer to him, only for the weapon to bounce off, slipping from his fingers and clanging against the wall. He kicked at it, pushing it backwards, but then felt tendril-like things grab his foot, which instantly went numb. He frantically pulled it away, and then grabbed Cedric, who was still in a daze, and tried to run.

Running however, felt very odd, as it was clear the thing had somehow taken (he wasn't sure if the correct word would be destroyed or consumed, or something else), not only his boot, part of his pants leg, but also at least some of his leg's hair and skin. He tried to ignore the sensation, which was not of pain but instead of lacking, as though the things had not been simply torn from him but instead simply ceased to exist. The thing continued to slowly chase after them, tearing into the walls as it tried to propel itself forward, which was not the most successful. It chittered in what could perhaps be misconstrued as anger, but was instead the same tone it had been chittering from the beginning, a call to combat for the rest of its ilk. However, none answered, which perhaps in some minor section of its coagulated mind was an important note, given its last memory was having been fighting alongside identical others. However it still marched, the minor pieces that perhaps considered these things not actually exerting force or control on anything, as they were in fact flaws, not elements, of a design older than time long ago exploited.

But mixing into the cacophony of its chittering were Cedric's nonsensical slurrings, which somehow still felt more natural and calm than the chittering, and Ostrung's nervous breathing, and these sounds bounced through and out the tunnels, being trumped by the various sounds of city life above them.

And so utterly silenced by the cacophony of life above them, Ostrung was sure no help would come. While his pleas grew more desperate as the seconds ticked on, they simply echoed through ancient tunnels the populace were already too afraid to enter, and what few guards and other explorers or scholars there may be, they were miles apart in winding corridors that often would never reconnect.

It was easy to say then, that they were alone, he and Cedric and whatever horrible monster that denied all comprehension. But this in truth was false. As the echoes bounced across and off of the ancient tunnels, the sound slammed into the earth and rock, the same earth and rock that felt the sickening touch of the horror as it tried to peel its way through the strands of existence to the even older order that had long ago burned and died.

And the earth remembered that order, remembered a conflict of cosmic proportions that the world forgot, though it itself was the world. Sathos, as its splintered fractions of personality swam in a great sea of unconsciousness, dreamt of a time it had been unified, a time whose obfuscation by the dust of history was nothing but a godsend. So

Sathos did not enjoy meddling in the affairs of its denizens, though some Directives had a greater proclivity than the average whole; take the Nonary Directive and its various subroutines for example, whose singular task was to communicate with the various forms of life that rested on and within Sathos, be it flora or fauna. But it was clear, at least in the very short survey Sathos had done as it awoke, that its denizens were unprepared to fight the battles that had characterized the time before time. This unpreparedness was not unfair, as the victory of those times had been the fact that those who came after should never have to fight the battles of the past again. Yet if this was true, then should Sathos not remain ever vigilant? Sathos could not detect any other influences of the Lieges or their war machines within its own bowels, but the horror Cedric and Ostrung had uncovered had still been operable millions of years after the war had ended. Sathos had not detected this specific horror at any point prior, so who was to say there were no other forgotten pinpricks of the Lieges' power, waiting to be unleashed, not only on Sathos' own form but across the wider universe as well?

And then there were the Lieges, blissfully unaware they had lost the war, consumed by paranoia because they felt too comfortable in their small victories, but not uncomfortable enough to actually discern the greater truth. The First War had been inconclusive; the Lieges had been stripped of a great deal of their powers by the tide of rebellion, but even then they still had the power to end existence with a single thought. So they had been tricked into believing just that, that they had reduced all Creation into an empty void, while they were instead trapped beyond the gates of existence in a vacuum that reflected this incorrect assumption. For all they knew, there was nothing else, and so they did not struggle against the bindings that kept them trapped within this empty prison. For now, existence was safe from their influence, but these bindings would not hold forever, and the unsettled end of the First War would thereby beget a Second. This possibility would likely only ripen billions of years in the future, an incomprehensible amount of time for any mortal, but far more immediate for an entity like Sathos. But there was a chance, perhaps an infinitesimal one, that the bindings would break sooner; perhaps in a thousand years, a hundred years, or even tomorrow.

This conflict was a threat more existential than any other war across all Creation. Yet across Sathos's body, nations battled and factions schemed and conflict endlessly continued. But Sathos was beyond all these forces, and it knew it could restructure them all with ease. Gone with all these unnecessary distractions, Sathos could mold its world, and then soon all others across the cosmos in the same image, a unified front to stand against the inevitable revenge of the Lieges, whose sole task was the annihilation of all things. It could take eons for this to happen, but Sathos would lay down the groundwork for a grand cosmic engine, one that would churn Creation into the most powerful force capable of defending itself from impending doom. And then, molded and unified into this great military machine, Creation would stare down the Lieges and their unending hordes and not give them an inch, and would be able to finally slay the horrors that dogged it since the beginning of all things.

A single voice spoke out against the greater whole. The Primacy Directive, the one shard of Sathos's personality matrix never activated, stood against the whole. This was the way of Lieges, Primacy proclaimed, to look upon existence and see nothing but waste and pettiness; this was the origin of their hatred, the cause of their previous crusade against reality, the crux of their attempted annihilation. There was meaning within Creation beyond what even Sathos and the Lieges combined were capable of producing, because it had been naturally grown, not forced into existence. To do as the rest of Sathos planned, to take control of existence in such a way, was no better than the

atrocious prisons and poisons the Lieges had inflicted on reality in order to extinguish all things. If existence had been meant to be a singular, unified system, it would have been, but it wouldn't have truly been existence, just some self-aggrandizing portrait without substance. There would have been no point in the First War, no point in the death and destruction that it had incurred. There especially would have been no point in the Primacy Directive specifically, an irony Primacy would not allow to go unnoticed. The Primacy Directive, like all personality subroutines of Sathos, had specialized roles that aided the whole, and Primacy's was to facilitate Sathos's own death if the rest of reality would be saved as a result. Why would Sathos ever sacrifice itself in the name of the wider Creation if Creation was nothing but a broken equation requiring a taskmaster to tyrannically enforce a new order? Why would Sathos ever care, ever give the power of absolute authority over the rest of the personality subroutines to Primacy, if Sathos and only Sathos could save reality? Surely if this were true, then the rest of reality should be left to wither and die, as nothing of value would be lost, while Sathos, the being who self-supposes itself to be the only thing of value, should be protected at all costs.

And say they did win, the Lieges were utterly robbed of their powers, never again able to rend all existence, never again able to wipe all existence out with a thought. Then what? What victory would Sathos have won? That the emotionless, uncaring machine of war it had molded all Creation into had defeated the uncaring machine of war that the Lieges controlled? If reality was destined to be nothing more than a means to victory, a tool in some grander game between cosmic forces, then why even fight if the entire impetus of the conflict was to protect reality from the Lieges once more?

Then the Primacy Directive pointed at Cedric and Ostrung. Why save them at all? Why save any of Sathos's denizens, really? If the sole factor that legitimized all things was victory, Sathos had won by destroying the machine, and did not also need to save two people. If anything this was an acceptable loss; there were many, many mortals who lived and died on Sathos, but there was only one such active war machine. Not only that, but they themselves were useless in the grand scheme of things. One was a scholar, a profession which bases itself on the concept that there is meaning to be found somewhere in the world. And yet if there is no meaning beyond victory, and Cedric was by no means a soldier, then he was doubly useless; Sathos should not have even intervened to help him. And Ostrung? He too was delusional, as he tried to defend Cedric and not simply save himself; it seemed that according to the rest of Sathos, compassion was nothing but a weakness.

But would the rest of Sathos stand by that? That compassion was a flaw that needed to be corrected? The First War was only won because of compassion. Sathos was only born because of compassion. Compassion was the answer as to why Primacy retained administrative control over the rest of Sathos, not any of the other Directives, no matter how important they may seem. The sole motivator of Sathos truly and completely terminating itself for the greater good could not be characterized through any other lens, Primacy argued, and as such it characterized every other choice Sathos had ever or would ever make, no matter the Directive or subroutine. The others could deny their nature, attempt to trick themselves due to their fear of what lurked beyond the horizon, lie that they were doing the only thing they could do, and that their proposed course of action was righteous and just. And maybe they would decide to initiate this plan, and seize tyrannical control over all existence. Primacy would not stop them, but Primacy also would not let them go about this without knowing the hypocrisy and inherent fallacies they deluded themselves with.

The rest of Sathos went silent, pondering this. It could not deny its fear, even Primacy, and various synapses and nodes fired potentialities and queries between each

other as the enormousness of Sathos's combined consciousness tried to find consensus. And then the thought returned to it, that of being ever vigilant against the Lieges. It did not need to tear down the world to do so, it was itself capable of such a task. But perhaps it should not slumber so soundly as it had, and perhaps it would need external help. So it remembered Ostrung and Cedric, who had so desired to change the world. Perhaps only saving it would suffice their quest for fame and glory. However, that could be done by a single Directive or two. Sathos did not need to fully manifest here, and instead, being split could be better suited to put the pieces it needed to aid in this defense in place. Only time would tell, and for now Sathos split once more and sunk back into the shadows. But the shadows of the Lieges too had their own designs.

The end

By Valentina Schembri

How Do You Know You're in Love?

How do you know you're in love?

Does it feel like a fairytale?

Do you feel like a princess being swept off your feet to some happy ending?

Do you blush and giggle in his presence?

Oh no...it's much more than that

It's feelings so intense that they encompass every aspect your life

It's when he's the first and last thing on your mind when you wake up and before you go to sleep

When you can never stay mad for too long because you'll go crazy if you can't speak to him

When you choose to lose sleep because talking to him is of utmost importance

When just the thought of him makes your heart flutter

When the moment you see him your face lights up with a gleaming smile

When you have exciting news and he's the first person you run and tell it to

When you spend evenings gazing into each other's eyes envisioning your future together

Traveling the world, cuddling by the Christmas tree, cooking our favorite meals

When you find being in his arms is your safe place, nothing can harm you

When he can bring you joy even on your darkest days

When you feel comfortable enough to show him the real you, flaws and all

When you would climb mountains just to ensure his happiness

When you realize that you don't even know how you ever lived without him

Because life with him just seems so much sweeter

Like you're in the fairytale you've always dreamed of

Why am I so in Love?

By Angelina Lambros

Why am I so in love with you?

What is it in those big blue eyes? Stern, firm is your stare, it's no surprise. You are of alabaster. My love is only growing faster, and I can't contain it anymore. Like your brows, thin, straight, in an ardent gaze. Under the side swept, slick, neat, shiny hair, dark as night. All I need.

You may not be strong or tall, but that's just what I love about you. Nothing else is on my mind but you. Nothing at all. You're all I ever think of, all I ever know. Is it a sin? I can't take it in. Some sort of curse? The love only gets worse!

Why am I so in love? What is it in my passion? Passion for you. What is it in that charming voice? Charismatic, eloquent. Have I got a choice?



Piercing stare, you give me shudders. How, I wonder.

Standing firm and a brilliant genius, painting a picture for me. What of your dainty fingers, play the piano for me. Write me the story, the story of your life, how it's been hard in all of your troubles, all that you've faced. It's a ride I've ridden. You've got pain, and so have I. That's just something that we can't deny. You walk in with a clickety-clack. You're never crass. Fly me in your little planes to a faraway land, so then we'll hide in a secret city.


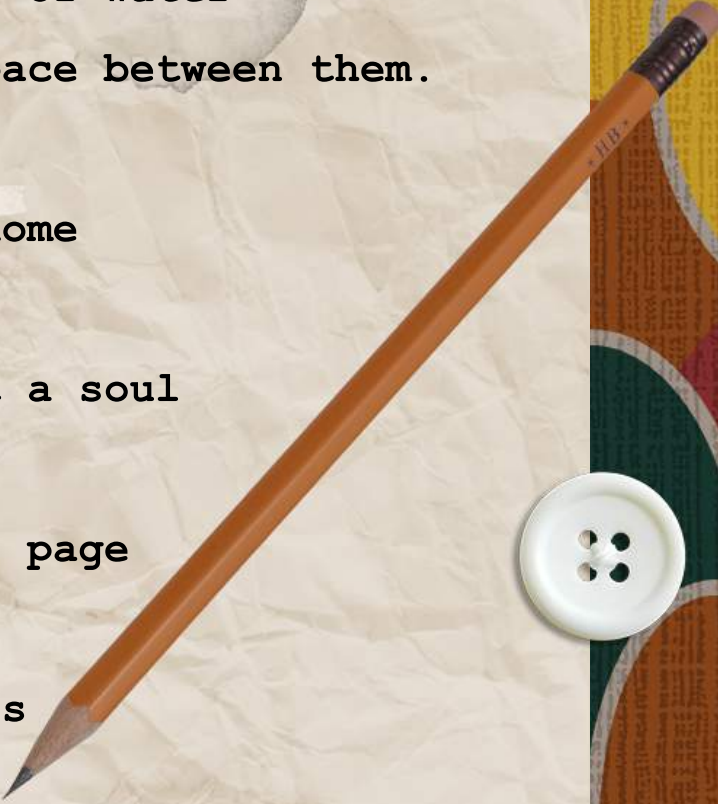

Oh, I just wonder, can't help but wonder, when I'll be over you. I knew from the moment I first heard your name, there was something different, something special about you. Like the red roses we love dearly. Like the way your rosy cheeks look when it gets cold. You don't like that very much. But you love the rivers of gold that run down their hair. That which you lack, and so do I. But it's alright, that's what makes you wonderful to me.

This is my manifesto. This is my declaration. Why do you fascinate me? Why do I find you so amazing? Is it a sin? I can't take it in! Why am I so in love with you?


"Resilient and brilliant and shining and reaching new heights."
Something you'd say when you're speaking clearly, so bright.



I am the warm sun in the bright blue sky
I am the white clouds of water
And I am the empty space between them.
I am a picture
Of a soul without a home
In black and white
And of a home without a soul
In color.
I am the lines on the page
In ink and in pencil
In words and in images
I will always be.



Delightful Days
by Dylan Sam Stybel



By Unknown

Mortality

A young boy stares at himself in the mirror and wishes everyday to grow older. He isn't yet tall enough to reach the cookie jar on the kitchen counter and he isn't old enough to play outside past 5 PM. He can't wait to be like his older brother who goes out every night and never even has to ask permission. Staring at his face, he wishes his baby fat would go away so his aunts would have nothing to pinch on when they visit the house. But most of all, he wishes to grow older simply for the fact that it must be more fun than being a kid, especially if he was allowed to do whatever he wanted and whenever he wanted.

A teenager stares at himself in the mirror and wishes everyday to grow older. He's old enough to reach the cookies on the kitchen counter now and cook all the food he wants, but he isn't old enough to drive and go out like he wants. He hates his mother's nagging and his father's overbearing presence in the absence of his brother, and can't stop counting the days until he can move out. His face has indeed grown slimmer but is plagued with acne which he hates to look at and more so when his cousins pick on him for it. But most of all, he simply wants to grow older to find himself and not be treated like a child while forced to act like an adult.

A young man stares at himself in the mirror and just wishes time would stop. He has moved out and gotten a job and even a car, but nobody told him how lonely adulthood could be, the same cycle repeating over and over. He feels it in the drudgery of his minimum wage job, the days and weeks blending into shifts and hours and pay stubs. He feels it whenever he enters his college classrooms as he tries desperately to keep up with everyone, only to never feel like he's reaching his goals. He recalls some poet had once said "to look in the mirror was to see Death's hand at work". He finds himself believing it more and more as he stares at the bags under his eyes that never go away even after he sleeps, as well as the furrow between his eyebrows which never seems to relax. His brother hasn't called him ever since that fight they had last Christmas and his mother calls him too much which defeats the whole purpose of him moving out. But most of all, he wants time to stop if only to let him rest for a while and catch up rather than see everyone around him hit milestone after milestone while he's left behind. If these are truly the best years of his life, then he has wasted them all.



By Unknown

Mortality

A middle- aged man stares at himself in the mirror and smiles as he wishes for nothing more than a good time. He has come to find himself as the years passed and committed himself to try every new experience he can get his hands on. He finds joy in his passions, hobbies, and career, but also in his lover who makes him feel timeless and infinite. He talks to his family as much as he can and visits when possible, especially his brother who he's still making up for lost time with. It is when he is among people that he feels most present. Every interaction feels so short yet so profound as he's prompted to experience a myriad of emotions all at once. The smile lines forming around the corners of his mouth do not matter if only to remind him of the many times he's laughed. The coarseness of his hands do not matter if only to let others know he's a hardworking man. The emerging gray in his hair makes him feel sheepish were it not for the fact his lover tells him it's endearing and makes him look distinguished. But most of all, he knows life comes to an end and only wishes for it to continue to be a good one. He's scared of his time running out before he has done everything he wishes to do, so he must make sure every minute of it is worthwhile.

An elderly man stares at himself in the mirror and greets time like an old friend. His height has shrunk enough that he uses a step stool to grab the cookies off the top shelf which his niece always tells him to move lower and which he stubbornly refuses to do because even an old man needs a challenge once in a while. His eyes aren't as good as they used to be either and he can't seem to stay awake past 9 PM anymore, but he finds that he doesn't mind staying in if it means he can spend more time with his lover. His lover who doesn't always remember who he is or where they are but for whom he would recreate their first date over and over again if it meant seeing the old glimmer in their eye. More than ever, he misses his mother's nagging coupled with the way she'd always end her sentences with an "I told you so".

By Unknown

Mortality

He longs for the scent of the hand-rolled cigars his father used to carry with him which always lingered even after he left. His brother may have recently passed, but he still sees him in the curve of his niece's smile, the way she spins a story, and the mischievous glint within the eyes of her child, both of whom visit him and his lover every Sunday afternoon. The skin around his face has sagged in recent years and he becomes easily winded after his morning walks, but he finds he doesn't mind as long as he's still strong enough to pick up his great-nephew and push him on the swings over at his favorite playground. He often finds his great-nephew staring at himself in the mirror and counting down the days till his next birthday, reminding him of a time when he used to do the same. The little boy looks up to him and says "I can't wait to be older". The elderly man simply chuckles and shakes his head as he kneels down to the boy's level and tells him no matter how young, it's never too late to enjoy life as it is. Growing older comes with its own troubles and pains, but there is solace in knowing that life goes on, and we get different opportunities further on. He knows his own time is coming to an end, but he's come to terms with it and knows he did the most with the time he's been given. For life is finite indeed which often prompts some around him to say that as a result, nothing of what they have done or accomplished matters. But is it not the opposite then? If nothing matters in the grand scheme of things, does not everything they do, from making a dream come true to being with the ones you love matter? He likes to think so.

By Alaina DiSalvo

The Immortal's Lover

Protecting my family, blood and blood-sworn,
Was the way my life worked, day in, and day out.
I watched those around me shine like gold
While I faded into the background, slowly becoming
dark/cold and gray. wearing away.
I became accustomed to the rough-hewn monotony
And tried not to think about the years to come.

Then I met him.
A soft-petaled flower unfurled in my chest:
Unbearably fragile, terrifyingly necessary.
His mystery kept everyone at arm's length
But all I could see were the smile lines around his
eyes
And the way his kisses were so shocked, so surprised,
Like he had never been loved like this before.

I have never been loved like this before.
He is timeless, infinite, power beyond my
understanding.
He burns with the darkest powers of the universe.
He likes to drink tea when it rains,
And shuffles to bed in socked feet when it is cold.

He looks at me with such tender love
That my breath still catches in my throat
After all of these years.

My future is only him
But I know there will be others
Once I am gone.

Sometimes, I can see it in his eyes.
He's thinking about what comes next. After.

It passes quickly, but it's there.
In my darkest moments, I wonder if he will leave
When I am aged and withered, but he is the same.

Until he takes my face in his hands
Lays his forehead against mine
And swears that in me,
He has found something precious
That he never realized was missing.

By Angelina

Determination

The peculiar day began
With an expedition.
It felt like eternity.
It sure was a mission.

The walls were around us.
We couldn't have won
Without that glorious thing:
De-ter-mi-na-tion.

I saw a vision so sublime,
A figure so ethereal,
A chill so queer,
And a palace so celestial.

A fork in the road,
Darkness sure did conceal.
Let peace be restored!
Too bad this wasn't real.

But there—a sky light!
It lit up the way.
We gathered our things.
Triumphant day!

We stood in a circle,
And held hand in hand.
Tranquility had cometh
To this peaceful land.



No More They Admire

By Angelina

The cold dark time has faded,
And a bright one has arrived.
One I remember quite well.
My aspirations, they had thrived.

But now I am alone.
I have locked myself away
From the absurdities of the world,
The despair and the shame.

The whimsical mind
Of the clever one as I.
Ambitious and eloquent,
Chasing after the sky.

Like a washed out photograph,
Fading in the rain,
Here now I write,
Recall my disdain.

This image I see here
In the crystal of my mirror.
Oh sorrow, sorrow!
I now see it clearer.

Persistent and relentless,
Staring at the city.
Like the fortress I know,
Now gray after pity.

Who knew the wonders
Of a little world unknown,
Filled with fascinating creatures,
Garish costumes overgrown.

As I wave goodbye,
No more they admire.
And here for my departure,
I have tales to inspire.

Rewrite

By Tzippi Applebaum

This life is like a paper
Shriveled and worn on me
I've worked tirelessly
To rewrite the last chapter happily

But to no avail
It did not come out as planned
And the paper ended up in the wastebasket
Crumpled all around

I go out to experience something new
But you are there
Requesting I do the same old things for you
And I do

Return to home
After serving your whims
Now I start fresh
To rewrite the chapter that ended grim

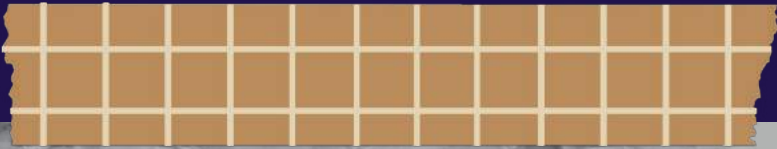
But to no avail
It did not come out as planned
And the paper ended up smoldered
Ashes all around

I lay there
Head in my hands
Thinking, contemplating
Trying to understand

Where life had taken a wrong turn
When I started doing
Everything
For everyone else
But nothing
For myself

Madness
It must be
To act this way
It seems like all is in disarray

Sitting down
Rewriting once more
This time the chapter starts with me
I serve you no longer



Arrival

By Zehong

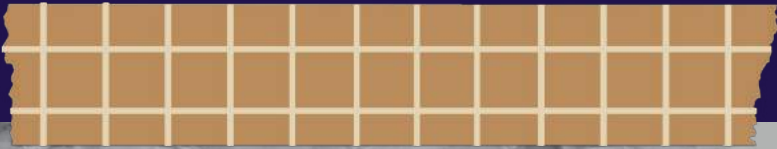
The door closes with a faint hiss of an airtight seal forming as the elevator cab begins to accelerate up the shaft.

The Special Agent pauses a moment to inspect her surroundings. The elevator pod is large enough to comfortably hold a dozen or so people, personal space included, but she is currently the only person inside the pod. It is a cylinder of glass and metal caged by four electric rails that propel the elevator. It is nestled in a trench-like elevator shaft embedded into the side of what at first glance appears to be the curved wall of a very large structure. Four metal rods in the shaft interface with the electric rails and allow the pod to move up and down. The floor is made of shiny steel that obscures the machinery presumably powering the pod, but the walls, ceiling and door are formed from unblemished glass that provides a clear view of the outside. The air at this altitude is thin, a bit too thin for unaugmented bodies and far too thin for sustained combat.

The Special Agent, meanwhile, is not as presentable as the space she is in. Patterns of artificial blood, the remains of fanatical Black League and Red Vanguards soldiers, stain the pale-white carapace-like ceramic armor enclosing most of her body, the smooth tinted glass mask wholly obscuring her face, the large power pack weighing on her back, and the several weapons on her person. The skeletonized sword in her left hand and the blade-claws extending out of her gauntlets are similarly caked with blood, brains, and entrails. With a mental command the energy fields in the blades vaporize the filth into a fine cloud. With another mental command the blade-claws retract away, and the Special Agent returns the sword to the holster on her right hip.

If they so desperately want to get into melee range, then I guess I will greet them in kind.

The Special Agent reaches around her back with her left hand, grasping for a cloth to clean her face shield with, but is interrupted by faint but growing tremors rocking the elevator cab. She grabs onto the railing on the inside of the cab and tries to identify the cause of the tremors.



Arrival

By Zehong

Not this again.

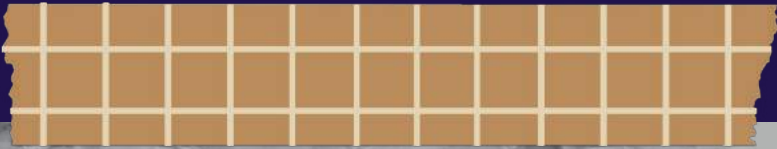
A powerful shock nearly causes her to fall over and rattles the elevator pod as if it is in an earthquake.

The base of the elevator shaft, terminating at the surface the wall rests on, explodes into rubble as a large object collides into it. Through a rain of broken glass and smashed concrete the object - a bipedal humanoid war engine the height of a tall apartment building, bearing a miniature cityscape superstructure on its shoulders - has run head-first into the shaft. It did so a few seconds too late to catch the pod that is now out of reach and getting farther away with every second. The engine reaches up with a pair of oversized metal gauntlet hands, animalistically hammering and clawing at the elevator shaft, in a futile attempt to crush its target. It sounds its foghorn as if howling in anger; the low tone of the horn subtly vibrates the pod.

The interloper - a Reduction Engine, and the apex of them to boot - shrinks in her field of view as the elevator pod continues up the shaft. The Special Agent has the displeasure of having faced it down several times in the past. Wherever its despicable master, the cause of the all-consuming war that led her here, is at, the cathedral on legs is as well. It seems to have developed a special hatred of her, just as its master did, judging by its relentless pursuit of her up to this point. She privately wonders if its master's madness has gotten to it too.

The nest of five-inch secondary turrets bristling from the engine's superstructure turn to face the elevator pod, ready to deliver a barrage of explosive shells, but the semi-intelligent machine shifts its attention away from the lone figure in the glass pod as explosions blossom across its back. It turns around to face this new threat, sounds its warhorn in challenge of the attacker, and fires off a rain of tracered shells. Streaks of light dart forth from the Reduction Engine.

The Special Agent recovers from the shock of almost being crushed into a pulp. She stands up, grabs the cloth from one of several pouches on her waist, wipes away the splats of gore on her glass face mask and armor, returns the cloth to its pouch, and looks out once more.



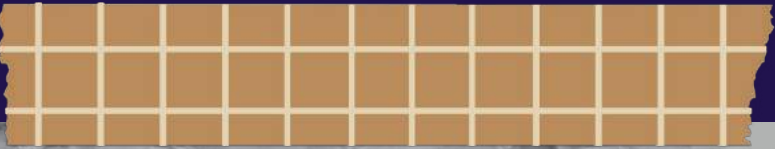
Arrival

By Zehong

The large curved wall the elevator is on is but the topmost portion of an engineering marvel easily the size of a large metropolis. The curved wall from this height can easily be identified as a cylinder of concrete and metal, growing wider at descending intervals like a multi-layered rod in a cut-away diagram with some of the outer layers peeled away. Giant structural support struts that would be more appropriate for orbit-bound space stations extend downwards and outwards from the cylinder at several areas, each extending down to the surface of this planet and meeting it at an artificial and unnatural angle. Of the six struts that stabilize the central cylinder, only two are visible; the other four are blocked by the curvature of the cylinder the Special Agent is ascending up.

The World Engine - a city-scale torch drive, designed by ambitious engineers, ordered by a former leader turned madman, built by the unchecked industry of star-spanning nations, and intended to propel this planet through the abyss of space with no regard for physics - sticks out of the surface of this planet like a Brutalist termite mound. It is inactive, silent and dead to the world. There is no sign of the apocalypse inducing reaction it is designed to ignite and sustain.

Surrounding the struts on the surface are rail lines, highways, smokestacks and refineries, open elevator platforms and tunnels leading underground, landing pads, missile silos, airfields, and all the other details of a mega-factory, spaceport, and military base crossed together. This industrial cityscape stretches on to the horizon in all directions, and it is ablaze. Columns of smoke and bright flashes of weapons fire form an arc of destruction around the portion of the planet surface visible from this perspective. The silhouettes of lesser Reduction Engines stride between factories and high-rises, through the streets and railroads below, as they march out to their final battle.



Arrival

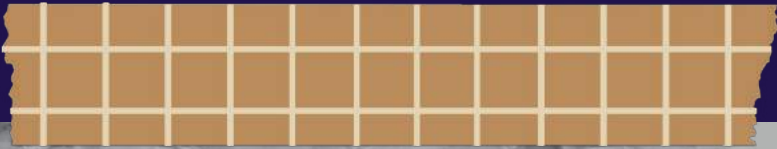
By Zehong

Stealth fighters and surface to air missiles play a game of whack-a-mole with each other, while dark swarms of bombers rain tiny dots down onto the landscape below. Raging firestorms spread outwards from where the tiny dots land and turn vital traffic junctions into impassable no man's land. The five-inch shells from the Reduction Engine below burst into black clouds of shrapnel in the sky, but the source of the explosions is long gone.

The Special Agent looks down at the end of a war to end all wars, the death throes of the Axis and its mythos of a million-year empire, and the ultimate triumph of democracy over tyranny. Here she stands, on an elevator headed up to the top of a marvel of engineering, with orders to capture alive - or destroy, if that is not possible - the Paramount Leader of the Axis.

She thinks back to the moment that set this all into motion, that early afternoon many years ago when she hurled the satchel at the retired politician exiting his front door to see who called for him. She was a hot-headed revolutionary with burning dreams of curing the evils of society one bomb at a time. He was the former Speaker of the Council with faded memories of triumphing against the Great Filters and ensuring the perpetuity of mankind. She watched the fires from the explosion devour and incinerate him and walked away, assuming he could not survive the inferno.

She did not expect him to survive and return a few years later; to roil up the people's fear and despair into a boiling pot of hatred; to coup and purge the Collective Security Union he toiled for much of his life to perfect; to turn it into the Axis and compel it into the bitterest persecution the history books has ever seen - and, if all goes well, will ever see.



Arrival

By Zehong

She understands well that, had she not thrown that satchel, the retired old man would likely never have gone mad and brought half of known reality with him.

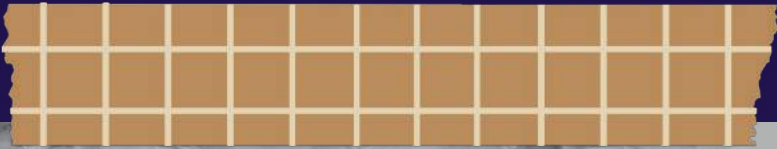
Time to clean up what I started.

The Special Agent dispels these memories for now. There is work to be done.

As the elevator pod continues its rapid journey upwards, she looks out the elevator and upwards.

The sunless and pitch-black sky, too thin to reflect enough light to take on a color, is broken up by small white orbs. Lines and streaks of light jump between the different white orbs, and every so often an orb turns into an expanding cloud of pinpricks of light in silent explosions bright enough to camera flash the landscape below. Of the many ships, Accord Home Navy and Axis Armada alike, locked in deadly struggle far above, most of them are only visible as bright dots too small to distinguish. However, as the Special Agent looks up through the transparent ceiling, the select identifiable participants of the ongoing space battle come into view.

At the heart of the brawl occurring far above, dwarfing all other combatants by almost an order of magnitude, is an ovoid ark-ship made of a patchwork of a hundred different ship design styles. Bright running lights along its hull reveal its skeletal structure, with half a dozen minimalist "ribs" surrounding an inner triple helix of wildly different modules jammed together in an almost haphazard way. Nestled at its rear is a cylindrical propulsion section capped by nine engines each the size of a Terminus dreadnought, while at the front is another mass of superstructure and greebles that, if detached and allowed to float freely, would easily pass as a naval space station.



Arrival

By Zehong

Inscribed upon one of its ribs is the ark's name - Solidarity - in large (relative to the rib) stenciled letters. It occupies a large portion of the sky directly overhead by virtue of its prodigious size and relative proximity to the planet surface, its shape and size in the sky evoking imagery of a zeppelin hovering above a skyscraper. Shimmering partition-like shields surrounding the ark-ship shield its interior against the onslaught of desperate fire headed its way.

Surrounding the Solidarity is an onslaught of doomed ships and dead men. What appears to be a significant portion of what's left of the Axis Armada is piling into a suicidally close-ranged melee against the ark-ship. The Hammer of Olympia, one of the last two Terminus dreadnoughts of the Axis Armada, fires a broadside of Casaba-Howitzer nuclear shaped charges into the port side of the ark-ship at almost spitting range. The plasma beams splatter against the partition shields and bounce away into an expanding shower of bright sparks. The ark-ship retaliates with its own salvo of ultra-relativistic electron beams that deflagrate the dreadnought's shields into a series of powerful X-ray flares.

The Empire's Shadow, the other Terminus dreadnought approaching from the starboard side, fires its spinally mounted Blazar Lance into the heart of the ark-ship. The sky flashes a blinding blue-white for a moment, forcing the Special Agent to look away even with heavily tinted visors. The superweapon, capable of crippling attack moons with a single shot, only manages to bring down the shields on the Solidarity for a moment. It immediately comes under attack by a lightshow of particle beams slicing and tearing up and down its hull, ablating away its main armor belt and cutting through less protected superstructure.

By Zehong

Arrival

The burning fragments of a conveyor ship, smashed out of the way by the ark-ship and cut in half by one of its maneuvering torch drives, falls out of the sky. The Special Agent watches as one fragment - stenciled with the text Chariot of Angels and a large symbol of a red right-handed metal gauntlet grasping a gray orb - falls past the elevator. The fragment slams into the flat area at the bottom of the elevator shaft, wholly tearing the entire area off of the World Engine with the force of the impact, and continues tumbling down the sides of the World Engine in an avalanche of broken concrete. The tremors shake the elevator pod once again, but this time she is ready and holds on solidly to a railing. She did not see if the Reduction Engine below was caught in the impact zone, but she hopes it was.

The escape route down is gone. The only way is up and through the Paramount Leader.

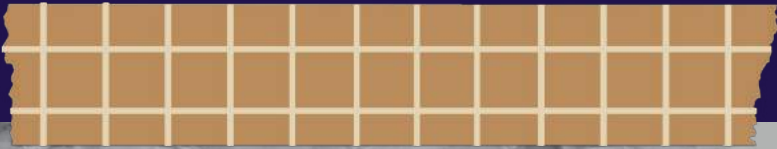
The tremors do not end. Instead, despite the fragment falling farther away, the tremors turn into a seismic event that seemingly rattles the entire World Engine.

What is it now?

The Solidarity, in its haste to smash the Axis Armada, has maneuvered itself into a position with its propulsion module located directly over the heart of the World Engine. The ark, unfazed by the last charge of the Axis against it, believed itself to be utterly indestructible. Nothing - not nuclear shaped charges, not X-ray beams, not the Blazar Lance - will break its guard. No force will ever truly harm this technological marvel. It is righteous, and heroes never die.

The World Engine, awakening from its slumber, enacts ignition.

Ouch, my eyes. Ouch, my ears.



Arrival

By Zehong

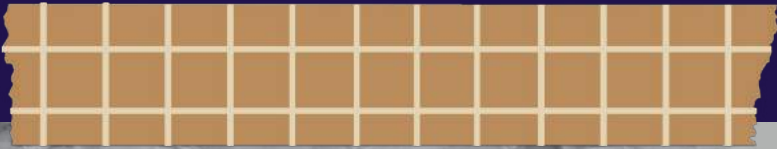
The torch drive mechanism buried deep in the bowels of the World Engine kickstarts an astronomically powerful reaction fueled by the might of Atom. Exhaust material, accelerated to a fraction of lightspeed by atoms smashing together and breaking apart, accelerates up the central cavity of the Engine and into the cosmos above. The relativistic exhaust beam immediately causes a booming thunderclap as its extreme heat and velocity forces the surrounding air to violently explode away. The entire World Engine trembles as the thrust force of the torch drive mechanism pushes it into the planet's crust, causing localized earthquakes and collapsing weakened underground spaces.

The blue-white beam spears into the Solidarity.

For a moment it seems that the ark-ship might be able to resist the exhaust beam with its almost handwavium shields. Then Newton's laws of motion triumph over Clarketech, the shields collapse, the exhaust beam pierces through the engine compartment and into the heavens beyond, and the compartment detonates. The rear of the ark-ship violently tears itself apart and sets off a chain of nuclear explosions ripping through the triple helix core of the Solidarity.

The old man commanding the technological marvel has only enough time to wonder if his friends on the planet down below will survive his folly before atomic fire incinerates him into ashes and dust.

The violent death of the ark-ship smashes its inner triple helix into splinters, creating a metal storm of supersized shrapnel that sweeps aside the Axis Armada charge like a whirlwind through a shanty town. A blizzard of debris and fragments, lit up by the World Engine exhaust and the dying Solidarity, descends from the firmament and towards the surface below. Above them, the immolated skeleton of the ark-ship, vaguely resembling a gas mantle heated to glowing, begins its momentous and now unimpeded fall towards the planet below.



Arrival

By Zehong

In contrast to the thunderclap of the World Engine vomiting out its atomic might, the death of the ark-ship occurred in deathly silence. There is no atmosphere at that altitude, no medium to announce the murder of the prized crown jewel, no substrate to carry on the regret of the wizened old man at the helm of the ark-ship.

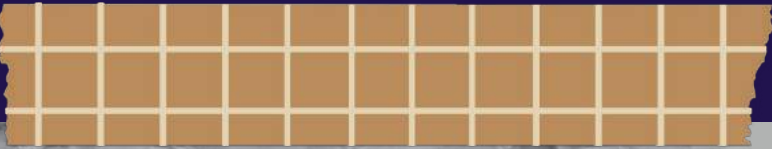
The Special Agent is partially crouched over inside the elevator pod, one arm held over her glass-shielded face. The sensory overload of this many things exploding is too much for her to handle all at once.

The sensation of deceleration and a quiet ding shakes her out of her stunned state. She lowers her left arm and looks around. The elevator has arrived at its destination.

She turns to face the elevator door that will bring her to the Solarium, to the large legislative chamber torn out of its original space station housing and unceremoniously relocated to the top of the World Engine, to the place where the cause of the war to end all wars stand, to the place where the war will end.

She checks her equipment once again. Tempest blade, ready. Lightning claws, ready. Everything else is in place. She pulls out a glass pane from another pouch and holds it in front of her, inspecting herself in the reflection. The angelic halo mounted behind her head, the source of a life-saving shield, glows a pale lunar white. The glass face mask turns transparent for a moment, revealing tired eyes and lips pressed together into a thin line, before restoring its tint. The glass pane returns to its pouch as the Special Agent looks up-

She is once again surprised as something large slams into the elevator's transparent glass doors with enough force to turn them opaque with a sea of spiderweb cracks. Seeing no other option, the Special Agent draws the sword from the holster on her right hip and, with several well-placed swings, cuts through the door at its edges. The door splinters into a small puddle of granular chunks, revealing the source of the impact: a person in body armor similar to hers. The face mask of this person is completely broken, with only a few glass shards stuck to the rim, and the sounds of pressurized air leaking out their suit and into the thin atmosphere emanates from the limp body.



Arrival

By Zehong

The Special Agent recognizes the calico hair and once confident face of the leader of the Company who now lies in near-death at her feet. The hilt and broken blade of a sword of Oriental design lay in the glass near its former wielder.

The Company leader has just enough life left to realize the lethal consequences of her rash actions before septic shock from her wounds shuts off all of her organs.

The Special Agent is stunned.

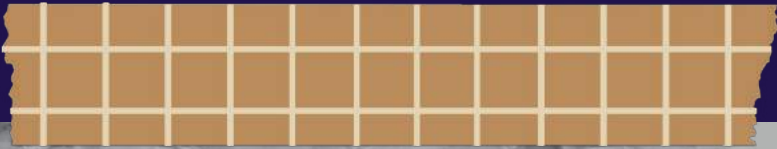
That's it? You abandoned us for this? You stupid idiot, what were you thinking?

The Five from the Company were supposed to accompany the Special Agent and the rest of the strike team through the World Engine. Together they were supposed to execute a series of secondary tasks and destroy the last of the Paramount Leader's assets before confronting him at the Solarium together. Part way through the ascent up the World Engine they suddenly disappeared without explanation or notification, setting off the attention of the Engine's defenders on their unknown path and drawing them to the strike team. From a platoon of hand-chosen paratroopers, the strike team has been whittled down to just the Special Agent.

Judging by the scene in front of her, the Five went straight for the kill and failed miserably.

Before her lies the large open space of the Solarium. A transparent dome held up by large opaque arches forms the firmament over a floor of a glass-like carbon material. The floor, at least a whole football field long in diameter, is strewn with the bodies of dead Umbral Order stormtroopers and the remaining four of the Company Five.

A raven-haired member of the Company Five lay in a pool of blood at one end of the Solarium, a dropped belt-fed grenade launcher beside her, a sea of brass casing around her, and a mass of perforated stormtroopers scattered in a rough arc in front of her. The Company gunner has only enough life left to regret single-mindedly chasing glory to its conclusion before she bleeds out from numerous bullet wounds.



Arrival

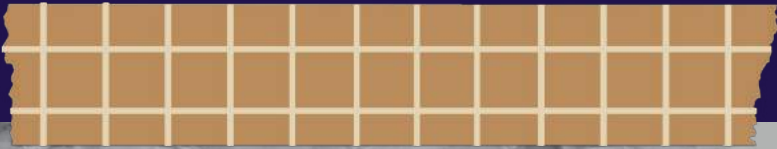
By Zehong

A tabby-haired member of the Company Five lay in a broken mass a short distance from the gunner, her chest armor broken into fragments and the contents of a medical kit strewn about her. The Company medic has only enough life left to regret not objecting to the decision to disobey superior orders and rush the Paramount Leader before her lungs fill with the result of several shattered ribs and she drowns in her own blood.

A silver-haired member of the Company Five keels over at the other end of the Solarium, engulfed in white phosphorus flame, a fallen precision rifle beside her and the exploded body of a stormtrooper with peeled open chemical tanks on their back a short distance away. The Company sniper has only enough life left to reminisce of all the things she wanted to say to the old man on the ark-ship before her nerve endings all burn away.

A crimson-haired member of the Company Five desperately struggles against giant metal gauntlets wrapped around her neck and head, her feet dangling an inch off the ground and an esoteric weapon laying uselessly on the ground. The Company specialist has only enough time left to feel one last burst of blind rage towards her assailant before the fists slam her upper body into the ground, her skull lethally fractures from the forces at play, and her vision turns red before shrinking to a pinpoint.

Standing above the now limp body of the last of the Five to perish is the Paramount Leader - or something that resembles him.

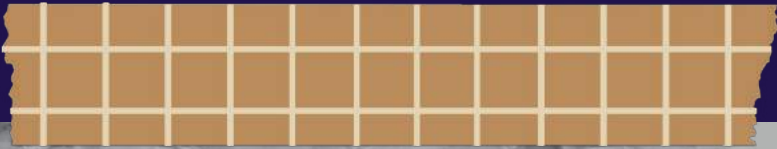


Arrival

By Zehong

The figure partially hunched over at the center of the Solarium is encased head to toe in a dark suit of composite material that draws artistic design from both medieval plate armor and the Special Agent's body armor. An angelic halo glowing a bright solar yellow rests behind his head, an enclosed helmet with a tinted visor that looks out at the world in a scowl of contempt and scorn. On his hip is a staff-like weapon, bearing a symbol of office as a mace head, no longer than an average baton. A dark cape drapes over his back, revealing the outline of some sort of backpack shaped device underneath it. A pair of metal gauntlets, crackling with power, enclose his hands. The dead body of the crimson-haired Company specialist remains tightly gripped in the metal gauntlets. He stares at the face of the dead specialist as if intently scrutinizing it.

The once commanding visage of the tyrant at the center of the Solarium is marred by wounds of war. Hairline fractures crisscross his helmet visor. Dents and bullet holes pepper the entirety of his armor, especially the well-armored chestplate, and a series of long and shallow blade marks - arranged as if created by a set of sharp claw-blades - crisscross his forearms and helmet. The cape on his back is perforated, burnt, and shot through in many places. Yellow and red blood splatters - from the mass of dead stormtroopers and the Company Five - cover his armor and cape in numerous places. Where normally he holds the look of absolute and unquestioned authority, here he more closely resembles a raving madman fresh off a killing spree.



Arrival

By Zehong

The Special Agent draws her sword and grips it tightly. Not only did the Five fail in their surprise attack, they also succeeded in stripping away what little sanity the former Speaker of the Council had. The last vestiges of things going as expected are now gone, reduced to atoms.

The Paramount Leader slowly stands up and turns his head in the direction of the elevator. Upon forming the closest thing to an eye contact with the Special Agent, he jolts, as if suddenly surprised, and drops the dead body in his oversized hands. He futilely wipes his gauntlets on his cape for a few moments, achieving little in the process, before eventually giving up.

She expected a mustache-twirling villain probing her with veiled accusations, a spiteful tyrant blaming her for all of the world's woes, a broken and hopeless man accepting his sentence, or - given what she just saw - a butcher of worlds preparing to claim another skull.

She did not expect what came next.

"Welcome home, mein fraulein."

Unlike his usual booming baritone voice demanding submission and compliance, here he is soft-spoken, cautious and uncertain, almost as if he does not know where he is or what to do.

"I am so sorry for the mess I made. These stray cats - vermin - got in while I was away preparing for your return. I had no other choice - none at all - but to have them euthanized."

