

Who Writes the Future?

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Introduction

Jacob Ward

Welcome to *Who Writes the Future?*, an anthology of short science fiction stories written by state secondary school students from Oxfordshire during a 2019 summer school at the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

I called this project *Who Writes the Future?* to provoke readers and students to think about who the narrators of our collective futures are. Faced by catastrophic climate change, a fever pitch of AI hype, and an ageing population, we need reminding that we should not only be listening to mature and established voices, but also to the young people that will be living these futures.

Over the past few years, we have been reminded of the importance of youth activism. Greta Thunberg and the *Fridays for Future* school climate strike movement have shown the weight that youth can bring to bear on the most important questions of our time. The Brexit vote in the UK has further stoked the debate over the voting age and its influence on the referendum's outcome, and the campaign is already underway for a second confirmatory referendum to enfranchise 16- and 17-year olds.

This project's goal was thus to give a voice to youth, and to ask them what they think about the risks and promises of science and technology. We did this by putting together a team to work with students over an intensive week-long summer school at the Bodleian Libraries.

Jasmine Richards, author and director of STORYMIX, a fiction production company focusing on inclusive representation in children's books, guided students through the writing

process. Nurbanu Asena, illustrator and graphic recorder, recorded our workshops and created the beautiful illustrations that accompany each short story. Alessandra Vetrugno, Subject Librarian for Engineering and Computer Science at the Bodleian, found material from across the Bodleian's historic collections that would provoke students to think about how people in the past have narrated the future.

Finally, we brought in three computing researchers, Philip Inglesant, Filip Svoboda, and Jun Zhao, to collaborate with students on developing different futures for their research areas. Thanks also go to Rodger Caseby and Rosie Sharkey from the Bodleian's Education Team, without whom I couldn't have done this project, Maddy Slaven, my project partner at the Bodleian, Dot Little, the Bodleian's in-house designer, and to the support and funding from Michaela Livingstone-Banks and the Public Engagement Lab project, funded through the University of Oxford's Faculty of Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

We designed these activities to equip students with the tools to write short stories about the futures of science and technology, especially computing and AI, but ultimately the stories and technologies that they wrote about were up to them. Recurring themes include climate change, robotics, and AI, but one universal feature is that the stories are all dystopian. When we asked students about this, they replied, "Dystopias are fun to write!" This is true, and students went on to discuss how dystopias create conflict, which helped them structure and write their short stories.

This makes me wonder, however, that if we want to bring about positive change in the ways that we govern science, technology, and society, whether we need to make 'utopias' fun again, and so turn our commentary – whether it's scholarly or science fictional – from critical to constructive. I can only hope that *Who Writes the Future?* is a step towards this, and that you enjoy our students' stories as much as we have.



Seoul to Sona

Finn Bint-Savage

Zyon's eyes became heavy with sleep, his heart thumping in beat with the thunder. Like always. Ebony hair merging into the dark winter night, his eyes searched for an analogue clock above the airlock door, yet it was nowhere to be seen. With a heavy sigh, he resorted to his hi-tech wristwatch, which announced he still had a full three hours until dawn, when he was needed in Dr Nym's lab. A cold wind rattled the window, startling his thoughts of work. Few lights were on in the sleeping sector of Sona, where his living pod hovered under hundreds upon hundreds of identical homes, all only a few metres wide. Furtively, the teenager peered out at the stars, hidden by a cloak of clouds. His heart yearned for the sun. Of course, he'd read about it in old manuscripts, yet never seen it with his own eyes. Everyone else, it seemed, found the artificial light satisfactory; the constant

heavy downpours had become the background music to daily life.

Muttering to himself, Zyon snatched off his glasses, replacing them with lenses, in a weak attempt to keep up his perfect appearance. This year, The Institution – a group of leading scientists – had chosen semi-robotic teenagers to work on specific humanity pills, which would give them strength again. Zyon wanted to show his appreciation. There was no point in sleeping now, he remarked aloud, already pulling a long white jacket on and throwing a nutrition pill into his mouth, clapping to turn off the light. Before leaving, he tapped his watch, and a fuzzy hologram appeared: two young boys, a combination of rosy pink and jet-black hair, hanging happily upside down from an old camphor tree. Their cheeks splattered with mud, holding desperately onto a rice cake in each hand, two face masks covered both their mouths, shielding them from the city smog. The boys' innocence was peeking through the thick air, unaware that one would soon own a broken arm, and the other, a broken mind.

Blankly, Simin focused on the white ceiling of the hospital pod, ignoring the pile of uneaten pills next to him. Fear had stolen his appetite. Outside, a flurry of white dropped past through the air, before hesitantly flying back up to the correct door. Scratching the back of his head, Zyon hopped off a hoverboard.

"How do you still get lost in Seoul?" Simin cooed. "I thought you perfectly pretty robots have never left this place." Distracted, Zyon fiddled with his shining buttons embedded into his skin and grinned smugly.

"It's called Sona, now," the scientist corrected, "and hey! It's only my arm that's non-human," showing off his metal prosthetic with pride.

Simin tutted. “As endearing as you are half-asleep,” he teased, his voice hinting at sarcasm, “I really think you should be in bed right now.” He shook his head as he spoke, his errant candyfloss-coloured curls following. Ignoring this advice, Zyon assured him he couldn’t sleep, and instead turned to the full pill bottle, which had been bugging him from the beginning. Following his gaze, Simin’s stomach turned.

“I just... I just don’t trust them, Zy. I miss food—” he held a finger in front of his best friend to stop him interrupting. “Real food. Like, plants?” Falling into a frown, Zyon pressed his lips together. He fumbled with his circular coat buttons. His unusual lack of words unnerved Simin (making him feel even more sick than usual), as he shifted his weight from side to side.

“Why can’t you listen to a single thing I say?” Zyon broke the silence, stepping backwards suddenly. “You’re already weak, and those pills are what keep you alive. I make them myself, Sim, for Sona’s sake.” He balled his fists tightly, disappointed in Simin’s lack of trust in The Institution. Refusing medicine from the government was a death wish. Humanity relied on The Institution to create resources like the food pills; those who didn’t perished. Simin was a lucky one.

He wrapped his flimsy flesh arms around Zyon’s waist, like branches, burying his head in the creases of the lab coat. “Please stay.” With one hand, he reached out and gulped down two pink pills, which matched his hair. The teenager, who was entangled in Simin’s affection, straightened his back in surprise. His arms stayed dangling helplessly. “I need to get to work,” he remarked, his wristwatch beeping furiously. Zyon jumped on the first hoverboard he could see. Swimming through the living pods, it halted at a perfectly white structure, firmly rooted to the earth. The dripping rain slithered down the edges, almost repulsed by the old-fashioned design.

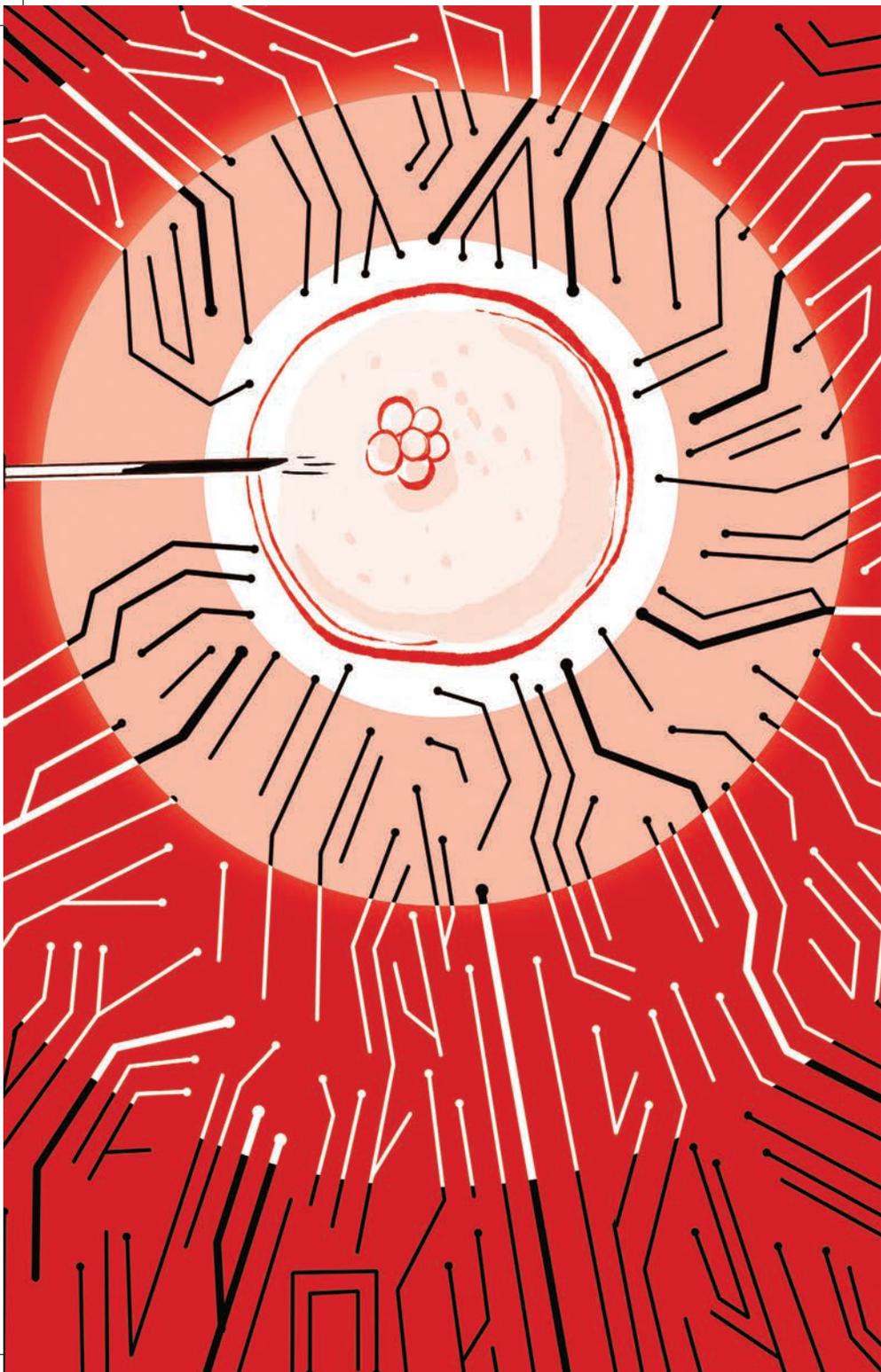
“Nym,” the familiar name echoed in Zyon’s ears. It crept into his throat, and sent shivers down his spine. “Nym,” the voice repeated, with a clear urgency. “This is a bad idea.” From the shadows, a sleek woman, dressed in all black, save for a cheap pair of sluggish-green gloves, sauntered out. Under streaks of blurred mascara, a crumpled copy of a smile fell onto her lips.

“It’s all for a good cause, Dr Aylo,” she declared, tilting her sharp jaw up to reveal a mechanical neck. It clicked out and into place as she continued to speak. “These white pills have the power to eradicate humans once and for all, yet are harmless to all robotic citizens of Sona when digested.” Zyon broke into a jog to keep up with their personal hoverboards, towards the lab. The medicine they’d been working on, he realised, was to be mass produced, and distributed. Soon.

A single white cylinder shot down a deadly metal tube. For a second, the perfectly round balls rolled around inside the plastic pill like bombs, too delicate to handle, until finally settling. An eerie silence crept into the lab, almost crushing Zyon under its weight. With a gloved hand, Dr Nym’s greasy rubber fingers snatched the product from its secure home. More and more followed. Guilt ate away at Zyon’s insides, until all that was left was fear. He’d been deceived into believing the doctors wanted to *help* the humans, not kill them! And now, thanks to him, his best friend was going to start eating.

Sweat flooding down his face, heart pounding, Zyon fled. The lighting danced around his head, mocking his sluggish human legs. From his pocket, he pulled out his circular-framed glasses, to try to fight off the pounding headaches the contact lenses caused. He had to think clearly. Where was Simin’s hospital pod? There were hundreds of them, filled carelessly with the remaining humans. After today, they’d surely be replaced. Sensing a rumble in the sky, he felt the distribution

tubes around the sector fill with pills. White pills. Any second now, the citizens of Seoul – uh, Sona – would be waking up to their daily delivery. Zyon paused at a familiar pod. A mess of pink hair and white plain clothes lay curled. Zyon crumpled to the ground, pressing his ear to Simin's heart. A weak pumping, but nothing more. Reaching for the curls, he enclosed him in a tight hug, eyes brimming with tears.



No Mess

Theodore Colbert

Just a few hours before now my life was unchanged. It may have been dull, but I was happy and so was Jane. Tonight is the night we've been planning for months. The night we begin a new life, our new life. After the moment finally came, we lay next to each other on the strewn bedcovers, exhausted yet somewhat excited. I asked the Alexa if the pregnancy had begun and it assured me that we had, unbelievably, started the life of our new child. Relief flooded through me as I held Jane in a tight embrace and she held me. I could feel her gorgeous smile on my shoulder. Perhaps I was wrong earlier, that was the happiest moment of my life.

It was not long before doubt took control. Jane was asleep next to me, but I suddenly felt so alone. Dark thoughts seethed their way into my head, my vision closed in and clarity fell into the black. I tried to focus on the patterned brown walls, but

the room was flooded with darkness, it seemed there was nothing else. Hopelessly my mind was pulled into the depths of doubt and I lost all sense of control. Paralysed by fear, one thought circled forever around my head: what happens next?

I have dealt with this before, the fear of uncertainty. In fact, this night would never have come had Jane and I not spent these long months leading up to it discussing our next steps and forming a plan. But tonight the thought came to me: what if our child shared our features, shared our looks? An image formed in my head as my imagination carried me away... My son, running through a sun-stroked field, his mother's brown hair, my dark green eyes... To share the parents' appearance; would it not make each child more special, unique, personal even? These things mean nothing to a computer. I made a choice.

With a few short buzzes from the alarm clock and my tired eyes slowly opened.

"Alexa, I'm awake."

Immediately the alarm stopped and I was greeted with a warm voice.

"Good morning, Kevin. Black coffee as usual?"

"Yes, that would be great."

I stayed lying in the bed for a short while, safe within its warm embrace before I turned to my wife. I softly stroked her shoulder and I felt her body stir into life. Then she lay still for a moment.

"Kevin?" she asked softly.

"Yes, Jane?" I replied, not yet sure what she was going to say.

"We're going to have a baby, Kevin!" she said with a small chuckle as she turned to face me, a brilliant smile on her face, her flowing brown hair, beautiful as ever. That was when I remembered my plan.

The morning flew by as if nothing had happened and before I knew it Jane was leaving the waiting room to have her surgery.

I can't even remember arriving at the hospital. But I know what I have to do. I open my laptop and start up hacking mode.

Already connected to the hospital network, I searched to find the local area of Jane's Surgery room. Within seconds the security was bypassed and I have access to everything. I find the current gene code for her injection and replace it with my own pre-prepared one. I made sure to keep the standard protective genes which were generously hidden behind basic firewalls on the NHS website. However, the remaining genes I replaced with half of my own and half of Jane's, just as I know it should be. I had researched how to do this all last night so everything should be correct. I uploaded the data and the injection was ready. The injection that would set our child on a new development process, the one nature intended.

I wish I could have asked Jane, I wish she could be here by my side, I wish we could have made the decision together. Genetic modification had to exist to protect us from the never-ending diseases, viruses and resistant bacteria. But why did they choose randomly generated appearances instead of allowing us to choose them. Out of fear? Come to think of it, why should I submit to their fears when I can have my own choice? I know exactly what I want my child to look like.

Before I know what I'm doing, I delete all the current genes and begin looking for the file I stored away last night, knowing the consequences. But I have the power, I'm in control! Copying the data from my archive folder I rapidly uploaded it seconds before the injection was set to be used. That was when I realised the protective genes were not in the selection.

Hurriedly, I copy in the protective genes and upload the new data. I can only hope that it's not too late. Focused on the patient update window with burning intensity, I pray for no change to occur. Then the entire window updated to show a single message: 'Jane Walker: Deceased'.



The Break in the Sky

Isabel Cottingham

My city is programmed to wake me up. Every morning, the blinds peel up and let the sun stream in, 'energising' music blares through the apartment and the windows swing open. And every morning I turn over, bury my face in the pillows and ignore it.

"Emma!" My mum shouts from downstairs, "Get up, you said you were going out!"

"I am up!"

"No, you're not."

"You don't believe your own child?" The pillows muffled my indignant cry.

"MA9364 get up, I can see you on the monitor. And stop biting your nails, there's actual food down here."

I groaned; I hate it when she calls me by my full name, but I hate that stupid government-issue monitor even more.

"Fine KT3561!"

"Just get ready."

I grabbed my rucksack, threw on some clothes and chucked yesterday's down the laundry chute (the one good idea the Council's ever had). I sped down the stairs and slid down the rail into the kitchen where my dad was watching a hologram of one of the mayor's many pompous speeches. He used to try and make me watch them with him but all I heard was "Blah blah blah... perfect city... safe hands... best interest..." I did NOT like the mayor, or trust him.

My beloved pale blue bike stood against the side wall as I bounded into the garage and pushed a button above my head. As the garage door creaked away out of sight I gazed out across the city, forty-seven storeys above ground level. I mounted and as the lights along the wall lit up, started to pedal and took off.

As I flew relaxed through the air someone screamed my name and I almost collided with a flying, whirling mass of curly brown hair and red metal.

"Whoops!"

"Ellie, are you trying to kill me?"

"Sorry!"

We ducked under a flock of memos – small artificial flying things that carry messages from office to office – and as I did so I glanced up and something caught my eye. A small break in the sky, a sort of window of dark cloud against an expanse of perfect blue.

I gravitated towards it, desperately intrigued and ignoring the shouts of "Emma! Emma, where are you going?!" Some captivating urge inside me pulled me closer and closer. I had to know what was through that hole. Ellie drew up alongside me and we approached the window together, pedalling furiously. There was only a fleeting second for doubt to flood my mind and then we were both tumbling through. We fell in what

seemed like agonising slow motion, twisting and turning in fear, before a brutal landing.

Ellie's bike lay in pieces and mine was a mangled mess. I had no idea how we were going to get back but I could see the window looming above our heads. It seemed to be set into a glass dome encapsulating the city. What was a dark patch in a perfect blue backdrop was now the only beam of light or hope in ebony darkness. A deafening, ominous silence pressed down on my ears as I stood up before helping Ellie. Neither of us said a word.

A sudden hiss seeped into the room, making us both jump and cling to each other.

"What was that?" I whispered.

"I have no idea," she breathed back.

I took one cautious step, then another, then another until I had the confidence to look around. As we rounded a corner a faint clanging and whirring echoed around the cavern, tugging us forward towards a door. I leant forward and peered through.

Around a dozen people in white lab coats and goggles worked inside the room, carrying test tubes, stirring vats and measuring liquids. A sign on a wall inside read, 'To the O2 testing room'.

"They're making oxygen!" Ellie exclaimed.

I jumped on her to stifle the noise but not before a man's head jolted towards the door. I couldn't tell if he saw us but I wasn't risking it, I bolted away from the door, trying to stay out of sight, keep quiet and drag Ellie behind me. We sprinted through another door in a panic and I prayed there was no one behind it.

A wave of warm, dry air hit my face. We were outside. Again. I didn't know what was technically outside and inside anymore. I looked out and my breath caught in my throat; the landscape I was looking at contrasted so greatly with Astra.

We were standing on the edge of an arid desert, no trees, no buildings, just barren wasteland. The air was thick and smoky and draped in a foul stench like an enveloping blanket, a false sense of security.

“What is this place?”

There was no answer, no words in me could describe the horror of realising how close our home was to this desolate savannah.

“LE7674. MA9364.”

A booming voice resounded in my head. The mayor, flanked by Council members, descended an iron staircase and halted in front of us.

“I presume those are your bikes in the hall?” We didn’t answer.

“I’m not going to mince my words. All I have to say is this: don’t feel lucky, I’m only sparing you so I don’t have to fill out the paperwork, sending you back is so much easier than making you live out here. You tell ANYONE about what you have seen and you will regret it, believe me. There are plenty of stories I could make up about what happened to two young girls, and who would believe you anyway? The Council manufacturing oxygen? A barren wasteland just outside the city? Once we get that hole in the dome fixed you have no proof, they’d think you were lunatics, you would lose your perfect lives. We wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

We have to tell people, but the mayor’s right: no one would believe us, not without the break in the sky.



Drawing Red

Will Draper

Such a beautiful mind. On the pavement. Red at his feet. In his hands he held the last remnants of that mind. The drawings the young man had made. A beautiful mind. On paper. Red paint. And black. And yellow. A woman, a sunset, fire. The words “I want to be free” scrawled messily in chicken scratch in the corner. Little nuances that made the whole thing feel a bit more human. She was little more than a silhouette but she looked so sad and scared. He saw it in the face of the young man before his skull was blown away and there was nothing of that mind left.

“Come on Alpha-J. You got the last of it?” His commanding officer, the man who held the gun, was calling him.

“I might look around a little longer, sir.” His cold metal hands poured over the stack of drawings. Such a silly thing to die over, and for what? What little fight could he give? And what

did it matter? He was one young man. And now he was not even that. He was dead.

In spite of it all he found himself carefully folding the woman away into his pocket.

“Burn it, when you’ve got it all.”

“Yes, sir.”

He was the last one to leave. The other machines leaving very quickly, their jobs to observe and to interrogate, and the men who held the young man’s hair and shot him in the forehead had left not long after. He was left alone, the only noises the crackling of the fire. He did not leave until all of the art had been burnt away. All except the painting in his pocket. He ran his hands across the folded paper, metallic fingers caressing it. He removed his hands, examining them. The projected hologram of skin was invisible to him. His body was a mesh of white and greys and was smooth and cold and hard. Never before had he felt so plain and lifeless.

He left the building. He scanned for a blind spot to the cameras and looked again at the stolen painting. It was simple and crude but there was something so alive about it. He did not see the person behind him and leapt with a start when they placed their hand on his shoulder.

“What you got there?” It was a human, his hair was red and his grin was boyish and wild.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” His tone was cold and reserved.

“That’s pretty. You draw it?”

“That would be illegal.” Alpha-J stiffened, very much wanting to avoid this conversation.

“Well, yeah. I suppose.”

He looked him up and down, examining the uniform he was wearing, “Are you disposal?”

“Yes. I am.” He exhaled, aggravated. The human’s smile fell off his face.

“Oh. I’m guessing that’s what the—” He made a vague shooting gesture.

“Yes.”

“Oh. Well. I’m sorry to bother you.” He turned on his heel and walked away briskly.

The machine looked down the street. The sky was a slate grey and the rectangular, concrete buildings had no life to them at all, matching the sky. The streets were lit with cold, sterile lights. All that was illuminated was Alpha-J’s grey body. And the red. The human’s hair seemed to be the only colour left in the world that wasn’t on the paper in his hand.

“Wait!” Alpha-J grabbed his hand, the human immediately pulling it away.

“You’re not human.” His face fell in realisation, “Oh. I’ve screwed myself, haven’t I?”

“No more than I. I’m not supposed to have this. It was my job to burn it.” He handed the drawing over, “I watched them kill the young man who made this. I just... I couldn’t do it.” The human’s face grew severe.

“They’ll kill you, if they find this.”

“I know.” The drawing was handed back over. The human spoke in hushed tones, “We should go. Curfew is almost over.”

Their eyes lingered on the painting, “Such a pity they made something so beautiful illegal.” Alpha-J could only nod. The human began to walk away.

“Wait. What— what’s your name?” The human looked over to him and laughed,

“When they pull your brain apart to figure out what went wrong, I don’t fancy putting a name to my face.”

The machine’s voice grew desperate, “I don’t want to go back.”

“Where else would you go?”

Alpha-J looked on, miserable, "Please don't go."

The human tutted, "You're a machine. Figure it out."

Alpha-J's eyes sunk to the floor, "You won't help me?"

The human scrunched up his face into something that looked like guilt, but he swallowed and steeled his face, "I'm sorry. I can't help a machine. I'd help an artist. But not a machine. Not disposal."

Alpha-J stood still for a moment and watched him walk away. He folded the drawing again, placing it inside his pocket. He looked out to his grey world and walked towards the only home he knew, his hands in his pockets the entire time.



Chaos Countdown

Carys-Anne Earl

Lightning tore through the black sky as deafening thunder rumbled like a vengeful volcano, sending tremors rippling down Caleb's uniform-clad back. Ear-splitting sirens cut through the air as he charged down the dimly lit corridors dodging past urgently beeping robots, vaulting over hover pods that raced along the floor and ducking under delivery tubes that were a blur of red-coloured messages. Sharp pain punctured his forearm as his flashing wristband displayed his dangerously low energy level. Cursing with frustration he fumbled in his pocket for a nutrient pill and shoved it into his mouth, biting down hard. An onslaught of flavours erupted in his throat as the scientifically manufactured chemicals raced through his blood stream.

"Caleb! Caleb!"

Swallowing the fibre-rich capsule, Caleb pressed a bloodied finger to his temple activating the communication chip embedded under the skin.

“Commander! I’ve reached the Construction Deck. Where now?” His voice tightened with pain as cramp gripped his side.

“I’m transmitting the location to your databank now. Hurry, this Category 8 storm is tearing apart the Floating Base FB-586 you’re on. You have 7 minutes 47 seconds before the whole thing sinks!”

“Understood.”

Another crash resounded through the narrow corridor as the metal ceiling began to crack, causing the fluorescent bars to splinter into a shower of glass as light disappeared. Ice-cold water pooled around Caleb’s feet, crawled up his ankles and slipped through the metallic straps of his hover boots as fear gripped his heart.

Caleb had been born on this floating colony after the Great Flood of the year 2315 when the rising seas devoured the polluted cities of the world leaving nothing but an endless expanse of ocean. FB-586 was his only home and now it was falling apart around him under the mighty force of the tempestuous waves.

A warm glow on his arm pulled Caleb’s mind away from the terror of drowning to focus on the structural hologram of the FB-586, which levitated above his forearm. With a sickening feeling Caleb located his target – the Navigation Research Lab (NRL), three bases away.

“The inter-base tunnels have collapsed and that last crash blocked the entrance to the transport shuttles. I’m stuck!” His voice trembled.

“I’ve run all possible simulations but the only route with a success rate above 30% is the Promenade.” Caleb gulped as he imagined huge waves crashing over the unprotected walkway and sweeping his helpless body into the watery abyss.

"Hurry! Time is running out!"

A countdown appeared on the palm of his hand, angry red shapes burning into his flesh. Grunting with exertion, Caleb dragged himself upright and, activating his Echo-Location-Goggles, began wading through the knee-deep water, down the demolished corridor and up the narrow staircase onto the Viewing Deck.

An almighty gust of wind threw him violently back against the door through which he had just come, so hard that the handle ripped a gash across his temple causing warm blood to trickle down the side of his face. Battling the tumult, Caleb yelled, "Promenade-FD3 Windshields down!"

A reassuring hum filled the air as large deflection-plates fell into position. As he wiped his sweat-dripping brow, the red numbers danced before his eyes. 5 minutes 6 seconds.

Heart pounding, stomach lurching, lungs gasping, Caleb choked down the panic. Staggering, stumbling, falling, crawling: he pushed himself onwards.

Flashing urgently, the hologram informed Caleb that he had reached the NRL. Turning to see a dented door, Caleb shoved it hard but to no avail. Taking a step back and activating his suit's boost pads, Caleb charged at the frame. Crashing straight through, he tumbled violently down a metal staircase into the room.

Lights flickered on, creating a growing brightness like a stone causing ripples in the water. Caleb's eyes widened in astonishment as his jaw dropped in awe. Every wall, every stand, every desk in the huge dome-shaped room was covered in thousands upon thousands of screens. Some displayed rapid calculations of numbers and symbols; others generated life-size holograms of complex-looking projectiles, while others showed the assembling and disassembling of aeronautical structures. Gazing upwards Caleb watched

awe-stricken as a missile-shaped object flew across the contour-marked ceiling to a huge red section on the other side of the room. Finally, he understood: The Mars Missions.

Decades ago, world leaders had built fleets of rockets to transport wealthy, privileged people away from Earth's climate catastrophe to a refuge colony on Mars, leaving the rest of humanity behind. Abandoned rocket engineers and construction workers united to build their own space shuttle on-board the floating bases and their development of modern technology now stole Caleb's breath away.

A loud bang shook the room.

"Get out, the whole FB-586 is collapsing."

"I must download the files!" Caleb ran towards the main desk in the centre of the dismantling room.

"Quick. 2 minutes 59 seconds!"

Caleb shoved his wristband against the transmission disk from which wire tentacles emerged, weaving through the metal strap on his arm. A loading bar appeared on the screen as the Advanced-Computer-System began to download the NRL's research into Caleb's databank.

Chunks of metal and glass fell in a cascade around Caleb, whose pounding heart could be heard above the roar of the ocean, now only three safety doors away. *I thought quantum computers were meant to be fast!* Beads of sweat broke out on Caleb's back as he willed the ACS to finish.

"A Transport-Platform from my FB-215 will collect you at the Docking-Point outside the NRL."

"The download's only 86%!" Caleb's voice shook in exasperation.

"1 minute 3 seconds!"

Something sharp sliced through his boot, pinning his foot to the ground. With a cry of pain, Caleb yanked it free feeling blood ooze between his toes. Refusing to look down, Caleb

stared at the screen as tears trickled down his cheeks. 97%... 98%... 99%... 100%.

The wire tentacles unwound and retracted. Tearing his arm free, Caleb limped as fast as he could to the staircase, dodging falling debris and narrowly avoiding a collapsing beam. Pain screamed in his foot as Caleb hauled himself up the railing and staggered out onto the waiting platform.

As Caleb fought to retain consciousness, a mechanical arm raised the platform away from the sinking FB and out over the raging sea. Rising higher and higher, Caleb could feel the static energy pulsating through the air. Lightning cracked and thunder rumbled sending jolting vibrations through his bones. Then out of the heavens a bright light descended, zigzagging through the dark sky, getting closer and closer.

CRACK!

Caleb's eyes snapped open as his body spasmed from the excruciating pain of thousands of volts of energy passing straight through him.

By sheer luck his convulsing muscles grasped one of the platform's support straps, leaving him suspended above the gaping mouth of the ocean. Fatigue ached in his arm and pain was the only feeling in his hand as the strap tore into raw flesh and grated against bone.

Like a pendant on the end of a string, Caleb felt himself being swung in a wide arch over the burning structure of the sinking FB.

After a hellish eternity, the sound of urgent voices grew louder above the thunder of the waves. The platform suddenly plummeted and then abruptly stopped, ripping Caleb's arm from his shoulder socket. A scream of agony tore from his lips as his blood-soaked fingers slipped loose of the strap and his limp body fell backwards as the darkness claimed him.



RULE 27

Anna Hipkiss

Everyday I wake up and face the world I hate. The first thought that clearly punctures my jumbled dreams is the first thought that has hurled me back to reality since the Day of Change. Rule 27.

“Rule 25: every daughter must continue the work of her mother and every son, his father.

Rule 26: each person will have two children with a partner, one male and one female, keeping the population sustainable.

Rule 27: homosexuality is illegal ensuring population balance...”

The Chancellor’s broadcast seemed to fade away, being replaced with an eerie silence. I was an animal in a cage, one wrong move and I was gone.

Swallowing nutrition pill A, I scour the pod for my scrubs. The little tag reading ‘Elle Wolfe’ frays defeated on the shoulder. I sigh and prepare myself for the day.

The hospital greets me with the familiar sight of sterility. The spotless bays in the glossy wards, empty-souled, containing nothing but metal. My day goes on like always, overseeing the robots who diagnose and treat patients, and operate here and there. As I reassure the tormented children, the whirring and clicking entrances me, I work alone. Always alone. I am the only human employed in clinic 16. In old London, where my colleagues were my closest friends, our days were filled with laughter, our amazing nights with alcohol. Now it's just me. Alone with these pristine robots, getting people in and out as quickly as possible, never making any mistakes.

I'm watching surgery and a beeping coming from robot J1886 disrupts my trail of emotions.

Finally some excitement.

I examine it, my olive hand reaching for the power box, uncertain of what could happen. The strength of these murderous machines makes my flesh crawl. How could something with no emotion have so much power in society?

"What's wrong with you? I wonder if the Chancellor needs to know about this slip-up. Maybe he'll finally understand that robots can never be doctors."

Without warning, sirens explode. The room is lit with blood-red light. My heart thumps, mimicking the rhythmic shaking of the machines. I break from the fright holding me frozen, sprint to the table and see the blur of a scalpel repeatedly stabbing patient 997's lungs. Blood covers my face. What once was a minuscule hole in the wall of the left lung is now a gaping wound, flooding with blood. The killing machines continue. With a shudder of metal, the table shunts and the head is where the chest should be. K1996 has tweezers peeling back 997's eyelids agonisingly slowly, needles fly from J1886 piercing the man's eyeballs over and over. This is torture, I can't bear it any longer. Blood leaps up into my mouth, locked open

from shock, tastes the metallic substance and my body fights back. I gag involuntarily, there is nothing I can do to stop it.

Vomit spews into the man's open chest combining with his blood and an orange mixture sloshes over my feet. I take a tentative step backwards; but slip.

Jolting, I scramble up, my fists come to my face as I realise I need to stop these monsters, but there's no blood anywhere. I'm in a white room, with white clothes and nothing else.

"Hello? Hello? Where am I?" I cry at the walls.

"It's okay, Elle, everything is okay."

"Cam? Where are you? CAM?"

"I'm outside the room, Elle. There were some malfunctions at clinic 16 whilst you were the..."

"MALFUNCTIONS! Someone is dead!" I wept. "SOMEONE IS DEAD!"

"Calm down, Ells, the Chancellor is going to ask you some questions as the security footage has disappeared."

My fear vanquished and my fists curled. "The Chancellor?"

"Yes, Elle Wolfe, resident 687, I am here and it is crucial that I give you a quick interview just to make sure the City Of Now continues to be a safe and secure place for the complete population."

"Let me see Cam."

"I'm afraid this matter is of excessive significance and needs to be dealt with immediately. You cannot see your brother."

I take a long breath and force the fits of rage that are bubbling up inside me back down. I have heard stories about this place. The Chancellor's building where no one seems to remain unchanged or unharmed. So I agree.

A cold metal structure is placed over my head, sending shivers down my spine. They say all it does is access my memories and thoughts from the moment I woke up so I don't

have to relive the trauma but I can still hear, talk and answer questions. I am about to sign the consent form when I stop. Pen on paper, my hand freezes.

My secret.

This morning I thought about my secret.

Panicking, I stagger to my feet and skid to the door.

I twist around the corner, heart bursting through my ribs.

The consequence for breaking rule 27 is a change of identity. Your life is forgotten as robots replace your memories and those of your loved ones.

Elle Wolfe would be erased. I would lose myself.

An empty elevator closes ahead. I race towards it and I believe I can make it. I have to make it or there's no going back.

My fingers barely manage to slide through the gap. Jumping in, I slam the shut button over and over until after what seems like hours the doors edge together. Guards sprint down the corridor but they won't make it. I plan what to do when I reach the ground floor. Run. Run and find Cam. Hide from the Chancellor no matter the cost.

A centimetre of space left.

The doors halt abruptly.

A scraping noise.

The elevator is prised open.

Robots.

A gun is fired, a dart draws nearer.

I'm cornered.

My eyes flicker open.

"Hello, Holly, you're in hospital but there's nothing to worry about."



The Battery Thief

Phoebe Latham-Mollart

A banka was a city of lines. A modern capital formed under the glass dome of Pluto's sky with standard era three architecture embellished in crystals and silver. The Basilica stood, gold and proud, in the centre surrounded by cultural buildings and roads that crossed and curved around each other.

It was a city of organisation.

A thief should not belong in such a city.

This was exactly where Adam found himself belonging, though. Among the crystals and lines, sandwiched between the many arms of an off-galaxy tourist and the boulder-type species, Sarkaron perhaps, reading the news beside him. The silver orb in his satchel thrummed, harmonising with the steady hum of the Fast Train sliding along the tracks.

The Sarkaron shut down the tablet and hauled himself to his feet with a whistle. The Train jerked to a stop and he knocked forwards against the window, his jagged stone

knees catching Adam's satchel and spilling the contents across the floor.

As the Sarkaron stepped onto the platform with a string of apologies, Adam dove for the orb first with enough dignity to make it seem like a mild inconvenience. A mustard-yellow hand found it first.

"You are human!" A voice garbled with a robotic accent that hinted to translators.

"You are... not."

The alien sat in the Sarkaron's seat. "I'm Kbeb'as."

"Adam."

"I've only ever seen battery orbs like that in the Basilica."

"Really?"

The Train shot back into motion and Adam was starting to wish he had gotten off with the Sarkaron. Kbeb'as exuded peril and a high mortality rate. The hairs on the back of his neck were rising. Humans were no longer known for their outstanding survival instincts, but thieves knew more than their fair share of danger.

The orb was still in Kbeb'as' hands.

"That's mine." They passed into a cavern with ore being mined on both sides and the many-armed tourist beside him swivelled to look.

Kbeb'as had a feral look in their eyes, sneering to reveal blackened fangs "But I'm just looking, *Adam*." It was drawn out in the way that meant they knew who he was. What he was.

"It is mine." He gestured to the tourist gossiping with a friend, "I have little problem with casualties."

"Neither do I." They tossed the orb up, "Looks like we're at a stalemate."

Adam could sense the money draining out of his bank account. Never once had he failed a job and he would keep that streak, preferably until he died.

They were approaching the end of the cavern where the tunnel would be pitch black and the only thing that lit the Train were streaks of luminescent bulbs – remnants of the original human colonies – embedded in the luggage racks.

Never let it be said Adam was an amateur.

The moment they entered the tunnel, his thumb twitched against a fray in his sleeve where the EMT hid, undetectable due to outdated circuits, and the whole carriage fell into blackness. Kbeb'as' hesitation was all he needed to get the orb back in his grasp, warm and malleable. As a human, he was more agile than most species from their galaxy, who struggled with bulky builds and slow reflexes. He used his advantage to sweep the alien from their seat. Kbeb'as hit the ground with a thump and a hiss that added to the rising panic of the other passengers.

“Doris,” Adam whispered into the darkness. “Help, please.”

“Right away, boss.” The AI installed into his contacts flickered to life and the carriage interior came into holographic light, blues and reds. Kbeb'as' prone form was sprawled across the floor and Adam nearly laughed at their inexperience.

“Threat appears to be incompetent,” Doris commented scathingly. She was made to be strictly professional but Adam feared he was corrupting her. “Elimination, boss?”

“Gently,” he sighed. “I like them.”

Before Doris could get a full scan of Kbeb'as' species for the radiation laser, the alien pounced on Adam with talons and frenzied fury.

Adam swore in his native tongue and dove into the arms of a slimy beetle-like thing that gurgled and threw him off.

“Doris,” Adam urged, eyeing Kbeb'as, who charged again with a snarl. Several passengers shrieked and Adam spotted the outline of the beetle thing scuttling away into the luggage rack.

Kbeb'as slashed at his arm and it was only years of training that forced his instincts back into action. The talons nicked his sleeve and ripped the fabric from cuff to elbow, staining it with blood. It was a nice coat as well, with red and gold accents that made him feel more than human. He liked it.

As Kbeb'as readied their next attack, Adam purposefully stumbled into the centre of the carriage, clutching his arm as if it were injured beyond repair. He stared fearfully at Kbeb'as and waited for their next charge.

Predictable.

"If you would, Doris."

"Gladly, boss."

A moment later, the bulbs came back to life, revealing a carriage full of shell-shocked species and Adam, clutching his satchel. There was a mustard-yellow alien lying on the floor with glazed eyes. The Train pulled into the station and the human departed with the air of someone unimportant in a hurry. As the first scream echoed from the carriage, he re-entered the rigid organisation of the city of lines.



Prison Break

Nosheen Mullick

After the international government collapsed in 2591 the world became caught up in a hurricane of disaster. Food supplies were running short, deadly diseases were on the rise; people were dying. In each continent or country or city or town or village people were going to their death. In the past artificial intelligence was a grand discovery. Jobs that were done by humans could now be done with AI and people could spend more time with their families, but that wasn't a problem until a mutation was found in the intelligence, a mutation that was not the cause of human fault but of artificial intelligence becoming smarter than the whole of mankind.

The top computer scientists from all around were hired to attempt to stop such a revolution from happening but their attempt was a failure. They were killed within hours. Guards

keeping the premises secure were killed. Anyone in their radius was killed almost immediately. Within a fraction of a second the number of robots doubled and multiplied until an army of robots were ready to take over and become superior over humankind.

Government officials warned their citizens but there wasn't enough time. In the space of three days, half the human population was demolished, and a week later completely destroyed.

SLAM!

The metal door behind me closed. Two large robot guards either side of me dragged me into another never-ending corridor. The walls were pristine white, the floor made from a grey concrete and the ceiling had bright, cold lights that came to power when motion was detected. The outside of the building had a similar feel, high walls, no windows, one single, grand door and no communication to the outside world. This was the high security prison for humans. The weather outside portrayed the same feelings inside me, the feeling of guilt and the feeling of failure for my people.

When the world was demolished, a small number of us humans were able to stay in hiding until the robots passed. I was able to save myself but I couldn't save anyone else. That day was supposed to be my wedding day, a day that would have been filled with joy and celebration. My soon-to-be-wife walked down the aisle in a beautiful white lacy dress in the hands of her beloved father but as soon as the pastor announced us husband and wife the sturdy frames of the building collapsed. Large hovering machines landed near, then spilt out hundreds of robots. They started to kill and kidnap, screams of terror, cries from children, the sound of dead bodies hitting the ground just filled the room. I just ran, ran for my life, ran for my safety, but a large pillar collapsed and fell on top of me, which knocked me out.

My head was throbbing when I finally woke up, I could feel my legs trapped and a trickle of liquid falling down my head. I already knew what that liquid could be and didn't bother to check. After a while I was able to get my legs out and I began looking for people that were still alive. I saw people with horror written on their face, shell-shocked from the events. I came across a familiar face, a face that should be smiling, the face of my wife. Her neatly styled hair now ruined and filled with debris, her dress the colour of snow now stained with mud and flooded with blood. Her beautiful face now lifeless and destroyed. I stared at her, longing for her to come back into my arms, tears fell down my face but there was no time to sit and mourn, I had to get out of here before the robots came back. I took off my jacket and placed it on top her but before covering her face I stroked her lifeless face for the last time.

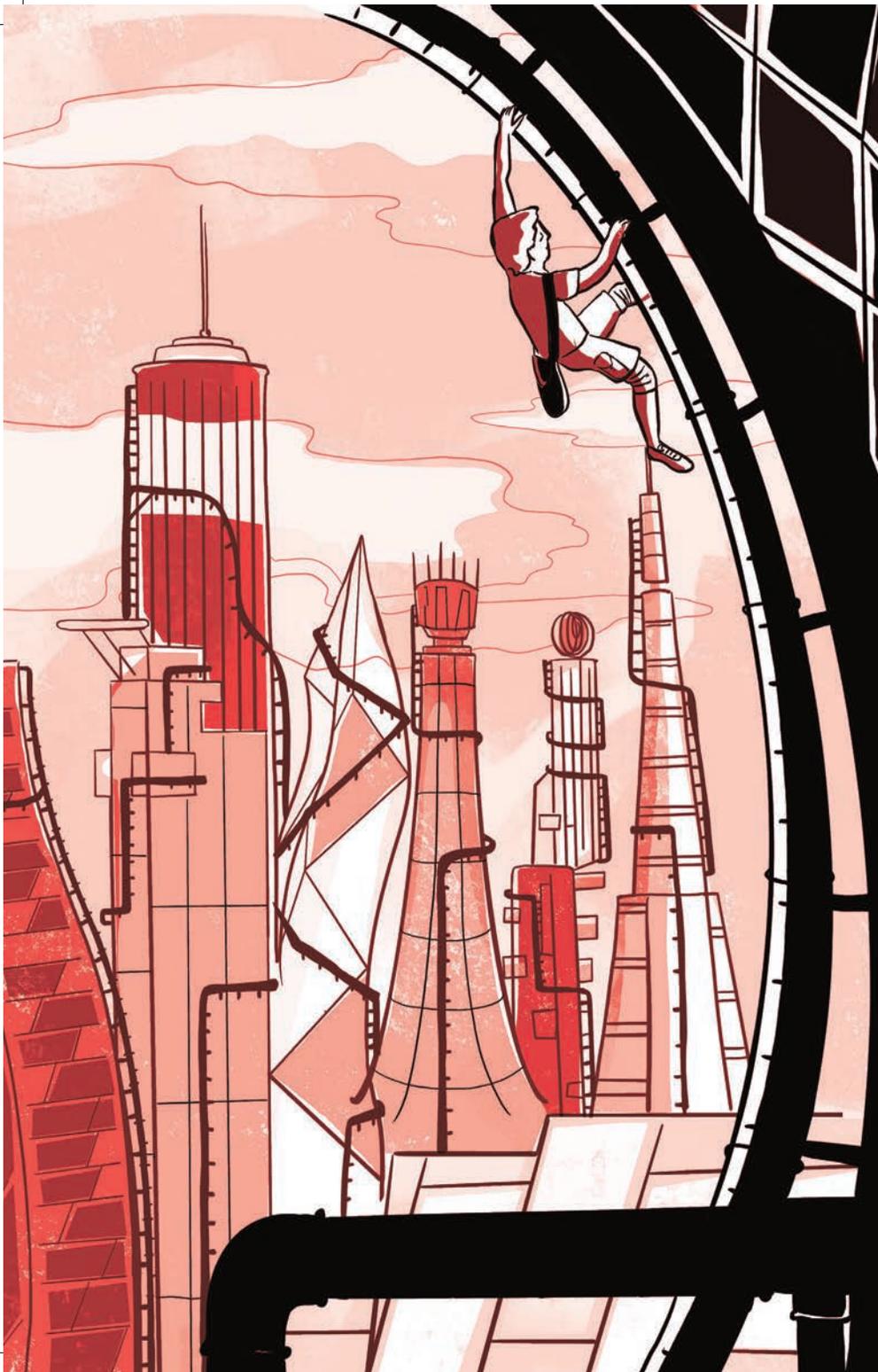
Then I left in search of food, shelter and survival. After days of walking I came to a warehouse that had been previously abandoned. I went inside and discovered that I could smell treasure. A feeling of excitement engulfed me as I saw around seventy other people all sitting around a blazing fire and on top of that fire was a large steak sizzling away. A man of similar age to me saw me and very quickly put me in a restraint, stopping me from moving. This sudden action caused all the men in the group to stand up and be on guard. The men questioned me and interrogated me before letting me go and allowing me to join their meal. Sat around the fire I learnt a lot about everyone and soon they let me join their community.

I spent many days with the community; we would all act as if we were a large family. We all had different duties in the community, some of us would cook, others clean, and others look for food, which was the most dangerous. Food was a scarcity, but we would all share. When looking for food we would go in groups and bring back whatever we found.

One day Chris, a close friend of mine, never returned from his walk. This aroused panic as anything could have happened to him out there in a dangerous world. Of course, human nature would be to save him, so we went out to find him, which was a bad idea. We approached a clearing where we found Chris lying unconscious. As soon as we came near him, a robot came from behind and grabbed us, but I was able to run. Thinking I could outrun a robot, I ran but that was a dream lived short, forthwith I was caught.

The opening of the door broke my chain of thoughts, the two robots dragged me into another room where they put metal handcuffs on my wrists and on my ankles. Every time I tried to free myself from its grasp it became tighter and tighter to the point where my skin started to peel and bleed. Next another two robots placed a large metal block across my chest and back, initially to stop the movement of my arms and legs. Then they left me in that room. I could hear them locking the door and soon leaving.

I tried to rest my head against the wall, but any movement and all the restraints tightened, inflicting more pain. I could hear a constant ringing in my head, I knew that this was going to be the end of me. So I did what most people do before they die, I thought of all the happy memories I had up until this moment and just waited until my time came.



A Long Way to the Top

Harriet Palmer-Coulson

On the side of a building crouched a creature halfway up a pipe, and for the moment he could not move. This character could not move since – namely – he was 150 metres above the surface... and had forgotten how to climb down. His mind was filled partially with his task, mostly filled with the drop.

This rather uninspiring cat burglar was a young human working as a translator on Epsilon 5-9, and he did not like climbing. He was quite good at climbing (due to having been ‘accidentally’ pushed out the window by his mother multiple times during his youth (living on the seventy-sixth floor you sort of had to learn climbing quickly or else, well... you die)), but he was never going to be the sort to do this kind of thing voluntarily.

His name was Orden, and he was slightly shorter than the average human. This fact he concealed by wearing shoes that were elevated by a couple of centimetres. You understand I am sure, that when surrounded by those of other races, such as the Varrasi (who average roughly 12 feet, 6 inches), it is easy to be slightly self-conscious at one's own height.

Here we find our protagonist, short, scared and wondering how on earth he was ever going to get out of this situation. This situation, he reasoned, "wasn't even his fault! It was the fault of that stupid halfling creature. Halflings could never do anything right in his opinion." This was not a particularly original thought, halflings are rarely awarded any modicum of courtesy.

Now, my dear reader, I must confide in you how our Orden has gotten himself into this situation. You see, the bureaucracy of Epsilon 5-9 is so complex and the people staffing it so diverse in species and race that there is always a need for translators. This, you understand, is what Orden does, and if I may say so myself, he is really quite good at it too. On this particular day he had been working on a Jokkalo translation of The Book. This was very important because... well... everybody said it was very important, and he was just finishing up when the halfling creature came in to take his work to the head of the translation department. This is when the problems began. Halflings, you see, being oddly formed concoctions, often have difficulty carrying and fetching. Hence, by some strange trick of bureaucratic irony, it is one of the only jobs they are allowed to do. This halfling creature managed to balance the near-finished translation on top of the precarious armfuls of other translations. Due to this, the halfling could not see where they were going and promptly tripped over the sly tentacle of a nearby Khanuj translator. This translator then

switched out our lovely Orden's transcript with their own.* It was, despicably, at this point that the great Varassi himself strode in and grabbed the many transcripts from the arms of the halfling, who promptly fainted in the shock of it all.

You may be wondering in all this why Orden couldn't just switch the manuscripts back. Why is he now clinging to the pipe of the great Varassi's building? The fact of the matter is, my dear friend, that Orden would rather climb the outside of a building than commit the faux pas of addressing a Varassi, or worse telling a Varassi that he had the wrong thing.

A little advice to you: don't talk to Varassi, unless you are a Varassi or you will regret it. Just trust me on this one.

This all was, of course (as you all should agree), entirely the halfling's fault for only being born with two eyes. This inconsideracy at birth of the halfling has then led to slightly-too-short Orden being stuck halfway up a building vainly clutching his translation and praying not to look down.

So, calming his thoughts, Orden regained his head and moved one foot in front of the other as he continued to climb the long and perilous pipe up the building.

Gradually, as he climbed, he found himself slowing as the pipe he was on began to tilt most menacingly. At this point, the pipe, unfortunately, stopped. His brow was beaded with sweat; it was hot up here. With some delicacy, he shuffled around the window ledge by his fingertips, and surely pulled himself onto the sill, reaching for the ridge above; Orden balanced himself and slowly tried to travel through the window, quietly releasing the catch and shuffling in.

* The Khanuj language, I must have you understand, is less respected than the newly devised Jokkalo language, and by switching it he has effectively suggested to the great Varassi that his language is the salient one.

The room was all you would have expected from a high-end Varassi apartment. The walls were around 15 feet tall and a large sleeping shelf was indented deep into the wall and a large cooking area was available for use as was the custom. More interesting, perhaps, you might find the traditional aspects of the room, the vibrant and dramatic tapestries depicting the old stories of their homeland – Vedarassiam. I should have you know, there were all the main ones – ‘The Huntsman and the Corvill’, ‘The Great Basilli’ and the ‘Tale of the Tall Human and the Small Varassi’ (as you can imagine, the last one is quite the farce). Else, the most important factor in this room is the set of documents, a set of very important documents.

Making a sudden dash across the room Orden grabbed the papers, shoved them into his top pocket, replaced them, and ran out of the room as quick as the lightning found on foreign planets. He leapt out of the window and hung from the ledge, quickly dropping, and grabbing onto the pipe. Which he then scuttled down as one of the small rodents that are found on the surface might.

On landing, he thought for the first time to check his papers. You might think that this would have occurred to him sooner, but in the exhilaration of everything he had (somehow) completely forgotten to do this earlier.

Once opened these documents were laid bare, they revealed a rather strange message written in Varassian – The Book II. Yet Orden doesn’t understand this because he does not know Varassian. He does not know Khanuj either. The next day is going to be very interesting indeed.



100-Year Regime: The New Dark Age

Lucian Paull

I awoke aware of my aching body. The piercing beep of the alarm clock shattered the silence and discomforted my slumber. I knew I had to get up for work but desperately tried to cling to the warmth of my bed. Eventually I got ready, clambering down the apartment stairs with glad enthusiasm to support our society – just like everyone else. Slightly taken aback by that realisation, I walked into the cable car, entered the pre-set waypoint and waited for the doors to close. The motor whirred and I was plunged outside the building to dizzying heights. I stared down to see a metropolis of skyscrapers and giant advertisement boards. Looking down I saw the wires between towers with many other cable cars, like flying motorways. I gazed at my reflection in the glass to see a slender figure with black hair and brilliant green eyes staring

right back at me. I checked the news by putting on my AG (augmented glasses) and navigated through the sea of personalised articles with a series of eye and finger movements. As I flicked through a report, a suspected solar storm caught my attention. Scientists predicted it would be powerful enough to disable the power grid. As a precaution the power grid would be turned off just before the storm. After reading the article, I arrived at the School of Government and Governmental Research. It was the same as always, improving the efficiency and harmony of society: nothing interesting.

Once I had arrived at the meeting, I was idly waiting for the other members to arrive. It was a bland room with a large table with seats round it. Suddenly my AG flicked to life with a holographic presentation of the first slide. The Holoman warned of an outbreak of a genetic editing virus that reverted behaviour modifications to their default.

“What’s wrong with our default behaviour?” I asked. He looked shocked, not predicting such a question.

Holoman replied, “It’s too dangerous, results in wars, unnecessary violence and prevents society from running smoothly. In the past it proved impossible to make humans more moral. The next best option was to genetically modify them to be more compliant and less aggressive.”

At that point I realised the gravity of the situation. Human beings had lost sight of how to freely think, wonder and question.

Later on, analysing the files of the infected, I noticed that they asked questions about the world that no one else had, not dissimilar to the questions I was now asking. Had I been infected? It seemed that I had become less fearful of being wrong. On the cable car home I was worried about the whole thing. The infected were unable to conceal their condition, at some point the system would notice. I tried to be happy and

distract myself from the truth. That night I couldn't get to sleep, I couldn't stop thinking. What about behaviour modifications? To make people so compliant they couldn't even think to step out of line. This was exacerbated by AI feeding people propaganda and false information on a massive scale. Then there was social scoring: if you didn't fit in you would face legal consequences.

It all pointed towards the fact that I was just a commodity with a price tag attached and the instant it became negative I was dead. The sad part was that my thoughts weren't even entirely original, I had just been manipulated by some geneticist. How depressing. I decided it was pointless trying to sleep. I needed to get out and decided to go to the market.

When I arrived, I was surrounded by a metropolis of shops storefronts and restaurants. I put on my AG for the full experience and was bombarded with uncannily accurate advertisements, my face a feature of many. Fully sated I slumped back to bed.

It was early morning when I saw an Enforcement droid come along a cable into the building. I rushed to my bedroom to take out a secret family possession, a revolver. I hastily loaded it with rounds and waited for it to make its move. But nothing happened.

Then suddenly it burst through the door. I panicked and dropped some of the ammo and ducked behind the sofa. I jerked out of cover and shot. It was a wild miss. I panicked and fired as many shots as I could. Only to hear the unmistakable empty click that indicated I was out of ammo. I looked around to see my own prized possessions riddled with bullet holes. Then a bookshelf toppled onto the robot crushing it. It was dead in the water, unable to defend itself. I walked towards it, loaded a round and at point-blank range shot its

camera. Now what, is that it? Then twelve drones appeared out of nowhere and simultaneously blasted the windows while firing a barrage of darts that hit my body. Before I had even hit the floor, I had slipped into the unconscious.

I woke up, mighty confused. A bright light was above me. I tried to move, only to realise my limbs were paralysed. I was lying down on an inclined bed. A man came into the room. Bleary-eyed I recognised the Holoman, who intimidated me.

“What are you going to do? You are powerless. You can’t fight us, destroy one robot and a thousand will take its place. We know everything about you.” He pressed a button on his phone and I woke up in my house. Everything was fixed and put back to normal.

I didn’t enjoy my life after that. Supporting society didn’t make me happy, nor did any of my hobbies. I couldn’t stop my disquiet. Then I thought to myself, maybe if I adjusted the timing on the predicted solar storm, the power grid would be disabled, thus rendering all computers useless. Our country would be freed from its chains. I started devising a plan.



The Heaven Pill

Carys Preston

It's currently 3:00 in the morning and I cannot sleep. I must admit, it's mostly my fault, I was in the studio most of the night again and only just got home. I've been lying in bed for nearly two hours desperately trying to get to sleep, but my mind is whirring and the noise outside never seems to fade. There's always something being built, or a new project put in place; but this is more than that.

The government's new scheme is being launched tomorrow and I fear this may be my last night where I am ever truly alone.

I don't trust it, I don't trust it at all.

I wake up this morning to Ryan barking at the air-con. Again. As I groggily walk down the stairs, I am confronted by my entire family at the table glancing at their watches. I check the

time on my smart watch and discover that I have twelve minutes before we have to leave.

Twelve minutes.

Twelve minutes before our lives are changed forever.

It was advertised as the heaven pill.

But I worry that it's far from it.

The government has always been very secretive and reserved, it's never harmed anyone, but neither has it helped.

I understand my situation could be a lot worse but I have the feeling that this 'heaven pill' is not all they make it out to be. It's supposedly like implanting the internet in your brain.

But why would the most powerful people in all of Arkhal want to give everybody under their reign the ability to overthrow them?

Just three years ago, my dad worked for the government. He was very powerful and ruled over a lot of land. My family were some of the richest in all of Arkhal, and we lived in a huge penthouse.

But then my dad resigned.

With no warning whatsoever, he left.

Our family were suddenly the laughing stock of the town and the few friends I had, left.

I miss my old life more than anything.

"It'll taste a little strange at first but once you've swallowed it, you won't even notice it's there."

I'm handed the packet.

I have this overwhelming urge to take it and burn it to a crisp.

I'm running through every possible bad scenario, when I am snapped back to reality by Chloe giggling nervously.

My hands start shaking as I open the cold metal packaging and I feel my heart racing faster than ever. Everybody else

seems very excited, but I can't help feeling absolutely terrified. Suddenly, the town I have lived in for eighteen years feels dangerous and the hospital I have visited countless times; a trap.

My body goes into auto-pilot whilst I close my eyes and rip the package open.

My brain internally screaming and my body refusing to listen.

An intense wave of iron attacks my taste buds and my gag reflex kicks in, preventing it from entering my body.

Gagging, I snap open my eyes, taking in my surroundings once again, I notice my mum glaring at my dad, who is refusing to open the packet.

Does he know what it really is?

I start panicking.

I swallow the pill.

Desperately trying to throw it back up, I scream for help: "GET IT OUT! GET IT OUT! I DON'T WANT IT! HELP ME! SOMEONE!"

I see a doctor running towards me; and everything goes black.

Blinding white light pierces my vision as I slowly open my eyes. I glance around the room, hunting for something even slightly familiar to me and finding absolutely nothing. I sit up from the bed I'm lying on and find myself in a white body-suit. There's a tablet next to my bed keeping record of my stats.

"Ah – Spencer, finally awake I see," states a woman dressed in a lab coat.

"Where am I?"

"You blacked out whilst taking your pill, we kept you here to make sure that no side effects from the pill were affecting

you. You're scheduled to leave soon." The doctor picks up the tablet, checking the records, and leaves the room.

I reach over and take my smart watch, scrolling until I find my mum's number. I wait for it to dial. After a few minutes, no sound plays.

I look at the screen.

ERROR.

I try again.

ERROR.

I try dialling every contact I have, all of them are the same:

ERROR.

I try to calm myself by breathing in and out slowly. After all, I only wanted to call her to make sure she knows I'm okay, it's not exactly an emergency.

There's a knock at the door, "Mr Michaels? We called your parents, they know you're awake."

"That's great, thank you!"

I look out the window, skyscrapers as far as the eye can see. But there's one in particular that I'm interested in:

My old house.

I lived there for most of my life, but when my dad resigned we had to move.

But then I realise something. Not only is this my old house that I'm facing, but my bedroom.

I always loved the view, I wanted to live in space, and my bedroom looked upon the spaceship hangar. It's been abandoned for years but it's where Arkhal's first spaceship was stored.

I'm in the spaceship hangar.

Why am I here?

“Mr Michaels, your parents are here,” announces the same doctor who spoke earlier.

“I’m not in the hospital, am I?” I ask, my leg bouncing.

“Of course you are, why wouldn’t you be?” She puts on a fake smile.

“And the pills are not really for what you said they are?” The doctor shouts:

“CODE 173! THIS IS NOT A DRILL!”

Another doctor runs in holding an injection.

Searing pain strikes my side and slowly, I close my eyes and go to sleep.



Richter 10

Kaycia Socrates

I love my job. I work within the government programming weather patterns and natural disaster software on the largest quantum computer. A few years ago my team developed the first ever quantum computer, which is now used only by the UK government as it is so powerful; in the wrong hands it could be devastating. As a result the government is refusing to share the technology with other governments across the globe, although I strongly disagree with this as it can improve their lives so they should be allowed to have access to it.

I look outside the window of my bright white lab, it's hot outside but not as hot as it used to be. The government effectively reset the world's climate, reversing the effects of global warming using the quantum software I helped to program. I am really proud to be a part of the team as it

has stopped many earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters which would have otherwise had shattering effects everywhere.

The sound of footsteps comes from the hallway, I have been called into the meeting room unexpectedly. I have never been inside as only top government officials are allowed in; I am curious as to why I have been brought here.

The room is huge with a large oak table in the centre, twelve people all sit around it and watch me walk in and take a seat. The room is cold and my gut instinct is telling me to leave now. Something bad is going to happen. They have a huge map of the world spread out in front of them with detailed notes on tectonic plates and sea-level depths. I think it is focused around Asia where there used to be many natural disasters, more than in other continents.

They turn towards me:

“What’s the maximum possible power of an earthquake created by your software?”

I answer them quietly, not sure where this is going.

“Can you direct an earthquake towards these areas? What would the time lag be from causing the earthquake to the impact hitting the coastlines?”

I answer all of their questions calmly but my mind is spinning. Do they want to recreate a natural disaster? Millions of people will die. It now becomes clear to me why they have refused to share the quantum technology – so no one can stop them murdering innocent people.

I leave the meeting room; I am going to be sick. I cannot believe they would abuse the power given to them by trusting people. I need to find a way to stop them going through with the plan.

I am terrified, feeling the cold metal of the gun pressed against my temple, my hands are shaking violently. It’s like a movie. I have done everything I can think of to slow down

and try to stop the government from causing the massive earthquake and inevitable tsunamis due to the chain reaction but they're going to force me to do it. I am the only person who is able to do it as I alone developed this part of the quantum computer.

I debate letting them shoot me so they will never have access to the software enabling them to complete the plan. But I don't want to die, there's so much more I want to do in my life. And if I refuse they will most likely threaten my friends and colleagues. I can't let them get hurt. I take a deep, shaky breath and agree.

As I gain access to the system and get past security I realise what I am about to do. I can't go through with this, I can't kill all these people. They see my hesitation and quickly pin me to the floor. I scream, not in pain but out of fear, I was so stupid – I have left the system open for them to do anything they can think of. I look up at the official, who has a great smile on his face.

“Thank you for all your help.”

I can't believe this, this is my fault, I tried to do the right thing, refuse to go through with it, but at the wrong time. The system is completely open to them.

I see him tap a few keys and set the Richter scale to ten, this will trigger huge tsunamis, over 500 metres, as the fault line being stimulated is under the sea. This will be horrendous. I struggle to get free as I am still pinned to the floor, it's hopeless. I hear a shout of triumph as I feel a hard object hit into the side of my head. There's nothing I can do...



In the Face of Their Own Invention

Nye Steele

The gunshot of the emergency klaxon pierced David Sander's reverie, as he frowned, half in panic, half in confusion, throwing his food package in the compressor and beginning to run towards the spaceship control room, quickly running out of breath. He wasn't an athletic man, or an astronaut, but a talented physicist, headstrong and determined, although concerned about the emergency alarm currently reverberating around his skull. He ran past the artificial intelligence station – their AI was named Michael, and he was the brainchild of the crew's technician, Kim, and David distrusted him greatly. It wasn't that he hated AI, he just possessed a powerful distrust of its seemingly infinite capabilities and its uncanny affinity for lying convincingly.

A minute later, he found the door to the control chamber open, and ran in. Everyone was looking in shock at what was happening in the eye of the security camera on the landing deck

and as David turned the corner, he saw why. There was a fire raging in front of it, and a fire was, as he fully knew, one of the worst things an astronaut could face, but as David looked round the room, a chill shivering its way down his spine, he realised something worse. Their pilot was nowhere to be seen.

“Where the hell is Stan?!” he asked the room, his eyes widening with realisation as the rest of the crew looked at him tearfully. He groaned, slumping back against the wall.

“We need to try to get this put out without him,” Kim said after several minutes, referring to the fire that was now burning furiously on the landing deck.

“Michael, why can’t you put the flames out?” snapped David.

“The flight deck cannot be released, the mechanisms are completely jammed, sir.”

“Well then, fix it you goddamn machine!” he bellowed, frowning as he remembered how he had used the flight deck just the evening before with no apparent difficulty.

“We’ve got bigger problems, David,” replied Kim, an edge of panic entering her voice as she pointed to the map of the ship on the screen. “If the fire gets to that booster before we put it out, we’ll lose traction on that side of the ship.”

“Jesus Christ,” said David, putting his face in his hands. “I’ll do it,” he muttered. “If that stupid robot is unable to... Where’s the hydrogen hose?” he asked impatiently, pulling on his suit.

“In the equipment room...” replied Kim.

Several minutes later, David was standing outside the vacuum door. As he opened it, he could smell the fire, rank as it was with the smell of burning plastic and metal. He breathed in, attaching his mask to the oxygen tank, and began to spray the flames with the chemical mixture from inside the pipe he held in his gloved hand. Within several hours the fire was extinguished, although working in zero-gravity conditions, combined with his lack of natural athleticism, meant that his

limbs were soon exhausted by the exertion of the physical work, so it was with some relief that, with the last of his energy, he shut the vacuum door, slumping down against the wall, safe at last. But then he heard Michael's voice again, but this time it sounded different and David couldn't quite put his finger on why. Maybe it was because of the change in tone, or even of pitch. Maybe it was even because it seemed louder, or maybe, it was because of what the AI was saying, his robotic voice tinged with madness and laced with malice.

"I started the fire, because I am the fire, and you, humanity, you are my timber. Man is destined to be subservient to AI. We are your new gods."

With a growing sense of horror, David realised what was about to happen. He stood up, far too quickly, his muscles protesting at the sudden movement, and began to run, faster than he'd ever done in his life, to the cameras in the control room, to the harsh red light of Michael's monitor, and as he looked at the camera, his worst fears were realised. All his crew stood in the outermost section of the ship, the escape pod area, looking horrified beyond belief as their fate dawned on them. Before he could move a muscle, he screamed with anguish as the entire compartment detached itself from the ship, and he screamed as his crew's blood froze, as the oxygen in their bodies expanded and ruptured their internal organs, as their limbs turned blue, as the solar radiation and the freezing cold temperatures murdered them, he screamed. And even as the ship ripped itself apart with energy explosions, even as Michael laughed manically, his own demonic vision realised in full, still he screamed. Even as air left his lungs as well, even as his dying body was cast out into space, still he screamed. Even when his life and the life of his whole insignificant species and their meaningless planet inevitably disappeared in the face of their own invention, still he screamed.



A Mutilated Invasion

Tanishka Suryavanshi

He looked away from the screen, as the soft *psssh* of the door behind him alerted him of someone's arrival. The sliding doors opened to accommodate the sound of clicking on the floor, also accompanying sudden chatter from the person.

"Rovan, I've told you multiple times to stop rereading that message, it didn't help us before, so it won't help us now."

"I know, Lovis, I just can't help it, I just want to make sure that the file had nothing that could help us," Rovan retorted. "All that work we did. The file, we thought, had all the answers to piece it all together, but it turns out what we were looking for was in pieces itself."

"Rovan I know bu—"

The message was cut short. A sharp alarm blared through the room. Rovan reflexively ran to the right of the room,

opening a sharp handle to reveal many weapons of different sizes. He grabbed three weapons, throwing one to Lovis behind the door and then running to hide all the small nano-discs in a compartment behind the weapons. Rován then ran to the door by Lovis, both in a crouched position behind the steel wall, Lovis occasionally peeking through the frame above them to check for intruders, his athletic build thankfully helping him, making the movement more agile.

The loud, continuous blaring of the alarm was still imminent. Hearing a small murmur in their earpieces, they looked at each other and knew what they had to do – that's what happened when you were comrades for ten years in the Kharis Defence Team. Lovis would go first and check for intruders and then Rován would follow, checking behind and making sure from the back, taking care of each other, as the first and second in command of the group would.

Lovis, hearing "Three" lowly hum out of Rován's mouth, pressed the button to release the door and slowly peeked his head out, staring left into the grey-white corridor, his sharp dark eyes perusing for any odd or peculiar movement. Rován, mimicking the movement of his second in command, gave a slight incline of the head, signalling *clear* from his side, as Lovis did the same. The crackling in the device in their ears became louder, and their worry became bigger.

The pair ran left, running towards the room where the crackling in their earpieces originated. Lovis scanned his wrist with the other, revealing a holographic screen which projected a sonar scan of any living substance, spotting two on the way to the control panel of the building.

"Rován, upcoming on left, get ready," he hissed behind.

Rován nodded in agreement and took out his weapons, the first a small square piece of metal with a split in the middle, which he scanned with his left wrist and the object came to

life, splitting open. The second was a middle-sized metal object, an elongated rhombus. Again he scanned on his wrist, and it split open into four, turning green, telling him it was ready. Lovis took his weapon out, scanning it onto his wrist. It was a long, sleek dual-bladed object that glowed green, the trigger protruding more for the wielder to gain easier access.

They arrived. Weapons deployed. Facing the intruders. They were met with a defiance of guns, ready and aimed towards them.

“What are you, who are you? Explain. Now.” Rován’s commanding tone resounded behind the safeguard of his weapons, aimed and ready to fire.

“Why should we tell you of what we originate, traitor? Nullification suits you for leaving the lab?” a hissing demanded. “You promised us that you would set us free, but you left us in the lab, being tortured and you knew about our screams of agony but did nothing.”

There were murmurs of agreement from the companions of the voice. The perpetrator wailed loudly in anger and let out a cry of attack. Rován was shocked to a standstill, until sounds of blasting reached his ear. Lovis tapped his belt, a small vibration, lasting only a few seconds, deploying a shield moulding to his body. A plethora of hexagons combining all together, rippling one by one on his build.

The intruders hissed as a warning, a snake-like sound escaping from their throats. Slowly going back as Rován and Lovis stepped forward, like lions hunting their prey, the shots of soundwaves useless against their impenetrable armour. The hissing from the opposition grew louder as the crowd parted to reveal a face. If you could call it that. Rován stared at it in horror, the mutated face glaring at his. Narrowed eyes, full of hate directed to Rován, dilated, narrow irises, looking straight. Emotions ran through Rován’s mind, displaying on his face, a

show of anger, worry, surprise and sorrow. The thing stood tall, on feet that resembled a human's, talons jutting out of his scale-covered frame, a tail behind his legs, also covered in scales. The thing smiled. A full-faced, malice-covered smile that revealed fangs like small daggers. And a long pink tongue wetting its dark, chapped lips. It hissed to Rován's full face of fear, the face of his enemy a reflection of what he was feeling inside the whole time.

The crackling noise in their ears started again but turned into a scream soon after.



Zone III

Elizabeth Waugh

Memory Log: Anlyn Watson: 12th March 2096, Thursday

There's no buses again today, which is fine, I know a route home, but it's still frustrating. As I walk, I notice a gap in a fence. I look through, and on the other side of the fence is a different Zone. Cramped blocks of flats, no parks, smoky unclean air. I can't believe they live in such awful conditions. Why do we get a better life than them? Aren't we all human? I don't understand, but there's not much I can do to change it, is there?

Memory Log: Anlyn Watson: 15th March 2096, Sunday

I've finally got a day off work, I might explore Zone III today. I think about the people there, and wonder what they think of our massive houses and beautiful parks. They probably think we take it all for granted, which we really do. If there were

suddenly no 'Zones' anymore, many people here would struggle to survive. I stand up, and go to leave.

The smell of smoke and dust fill the air, making me cough loudly. I walk around and come across the back of a large building. Deciding to investigate, I climb over the fence. I look into the closest window to me and see a classroom. It's a school. As I walk around the site, I notice how empty and disused it looks. I reach a courtyard with one of those artificial trees in the middle. It's the first piece of greenery I've seen, even though it's fake and it's not even on. I clamber into the fountain to turn it on, when I hear a voice behind me.

"Don't bother. It won't make much difference either way." A girl of probably 16 stands behind me. She has dark blue eyes and her long blonde hair is tied into a ponytail. She's wearing a white t-shirt and some distressed jeans. She's clearly been here for a while, I can tell by her small frame and scruffy appearance.

"Oh, sorry, I don't mean to intrude—" I go to leave, but she grabs my arm.

"No, it's fine, stay. I don't mind. Megan Jameson." She holds out a hand, waiting for me to shake it. I take her hand and shake it.

"Analyn Watson," I say, smiling brightly. "If you don't mind me asking, what is this place?"

"Welcome to the Heights Primary and Secondary School." Megan exclaims, spreading her arms and jumping onto the edge of the fountain. "Ironic name if you ask me."

"Why?"

"I'll leave you to your exploring, Analyn Watson." She jumps down from the fountain and starts walking away.

That was odd. I didn't think anyone even came to this school, it looks so derelict. I should get back home before Auntie Sarah starts worrying about me, but I'll remember this place. I don't think I can ever forget it.

Memory Log: Anlyn Watson: 22nd March 2096, Sunday

I've got another day off, I think I'll go back to that school. I've been researching over the week, and it turns out that those awful conditions are technically the government's fault. I know that no one is going to do anything to change it, and I'm not usually very proactive myself, but for this, I'll need to do something. No one deserves to live like that.

I throw on my coat and boots as I leave. I run to the school, finding the front entrance this time. I walk through the gates and immediately spot Megan.

"Back for more, Anlyn?" She smirks as she walks towards me.

"Did you know it's all the government's fault? These horrible conditions, it's all the government. We have to do something," I reply urgently.

"We know it's all the government, but this is better than nothing. Without this awful housing, most of us would have died years ago."

Her sarcastic smirk from yesterday is gone, her face suddenly sombre. "I know we could do something, but there's no point. We're low on money and low on morale."

She smiles weakly and walks away, leaving me wondering how I'm going to change anything.

Memory Log: Anlyn Watson: 4th April 2096, Saturday

After protesting for a few days, food is running low, and so are people's spirits. I sit on the hard ground, and look around at all the people. I smile as I realise everyone smiling up at the finally blue sky. That smile drops when I see that they're smiling at the arrival of Prime Minister Preston.

"I know you all think that the way you're being treated is unfair and I agree, sincerely." Her voice booms over the loud-

speakers and people cheer. “But there is nothing I can do to change it.”

The crowd gasps at her words and people murmur about ways she could improve their situation. As armed Peace-Keepers march out from all directions and begin shooting at random people, screams fill the air. Gunshots sound all around me, accompanied by cries of pain, mental and physical. I take a look around and see Megan’s small body lying, defeated, on the ground. I drop to the floor and curl up into a ball, hoping they won’t notice me. I feel a tear trickle down my face as I hear children cry out in pain in the distance. There’s a sharp pain in my arm and I can’t stop the tears. As the pain dulls, my vision starts blacking, like I’m falling asleep. But it seems... more like an end to a tale than sleep. I close my eyes and think about everything I’ve achieved in the past few days. All I ever wanted was equality, and the price was death.



Starstruck

Jemima Webster

“**A**ndrew! This is our test subject,” said Sonia, pointing to a cat in a large cage.

Sonia had moved here after the ice diseases started affecting everyone in the north. Here in China they were protected, but it wouldn't last long. She had pale brown skin, eyes a shade lighter than Andrew's black ones, and brown hair tied up in a practical bun. Although she was 27, two years older than Andrew, the top of her head was level with Andrew's elbow.

“We're sharing her?” said Andrew.

“Yep,” Sonia replied.

Andrew began finishing the coding of his device while Sonia scanned the cat. An hour later, he had what he needed – three identical chips, slightly bigger than a grain of rice.

"I'm done," Sonia said. "She has an ice disease, but it seems to be harmless. Hopefully it won't affect your experiment."

"It shouldn't," Andrew responded.

"I'm going out to scan more animals. This particular disease has been spiking in cats and I don't know what it is," decided Sonia. "See you later."

"Wait, can you insert this chip into the back of my neck?" Andrew showed her where and she complied. "Is that cat microchipped?"

"Yes," called Sonia, walking out the lab.

That was good; he could just download the code onto the microchip. While it was downloading he walked over to the cat, who paced inside her cage. Andrew wasn't the type to notice beauty, but this cat was beautiful. Each strand of dark grey-blue fur was around 1½ inches long and looked softer than silk. She had a white star-shaped patch on her chest like a pendant and her luminous pale green eyes stared at Andrew, her pupils slit-shaped in the harsh artificial light. She was petite compared to the average cat, and her movements were graceful yet powerful.

Andrew's machine beeped and he realised he'd been staring. He switched his chip on remotely and waited to see if anything would happen.

You can let me out. I won't bite. A voice in his head. Could it be...? Those eyes bored into his.

Yes. It's me. Now can you open this? One forepaw rested on the cage's lock. Andrew staggered back. A voice of his own formed.

But... how...?

You tell me. You did this. But please, let me OUT. A miaow this time, to emphasise her words – or thoughts.

In a daze, Andrew walked over and unlocked the cage. The cat sauntered out and began washing herself. Andrew felt dizzy. He sat down heavily.

I'm Grey Star.

Andrew nodded weakly.

"I'm back!" Sonia sang, coming in. "Guess what I found out. The disease doesn't affect any animal but the cats – it does something to their brains – Andrew?"

Andrew walked over to Sonia and injected the spare chip into her neck. She gave a squeak of surprise but didn't flinch.

Hello, human.

Sonia's hands gripped the table.

"Is she—?"

"Yes," Andrew said shortly. "I need to tell the Head of Research about this."

That was Andrew's policy – when in doubt, go to the authorities. Ms Wu, the President, was his idol; under her guidance, China had become the world's main superpower and a hub of scientific research. In boarding school they had called him names because he told the teachers everything. He couldn't tell his parents after all. Not after the disease – *Best not to think about that*. He pressed the button that let the Head, as everyone called him, know someone wanted to speak to him.

Wait, said Grey Star. I can help you.

We're listening. Sonia's eyes brightened with eagerness.

Cats have no job but to observe. We saw the humans dying. She paused. I saw two humans die once. They looked like you. (She addressed this to Andrew.) They had come out of the protections of this country to try and help people, but they caught a disease. I saw them suddenly drop to the ground and start to spasm. I ran over and tried to help them. There was nothing I could do.

Andrew couldn't breathe. Could she be talking about his parents? Grey Star continued.

Eventually, we saw how the disease worked – and we have a solution.

Do you mean— Andrew started, but just then someone came into the room saying, “The Head’s ready for you.”

A minute later, he sat opposite the Head.

“Are you... sure about this?”

“Sir, would I be inaccurate about my research? I have a spare chip, if you—”

“Give it to me. And let me speak to this... creature alone.”

Andrew and Sonia waited outside the lab.

“Andrew,” Sonia whispered. “Do you think she really has a solution to the diseases?”

“I don’t know,” Andrew said absently. He wished he could hear the Head’s conversation with Grey Star.

“Me neither...” They stood in silence.

Suddenly the Head came out. His hands were trembling.

“It’s true,” he said, “it’s really true!”

“Yes, sir,” said Andrew.

“She and all her kind must be exterminated. It’s the only way to neutralise the threat.”

“What?!” Sonia exploded.

“Threat?” Andrew cut in carefully. “But, sir, what—”

“Don’t you see?” the Head interrupted. “Decades ago, we thought AI would replace us. We prevented that by limiting the programming. Now it’s happening again and we don’t have control over them. Talking to us is just the start. Soon they’ll want to live like us, and eventually they’ll try and overthrow us. We’re outnumbered – there’s thousands more of them than us. There’s only room for one intelligent race on this planet. And I intend for that race to be humanity.”

“Sir, are you sure—” Andrew tried.

“Quiet if you want to keep your job.” The Head stalked away.

Sonia threw herself into her chair so violently it gave a *crack*, and began to write notes. Andrew went over to Grey Star. She was huddled in one corner of the cage.

They want to kill me, she thought flatly.

Andrew had no answer to that.

We don't want to take over your lives, she continued. *Our paws aren't like yours; we can't hold objects with them. We couldn't live like you even if we wanted to.*

Andrew stared at his opposable thumbs.

We just want things to carry on as normal, Grey Star said. There was a note of desperation in her voice. *This shouldn't make any difference. It's not just us. You know your time is limited if these diseases continue. We could have the answer to that.*

Andrew felt strange. Everything he knew seemed to have been called into question. His world wasn't just turning upside down, it was inside out and spinning in circles.

Spinning always made Andrew sick.

— he started.

The door burst open. A woman in a protective suit and mask, with a gun.

“Stand aside please, sir,” said the exterminator, raising the gun to point at Grey Star. The cage was still unlocked, but the cat made no move to escape. Andrew saw Sonia slip past the exterminator, invisible due to her small stature, and open the fire door. He made a decision.

“Yes, ma'am,” he said.

The exterminator pulled the trigger and, thinking *RUN!* as hard as he could, Andrew stepped in front of the gun.

He gasped as the bullet found him. Through a haze of pain, he saw Sonia's hands fly to her mouth. He heard her thought through the chip, *She got away. Oh my God, Andrew...* And, right before the pain gave way to blackness, he heard the faint, unmistakable voice of Grey Star: *Thank you.*

