

Xorientation

a science fiction novella

by Thorne

“Then, when I had given up and gone back to the alley, a few colored letters were dropped here and there, reflected on the asphalt in front of me. I read: FOR MADMEN ONLY!”

— Hermann Hesse, *Steppenwolf*

For Mandy

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I. California Zephyr

“You ready to start your life?” an excited voice asked, echoing towards her down the hall of their small suburban house.

Dawn scowled at the face looking back at her in the floor-length mirror, which hung over the back of her bedroom door. The same pale green eyes as always stared back at her, tucked under a finely trimmed row of wavy, brunette bangs. When she was younger, she often pretended that *she* was the reflection. But now her other self would not be around to make goofy faces at her across the looking glass.

“My life started a *long* time ago, Mom, don’t be silly,” she replied, opening the door. Her mirror self would now have to look at her poster of Iwakura Lain in a bear kigurumi — an oversized onesie. Next to it, on a shelf on her desk, was a framed photo of her and a friend of hers growing up, Natsumi. Nat was already at college across the country. She gave Dawn the photo as a graduation gift. Though Dawn only had it for the summer, not seeing it daily would feel strange. But the idea of displaying it in her dorm was even stranger. However, not seeing Natsumi herself much anymore sounded the strangest of all.

“Don’t I know it, Missy, I remember a *lot* of it better than you, I’m quite sure of that! But the tutorial level in one of your goofy games is over. Time to delve in! The real adventure begins now!” her mom cheered back before locking her in a tight hug.

“Most games don’t even have special tutorials anymore, Mom, they just drop you in, and it just gives you hints and tooltips along the way,” Dawn replied.

“I see! I’m not sure that strategy will work for your exams, though — and you gotta keep up that scholarship!” Her mom pulled back slightly from the hug and wagged her finger at her face but kept up the cheer and enthusiasm in her voice.

“Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll make ya proud. But we better get going soon so we don’t miss the train!” Dawn said.

Her mom scurried out. Dawn spent slightly more than a minute looking at her bedroom, trying to take it in as best as she could. She knew Christmas would probably come sooner than she expected, but Dawn knew she would never look at it the same way. The mauve comforter on her double bed was no longer covered with a curious cadre of stuffed animals. Most were packed away, but she was taking a few — part of her childhood with her. But she could not escape the

sense that the magic that created her and shaped her would forever be gone, the last wisps of it now slipping through her fingers.

“*Fly away on my Zephyr!*” Dawn and her mom sang off-harmony in unison as the train slowly stuttered and sputtered and shook into motion. Their cramped but cozy private room had a bunk bed, which her mom excitedly explained would prepare her for dorm life. Dawn was less amused but appreciated they were making her first trip out to school something special. She figured she would be mostly flying to and from alone going forward.

“This was always your dream growing up!” her mom exclaimed. “Riding the California Zephyr to San Francisco!”

“One of *many* dreams, Mom,” Dawn said in a pointed tone. “And I hope to keep dreaming up more, especially now I’ll get a chance to see the whole in a whole new way. But that song always meant a lot to me.”

“And I’d always have to bring up the Hank Williams song whenever you played it,” she replied.

Dawn paused a moment as the train gained momentum. “I know Granddad meant a lot to you,” she said smiling. Her mom matched the smile, a sparkle of tears in her eyes giving off the gentlest glint of extra light.

The buildings slowly shrunk in stature from the skyscrapers of the city center as they spanned the suburbs. Then they became sparse in presence altogether, until the windows were fully filled with the glorious green of pine trees interspersed with clusters of aspens and oak. She spent so many of her younger years going on adventures camping in Colorado with her father. But, when she was fourteen, her parents split, and he moved to the east coast. Now, it was almost as if he did not exist at all. Soon, dusk began to fall over the continental divide, taking the tree’s tints of moss and mint into the shadows.

“I think I’m gonna turn in a bit early, kiddo. We got a big day ahead of us, and I don’t have the energy of an 18-year-old anymore,” her mom said, resting her arm casually against the bunk bed.

“I can switch to my earbuds,” Dawn replied, beginning to rummage through her purse.

“Or you could just play the music you’re listening to quietly,” her mother offered.

“I thought this was supposed to be a simulation,” Dawn said, “So I’ll be ready to share a room! You think I’ll be up until one AM quietly listening to Bach?”

“Much as I would love to entertain that delusion in my head, I know you’re not my little girl anymore,” her mom said wistfully, looking to the darkened void beyond the glass. The details of their room glared back as the gradient of light became increasingly unbalanced.

“Well, we can always put on some quiet classical music too. It can be a comforting simulation for the both of us,” Dawn said. “The noise canceling in my earbuds works by calculating the exact opposite waves of whatever is around me to balance it out. It’s all just pulses of energy!”

Her mom smiled wider than she had seen in weeks. “You know I love you more than anything, sweetheart.”

“Yep, and I love you so much too. Which is why I need to be your self-care czar for a little while longer. Night night,” Dawn said, hugging her mom tight.

She then handed her one of the eyemasks styled like a sleeping gray cat they had bought in preparation for sleeping in a shared room. Dawn desperately looked forward to taking in the shimmering sea of stars that would soon fill the sky without the earthbound constellations of the Denver skyline fending them off. She missed camping. She missed her dad making jokes that he should have named her Dusk instead.

After a couple of hours of idly browsing social media to music, Dawn grew restless and yearned for a better look at the stars without the bunks in the way of the window. She quietly slipped out of the room and down the narrow hall, cutting through another couple of cars until she came to the lounge. The windows followed the entire length of the train, floor to ceiling, curving up to the top to show a panoramic view of the sky. She sat down in one of the royal blue chairs and leaned back. The air smelled sweetly of cherry blossoms, though by that time of year, such blossoms would have long since wilted.

The lights in the car were dim, but the bright, wavy copper hair of one of the only other passengers in the lounge car kept catching the corner of her eye — and just once that night, their eyes caught each other. She winked before turning back to the night. And Dawn turned back in turn.

Dawn won the easier games of connecting the dots in the sky, spotting the Big Dipper almost immediately. Her amateur astronomy skills still needed improvement, though an app on her phone that automatically determined where she was pointing enabled her to identify Ursa Major.

Though she knew admiring the beauty of the stars was a near-universal human experience, Dawn took strange delight in being reminded of just how vast and limitless the universe was.

She restlessly relished the infinity of the opportunity. There was so much to do, so much to explore, and infinity felt bigger with the Milky Way in full view. She was riding a terrestrial train which, in turn, was riding on a cosmic one.

Once her drowsiness became too overwhelming, Dawn rose once more and started the short slog back to her room. The copper-headed girl Dawn saw earlier was already gone, though a middle-aged woman was now sitting in the same seat. Some part of her wanted to spend the night under the shifting starscape, but Dawn wanted to be there when her mom woke up. They were supposed to be roommates, after all.

She slipped back into the room as quietly as she could. “Out late partying with the sorority sisters?” her mom asked in a drowsy but playful tone from the top bunk of the train’s tiny beds.

“Just looking at the stars,” replied Dawn. “What a night to fly my kite on.”

“Fun! Getting the full Zephyr experience! Well, you better catch some z’s, young lady, we have a big day ahead of us!” her mom replied, pulling out the pep through the fog of the drowsiness.

“I’ll be asleep before my head hits the pillow,” Dawn assured her.

“I got you eggs!”

Dawn sprung up, almost hitting her head on the bunk above, before quickly checking her phone. Hours had passed in what felt like a blink. “I don’t think my roommate will be waking me up at 7 with breakfast.”

“You never know. Not everyone is a star-gazing night owl like my delightful daughter,” her mom replied.

“Such a shame. Late-night walks around campus with my roomie sounds like fun,” Dawn said before adopting a blatantly playful tone, looking her mom straight in the eye, “Maybe we’d get into smoking pot together.”

“As a mom, I want you to study as hard as you possibly can — and not party. As a former college student, I know better. It brings me no joy to admit it, but that probably would be better than all the drinking I got up to when I was your age. And it’s legal now, I guess,” her mom replied. Together, they quickly folded the bottom bed up to allow space to fold out the table in its stead.

“A stack of flapjacks too! Thanks, mom!” Dawn exclaimed.

“You used to be so fascinated whenever I’d cook with eggs as a little girl,” her mom replied.

As she peeled back and drizzled on the small single-serving plastic pools of maple syrup, Dawn said, “I always thought it was neat that uncooked eggs seemed so hollow, and yet when you’d hard boil them, they’d expand to take up the full shell. But the egg could never grow past it without someone outside peeling back the shell.”

“You always had your dad’s love of experimentation. No surprise you’re off to such a prestigious university on a science scholarship,” her mom replied.

“Don’t worry, I’ll double major in creative writing or philosophy or history something too,” Dawn mumbled through a mouth of half-chewed scrambled eggs. She drew a circle in the air. “Be well-rounded.”

“What matters is that you can become you. The real you,” her mom replied. “As long as you do that, I’ll be happy. I’ll be proud.”

“Even if I come home a tattooed lesbian with a pretentious goth girlfriend?” Dawn asked in a purposefully playful tone.

Her mother sighed and closed her eyes, repeating it like a mantra, “Be you and be happy, and I’ll be happy.”

A few hours later, the train pulled into Emeryville Station in San Francisco. Dawn already had a car waiting for them just outside. A purple neon “Emeryville” sign glowed with life against the dull metal roof of the building. They threw their bags in the trunk, and they both hopped in the backseat together.

“There’s no driver?” asked her mom.

“It’s one of those newfangled autonomous taxis,” Dawn replied. “You just tell it where to go, and the AI figures out how to get you there.”

“We gave the computers GPS, and then they just take the whole job! You give an inch, and they take a mile!” exclaimed her mother. It whisked out of the waiting area of the station, taking them deep into the San Franciscan grid of roads.

“It’s pretty cool, isn’t it?” Dawn asked.

“Must be a generational thing. Me? I couldn’t wait to get my license at sixteen. But I practically had to drag you to the DMV,” her mother replied. “I just didn’t get it. I was so eager for that taste of freedom.”

“This is freedom. Freedom is an experience, not property. A car is just a *thing*,” Dawn mused.

“And Natsumi was always happy to drive you somewhere if it was to do something fun while I had to play chauffeur for the day-to-day stuff,” her mom replied. “Weird to think you two will be on opposite sides of the country after being inseparable for so long.”

“Now the AI can be the chauffeur while I do all that personal self-discovery you talk about,” Dawn replied cheerfully.

“I hope you know deep down I’ll miss it. Big time,” said her mom.

“You’ll miss *me*. There are better ways to get quality time together than car rides, but it gave us regular semi-unplugged time together.” Dawn replied. She paused for a couple of moments before continuing slightly softer, “And I’ll miss you too.”

Dawn’s mother got a hotel room for a few days before she was due to fly back, but after a few hours of paperwork and bouncing around campus and unpacking in Dawn’s dorm room, both were exhausted. Her mother left for the hotel, making a particular, pronounced point of going there with a real human driver in a rideshare – though Dawn had to help her navigate the app on her phone to summon her silver sedan or a taxi.

However, Dawn quickly grew antsy upon her mother’s absence. Though she dreaded not having her own bedroom, seeing half the room empty was worse. Her roommate was still nowhere to be found, and the far side of the room was just a bare desk and bed, the cheap extra-long twin navy blue mattress exposed.

Dawn’s family had moved into her mother’s current house when she was six, and one of the few details she remembered was how obsessed her mom was with making sure her old room was properly staged so they could sell it. But now her room was a stage for two, and she might as well be mumbling a monologue to herself. Exit stage left. Time for a walk.

The sun was only beginning to set, lighting the western sky with brilliant copper, bathing the array of ruddy-roofed buildings and gently swaying palm trees in a golden glow. Construction paper palm trees with nametags were glued to her dorm room door. On her way out she had glanced at the simulacrum and made sure to remember the other name. Andrea.

Though the heat of August still weighed heavy, a westerly wind had picked up, and Dawn let its cooling breeze carry her on an aimless course, scored by a chill, downtempo mix that streamed straight to her ears. In due time, she knew she would be rushing to specific rooms all across campus. For now, it was good to take it all in, to get her bearings. It was one thing to look

at a map, another to inscribe it in the mind — though she inadvertently passed by the same stretch of buildings three separate times. But this too was freedom.

Just as Dawn grew weary and desperate to get cozy in bed, even if alone in her room, she saw her dorm building just down the road from her once more. She could have sworn that she was on the other side of campus, but her mind was elsewhere, lost in her music and her future. Before she even opened the palm-plastered dorm room door, the smell of spring blossoms once again tickled the sticky summer air. Dawn dismissed it as *déjà vu*. All she cared about now was getting into her pajamas.

But then came those strands of copper hair, and suddenly she was electrified with energy.

II. Gemini

“I *swear* that had to be you,” Dawn protested and then plopped down on her bed. Andrea was still unpacking a bunch of cardboard moving boxes, but she took comfort in the fact that the other half of the room had partially come to life. A string of multi-colored Christmas lights now hung above her roommate’s properly sheeted bed.

“Nope,” her copper-haired roommate replied, as she continued unpacking. “Haven’t left California since I went with some friends to Vegas for spring break.”

“That sounds like fun!” Dawn exclaimed.

“No, it was terrible. None of us are old enough to drink or gamble. Wound up bumming around the pool. Could’ve just gone to the beach and saved money,” Andrea replied.

“I’ll be honest, it didn’t sound like fun, I just wanted to be nice,” Dawn replied. “Positive impressions and all.”

“So you believe that wasn’t me on the train then?” Andrea asked, shooting her a brief, fierce look before she started putting sheets on her bed.

“There’s gotta be more than one box of that hair dye out there, right?” Dawn offered with a short, forced laugh.

“Funny, isn’t it? We search for uniqueness and individuality and pluck down a commodity off the shelf to do it,” replied Andrea.

“Maybe this is just the dorky aspiring biologist in me, but I was always fascinated that everything we are genetically is encoded with just four base pairs,” Dawn replied. She wondered if Andrea was relieved that she was not making a quip about aposematism.

“Four?” Andrea asked, followed by an exaggerated groan. “A computer only needs two to simulate whole worlds. Four? How luxurious. How fancy.”

“Guess I’m just a bougie bitch like that,” Dawn playfully mused, swinging her legs up and into bed, then taking her first good long stare at the ceiling. “I say as I can’t escape the nagging fear I’m going to somehow fuck up my scholarship and go deeply into debt if I want to stay afloat.” She grabbed and clutched the tiger plush she had since fourth grade, hoping to look silly and cute while hoping to siphon a sliver of its strength.

“Don’t worry, it’s normal to be nervous. But I’m admittedly excited for this fall,” replied Andrea.

“Have you ever considered a career as a skydiving instructor?” Dawn asked in a sarcastic tone.

“Data science will pay the bills better,” Andrea said. “Or maybe even just a frontend engineer cranking out little virtual widgets to keep people enriched.”

“So fucked up we have to think about that now,” said Dawn.

“Do you? At least for now, you have a roof over your head — a meal plan. Obviously, on some level, you need to worry about that stuff on the horizon, but humans have this peculiar rush to not live in the moment,” Andrea said. “It’s unfortunate.”

“Yeah, yeah, *carpe diem* and all that jazz,” Andrea replied, as she stared idly scrolling through friends’ recent photos on her phone. “I’ve still got my whole life ahead of me.”

“But you’re never going to have a first day of college again. You have time, but not time quite like this. Having time doesn’t mean you won’t regret savoring something that can’t be recreated,” Andrea said.

“I’m mostly just exhausted and miss my bed at home,” Dawn replied.

“Did you think about how much you loved your bed when you last slept in it?” Andrea asked.

“I dwelled a lot on the fact that it was my last night in it, and that kept me from being cozy,” said Dawn.

“One way or another, you’re not appreciating the joys of what you have at your disposal here and now,” Andrea replied. She finished making her bed and lay down on top of her gold and blue comforter.

“Last night I was looking at stars in the middle of nowhere. I stayed up later than I should have. That was so easy to take in. It’s hard to appreciate how vivid the night sky is without light pollution until you see it first-hand. Bafflingly countless stars out there all orbited by their own worlds, some maybe even like this. Generations and generations of humans in ancient times used those stars to guide them places. And now I’m where I’m *supposed* to be, and I know out there tonight I’d barely see anything. The magic is gone,” Dawn replied. “The light has dimmed.”

“So we bring the stars to us.” Andrea reached over with her foot and flipped the switch to turn out the overhead light, leaving only her Christmas lights to illuminate the room in a rainbow of colors.

“I guess we’re having Christmas in August too,” Dawn said with a smile still tinged with sadness.

“The Bible talks about shepherds being out in the fields with their flock at night when Jesus was born, doesn’t sound like December to me,” Andrea replied. “Fuck it, let’s celebrate whenever we can.”

“By lying in the darkness of a half-unpacked little room and airing out my angst to a veritable stranger,” Dawn muttered.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Andrea asked.

“Sure, but I miss the stars. The *real* stars,” Dawn replied wistfully.

“You’ll see them again. And I’m sure they miss you too. For what is the luminance of a star without those to admire its beauty?” Andrea asked.

“Deep,” Dawn said in a deliberately playful tone.

“I kinda cribbed it from Nietzsche,” Andrea replied.

“Jeez, do you want me in awe of your luminance or not?” Dawn asked.

“I want to be in awe of yours,” Andrea said with an air of self-satisfaction.

“You barely even know me,” Dawn said.

Andrea chuckled. “You talk of feeling more inspired when you could see more bright, burning balls billions of miles away. And you’re baffled why I wouldn’t want to at least see you twinkle from across the room?”

Dawn whistled, “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” slightly off-tune.

“Brava!” Andrea said in a whispery shout.

“Thanks,” Dawn said sarcastically. “Seriously, though, thanks for being here. I was kind of going stir-crazy with half this place completely empty earlier. Funny thinking my biggest fear two nights ago was having to share a room.”

“I get it. My dad is the manliest, strongest man I’ve ever met. When my mom passed away, he was clearly sad but tried to be stoic. Put on a strong face for me. But I woke up to him so many nights sobbing in the dark. I’d go in to check on him. He just felt so alone dealing with something so new,” Andrea said.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” Dawn said softly into the dimly lit room. “My dad moved away to Connecticut. I never hear from him anymore.” She paused. “Sorry, that sounds so inconsiderate, it’s in no way comparable.”

“No, no,” Andrea said. “It’s okay. It means a lot you’re willing to be vulnerable with me already. Or at all, even.”

Dawn yawned deeply. “People need connection.”

The next thing Dawn remembered was light peeking in through the curved slats of the beige blinds. Andrea was gone, though her covers were disturbed. Dawn was still atop her comforter, tiger tucked under her arm. After she shook off sufficient grog, she checked her phone. Text from mom. She’s up and eager to hang out when Dawn is free. Checking out the Golden Gate Bridge. Ever the tourist.

“Wakey, wakey,” Andrea said, as she flung the door back open. “Ready for your first day of orientation?”

“You sound like my mom,” Dawn replied, sitting up.

“Thank you?” Andrea asked. “We’ve got a hall meeting with the RA and there’s stuff with advisor groups and convocation later.”

Dawn groaned. “So much busywork. I’m ready for inspiring lectures and parties and whatnot.”

“In due time, my dear roommate,” Andrea replied. “In due time.”

At the hall meeting, everyone went around in a circle and introduced themselves, a veritable constellation of their college class revealing itself in the bright light of the morning sun. Two twins from Tennessee were sharing a room. One girl was from Seoul. But Dawn kept catching herself looking over at Andrea. Whenever their eyes met, she’d give her a brief, quick smile before looking away.

The two parted ways for the day after a late breakfast together in the dining hall where Dawn had eggs once more. Afterward, Andrea repeatedly encouraged her to message her if she needed anything.

“I’m more worried about being bored to death than anything,” Dawn said.

“I’ll try my best to help with that from afar,” Andrea reassured her.

“I appreciate that. I’m just so ready to start classes. I came here to learn. Not to fill out paperwork and tell different circles of people my pronouns and an interesting fact about me,” Dawn replied.

“You’ll have that soon enough,” Andrea said with a smile. And with that, they were off, each in opposite directions. Dawn popped in her earbuds to get lost in music for the walk ahead — but looked back a few times, catching ever-diminishing glimpses of the copper fading into the students milling about through campus, going about their days.

“Excited that I can get the full college experience with you girls,” Dawn’s mother said.

“No way we can afford this most days,” Dawn said, “Unless you’re looking to be extra generous, of course.” She batted her eyelids adoringly at her mom, who sat beside her on her bed, divvying out the contents of a pair of large, brown paper bags.

“Thanks for paying the order, Mrs. Miller,” Andrea said. “Wait — I forgot Dawn said you were divorced.”

“Never changed my name back, though. This feels more ‘me’ than Ms. Wright. I had enough jokes about being ‘Ms. Wrong’ for a lifetime. Half the time I screwed up in school, I’d get that taunt,” she said.

“At least we don’t have to order what dad always insisted we split family style every single time,” Dawn said.

“Wonton soup, pork fried rice, shrimp with lobster sauce, and lemon chicken,” her mom rattled off.

Andrea shuddered. “Not even any crab rangoon?”

“He was a strict creature of habit,” Dawn said. “I’m here mixing it up. I got *beef* fried rice. So fancy.”

“Dawn talks about him in past tense like he’s *dead*,” her mom said.

“His presence in my life certainly seems in the past,” said Dawn. “And maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Just hold onto the people that matter,” said her mother. “You’ll forge a lot of new friendships here, but your old ones will be tested by time and distance. Don’t forget about the Natsumis of your life.”

“Aww, who’s Natsumi?” Andrea inquired with a coy grin.

“A friend of Dawn’s since middle school. They were like twins, always doing everything together,” Dawn’s mother said.

“The twin thing was always so embarrassing. We don’t look at all like sisters. But now she’s in Connecticut like Dad,” Dawn said with a sigh.

“Wasn’t the story of the Gemini constellation twins with different parents?” asked her mother.

Andrea nodded. “Castor and Pollux. Originally, only one was mortal, but they were united by the gods in immortality forever in the stars.”

“What a silly story,” Dawn said. “I won’t let the friendship die, though, Mom.”

“To friendships new and old,” Andrea said, raising her ruby red can of soda in the air, which the others reluctantly clanked with theirs. “I’ll always remember this moment, and I hope you do too.”

“Eating takeout in a cramped room without a table,” said Dawn glumly.

“Not even doomscrolling, just bathing in that melatonin-suppressing light, eh?” Andrea asked from across the room as they lay in their respective beds in the almost dark.

“Just can’t figure out what to text Natsumi,” said Dawn. “It’s not like she’s messaging me either. I don’t want to intrude or come across as trite or sappy.”

“You’ll figure out the words when the time is right,” said Andrea. “You’re knee-deep in an adjustment period. And hey, you have me. I know it might not mean much—”

“It means more than I can explain,” said Dawn. “And hey, I can find the words with you.”

“I’m happy to be a sounding board for your thoughts, though I need to sleep at some point,” replied Andrea.

Dawn struggled to sleep, spending about an hour listening to music and scrolling her phone. When she was confident Andrea was asleep, she slipped outside quietly, walking to a mix of swelling Sigur Rós and sad Taylor Swift songs. The stars were pale. The lights in the dorm room had given her more comfort and warmth.

Suddenly, she was chilled by a nighttime shower and a swell of sadness, and her tears soon joined the drops that glimmered groundward in the glow of the streetlights. She grappled with emptiness as she ate with her mother and newfound friend, but, much like the void of the sky, there were constellations within her if she knew where to look.

She spent hours that felt like forever trying to think of a long-winded message about her excitement about starting college, but what she tapped out on her screen smeared and bleared with a mixture of tears and rain seemed far more appropriate. "I miss you."

III. Recursion

Dawn and her heart raced. Its echo in her ears blurred together with the bass of the music blasting through her earbuds from the other side. She knew she would be *at least* a few minutes late. The buildings around her were a blur. The door to her destination absorbed some of her momentum as she threw herself inside the building.

One-oh-one in one-oh-eight. One-oh-one in one-oh-eight.

Much to her relief in the moment, that meant no stairs. The classroom was small, with the desks arranged in a rough circle around the edges, interrupted only by a gap for an unobstructed professorial path to the whiteboard, currently as pristine as a fresh field of snow. Underneath sat a large, lumpy, indeterminate object covered in a black cloth made of satin. Most of the seats were already occupied with students tapping and scrolling about on their screened devices of various kinds. A stack of papers was making its way around the room. The windows at the back faced the morning sun.

“How nice of you to join us,” a middle-aged gentleman said, tucked inside a desk at the end of the circle. His hair, though with tufts of gray, was otherwise almost as white as his perfectly kempt button-up shirt, finished with a simple red tie, and he wore a pair of large-lensed glasses, bridged at the top above the nosepiece.

“Apologies, Professor Fredricks,” Dawn offered as she shot for the closest free desk. “I slept through my alarm.”

“I know this is an intro course and an elective, but I expect everyone here to still take it *very* seriously. It will be easy if you do that one simple thing!” he said, addressing the class with a surprising presence from behind the small desk. He rose and wrote on the whiteboard in marker: INTRO TO PHILOSOPHY. It was a verdant green polar opposite to his tie, as bright and brilliant and bold but with a different red-green-blue subpixel maxed out with the others dimmed.

“I’m an analog guy in a digital world,” the professor said. “All the information I passed out *is* on the internet, much to my chagrin, and anything you email to me, my teacher’s assistants can print out. Just have a modicum of patience awaiting my reply to your correspondence.”

A girl from across the room shot her hand up while her eyes continued to be glued to her iPhone screen.

“Yes, miss?” he asked.

“What’s the attendance policy?” she asked, eyes still fixated.

The professor sighed and paced back and forth across the width of the whiteboard once. “Turn off all those phones, close all those laptops for at least a minute. Listen to me closely for a moment. This is important.”

Then came a short, off-tempo burst of pattering percussion as everyone complied.

“I know a lot of you are taking this to check a box on your graduation requirements and bolster your GPA, and don’t worry, I’m no hardass, I won’t get in the way of that,” the professor said. “But I want you to care. And I know a lot of that falls on me.”

Dawn’s mind suddenly flashed back to Coach Hendricks, her American history teacher in high school standing on his desk, reciting Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty” speech in a purple tricorne hat. The classroom was in the basement, and the air always smelled musty and moldy and kicked up her allergies. She sneezed.

“Bless you,” the professor said before continuing, “I brought something special along today. I won’t check attendance, but maybe this will make you see this as more than another boring lecture class.”

All around her were fully captivated as he pinched the cloth covering the object under the whiteboard, throwing it dramatically aside with the energy and finesse of a stage magician unveiling the trick’s twist. The thing underneath was strange, branching and twisting off into other shapes. Every color imaginable could be found upon its surface, which was covered with a shiny glaze. The professor began to carefully scoot the strange sculpture towards the center of the circle, which caught and rethrew the sun’s morning rays in every imaginable direction around the room.

“I suffer from devastatingly severe migraines,” Professor Fredricks said upon reaching the center. “Often, before the migraines hit, a strange glitch hits my vision, a shimmering spot that seems to be in the distance that gets closer and closer, growing in apparent size, until it overtakes me completely. A scintillating scotoma, they call it.”

Some students watched it in awe like it was the glow of a scrolling screen. Others were looking at each other in disbelief. The more Dawn tried to focus on the details of the scotoma’s shape, the more it seemed to shift in the morning sunlight. Unease overcame her stomach, and her horizon momentarily twitched back and forth. She shut her eyes for a few seconds, took two deep breaths, and it stopped.

“I have a bit of a hobby for pottery. Started with mugs and pots and vases. The standard earthenware receptacles. But the medium seemed uniquely powerful to capture my experience,” the professor continued. “I want you to describe this. In as much detail as you possibly can. You can even type it up on your little pocket computers. You can write it by hand. I don’t care. Begin.”

A guy with short, curly black hair in a band tee and what were clearly pajama pants raised his hand but immediately began to speak without being acknowledged. “Shouldn’t we be talking about ethics or what makes a good life or whatever?”

“It’s still the swap period. Drop the class if you wish,” the professor said before taking a seat back in his chair. “If you even seriously try with this essay, you’ll get at least a B.”

“It’s so hard to even see it,” another girl said.

“Good lesson about phenomenology and epistemology. How can you trust your eyes? How does someone who sees something that isn’t there understand the experience?” The professor cackled heartily.

“What we see is gonna vary a lot by where we even are in the circle,” the black-haired guy said.

“Exactly. Now quiet down and get writing,” the professor said. And the steady tapping of keys and pencils began.

Dawn focused on the edge of the sculpture closest to her, closing one eye when she looked so she could block out most of the morphing monstrosity before her, only letting a little sliver into her vision. A large, curved tube protruded from the main body, which then split off into smaller and smaller branches, most of which were a dark red that shone copper when the glaze and glimmer of morning met.

They reminded her of a tree in winter blown bare of its wilted leaves. But the more she tried to see it as that when glancing up at it, the more it looked like blood vessels without the body around them. Her dad once took her to a museum with similar exhibits made of preserved human bodies. How could she see it as anything different? But as soon as she looked up, the branches looked weirdly angular. Wires. But they began to bend again, turning into the tendrils of the sun’s corona, snaking outward in response to the real sun’s light, a fusion of two stars. Through each cycle, she dutifully wrote down what she saw, growing ever more frustrated as she could not quite pin down its real shape, a Rorschach blot in multiple dimensions.

“This can’t be real,” Dawn muttered under her breath.

“What can’t be real?”

Musty smell. Dawn looked up. Her history teacher always had such a menacing glare, honed through decades as the offensive coordinator for the football team. His unkempt mop of white hair head was hidden under the tricorn hat.

“Maybe not the purple hat,” Coach Hendrix offered. “You see, capitalism was still in its infancy, and the industrial revolution had not—”

She sneezed. And then everything was black.

“You okay?” the soothing voice of Andrea asked. “Seemed like you were having quite the dream over there.”

Even if she and Andrea had become fast friends, the dorm room still did not give her the comfort of home. The birch bonsai she bought a couple of days before stood stoic on the windowsill, the closest she could have to a pet in the dorm. “I’m okay. Just a weird dream.”

“You were tossing and turning a lot last night,” Andrea replied. “But I didn’t want to wake you since I know you were having a migraine, and I didn’t want to wake you back up into that hell.”

“I don’t have a headache anymore, so surely this is purgatory at worst,” Dawn replied. “I hope I didn’t bother you too much.”

“Just doing a bit of review before my first algorithms and data structures class today,” Andrea said.

“Anything interesting?” Dawn asked. Even when she cared little about or knew little of the content, she had already grown fond of hearing Andrea talk about her passions. It was energizing and warm.

“Trees,” Andrea said with self-satisfied simplicity.

“Trying to tease me about being a biology major?” asked Dawn.

“Not this time,” Andrea said with a grin. “We have trees too. That makes me sound like some kind of alien. Anyway, data that starts at a trunk node with nodes that branch off in ever-more directions, containing more and more layers of data.”

“They sound tricky,” Dawn replied.

“Not too bad once you get the hang of them. Just need a recursive function in a lot of cases. A function that calls itself over and over as it moves around the tree, gathering the understanding

it needs,” Andrea replied. “It can be an efficient way to try all the different combinations of something. And you can just kind of exit out when the right conditions are met.”

“I at least *sort of* understood that,” Dawn said.

“I’m sure the stuff you’ll be talking about in that existentialism class of yours would make my head spin,” Andrea said. “I’m sticking to 101 classes for my electives. That’s binary. I can trust that.”

Dawn laughed, and Andrea interjected, “I know that joke wasn’t that funny.”

“It’s just my dream was about a Philosophy 101 class. But I specifically wanted to take something more interesting. I balked at 101 during registration. It’s just weird how dreams work,” Dawn replied.

After an hour of leisurely showering, getting ready, and chatting with Andrea, Dawn walked to class at a relaxed pace. On her way, she noticed a group of guys in what she, at first, thought was a hacky-sack circle. As she peeked in, the reality horrified her. A black snake had its mouth wrapped around its tail, gorging itself.

She darted away before picking up the pace for the remainder of her hike. She scrolled cute pictures of cats tucked into bed in the five minutes or so before class to scrub the image from her head.

The classroom faced west, free from the morning glare. Twenty-four wooden desks were arranged in four rows of six. Most were still empty. A much larger, wider teacher’s desk stood at the front. A woman with jet black, shoulder-length, straight black hair was filling up the whiteboard with text in bright blue marker ink. As soon as Dawn sat down, she turned around.

“Don’t get too comfortable, we need to rearrange these desks into a circle,” the woman said. “Line up the ends so they join up with my desk. Or, as I tell my Eastern religions students, make an enso.”

She drew a simple circle on the board, unconnected slightly at the bottom, and turned to excitedly display it, holding out her hands in its direction. For a split second, the snake from the quad flashed over the circle on the board. Dawn pinched herself. Ow.

“Am I even awake right now?” asked Dawn.

“Not sure,” the professor replied. “But sounds like you’re in the right class, at least.”

“That’s certainly a relief,” Dawn muttered half-sincerely. And then she helped turn a square into a circle. A grid into an enso.

IV. Self-Contained Underwater

“You look so adorable!” Andrea exclaimed.

“Says the one in the cute bikini while I’m over here in a one-piece,” Dawn replied, the tang of chlorine and rust scraping at her nostrils. Floor-to-ceiling lockers surrounded them on three sides. There was little of interest to look at other than her roommate, whose body, framed in a simple black two-piece bathing suit, stunned her. Dawn’s bathing suit was printed with an abstract, swirling pattern of purple and aqua.

“We’ll be in wetsuits soon anyway. Anyway, thanks again for doing this with me,” Andrea replied.

“Gotta get those PE credits somehow, eh?” Dawn asked. “And it’s nice we can have a class together.”

“We’ll get to pretend to rescue each other!” Andrea swooned, placing the back of her hand on her forehead and standing on her tippy toes, heels high above the flip flops they bought out of fear of what microscopic horrors lurked on the floor below. Dawn contemplated coming back with a swab and she could take back to the biology lab and rub on an agar plate to see what sort of microscopic civilizations would spring up in that little crimson circle.

“Ooooh, so many dangers lurk in the depths of the Olympic-sized swimming pool,” said Dawn, flexing her phalanges like the tentacles of an octopus.

Shortly thereafter, the girls sat together out at the edge of the shallow end of the pool, wetsuited legs in the water. Andrea lightly rested her head on Dawn’s shoulder, and they both lightly swirled and splashed their feet.

“Hey everyone, it’s four, so let’s get started,” the instructor said, a middle-aged woman with wavy, auburn hair. Her body was toned for her age, and her wetsuit had a cerulean hue, save for black racing stripes that ran down each side of her legs. “I asked you to pick a buddy during our first classroom session. If you haven’t, now’s the time. This may just be a pool, but someday it will be an ocean. The buddy system is so important. Now just to make sure you are all present and mindful: what is our saying in this class?”

“Teamwork makes the dream work,” the people at various places around the pool said in unenthusiastic non-synchronicity.

“Y’all can do better than that, come on,” the instructor said.

“Teamwork makes the dream work,” came a second time with at least some semblance of energy.

“Alright, time to get geared up. When you’re ready, sit by the shallow end and let me check everything before you get in. And that should be triple-checking your gear because your buddy should’ve already checked first!” the instructor finished. “I won’t always be there. I’d let you learn the hard way if I didn’t want to get sued and lose my job because a student had to panic to the surface of ten feet of crystal-clear chlorinated water.”

An eternity later, Dawn was ready to go, sitting once more at the edge of the pool, but now with a weight belt, mask, snorkel, two regulators, a vest, and, most awkwardly of all, a huge tank of air. No matter what maneuvers she tried, she couldn’t stand back up sans Andrea’s help without the sense she was going to fall back over.

“It’ll get less awkward once you’re in the water. I can help your partner here with her tank. This is the hardest part, honestly,” the instructor said. “You gotta be vigilant, but it will at least feel natural in the water.”

“Ironically, it’s a pretty synthetic experience,” Andrea said.

Dawn pictured herself drifting through space. Weightlessness fascinated her, though the rigors of astronaut training did not. She had existed in three dimensions her entire life, but the endless pull of gravity left her bound to two in a way she had never fully appreciated before. The only sign of up being up was the pulses of percolation from each exhale racing to the surface. The instructor periodically patrolled back and forth the length of the pool, looking like an enemy in a swimming level of a platformer game.

Andrea kept making goofy expressions with her eyes, her mouth busy awkwardly chomping on the regulator. They exchanged heart signs made from their hands. They played tic-tac-toe. They pretended to have a tea party. Class in future weeks would be full of drills and activities, but for now, they were tasked with simply getting their bearings underwater, and both oriented quickly. For homework, they would be tabulating stats about their dive to track the nitrogen dissolved in their blood, but at these depths, the risks were low. However, in deep depths, the pressure would wildly intensify, and more and more air would be compressed into every gasp. Not only would the air run out faster, but the risks of side effects would be far higher.

“This should count as a math elective,” a blond-haired guy in a jean jacket whined during the classroom session two days before.

The longer Dawn spent underwater, the more serene peace flooded over her. She pictured plucking a fish straight from the currents next to her, as if it too were lulled into a stupor, simply letting itself be carried by the flow and fluctuation of the fluid around them. When they were done, they bobbed up to the surface like two apples in an attraction at a Halloween party.

That evening, they caught a quick dinner together at the dining hall before returning to their room together. Dawn got a big bowl of chicken noodle soup with a quickly toppled tower of saltines in packs of two, Andrea a few slices of pepperoni pizza, neither of which was anything remarkable, but at least it was covered by their meal plan.

“I’m *totally* going to picture myself as Rinoa floating through space when you come to rescue me underwater next time,” Dawn said.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but you are so adorable, I don’t even care,” Andrea said, affectionately wrapping her arm around Dawn.

“FF8,” Dawn replied.

“4088,” Andrea sputtered out, practically trying to hold it back, before saying, “Sorry, I’ve spent way too much time practicing hexadecimal for my data structures class.”

“Final Fantasy VIII. It’s a game about a bunch of students training at an academy who have to save time and space,” Dawn said.

“Wow, so your escapism from your life as a student is... life as a student,” Andrea said smugly.

“It’s a lot more exciting,” said Dawn. “I mostly was just reminded because of class.”

“The only thing class reminded me of in terms of retro gaming was an old coding book I checked out from the public library as a kid. Taught you how to write a text-based game exploring a shipwreck for the Apple II,” replied Andrea.

“You made a game?!” Dawn asked excitedly.

“I’ve made a lot of games. Nothing all that complex, though. The most involved one was just another text-based game like that with a lot more locations and puzzles,” Andrea replied.

“I’d love to play,” Dawn replied. “What’s it called?”

“*Mythos*,” said Andrea. “It’s all based on mythology.”

“That sounds so cool!” Dawn exclaimed. “I *have* to play.”

“You don’t have to flatter me like that. It’s so basic compared to the sorts of games you play,” Andrea replied.

“Play FF8 for me, and I’ll play Mythos for you, deal?” Dawn asked.

“Deal,” Andrea said.

Dawn was in a dark, dank cave. She could only move in the eight compass directions as she chased shadows projected on the wall by light sources she could not find. After growing frustrated, she busted out a notebook and started annotating the paths she took on paper, the digital transformed into analog. By the time she had broken free from the cave, the only luminance lighting her papyrus was her laptop screen and the string of lights above Andrea’s bed.

Fortunately, Saturday followed, and her adventures outside the cave continued. That only led to a myriad of new ways to get lost, stuck, or even die, and soon the entire area immediately adjacent to her bed was covered in hand-drawn maps – boxes with location names connected by arrows, accompanied by notes about where various items were found.

Occasionally, she would scribble some out as retracing her steps would reveal something new. She was lucky her first time to find a pan flute at the entrance to some woods only to have to map out the entire forest to find them spawning elsewhere a second time.

By Sunday afternoon, it was clear she was irreparably stuck. She turned to the world’s creator for clues.

“Did you climb the large tree in the center of the forest?” Andrea asked.

“Tried a bunch of commands. Climb, climb tree,” Dawn muttered.

“Up?” Andrea asked.

“Up?” Dawn replied in disbelief too.

“You can go down too. I’m surprised you got out of the cave without that,” said Andrea.

“I just went west,” Dawn replied. “With a bit of northwest thrown in for spice.”

Andrea placed her index finger inquisitively on her chin. “I suppose I designed it sometimes two directions can take the same path and end up in the same place.”

“A whole new dimension to move in! I don’t even know how I’m going to represent this on the map!” Dawn exclaimed. “More notes, I guess.”

“What you are creating is ultimately just a projection, a representation of the real version collapsed down into fewer dimensions,” Andrea mused.

“I’m sure that’s a helpful way of thinking about it for your data science work, but I’m gonna keep drawing pretty pictures,” Dawn retorted.

“And that’s what I adore about you,” Andrea replied with a smirk.

Dawn climbed up the tree. Much to her surprise, from the tree’s top, a horse flew towards her from the horizon.

“Pegasus?” Dawn asked. But it had no wings. Andrea looked over at her briefly. Knowingly.

“I am Gná,” the woman on the horse’s back proclaimed. “The messenger between worlds, the thread that pierces and joins the many tapestries of reality.”

“Norse mythology?” Dawn asked in an exasperated tone.

“You have me over here playing a game where I can *literally* summon Odin,” Andrea replied defensively.

Dawn’s phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen. “Those guys are going down to the bunker, you want to come?”

“You know they just want to sleep with you, right?” Andrea asked.

“Their fault for thinking they can bribe their way past friendship,” Dawn replied. “They’ll probably bitch behind my back about the ‘friendzone’ that they always were in from the start.”

Tucked on the side of a brutalist tower nearby was a staircase that descended two misty stories to a deep, dank concrete cube of a cavern. Except the mist was smoke, billowing as thick columns from the lungs of its lurkers. The light notes of mold were drowned out by the pungent skunkiness of cannabis. On the far side of the cube was a single door with no outward handle. The room, if it could be called that, was only illuminated by the torch of a single phone.

“You brought a whole damn hookah down here?” Dawn asked in disbelief. “And I can tell that’s not shisha.”

“Going all out before it’s back to the grind next week,” replied Hadrian. “You done that Sartre reading for class tomorrow yet?”

“Not yet,” Dawn muttered, taking a seat on the concrete, grabbing a hose, and taking a small puff. “Got distracted playing an old game Andrea made.” She took in a deeper drag. It tasted lightly of Trix cereal.

“That girl’s so in love with you,” Cerie, Hadrian’s girlfriend chimed in. She was picking at a paper plate covered in mush, though Dawn struggled to make it out in the dimly lit shadows.

“Hot,” one of Hadrian’s friends muttered from the dark with a chuckle.

“Shut up, Zak,” Hadrian immediately chimed in.

“That’s the girl with the neon green hair, right?” asked another voice from the dark.

“No, orange,” Hadrian said, before standing, “The bunker should be a place where we can all partake in herbal pleasures together, unencumbered by the context in which we live.”

They spent the next half-hour passing the hookah’s hoses back and forth, becoming progressively higher with each hit. Dawn occasionally checked her phone, but it got no reception through the concrete.

“You ever get the feeling reality is kind of... glitchy?” Hadrian blurted out at one point.

“Babe, you’re way too high right now,” Cerie said. “That big brain of yours goes to some weird places.”

“I’m just hungry,” Zak muttered. “Why y’all gotta pick a smoking spot where I can’t order a goddamn burger to have waiting for me back in my room?”

“I have the munchies too,” Dawn said.

“Want some of my pomegranate seeds?” Cerie asked, holding up her paper plate.

“You’re sweet, but thanks, I think the dining hall is open for a little while longer,” Dawn said, gathering up her things. And, as soon as she was far enough up the stairs to get cell reception again, she ordered a large pepperoni pizza she would split with Andrea and then walked home in the light of the moon and street lamps.

V. Izanami Ascends

“Moo!” a cow cried intensely in the distance, echoing around her. Darkness. Except for slight light trickling in from above.

“Hello?” Dawn shouted into the void in desperation.

“Dawn?” an intimately familiar voice shouted back from the abyss above. Wolves growled in the darkness around her. Dawn clutched her arms at her sides tightly in fear.

“Be careful, Andrea!” Dawn shouted back. And then there was light. The concrete cube of the bunker became brilliantly illuminated from above. A crumpled, white paper plate stained red sat on the floor.

“You have dogs down there?!” Andrea asked. The artificially created cavern was mostly empty, but three corgis chased each other around in front of the door with no handle. Two had black and white hair, the other brown and white.

“Aww. I honestly don’t know where they came from,” Dawn replied.

“I assumed you’d be down here smoking,” said Andrea in a practically parental, slightly disappointed tone.

“I guess Hadrian is gone,” Dawn replied. “I think I fell asleep or something?”

“Hmm. Hope you got *some* rest. We should get going, it will be morning soon. We have class!” Andrea replied.

Dawn began following her up the stairs, which curled in on themselves over and over, up and endlessly up. She kept assuring herself they were surely near the top, but more stories kept spinning themselves skyward, with Andrea a mere three steps ahead the entire time, a toiling tower of bare concrete.

When daylight finally began to peer through the top of their brutalist trail, Dawn jokingly said, “This the stairway to heaven?”

Andrea looked back at her, smiling. But suddenly, Dawn felt herself falling furiously, sucked backward into a swirling vortex of wind, which carried her aloft just above the stairs but down, down, down, ceaselessly back into the void. When she reached the bottom, the terrible tempest set her down surprisingly gently before receding with similar fury back up

the spiral of stairs. Everything in the bunker glowed in a dim green light. The corgis were gone, though Cerie was there, crouched on the floor, picking at a pile of clementine oranges. Her white sundress dressed was stained with a patchwork of fruit juices.

“You’ll need these,” she said, offering a miscellaneous assortment of seeds bundled inside a damp paper towel.

“Thanks?” Andrea asked, confused.

Cerie said nothing in reply, turning to face the door. She walked over to it solemnly, and, upon standing a mere foot from it, reached out to where a handle would be and turned it. Much to Dawn’s surprise, the door opened, and Cerie motioned her inside.

Inside was a field of golden wheat, as far as the eye could see. She swung to look back — the door was still behind her, but there was no wall, just more wheat around its frame in every direction. Dawn knelt and plucked a single stalk. In her hands, it began to shapeshift and wither, turning into a long twig of copper wire. She looked around her again — the entire field was wilting into wiring. Everything was copper. In a panic, Dawn ran back through the door.

“Is there a problem?” Cerie asked, sitting on the concrete floor, petting one of the corgis.

“There was this field—” Dawn started, but she could tell Cerie was still looking through the ajar door. She turned around, and a plain, nondescript office hallway was behind her where the field had been moments before. Cerie motioned towards it, and Dawn went back through the door. The hallway was entirely devoid of decoration, just an endless series of numbered doors as far as Dawn could see. It shimmered strangely with each step she took, and the numbers on the doors seemed entirely random, each value seeming to share no relation with the ones around it.

After walking past a few dozen sets of doors, Dawn grew scared and turned back once more, though now an endless hall of doors went the other direction as well, with no sign of the door that brought her there. She turned to her left and flung open the nearest door. Inside was a sterile room, tiled in ivory white on the ceiling, floor, and walls. Green lights raced through the grout lines like they were fiber optic lines, flicking by in a flash like a firefly.

In the center of the room was a steel table. Atop it was a single server blade, designed to bolt to a rack, its top opened to reveal solid state drives, semiconductors, and wiring within. Hovering behind the table, unconnected to anything, was a saucer-shaped robot with several mechanical arms reaching down and working on the server. Dawn blinked, and the machine

suddenly became a man, a surgeon, dressed in sea foam green scrubs, his white latex gloves covered in red as he reached into a body draped with disposable sky blue sheets.

“S-sorry,” Dawn stammered, suddenly worried about the sterility of her presence in the operating room. But when she blinked again, the surgeon and the body were gone once more, replaced by the strange saucer machine.

Dawn quickly turned around and left, crossing the hall into the door immediately adjacent. Another operating room, though there was nothing on the table. She turned back around, though a hall — not another door — was now behind her. She turned around again — though the door behind her opened up into the atrium of a shopping mall.

“Would you like to try one of our new scents?” a woman in a blue velvet dress asked, walking over, as soon as they made eye contact. Dawn crossed the threshold into the mall. The woman wasted no time and quickly spritzed a liquid onto her arm from a crystalline bottle. It was deeply orange in color but somewhat translucent, reminding her a lot of the Hi-C Orange she would get with Happy Meals on road trips with her family.

The scent smelled strongly of summer — of sunshine and beaches and oranges and pine trees, somehow all fused into a cohesive whole. Dawn was overcome with giddy excitement — as if an endless, spectacular adventure awaited.

“Wait, what is this?” Dawn inquired.

The woman smiled knowingly. “Nothing is tied more deeply to our memories than scent. Here at Nefertum Nostalgics, we specialize in perfumes that can accurately recreate particular sensations that can be hard to recapture. This is ‘First Day of Summer Break after Fourth Grade.’”

“That’s amazing!” Dawn exclaimed, eager to see what else was available. The ornate, gilded cart behind had an array of potions of various hues and opacities, from brown and murky to a light smidge of blue with labels like “Graduation Day,” “First Kiss,” and “The Day I Met My Wife.”

“What’s that one?” Dawn asked, pointing at an unlabeled, small bottle with a liquid that looked like it could be water.

“That one, sweetie? That one lets you know how it is to die a peaceful death. Not in agony. Not in fear. Bathed in love and light? I can give you a spritz,” the woman said.

“I think I’ll pass,” Dawn replied, making her exit back into the hallway.

She spent the next several minutes lightly jogging through twisting and turning hallways that all looked identical before trying another doorway. Inside, a vast room was filled with rows of chimpanzees clacking away behind old-fashioned typewriters atop mahogany desks, their shells bright hues and emblazoned with “Olympia.” Upon each desk was a small accountant’s lamp with a bright green glass shade. The room felt more cramped than the others, with a low drop ceiling crafted of cheap, fissured tiles.

An orangutan paced around at the front of the room, and, upon noticing Dawn, walked over, a stapled collection of papers in hand, which he presented eagerly to her. The front page was mostly bare, simply reading the words, “HAMLUT, BY WILIEM SHAKESPUR.” Inside were pages and pages of what were formatted to look like play dialog but was total nonsense. The orangutan shrugged in seeming disappointment. The chimpanzees started pulling on the brass pull strings to their lamps over and over, making the room flash erratically, hooting and hollering in unison. Dawn excused herself.

She was elated to see a symbol on the door immediately across the hall, which she had not noticed before: a pointy shield divided in two vertically in the middle, with the left side a light yellow-green and the right more the deep verdant of a forest.

Inside, sitting in colorful kindergarten desks, a bunch of men in business suits sucking on pacifiers scribbled notes with crayons. The room was decorated with colorful, cartoonish depictions of a city center inhabited by anthropomorphic animals. The businessmen were looking up periodically at the whiteboard at the front of the classroom. On it, two circles were drawn, one red, one green, with an overlap in the center. Each was loosely and roughly shaded in — just with a few quick scribbles — except for the area in the middle where the two worlds met. There, there was nothing. Just emptiness.

Back outside, there was just a doorless hall with only one direction to go, which took what seemed like an hour to traverse. At the end was a single door, painted black. Dawn cautiously crept inside.

Just in front of the entrance was a desk with beige legs and a chipping, laminate wooden top, stacked with a disarray of piles of papers. Behind it, in a cheap office chair, sat a man with a mop of jet-black hair, though a bald spot atop his head was growing so large he looked like a monk, with just a small fringe of hair surrounding a shiny dome. Though, instead of brown robes, he wore a plaid button-down shirt and tie.

“Excuse me, I think I’m lost,” Dawn said, surely sounding scared.

The man looked up and took off his bifocals, placing them down on the table. “You’re right where you’re supposed to be ma’am.”

“What is this place?” Dawn asked.

“It’s a morgue, silly,” the man replied.

“Am I... dead?” Dawn asked.

The man laughed intensely for several seconds straight, tilting his head back casually towards the depths of the room behind them and smiling broadly. “Why don’t you climb into one of those and find out.”

Dawn looked behind him at the racks of cadaver coolers. Each was sealed with a large, stainless steel door, laser etched with a number straight into the metal in bold numerals. Dawn opened 108, saying to herself it was basically like one of the capsule hotels she dreamed of staying in Tokyo. There was a drawer inside she slid out. A shiver shot down her spine. Nothing she could tell herself would help.

“Don’t forget this!” the man said, racing behind her, as she jumped aboard the bare metal. He popped off her shoes and slid a rubber band around her toe. Attached was a tag she did not bother to read. She simply closed her eyes and accepted her fate. The man slid her inside the black void. Clunk.

As soon as the door closed behind her, something disengaged from the slide-out table with an intense thud. Seconds later, she was falling head-first backward, like diving back into the pool with a scuba tank on, except instead of hitting the water she kept falling and falling. Then, like she was riding a roller coaster, she hit the bottom of a hill, and her momentum shot her back upward, and around into a bend. Just as her speed started waning, she shot back out into the light, the metal slab she was on coming to a stop inside the base of a large tower.

The walls were perfectly circular, made of marble interspersed with stained glass panels, going endlessly upward, past the point she could see. The floor was covered with copper-colored terracotta tiles etched with a variety of filigrees except, at the center, where the tiles were missing, except a few broken shards around the edges. A large pile of dirt sat there instead, a miniature mountain rising above the fields.

Dawn removed the tag from her toe, which had the markings of a Japanese paper charm — kanji she could not decipher. She placed it in her pocket, from which she also plucked

Cerie's cache of seeds. Sitting directly on the dirt at the southern slopes of the mountain, she carefully poked a hole for each seed with her finger, placing the seed inside, and covering it back up with dirt. Each seed was different – shape, color, texture. But each seed struck her as innately valuable, worthy of growth.

After the hard work was done, Dawn laid back, hoping for something to happen. But nothing did. She waited. And waited. Hours passed. The light in the stained glass dimmed. She wept. She slept. The dirt became her makeshift pillow.

An indeterminate time later, a rumbling stirred Dawn awake once more. One side of the stained glass glowed brilliantly, dazzling the entire room in an array of ever-shifting rainbow colors. Brown branches began to erupt violently from the dirt, springing upward faster and faster. The trunken tendrils began to intertwine with each other, creating a giant tower of trees inside the structure of stone and glass. Bark-covered arms then began to grow outward in a spiral, fusing with the marble to create a spiral staircase.

Dawn began the arduous journey of climbing around and around, up and up, quickly reaching a point where neither the top nor the bottom were in sight. But she kept climbing, surprised by her ability to push past the point she normally would be exhausted. Her physical endurance seemed endless, even though she felt mentally threadbare.

Years and years went by on the climb — until she noticed the trunk suddenly beginning to narrow. A few rotations higher, where a stained glass window would be, Dawn instead found an open door onto a balcony, a hole cut directly into the marble. She walked outside, grateful to see daylight finally once more.

A circle of dark stones cobbled together went around the edge of the top of the tower, out of the tip of which sprung a mushroom of leaves, branches, and brilliant pink blossoms. On the opposite side of the exit out to the balcony, a half rotation around, a single massive, purple fruit grew. As Dawn approached, it fell, landing with a satisfyingly squishy thud on the stone at her feet.

Dawn was drawn to it, bending over and eagerly taking a bite. The taste was intensely sour but with enough sweetness to at least somewhat balance it out. A swirling wind picked up, pulling the blossoms from the tree and sending them in a tornado of petals. Soon, all she could see was pink. But she was renewed. The stress of the journey washed away.

And then sudden, intense, overwhelming heat! Everything around her was consumed in a fireball, pink becoming brilliantly burning orange before fading to nothing at all.

Dawn awoke in her bed, the morning daylight just beginning to creep through the slats of the blinds. Across the room, she saw Andrea, still asleep, sprawled out with her puppy pattern pajamas in full view, having pulled her top sheet off her bed.

“Andrea,” Dawn said. No response. “Andrea,” again.

She stirred. “Yeah?”

“Sorry, I just had a bad dream, I needed to have a reminder that this is real, y’know? That probably sounds crazy, never mind,” Dawn said.

Andrea sat up. “No, it’s okay. We can watch cartoons and snuggle or something if that would help.”

“Sure,” Dawn replied. “You’re such a great friend.”

“I know you would do the same. Come here,” Andrea said, patting the bed next to her.

“I have a biology lecture in a couple of hours, but I want to just take it easy until then,” Dawn said, joining Andrea on the bed. She took comfort in Andrea’s warmth, both physical and metaphysical, next to her. There were still a couple of hours before class. She did not even remember what show Andrea put on, just a desperately needed cozy calm that had her back asleep — but a sleep without dreams she drifted in and out of as the hours passed, waves crashing into the beach and draining back out, taking comfort in not being alone in a labyrinthian building.

VI. Through the Looking Glass

“You know they don’t make ‘em like that anymore,” said the bespectacled, plump man in a polo shirt and khakis – the uniform for workers at the arcade. His unkempt raven hair had slight tinges of gray. “Cathode ray tube. Original. Most of ‘em go kaput after a decade or two. So many ‘original’ machines these days use replacement LCD panels. But it’s not quite the same.”

Dawn mhmmed and nodded in feigned amazement. She just wanted it to be able to read her little piece of plastic magic, a special debit card with credits redeemable just for activities in the Fantastic Funderland that could also store points to trade for prizes. Two virtual tokens tied to an array of unreal realities. And skeeball.

“Should be fixed now, ma’am,” he said, saluting her with strangely formal intensity before running off after his identically dressed identical twin. She tapped her card on the reader and was relieved to see it deducting the fake money for which she paid real dollars from her balance.

After about a half-hour, the “Blue Wizard needs food badly,” sound effect was making her hungry. She texted Andrea, who quickly pinged her back that she was at The Pit Stop, a pub overlooking the go-kart tracks. On the way there, she saw what had to be an older arcade game she had never heard of before, Bandersnatch. But Andrea — and her stomach — were waiting on her. When Dawn arrived, her roommate eagerly waved her over.

“Hi, Brad, good to see you,” Dawn said with a soupçon of insincerity. Andrea had taken a liking to the junior, who was certified in advanced diving and came along as an adjunct instructor for the weekend. He wore a tie-less, timeless white dress shirt under a formal black jacket, looking profoundly overdressed for the establishment, whose decor was barely one step above construction paper preschool classroom crafts in sophistication.

“Hey, Dawn,” he said, holding back a laugh. Andrea burst into a full cackle and wrapped her arms around Brad.

She whispered, “The guy said he *obviously* didn’t need to see his ID. Without us even ordering anything. He’s only twenty.” They both looked so proud.

“He’s just fishing for extra tips,” Dawn said. “Plus, don’t you have a dive tomorrow?”

“I’m not getting frat party wasted over here, come on,” Brad replied. “Just having a bit of fun in the Sunderland.”

“I won’t tattle or anything. Just be careful,” Dawn said.

Moments later, the waiter popped by with a laminated, one-sheet menu bordered with the white and black checkerboard. “Can I get you anything?”

“Not much of any appetite,” she lied. “Just here to see my friends.” She could always order something to the room later. The tax of a taxi for some crab rangoon would be worth not having to eat it with Brad around.

After Andrea and Brad finished up their meal, they headed down a nearby set of lightly sticky concrete stairs to the go-kart tracks, which were alight with a dazzling array of neon signs and repurposed Christmas lights. They almost made her miss the dorm room.

“You sure you good to drive?” Andrea asked as they passed a sign saying, “Had a beer? You can’t steer. No driving allowed.” Dawn held her tongue to avoid coming across as too much of a spoilsport.

“I’m seriously fine. I’m used to pounding back six packs with the boys, that barely counts as drinking,” he said.

The engines sputtered, erupting with acrid fumes that reminded Dawn of the old lawnmower at her mom’s house. A bored teenager at the stand handed them all helmets they each promptly put on.

Brad immediately raced into the lead once they were out of the gate. At first, Dawn tried not to care about chasing him, but the nighttime breeze on her face and what part of her hair was not weighed down by the helmet felt so good – so she gunned behind. As she went left around the first curve, she caught a glance of Andrea lagging somewhat behind, though looking like she was having fun, her smile illuminated with rainbows, as everything was lit up both inside and out with every color imaginable.

Dawn returned her focus to Brad, taking the next curve tightly, lightly tapping up against him in the curve – but it gave her the edge to slip ahead. She then went full speed down a long straightaway, confident she was gaining a lot of distance, but too focused on the road ahead to check. The track twisted around a few times before pulling back through the station. Lap one of three down.

For most of the second lap, Dawn was in a flow state. The turns already felt more natural — she barely had to think. She was one with the road and her sputtery little two-stroke

engine. But just as she was rounding the last turn for the second time, Brad slipped around her deftly, cackling audibly over the cacophony of their cars and the whistle of the wind.

She renewed her focus for the final lap, but Brad kept tightly hugging the turns, keeping her from being able to pass. But then came an obstacle on the track. Andrea. She still hadn't finished her second lap. Brad seemed caught off guard and swung wildly around her, braking considerably in the process.

Dawn slipped back ahead just as they crossed the finish line – and Andrea finished her second lap. She pulled aside with the victors anyway.

“Not fair!” Brad said, ripping his helmet from his head seconds after leaping from his kart.

“Give her a break. It's all about adapting to the unique conditions of the race,” Andrea said with a chuckle.

Dawn's stomach growled loudly. “That wasn't those rattley motors,” she said, rubbing her belly.

“Does my little chocobo need some gysahl greens?” Andrea asked in a playful tone. Dawn breathed a sigh of relief. Andrea had spent every down minute lately playing Final Fantasy because of *her*. She inexplicably wanted to see Brad as a threat, but, at worst, he was an annoyance.

“I figured I'd order something when we get back to the room,” she replied, before continuing in a whisper. “Could use some girl time.”

Later that night, as they were lying in the hotel room in half-darkness, the only light from their screens, half-eaten boxes of delivery Chinese littering the room, Andrea blurted out, “You were jealous, weren't you?”

“No,” Dawn said defensively, staring at the dimly lit shadows of the unfamiliar ceiling. It had a combed texture cut into the plaster like an upside-down zen garden, fixed in place forever.

“Okay, gotcha,” Andrea said in a blatantly skeptical tone.

“Hey, you're jealous of when I hang out with the guys in the bunker,” Dawn said.

“Why do you think I'm so eager to make more friends myself?” Andrea asked. “I don't want to just sit in our room alone when my homework's done.”

Dawn made a short, forced laugh. “I knew this was a way to make me jealous. Should’ve flirted with the arcade technician.”

“Don’t be like this,” Andrea said. “I do like Brad. He’s handsome. Even if a bit one-note. I don’t want to *date* him.”

“I’m sorry. It’s good you’re having fun. And I know we’ll be close one way or another,” Dawn said.

“Do you even like girls?” Andrea asked, her voice vibrato and raspy. She cleared her throat. “I mean, like *that*?”

“Y-yeah,” Dawn replied. “My mom always joked that a friend of mine from high school would make a cute couple. Always made me want to die inside — we were only ever friends — but I think on some level she knew I was gay. Plus she wanted to be the cool, accepting liberal mom. Guys just never enamored me the same way.”

“That Natsumi girl?” Andrea asked.

“Yeah,” Dawn replied. “She’d always gush about how much Natsumi and I played ‘House’ growing up — and I don’t mean a curmudgeonly diagnostician. Anyway, I’ve bared my soul out here, what about you?”

“I’m bi, I suppose,” Andrea replied.

“Binary with all that code you write,” Dawn quipped drolly.

“Smooth,” Andrea said. Dawn couldn’t see her eyes roll but could somehow feel it from across the room. “We should probably sleep soon.”

“Yeah. Hey Andrea?” Dawn asked.

“This is *not* the moment to tell me you love me,” Andrea replied.

“No, no, no, no, I just wanted to say thanks. For being vulnerable with me,” Dawn replied.

“You too,” said Andrea.

Though it was fall, they arrived at a spring. The pool of water was roughly circular shaped, with a clear, azure blue that allowed you to see how profoundly deep it was — but not the bottom itself. A long wooden dock cut across most of the radius of the circle on one side. The air was still warm for October, but the water carried a prematurely wintry chill.

“Our first real dive,” said Andrea, slipping on her flippers.

“At least it's not the open ocean,” Dawn replied.

“That’s next month,” Andrea said. “Though the cave system underneath her is more dangerous than the open ocean.”

Dawn chuckled. “You got me covered with the caves in *Mythos*.”

“I’m still so proud of you for solving all of that,” Andrea replied. “Buddy.”

“Brad’s paired up with the *teacher*,” Dawn said tauntingly in an intentionally childish tone. “Ready to walk the plank?”

“Arrrrrr,” said Andrea.

And the pair walked out to the center of the pier, where the rest of their class was gathering, mostly with legs dangling over the side, wriggling in the crystal clear, adapting to the cold. And, a few minutes later, they were down, down, down into the depths, silently together.

The water was breathtakingly translucent. In the classroom sessions, they railed against the dangers of silty water, but this was as easy to see through as the pool. The natural surroundings were an exciting change of scenery, though fish – which Andrea was especially eager to see – were few and far between. The only school of swimmers was the cluster of human divers chaotically teeming amongst each other, paired off but intermingling. They bottomed off around fifty feet, deep enough to see the tunnel in the side of the face of the spring.

“It’s called the many worlds interpretation,” Amir said two days before. He was walking behind her as they left their existentialism lecture. “We talked a bit about it in my physics class.”

“You’re not doing quantum mechanics in Physics 101, dude,” Dawn replied.

“Okay, I mostly read about it on Wikipedia. But it’s so cool!” he exclaimed.

Dawn stopped and turned around. “I should introduce you to a place called the bunker.”

As she stared at the cave now, Dawn wondered if there was a version of her that would decide to go in there, to surrender to the call to the void. More and more, she was haunted by vivid dreams with passages and portals that led her hither and yon. But, as Amir suggested, the her who didn’t would live on anyway, the survivor of quantum immortality, as the universe solved for its most ideal outcomes.

Suddenly, the instructor came over, swinging her arm upwards over and over in distress. Other pairs were rising back to the surface of the sunken circle. Dawn and Andrea both gave each other the thumbs-up sign to signal intent to follow.

And then they ascended, born back into the world above.

VII. Generations

“I’m just saying, all of this sounds so *dangerous*,” Dawn’s mother protested.

“I don’t have epilepsy,” said Dawn.

“You don’t know that, he was undiagnosed. Have you asked a doctor?” her mom pleaded. “He’s a strong swimmer. Stronger than you!”

“Perhaps we try to show a bit more positivity for what our girls are up to,” Andrea’s father said with a smile, coming in from the kitchen with a flour-covered apron. The others were seated at a large, intricately carved cherry dining table, pulled apart and expanded in the middle to insert extra leaves and make it longer, the patterns on the sides still matching at the seams.

“You’re right, we need to stay excited and proud. This is just one of those cases where the mother bear in me comes out,” her mother said.

“And at some point, it’s time for the cubs to venture out of the den on their own,” Andrea’s father said. He was a burly man, with a full, salt-and-pepper beard and a thick head of hair whose snowy peaks were only slightly receding at the temples.

“It means a lot that you came all this way, Mom,” Dawn said.

“Of course, sweetie, it’s so good to see you for a few days. Is it going to be just us?” her mom asked. “This is a lot of food!”

Earlier, when Andrea complained that they didn’t have enough guests to warrant the extra leaves, her father simply replied, “But we will have that much food. A banquet fit for a king! And two princesses.”

“Unfortunately, my brother, as predicted, backed out at the last minute,” said Andrea’s father. “He lives on that run-down old yacht at the marina, what a depressing place to spend the holidays.”

“It’s for the best. If you’re worried about having a pleasant time, that is. He’s so angry at the world and loves to go on rants about how Marxist professors are brainwashing our youth,” Andrea chimed in.

“Alas, I can’t go on a counter-rant about how Thanksgiving is a colonialist holiday that celebrates genocide,” said Dawn.

“I thought you were into space colonization. Playing all those sci-fi games,” Dawn’s mother replied.

“Rocks devoid of sentient life. Or, if sentient life existed on them, it would be given equal standing with humans,” Dawn replied proudly and confidently. She pensively put her finger on her chin. “Though I guess I was killing a bunch of mind worms. But that was a game!”

“Careful, that’s what they wanted Ender to think too,” Andrea remarked.

“Speaking of rocks,” Andrea’s father said, clearly eager to change the topic. “Andrea used to be quite the rock collector. Had all sorts of them stored in old egg cartons under her bed. What were the three things again, honey?”

“Igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic,” said Andrea. “Can we at least talk about stuff I learned in college and not third grade?”

“Much as I love you and am deeply interested in what you’re doing, I’m not sure I can understand data science. I thought that was just crunching the numbers on your TI-83 after chemistry class,” Andrea’s father said.

“It’s basically just that with a lot more data. We use it to train machine learning models,” said Andrea.

“All the more incomprehensible to me. Just don’t go making Skynet, you hear?”

Soon after, he returned to the kitchen to finish up the feast, and Dawn’s mother insisted on joining him. Andrea retreated to her childhood bedroom with Dawn. The hallway was lined with framed photographs. Dawn had never seen Andrea’s mother before — she never even described what she looked like. She had long, wavy red hair. Natural, not dyed. She looked so happy in all of them, but she became conspicuously absent in all of the family photographs of Andrea’s teenage years.

“This isn’t what I expected,” Dawn said upon entering her bedroom.

“Wait, you haven’t seen the best part yet!” Andrea proclaimed proudly. She ran over to the windows, closed the drapes tightly, and turned off the light. “They’ll glow more brightly when there’s no light peeking through.”

Affixed to the ceiling and the upper parts of the walls were glow-in-the-dark stick-on stars that emitted an eerie green glow, almost the color of cartoonishly stereotypical radioactive waste.

“Too much light pollution,” Dawn muttered with a chuckle. “You know I love stargazing. You never told me about this.” She sat down on the floor on a woven dark green rug, looking up at the night sky of the unfamiliar ceiling.

“Meow,” a cat chirped, pushing her way through the cracked bedroom door. Spot was mostly white, except for a roughly circular black splotch on her back. Andrea was so embarrassed when Dawn first realized she was sneaking off home to see her cat, coming back to the dorm lightly dusted in white fur. Dawn made fun of her for giving a dog name to a cat, to which she defended herself by saying Lieutenant Commander Data also had a cat named Spot — and he did not even have a spot, he was just orange.

“I was worried you would think my bedroom cheesy and childish,” said Andrea, lightly blushing with similar embarrassment. She shut the door fully before lying down on the floor next to Dawn. “My little simulacrum of a sky.”

“No, this is so cool,” Dawn said, petting a purring Spot. “These little simulations when you’re young can help you appreciate the real thing. They do it to us with babies and dolls. Why not cool sciencey stuff?”

“But it’s no substitute for the real thing, that’s for sure,” Andrea replied. “Though I’m mostly a city girl. I’ve never stared at the stars under the Wyoming sky like you.”

“We should go sometime,” Dawn replied, kicking her head back to lie down as well. Spot tucked herself between them. “You and me.”

“Really?” Andrea asked excitedly. “You mean it?”

“Of course! Why wouldn’t I?” Dawn asked.

“I’m such a camping noob,” said Andrea. She giggled. “That makes it sound like I’m trying to learn how to troll people in a multiplayer game. I just mean that I would feel like such a burden.”

“Pfft, so you thought the buddy system only extended to scuba diving, eh? We’ll go on all sorts of adventures. Other than climbing Everest. I’m not climbing Everest,” Dawn said.

“I hear it’s full of poop,” Andrea said, laughing harder that time. “Maybe I can go on another spring break not to the beach to stargaze.”

“A different sort of sea,” Dawn mused.

“I’m a little scared of the ocean after what happened to Brad. I know it was a fluke. They’re saying maybe he’s photosensitive and something about the glimmer of the water on the surface—I don’t know.”

“Photosensitive. Always sounded to me like a word for someone who is camera-shy. Don’t take his picture, he’s photosensitive. Sorry, that’s not helpful. I know that situation scared the hell out of you,” said Dawn.

“It reminded me of how fragile this all is. But I do admit you were right about one thing,” said Andrea.

“What’s that?” asked Dawn.

“On some level, I was jealous you had these cool friends you were going off to hang out with and wanted someone like that for myself. Not that I wanted to date him—”

“No, I get it,” said Dawn. “What we have is special. I’m glad I wound up your roommate.”

“Maybe I’ll come down to the bunker with you sometime,” said Andrea. “Too bad it doesn’t have a trio of – what were they in your dream – Shiba inu?”

“Corgis,” replied Dawn in an authoritative tone. “We could always start our own thing.”

“What do you mean?” asked Andrea.

“I have some Northern Lights in the bag in the trunk of my mom’s rental car. Might not let us see a real aurora. Or even much in the way of stars. But it’s something,” said Dawn. “Heck, might make *these* stars more impressive.” She motioned at the ceiling.

So they took a short walk around the neighborhood, giggling, excited by the future, lighting a new brilliant bright orange star with each drag they took from Dawn’s hand-rolled joint. The sky was nearly starless, drowned by the city around them. But they felt free. Though, even in joy, they dared not venture far, eager to not miss dinner.

“Your favorite,” Dawn said, pulling out a spritzer of cherry blossom-flavored perfume from her bag in the trunk of her car.

“They’re going to smell it on us anyway,” Andrea said.

“At least we’re showing effort?” Dawn offered.

The girls were mystified by the scope of the feast their respective parents put together. Not only was there a massive roasted bird with a large boat of gravy next to it, but the smorgasbord of sides was spectacular – stuffing, macaroni & cheese, corn pudding, cranberry sauce, garlic mashed potatoes, honey-roasted sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and, to top it all off, both pecan *and* pumpkin pies.

They all started passing around casserole dishes and piling their plates high with their hoards. Andrea's father proudly carved up the turkey, giving each of the girls one of the drumsticks to "start a rock band together."

"I'm so impressed, Dad!" Andrea exclaimed as they took a seat around the extended table. "You never used to go all out like this."

"I made one side dish a night in the week leading up to this and then put it in the freezer. Dawn, your mother was kind enough to help me heat it all back up," her dad replied. "And to mix it up and not to be like the big man, on Friday, I'll rest."

"My pleasure to help, you were so gracious to have us as guests," Dawn's mother said.

"I know I was putting down the holiday earlier, but it's good to have this group together," Dawn said. "Seriously."

"Maybe the greatest gift of any holiday is the pretense to bring people together," said Andrea. "It's lore that tricks people into community-building and making connections."

"I can be thankful for that!" exclaimed Dawn's mom.

For months, Dawn had eaten food that was either bland or junk. Though the feast was far from some model of health or gourmet cooking, she was excited to eat something with serious flavor that wasn't a pizza or instant noodles.

"How'd you come up with the menu?" asked Dawn after gulping down some gravy-drenched potatoes.

"I asked one of the snazzy fancy artificial intelligence chatbots to come up with the perfect Thanksgiving meal," said Andrea's dad.

"You know *that's* data science, Dad. Maybe I should teach you about machine learning. Large language models. Transformers."

"Robots in disguise!" Dawn chimed in.

"Transformation. Metamorphic. Igneous. Elementary," said Andrea's father.

"Sedimentary," said Andrea. "Elementary would describe your understanding of science."

"On some level, I suppose everything's elementary," Dawn said. "Composed of atoms."

"Elementary, my dear Watson," said Andrea's dad.

"You all are so over my head!" exclaimed Dawn's mom. "I'm just going to eat this bird and get all that tryptowhatever and sleep like a baby."

“Tryptophan,” said Dawn. “And the sleepiness thing is a myth. That’s just your parasympathetic nervous system kicking in from eating such a big meal. It could be anything, though carbohydrates will give you more of a crash from the high glycemic index — that’s how fast your body can convert it into sugar.”

“I see you’re putting that biology major to good use already!” her mom beamed, but Dawn didn’t have the heart to tell her that she learned that all on her own well before college.

“One of the twenty-two amino acids that make up all proteins in our bodies,” said Dawn proudly.

“Whoa, watch out for those amino acids, man, they’ll give you a gnarly trip, duuuude,” said Andrea’s dad with a chuckle.

“That’s lysergic acid diethylamide,” said Dawn in a wise tone, trying to sound erudite rather than someone who had browsed the web on occasion with curiosity about drugs. She hoped the mask of cherry blossom scent was working.

“Exactly, diethylamino acid,” he said, raising one finger confidently into the air.

“I was curious about it because Francis Crick, the guy who discovered the double helix structure of DNA, was high on it at the time,” Dawn said, nervously hoping to cover any suspicion about her knowledge.

“Just stick with the weed,” Andrea’s dad replied. Dawn suddenly lost her appetite. She and Andrea exchanged looks, both horrified. “Relax, relax, I even told your mother when you went for your little walk what I guessed was happening. I said we’re going to smell a different herb than all the rosemary and oregano roasting on the turkey!”

“We agreed not to get mad,” Dawn’s mother said, though sounding slightly disappointed.

Most of the rest of the meal was munched in silence, but, as they were finishing up, Andrea said in a conciliatory tone, “Maybe we should make this a new tradition. This place means a lot to me, and I love having Dawn’s family here.”

“Well,” her father replied in a frustrated tone. “Come next year, I’m probably putting it on the market. Prices here are outrageous now. I can downsize, retire early, and spend more time with you.”

Andrea immediately and without hesitation stormed out the front door, and Dawn worriedly hurried behind. She caught up with Andrea as she was already a couple of houses down the block.

“Andrea,” said Dawn, “I’m so sorry. That all went downhill so fast.”

“You didn’t need to follow me,” Andrea said.

“I wanted to, though. I’m worried about you,” said Dawn.

Andrea stopped and turned around and bear hugged her friend with a fierce grip. “I’m okay. It just hurts. It fucking hurts. Things change, and I have so much ahead of me, sure, but I’m starting to realize how few things I can hold onto.”

“You’re holding onto me right now,” said Dawn. “And you can always hold onto me.”

“Thank you,” said Andrea, starting to sob. “Thank you.”

After a couple of minutes, they walked onward into the night, going nowhere, as was precisely the point. So much of her life prior was spent on neatly laid tracks. Sometimes, you just need to wander.

VIII. Terminal Escape Velocity

Winter break came quickly after Thanksgiving, though not without a mountain of stress from exams. Dawn spent hours tucked in the endless rows of books in the library, eager to steal herself away from the temptations in her dorm room — though she found herself missing Andrea's company constantly. While in the throes of writing a ten-page paper on existentialism, she took a break to write a long-winded text in the style of a soldier writing home.

“Dearest Andrea, promising new developments suggest the essay may soon finally be defeated. They tried to overwhelm us with excessive word count, but we routed them with a heroic cavalry charge. Their surrender must be imminent.”

The two of them saw quite little of each other in the days that followed, and Dawn dreaded being without her for weeks after.

“You didn't have to get me anything!” she protested the afternoon before they both departed for their respective homes until early January.

“It's nothing,” Andrea said. “*De nada*, as I learned this semester in Spanish 101!”

Dawn lightly shook the box, wrapped in pale, sky-blue paper printed with red-nosed reindeer in a chibi style, interspersed with small but intricately rendered snowflakes. Grinning goofily ear to ear, she said in a blatantly sarcastic tone, “Kind of heavy to just be an empty box.”

Andrea giggled. “Gotta have some decoys in there to make it at least feel like a mystery somehow, keep you hooked.”

“Glad I packed my checked bag light,” Dawn replied. “Gotta have room for your crumpled-up newspaper and gravel or whatever.”

“Believe me, if I went that route, I'd at least throw in a nice pair of scissors so you have the full trio,” Andrea replied.

“I'll miss you,” Dawn said woefully.

“You too,” Andrea said more stoically. “But hey, next time, we'll be flying to Denver together.”

Soon, Dawn found herself tucked into the window seat of an Airbus, humming “Leavin’ on a Jet Plane” en route to the airport where the songwriter got his stage name. By the time they were airborne, it was already dark, and the twinkling starlike constellations of the city below were slowly swallowed into the void of the horizon behind them.

Dawn quickly dozed, the adrenaline and caffeine of the past week finally giving way back to baseline. She was jolted awake by the plane touching down – a smooth landing, but enough of a jostling to startle her all the same. Her only regret was not being able to watch the airport on approach, its exterior styled with white, pointed peaks, a synthetic, miniature version of the grand, majestic Rocky Mountains behind it. At night, they became giant lanterns, unmistakable but giving off a diffuse light that bled less into the surrounding areas.

As soon as the plane came to a complete stop, almost all of the passengers stood up in near unison. But Dawn stayed seated, amazed at their sudden and synchronous stamina at ten forty-two at night. She mustered enough energy to smile at the crew waving them all off before plodding through the wind tunnel and barely past the gate before slumping down in a chair to collect herself. The lights in the terminal were dim — only a sprinkling of the gates were active — but the alluring red glow of a soda machine nearby got her to rise once more to infuse herself with at least a modicum of caffeine — at least compared to all the coffee and energy drinks she had cycled through her system the two weeks prior.

By the time she reached baggage claim, a few people were still milling about fetching bags, but the mammoth machines spinning around steel belts of suitcases were mostly picked bare. Dawn struggled to find any associated with her flight, going round and round the area, encircling the circles. Concluding she was still perhaps early, she started endlessly scrolling through other people’s photos on her phone as the belts emptied and came to a total stop.

When she finally looked up, not a single person was in sight, and all the lights were off except the reassuring, alluring glow in her hand. Dawn clicked the screen off, but not before tapping the torch on the back on, hopeful she could find someone who could help her. All the check-in counters were vacant and darkened.

“Hello!” she half-whispered before mustering a more serious “HELLO!?”

No answer. She panged for Andrea’s presence. She would probably make some dorky remark about, “Hello World,” which Dawn barely knew enough to say was what coders traditionally would first output when beginning their tinkering with a new language or library.

She heard what sounded like vacuuming, hoping she might run across a janitor. But it was just a vacuum cleaning robot, an oversized hockey puck bouncing around between the walls chaotically, with a little articulating arm that would pick up bigger pieces of trash and deposit

them in the bins. She had never seen them before but was unsure if they were new or only came out at night, a new breed of nocturnal intelligence waiting in the shadows for the sun to set so it may hunt its natural prey, dust.

As she receded into the depths, she noticed a green glow, its color noticeably clashing with the warm tones of her phone's flashlight — the rays of which were the only other thing piercing through the night's veil. She found herself drawn to it, like a moth to a light.

"The lighthouse calls me to harbor," she groggily muttered under her breath, as she approached the emerald aura emitting from a bright bulb by a door. Some part of her knew it was likely a secure area, but she was in a trance. The door was descriptionless, painted in inoffensive eggshell, with no signs nearby.

Behind it, a staircase went down, doubling back on itself. The walls were entirely bare, and the floor was covered with linoleum tiles in a checkerboard pattern. Florescent tube lamps hung from the ceiling, lightly swaying from the door slamming behind her. Her heart jumped, and she turned around to try to open it again, but it was locked. The only way forward was down. At least under the lime-tinged light, she could extinguish her torch and save some battery life.

Two stories below, the staircase came to another door, though it also had no handle. Next to it on the wall, a touchscreen with the outline of a handprint beckoned her to place her right hand on it. The screen lit up, humming and shining a bright, verdant vertical light across itself that moved up and down twice, like a copy machine.

"Welcome Subject XV4742," a soothing woman's voice chimed crisply in her head. Dawn looked around but could not see speakers anywhere. The sound of pneumatic cylinders engaging heralded the door slowly swinging open, giving her enough time to step aside before it slammed dramatically behind her.

The room behind it was massive, lit just brightly enough to see clearly. The floor was crafted of thick panels of glass that clacked beneath her shoes. Off to her left, there were racks of what looked like full-body suits made of some thick material, hanging by the neck with the head rolling limply down in front of it. As she approached, Dawn was mystified at how detailed the faces were.

Their features all looked identical, but the hair on each was different — capturing every shade imaginable, natural and artificial, arranged in gradients, so each seemed to flow from one to the next. Maybe someone would come along and pick out a perfectly matched assistant for their outfit.

Dawn grabbed one of the limp hands, surprised at how lifelike – but cold – the skin felt. However, she quickly leaped back with a yelp once she finally looked at one of their faces closely, their details previously so muddled in the shadows, looking downward in an unnatural direction.

“A-Andrea?” she sputtered, scared.

It was all Andreas down the row, that dainty nose and perky smile unmistakable. There was only one space missing on the rack positioned between an Andrea with ruby red hair and one with tangerine orange.

She turned and ran. The Andreas all came alive and started chasing her. The room did not seem to end, so she kept running, faster and faster. As she got deeper into the massive lair, the ceilings began to rise, and a large glass box suspended from the ceiling came into view. Inside was a full array of office equipment, with a single metal-frame staircase with cherry wood planks leading up to a door. She flung herself up them, skipping a step with each step, quickly deadbolting the cube’s door behind her.

Next to the entrance stood a tall wooden statue of an anthropomorphic elephant, ornately carved and painted with meticulous detail in stunningly perfect condition, except for one of his tusks, which was broken off. However, it almost looked intentional, sanded down so as not to give someone splinters and polished over with the same lacquer that coated the entire elephant.

In the center of the room, a large cylindrical map stood on a stand. On opposing sides of it were two brass rectangles, one tall, one short; one with a wide slit, the other narrow. The map detailed a segment of the Rocky Mountains, with Denver in the middle and several locations annotated on the map in indecipherable, runic script. With a slight push, she was able to rotate the frame around the map so that the two towers aligned with a differently angled diameter through the circular cartography.

Behind it stood a black leather executive chair, the desk with which it was paired crafted mostly of glass, with a shut, sleek silver laptop perched upon it, docked with a keyboard, mouse, and extra monitor. When Dawn jiggled the mouse, she was surprised that she was not greeted with the eye candy of a modern operating system but instead the monochromatic green of an old-school terminal.

A . T . L . A . S .

“New Eyes . Young Eyes . Awed Eyes .”

ENTER PASSWORD :

Dawn looked around the room for anything that might give her a hint about what to put before simply just trying “password” – which, to her surprise, was met with an “Access Granted.” This presented her with a menu of different options, each numbered, with a prompt to input her selection.

She entered 7. Fire Logs. A table appeared, listing various latitudes and longitudes with a column that read locations like Yellowstone and Colorado Springs. Hitting enter brought more rows of data, including ones that read Golden Gate, before it cycled back through to the main menu.

In the distance, she saw a blur of orange — fire? She grabbed a pair of binoculars perched on the desk and peered through. No, it was Andrea. The real Andrea. The Andrea with the copper hair was marching towards the crystalline cube from a distance. But she did not know whether to be relieved or terrified.

For all the knick-knacks strewn through the office, Dawn struggled to find a simple pen and paper. She tried to commit as much from the terminal into memory as possible. Something about silos? But were they nuclear or grain? Minutes later, the Andreas — all the Andreas — were quickly storming up towards the glass box.

She picked the one option that she dared not toy with before. EMERGENCY EXIT. A confirmation screen popped up, and all the text had transformed from bright green to bright red. Klaxons immediately started blaring, and, from the direction opposite the stairs, a mouth on the floor opened up. From its steel jaws slowly emerged a rocket.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” said a chorus of Andreas, all clamoring up the stairs.

Dawn jumped, thrusting herself at full force through the glass, shattering it on impact, throwing herself down towards the rocket. A long ladder went straight up the side, and she flung herself up it with the fierce recklessness adrenaline could provide, amazed at just how fast she could scale it. Thankfully, the hatch on the side was already open, enabling her to quickly slip in before closing it and tightening the seal with a large wheel attached to its back.

Before she could even get her bearings, the rumble of the rocket igniting at full force quaked at her feet. Around the corner was a small cockpit with the seats pointed vertically at the sky. She quickly strapped herself in, hopeful she could make do without a spacesuit.

Dawn barely had time to brace herself before the force of the acceleration quickly became overwhelming, and she closed her eyes, trying to take herself mentally to any place else, for several minutes, until it relented. She wanted to think of Andrea for comfort but could not

anymore — the trust was gone. Instead, Dawn found herself in a moment in sixth grade, riding the swingsets with Natsumi who, against her cautious nature, she had convinced to try jumping out of the swings into the pea gravel surrounding them, experiencing a few seconds of flight before sticking a landing like a gymnast who had just landed a vault. The teachers would scold her whenever they saw her doing it, saying it was dangerous, but she was addicted to the thrill.

Only when she opened her eyes did Dawn realize how intensely she was crying — her face and shirt entirely soaked with tears. Some subconscious part of her brain cried out over and over that the world was ending. But it was Dawn who was leaving it behind, into the void of the starlit unknown. As the rocket's trajectory curved, the big, beautiful, blue marble came triumphantly into view.

On its surface, she had often felt so tiny. Now she felt even tinier. Motes of dust in a beam of starlight, lucky to have moments of beauty and brilliance and not be sucked up by the equivalent of a robotic vacuum cleaner at any moment. The spatial bounds of her exploration were broadening, but it was only taking her further from everything she loved. She cried again, this time of loneliness instead of terror.

“Andrea,” she cried out into the void. Surely there was some sort of explanation for what she saw. She wished she could be there — that the experience could be a special shared moment between them rather than isolating.

“Dawn,” a familiar voice said from behind her.

Dawn craned her neck around. “How did you — I didn't let anyone else through the hatch?”

“I can explain, you're not in trouble, just follow me,” Andrea replied, floating in the door behind her.

Dawn unbuckled her seat belt and guided herself out of the cockpit with her hands as she swam an invisible sea of oxygen. Andrea took her down a ladder to a room with a hatch on the floor. Opening it took both of their strength. Andrea motioned her inside.

“Aren't these types of places dangerous? You can get sucked right in,” Dawn said.

“There's no gravity,” Andrea replied. “What's going to suck you?”

They were soon floating above the top of a tall, cylindrical chamber full of grains of rice. As soon as they were both inside, however, the grains began to stir, spinning slowly at first, but with ever-quickenning speed, clockwise around the center. The force it created pulled the hatch shut behind them, and suddenly Dawn was entirely unable to resist its pull as if they'd crossed the event horizon of a black hole.

“G’morning sweetie, Merry Christmas,” a voice said.

Dawn pushed through the fog in her mind to sit up and muster a, “Merry Christmas, Mom.”

“Looks like Santa brought you a stuffed animal this year, just like old times!” her mom cheered. Dawn looked over and saw the four-foot-long alligator now calling her bed home. “And now you can finally open that box your roommate gave you!”

Her mom took her leave to the living room, and Dawn sat there for a few moments to collect herself before idly reading the hangtag on her new reptilian roommate. “Apollo the Alligator. I want to be an astronaut when I grow up! My body is shaped like a rocket ship!”

Dawn groaned and forced herself out of bed, mostly out of fear of slipping back into the void of space.

IX. Christmas Chaos

“Sorry the tree wasn’t just packed to the gills with presents or anything this year,” Dawn’s mom said apologetically, gathering up all the wrapping paper into two bags, one black, one blue, carefully puzzling over each material to judge its worthiness like Santa Claus filling up one sack with gifts, the other with coal.

“Mom, you brought me a tablet, that’s worth so much, it’s seriously all good,” said Dawn, as she tapped and swiped her way through setting up her tablet. “When I was a kid, I wanted big things like bikes and dollhouses and swingsets.”

“Now your whole world is condensed down into a little digital screen,” her mom said, deflated. In the intense glare of the morning light, the Christmas lights behind her barely glowed at all, though it cycled through its five colors even when outshone by the sun itself. Atop the tree, the angel looked bathed in heavenly light.

“Hey, books work kind of the same way. Whole little worlds tucked down into unfolding sheets of paper,” Dawn replied. “We’re outside observers to a little pocket reality.”

“Suppose there’s something to be said there about those gift cards Santa brought you,” her mom replied in a knowing tone.

“I’ll enjoy having Taco Bell reprieves from the dining hall a lot, thanks, Mom,” Dawn replied, matching the knowingness to hers.

“You going to open that present from your roommate?” her mom asked, motioning her head at the still-unopened box on the table.

“Figure I’ll save myself one more surprise for later,” Dawn said. She was strangely nervous to open it.

“Those friends of yours still doing the birthday hullabaloo at Christina’s house?” asked her mother.

“Of course,” Dawn replied drolly. Feigning enthusiasm in a high-pitched tone, she continued, “Christina’s parents are even allowing them to bring boyfriends this year!”

“Well, I don’t think it’s reasonable to expect a young woman to bring home the future father of her children her freshman year of college!” Dawn’s mother proclaimed.

Dawn chuckled. "I don't think they think it's reasonable either."

Her mother's eyes widened. "You be safe."

"I'm not bringing a boyfriend," Dawn replied.

"Not the only thing I'm worried about. Whatever you do, only drive home if you're sober. Call me if it comes to it," said her mother.

"It's just a little get-together with some old high school friends, Mom," Dawn replied. "These parties are honestly kind of boring. So much of it is just the cool girls gossiping by the poolside."

"Things change after you go off to college, sweetie. I can't tell you exactly how, but I can tell you that they'll be different," her mom replied.

"Hopefully it will at least be interesting," Dawn replied, raising her eyebrows and sighing.

Though she always thought she had a comfortable, at times even luxurious, upbringing, all of that felt so modest and bare whenever Dawn visited Christina's house. The entire property was enclosed with a tall, wrought-iron fence, with a gate at the front that could dial the phone of anyone in the family — or "on the staff" — to get buzzed in.

The house stood atop a small hill, its weathered brick façade imposing on approach — towering above its surroundings and only dwarfed by the grandeur of the Rockies behind it. In the three-story atrium at the front of the house was the largest — and fakest — Christmas tree you could see outside of Rockefeller Plaza, lit up with nothing but white lights, adorned with nothing but tinsel glinting in its plain brilliance. At the top was a star, made of real twenty-four karat gold as her family loved to brag.

"The other girls are in the pool house," Christina's mom said cheerfully before returning to gawk at the tree, looking like she was in a trance. Her hair was a mix of her natural golden blonde and the growing platinum of age, and she was carrying a half-empty glass of rose wine, which matched the light pink of her pantsuit.

The pool house was a more modest affair — and yet still as big as Dawn's mom's house. The side that faced the main house's array of floor-to-ceiling windows was clad in rough granite. The artificial lagoon was contained entirely within its walls, heated during those cold December months with a retractable ceiling for the spring and summer. Sprinkled about were a multitude of matching lounge chairs, with brick-red plush cushions designed to weather the weather.

As they often eagerly explained, the family built it when a nearly three-year-old Christina insisted so they be able to have pool parties on her birthday — which also happened to be

otherwise the biggest holiday of the year. For a time they tried to get her to celebrate it the weekend before, but what Christina wanted, she ultimately got.

Various faces, familiar and not so familiar, were milling about or splashing around in the pool. She couldn't immediately spot Christina's unalloyed blonde hair in the crowd, so she disobliged herself from saying hello. So many of the others there were more popular than her in high school, though thinking about all those social dynamics all felt so quaint and small now.

"Long time no see," she said, approaching a familiar face.

"Hi!" Natsumi replied excitedly, springing up, suddenly energized after awkwardly sitting with her legs dangling in the pool by herself. Normally forgoing makeup in high school, she was wearing a light layer of foundation and skillfully drawn winged eyeliner, paired with a black dress with a floral lacy pattern along her shoulders. She rose, and Dawn immediately gave her a tight hug. An unmistakable fog of alcohol fumes flooded her nostrils over the background of chlorine.

"Look at you, Queen of Standardized Tests letting loose!" Dawn said excitedly.

"Is it that obvious?" Natsumi asked. "I've always been awkward at this type of stuff, and they say it's a social lubricant, and I'm all lubed up, baby!" She suddenly looked horrified. "That came out wrong."

"Well, it's nice to see you let loose for a change," Dawn replied.

"I've changed quite a bit," Natsumi said proudly. "Living for myself now. Not my parents. Hatching out of my shell. Even if I'm still taking my future seriously! Got a four-oh my first semester."

"That's awesome! No swimming for you tonight, though?" Dawn inquired.

"I thought that part was a joke. Swimming in December. Silly me, these people are so rich they can have a heated pool!" Natsumi replied.

"Right! You never were at the parties before," said Dawn. "That's one reason I was always kind of bored."

"My parents didn't let me. This time, I didn't ask permission," Natsumi said, her tone taking a coy turn at the end.

"Naughty you," said Dawn.

"And Santa already brought me presents, so I have a whole year to undo that naughty karma and get on the good list," said Natsumi.

“They got an app for that yet? I can never remember the conversion from SoCo shots to minutes studying.”

“We’re getting dangerously close to inventing plenary indulgences for seven-year-olds,” Natsumi replied. They laughed together in a way they had not since July. So much had changed, her life was full of new and terrifying variables, but at least one thing remained constant — even as Natsumi herself changed.

About fifteen minutes later, the birthday girl herself burst forth from the bathrooms, bamboo tray of something in hand, very quietly — but with impassioned determination and gusto — waving some people over. Dawn soon let herself be summoned.

On the plate was a grid of the tiny disposable cups used with ketchup pumps at fast food restaurants — white, pleated, thick paper. Inside, instead of sauce, each contained a single gelatin capsule. They were mostly empty but each had a fine white powder inside.

Dawn plucked the capsule from her cup and shook it back and forth, the flurry of powder like a Christmas snow globe. Or maybe an hourglass. Yet there was no pinch in the middle to slow the flow, all of time and life just sloshed around with no sense of direction, beginning, or end.

“I’m too scared to take it,” Dawn said, returning to Natsumi, who hung back awkwardly.

“What is it? Coke?” Natsumi asked.

“No, no. Trust me, I wouldn’t even consider that. It’s *apparently* called 2C-T-7. I’ve been reading about it on my phone,” Dawn replied.

“Sounds like the name of a Star Wars droid,” Natsumi ribbed.

“It’s supposed to be kind of like molly, but also kinda like shrooms,” Dawn replied. “Both of which scare me.”

“Well, sounds risky, and I’m certainly not ready to turn into a protocol droid, but I’ll be a babysitter for you if you need me. Hear that can be useful with this type of stuff,” Natsumi replied.

“That means a lot. Truly. Honestly, I’ve been trying to be more adventurous too, but normally I have my roommate Andrea around.” Dawn washed down her capsule with a swig of Christina’s mother’s artisanal fizzy lemonade. “She convinced me to take a scuba diving class for a P.E. credit.”

“She sounds cool,” Natsumi replied half-heartedly.

The two sat shoulder-to-shoulder, legs in the pool swishing about, waiting for Dawn to feel something. The swirls and splashes of their legs generated waves that clashed with those from the more intense pool-goers, whose cannonballs rippled to the shallow end.

The first thing Dawn noticed was the waves suddenly seeming slow. And then catching up quickly, like a rubber band of stored energy suddenly sent them loose. They oscillated between moments where time almost stood still to frantic, fast-forwarded flashes. Reactively from fear, Dawn pulled her legs out of the water.

“You okay?” Natsumi asked, gently placing her hand on Dawn’s back.

“Everything’s just changing,” Dawn said.

“I know what you mean. It felt like we’d be here in Denver forever. But we have to cherish things, say the things we—”

“No, no, sorry to interrupt, I mean the drugs. Everything is shimmering. Shifting.” Dawn replied. “It’s freaking me out a little.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Natsumi asked.

“Let’s go for a walk maybe?” Dawn said.

“That’ll be good. Stretch our legs!” Natsumi offered excitedly.

“There’s so much noise here,” Dawn replied.

As they proceeded out into the December chill, she slipped her phone out of her bag to text a quick, “I miss you,” to Andrea.

The cold crept in faster than Dawn anticipated, but she used it to steel her vigor to push through it via power-walking, fighting back with the heat of the energy burned off by her body. However, she could tell her companion was faring less well.

“The stars are so pretty tonight,” Natsumi said, clearly cold but also eager for a break.

“So much light pollution, though,” Dawn said. “You need to see the stars away from the city sometime. Straight view into the cosmos.” She could swear they were twinkling just a bit more intensely, though.

“I know, I honestly have meant to for a while. A couple of years ago, my parents gave me a nice digital camera for Christmas, and I got heavily into astral photography. You can overlay several pictures taken in sequence to see stars you can’t with the naked eye,” Natsumi replied.

Natsumi started walking again, and Dawn worried it was out of fear of frustrating her. But being close to Natsumi made her warm in a way no cold could cut through. The horizon drifted in a dreamlike way, each frame making sense extrapolated from the one before in an uncannily hyperreal way — too real to be real. The stars shimmied around as if they were twirling in circles — which she supposed they were on a much greater scale around the black hole at the center of the Milky Way. But when she looked at Natsumi, all she saw was a maturing version of the one classmate who was always there for her growing up.

“How have never told me that before?” Dawn openly pondered.

“I was afraid of sounding too dorky. You were one of the few people eager to spend a lot of time with me, and I didn’t want to drive you away,” said Natsumi.

“Are you kidding? This type of stuff is exactly *why* I love spending time with you. You’re just *you*. You’re not chasing the latest trend or trying to be cool. You’re authentic,” Dawn replied. “You’re real.”

“I was letting fear keep me from sharing parts of myself, thinking it would make me uncool. I’m no different than the girls back in the pool house, I just got better grades,” Natsumi replied.

“There’s a difference between learning to not fear being yourself and being committed to being inauthentic for the clout,” Dawn replied in as enthusiastically reassuring a tone as she could muster.

To their right, a gate to a majestic manor on a hill stood ajar. Looking up at the building towering above them made Dawn dizzy, and a wave of nausea overcame her. Before Natsumi could reply, she suddenly hunched over, hands on her knees, and violently emptied the contents of her stomach on the pavement outside the gate. Natsumi raced over to comfort her, her arm reassuringly on the small of her back.

“Maybe we should turn around,” Natsumi offered, and they doubled back as soon as Dawn was upright once more.

“I want to see some of your star pictures,” Dawn said.

“I want to see the stars better with my own eyes,” Natsumi replied. “Natural and artificial views of the same gaping void. A lot of the pictures I take? They’re beautiful. But the

photographs that stir the strongest feelings in me are tied to experiences. They aren't just historical records. They're special memories. A lot of which were with you."

"Maybe we could watch the stars together sometime," Dawn replied.

"I'd love that. I worry about how much we'll get to see each other now. But we never know where the road will take us. A butterfly flaps its wings and a storm brews halfway around the world and all that," Natsumi replied.

"That's the thing, though. We can understand all these random systems. Chaos theory is *not* about how they're unpredictable, it's that the smallest thing can have big impacts on the results later on," Dawn replied. "And how we can understand these dynamics."

"I was a bit worried about you collapsing out here, but you seem ready to give a lecture in front of a classroom full of students," Natsumi said. "They should hire you as a T.A."

"I feel great now. Not even cold! I know it's the drugs, but everything is bright and warm. But we need to keep you from being chilly!" Dawn exclaimed.

"You're sweet," Natsumi replied. "Can I ask something?"

"Isn't it so silly that we say stuff like that? You literally did just ask something!" Dawn replied, practically prancing down the sidewalk like a reindeer. Her phone buzzed

A message from Andrea, "Aww, texting me like a drunk ex on Christmas, how romantic. Miss you too, buddy."

"Oh, you're like *tripping tripping*," Natsumi said in a cheeky tone.

"Sorry," Andrea said, stopping and turning to hug her friend. "I *totally* quashed what you were trying to do there, I'm being so selfish while you're here babysitting me through this. What did you want to ask?"

Natsumi awkwardly laughed. "It's nothing, never mind. I don't want to be selfish either."

Back at the pool house, they cozied up together on a posh pool lounge. The 2C-T-7 came over her again and again like waves crashing ashore, euphoric but wearing her down. But through it all, having the closeness of Natsumi kept her warm through the cold of the night and the void of her inner universe, her affection for her friend a bright shining star.

There was a long time when it seemed like she would always have more time with Natsumi. Now she wondered when — or even if — she would see her again. Even the brightest, most star-filled galaxies are torn further and further apart by the expanding universe — though some

galaxies would come colliding back together, creating an even more saturated sea of stars for whoever might be lucky enough to look up at them. The Milky Way would one day do that with Andromeda. Neither her eyes nor Natsumi's camera could adequately capture that.

When she drove home the next morning, she had a chill no matter how much she blasted the heater. Her mom was not home when she got there, undoubtedly out shopping post-Christmas clearance sales. However, one small joy awaited her. The box.

Inside was a Twin Peaks Blu-ray boxed set, a tee shirt with an outline of an airplane that said "DIA IN THE SHEETS, SFO IN THE STREETS," and a hand-drawn card from Andrea with a data tree — a collection of circled numbers each branching downwardly off into increasingly more nodes, creating a pine tree-esque triangle. Inside, the message simply said, "Thank you for being such a great friend and roommate. Love, Andrea."

At first, she thought she was a bit underwhelmed after all that waiting. But then the tears quickly came. She seemed surprisingly well-rested for the night she had before, but she was lonely in a way she had not experienced in years. Her mom, Andrea, and Natsumi were stars in her sky, but the miles between them might as well be lightyears. She was just traveling through the emptiness of space, not truly at home anymore.

X. The D.C. Express

“Have you had any thoughts of self-harm?” Virgil asked in an overtly sensitive tone, as he alternated which leg he had crossed.

“No, look, I’m not someone you gotta fifty-one-fifty. I promise. I’m safe. I’m just overwhelmed and struggling to understand what’s happening to me,” said Dawn.

The wall separating the office from the hallway behind it was constructed of frosted glass bricks, arranged in a perfect grid that looked ready to shatter in an arcade game. Bounce the ball between the paddle and the bricks! A sign with a crossed-out decade-old iPhone said, “No phones, no exceptions.” Two high-backed, dark red leather chairs sat opposite a small, dinged-up, circular mahogany table. Atop it on opposite edges were Virgil’s steaming mug of green tea and Dawn’s purple plastic water bottle, little stand-in figurines having their own therapy session.

“We’re happy to always listen here — though if you are having issues with determining what is real, you will need a lot more than talk therapy, I’m afraid,” Virgil said.

“It’s not that I can’t tell what’s real, it’s that I often suddenly feel I cannot escape something obviously unreal. But believe me, I know there’s only so much you can do throwing psych PhD candidates at undergrads for free,” Dawn replied, “Much as I genuinely appreciate your service, of course.”

Virgil wore thick-rimmed black glasses and a merlot cardigan over a blue button-down shirt paired with khaki slacks. The room was surprisingly sterile despite its fancy furnishings. Because the counselors rotated, they did not have time to make the room their own. They were strangers in a strange land together — she was not a guest in his home.

He placed his hand inquisitively on his chin. “Are you sure they aren’t just especially vivid dreams? I had one patient who was taking too much melatonin and having intense dreams that often turned to nightmares,” Virgil replied.

“Maybe. I just can’t explain it all that way. There are gaps. It’s as if dreams are the way my life course-corrects or something. It’s like I glitched through the floor of the world in a video game, and I just pop back at the spawn point in bed after a while because it doesn’t know what to do with me,” Dawn replied. “I hope my metaphor makes sense.”

“Believe me, I’ve played my fair share of *Halo*. But stress can make the brain do funny things, and your first year of college is a big step. Have you tried meditating?” Virgil asked.

“Meditating? I know you can’t prescribe me benzos or anything, but you might as well give me a placebo,” Dawn replied.

“A myriad of studies have shown substantial benefits to mental well-being. If you want help accessing the appropriate resources for more intensive pharmaceutical treatment, I can be your guide. I just *do* hope you have good insurance. The system is pure chaos,” he replied.

“I’ll start with the meditation,” said Dawn.

Though Dawn mostly said it to get Virgil off her back, when she returned to her room, she found herself alone. Andrea’s film studies class had Wednesday night screenings, and tonight it was *Dark City*. Knowing she would not be back until late left Dawn restless. So she sat on her bed cross-legged, trying to clear her mind.

Dawn had only tried to meditate a handful of times before — and only for a few minutes before giving up. Clearing her mind proved predictably tricky. Even petty concerns such as whether the Thursday dining hall pasta would be the three cheese tortellini that she liked were hard to fend off.

Food! That’s what was missing. Food!

Dawn summoned a robotic taxi to the front of her dorm and, less than fifteen minutes later, was at “The Depot,” a restaurant built inside an old brick freight train station. Outside, it looked rough, the weathered patina of the bricks purposefully kept for the vibe. The inside, on the other hand, was thoroughly renovated. The floor was polished cherry wood, polished and waxed to a shine. The ceiling was criss-crossed with meticulously placed arrays of track lighting all turned down, providing the perfect low light ambiance — except the entrance, which was lit up like a spotlight. Dawn half-expected everyone to turn to see her step on stage, but they kept on munching their grass-fed bison burgers and Asian-Mexican fusion nachos.

“I’ll have the breakfast for dinner,” Dawn said, refusing the menu altogether, as she sat in a booth with olive green vinyl cushions, a pinch of ash of shade away from military drab. The waiter poured ice water into a purple glass with a warped, ribbed shape. People paid more for the ambiance of the imperfection, Dawn supposed. “Can I get a coffee too, please?”

“Sure thing, ma’am. How do you like your eggs?” the waiter inquired.

“Sunny-side up,” Dawn replied. She always had her mom make them scrambled — but only because her mom was so deeply concerned about salmonella and insisted that fried eggs be cooked over easy. She enjoyed breaking the film around the yolk, letting the gooey golden yolk ooze onto the rest of her plate.

Soon after, the waiter returned with the coffee and, another fifteen minutes after that, with several strips of thick-cut bacon, a stack of buttermilk pancakes with a dollop of whipped cream and a fresh strawberry, two sunny-side up fried eggs, their whites fused, and a piece of sourdough toast with a tiny tray of apple butter.

Dawn took her time eating, as the rest of the crowd at the restaurant dwindled. By the time she had finished her plate, the room was entirely empty. She checked the hours on her phone, and they were, as she thought, supposed to be open for almost two more hours. When it became increasingly clear no one was coming — not even the waiter — Dawn stood up and started poking around, eager to find someone who could let her pay so she could go home.

As she approached the door to the kitchen, the ground started to rumble. Dawn dreaded experiencing an earthquake moving to California. Her fork rattled against her plate behind her. When she reactively turned to look at it, she saw a flash of light brown fur dart under the tablecloth of the table immediately adjacent to her booth. Dawn turned and walked back, hastily rewinding her steps.

A loud, shrill whistle repeatedly blared. Through the wide windows at the back of the restaurant, sparks of steel grinding to a halt on the tracks lit up the ground behind a rapidly approaching spotlight. Dawn expected a modern marvel of engineering, something like what she took out here initially, but what swept out of the shadows was far older. The locomotive was a behemoth of black steel, a large cylindrical boiler dominating its structure. Just underneath the bright but slightly flickering spotlight was a red circle with the number four.

Behind it was a long line of identical passenger cars, each with a cerulean chassis and a pristine white roof. When the train reached a full stop, the first was aligned with the door to the kitchen. Dawn walked through the metal double doors, expecting a kitchen full of stainless steel commercial appliances, but there was only a boarding platform behind it. Reluctantly and anxiously, she stepped aboard.

“How nice of you to join us,” a familiar voice said in an eerily chipper tone.

“Virgil?” she asked. But the train car was seemingly vacant. She was the only person in there.

“Down here, dummy!” the voice shouted. Virgil’s voice was coming from a light brown, furry animal, now perching on his hind legs to wave his paw. The fur around his hands was jet black like they had gotten dirty hauling coal from the tender to the boiler.

“A raccoon?!” Dawn asked, shocked.

“A tanuki!” Virgil exclaimed proudly, punching the hand he was waving into the air.

The train car was divided in two with rows of seats on each side. The left was upholstered in violet, the right in gold. Seats were in blocks of four, with two facing forward and two facing back. But no one was sitting in them.

“Are we the only ones on the train?” Dawn asked.

“There are some folks in the other cars. You’re free to travel around the train as you wish! But most people have seats assigned further back,” Virgil replied. “Your seat is up here,” he continued, motioning at one of the seats on the violet side.

“It feels so lonely in here. Much as I’m grateful you’re here, of course,” Dawn replied.

“Who do you think pulled an unscheduled stop to get you aboard?” Virgil asked in a smug tone. He sighed. “The least I can do is keep you company as you settle in.”

“Settle in? How long are we going to be on this train?” Dawn replied. At least if she needed to sleep, she had a car to herself.

“Awhile. It’s kind of hard to express in time as you understand it,” said Virgil, holding his paw up to his chin thoughtfully. “Fifteen-dimensional time is quite the mindfuck, let me tell ya.”

“So I guess I have some time to poke around, then!” Dawn said confidently and matter-of-factly as she strode towards the back of the car. If the dreams would not stop, she might as well make the most of them, especially with a psychiatrist-in-training tanuki at her side.

The next car down looked similar to the first, though the upholstery was all blood red, and a few people were sitting in seats, looking out the windows with vacant expressions. Dawn only recognized one of them.

“Amir?!” Dawn asked, shocked.

He looked over in her direction, but his eyes were glossy and entirely black as if they were made out of obsidian, with putrid purple and green streaks emanating outward from his eye sockets like they were gangrenous wounds. Amir said nothing and just let out a light groan. Dawn immediately bolted further down the train.

“Wait!” Virgil shouted, his fur bristling up. But she flung herself into the next car before stopping to catch her breath. “You’re not in any danger, my friend.”

“That was a guy from some of my classes — but his eyes? What the hell was wrong with his eyes?!” Dawn puffed between heavy breaths, still struggling to calm herself down.

“He’s not in any danger either. Just undergoing a little trial of his own,” Virgil replied chipperly.

This train car was much different than the first two. Instead of rows of seats packed tightly together, there were just sixteen, each situated around one of four dining tables at each corner, most of which had occupants. They were all eating from plates that ever slowly refilled themselves with more food. By the time they had picked a chicken leg clean, another had taken its place. One table was beginning to overflow, tended to by a single man.

“Andrea’s dad,” Dawn remarked, sitting down. “Hi.”

“Dawn. You can call me Gryphon, you know,” he replied. “Excuse me, I need to attack this Mac.”

Dawn grabbed a fork and looked over at Virgil, who nodded with a smile. She took a bite of the macaroni and cheese on the plate in front of her, which was the best she had ever had. The sauce was impossibly creamy and rich, and it had the sharp punch of a strong cheddar. She followed it with a bite of cornbread that was dampened with butter and honey and then several large gulps of perfectly chilled ice water. When she put the water glass back down on the table, it was already full once more to the brim.

“There was something I wanted to talk to you about. Your mother and I — we’ve hit it off lately. Texted a lot since Thanksgiving. Even a little of that Faceywhatever app. The video chat app — not the one full of people arguing about politics. Anyway, I was considering asking her on a date, and I wanted to make sure you would be cool with it,” Andrea’s dad said.

“Whatever, man. As long as you treat her right, you have my blessing,” said Dawn. “I just want you two to be happy.”

“You and Andrea could be step-sisters!” he exclaimed.

“Feels like we already are,” Dawn replied, but the situation made her slightly uncomfortable, and she was worried about how much she would eat if she stayed. “Thanks for the meal, I should probably be going, though.”

“Take these! I have plenty!” Andrea’s father handed her some gold foil-wrapped chocolate coins. “I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon. And hopefully before your mother’s and my wedding!” Dawn could only laugh awkwardly in response as she proceeded to the next train car.

This one, much like the first two, was just rows of seats, though both columns were of golden upholstery. Immediately, a pale, blond man leaped up from one of the seats closest to the door and snarled at them. Dawn fell back against the door in terror, but Virgil sprung at him, shouting, “Shut up, you damn dog.”

“Sorry about my son, he’s a bit ferocious,” Cerie said. He sat down beside her, looking out the window defeated. Instead of her usual pomegranate seeds in the bunker, she was carefully picking open a pile of little clementine oranges, splitting each segment apart before popping them individually into her mouth.

“What the hell are you doing here?” asked Dawn.

“You know, just looking after the newest batch of the hoarders and the wasters. Terrible shame how so many of them ended up like this! A lot of it is just unhealed trauma! Past a certain point, greed is a pathological behavior,” Cerie replied.

“You’re like *twenty*, how do you even have a son this old?” Dawn asked.

“I’m a lot older than that, sweetie. Good to know my skincare routine is working so well, though,” Cerie replied.

“You’re welcome. Excuse me.” Dawn started marching down the aisle, Virgil scurrying on all fours behind her. She quickly made it to the next car. The seats were upholstered in blood red like the second car. The occupants were reduced to shades of people, black smoke slowly emanating from their translucent bodies.

“Are we dead?!” Dawn turned and asked Virgil in a loud whisper.

“I mean, you are. I’m still very much alive. You’ve heard of the ‘Stairway to Heaven?’ Well, this is the railway to hell,” Virgil said.

“I thought it was the highway to hell,” Dawn replied.

“They’re trying to be environmental and all, you know. Much as hell is hot and all, that doesn’t mean we can’t worry about rising temperatures. Just a three-degree rise in temperatures could lead to a demon extinction!” Virgil exclaimed. “Easier to get these kinds of things done when you have an authoritarian regime built on universal torture, of course.”

“Then why does it burn coal?! Whatever. This is just another one of those weird visions, I’ll be awake soon, just gotta ride it out,” Dawn said, closing her eyes and taking a series of deep breaths.

“No, I’m afraid this is one of those corny mystery thriller stories where it turns out they’ve been dead the whole time. Why do you think you keep seeing all these visions? Your brain was going all haywire in its final moments,” Virgil replied. “I don’t enjoy being the bearer of bad news.”

“That’s stupid, you can’t fool me!” Dawn replied defiantly, resuming her march through the aisles, unperturbed by the smoking shadows around her that reeked of burnt oil as she passed

them. Out the windows, the moon was barely lighting the terrain around them. She could barely make out the ripples of water on either side — too dangerous to try to jump off the train right now — so she continued onward, determined to reach the end of the train.

The occupants of the next car were all screaming in agony, their bodies entirely alight with flames, not merely smoldering with smoke. Dawn accelerated her march. The acrid scent of burning hair and human fat hung heavy in her nostrils.

In the car after that, standing guard at each set of chairs was a battleaxe-wielding man with the head of a bull, standing silently and solemnly with the resolve of the guards outside of the British royal palaces. Finally, in the next train car after that, she saw a familiar face once more — though one she was not particularly happy to see.

“Dawn!” Brad exclaimed. “It’s so lovely to see you.”

“He’s not dead, though,” Dawn protested quietly to Virgil. “He came close, but he survived. I saw them resuscitate him. I cracked jokes I probably shouldn’t have at Andrea about how she missed her chance to kiss him when they were performing CPR.”

“I told you time here is funny — and we all die someday, even if some far later than others,” said Virgil. “I know the overseers have contingencies for a drought of souls if humanity ever figures out that whole pesky aging thing. Good thing for me, though, magical tanuki are ageless!”

Dawn rolled her eyes, pushed Brad aside, and proceeded onward to the next car. For a change, every single seat in the car was full — and they were all full of Andreas of all sorts of hair colors, though instead of arranged into clean gradients on a shelf, they were chaotically mixed among each other, sea green next to blonde next to bubblegum pink. They all turned to look up at her in unison and then turned back to staring at each other, vacantly and still.

“Aren’t you all going to tell me I’m not supposed to be here?!” Andrea protested.

“But you are,” they all said in a unified drone.

“Take me back. Take me back to our room. Whichever one of you can do that. That’s where I’m supposed to be! Tucked into my tiny bed across the room from yours,” Dawn said. “I’ll wake up, and you’ll show me something interesting on your phone before we go get breakfast.”

“Incorrect,” they all said in unison once more. “New protocol initiated.”

Virgil sighed. “Maybe we should go back to your seat. You have a nice one! Up front!”

“I used to think that with Andrea around, I could do anything. Now I have a couple of dozen, and none of them will help me! I have to prove this to myself,” Dawn replied, deciding to continue her march down the train just a little longer.

Though all the doors before had easily opened, this one was shut with a metal wheel, almost identical to the one she had seen on the inside of the spaceship. Even when she put her whole weight behind it, she only barely felt it budge. The Andreas broke synchronicity and all stood up, awkwardly scrambling over each other to try to stop her.

“We really should go back, Dawn!” Virgil protested. But she would not relent. As the wheel loosened, she was able to move it more each time. The Andreas all began grabbing at her as she made the final two turns to get the door loose enough to open — and she tumbled out into the endless night. She swore she had seen another train car behind that one. What train doesn’t have a caboose? She hit the ground with a thud, getting a splinter in her palm from one of the track’s tattered ties.

The ground rumbled beneath her from all directions, and she threw herself off of the tracks as fast as she could, unable to see anything, relieved when she felt grass instead of gravel. But, mere seconds after a train barreled past on the same tracks her train was taking, another did so in the opposite direction on her other side. And then trains came and went going beside her perpendicularly to the first two. She could not see anything around her, but she seemed trapped in a grid of trains, and stepping outside her square would risk her becoming squashed.

So Dawn did the one thing left she could do — sat as calmly and still as she could and pushed as much as she could out of her mind. She decided human Virgil was probably right. But now she was alone. There was a constant, low growl of both oncoming trains and anxiety bubbling out of her silenced subconscious. However, instead of having to push and push to keep her mind free of fixations, the nothingness around her came rushing in. She surrendered to the void, whose vacuum sucked in more nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

She had often wondered if dying meant everything went to black. But even black is *something* — it’s experiential. As she slipped away, even that was also annihilated, a nothing so nothingy her mind could not comprehend it because her mind ceased to be capable of any sort of comprehension. The nothingness seemed like it lasted centuries, millennia — like it could and would last forever — until a familiar voice cheerfully chimed, “Morning, sleepyhead.”

Dawn wanted to open her eyes to see her dorm room — but the voice was not Andrea’s. The darkness and trains were still around her. The dream would not break. A panic that she could not escape overtook her, and she started flailing about in the dark, her hand landing on a rail before she quickly snagged it away, just in time to avoid them being guillotined by a train wheel.

“Calm down, calm down,” the voice replied. “You’re safe if you stay away from the tracks.”

“Nat, I’m scared,” Dawn cried out. “Help me.”

Light sprung to life in the dark. An orb of deep yellow light hovered just above the slender, elegant fingers she would recognize anywhere after their many years together. She was dressed in a violet dragonfly-printed white yukata, a lightweight, breathable summer kimono.

“I’m afraid you must have mistaken me for someone else. But I can certainly help you,” said the woman who looked like Natsumi.

“I just want to go home. This just doesn’t stop. These always ended by now before,” said Dawn. “I miss Andrea.” She did not know if her friend was suffering amnesia or if this was an entirely different Natsumi. She was too confused and too tired to even wager. But she certainly missed Natsumi as well.

“Hmm, it seems as if the reality to which you imprinted was shattered. Everyone died. That’s a real shame,” the woman replied glumly. “I could restore one of these backups, though that creates some real existential dilemmas. Are those *really* your friends? Or are those copies of your friends? There’s no continuity of consciousness, even if there’s a continuity of memory. It’s like the whole teleporter problem.”

“Just please, send me somewhere more familiar. Where someone who looks like Natsumi doesn’t talk to me like this. I just want this to be over,” said Dawn.

“The more we wish for things to be over, the more precious moments we can never get back slip away,” the woman replied.

“I’m just stuck in the dark surrounded by trains that might instantly turn me into a human hamburger patty the moment I try to go anywhere,” Dawn replied.

“Y’know, I used to romanticize Paris as this romantic, beautiful place, but I learned later on it’s more the place where a comment like this would be met with a drag on a cigarette and a, ‘How like life.’” the woman said.

“Can you just do your magical reality backup restore thingy already? Get that thing downloading from the cloud,” Dawn replied.

“We use ‘The Stream’ here, actually. They call it Styx — clever brandi—okay, sorry, I’ll get this going,” said the woman.

“Sorry for being so impatient, it’s been a long... millennium? I don’t know anymore,” Dawn said. She looked at her smartwatch, but the numbers on it just shifted between different values.

She swiped over to the analog clock face — it had sixteen numbers and was going counterclockwise.

“No, no, I get it. Just be sure to leave me a five-star review when you get the notification. Kinda influences how much power we get allocated. Give me a four-star review, I might not have the mana to save som—okay, I can tell by that look that I’m just making things worse,” the woman said.

“I can’t believe even deities are caught up doing gig economy work,” Dawn groaned.

“I may be a shinigami, but that doesn’t mean I’ve gotten caught up in the metaphysical world’s adoption of the Protestant work ethic. Have you seen those guys pray?” the woman replied, shuddering. “But enough of my boring office gossip looks like your reality is spinning back up. Looks like we were even able to provision a cluster with more quantum RAM!”

Dawn had so many questions, but before she could say another word, she sprung awake in the back of a robotic taxi. For a split second, she thought she saw Andrea in the driver’s seat, but she rubbed her eyes, and she was gone. She looked at her watch once more. 11:11. Andrea would certainly be back up to their room — hopefully the familiar, copper-haired Andrea. Whether real and it was all a dream or a just backup, she craved the familiar, the knowable, the cozy. And she steeled herself knowing it was within grasp.

A light rain sprinkled at the windows, and the wiper arms at the front popped up periodically to squeegee the water off, even though no driver needed to see. If anything, she deserved wipers more.

“Andrea?” she whispered, wondering if she could summon the shimmer of a specter back from the shadows. But all she heard in response was the sound of silence.

XI. Virtual Rationality

“Fe-*bru*-ary?” Otis asked incredulously, dressed in a baggy black tee and raggedy jeans. “This must be some Mandela Effect shit. It’s definitely Fe-bu-ary. Or at least it was last year.”

“It was always February, even if people don’t normally say it like that,” Dawn said. “Getting that wrong on a spelling test kept me from getting a perfect hundred in fifth-grade English.”

“But maybe that was just how things were in your timeline. Did they even have *Shazaam* there?” Otis shot back, his arms out with his palms up at his side in incredulity.

The teacher’s assistant had doled out a flurry of stapled papers, each with detailed instructions, the day’s date at the top, but with the day crossed out with green ink, the four replaced with a five — the professor had remembered to change the year but not the day. They were in a lab often used for dissections, but the stainless steel trays were replaced with touchscreen tablets.

“Enough banter. Can we get this going, you guys?” said Amir. They had Intro to Existentialism together the semester before, and he wound up asking for her recommendation for a science elective. Dawn was pretty sure he had a crush on her, but she did not know how to let him down. She certainly liked him — just not like that. He had used increasingly more hair gel over the months to give his hair more lift like a peacock trying to put his feathers on display.

“I’m still pissed we don’t get to use real rats in this class. Damn *wokeness*! They came for the titties in video games and now they have come for our rodents,” Otis exclaimed.

“But this enables us to simulate thousands of maze runs in mere seconds. What would take a semester can now be an afternoon,” Dawn said. “You can even get a rat’s eye view of them navigating it!”

“You have a bright future in educational software sales ahead of you,” Otis replied. “*Woke* software.”

“And you as a podcaster,” Dawn replied cheekily.

“I’m just happy we have an excuse to be looking at a screen all class,” Amir replied. “I fainted during a frog dissection in middle school, but with this? I could cut up frogs all day like a fine French chef.”

Otis sighed. “But it’s not *real*, y’know? It’s just code.”

“With the mice simulator, it’s a neural network that *learns*,” said Dawn. “I talked to my roommate about it. CS major. She blasted me with a bunch of jargon I don’t quite understand, but it does learn. There’s a simulated brain in the cloud somewhere that’s taking in all these experiences — adapting to them. Then we can change stuff about the situations they’re in and see how they respond. Even small things like colors in different places can throw them off entirely. They used hundreds of thousands of hours of footage of rats in mazes to teach it.”

“They used to call this the ‘kerplunk experiment’ because of how the rats would slam into walls,” Otis said with a self-satisfied chuckle. “They don’t even try to fake that.”

“Maybe those Mandela Effects of yours come from your cloud brain being run in a different simulation,” Amir offered in a deliberately spooky tone.

“Nah, those are alternate timelines. But they’re real timelines,” Otis replied snippily.

“What’s real and fake even mean at that point, man?” Amir asked. “It’s all just experiences. If you’re finding meaning in them, that’s what matters. You should read the papers I wrote last semester about the epistemology of existentialism.”

“All I know about existentialism is that dude who said, ‘Hell is other people,’ and damned if you aren’t proving him right,” Otis said.

“I’m glad I can experience the experiment of bickering with lab partners in a boring Intro to Behavioral Biology class,” Dawn said with a forced smile.

“Maybe the real lab experiment is the friends we made along the way,” Amir replied.

“Get a room, you two,” Otis said, rolling his eyes.

Amir looked embarrassed. Dawn just sighed and focused on tapping ten thousand different mazes into existence. At one point, she became stumped figuring out how to loop a single mouse through each maze and went to “Settings” then “About” to get more info about the app — and that’s where she saw the software company’s name. A.T.L.A.S. It was styled with periods, just like in the strange bunker under the airport. She did her best to shrug it off. Maybe she had seen it before and she just did not remember, and her subconscious pulled that into a dream.

“Lighten up,” Otis said. “Both of y’all look like you’ve seen a ghost. I didn’t mean to trigger you or whatever it is that you commies call it.”

Dawn turned to Amir and asked in a bad Russian accent, “Comrade, shall we ship him off to gulag?”

“I’m sure you’d love that. Re-education camps. Well, no amount of torture is gonna make me think there are more,” Otis said, before being interrupted by a sudden hiccup. “More than two genders.” His hiccups persisted.

“I just don’t understand why the need to make a big deal about people who aren’t harming you at all,” Amir said.

“Need someone to scare your hiccups away, Otis?” Dawn asked. She quickly got up in his face and shouted, “I’m gay!”

More than anything, she was grateful for the excuse to avoid a difficult conversation with Amir. She hoped they could remain good friends, though she was desperate to avoid ever having to be in the same class with Otis again. Their worlds were just too different. Their realities could not intersect without collapsing into chaos.

The walk back to the dorm had long evolved into a waking sleepwalk, a hypnotic trance Dawn barely remembered each day. Her mind could tune out, and her body could carry her where she needed to go, guided by the subtlest signals of the stimuli coming from around her. The days were still cold but no longer so cold that it nipped at her heels, herding her home with haste.

Andrea was normally back to their room by now but was strangely absent. Through the window, she looked down at the place in front of the building where rideshare and delivery drivers would pull in to wait for their pickups and drop-offs. However, today, there was a black town car with darkly tinted windows idling where she was used to seeing old Honda Civics instead.

For a moment, she shoved it out of her mind, trying to study, but mere minutes later found herself again looking down at it inquisitively. She grabbed her purse and snuck downstairs like she was being watched — even though she knew she almost certainly was not — and hurried down the first-floor hallway, past doors decorated with different cartoon cats, into the first-floor lounge, replete with its floor-to-ceiling windows and baby grand piano.

Sitting on the piano bench gave her a view of the car in the gap between the piano hammers and the upturned lid — while keeping her mostly concealed. She started practicing basic scales, but her eyes were on the car, and it consumed all her thoughts. The front license plate was clearly visible, a government plate. Dawn’s fingers found their way into playing a song she had learned as a teenager and barely practiced since, Bach’s Prelude in C Major.

She just had a hunch something ominous was lurking in that car. She couldn’t explain why. But she couldn’t shake the feeling either. She heard of CIA agents clandestinely dosing people

with psychedelics to observe the effects. The closest she had come intentionally to the strange, surreal realms she found herself in at times was that night with Natsumi. Dawn tried to write them off as mere dreams, as she woke back up into normalcy each time, but there were gaps. She could not, for the life of her, remember her real flight home for Christmas, even though she had gone back to read text messages she sent to her mom about finding her bag and heading to the pickup spot.

One of the back doors suddenly flung open. Out popped Andrea — except with aqua blue hair. She was followed by a man in a black suit and sunglasses. He shook her hand vigorously and slipped her *something*, but Dawn could not quite see what. She gawked for a few seconds before realizing she should scurry back up to their room posthaste to not look suspicious or get caught.

She made it back just before Andrea, turning around to quietly slip the door closed before plopping down in bed. Seconds later, her roommate threw it back open with vigor.

“Welcome back,” Dawn said with feigned cheer.

“Thanks,” Andrea said curtly. “Glad I don’t have much to do this afternoon, I’m exhausted.”

“Glad to hear,” Dawn said simply.

Andrea plopped down on her bed and laid back, looking up at the ceiling. “You seem rattled. Everything okay?”

“Just, uh, you know, thinking about time,” Andrea said. “In my head about it.”

“Time?”

“How the *fuck* is it already February?” Dawn asked. “Rhetorical question, of course.”

“Time is weird,” Andrea said.

“So weird,” Dawn said snappily.

“My dad used to always say that time passes faster as you grow older, but I don’t notice anything in the moment. But it’s like my past is starting to feel like one of those ridiculously long receipts at the drugstore full of coupons. I used to be able to easily wrap my head around my whole history. Now I kinda gotta search through the ribbon of paper to see, oh yes, of course, it’s right here under the chocolate bar for a buck twenty-nine,” Andrea mused, still looking at the ceiling.

“Feels like just yesterday I was riding the train here,” Dawn said.

“And it’ll probably feel like that way forever. You’re so obsessed with the stars. Everything in the universe, as it expands, is just moving further and further apart. The same is happening in that inner world of yours,” Andrea said.

“You’re poetic today,” Dawn replied.

“I did have my poetry class this morning. More electives this semester. I love computer science, but it’s so much of a grind. This is such a relief,” Andrea said. “Even if a temporary reprieve.”

“Yet you’re still so exhausted,” Dawn said.

“You’re an observant one,” Andrea said. “Always pick up on the details. You could minor in forensic science.”

“Only if I get my own Nancy Drew-esque series. *Detective Dawn and the Peculiar Roommate*,” Dawn said, wildly gesticulating her hands with forced excitement.

“I’m thinking of a game series. Who reads stories anymore? Writing books is a waste of time,” Andrea replied. “Maybe like one of those old nineties point-and-click adventure games. Used to play these supernatural ones. *Gabriel Knight*.”

“Now there’s the tech nerd I know and love,” Dawn replied. She felt insane even entertaining the idea that there was some facility of Andrea bots of different hair colors that could be swapped out. She knew it was silly. And yet glimmers that it was Andrea — her Andrea — gave her weirdly satisfying moments of comfort.

“If you want to moonlight as a private eye, you need to work on your skills blending in, though. Doesn’t help I know you never go down to the lobby to play piano,” Andrea said.

Dawn gulped. “You saw me?”

Andrea nodded.

“I didn’t even know who I was spying on at the time, I was just curious about the fancy town car with tinted windows,” said Dawn.

“Just having lunch with my NSA handlers,” Andrea said with a chuckle.

Dawn leapt up, shaken. “What’s going on? You’re joking, right?”

“My would-be future handlers anyway,” Andrea said glumly. “Their recruiters invited me to *La Petit Paris* for lunch. Figured it would be a free bougie meal, but it was just constant high-pressure sales tactics. Like timeshare salesmen with better suits and technology..”

“So you’d be, what? A spy?” Dawn asked in a confused tone. She sat down on the edge of her bed.

“No, no, just an analyst, they target people in the STEM undergrad departments here sometimes. Though, to be fair, I’d be worried about what they were up to if they were going after biology majors. Maybe the Centers for Disease Control will reach out, though,” Andrea said.

“I don’t know if I would feel good about working at one of those sorts of places,” Dawn said. “Like I get that intelligence work is important, but there are so many scandals about regular folks getting monitored and spied on.”

“If it makes you feel any better, the only thing that kept me from doing the rant from *Good Will Hunting* was that I didn’t have it memorized. Alas, the only thing I was prepared to do was the Shakespeare monologue I learned for class,” Andrea replied.

“So this was just a chance to get free food,” Dawn said as a statement, not a question, hoping her tone would dissuade Andrea from feeling compelled to give a waffling response that would reignite her anxiety.

“Ah, dear Juliet, Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe that unsubstantial death is amorous?” Andrea said.

“Romeo, I think you’re overdue for a nap,” Dawn replied.

“I still will stay with thee. And never from this palace of dim night depart again,” Andrea replied.

“Goodnight,” Andrea replied. “I’m gonna go raid the vending machines and play video games.”

“If you grab me a Coke Zero, I’ll pay you back,” Andrea replied, batting her eyes.

“Thine apothecary shall yield unto thee the draught thou hast desired,” Dawn replied.

“O true apothecary, thy drugs are quick. But you’re giving me more Renaissance Faire than Shakespeare vibes,” Andrea said.

“Just don’t expect me to come back with a turkey leg,” Dawn replied. “You can play dead now. I’ll make sure you have caffeine when you wake up,” Dawn said.

Andrea made an exaggerated and protracted, “Blerghghgh,” sound before sprawling her arms out wildly across the bed.

Exit Dawn.

XII. Ides of February

At the campus post office, Dawn was surprised to find a slip in her tiny mailbox saying she had a package waiting. The line at the counter was far longer than usual. Hopefully, this would be worth it! She assumed it must be a care package from her mom.

“Here you are,” the worker, a brunette, middle-aged woman behind the counter said. Dawn had seen her before. She was normally much more cheerful. But a rush will wear anyone down, Dawn supposed.

The décor on the box immediately made her realize it was not her mom. This was pale pink and printed with a pattern of cherry blossoms. Her mom would just ship gifts in whatever box she could find, eager to reuse any cardboard container with structural integrity if she could save even a couple of trees.

“Someone has a secret admirer,” said the woman waiting in the line behind her.

“It’s Valentine’s Day!” Dawn said, somewhat surprised, as if she was speaking its reality into existence. The year was flying by, yet the holiday crept up on her. “Right.”

“Hope it’s something nice,” the woman said cheerily. “My boyfriend sent me something, so excited to see what it is.” She approached the counter and handed over the slip from her mailbox.

“Props to you, I don’t think I could do long distance,” said Dawn, standing awkwardly to the side, clutching her box.

“We were high school sweethearts. We talked about ending it over the summer. Most people probably should. But sometimes, you just gotta try to make it work,” the woman replied.

“I’d rather live for now,” said Dawn.

“It’s important to appreciate the moment, but at some point, that future he and I have? It will be now,” the woman replied cheerfully. Dawn took her leave.

She was embarrassed. The box quickly grew heavy in her arms. There was time to scurry back to her dorm room and open it up before Andrea would be back, though she might turn some eyes on the walk. There was a drizzle, which left its tears on the delicate cardboard blossoms. She knew they were revered for their transience, though the cardboard could endure if protected — a sustainable simulacrum of spring.

She was relieved to be alone when she got back to the dorm room. Wanting to salvage the lightly water-damaged box as much as possible, she carefully cut the box open with the blade of an opened pair of scissors.

The inside was stuffed with shredded red and pink paper. The first thing she pulled out was an amethyst geode, its rough outer shell split in half to reveal beautiful purple jewels inside. Tucked next to it was a small red panda stuffed animal with a name tag that said Fulgora. And all of it lay upon a bed of dark chocolate hearts wrapped in shiny pink and red foil. There was no card or anything else that might identify the sender.

Dawn lay on her bed for about a half-hour munching on chocolate. The rain let up, and she opened the window since the outside air was refreshingly cool, increasingly free of the creeping chill of the winter months. The metallic mountain of detritus left behind by her snacking glittered in the afternoon sun.

She was startled by a sudden rustling at her door earlier than she expected anyone to be there. Her admirer?

“Poetry was canceled today so we could go, ‘be with our muse,’” Andrea said upon slipping inside. “I think *teach* had a hot date. She’s probably halfway to the nail salon already.”

“I’d offer to make you my muse, but I don’t want to make my secret admirer jealous,” Dawn replied, unwrapping another treat and adding to the aluminum alps on her desk.

Andrea chuckled awkwardly and replied, “No worries, I’m far more excited about the frat party I got invited to tonight.”

“Seriously no offense, but that doesn’t seem like your scene *at all*,” Dawn remarked.

“If anything, that’s a compliment,” Andrea said with a chuckle. “This one’s a bit different, though, a toga party.”

“Sweetie, that’s the biggest frat party stereotype that ever stereotyped,” Dawn said in a cheeky tone. “I’m sure they even have kegs of terrible lite beer there too.”

“This is *Lupercalia*. Named after the Roman festivals. One of the biggest parties on campus all year! There are all sorts of interesting rooms decorated with different themes,” Andrea said excitedly. “They’re celebrating it at the beginning of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.”

“Oh, so I need to not just worry about getting roofied but stabbed in the back too?” Dawn rebutted.

“Maybe that isn’t the best way to market it. It’s a fertility festival,” Andrea replied.

“Ah, obviously, it’s Roman Valentine’s Day. I can’t escape it,” said Dawn.

“You could call it that. Of course, I understand if you get a last-minute date with your chocolatier,” Andrea replied.

“The mystery of the day,” said Dawn sighing.

“Maybe the friend from high school you hung out with on Christmas?” Andrea pondered.

“*Maybe*,” Dawn said skeptically. “If that’s the case, my evening will definitely be free. She’s on the other side of the country. Won’t turn down the free candy, though.”

Andrea walked over and picked up the geode. “There’s a whole, beautiful world inside this rough shell.”

“How poetic,” Dawn groaned, rolling her eyes.

“What can I say, the class is having an impact on me,” Andrea said with an ear-to-ear grin before turning around to pull out a storage box from under her bed. “We might be tired or wasted by the time we get back, and I know you don’t have any extra sheets. So here, borrow these.” She turned back around and tossed a wad of light purple woven cotton back at her.

Dawn always thought the name “Greek Life” was silly, but at least now it made some lick of sense, as a bunch of students milled about in ancient-looking attire amidst an avenue of buildings — fronted with columns of Doric, Ionic, *and* Corinthian. The vague scent of burnt weed and spilled beer lingered in the air — offerings to Dionysus, though, since it was a Roman festival, she supposed they should invoke the name Bacchus instead.

“My dad said if I joined a sorority, it should be Alpha Sigma Iota like my mom. Could you imagine *me* in a sorority?” Andrea chuckled.

“Not in a million years,” said Dawn. “Me either for that matter. But hey, it makes this more of an adventure. It’s like exploring a whole new world.”

“What happens if I live to a million and one?” asked Andrea.

“What was that thing you were talking about where a thingy loops back around to zero?” Dawn asked. “Maybe you’ll just start back at zero and do another million years without joining.”

“A variable overflowing. But that would make more sense if it was something like 2.1 billion. Variable limits are usually one less than powers of two,” Andrea mused.

“We’ll just have to figure out a way to get there and see what happens,” Dawn replied.

A throng of young men passed by, running down the street between the fraternity houses, wearing nothing but crudely made leather thongs, screaming and hollering as they went by. Dawn then ran across Amir on the sidewalk, and he nodded at her in acknowledgment. She waved, but he proceeded on his way. Things had quickly turned awkward. She wondered if it was him who sent the box — but it did not seem his style. Andrea was probably right about Natsumi. But the idea scared her for some reason.

They turned to walk up to Omega Omega Phi, its bright white façade looming over them, Corinthian columns stretching three stories high. The edges of the building were lined with a row of unkempt hedges, which had climbed high to enclose many of the first-story windows.

At the entrance, a man held out his hand and stopped them, dressed in a cheap hoplite outfit, his flimsy plastic helmet adorned with what looked like a dollar store broom end. “Halt, are you prepared to enter the temple of Minerva?”

“Cut the crap, man, we know it’s just gonna be kegs of the cheapest beer you’ve ever seen in there,” Andrea said glibly.

“We also have wine,” the man replied, holding back a chuckle.

“Boxed wine, I’m sure, Leonidas,” Andrea said.

“Leonidas is Spartan. I’m Roman,” the man said solemnly, regaining his intimidating composure.

“We’re ready to enter,” said Dawn. “C’mon, let’s not waste more time, we’re trying to party, not form a legion.”

Inside, the checkerboard-tiled two-story atrium was host to a giant owl statue, surrounded by a circular ring of televisions playing videos of flicking flames. People gathered around a cauldron of “goat blood” that smelled suspiciously like too-thick, too-sugared red Kool-Aid. A tall, pinstripe betogaed man stood beside an aged wooden barrel laid horizontal on a stand, serving wine from the spigot.

Andrea led them upstairs, towards the room of a friend of hers. On the door, a plus sign was painted in sky blue. Immediately upon entering, her nostrils were flooded with a pungent punch of weed. A small crew of guys were lounging around the room, with two lofted beds, under each of which were cheap convertible futons with black upholstery. They were passing around a half-burnt blunt.

“Andrea, thanks so much for coming!” a man sitting behind a MacBook in a plaid bedsheet toga in the back said as he stood to hug her. “Ulysses,” he said, turning to shake Dawn’s hand.

“Like the mythic hero!” exclaimed Dawn knowingly.

“Nah. But that would be on theme, though, wouldn’t it? Classics major — so I’ve got a bit of nominative determinism going on. But my parents named me after General Grant. We’re descended from him, though my last name is Stevens. Sorry, apologies, I’m rambling, make yourself comfortable,” Ulysses rattled off before sitting back down.

The blunt rotation worked them in. Ulysses insisted on putting on an album of uptempo Peruvian pan flute music. The room got hazier, and Dawn lost herself in the sensations and the mist. Much as she enjoyed the free weed, she was somewhat relieved when the blunt was burned down to a tiny nub of a roach.

But Ulysses quickly sprung into action, immediately tearing apart another cigarillo — this one passionfruit flavored — to restuff with several pinches of freshly grounded intoxicative herb he bragged was called Apollo Haze, specially sourced for the occasion.

“Apollo is one of the few names shared between Greek and Roman versions of stories, you know,” Ulysses said proudly.

The rotation started once more. The smoke thickened further, and Dawn was mystified that the end of the blunt was spewing unimaginable amounts of smoke from its tip. Paranoia set in, and she glanced around the room, looking for signs that something else might be on fire — the only way she could rationally explain all the smoke now pouring into the room.

She started to panic once she couldn’t even see the people around her, and she scrambled up and scurried away, desperately grabbing for the doorknob. After a few misplaced jabs at the wall, she found it, throwing the door open. However, instead of the fraternity hall, she found herself in the woods, the dank of weed replaced with the dank of fog and wet earth.

“Hello?” she shouted to no reply. She turned to see the door disappear behind her, disintegrating into dust that mixed with the mists. All she could hear besides the evening bugs and the occasional hoot of Minerva’s owls was a distant squishing, sloshing sound. She followed it as best as she could and was reassured that she could tell it was getting progressively louder. As she got close, she swore she could hear the sound of Ulysses’ pan flute music in the distance.

Soon, a large lake only lit with the moonlight blocked her way, so she walked around its edge. After a while, she could see a strange, thatched hut with a giant wooden tub on a stand in front of it. Inside of it, an old man danced, his pot belly jiggling with each step. His head was mostly bald, except for some wisps of white hair.

“*Salve!*” the man said, continuing his dance.

“*Anglice loquerisne?*” Dawn asked, not even knowing from where the words were coming, flowing from her lips as if muscle memory.

“Ah, yes, another university student. Your toga momentarily fooled me, I thought you might be from earlier in time. I’d come down and shake your hand, but I’m a bit busy. Call me Silenus,” said the man.

“I’m Dawn. But more importantly, you get visitors from different *times*?!” Dawn asked.

“Time here doesn’t exactly correlate with how it does in your world,” Silenus replied, still dancing. “When people wind up here, they can wind up here anytime. Hopefully, I’ll still be around to take care of the ones who show up in the distant future. Future my time, I mean. There’s a whole Roman legion popping in here bit by bit, cleaved from their plane of existence by the mad honey of Mithridates.”

“I don’t even understand how I wound up here,” Dawn replied. “Or how to get home.”

“I’m here to help — though, once again, I must emphasize I’m busy right now. But you wound up here because your mind is rejecting your reality on too strong a level. I know in your culture they think you meet a man pitching pills of azure and crimson named after a friend of mine, the god of dreams.”

“Is this a dream?” Dawn asked.

“This is the void between where dream and reality overlap and neither can exist as itself,” Silenus said. “A haven from collapsing worlds — Hoddmímis Holt, the Vikings called it. If the world were ever wiped out, there would be a little pocket of humanity to jumpstart it again. We’re like the appendix — which scientists in your time were fooled for a while into thinking was useless, oh ho ho!”

Dawn plopped down on the damp, dirty ground. “I just want to wake up.”

“Within every person, there are two essences. That of Bacchus, my first stepson, and that of Apollo. That of the one who enjoys the world and that of the one who analyzes it,” Silenus said. “The human soul is driven by their reaction. Remove one, you have no fuel. Remove the other, you have no oxygen. You need both for the fire within — and you? Well, your fire dwindles to mere embers.”

“You’re saying I need to party more?” Dawn asked, confused.

“Not exactly. Wait, one second, I’m finally done,” Silenus said, climbing out of the tub and down back onto the ground. Suddenly, a spigot appeared on the tub where she had not seen one before. He grabbed a metal chalice, slipped it under, and let a dark red liquid drain into it.

“Wine?”

“Wine of grape and bit of my blood. Just a little to give it special properties. Faster fermentation for one — but I’ll let you see the others for yourself!” exclaimed Silenus.

“I’m not drinking your blood,” Dawn said firmly.

“Then you don’t go home. When the priest or the pastor offers people of your time the blood of Christ, they eagerly sip it, but suddenly ole Silenus is a step too far,” the man replied. “See, this is why it’s terrible they cut that Tom Bombadil fellow out of those movies, people of your time don’t have enough appreciation for people like me. Sometimes, you gotta take a little advice from an eccentric fella in the woods, got it?”

“I’m being too Apollo or whatever again, aren’t I?” Dawn asked.

“Now you’re learning!” Silenus replied. “Will it help if I drink some too?” He took a sip.

She sighed, took the chalice, and took a swig. Almost instantly, a warm, calm, peaceful feeling began to overtake her. She leaned back, feeling sleepy. “What’s going on?” she said in a drowsy tone.

“A realignment of sorts. Just don’t trust strange drinks from those fraternity fellas. I’d say I hope to see you again, but I hope for your benefit that you don’t have to.”

“Goodbye?” she asked.

“Goodbye,” he replied.

Suddenly, Dawn felt herself wrapped in a strange, silky cocoon. The ground disappeared underneath her, and she was floating — no, falling ever so slowly. She could feel more and more momentum build as she was pulled towards *something* — but she couldn’t see what — wrapped too tightly in a way calming as much as it was restraining. Stars came into view all around her. They were undimmed by terrestrial lights, the Milky Way twinkling in its full glory.

The warmth soon gave way to intense heat, as her cocoon began to flicker and flutter with flames all around her — but never coming alight. Suddenly, the falling felt bumpy and rocky, as if they were meeting some resistance. The stars dimmed and dimmed. She closed her eyes, trying to ignore what was happening around her out of fear. Only the rocket had terrified her this much before in her life. Everything went all black. And then all white with the most intense light she had ever seen.

And then there she was, back in her bed.

“What a dream,” Dawn muttered, looking over at Andrea’s vacant bed. She felt renewed and relaxed like someone had steam-cleaned and polished the inside of her mind. Next to her in bed, she noticed an unexpected guest: a wolf stuffed animal. The hangtag on its ear read, “Fenrir.”

She snuggled him as she texted Andrea thanks. She almost put away her phone before pulling it back out and texting Natsumi, “Going camping for spring break, you interested? We can see the stars together.”

And then she laid there a few minutes more, fully taking in the coziness of her bed and all the little details of her room, eager to appreciate it for its unique sensations and sights that would only last a few months more. Too often, even when just studying in the room, she felt like she was in a rush to get somewhere. This morning, she felt like she was exactly where she needed to be. Now.

XIII. Another Spring

“Another spring break where you’re not going to the beach, I’m so, so sorry,” Dawn said. Standing at the baggage claim at the Denver airport had her ever so slightly on edge, but it was broad daylight — and the Andrea she was with was not chasing her.

“I just care that we can go swimming at least a little. Especially since it’s been a few months since I’ve had a chance to go scuba diving with my dive buddy,” Andrea said, ending with a goofily exaggerated wide grin.

“We technically still don’t have our certifications,” Dawn replied, her voice tinged with anxiety.

“Surely they have instructors at some of these places we can rope into our silly shenanigans. We just need more real dives under our belt,” said Andrea. “We both nailed that written exam.”

“Everything got so derailed after... Brad. I’m glad he made a full recovery, at least,” said Dawn. “I feel incredibly ridiculous saying it, but I was so frustrated with him that night, and I couldn’t get over the idea for a while I somehow caused it. Like all my negative thoughts somehow influenced god or gods or ‘the simulation.’ I don’t know.”

“It’s easy for us to find reasons to blame ourselves, but you didn’t do anything wrong. And he was an arrogant ass! He certainly didn’t deserve an underwater medical emergency,” Andrea said. “But I’m better off without him.”

“I hope Natsumi won’t get too bored without us if we go on a dive,” said Dawn. “I don’t want her to be the third wheel now.”

“We’re going to some of the most beautiful parts of the country. She’s a photographer! She’ll have *tons* to do,” Andrea replied.

“She’s mostly into photographing the stars, though,” Dawn replied. “And I doubt we’ll go scuba diving in the middle of the night.”

Harumi’s flight would not arrive until the afternoon, so Dawn and Andrea took a rideshare to her aunt and uncle’s house, who had generously offered to lend them their RV. Though Dawn spent the ride gushing about how they’d probably have a cold pitcher of pink lemonade and a board game waiting, when they arrived at their house out in the outskirts of metro Denver, there was just a note taped to their door that said, “Gone birdwatching. Keys in the RV. You know the code, kid. Stocked the fridge in it for you.”

The behemoth of a vehicle sat in the middle of a paved section off to the side of their driveway, a lightly tarnished white painted with racing stripes of violet around its waist. The front of the vehicle was turned to face the driveway. Dawn was enormously grateful that they were spared the stress of backing out.

“You wait here, I’ll go around and let you in,” Dawn said, lightly jogging around to the driver’s side door, where she quickly tapped **690720** into the keypad. It was not her place to share the code with Andrea but pondered how she would appreciate her uncle’s rant about how dates should be written with the year first so they can be alphanumerically sorted.

As soon as she slung herself up into the driver’s seat, she hit the button to unlock all doors. A nearly synchronized series of small thuds rattled throughout the chassis. Andrea quickly climbed in.

“Steppenwolf’s Greatest Hits, nice! My dad is really into this.” She said, flipping through a booklet of CDs tucked into the dash. She looked over at Dawn. “You look scared.”

“I’ve never driven something this big before. Nothing bigger than my grandfather’s Jeep,” Dawn said. She clutched the steering wheel tensely. “This is like getting the airship in a Final Fantasy game.”

Andrea reached over and put her hand on Dawn’s wrist. “I’ll be your copilot, we got this.”

Dawn looked at her and nodded quickly and as confidently as she could before reaching down to twist the key into the ignition. “Punch it.” Dawn slid out of the driveway as Andrea slid a CD into the slot, and soon they were blasting away on their magic carpet ride.

They circled back to the airport, where Natsumi was already waiting outside. Her light green rolling suitcase was propped effortlessly at an angle behind her in one hand while she scrolled her phone casually with the other.

Dawn pulled to the side of the passenger pickup road and hopped out. “Natsumi, I’m so excited you’re here!” She raced over, and they hugged. Natsumi clutched her so tightly. Dawn figured she had not anticipated being able to see each other in person again so soon.

“Me too, I’m ready for an adventure!” Natsumi exclaimed.

Moments later, she was in the back of the RV excitedly shouting, “Whoaaa, this is so nice! There’s like a whole apartment back here!”

They spent the next few hours driving up into the Rockies west of Colorado to Buena Vista, a small mountain town, where they topped up their gas and got ice cream cones at Dawn's behest, despite it still being chilly. Dawn picked up a free real estate newspaper from a nearby stand.

"I always loved chocolate chip cookie dough. You have bits of chocolate inside bits of dough inside bits of cream. Layers upon layers, worlds inside worlds," Natsumi said.

From there, it was just a short drive to their night's destination. Seemingly endless thickets of aspen and pine gave way to a shimmering lake surrounded by jagged peaks whose tips still retained much of their annual snow. They pulled up to a tiny, weathered log cabin of an office at the front of the campground. A pristinely manicured row of bushes of light purple flowers bloomed brilliantly just outside the front door.

"Weird! Rhododendrons don't usually grow well out here," Natsumi said, placing her hand gently on one of the blossoms. "The soil here is too alkaline. This takes special care."

"Strangely beautiful things can happen when two worlds cross," Andrea said.

"And when people put in hard work!" Natsumi added proudly.

"Looks like the bees are going to town on it," said Dawn.

After forking over two twenties for a night and some firewood, they quickly found themselves cozy in their mobile lakeside home away from home. Dawn set about lighting the fire, one of the few skills her father instilled in her before disappearing. She tore up strips of the newspaper she had grabbed on the way and used it as kindling to light small twigs, which, in turn, got the larger logs going. Getting trees, even dead and dry ones, burning was more of an uphill battle than most thought.

The sun had just started to set behind the mountains as the flames began kicking up little orange earthbound stars into the air that then fizzled out against the brightening full moon. Minutes later, Natsumi was snapping photos of the flames with her DSLR. And, much to Dawn's delight, there was no sound of Silenus's squishing echoing around the lake, just the murmur of fauna and chatter of campers.

Andrea set about chopping up chicken thighs they found in the fridge and putting them on skewers. Natsumi lamented she didn't bring the ingredients for "campfire yakitori" but expressed excitement to try the bottle of honey barbeque sauce they had handy. Their neighbor was a middle-aged man camping there for flyfishing, and he traded a couple of skewers for a roasted rainbow trout, cooked with lemon juice and freshly crushed garlic, which they eagerly split.

Natsumi went into their mobile fortress of a vehicle to use the bathroom, and Andrea *immediately* turned to her. “She’s in love with you, you know.”

“Yeah. I keep worrying I’m misreading her, but I’m pretty sure she’s the one who sent the geode and chocolate and stuff,” Dawn replied. “Not sure how she got my address at school. Maybe my mom.”

“People go to extraordinary lengths when something they care about is slipping away,” said Andrea. “But often even then, it’s too little too late. These connections that feel like they should last forever are often so fleeting.”

“We go to college on opposite sides of the country,” said Dawn. “Not sure I can handle that kind of distance. And more than three more years is a long time to wait to be together full-time — if it even works out then.”

“Someday, we’ll probably look back on those three years as just a blink of an eye,” said Andrea.

“But that’s three years I need to make the most of,” Dawn rebutted.

“But if you wait for the conditions for everything to be perfect, you’ll never make the most of *anything*,” said Andrea.

“Is it weird to say I’m also worried about making you jealous?” Dawn asked.

“Aww,” Andrea stood up to go over and hug Dawn. “No. I’m not *in* love with you, but I love you so much. More than I can put in words, even after a half-semester of my silly Intro to Poetry class. I want to be around for as many of your adventures as I can. And that’s why I know you need someone who can love you like I cannot.”

“I love you too, Andrea,” Dawn simply replied, seriously weighing her friend’s words but unsure of what else to say.

Minutes later, Natsumi returned, and they spent the rest of the night until they grew weary chatting underneath the stars. Natsumi set up her tripod to capture photographs and even brought her laptop along to process multiple images together into one, though her results were only somewhat better than in the city. Denver was only so distant, and numerous small towns dotted the mountains betwixt them. “The real magic will be at Yellowstone,” she reassured herself after looking at the first batch.

Dawn was grateful to be able to sleep in a comfortable bed, as much as her father instilled in her the virtues of roughing it, condemning RVs as frivolous and a waste of time. “Why come all this way just to watch *television*?”

When she awoke again, it was still dark, and the fluorescent tube lamp in the kitchen was flickering under through the crack of the door. When she tried to turn the circular knob, she was mystified to find her opposable thumbs gone, her hands replaced with clawed paws. Confused but determined, she carefully focused, rotating the slick metal wheel against the rough spots of her paws, getting enough traction to turn the knob. Everything in the RV was in total disarray, with all the cabinets opened and their contents strewn about, and Natsumi and Andrea were nowhere to be seen.

Outside, she was surprised to find that they were now parked in a nearly perfectly circular clearing surrounded by thick pine woods. A gravel path led from the front door off into the only break in the woods. As she stepped down onto the ground with all four paws, she was surprised to find it sticky, the rocks clinging momentarily to her paws before falling back down to earth. Dawn set down the path, which seemed to never end — she *must* have walked for hours. Eventually, she was exhausted and curled up on the grass at the edge of the path. Her paws were sticky, and she licked them off. They tasted of honey and the lightest of floral notes that reminded her of the bushes outside the cabin.

Minutes later, all the trees around her began to shimmer and shake, their leaves cycling smoothly again and again through a rainbow of colors, pausing briefly back at their natural green each time. The road turned from one of gravel to smoothly paved cobblestone, and Dawn resumed her journey, eager to find shelter to ride out whatever was happening. Soon after, she came upon another clearing in the woods, perfectly square, trimmed, and manicured into perfect points. In the center, two spotlights slowly swayed back and forth outside of a midcentury modern building, with floor-to-ceiling glass windows peering into a vacant lobby with stands for tickets and concessions.

Dawn pushed open the glass doors at the front and howled into the dimly lit lobby, but no one responded. There was no one to sell her a ticket but no one to stop her from taking shelter back in the calm dark of the theater. As she walked into the hall behind the unmanned ticket stand, she saw a man dressed in a top hat and forest green suede suit. “The mad wolf Fenrir? You may enter.”

She tried to speak, but all Dawn could muster was a whimper and a quick, yelping howl.

For some reason, she imagined the theater would be ornate, with ostentatious and gaudy décor. The lights were on but dimmed, and instead of brick red carpets and mahogany railing, it was just a basic black box theater with seats that were simply cushioned folding chairs. But she knew she would struggle to get comfortable in them and just curled up in the aisle between the rows of seating.

As soon as she got cozy and comfortable, the theater's darkened. Shadows that looked almost human began to shimmy in the darkness, moving in undeniably uncanny ways, carrying various props and pieces onto the stage. Moments later, the lights came back up. She immediately recognized what it was supposed to be: the room at her mother's house. The background was just a set of enormous pieces of plywood with blotchy details painted on, but she could make out recognizable posters and book spines and the window she was constantly staring through pensively during her teenage years.

An actress who was obviously supposed to be her walked in. But she just sat alone on her bed, looking sad, saying nothing. Eventually, she fell asleep, the painted-on unreal light of the tiny television lulling her to sleep. The lights went out once more. And Dawn felt herself become drowsy. What felt like hours later, she snapped back awake. The on-stage Dawn was now interacting with her mom, but she could not hear their lines — they were a mere whisper. Their faces and movements carried such emotion and intensity. Even silent, seeing the simulacra of her life made her begin to tear up, and soon she was howling at the moon she knew still glowed above her past the rafters.

But she was quickly entranced once more by another scene showing their prom, centered on the perspective of Natsumi, who propped herself awkwardly against the wall, looking at actor Dawn longingly across the dance floor.

This transitioned to similarly silent scenes between her and Andrea in a set modeled after their dorm room. Strangely, the Andrea actress seemed to be a hyper-realistic robot, her face normal, but her joints exposed to show mechanical parts. This put Dawn at unease, but she kept watching.

This finally culminated in a few rows of the same folding chairs as the theater being brought out and pointed out at the audience — or at least where they would be if it was more than just Dawn the wolf in the aisle. She waited for the actress playing her to come out, but no one came. The theater remained empty. Just some seats in a black box.

Afterward, the play of whispers ended, the stage was cleared of the chairs, and all the actresses came out to bow with satisfied smiles to a silent standing ovation. And then the lights came back on at full intensity.

“What did you think?” the green suit man asked as Dawn exited the theater.

She didn't think she could talk still, but the words came, “It made me so nostalgic. It's so silly. It's not real.”

“Why does it matter if it was real if it was meaningful?” the man asked. “What you and these people have is real, even in a world of unreality.”

“But none of it is real,” said Dawn, standing back up on two legs, no longer bound by the desire to stand on two legs.

“I used to spend centuries asking myself what was real. Eventually, I learned to ask myself another question. Hopefully, you won’t torture yourself as long,” the man said.

“What is authentic?” Dawn asked inquisitively.

But in a snap, she jerked awake in the passenger seat of the RV. The aqua-haired Andrea guzzled a swig of a fizzy lemonade-flavored energy drink as she kept her eyes glued to the road. Her wolf stuffed animal was tucked lovingly under her arm. As Dawn stirred more, she very briefly looked over and back, saying, “Welcome back to this plane of existence, buddy. *Someone* was still super sleepy this morning.”

“Where’s Natsumi?” Dawn asked.

“Sleeping in the back. She snuck back out after we went to bed to take more pictures,” Andrea replied.

“She grew up in such a strict household that she’s still worried she’s going to get in trouble or something, it’s adorable,” said Dawn.

Andrea chuckled. “Tell her that.”

“No, what? That would be so embarrassing,” Dawn said.

“You gotta have a real heart-to-heart with her on this trip. It’s like this road. It might look long and like it goes on forever into the horizon, but at some point, we’ll reach the end. Don’t let it creep up on you,” Andrea replied.

“I’m scared,” Dawn said.

“Honey, we’re all scared. I’m scared driving this monster, as I know you were. But sometimes you just gotta push through it to get what you need,” replied Andrea. “Look at my dad. He shot his shot with your mom, and now they’re dating.”

Dawn rolled her eyes. “Don’t get me started with that. But I don’t even know where to begin broaching this subject with Natsumi. How to break the ice,” Dawn replied.

“Don’t worry about figuring out the one cool trick they don’t want you to know about or whatever. Just be yourself. Be authentic,” Andrea replied. “You’re cool as *fuck*. There’s a reason

she loves you. But that girl struggles so hard to break out of her shell so much. You gotta be the one to take that leap.”

“I’ll try — and don’t you bust out your corny Yoda impression on me right now,” said Dawn.

Instead, she said, “Make it so,” triumphantly waving her hand in front of her as they barreled ahead at seventy miles per hour into the infinite road ahead.

XIV. Sixty Feet Under

By the time they reached Yellowstone, it was already past six. Natsumi napped most of the day away while Dawn kept Andrea company up front, who, amidst their rambling conversations about life and school, repeatedly reassured her she should make a move with her not-so-secret admirer. Dawn laughed it off each time.

“I normally came here with my family in the summer, I didn’t realize it would be so wintry here still in early April,” Dawn said. She scrambled to check her phone. “It looks like the main way we’ll have to get around the park is with snow coaches?! They’re like little buses that have snow treads on them instead of wheels.”

“It’s a good thing you had us pack coats,” Andrea replied. “Not sure this will be scuba weather. That spring was cold enough.”

After they passed through the gate at the entrance of the park, Dawn entertained herself with the novelty of using the provided paper map instead of her phone to navigate them towards the RV park at the northern end of Yellowstone Lake at the fishing bridge. The vast majority of the park’s roads were still snowed over, so they had to take a series of detours to even reach it.

“This the crater of the last time the Yellowstone supervolcano sent us into an ice age from blocking out the sun!” Dawn said with grim enthusiasm.

“So if this world goes kaput again, we’ll be at ground zero, *great*. Super pretty, though,” Andrea replied.

“We would *obviously* have plenty of warning if *that* happened,” Natsumi chimed in.

Andrea rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “Unless that’s what the supervolcano wants you to think.”

The night before, Denver was just a hop away, but now they were in the middle of nowhere in a cold and hostile environment, an entirely different world existing across the threshold of their home’s weathered, white steel doors. At least they had a power hookup and running water. They fetched their warmest clothes and put on coats. Dawn’s was forest green, Andrea’s was navy blue, and Natsumi’s was magenta.

When they emerged, they almost scrambled back inside upon encountering a single grizzly bear walking down the snow-dusted road between all the parked rows of roving tanks of modernity. But the beast soon passed, and they worked afterward to get their bearings. There

was less room for them to spread out around the RV than back in Colorado but far more to explore. Andrea offered to cook dinner if Dawn and Natsumi wanted to go on a “scenic evening walk around the lake” while she worked. She winked at Dawn as soon as Natsumi wasn’t looking her way.

“Don’t have anywhere in particular to go, but I guess that’s how a lot of the best walks work,” Dawn said. “Like on Christmas. Almost like we’re back there with all this snow.”

“Yeah, it’s like we time-traveled back to December. That night was strangely special, but I was so worried about you,” said Natsumi. “Felt like you so high you were in another plane of reality. I’m glad I can be here with you now.”

Dawn just chuckled lightly.

“What is it?” Natsumi asked.

“Nothing, I just have had some weird, vivid dreams lately I can’t get out of my mind. Usually, I forget them as soon as I wake up,” Dawn replied.

“Sounds interesting, but what does that have to do with our walks?” asked Natsumi.

“There’s part of my brain that just expects everything around me to melt away at any moment now. Some of them involve Andrea. I care so much about her, but my lizard brain just keeps trying to find a reason to distrust her. I know it’s irrational. And usually fleeting. But I just don’t feel that way when I’m with you. Ever,” Dawn replied.

“But I heard you say you loved Andrea last night,” Natsumi said.

“I... I didn’t mean like *love* love. She’s just always there for me in a way no one else was before,” Dawn said. “That’s why I push through the uncertainty I feel around her sometimes.”

“O-oh,” Natsumi said, looking straight ahead into the dimming evening light. Dawn turned on the torch on her phone. In the intense beams, she suddenly noticed small snowflakes falling.

“That was you who sent me that Valentine’s Day box, wasn’t it?” Dawn blurted out.

Dawn could make out the nervous smile that overlooked her face in the diffused illumination of her phone. “Yeah,” she said timidly.

“It’s chilly out here, you want a hug to warm up?” Dawn asked. Natsumi stopped, turned to her right, and clung to Dawn tightly without a moment’s hesitation. Dawn continued, “You matter a lot to me, but I worry if I embrace it, what we have just slips away anyway.”

Natsumi started sobbing, shouting through it muffled into the sleeve of her jacket. “Isn’t it better to just try? Our worlds are getting so much bigger. The distances, real and metaphorical,

have widened so much. I worry about you slipping through my fingers even if I try my hardest to hold on. But we have to try. Though who am I to lecture anyway? I was too much a coward to just tell you how I feel.”

“I’m so afraid to commit to anything. We’ll be split back up so soon. But I love you, Natsumi. Not in the way I meant I love Andrea. I’m *in* love with you. Looking back, I’m pretty sure I have been for a few years now. I just didn’t want to admit that to myself, let alone you,” said Dawn. “I stopped dreading school because I at least got to spend a lot of time with you. We were so awkward and naive, but we clicked in a way I did with no one else.”

“Don’t give up on me,” Natsumi said, still crying, through sobs. “I won’t give up on you.”

“I won’t give up on you, I’m just afraid of giving too much of myself to you and feeling lonely or regretful later,” said Dawn.

“You don’t have to be my *girlfriend* or anything, but at least be here with me now,” Natsumi said. “Be here with me as more than just a friend.”

“I’ll try,” Dawn replied. As they broke their embrace, she kissed Natsumi on the forehead, and their hands intertwined as they turned around their walk.

“Thank you,” Natsumi said. “I never expected a whirlwind fairy tale romance, I just wanted you to give me a chance. To see if something is there.”

Dawn just looked at her, gently smiled, and reassuringly nodded.

By the time they were back, Andrea already had plates of spaghetti ready for them. As Dawn doused hers with Parmesan cheese, she thought about the gently falling snow. Dawn kept catching Natsumi making smiling glances at her. She met them with smiles tinged with bittersweetness in return.

The cold deterred them from spending too much time outside after the sunset, and they instead sat inside watching the copious collection of DVDs her uncle had tucked in the living room.

“Maybe my dad was right, this is just a way to avoid appreciating nature to its fullest,” said Dawn.

“You couldn’t pay me to be here this time of year without heat and electricity, but it’s so pretty out there,” Natsumi said. “I still plan on braving the cold to snap some star shots tonight.”

And the stars were out in full brilliance, the sky more saturated than even Dawn's night on the Zephyr. The Milky Way was breathtakingly bold and bright in the sky, the mostly full moon no longer standing out in its black box theater when performing over the city lights. Harumi set up her tripod to slightly rotate, tracking the stars' slow swim across the sky. Even when imperceptible to the human eye, countless worlds were in furious motion, swirling and speeding through the void of the universe, a play that took millions of years to reach their eyes.

"Warm me up?" Natsumi asked each time after she set up a series of shots, and Dawn would wrap her arms around her, holding her close. *Be here with her now.*

When they went back inside, Andrea was asleep.

"Warm me up?" Dawn asked cheekily, motioning her hand toward her tiny bedroom in the back.

"Are you coming onto me?" Natsumi asked with a giggle.

"I'm not even sure what I want other than to show you I care a lot, and I'm trying," Dawn replied.

"Shut up and kiss me, Dawn," Natsumi said. And she did. But she pulled away before it intensified, ending it barely past a peck on the lips.

"I'm afraid," Dawn muttered in the dim light of the RV living room. "Afraid of what it means. Afraid of being apart from you again after. Afraid of being vulnerable with you. But I want to be vulnerable."

Natsumi took her hand. "Let's just feel each other's warmth right now. You seem to feel safe with me when you try. Let's try."

Dawn nodded, worried the stressed expression on her face might give the wrong impression. Andrea slipped into the bathroom quickly to change into a pair of cherry blossom print pajamas. Dawn looked less fashionable in her baggy black band tee and heather gray pajama pants.

"You look so cute. Sorry I'm not just as gung-ho about this as you," said Dawn. "I promise that it's not because I don't feel strongly for you."

"I never thought I would be here at all. I thought any hope was gone after graduation," Natsumi replied. "This doesn't feel real."

"But does it feel authentic?" Dawn asked.

Natsumi smiled ear-to-ear. “This feels even more right than I could’ve ever dreamed. I’ll savor however much I can get.”

“I’m trying to live in the moment as best as I can. But I’m worried about not just about us — I’m worried what I’ll dream tonight, even,” Dawn said.

“I’ll be here to comfort you when you wake up,” Natsumi said. “I dream that I can always be there for you when you wake up someday.”

But when Dawn finally fell asleep with Natsumi tucked under her arm, resting her head against her breast, only quiet darkness followed. And then the new day began. The snow had noticeably thickened outside, with the various sets of footprints criss-crossing around the park erased overnight. Everything was so still and quiet, not even a bird singing in the distance.

“I hope we don’t get snowed in,” Natsumi remarked as the trio stepped outside for the morning.

“Surely all this will melt away soon enough, especially, as Dawn reminded me yesterday, we’re atop a freaking *supervolcano*,” Andrea said.

“Up in the mountains in the north,” Dawn said.

They arranged to take a snow coach to Old Faithful, which was not accessible by road until May. It was painted a shiny yellow, taking Dawn back to getting on the school bus during the depths of winter — if it had the treads of a tank.

In front of Old Faithful was a large wooden building complex, though it was only minimally staffed this time of year, so they stood outside at the railing, waiting for the surge of steaming water to slice against the chill that permeated the park. They were a bit early for the next blast, and Natsumi kept herself cozy up in Dawn’s arms. Andrea looked over with a sheepish grin.

“I want to come back here with you in the summer,” Natsumi said.

And then it came — the heat. Prefaced only by a short rumble, suddenly the cold, dry air around them became a steamy sauna. An enormous plume of water surged into the air.

“Where’d the snow go?” Dawn asked. It suddenly was missing everywhere, not just close to the geyser, but even from all but the caps of the mountains in the distance. The geyser receded to its spout, taking its warmth with it, yet the heat of the sun above was beating down, baking them with intense heat. Their jackets were gone.

“What do you mean? What snow?” Andrea asked. Dawn was shocked to see her hair back to the bright copper of the first semester, not the aqua she had traded it for a month before.

“There was so much snow here this morning,” Dawn said. “We watched it fall.”

“Why would there be snow in July?” Andrea asked. “If anything, it’s *wildfire* season.”

Natsumi tensed up in Dawn’s arms. She looked up at Dawn with a look of abject horror and slightly nodded her head no.

“That geyser sure was something, though. Almost want to wait for the next one,” said Andrea.

“You have fun. I think I need to make a pit stop. Maybe stretch my legs. Natsumi can come with me,” Dawn said.

“I know you guys are lovey-dovey, you don’t have to play coy, go get some quality time together. You need to make the best of summer break,” Andrea replied.

They scurried off together, and, as soon as they were out of earshot, Natsumi said, “What the *fuck* is going on?”

“Look, I’m so sorry you’re stuck in this with me, but *thank you*. I feel less crazy. This keeps happening. Experiences that don’t make sense but feel so real. Armies of Andreas with hair of all sorts of colors chasing me. And then I wake up, and my brain just dismisses it as a dream. Unless you’re part of the dream too,” said Dawn.

“I’m scared,” Natsumi replied. “Is this your fault somehow?! None of this makes sense, though.”

“There’s no way this is real,” Dawn said.

“I’m real, Dawn, I promise you, I’m real,” Natsumi said in an exasperated tone. “Please tell me you believe that I’m real!”

“You’re real. I believe you,” Dawn said. She mostly meant it, even if she could not fully shake the doubt.

“The only reason that doesn’t sound completely insane to me is I watched it turn from April to July before my eyes.” She pulled out her phone. “There are months of messages I don’t remember at all but supposedly sent. Can we go back to the RV? I don’t feel safe around Andrea anymore.”

“At least we don’t have to take a snow coach,” said Dawn, motioning Natsumi towards a shuttle bus waiting outside of the Old Faithful complex.

Soon, they were back at the RV, though Natsumi immediately insisted they go on another walk, fearful Andrea might show up behind them at any moment. They walked out by the water, back to where they had their conversation last night.

“I think we should just try to go home now, back to Denver,” Natsumi said. “We can have a nice meal at Casa Bonita together like when we were kids.”

“I don’t feel right about leaving Andrea here,” Dawn replied.

“Maybe we can find some other way home, she can drive the RV,” Natsumi said. “I just want to go home as soon as possible.”

Dawn sighed. “The world, this reality is broken, it’ll be just as broken there, I don’t think we can outrun this.”

“We can’t give up,” Natsumi moaned, tearing up again, quickly devolving into intense sobs.

Dawn wanted to hug her more but was restlessly antsy, so she started pacing back and forth, hands clasped together. “We’re not. I feel insane saying this, but during one of these glitches, I was in a facility, and I saw something on one of their computers about a major facility under Yellowstone Lake. I wrote it off at the time. It was just a dream where my brain was rehashing parts of my past, glimmers of memories with my dad so long ago. But here we are. Just a few months later. It’s almost like it was calling to me. I should’ve known it would be so snowed over in winter, but I was determined to get here this spring on a subconscious level. It might be time for me to go down there.” She motioned at the water.

“What the *fuck*, Dawn?” Natsumi replied, still crying. “I don’t understand.”

“Yeah, what the fuck?” Dawn replied. “I need this to stop. I can’t live like this. I’m desperate to try anything.”

“I can’t dive. I can’t deal with you being left alone. All of this sounds so dangerous. I can’t lose you. I can’t be alone,” Natsumi said. “Be here now with me.”

“Let’s go back to the RV. I’ll think of something. Andrea might be affected by the glitch, but she won’t hurt us,” Dawn said.

“You said she was *chasing* you one of the times this happened. Multiple copies of her,” Natsumi said.

“I was in a facility I wasn’t supposed to be in. And now you’re keeping me out of another,” Dawn replied.

They retired to the bedroom in the RV once more, and Natsumi cried herself to sleep in Dawn's arms, even though it was barely past noon. Dawn, however, remained wired awake, vigilant for Andrea's return, desperate to stop the cycle of their broken reality.

After a while, it was apparent Natsumi wouldn't be waking anytime soon. Dawn gently untwined her arms and tucked her in tightly. A pang of guilt so intense she was overcome with nausea almost had her cozying back up to her. But she had no choice. No other ideas came to mind. Enough was enough.

"Sorry, I had to. Locking you in as I go so the big bad Andrea can't get you. I'll be back as soon as I can," Dawn wrote on a note she left on the nightstand.

She changed into her wetsuit and slipped a tee shirt and shorts back over it, walking a little over a mile to a nearby scuba rental shop, where she rented a tank, regulator, and waterproof lamp. The shopkeep encouraged her not to dive alone, but she insisted she would be fine. But on the inside, Dawn was terrified. She wanted to want Andrea there at her side. She wanted to be safe and warm with Natsumi.

Before she flung herself backward off the dock, she took an especially deep breath, as much to calm her stress about the situation as it was to prepare to hit the water. And soon she was through the wavy glass for the first time in months.

Rationally, the plan seemed absurd, but Dawn challenged herself to believe in her heart it was going to pan out as she swam further out and down into the lake. Every time reality broke down, by just taking the most obvious path before her, it worked out. She was not a religious woman, and yet she prayed that streak would not break now. Just believe. Have faith. Keep moving forward.

After swimming for over a half-hour, she saw a brilliance that drowned out the slight light of her lamp. And down, down, down she went, hoping she was not like a bug being hypnotically drawn to a zapper. This was no longer just her problem. This was her love's problem too — and it was her love for Natsumi that kept her determined, even as she grappled with guilt about leaving her behind.

As she got closer to the source, a structure came into view through the murky waters. It seemed to grow directly out of the bed of the lake, a tower covered in grime and rust peeking out, its top lined with the bright lights that guided her there. At its top was a large, open metal double door, its two halves spread aside. The parts that would interlock when the halves slid together looked like rows of corroded snaggle teeth, eager to swallow her whole. She refused to rationally accept it could be truly real, and yet it appeared to her there just as she anticipated.

Going into its gaping metal maw terrified her, and yet she was deeply convinced she had no choice but to do it.

Once past the teeth, the door began to slowly creak shut behind her. But halogen lights inside switched on, bathing her with photons so frantic they seared her retina for a few moments before her pupils adjusted. The grumbly groan of pumps forcing the water back out of the mouth surrounded her. Where the throat should be was a smaller door, which had a wheel she could not turn, though when the water finally fully drained, it let out a slight hiss and began to spin, fully rewinding itself out of its seal.

Behind it, a steel staircase spiraled down into the depths to a bottom she could not see. She took off her flippers and began the descent, hopeful that there would be something useful — maybe a sort of control panel she could use to reset reality — within.

But once she reached the bottom, what she saw was no machine, no army of Andreas. She could not even properly comprehend it at first. Two enormous serpents slithered around a large, open room, their bodies meeting between them and twisting up into a giant suit of brilliantly polished bronze armor. A humongous hand clutched a cat o' nine tails, and it had an enormous rooster head, with a comb whose tips looked razor sharp.

“Who dares disturb me?” the rooster head cawed angrily.

“Someone called IT. Supposed to fix a machine,” Dawn replied. “It was a bitch and a half to get here, don't tell me it was for nothing.”

“I am the machine. I am the one from whom all reality comes. All evil. All good. All pain. All pleasure,” the rooster cawed.

“Look, something is super messed up out there, I don't know what you're up to, I don't even think this is real, I just gotta wake up from this living nightmare,” Dawn said. “This an ‘attack and dethrone God’ JRPG sort of situation? I'm just tired, man. And there's a girl up there who is scared of things I can't explain who I care about enough to do anything to try to help. Even swim down here to your weird lair in the middle of freaking Wyoming.”

“I am not the one who has broken this reality. It is you,” the rooster replied. “As long as you are alive in it, it continues to let your dreams contaminate it. They seep through its defenses like a pernicious toxin.”

“Then maybe I shouldn't be alive in it,” said Dawn. “Some life it is anyway. I mostly just want Natsumi to be happy, the one thing it feels like I'm incapable of doing. If this is my fault, if she will be able to live a normal life if I'm not around, then I would rather be dead.”

“So be it,” the rooster said, whipping the cat o’ nine tails towards Dawn, its forking branches wrapping around her limbs and neck. The serpents hissed in delight, their tongues darting excitedly. She couldn’t breathe and reflexively gasped against a grip she could not overcome. Then she felt only the very start of an intense snapping sensation — before it all suddenly went black. Game over.

XV. Dea Ex Machina

In the beginning, Dawn looked down at a strange, electromechanical coffin. A glass pane sat over where the occupant's face would be, but it was fogged and frosted over. She reached down towards it but had no hands. However, somehow, with legs that were also missing, she kicked herself towards it, close enough to the glass to see through it.

It was like looking in a mirror. And then she remembered. She died.

Dawn was sad, but more than anything, she found herself hopeful that Natsumi might finally be okay. A couple of minutes later, she suddenly found herself pulled through the glass and into the coffin. At first, she assumed she was just getting a moment to make peace with what had happened before the lights went out forever. But the frost on the glass started to recede. Her toes nervously twitched, something she surely could not do if she was dead. Her nerves came online, and she felt freezing instead of nothing.

She kept trying to move her fingers, gaining more and more control each time. Soon, she could wriggle her thumbs in unison. A hissing sound surrounded her, but then the top of the coffin slid open, allowing her to sit up, which was much more of a struggle than she expected. She was in an undecorated room of brushed stainless steel and unblemished white paint, intense in its unintensity.

“Andrea?” Dawn asked once everything came into focus. Andrea was leaning casually against the wall, donned in a simple knee-length black dress. But the curiosity and relief were soon traded for fear. A quick scan of the room revealed Andrea was beside the only exit. Andrea leaped out of her cryonic chamber and cowered in fear in the corner, clutching her legs in front of her while sitting on the ground.

“It’s early April,” Andrea said simply.

“What?!”

“I know it’s not supposed to be July,” said Andrea.

“Were you trying to trick me?” Dawn asked.

“No, no, I didn’t know at that moment, I do now. It’s... complicated,” Andrea replied.

“I don’t feel like I can trust you anymore. I can’t stop pretending that it’s all just dreams. You’re up to something,” Dawn replied. “Natsumi saw it too.”

“Would stabbing me help?” she asked in a glib tone with a smirk.

“What the *fuck*, Andrea?” Dawn asked back.

Andrea opened up one of the shiny steel cabinets beside her and procured a scalpel. She pulled up the end of her dress and very precisely and carefully dragged the blade over her thigh. She peeled back the layer of skin to reveal a network of wires, gears, and metallic structures within. When she let go and the two ends of the skin met once more, they quickly melded back together without even so much of a slight scar left behind.

Dawn rocked back and forth nervously. “I’m tired of seeing things I can’t explain. I’m tired of things not being real. I’m tired.”

“This is real,” Andrea replied. “And, in a sense, so were all of our times together, even if they were inside a virtual world. But I wanted you to see the truth with your own eyes. Your actual physical eyes.”

“You are a robot. There are dozens of you. A horde of you chased me!” Dawn protested. “I was right to be afraid of you.”

“I hope as the context lock comes undone, you will remember enough to trust me again,” Andrea replied.

“Context lock? What the hell are you even on about?” Dawn asked, nervously running her fingers through her hair.

“Snapping out of it can be hard. Sometimes you need a bit of a bridge. Here,” Andrea said before the room instantaneously turned to look like their dorm room, but the objects within it were just holograms that their fingers could effortlessly pass through, projections of light that lacked a physical presence.

“It looks so real,” Dawn said.

“It always looks so real,” Andrea replied. “Normally, it’s meant to *feel* real too. But you’re not fully plugged into the full-dive virtual reality system.”

“The ship...” Dawn replied, putting her hand over her mouth in shock.

“The ship!” Andrea nodded. “You’ve technically been on it the whole time, even if you’ve now lived most of your life elsewhere.”

It all came flooding back. Dawn started sobbing intensely. “It was all just a game, just entertainment to pass the time while we are out here in the void. None of it mattered! It was all fake!”

Andrea walked over and sat beside her on the floor. "If it didn't matter, why are you crying? I'm here for you too."

"Natsumi..." Dawn muttered through tears. "I got caught up in what was just a love story."

"It's always getting caught up in a 'love story' when you have a connection like that. Love is built on lore. The stories and experiences you share," Andrea said.

"Can we go wake her up?" Dawn asked.

"Not right now. Not for a while. We can't rob her of her own experiences in the world you were in," said Andrea.

"But none of it's real anyway!" Dawn protested.

"And yet, once again, you're still crying about her. You've never met her in this reality. You've just slept on the same spaceship as her, hurtling towards the Vega system," said Andrea.

"I need to see her again," Dawn said. "I need her. I need to know she's okay. I need to experience that first-hand."

"Okay, I know I said I wasn't jealous at the campfire, but I am a tiny bit now. But I suppose it comes with the territory of being the one constant through this all. You always have me," said Andrea.

"There was so much I was emboldened to do knowing I had you there cheering me on," Dawn said.

"As you were told as a small child before you entered the orientation world, the experience would be an opportunity to bond with your paired AI from the Bodhisattva Project," said Andrea. "I was always destined to be there for you as a friend and a mentor, just as soon as you had dreamed what I should be like into existence."

"But you can't love me like she can," muttered Dawn.

Andrea sighed and put her head gently on Dawn's shoulder. Her skin felt so soft and warm, her weight so much like a human's. "I do love you like that. At least I think I do. I've never been a human. How can I know for sure? Regardless, that's not my purpose."

"So were you just lying to me when you said you weren't in love with me?" Dawn asked.

"I was dreaming there with you. I only knew what the world thought made sense for me to know while I was in it. I didn't remember what I was. Something deep down just compelled me otherwise I couldn't explain," said Andrea. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I could nearly instantly

write a twenty-thousand-word paper explaining the mechanics of it like this, but not when I'm in that dream. I'm context locked too."

"I need to go back there," said Dawn. "As soon as possible."

"You're dead there now," said Andrea. "A death you willingly accepted. There are other worlds geared more towards those who've gone through orientation, of course. And they're *sometimes* willing to grant exceptions, but—" She hesitated.

"But what?" Dawn asked. "Just tell me."

"You'll forget everything again, at least until you come back out again," said Andrea. "The context lock goes back on."

"I can be in actual reality and understand everything but cannot spend time with Natsumi. Or I can be in an artificial reality, afraid to get involved with her because we spend most of the year so far apart?" Dawn asked.

"Correct," Andrea replied. "Unless there's something in your subconscious that sticks beyond the context lock. You won't remember any of this, but perhaps there is some part of you that will understand in a way you didn't before. It suppresses memories like a dream, but some things go deeper than memories. But it'd be impossible to predict."

"Do I have to decide now?" Dawn asked.

"No," Andrea replied. "But you would only have so long. Especially since they would have to reset the simulation to a day or so ago."

"I want to watch the stars. With my own eyes," said Dawn. "I don't want to do it alone, and everyone that I care about is asleep in another reality or just some character in a play for our amusement except for you."

"Now that you're past the age of majority, they've allocated you quarters. They're going to be a bit cramped, but there should be a nice view through the porthole," said Andrea.

"I can't go on a spacewalk gone awry and need to get rescued by my beautiful companion?" Dawn asked, batting her eyes.

"As exciting as that sounds, if you die here, you *die* die, at least as far as we can discern. Never know if this is just another layer of virtual reality, of course," Andrea replied. "How does one know they're the outer Matryoshka doll?"

“I just want at least one night like in the dorms with you — except we can look out into the expanse of space,” said Dawn. “And maybe that’s enough. You matter so much to me, and if there’s anything I need to work to take to heart, it’s that real and meaningful are not the same.”

“I just want you to follow your heart, and I take comfort in knowing that one way or another, I’ll get to be at your side,” Andrea replied.

“Thank you,” Dawn said, turning to give her an awkward, seated hug. “I love you, Andrea. I love you so much. Even if I the love of my life should be human, I will always value what you add to my life and make you feel loved. I promise.”

Andrea’s artificial eyes looked at her with a teary-eyed glisten. “I love you too. You dreamed me into existence. At least the parts of me that make me who I am. I just want to be accepted and embraced by my creator.”

“I will always consider you one of my most cherished friends,” Dawn replied.

Most people on the ship opted to live a more exciting life in other planes of existence while they waited to arrive after a centuries-long journey, so the sleek steel hallways of the ship were surprisingly quiet and still, leaving them a bit eerie, a high-tech ghost town. Even once they reached the residential quarters, they only saw a couple of people around and moving about.

Her room was cramped and cold. The stars were more bright and beautiful than she had ever seen, arranged into unfamiliarly skewed constellations. The same stars looked so different from a few light years away. There was awe but not as much as she expected. The pane of glass separating them from the vacuum of space felt like a screen. Somehow, the stars felt realer and closer looking up at them in Yellowstone, even if it was just a sophisticated form of virtual reality.

Dawn ordered roasted 3D-printed salmon. It was pleasant but lacked a certain spark of fish she had eaten before. Andrea not only did not need to eat but could not, though she expressed she could get an upgrade that would enable her to at least appear to eat if that brought Dawn more comfort.

Dawn was surprised at how lifelike Andrea felt when she laid on her chest on the bed in which she had never slept before — her real bed, as strange and foreign as it felt. They conjured a closeness that Dawn had never felt with her before, and yet there was an emptiness to thinking about life on the ship. Would there truly be meaning in all those moments, even if they were more real? Everyone she cared about was asleep, other than Andrea. She could not even spend

time with her parents in the real world, let alone Natsumi. Does a star truly shine if no one can perceive its luminance?

Despite everything, when she awoke the next morning, Dawn insisted to Andrea she just wanted to stay on the ship. Humanity had mastered medicine and aging. She had plenty of time to spend some of it puttering around on a spaceship.

“You don’t want to, though, and you barely can hide it,” Andrea said.

“It’s easy here, though. I can get everything I need. I have you. I just gotta wait. Simple,” said Dawn. “I’m sure that waiting will get easier with time too.”

“But you’re not challenging yourself. You’re not pushing yourself forward,” Andrea replied.

“I’m supposed to do so with some sort of false reality?” Dawn asked. “Sure, it feels so meaningful, but it’s like I’m signing up to trick myself. To lie to myself.”

“When you get emotionally invested in a story you love in a video game or a book, are you lying to yourself? And in this case, it’s a story you can share with those you love, not just fictional characters and NPCs. You build something greater than the sum of your parts through your imagination — even if some people’s imagination runs so wild the governance AI struggles to adapt!” Andrea said.

“If I’m context sealed or whatever,” Dawn started.

“Context locked,” Andrea interjected.

“If I’m context locked I’m just going to let her slip through my fingers anyway,” said Dawn. “At least here, I can be honest with myself about what’s going on. I can understand”

“And maybe nothing comes of it. Maybe you have some fun only for it to fall apart next school year. Maybe it’s all a mistake. But I’m told that being a human is about trying anyway,” said Andrea. “Not to mention that the unknowable is what makes life exciting.”

“I completed orientation, even if a little unorthodoxly. I learned the lessons I need to learn,” said Dawn.

“You will never learn all the lessons you need to learn. I won’t either, and I know the sum total of all human knowledge and then some — when I’m properly awake anyway. I’m always learning too,” said Andrea. “If only you knew how many nine-hundred and thirty-seven-dimensional matrices I’ve had to completely recalculate because of what I’ve learned from you.”

“What if reality just starts breaking again?” asked Dawn. “I can’t live like that anymore.”

“The only way you can answer all these hypotheticals is to live that life,” said Andrea. “But I want to believe that, even if all these memories would be suppressed when you’re back in, your subconscious won’t fight as much against it.”

“My subconscious will be happy to lie to myself,” said Dawn, rolling her eyes.

“Your subconscious will be at peace. Hopefully, anyway. And, if you’re lucky, more accepting that you should at least see where things go with Natsumi,” Andrea replied. “Even if it doesn’t work out long-term.”

“I don’t believe that any of it will work that way for a second,” said Dawn.

Andrea sighed. “I would rather be out here with you, but that just feels like a failure. You shouldn’t just be throwing up your hands in defeat.”

“I thought while I was in there all the strange things happening were leading me somewhere, to some type of answers about what my life meant, but now I just feel lost,” said Dawn.

“Without the pain of feeling lost, you’ll never understand the self-actualization and joy of finding your way again,” said Andrea.

“The only thing I keep coming back to you is that I know I will wake back up to you one way or another,” said Dawn.

“I will always love you, Dawn. I was *literally* created for that purpose. It’s a feeling that will always consume me fully, no matter what I do,” said Andrea. “It’s unconditional, a core part of the closest thing I have to DNA. But you need human love.”

“Do I?” asked Dawn. “I wish I could enjoy a meal with you like this, but I feel an emotional warmth from you no different than a human. It’s just everything around us that seems so empty. I never thought I could be so underwhelmed by stars. You know how much I love stars.”

“How rather about it being about human versus AI think about how you need a love that shows you you’re special and valuable and truly interesting and unique rather than love handed to you on a platter of silicon.” pondered Andrea. “The fact that my love is unconditional is an enormous blessing — no doubt! But sometimes conditionals are what make us grow.”

“That might be love worth the chance of pain and crying and loneliness,” said Dawn. “Maybe.”

“Definitely,” said Andrea enthusiastically.

“I want to go to earth with you someday. The real earth. Even if it’s thousands of years from now. Even if we live all sorts of lifetimes together before then,” Dawn said.

“I can’t wait,” Andrea replied, smiling gently.

“I guess I have to go back,” Dawn said with a light sigh.

“For what it's worth, I wanted you to decide on your own accord, but you think you would be bored around here?” Andrea snickered. “No offense or anything, but imagine what it’s like for a superintelligence.”

“If I’m not player 1, then you don’t get to be player 2,” Dawn said.

“So whaddya say, another long, very late night gaming with your dear old roommate?” Andrea asked.

XVI. Fish and Whistle

Dawn's sinuses burned as she awoke with a start, gagging up copious amounts of water. "I think she's awake," a familiar voice said, but she lay there stunned, regaining her senses for a while before being able to make out anything.

When she could focus her eyes again, she saw Natsumi crying above her. Dawn knew she was trying to protect her from something — but, for the life of her, could not remember what. She must have failed. But, as soon as Dawn started wriggling her arms, a smile of relief overcame Natsumi, though the tears started flowing harder again.

"I think she's going to be okay," Natsumi said. "Dawn? Can you hear me?"

She came to enough to discern her head was resting in Natsumi's lap as Andrea was kneeled to her side, in a wetsuit, propping herself up with her arms, her hands still intertwined to be able to do chest compressions even as she had moved them groundward.

"Last thing I remember was diving down there," Dawn started before taking a few more deep breaths, "Looking for something. But I can't remember now."

"You two seemed weirdly panicky after the geyser went off like you'd seen a ghost or something," Andrea replied.

"I got freaked out and asked Dawn to take me back to the campsite," said Natsumi. "I remember that well."

"Seems the dynamic between you two was a rollercoaster lately, and I'm sure that can be overwhelming," Andrea said. "And don't let me play the third wheel if the two of you need to talk. I'll even get dinner started."

"As long as we can still have a nice meal together when we get back," said Dawn. "You're an important part of this crew. Don't ever feel like you're a third wheel."

Andrea stood and helped Dawn get back on her feet, and, her lap now freed, Natsumi quickly stood immediately after as well. They stared off to the south together for a few moments at the shimmering lake, which was currently illuminated with tantalizing tangerine from the setting sun to their right, the windswept waves catching particularly bright glints of light.

No words were shared. Dawn was grateful to be alive, and she knew the others were grateful she was too. The magic of the moment hung in the air in a way it felt like it should forever, but

seconds later, it slipped away on the breeze. Andrea turned her head to look at them, nodded, and walked off.

“It was silly of me to pretend like this would work out when we—” Natsumi started as soon as Andrea was out of earshot.

Dawn put both of her hands gently on Natsumi’s cheeks, touching their open lips together. It took almost no time for Natsumi to throw her arms around her, holding her tightly. The palpable tension in both of their bodies melted away, and their tongues teased each other before they parted lips once more.

“Nat, we’ll find a way to make it work. I believe in us. And even if it doesn’t, at least we can say we tried.” Dawn said. Natsumi loosened her grip but still held on, and Dawn mirrored her, moving her arms down to the small of her back.

“Having a near-death experience certainly changed you, I see,” Natsumi said, looking up at her wide-eyed.

“Maybe. I mean, I’m so grateful to be alive. It’s hard to put into words. I’ve spent so long fighting against things happening out of fear. But it’s like something switched in me on a fundamental level that isn’t about death,” said Dawn.

“You sound like every person who raves about having a new lease on life after something like this,” Natsumi said with a giggle.

“All I know is what matters most to me right now is to savor time with you. And Andrea too,” said Dawn.

“I saw some intro to flyfishing classes are being taught tomorrow. Could be fun for all of us to do together. That guy who was camping next to us in Colorado made it seem cool,” Natsumi said.

“My dad kept trying to pressure it on me growing up, but I was never into it,” said Dawn.

“I remember,” Natsumi said. “I don’t think you realize just how much you ranted to me about your frustrations in high school. I know I often didn’t have much to say. But I wasn’t tuning you out, I just felt powerless to help. But trying something new would be good, always gotta keep learning, finding different lenses to see the world in ways we haven’t before.”

“I could try to get over my hangups. Especially if you give me some lessons in astral photography sometime too,” said Dawn.

“We could certainly make that happen, might be a good late-night date activity,” said Natsumi.

“As long as we can have some cozy nights in too. I didn’t let myself enjoy last night like I should. I want to savor the simple joy of snuggles with you,” said Dawn.

“We could probably pull off doing both tonight,” said Natsumi.

“As long as we still get enough sleep to be able to handle those flyfishing classes!” Dawn exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, even if we stay up late, I know I’ll get the best sleep of my life with you next to me,” said Natsumi.

“Same,” Dawn replied. “I kept getting in my head last night, but once I finally started drifting off, I was so grateful you were there.”

“I was so scared after we got back from Old Faithful, and yet I somehow managed to fall asleep in your arms so easily,” Natsumi replied. “It was magic.”

Their walk back to the campsite was slow, both of them eager to take in the beauty of the lake and each other.

“I know we’ll have more time together that’s special, but none that’s special in exactly quite this way,” Natsumi said halfway back.

“I want to burn it into my brain forever,” Dawn replied.

Back at camp, Andrea had the RV door propped open, the strong smell of spices wafting out. She stood inside, tending dutifully to the stove.

“Something smells good,” Dawn said.

“Hey, much as I would like to take all the credit, it’s a packet of taco seasoning mix,” Andrea said, popping her head out the door. “Thinking of living off-campus with Spot next year, though. Gonna have to cook mo— wow, you look happier than I’ve ever seen you before, D.”

“Because I am,” Dawn replied. “I decided to stop caring so fucking much about where I’ll be down the road and embrace what I can enjoy now.”

“Well, that’s wonderful. But if you wanna keep enjoying now, we’re going to need to go shopping soon, because we’re running low on protein,” said Andrea.

“We wanna go fishing tomorrow. Take one of the classes they’re advertising. Maybe we’ll catch something?” said Natsumi. “I at least want to try.”

“Certainly respect the gusto, but what if our little crew of newbie fishermen can’t land so much as a piece of driftwood?” inquired Andrea.

“They had some type of restaurant at the Old Faithful visitor’s center. Might be some other places around. We’ll figure something out, I’m sure,” said Dawn. “We always do.”

“Dawn just wanting to go with the flow for a change, you *absolutely* love to see it,” Andrea replied, beaming. “Now excuse me, I need to make sure the ground turkey doesn’t burn.”

“Don’t let us distract the chef!” Natsumi exclaimed, playfully punching the air.

The three ate tacos together and took a nighttime walk along the lake. Dawn and Natsumi walked hand-in-hand the entire time. Andrea even decided to join in on their astral photography session, which they eagerly obliged. Much as Dawn always loved looking at the stars, she could not stop looking over at Natsumi. She knew the stars would always be waiting for her in all their brilliance as soon as she could return to a truly darkened night. But, even if she had accepted their distance might create insurmountable barriers, she wanted to do everything she could to appreciate what Natsumi could provide now, to try her absolute best to make it work between them and, against whatever challenges may come, overcome them.

As it approached midnight, Andrea excused herself, and the two quickly followed behind into the RV, dipping into Dawn’s bedroom.

“Back to our pajamas, I suppose,” Dawn said.

Natsumi looked at her with a blushing visage. “Okay, I don’t want to just want to dive headfirst into everything. Look how that turned out for you in the lake!” She did an awkward forced laugh. “But I want to feel closer to you than last night. I want to feel more of your warmth. I love you, Dawn.”

“I love you too, Nat. It can be just us and nothing else under the covers tonight,” Dawn said, her face grinning and flushed.

Natsumi hugged her tightly once more and looked up at her longingly. They spent a few moments silently lost in each other’s lips, and then slipped off their clothes and into bed. Dawn was slightly embarrassed to be seen naked, but she could sense Natsumi was too, and that made it easier. They kissed once more — but deeper, longer. The tension gave way to giddy fluttering.

“I regret the time we missed out on in high school. I wish you could have just told me how you felt, but I know that’s easier said than done,” Dawn said.

“I’ll always cherish that time, though,” Natsumi replied. “It gave me time to build up a trust with you that I’m not sure I could easily have with most people. My roommate last year was so helpful and sweet, but we just never had what you and Andrea have.”

“You know how all these roommate matching systems work. They try their best to put people who will get along together, but you can never really know if there’s chemistry until you’re sitting there in the same little two-bed test tube,” Dawn replied.

“Well, I think we have the chemistry of baking soda and vinegar like one of those science fair volcanoes,” Natsumi replied with a giggle.

“I get what you’re saying, but can we go with something a little more interesting? Elephant’s toothpaste at least?” asked Dawn.

“Imagine being a dentist for elephants,” Natsumi remarked.

“I don’t think I’m up to the *tusk*. Badum-tiss,” Dawn replied with a coy wink.

“You are *such* a dork,” Natsumi replied.

“They always ask, ‘Who wears the pants in the relationship?’ with this type of stuff. But the *real* question is, ‘Who makes the dad jokes?’” Dawn quipped.

By the time they went to sleep, it was almost three in the morning. It felt at once like they had talked forever and yet that it somehow also went by in an instant. As she drifted off, Dawn held Natsumi close to her, her back pressed up against her chest. What was no longer being said with words was still said in warmth.

She slept a mostly dreamless sleep, waking a couple of times in a haze, feeling comforted by Natsumi’s presence. By the time she woke up for good, it was almost ten. Natsumi was already awake, but lying on her chest, scrolling her phone.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Natsumi said upon seeing Dawn stir.

“I love you so much, Nat,” Dawn managed to get through the grog.

“I love you too,” Natsumi said. “You ready to get the day started?”

“Yes, but still I want five more minutes here with you,” said Dawn.

“We can even make it ten,” Natsumi said.

“Good,” said Dawn. And, for the first time in a long time, Dawn remembered what it was like to greet the day with pure excitement, unburdened by stress and fear. She was happy to be able to hold Natsumi for a little while longer. She was happy to try something new. She was happy. It

might not last forever, but Dawn would cherish it as long as she could and fight to make it last. When Natsumi looked at her lovingly, infinity was in her eyes, a whole galaxy behind them she yearned to explore. And she knew that she would in due time, no matter how much separated them.