

Zine
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2020
2020
2020

The Delta Journal's first digital zine
is dedicated to
health care workers,
scientists,
teachers,
professors,
family members,
and every one of US,
for advocating and fighting for a better tomorrow.

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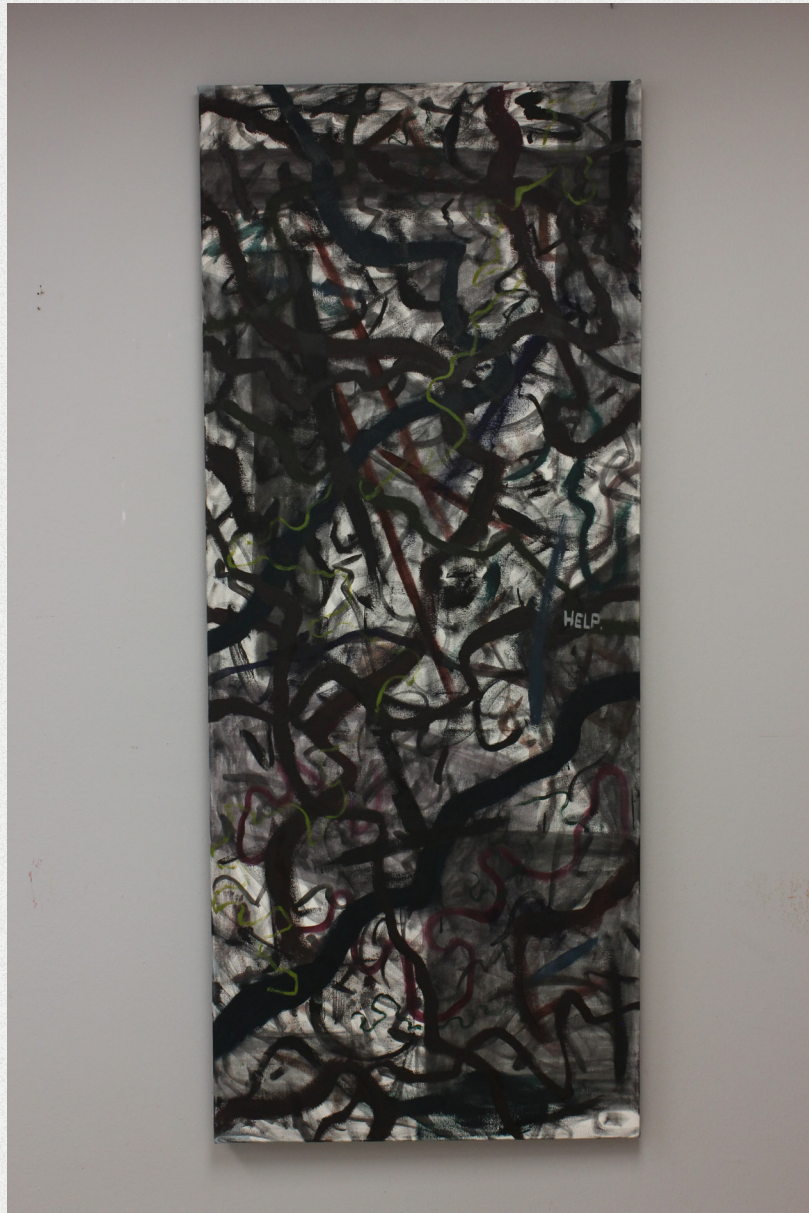
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Help

by Mary Lukachick

During quarantine, depression seized me. I normally paint in bright saturated colors, but I needed to paint in black muted tones. My cry was for help. My cry was to be seen and understood. The darkness within was coming out. This needed to happen. For by letting the darkness out, I made room for light to enter.

With Love, A Friend

by Anthony Bui

With everything going on, I'm okay. Despite the pandemic and the death of my grandfather, despite the damage that the storm has done to the family business, despite the embarrassing loss to Mississippi State and just the overwhelming gloom that is 2020, I'm okay.

See, with everything going on, it's easy to focus on all the negatives. Racism continues to sit in the back of people's minds, innocent lives are cut short, families are separated fearing the spread of disease. I spent the first three months of quarantine alone. It wasn't the virus that was going to kill me; it was the loneliness dancing with the headlines that 2020 conjured up: death, fear, injustice.

With all of this, let's not forget the good things 2020 has given us. Things that the news does not cover, things that we all should hear. Like how a 103-year-old grandma beat Covid and celebrated with an ice-cold bottle of Bud Light. Did you know that Crayola launched a brand-new box of crayons with diverse skin colors so children of all backgrounds can accurately draw themselves into their fantasy worlds on paper? Have you heard 12-year-old Keedron Bryant's amazing song about being a young black man in America? Did you hear the desperation in his voice? Can you feel the pain in his heart as he repeatedly sang "I Just Want to Live"?

When I was swimming through the Mariana Trench, slowly depriving myself of oxygen, my roommates came back. When I was stressed about online classes, I found this class. I found relief when times were toughest and when I look back on 2020, the bad will still be there, and the dead will still be dead. But I will live on, trying my best to be a light in all the darkness.

To Whom It May Concern, Read Again if Needed



Nightlife

by Evan Leonhard

This photo is from quite a long time ago but has found renewed significance for me over the past year. I see it as a nice single-image summation of 2020's social, cultural, and spiritual atmosphere.

Funk Sway

by Calvin Marquis Morris

I say I'm making improvements
in my life. I download a compass so now
I only open grindr when facing southwest. He asks

looking? I say
most days 180 degrees or 270. I stay eyeballing
new beginnings. If my blessings are to come

I expect them to pour down. My friend asks, *what are you doing to make your dreams come true?* Next morning I anoint my whole dorm

in bleach. I say

lately I've been feeling this imbalance. The Twitter astrologers say nothing in retrograde at this time. The counselor suggests
setting small strategic steps

towards reaching your goals and I say *Big Bet.* I buy highlighters, colored pens, a new planner. When Ma asks, *are you coming back to church this Sunday?* I tell her

I have to check my calendar. I be busy bossing.
I have been meaning to get back

to meditating. Lately, I've been feeling
off.

I say, *tomorrow imma wake up
and jog around that big ass lake on campus.*
Tomorrow I always end up sleeping in.
My friends say the signs are all there. Ask,
*Why wait? When? Now. Take Risks. Now. So much
potential.*

When the doctor asks what potential
stress factors have brought me in, I say, *it's just
seasonal?* I haven't been facing east much.

The therapist says have you been practicing

My mom calls and says, *you shouldn't be struggling so much. if you just pray more...* Truth
be told I still do.

It's just harder to pray when you have no city to look towards. *North is the direction for career.* All

I can do is cast my hopes up towards the Mississippi.

I think I just have too much of the wrong faith.

The commercial says, What are you doing to improve your life today? I masturbate And decide Imma answer that question

Tomorrow.

Isolated Incidents

by Haley Stuckey

You carried me across the threshold on your back, gently letting me down once we'd passed that fine line between our pasts and our present. The house was large enough, with two bedrooms and plenty of walls that would soon be adorned with silly artwork and memo boards because you were so forgetful, and you loved being reminded. I took off my sneakers and laid them gently against the wall as you kicked off your boots, letting them land at different spots in the front room. A breath of fresh air told me that life was starting over once again, this time for the better. Still, I was apprehensive. We'd never lived together before.

November was a daydream, a month of playing house and cooking elaborate dinners. We'd don our nicest dresses and toast champagne, only falling into bed once our bellies were full and a soft glow had risen to our cheeks. Exhaust and exhilaration tied us together beneath the covers of our shared bed. Our days were long, beautiful, and tinted in pink and gold. We went to work and returned, falling into each other's arms against a refurbished sofa, drinking in each other's company over whichever film I had chosen for us. You didn't mind my insistence on picking; you were just happy to see me. I wondered how long this could last.

Without warning, the routine arrived, a cold winter of words exchanged, and meals prepped. I felt out of place in an apron. You looked your best in a sweater, your hair thrown carelessly into a bun at the back of your head. The water heater made noises constantly, a prisoner of our hall closet. The second bedroom became the office into which you retreated; the clacking of your keyboard calmed my fears of domesticity and assured me that this was bliss. The routine grew boring, but I still felt that initial happiness, and you still walked through the door every day with a smile on your face and a strange new find from the grocery store in hand.

We spent less time at the dinner table and more time in bed, chilled to the bone, eating takeout. The façade of perfectionism had fallen. Making dinner was no longer an ordeal as the days grew shorter. The confines of these walls were almost comforting. I was no housewife, and neither were you. We exchanged insecurities beneath the sheets, and you assured me that I would find my purpose with time. The house shifted from a museum of you and I to a place that I could call "home." I grew comfortable with the thought of never leaving, and so did you.

The wintry days of February bled into soft days of March and the blossoming hope that I assumed would come with April. The rain shone on the pavement, creating pictures of the sky that you could almost fall into. We wore our masks, venturing outside for only brief periods of time. The thought of never leaving soon crossed my mind with each day, and I began forcing myself to take walks. You worked from home, and with each day, the clack of your keyboard sounded less like comfort and more like a song I'd played on repeat until I was no longer fond of it. Something about it felt off, but I ignored it.

One day, after a particularly long walk, I noticed that the house had begun to shrink. It was a small change, minute really. However, I had remembered the entryway being slightly larger than it was when I returned. You kissed me on the forehead, assuring me that everything was fine. I sunk into a bath, assured for the time being that the state of the world was only weighing heavily on my mind. The bath seemed to hold less water than usual. My knees were cold.

You sighed as I climbed into bed, shivering as I pressed my body against yours. I was cold natured, and you usually didn't mind. However, I noticed as you created a small space between us. Though it bothered me, it was minute. I didn't want to start an argument. The next night, I listened to you typing away once again, seeking comfort in the sound but failing. The bed seemed smaller than before. You fell asleep on the couch. I made coffee in the morning and watched you eat your omelet from across the table, which also appeared smaller. My elbow bumped your cup of tea, and you smirked. Something about it felt off-color, tinted in gray. I sighed and grabbed my sneakers from where they sat against the wall. Had they always been there?

The pictures on the wall felt like strange spectators, and I began to feel as if I were performing. How I wished I could go back to work. Your presence began to feel suffocating, the keys on your keyboard became a resounding death march. I apologized to you for the things I was thinking, but only in my head. I played the role of happy partner each night, wrapping my arms around you in our suddenly tiny queen-sized bed. Your body grew colder. I wondered when things would go back to normal. Deep down I began to notice a glimmer of hate, replacing the "unconditional" love I'd felt for you. I wondered if you'd notice my absence if I went away for a while.

But there was nowhere to go.

No travel allowed. The world was quiet, but parts of it were screaming, or on fire. How I wished to be a part of something. When May rolled around, your tired eyes no longer peered at mine from across the table. You read the news from unreliable sources. How I wished to abolish Facebook, or Twitter, or YouTube. BuzzFeed became your best friend. I scowled to myself and started changing my behavior in subtle ways, hoping you'd notice my distaste for the you that you'd become.

My walks became longer, until one day I found myself an hour away from home, crying in a parking lot, wondering how I'd gotten there. My head felt fuzzy. My hands were cold, despite the warm weather. You pulled up in your car, sympathetic as ever. I wanted to take your sad smile and twist it right off your face.

You tucked me into bed with a cup of hot coffee and my favorite film. Your kindness was a nuisance. You were omnipresent, and I only wanted to be alone. The house was so small that I felt like a caged animal, on display at a zoo that only you could visit. I growled when you turned your back and sneered when you looked away. I became disgusted with everything you did. The clacking of your keyboard became an alarm, always bringing me back to this suffocating reality. We no longer took meals together; I couldn't stand to watch you eat. At night, I'd wait for you to fall asleep, retreat to the couch, and then make sure I was awake before you. You only caught me twice, when you found yourself walking the halls in the middle of the night after a trip to the bathroom.

You could do nothing right. Even the sound of the toilet flushing made me hate you. You had taken something from me, but it wasn't your fault. Just like it wasn't your fault when, one night, I chose to follow you into the bathroom. I'd finally reached my wit's end. And as I stood behind you in the mirror, I wished I could read your mind. I stared at the back of your head, trying to make sense of the things I felt, but the only sounds playing in my mind were television static. I'd lost the ability to speak to you. I wished I could hear your thoughts over the white noise.

I'm only curious what word play occurred between the synapses of your brain in that exact moment. In the days leading up, I couldn't have cared less. We were islands in a sea of frozen clocks and news articles. We were ships passing in the night, and I found that it didn't bother me. But still, I'd like to know what you were thinking in the bathroom that night. What were you thinking when you looked up, wringing your hands, only to see me standing behind you in the mirror? Why was your kind smile not

enough to ease my mind? And why was the ringing in my head so loud?

Most importantly, I wondered what you thought of me when my hand flew to the light switch. When the darkness passed over your face, what did you see? Was it the glimmer of a kitchen knife, growing closer?

When you grabbed my hand in the dark, I realized what I had done. The knife fell from between my fingers, and I collapsed to the floor, sobbing. You left me there, too afraid to play the comforting lover. I'd spent so many nights searching for a reason to blame you for my brokenness. You'd adjusted accordingly, and you'd given my space. Your patience had held up, but you were exhausted. Our love had given way to a subtle hatred and a growing fear.

In the end, there was nothing to be said. You took your things and left me there. The white noise stayed, and the clacking of your keyboard could still be heard when it was quiet enough. But there was no source of these incidents. There was nobody to blame anymore. I was framed between the walls of a shrinking house, alone with a broken brain and the weight of our memories.



I Get Stuck in My Head

by Mary Lukachick

My mind has always been active. I love to ponder and examine what is going on inside me. However, my mind can trap me. It lays snares and lures me into dark corners. I get tangled and confused. I cannot find a way out. Though I love to think, if I only think on what I am thinking of I will get stuck. I must listen to outside sources. I must broaden my thinking to include thoughts of different origins. I must be critical of my own thoughts. Never trusting until proven true.

Impacted

by Evan Leonhard

Time

a compulsory conveyor belt

dragging me toward the inevitable

i postpone acknowledgment

i sedate thoughts with diversion

but upon approaching collision

recognition infects my mind

anxiety mounts

i squirm

i struggle

i throw myself back in opposition

all pointless

i brace for impact.

Among Us

by Bailey Barrett

“Don’t let them underestimate us little guys.”

His voice was always calm and collected. It was charming and warm. He was comfortable and familiar. He seemed to understand. Not seemed. He did understand. The smaller your planet is in size, the less the Intergalactic Astronomical Union—better known as the IAU—cares about you. That is common knowledge. We have to work harder to keep our standings in our units.

“Elias, how are you keeping up so easily?”

Let me tell you, training with him was intense. I don’t think that any of us would have even imagined training with the top-tier IAU hero unit.

“When running the course just now, what were you thinking about? Be honest.”

I never understood why he was interested in my thoughts. At least not back then.

“I want to prove to the Vulcan, my crew, that I am meant to be here,” I said. “I want to prove that I am a hero just like those who came before me. That I have what it takes to help save the galaxy if need be.”

“Exactly. Run the course with me again. Don’t think about them. Don’t think about me. Just yourself. Only yourself.”

He reset the course once more, made it harder than ever before.

“You owe these assholes nothing. You know what you’re capable of.”

I took a deep breath, and the starting horn blared. I pushed myself through the crashing solarstones; I did what he said. I didn’t think. Instead, I tuned into the energy around me. I closed my eyes. I could feel the glow of the stones as I dodged them. The energy of every single object, surface, and person in the room passed through me. It was transcending. Elias; I could feel his thoughts, his desires, his passions, his future. His aura was stronger than anything I’ve ever felt before in my life. He held the potential of the universe and he knew it. He had a plan. A big one. One that will change the course of everything ahead of us.

I heard the finish bell ring as I collapsed to the floor. When I came to, I was met with Elias’s eyes. One blue as Rigel in the Orion constellation, the other glowing red like the auras of the solarstones.

The scoreboard flapped as the rankings changed. My attention was moved from him to the board. I watched my name move from fourth to first. “Dealos, Frey” it said. If only the final ranking test were that night. We would have both been captain of our respective units. If only the test weren’t rigged for the biggest planets to win. They have to keep their control somehow, I guess; after all, the planet who holds the spot for captain gets to represent their system in the IAU.

Second in command Lieutenant Commander isn’t too bad though. It’s a slightly higher rank than my planet is used to holding. But Elias with the same ranking as me, he scored big for his home. He pretty much brought his dwarf planet back from the dead in terms of the IAU.

“I’m proud of you,” he said, and gave me one last comforting hug on our last day before we deployed. “Dealos. I’ll remember you. We’re going to change the universe one day.”

He gave one last wink, his eye, again, glowing red.

~

"That was the last time I saw him," I explain.

"That's it? That was the last time you saw him?" Kappa interrogates in a loud whisper. "Frey, that was nearly a decade ago."

"I'm sorry? Last I checked, you were the one who asked about him. And I surely don't remember you ever meeting this god of a man who is trying to actually do good in this universe."

"You're right. You were the only one on the crew who has had personal connections with Pluto. You saw him in action. I've only heard the stories of that ambition on the course. I just feel like he could be a new inspiration for me, you know?"

He transmits a wink through my thoughts.

K'Vasians have this unique ability. They are highly persuasive people. They get into your head. Literally. They send thoughts and images into your mind to make you understand things their way. Kappa is no exception.

He knows Elias's plans. I'm not sure how, but he does. He must be the other imposter. In my last call with Elias, he told me there is one other crewmate on this unit who will help carry out the mission. But why of all people would he choose Kappa? I mean he is techy and does have the K'Vasian power, but sometimes his common sense isn't all there.

"Like I said, Kappa, that was the last time I saw him."

"Yes, I just agreed to that."

I look around the room double checking my surroundings. There is only one other person within possible ear reach.

"No, Kappa, that was the last time I saw him."

"I'm not following."

"JESUS FUCK, Kappa! Use any part of your brain cells here. She has talked to him since then she just hasn't seen him like you asked."

It was only a matter of time before Bea interrupted with her super-hearing and all. Bea is my best friend on the unit.

She was the first one I bonded with outside of training.

~

When all of the training tests were done and we were awaiting our ranks, the units decided to throw a party to celebrate the end of our training period. Bea handed me a minuscule drink.

"Tequila," she called it. "I saved a few from my studies on Earth. Try it!"

She clinked our tiny glasses together, swung her head back, and downed the liquid. She giggled and looked back at me; I was still unsure about this whole drinking foreign liquids thing. She rolled her eyes, grabbed my hand, pushed the glass to my mouth, and made sure I swallowed it.

"That stuff burns," I coughed.

"Yes. But! It works in terms of making you want to have fun. And you, tiny little thing, seem like you enjoy having fun! So, let's get on that stage and dance the night away, making all of these guys and girls here want to be with us."

I giggled at her but did as she said. And as promised, we had the most spectacular night of our lives. We danced, sang, and laughed, occasionally taking another drink of her liquid from Earth. She told me all about her adventures on Earth. She explained how there is a goddess there who shares my name.

"Norse Goddess of love, beauty, sex, war, and gold. It fits you!" She exclaimed.

As the night began to die down a little, it seemed as though everyone was partnering off into couples and trios as they headed back to the sleeping quarters. She ended up fawning all over some random captain from a different unit and following him down the hallway. I watched her leave and

she waved back at me with a thumbs up and a wink.

Next to the exit, I caught the eye of a tall, handsome, laid back, obviously going to be captain of his unit kind of guy. He approached the stage and whispered sweet nothings into my ear. He was flirtatious and sexy. Was I not supposed to follow him back to his room?

~

“Sissy had a little crush on him at one point.”

“I absolutely did not. He is an idol to me. He is making history”

“Let me tell you, Kap, they sent hologram messages to each other nearly every night after training ended. Isn’t that right, Frey?”

“I have a boyfriend, Bea. Come on. We’ve been together since before we got here. You know this.”

“Hey, shit happens. Am I right?” She nudges Kappa and gives him a wink.

Are they? They might be hooking up. And she didn’t tell me?

“Anyways, I’m off to calibrate our defense weapons.”

She bounces off to through the hallway on the starboard side of the ship. I turn back to Kappa. He sends me a few more messages through thought. Smart of him considering we can’t really talk about these things out loud.

“Do we make her our first target?”

“Do you really think that is smart? Also is there something going on between you two? Because what was that?”

“We had a bit of meteorjuice last night. That’s all. Maybe something happened. Couldn’t really tell you if it did.”

“And that’s why you want to make her the first one?”

“All I’m saying is that it’ll be easier to let her down that way, you know?”

“Kappa, you’re an idiot and you’re gonna get us caught.”

“What do you suggest then?”

I close my eyes and tune into my surroundings. I see the glowing auras of everyone around me. I see Kappa’s orange with a confused energy radiating off of him. I venture my senses further around the room. I decide to focus on the yellow one. Charlie. Sweet and innocent Charlie.

Back in training I decided to race Neptune from the Quantum Unit in a course I knew was far too advanced for me at the time. We were competing through the ruins of a Xevoke temple. These temples are famous for their falling rocks and secret traps. It was a fake temple for training, but still had all the works of a real one. We were in the final stretch; I was climbing up the steep stairs. They were damp and slippery because we had set the course to advanced. I was on the last strain to the top; I gripped to a vine to pull myself up and then it snapped. I tumbled down about 100 galactic meters and hit the ground. There was padding on the ground in case of these accidents, but I still felt a shooting pain through my leg.

Charlie bolted from the stands the second my body made impact with the floor. She helped me up and brought me over to Med-Bay. She sat me on one of the beds and began to wrap my ankle. As she wrapped, she sang a little song in hushed tones. Next thing I knew, my ankle was completely healed.

“That’s a very useful skill you have there, Char.”

She smiled brightly at me. She was never one for talking much.

I focus further into Charlie’s yellow glow. I see the possibilities of her future. I pull back to Kappa’s orange glow and open my eyes. I glance more around the room trying to complete my thoughts.

“You have a plan,” Kappa sends in thoughts.

I nod and sip my star-juice. But we must wait until the cafeteria is emptied before we can discuss. I know he can hear me. We stay sitting at the center table for a while. Slowly eating, gazing at the shiny red emergency meeting button. It sits in a glass box, waiting to be pushed. One day maybe. Hopefully not

today.

Everyone trickles out one by one. I stand up silently, gesture to Kappa to follow me, and make my way to the vent in the bottom corner of the room. He opens the hatch, and we hop down. He does a quick scan of the room before closing it over him. I start walking, knowing that he will follow.

"Where are we going?" He questions.

"Electrical."

"Electrical?"

"Charlie is in charge of all the electrical wiring of the ship, remember? If we sabotage lights, Charlie will have to come all the way down to electrical to fix it. She will be alone. We can make our first kill."

"Won't somebody find her?"

"Although a valid concern, no one ever comes into electrical without a reason. The only one who has a reason is Charlie."

I create a peephole in the vent at the top of the electrical room.

"All clear."

Kappa hops out of the vent and heads to the electrical unit for the lights at the entrance of the room. He pulls the wires, flips a few of the switches to off. He then heads to the three other electrical boxes closer to the vent. He rips a few wires out of each one. He turns back to me, still peeping through the vent.

"Now what?"

"We wait. Charlie should be getting notified any second now. She will have to fix the wires before she can flip the light switches. Come get back into the vent."

We sit in the vent for a few minutes before we hear footsteps overhead. Charlie is here. There are a few whispers. Must be Charlie talking to herself. I hear her beginning to fumble in the wires.

I sneak out of the vent as quietly as I can trying to not have the hinges creak on me. Kappa follows suit. I watch Charlie continue to fumble with the wires as I come up next to her. My shoe makes a small squeak on the floor, catching her attention. She jumps slightly but gives a relieved smile when she registers that it is just me.

"Oh, hey Frey, what are you- "

The upper half of my body separates from the lower. A mouth opens up filled with sharp teeth. The saber like tongue releases and stabs Charlie through her stomach, killing her instantly. I do feel an ounce of regret seeing the sorrow and betrayal in her face as she takes one last gasp, but this must be done for Elias's plan to work. The tongue pulls back out of her body, dropping her to the ground in a splat. My body returns to normal.

"Uhhhh, Frey?"

I turn to see Kappa pointing towards the door. Atticus is standing there in shock. He bolts for the door.

"Get him!" I screech.

Kappa takes off and I jump behind him slamming the close door button on the wall. The two of them travel out of sight around the wall. I close my eyes, reaching out for their auras to complete the scene.

The doors are heavy, weighing thousands of pounds, but they close fast and can be hard to open back up. Unfortunately for Atticus, he gets caught in it. Kappa's orange glow grows intense and passionate as he pulls out his silver blaster and sends one smooth shot into Atticus's head. I see Atticus's red glow dull down slowly until it's gone.

I come back to this reality to see Kappa's face staring at me with a "what do we do now" impression. We head back to Atticus's body. I grab one leg; Kappa grabs the other. We drag him to meet Charlie's body in the back of the room. I hand Kappa the mop with the understanding that he will be cleaning

up the silver blood that is now spread everywhere across the floor. A loud alarm blares and red lights flash just as we finish. Chicxulub. An emergency meeting. We have to finish this first. I hide any and all wounds with spare wires and dump a bucket of water onto the bodies. Now it just looks like they were electrocuted.

Kappa and I reopen the doors to electrical and make our way to the cafeteria. Everyone seems in a slight panic and disarray with this being the first time that button was ever pushed. We take our seats at the table.

"Frey. Kappa," a stern voice booms. "What took you so long to get here?"

"What do we say?" Kappa asks internally.

"Charlie found us in the hallway earlier and asked us to fix the electrical equipment. She wasn't feeling too good after lunch and needed to lay down."

The tall, handsome man standing in the center of the room raised an eyebrow. "Why didn't she send Atticus to fix it? He has been studying electrical under her."

"Oh? Um," I stumble over my words trying to piece anything together.

"Atticus left after lunch for his trip home, remember, Captain?" Jonas interjects. I'm glad Jonas had an answer even though he does not even know the truth of what happened back there.

Captain Ezera nods his head in remembrance.

"Fair. The lights were fixed a while ago. That still does not explain what took so long," he says eyeing Kappa.

"Doors, sir. They shut on us and you know how tricky our door system is, especially on that side of the ship," Kappa bullshits.

Captain Ezera darts his eyes between the two of us, an almost jealous look on his face. He turns his attention to the wall, pressing a remote button to pull the projector down. A bold headline gleams on the screen.

"Quantum Unit fails mission. No survivors found." I'm sorry what?

"I just received the news. The Quantum Unit, our sister ship, was sent to save a planet on the brink of extinction due to a solar stone planet crashing into it. The mission failed. The planets collided. The Quantum Unit was destroyed."

The air in the room stands still. Not even a breath can be felt between the team.

"This is a heavy-hearted moment for all of us, but keep in mind, team, that we do not have much time to grieve. We, being formerly the number two unit, have now been promoted to top-tier one. It is now up to us to lead all of the other units in this time of uncertainty. We will be flying out to the Milky-Way galaxy momentarily to meet with the IAU."

Chicxulub. This is actually happening. Kappa and I need to speed this up.

"Head back to your rooms. Take a nap or a shower. Let this news process in your mind and emotions. Let it out. Get dressed. This is the IAU we are talking about. We must each be feeling and looking our best. If you need to talk, you know where to find me," he finishes.

I do just that. I head down the hall to the rooms, wandering through the dizzying hallways. The lights blur more into blobs as my eyes slowly fill with tears. Fake tears of course; I know that Elias is not dead. He survived. He is the leader of the revolution; he has to survive. Luckily our doors are a hand scan because I would not have been able to type in any sort of fancy code.

I grab a Neuromari petal off of my nightstand. Hopefully this will take some of the weight away from my chest. Neuromari also helps me astral-project further than I can on my own. I lay on my bed, the fur blanket soft as ever against my skin. Up on my ceiling I gaze at a tapestry, a gift from Elias. The detailing is so intricate, as if made by fairies. The changing lights of my room create a breathing effect with the star in the center, the flowers spread across the background that begins to dance. I change my breathing to match the star's: In... Out... In... Out... In... Out... In... Out... In... Out... In...

"We start with stars in our eyes. We start believing that we belong. But every sun doesn't rise. And no one tells you where you went wrong." Lyrics from my favorite musical that Earth shared with me. Do you know what a musical is? Its self-explanatory really. It's kind of like a story, but parts of it are told through song. Anyways, this may be my last voice message for a while. We should be headed off to save Xuvis. This shit is gonna be crazy. Can't wait for the chaos of the mission to begin. See you out there, Pluto Elias.

P.s. I hope that your mission goes as well as mine.

I've always loved the style of his letters. He hand-writes them but also sends a voice message of him reading what he wrote. It makes it feel more like he is talking directly to me.

"Well of course I'm talking directly to you," a calm, charming voice says. "You're doing wonderfully. Go for Jonas next. He is in charge of navigation to the IAU correct? Meaning he will be alone in that room."

I jump up into a sitting position at this familiar voice. I see him. In the corner of the room. His eye glowing bright red, the other blue as Earth's sea.

"Be careful though. Clara will be on cams. Have Kappa enter the room with you but vent to security to get her. It's- "

"Foolproof," I finish the sentence for him.

I step onto the floor and toward him, reaching out for a touch.

"Don't bother. You've projected me here to help you. You're doubting yourself again."

"Elias, I just needed to make sure you were still alive."

"Of course, I'm alive. My plan was solid. You and Kappa have your work cut out for you now," he sounds almost disappointed but continues. "You fell for those outside of the plan. If it weren't for how smoothly your double kill in electrical went, I would think that you've both betrayed me."

I lower my head. He is right. That night at the party with Bea, I followed Captain Ezera back to his room. He was the mysterious man. He was not technically Captain at the time, but I knew he would be. We have been together since. I don't want to call it a mistake because I do love him. I've considered not following Elias for the sake of saving Ez, but the universe is more important.

"You've made your choice, Frey. Follow through."

Elias's figure disappears. My door slides open, awakening me from the scene that just occurred. I'm met with kind, confident ocean eyes and a warm, sparkling smile. Ezera.

"Frey, baby? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sorry. I must have fallen asleep. I'll be on my way to the bridge now Captain."

He grabs my hand to stop me from leaving.

"Hey." He pushes a strand of my pink hair behind my ear. "Talk to me, love. How are you taking this news?"

"Honestly?"

I nearly choke on my words. The pain in my chest is back.

"Honestly. I care about you. I want you to feel safe and loved here with me."

"I was close to one of their members," I say, and judging by the concern on his face, I can tell he interpreted that wrong. "No, no," I chuckle, "not in that way. He was a friend. He helped me want to be here. He was an inspiration."

"Pluto. Right. You trained a lot with him back then." He puts his arms around me in comfort. "They were by far the most amazing team that unit has ever seen. And he, he gave his planet a tremendous amount of honor. The same thing we are doing here."

"I just feel bad for replacing them so quickly, you know?"

"We are not replacing them. No one can replace them. They will always be with us. But for now, we must fulfill our duty to the universe." He stands up and offers his hand. "Come on, darling."

“Can I just meet you there? I think I’ll shower first.”

He nods his head with a sweet smile and heads off to check on the rest of the crew. I watch him enter into Bea’s room before closing my door. I throw on the first shirt I can find and head over to Kappa’s room. His doors slide open. I see him sitting on a chair playing a game. I grab the controller out of his hand, pull him by the arm and lead him to the admin room.

We close the doors behind us and swipe our cards to check in and give us an alibi. It takes a few tries for each of us to successfully swipe because the machine is touchy and has to be done in a specific way. We silently hop down into the vent at the bottom corner of the room.

“What are we doing?” Kappa whispers.

“We are headed to the starboard hallway. Between Oxygen and Navigation. We are both going to walk into Navigation. Clara will see us both do so on cams. I take out Jonas in Nav. You vent to security and take-out Clara. Our last double kill.”

“Our last? What about- “

“I don’t agree fully with Elias’s plan. Not everyone here should be sacrificed. We can take Bea and Ez as captives. Who knows, they may be swayed to join us,” I hint at his telepathy.

“Okay. But why are we sparing them?”

I turn to Kappa and look him deep in his eyes.

“Do you honestly want to kill Bea? What has she done to deserve that?”

“Why are you suddenly growing a conscience, Frey?”

“I’m not. I just also think that Elias’s plan needs more than just small planets. Those two are bigger than us. They can be useful. Stop asking questions and go with it,” I snap.

I push the vent in the hallway up to make a peephole.

“All clear.”

We hop out and stroll casually into navigation creating a fake conversation about going to the IAU. Jonas looks up, acknowledges our presence, then continues on his programming. Kappa heads to the vent. I walk up behind Jonas, put my hands on either side of his head and twist my arms. His neck snaps and his body falls. Kappa jumps into the vents.

I do as I did before and tune into the auras searching for Kappa and Clara. Them being further away from me takes much more energy. Their glows are faint, but I find them. Kappa’s moves closer to hers until the purple glow is gone.

I open my eyes and blankly stare at the body below me. I begin to feel guilt. There is no silver blood this time, but the pathetic eyes make mine water. I question all that brought me to this point. All who are left are Bea and Ezera.

Do I follow Elias blindly and kill them as well? Do I trust in my instinct and keep them alive? This is beginning to feel all so overwhelming.

I pick my head up and do a scan around the room. There on the wall, I find a glass case with a shiny red button inside. I do what a good crewmate should do in a time like this.

I report the body.

Check

by Frances McCann

I cried when I accepted that big
Game show check from the
Balding man with the clammy hands.
But I paid off the daycare bill
And your student loan debt.
I bought furniture that doesn't stab
You in the back with a rusty spring
And put it all in our new house.
One you'll never get to step in,
A place where our children will
Grow up and always ask
"What happened to Daddy?"
And do I say "it was God's plan"
Or do I say "Daddy existed
While Black and was found
Dead at the feet of a white man?"
Because when I heard you were
Dead, body lying next to that cop,
I knew you didn't kill you.
I thought about how you'll never
Get to see the kids graduate or marry
As I waited for the autopsy report
As they lowered you into the ground
As they lied about your death in court.
Every morning I make our bed with
The new green sheets while I
Wait for you to come home, but
I hear those maggots under the
Floorboards, six feet under,
And I know you never will.

After Jericho Brown's "Bullet Points"



Levels

by JaNiece Cambell

“Levels” is an exploratory piece that examines not only the relationships between the three main characters within this story, but also the interplay between different aspects of the composition itself. This was one of the first times that I started to mess with blending my strong linework and flat color with more painterly and abstract elements in the background. This also speaks to the characters who, though at different physical “levels” on their platforms, are looking between each other as a sign of understanding. I wanted to embrace this circular dynamic, as a contrast to the rectangular composition.

Home

by Brianna Beck

Home is yellow walls,
and fresh pressed coffee
it's hugs you wish could last forever
Belly laughter
it's pizza nights and movies
Evening tears
it's loving because you should and
realizing you would love more if you could
it's good mornings
and good nights
Kisses on foreheads
and warm faces
I love you and
I miss you
Home is sleeping in,
but it is also restless nights
that eventually break through to morning

Home has no capacity limit
because love isn't claustrophobic
and maybe when you no longer
wake up to yellow walls
the same shade as your old ones
you'll still remember home
when you smell fresh coffee
because home never leaves us
and exists within people, places
and always within us