

Name: Morgan Robinson

Work title: Fractures

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Award: Gold Key

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Sylva is a broken planet both figuratively and physically. It once was called by another name, but that name became lost to time as all life had gone extinct when an unknown power ruptured the principles of physics. This power is known as Sakti. It is the cause of all life and death, love and war, and so on. Tales and legends have proven that Sakti is more than a life source. It has needs and wants that influence the past, present, and future of those living on its planet. It's the main reason Sakti created Sylva and its inhabitants, Oni. It wanted to watch what a species would do as time went by and they discovered its presence. They soon learned how they could concentrate Sakti towards different areas to manipulate elements, objects, or mystics. Each manipulation provided various aptitudes, depending on the Oni. However, these wishes divided the planet and caused an imbalance in how much Sakti one should hold multiple times. These factors resulted in new species. Even after these species were created, they constantly relied on Sakti to maintain their life force. Sylva was split unevenly into five major sections, leaving fragments of oceans and islands to orbit around the central sections. In the center resides pure Sakti, compressed into a sphere that leaks power endlessly. These sections are known as fractures and are numbered in the order in which they broke off.

Fauna, the home of the Ixtals, is recognized as the first fracture. This fracture wasn't synthetic and was caused by an abrupt rupture in power. Their species came soon after the discovery of Sakti, something they learned was more than just their life source. Sakti created the Onis to prosper and flourish on Sylva. They were supposed to keep them entertained. The Oni planned to do just that. Small towns were created with the beginnings of a monarchy on the horizon. The most gifted Oni, their future emperor, named their newfound territory Asinus. They learned that some Oni had more Sakti than others. Some species had more Sakti than Oni, and different states of matter held more amounts of Sakti. They absorbed information like sponges and documented all their findings. Then they began to experiment, which caused the phenomenon.

Oddly enough, the first Ixtal identity is still unknown to this day; their name is lost to time or some other force. Theories on the first Ixtal range from commoners wandering into the woods, alchemists experimenting with various mystics gone wrong, or the local farmer deciding to test their abilities. An Ixtal is the result of the merging of an Oni's and mystic's Sakti, providing a new, modified body depending on the mystic the Oni has merged with and the amount of Sakti both hold. This new species created an unnatural balance; Ixtals now had more Sakti than the Oni. When the Oni acknowledged the Ixtals, they quickly outcasted them in fear that the amount of power they held could ruin their developing empire. They didn't want them to upset the balance any further between the more powerful and the weaker Oni. They isolated mystics from Oni the best they could to stop Ixtals from rising. Despite their efforts, commoners and those less fortunate than Sakti decided to follow the first Ixtal. Ixtal's number increased, and some decided to wreak havoc among other Oni. Some Ixtals wanted revenge for how they were treated in their past lives, while others wished to move on. Either way, the rift between the Oni and Ixtals continued to grow further.

The monarchy grew with borders and frequent wars with the Ixtals. They discouraged any action to merge with mystics and isolated them from the lower classes. Most Oni wished to merge with powerful mystics to take control of the monarchy. Some merged with calmer mystics, but chaos still ensued. As they wreaked havoc, Sakti took notice of this change and decided it wouldn't be long before the Oni became extinct. This wasn't an outcome Sakti wished to see. Sakti experimented with their abilities on Sylva and started to separate itself to create a fracture to separate the two species. As it separated Sylva, mystics began migrating towards the fracture, fleeing from their captivity and going towards the Sakti they needed to survive. Oni scholars slowly realized the fracture and its cause—the unbalanced power. The final attack against the Ixtals and their followers took place soon after, led by the strongest Oni. Luckily, Sakti's fracture weakened the Ixtals, as they had less Sakti to depend on. Due to the decrease in Sakti on the Asinus, all Ixtals were forced to flee towards the first-ever fracture and continue their lives there.

The second fracture was caused by the Merk deliberately and they took 90% of Asinus' water. The fact that Merks could not survive to the fullest extent without the ocean gave rise to a strong affinity for the ocean following their discovery. Merks are Oni with gifted beauty and a stronger connection to Sakti. This allows them to be naturally stronger than both Oni *and* Ixtals. The first Merk was a high-ranking noble in the monarchy system. Two generations after

Ixtals were exiled to Fauna, the monarchy was properly established. Everyone served under the blessed and prosperous of all, the emperor. The emperor was deemed the strongest Oni, hence their title.

They chose seven houses with the most useful abilities to help delegate their empire after being appointed ruler of Asinus. The monarch made sure the first Merk's name had been hidden from the public, leaving only its story. According to the tale, they were in charge of the foreign affairs. They were curious about the research that alchemists found when finding ways to overpower Ixtals. A simple mistake when exchanging files had caused the Merk's creation. Instead of the Sakti research going towards the alchemist head, it landed in the hands of the foreign affairs head. They looked through and realized that Sakti could increase depending on its state of matter. At night whilst everyone slept, they'd disappear towards the outskirts of the empire to concentrate their Sakti in the air, land, or water in search of a reaction from Sakti. After realizing that the water held the strongest connection with Sakti, they meditated daily with it. Soon thereafter their Sakti was more suited inside water.

The noble decided to reveal their findings to their empire. They were an outcast at first, forced to hide from the backlash of their actions, but in time they were in awe of the beauty that the Sakti had graced them with. This caused a quarter of the empire to dedicate themselves to becoming a Merk. The rise in Merk caused Oni to look at them differently. Merks were as graceful as a swan in water, capturing the eye of all living things. Not only were they graced with beauty but also with strength and power to influence the water. This was a power the emperor wished to use to fend off any potential threats in the future. The Oni's awe soon turned into a desire to own the Merk. The Merk did not wish to be controlled in any way, and the first Merk fled from their noble responsibilities to lead the Merk in battle. At first, Merks were able to ward off all controlling Oni, but the Polymealians were created and changed the tide of the war. The first Merk, granted with the most power, was forced to split the land and sea away from all Oni. They acknowledged Sakti and their presence as a higher being and made a deal with them. They took the majority of the water on Asinus and created the confined water sanctum that would be known as Orca where all Merk would live.

The third fracture was also man-made, as not all Oni would get along with the Polymealians despite their attributes in the Merk War. Polymealians were created as the last stand against

Merk, gifted with extra limbs, heightened senses, and Sakti. The Blythe family contributed to their creation, as they specialize in Oni experimentation and have the aptitude and insight to navigate and apply the essence of Sakti. They decided to replicate the strength of the Ixtals, meaning they needed a volume of Sakti to infuse in a warrior capable of fighting for them. They started to drain the Sakti of mystics, but mystics soon learned to avoid them and were scarce on Asinus. They tried draining the Sakti of mystic plants, but their progress was slow and would be incomplete to stop their extinction. Running out of time for a solution, they turned to their last resort: the outlaws and commoners.

Since commoners have less Sakti than average, they drained the Sakti of thousands of people. Nearing the climax of what should've been the end of Onikind, the head of the Blythe family chose a sole warrior to manifest the Sakti that had been drained and collected. The warrior, being from the Aesria family, manifested enough Sakti to create another being asexually, but due to the amount of Sakti one could hold, the warrior's body adapted and created an extra set of limbs rather than another being. This allowed the warrior to properly wield the Sakti and perform just as well as an Ixtal or Merk. Soon Polymealians mushroomed, and the Merk could only compete effectively underwater because they could not perform as well as the Polymealians did on land. The war quickly ended after that, and the Merk isolated themselves from all Oni and Polymealians.

The emperor bestowed the Aesria a title of their new genus, Polymealian, as a reward of thanks. A trade system was conjured to properly thrive to make up for the resources each species lacked. The remaining Polymealians were slightly discriminated against, as lower nobles were jealous of the power they were able to wield. As a result, the Blythe family began to receive numerous requests for power; however, the emperor ultimately decided against it. Instead, as a compromise to those with less Sakti, the Polymealians separated themselves, some staying on Asinus, while others started the creation of the third fracture. Thus, the third region, known to be neutral towards all species, was established as Dolos.

The Elves and Sakti were said to have caused the fourth and final fracture. It appalled the emperor, as Sakti wouldn't help the Oni unless a deal was made in the past. One of the commoners taken to produce the Polymealians was unfortunate enough to receive more Sakti than most during the chaos of the first war. A young lady, only 19, was taken along with her

younger sister. They were told that they would be transported to safety bunkers, safe from the Merks' terrorist attacks. Rather, the people who were taken were divided based on their age, Sakti, and Sakti control. She was one of the few taken for her high-level control of Sakti. Despite always being drained of her sakti, she never succumbed to her death. During tests, the head Blythe noticed quickly that it was uncommon for a lowly commoner to have almost as much Sakti as a high-ranking noble. She was frequently drained of her never-ending Sakti to advance the development of Polymelians. No matter how much they drained, her Sakti replenished faster than most. She grew to see it as a curse, as those around her were stripped of their lives, leaving her as one of the remaining benefactors of the experiments. She tried to command others to revolt against their captors, but they were too weak to fight back. Her attempts ended when her sister died during her experiments.

On the day of her final experimentation, lacking the will to move on, she was drained of more Sakti than usual and fell into a coma. Fortunately, the Head Blythe assumed all her Sakti had been exhausted and he lost interest in her. Just like the ones before her, she was thrown into the mass graves to die a slow, aggravating death. However, she wasn't dead. She awoke from her coma, unaware of the time that had passed, and slowly climbed over the bodies of her town. She wandered around for a while, lost, until she felt a string of fate pull her backward. She attempted to continue moving, but something redirected her path to assist her. She soon realized this 'force' was Sakti guiding her after mystics appeared near her continuously as she kept searching for refuge. With the help of Sakti and the mystics, she was able to reach Asinus' current civilization. There she was able to get back on her feet with the help of a small family. When she asked around, she learned three things: one, the war was over with the help of Polymealians, a new species; two, her horns were reducing in size every day, for reasons unknown; and, three the most shocking of all was the tremendous increase in her Sakti reserves. She never understood why, but the Sakti seemed to influence her, almost controlling her every action, thought, and body. She soon lost her horns, her ears became sharper, and her vision adapted. She was shocked to discover that she could now see the Sakti in all living things.

Unfortunately, her physical changes did not go unnoticed, and she was soon outcast as rumors spread. She became the first elf, an oni that lacked horns. She left the small family in fear of affecting them negatively and hid from all of Asinus. The empire feared her condition and its origins as more Oni-turned-Elf appeared. The empire was worried that they would infect them with her supposed sickness or curse. When the head of the Blythe family realized who she was, they immediately informed the emperor. The emperor realized that Sakti had favored someone

other than themselves and authorized the elves' immediate capture. While on the run from everyone, the first elf met other ex-captives with her condition. The surviving captives all ran from the dictatorship of Asinus, but the first elf knew that it wouldn't be long before their capture. Sakti had also realized this and decided to offer their help to them. With the help of Sakti, she created the 'final' fracture, creating the land of the elves, Elven.

Sakti had enjoyed watching the species deal with each other throughout time and knew it was only a matter of time before the next drastic movement took place. They would simply watch as the inhabitants of Sylva fight amongst each other. The species would live apart from each other for all of time, constantly in disagreement. It was only a matter of time before they would reach the Antebellum Epoch.

Name: Nicole Janoff

Work title: Hell and Back for You

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Award: Gold Key

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*I will go to hell and back for you....*

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You open your eyes.

You are not a human, you are a green. You know you are a green because your entire body is green. You are a very basic creature, you don't even have five fingers, just an extension of your palm and an opposable thumb. Your feet don't have toes either. You look like a shadow, everything about you is the same, you have no dimensions. You wear a jacket that looks like one in the American Revolution, but you're not sure why.

You are also very short. You know this because you are sitting on a log, its splinters are poking at your butt, and your feet cannot reach the ground, they are just dangling.

You see a creature next to you, but you calm down. Because you know they are your best friend. They look exactly like you, but they're red.

You know another thing.

You're dead.

But you also know this is not the first stage of the afterlife you have gone through.

A very large creature approaches you, it is massive, its chest puffs out in a macho way, its arms are long and thin while its legs are short and stubby. His shoulders are enormous with spikes on them. Its face is the face of a 50 year old grumpy character in a cartoon. They are a blue. You are terrified.

` "You're in Hell," they hoarsely spit at you, and you turn to your friend, who turns back to you in equal fear, "but you are a red and you are a green. You don't belong here, so we're going to kill you!" It grabs its massive fists and smash the log you sit on.

*SPLAT!*

You don't know how, rolling over just as the blue's massive fist demolished the log, but you've escaped, and your friend has too. You see a thorn bush nearby and both hide behind it. From the blue's reaction, it thinks it has accomplished its mission, and stomps away.

The red turns to you, "are you ok?"

You turn to the red, "I'm not sure. What is happening? I know you're a red, I know we are not somewhere... normal... but that's it. I'm not sure what to do."

The red sighs in sympathy, "don't worry, this has happened to me before. But you saved me. Don't worry, I got your back."

"But where are we? I know the blue said Hell, but what does that mean?" You feel stupid of asking that question, especially since the world around you brings back the definition to your mind. The rock you stand on is charcoal, everywhere there are rivers of lava and fire. The trees are nothing but rotten stubs.

"The better question is where are we from, but I cannot answer that, because if not you might fail the test and become like one of them."

"Like the blues?"

"And the whites and blacks and purples and oranges and any other color that comes to mind. Reds and Greens are the only ones that can help us. Some of the other colors may help us, but we should not trust anyone."

You feel scared. The red straightens out his coat, "I'm Friend by the way."

"And who am I?" You ask, even though the question is silly.

“You are Yourself,” he tells you. He then points to a staircase. You can see what must be hundreds of purples, whites, grays, aquas, all big and bulky like the blue you had met only a few moments ago. There are stairs in the distance coated in an elegant red velvet cloth. At the top of the staircase, there are two grand doors. They are large, made of every metal, stone, rock you can think of. They are twice your height, even taller than the creatures trying to barge through them to no avail. But you are perplexed, however, behind the doors, there is no room or house, only a spark of light, but besides that, just empty space.

“We need to get to those doors,” Friend says. You both skip by from thorn bush to thorn bush. Your gut is clenched with the fear that before you know it, you’ll be smashed. Thankfully, you are both short and small, so you go by unnoticed. You are still very nervous. Once you get to the stairs, however, they are packed. You can hear the droning chant of “let us up! Let us up!” You know that it has something to do with the doors that led to nothing.

You and Friend share a glance of nervousness. “You two!” You hear behind you, it is the voice that is so familiar yet so distant. You know it is the voice of someone close to you. You turn your heads to see a purple, looking like the rest of them, but not as macho and disproportionate. Almost human, except everything about her is purple. She doesn’t look very grumpy.

“Quick! We have got to run! We can’t trust anyone!” Friend cries. But you know that this one is different, even though you’re not sure why.

You’re both horrified, but resist the need to scream and bolt, knowing it would bring unwanted attention. “I can help you get up the stairs. Hold my hands behind me and I’ll take you to the doors.”

“Can we trust you?” You ask carefully.

“I just want you to be safe,” she responds, sad for some unknown reason.

You aren’t sure why, but you trust her and do as she says. You hold her hands and hide behind her as she climbs the stairs. You are trembling so much that you’re afraid you’ll trip. You wonder *who is this purple? Why is she helping me?* For some strange reason, no one notices you as you squeeze through the crowd, you just assume it’s because you are short.

Even though you completely doubted yourself, you made it to the top. The chants of “let us up! Let us up!” ring ever louder. “Okay,” says the purple, “now go in front of me, and go through the doors.” You and Friend creep in front of her. You see the pure, gold door handles, and you reach for it-

“Look! It’s a green!” You hear someone roar behind you.

“And a red! They’re the only ones that can go up!”

“It’s not fair! We should get to go up too!”

“Kill the red!”

“Kill the green!”

Your eyes dart to Friend’s, and his dart to you. You both know what to do, you run, and leap off the stairs.

You faceplant into the ground, and everything goes blank.

~

Good news, better news, and terrible news.

Good news, you're still alive and your body is completely intact.

Better news, you fell under the staircase, so you are hidden from sight.

Terrible news, Friend is in danger.

As your vision becomes less and less blurry, you see Friend riding some sort of mechanism you can describe as a bouncy ball with a handle for Friend to hold on to. He sits on it, and uses it to bounce at levels twenty times his height. He is being hunted by a hoard of blues, yellows, pinks and so on. He sings a song very loudly, and you can’t tell if he is taunting or entertaining them.

He sings:

*I am a green!*

*And I can go to heaven!*

*You wish you could be me!*

*You must be so jealous!*

You panic, you see his bounces beginning to get out of rhythm, the hoard was catching up, they were preparing their long arms and legs to stretch out and-

You bolt to save Friend, you jump in the way-

**SPLAT!**

You manage to shove Friend out of the way, “We have to get to the stairs!” You cry. You grab on to Friend’s bouncy mechanism and you both work together to start the bounce again. You jump, just high enough to see the top of the staircase, you jump forward, leaping off of the mechanism-

Leaping-

Almost there-

You both manage to grab on to the ledge, but you can’t pull yourself up. Friend climbs over the ledge. You try to pull yourself up again, but with every attempt you feel yourself get weaker, “Friend!” You call out desperately, “Friend! Help”

Friend goes to the door, he doesn’t seem to hear you.

You panic, it’s over, you can hear the booming sprints of the blues-

A hand pulls you up.

It’s the purple.

As she raises you onto the platform, you look at them in her eyes, they seem to be filled with loss and pain.

You want to ask what hurt her so much, what you could do to save them- Friend shoves her to the ground, “STAY AWAY! DON’T HURT MY FRIEND!” He grabs your wrist and drags you to the door, it is now wide open, the only thing you can see is a bright, white light, welcoming you in.

You take one more glimpse at the purple. A tear flows down her cheek in despair.

Just as you step into the light, you can hear her quivering voice one last time.

“You promised.”

~

Once again, the world begins to become less blurry.

You are laying flat on the ground, face down. You look at the floor you lay on, and it feels like the softest pillow, but looks like marble. You look up, and you see palaces and carnivals, trees made of cotton candy, filled with golden apples.

You realize that you are no longer in Hell.

You’re in Heaven.

You hear an otherworldly voice.

*“In the beginning, Hell was created to punish those who are evil. However, the evil might escape, and they needed someone to watch over it. So Heaven was created. But since Heaven needs to watch and protect, it does not face up...”*

You try to stand, but then you feel yourself detaching from the ground, so you lie down again, holding on tight to the earth below you.

*“It faced down.”*

“What?!” You call out. You look up, and realize that these words are true. You can see the rivers of lava, the charcoal ground, and the staircase. You are right above them.

“Yeah!” It’s the voice of Friend. “They all want to come up, the blues, and the rest,” but they're too big, every time they try, they fall. The magnetic pull of Heaven can’t hold them. But we’re small, so it can hold us.”

You both stay there for some time. The gusts of wind fill the silence between you. “So what now?” You dare to ask.

“Well, I guess we could crawl to the tree and admire it...” suggests Friend, “but that’s too dangerous. We might fall again.”

“What do you mean ‘again’” you ask curiously.

“You have fallen about 9,000 times. You always talk about how you want to find a person. That you had a promise to keep.”

“A promise?”

A memory floats by.

*A hospital bed.*

Friend laughs, it is childish. “Don’t worry about it.”

As you sit in silence, you stay there for some time, and then another memory flies by.

*Friend sitting by your side, counting... something.*

“You know, there is a secret I have never told you.” Friend tells you.

*There is a crying mother. Your mother.*

"I know what those blues are."

*A weeping father. Your father.*

"They are like me."

*A cold hand, held by a warm one.*

"They are in places where they are afraid. Those who can show they are afraid of where they are, stay there."

*A weak body.*

"By staying with me, up here, you are protecting me."

*A promise. You made a promise.*

"You are protecting me from staying there forever."

You remember everything.

"You saved me from Hell, and you don't even talk about her anymore." he laughs, thankful.

"Talk about who," you ask, even though you already knew the answer.

"No one," He lies, "it doesn't matter anymore."

You both sit there in silence. You begin to feel restless and bored. "So is this how it is always going to be?"

"Guess so."

You begin to think back. Yes, this life was safe, but were you really ready to stay like this for your entire life? You know this is the afterlife, so how long can you last here? Eternity?

No.

This would not be how you would spend the rest of your life. You put your palms on the surface of the ground.

"What are you doing?!" Friend questions.

"I'm going to stand up," you say, rather calmly.

"Why?! You'll just fall into Hell again!" Friend panics, "There's no way I'm going with you!"

"Okay," You say, bringing yourself to your knees.

“No! You can leave me!” accuses Friend, “you can’t stand up! You won’t survive on your own!”

“Better be there and standing then here lying down doing nothing!” You cry. You are afraid, but know you are doing the right thing.

“No!” Friend’s hands seemed to be growing, their arms getting longer, his body thicker. “I will never leave!”

You bring yourself to your knees, you can feel gravity only holding you by a thread, “Friend, what is happening?” You look down at yourself, you seem taller, you feel stronger.

Friend growls, “what have you done!” You look back at him, he has lost his redness, he is much bigger, with long arms, and an enormous body...

He is a blue.

You look down at yourself, and you know that you are no longer a creature.

You were something else.

You both fall.

~

You open your eyes.

A smile spreads across your face.

You're in the same Hell as before.

But this time it is different.

The ground is still made of charcoal, but you see it as sand by the beach. The rivers of lava are still there, but you see them as calm, crystal waters. And your hands... they have five fingers...

You see the purple who had saved you before, “finally!” She laughs, it’s just as you recall, sweet like your favorite candy, “you made it! You promised!”

You squint, “promised what?”

She smiles softly, as if she were mourning a long cherished memory, “that you would see me again.”



Name: Morgan Robinson

Work title: Lost

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Award: Silver Key

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Antebellum Epoch: 6MM: Sunday, 109 Town Square

It was clear from a woman's earrings, a man's tie, or a person's makeup that the town square yearned for a nobleman's disposition. Not that it matters to the heir of the Blythe family; Ximena cared little for the concepts and ideologies her kind preached. Even if her lack of consideration is viewed as selfish or rude, it should have little effect on her life. Her genus, be that of Oni, praised and worshiped a life of hierarchy. Those with superior volumes of Sakti, greater horns, or longer hair emerged with a glut lifestyle; they satisfied their inclinations. Those condemned with the misfortune of lacking those qualities were outcasts and cursed to live a shunned life. Although, what does it matter to her? Some odd stroke of 'luck' sentenced her to a life of nobility, but she'd rather live without it. Overall, she is simply aloof from her empire. She feels lost in her empire.

Today, six maids surrounded her as she led in front, coercing her to go shopping. According to her mother, head of the family, her attendance was necessary for an upcoming fête. A celebration was commending one of her mother's many accomplishments, so she needed to look her finest. She was the heiress of the Blythe family, after all. Words could not represent her distaste for the situation, as she would rather be with her father. Alas, she's only doing this for him, since he's organizing it.

"My lady, there are a few shops north of us. Would you care to check their dress assemblage?" Her head maid queried. The dull tone created a suffocating atmosphere, but she would endure it for her father. Ximena responded with a soft, affirmative hum before setting off to browse numerous boutiques.

Their search felt endless as Ximena showed distaste for all the dresses she tried on. As they proceeded, countless eyes peered through nearby windows and cafes. It was unnerving. Wandering eyes evaluated every aspect of her being, from her walk, expression, and horn size. Her nerves got to her as she became self-conscious of her appearance as they persisted, but she remained stone-faced throughout her endeavors. To calm herself, she took out a small pocket mirror. It was a gift from her mother, supposedly the heirloom of the Blythe family. She cared little for it, but her father spoke about it with high praise, so she kept it on her person

whenever she went out. Family rumors claimed that the intricate design of the object had Sakti infused in it, granting it multiple qualities. She could feel the power that created her kind slowly pulsing through her veins as she traced the design. It was intriguing to think about the abilities it might have. It was also easier to place her concentration on something that could ground her rather than the negative views of others.

The attention on her grew as they continued to window shop. She attempted to ignore their gazes and concentrate on choosing a dress suitable for the fête. It was challenging to focus on the task at hand if you were too focused on your surroundings. Ximena, too caught in her thoughts, was abruptly aroused after she missed a step, landing on her dress instead of the cold, dark brown bricks. Luckily, she didn't trip, but in that moment, it felt as if the world had gone silent; a few tears in her dress formed from the stress of where it stretched just too thin. Eyes around the plaza seemed to set her presence as the center of the universe. They had noticed her minor error and intended to exploit it to the fullest.

"She tripped; how unladylike.."

"Is this the outcome of how the Blythe family instructs their children? How embarrassing..."

"Oh my, considering her age, she'd be capable of walking properly, no? Just what is the Blythe head..."

"See darling, this is why we must take our status seriously as.."

"Tsk, this is why I demanded we leave Leto home; what will we do if she makes a critical error in front of others' eyes too?"

"My lady, are you okay? You seemed to have torn your—"

"I'm fine; let us look for a replacement later," Ximena replied. She spoke the words effortlessly, but the stiff language left a bad taste in her mouth. She brought the pocket mirror to her face, checking to see if her hair was also ruined, before reclaiming 'a noble's posture' and continuing on their excursion. She was fine. There are still plenty of boutiques to pursue. She lightly gripped the mirror as she traced the pattern on it. She was fine. Ximena moved from the front and shadowed three maids as they recovered from her stumble. She effectively composed herself before an outburst, handling it as a noble should, allowing her to seclude herself from the public eye to collect herself. She tightened her grip on the mirror, but not enough to crack it. She was fine. She had to be. They were in public; therefore, she couldn't afford for her father's name to be tarnished because she decided to whine about one error. The mirror faintly glowed blue with a light pulse as Ximena discharged her Sakti out of anger, unknowingly. Everything was fine.

Nothing is fine; she despised her empire. Why couldn't she just be born a lower noble? If she was born a lower noble, she could live a regular life. Why did she have to be cursed with the title of 'Heiress of the Blythe family'? She found herself somewhat disoriented as her maids guided her down the alley, struggling to discern their speech. Even if she was born on Elven and given the same rank, they weren't as strict as the oni, or so her father says. Elves are stereotyped as gullible, naive, detached, and self-centered. In reality, they prioritize their needs while still lending a helping hand. Ximena would be able to adjust to living there effortlessly. Although that would mean losing her horns—an oni's honor.

(Would that truly be so unfortunate?)

Clink

Crack

Crunch

The sounds of glass cracking filled her ears. No longer was she surrounded by her maids or standing in the town square. Instead, she was standing in an abyss—or a void? It was as though a shadowy aura enveloped her. Where was she? She surveyed her surroundings, wandering in the darkness; it seemed she was walking on water as scarcely discernible ripples spread from where she had walked. A quick pinch to her cheek confirmed this was still an unfair reality.

She felt something warm trickle down her arm from her maneuver. She opened the hand that held her pocket mirror slowly. A feeling of dread crept up as she saw the shimmer of glass from whatever light source shone in the void. Had she broken the heirloom? She was too afraid to check. What would her mother think? Scratch that—and what would her father think? Tears welled up in her eyes as she envisioned the worst outcome. Would he see her differently after this? Maybe she could have it fixed? Heavy, thick tears streamed down her face slowly, sinking into the illusive floor and rippling the water. Incapable of maintaining her balance, she collapsed onto the floor in a panic. She was imprisoned on some foreign plane with no outside communication. What about her maids? What if they report back, stating she went missing? Her breathing quickened. She was missing, but she could find her way back before she had to inconvenience her father, right? Not only would he have to search for her, but she'd have to disappoint him further with the news of the heirloom. Assuming they could even find her. What if—

Swish

Swoosh

Whoosh

The tranquil sound of wind filled her ears, slowing the everlasting flow of tears. She realized there was no longer an empty void; it was filled with various mirrors of different shapes and sizes. Her eyes alighted on the intricate designs adorning every mirror frame, some of which she recognized as she sat up transfixed. As her eyes wandered, they caught a swift movement of blue that flew from above. She whipped her head around to follow the blue hue.

"Uhm..hello? Do you know where I am? I assure you, I mean no harm." Ximena says cautiously as the hue hid from her view. Its existence in the void was incomprehensible to her. It couldn't be a person unless they were from the Vonne or Lotte family, gifted with the ability to shapeshift...

It must have been a mystic, an animal manifested through Sakti's power. But what would one be doing here, in a dark void filled with infinite mirrors? Just then, a sharp fragment of glass whizzed past her, narrowly missing her cheek and impaling the faux floor of water before sinking under.

"I don't intend to harm you, you prick!" she shrieked as she crawled away from the targeted spot in a fit of rage. What are manners for if they're always ignored? Stupid nobles and their teachings.

Ximena rose from her spot on the floor, dusting her clothes off. Her dress had seen better days, as it was ragged with a few extra tears. The shopping she'd be tormented with later wasn't something she was looking forward to.

"Please help me leave. I don't want to stay here, and you don't want me here, so just guide me out!" exclaimed Ximena, feeling exasperated. She glanced around the room again, hoping for a response, when she was startled by a chime behind her. She widened her eyes in astonishment as she saw a fuzzy, blue moth hovering at eye level, its wings reflecting light from the mirrors. What caught her attention even more was the pocket mirror it was holding. As she looked down at the hand that used to hold the mirror, she saw only a few fragments of glass and a healed gash with barely any traces of blood.

"What the?! How...when did you..." Ximena stutters in confusion as she further examined her hand.

(Are you alright, child?)

Somehow, she is able to comprehend the words as if they echoed in her mind. The voice was enchanting and smooth, relieving her of any worries she may have had. Not trusting herself to speak, she closed her mouth and simply nodded in response. Before her eyes, the mystical blue

moth split in two. The original returned her pocket mirror, while the other replicated itself once again. Looking over the heirloom, she found that it was completely fixed.

(Come now, it's alright. Forgive me for striking at you...you remind me of someone I once knew.)

Enchanted by the melodic voice of the moth, Ximena soon forgets her irritation and shook her head to snap out of her trance. Quickly responding, she replies, "It's okay... I'm sorry if I frightened you. Who did I remind you...?"

(Someone from my past, yet that doesn't matter as I am here for you.)

She watched the moth circle her and echoed, "You're here for me?"

(Precisely, I come to warn you, as your family will soon be facing constant danger in the future.)

Ximena eyed the moth wearily, skepticism showing through her expression. The Blythe family was rarely attacked and was constantly protected due to their status. Not sure if she should interrogate its claim, she observes the duplicated moths that float above before focusing back on the original moth to change the topic, "Where are we?"

(We're in the Mirari Gabiola.)

"Mira-Gabi— the what?"

(You fell inside your mirror, child. Did you not notice?)

"Uhm.." Ximena gazes at the pocket mirror that's the size of her hand unbelievably. "Well, how do I leave this place?"

(Follow the moths.)

As the words were spoken, a flock of moths suddenly appeared and performed an aerial turn before flying low past Ximena. She chased after the eclipse, passing various mirrors that showed faint figures and dark shadows inside them. She disregarded them and continued to follow the moths, with the original flying beside her. As they went further, more and more moths disappeared, some passing through mirrors and others vanishing right before her eyes. Eventually, only one moth remained, hovering in front of a mirror. It turned to Ximena, signaling her to follow, before flying through the mirror, leaving her alone in the void.

As Ximena caught up, she looked around and asked, "Is that the exit?" Her last word echoed in the silence as she questioned the mystic. To her surprise, not only had the original moth

vanished, but all the other mirrors had disappeared as well. It appeared that an emptiness had engulfed everything except for Ximena, figures, and the last mirror.

Ximena cautiously approached the final mirror and tentatively extended her hand through it, feeling a tingling sensation. As she tried to pull her hand back, she was suddenly pulled in and exposed to a bright, intense blue light.

“Mena? Mena?!”

“The heiress has returned!”

“Quick, get the duchess

Ximena stirred at the sound of her name and loud footsteps. Although her surroundings were blurry, she knew she had to be next to a wall, and she was definitely on the ground. The voice sounded familiar—almost like her father's. With that thought, her eyes widened; she jolted awake, almost hitting her head. Fortunately, she was drawn into a warm embrace and saved by a comforting hand behind her head.

"Papa, is that you?" Ximena queried, her words slurring together as she tried to adjust her eyes to the faintly lit room. The figure slowly released her from the embrace, much to Ximena's annoyance. Her head was raised until it was level with the warm hands that cupped her face.

Ryker, Ximena's father, frantically checked for any signs of injuries. "It's me, it's me... I'm right here. Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?" Once satisfied with his search, he scooped Ximena up off the floor into a bridal carry, walking to Ximena's room. Once there, he sat her down on the bed, took a knee to look at her from eye level, and delicately held her face with one hand.

"Where were you, Ximena? The maids said that you almost tripped in the plaza in front of a small crowd and tried to guide you towards other stores to distract you from the other nobles, but they said you disappeared, only leaving behind a flash of blue when their eyes left you for a second, and that—"

"Papa, papa, calm down... I'm still alive. I just got lost for a moment." Ximena huffed lightly, leaning into her father's touch to assure him she wasn't going anywhere. "I fell into our heirloom for a while... Although I almost broke it, are you upset with me?"

Faint tears welled up in her eyes as she waited for a response, her eyes downcast towards her tattered dress. Although he was surprised at the news of her Sakti control getting out of hand, he composed himself to comfort Ximena. Ryker gently placed their heads together to calm her. "I could care less about the heirloom, Mena; I'm just relieved you're ok. What happened while you were in the heirloom?"

And so, Ximena anxiously recounted the events inside the mirror, displaying her deep concern for her father. "Will you be okay? The mystic said that the Blythe family would be in danger," Ximena questioned.

Ryker shook his head lovingly, "I'm more concerned about you, but I should be fine. I will have to investigate this matter with the other nobles before anything drastic happens, however. Aren't you also concerned for your mother?"

Ximena envisioned her cold-hearted mother, an executive of the 'Evolutionary Experiments' scheme. "No, not at all. She'll be fine."

Ryker sighed at her reasonable yet disdainful response, "You can't avoid her forever, Ximena, but we'll leave this conversation for another day. I'll call the maids to help you clean up so you can go to sleep."

The following two hours went by as a blur. The maids were relieved to see she was well and helped her change clothes, shower, and prepare dinner. Unfortunately, she couldn't eat with her dad because of the emergency meeting with egocentric nobles. She was too tired to care. Finally, she was left alone in her room. Sitting on her bed, she looked out her large, circular bay window. Taking in the view of the various Victorian cottages that housed her external relatives, Ximena knew she wouldn't care if they suffered from the fate they were destined to. She didn't care if they died. They had done nothing but influence a life of perfection and set unachievable ideals for the lower classes. They wouldn't bat an eye if she died because it would mean they could take her place as an heir to the family. Though Ximena still felt out of place in her empire, she shook her head to divert her attention. Maybe one day she could live in an elf cottage with her father, ignoring the wishes of their godforsaken empire. Maybe one day someone would start a riot and kick the Blythe name off their high horse.

As she drifted to sleep, her mind preoccupied with these musings, she remained oblivious to the impending aerial assault aimed at the Victorian cottages in the fields. She had yet to understand the consequences of the ideologies and principles that her empire advocated and

how they would impact her life. The constraints that typically governed the outcasts would be liberated soon.

Ximena remained blissfully unaware of the impending challenges she would encounter for one final night, with only the company of a mystical blue moth by her side as she slept.

Name: Morgan Robinson

Work title: Mortimer

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Award: Silver Key

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Mortimer grew up with her external family. She was one of the heirs to the Blythe family—the daughter of the head of the household. Although that didn't mean that her title was secured, she was constantly competing with her cousins, striving to outshine them in every way, all by herself, for her parents' approval. That's how things worked on Asinus for high-ranking nobles. She wasn't completely alone, though. She made room for both her and her twin sister, Wade. Mortimer and Wade collaborated on everything. Putting down their cousins, sabotaging their relatives' debutante balls, and embarrassing their parents was just the beginning. Before long, they were the only ones who truly affected their parents' decisions and plans. Their opinion was considered—necessary even! They understood what it meant to lead. To rise to the head of the family meant to have no setbacks or burdens; to rise to the occasion, you had to be wise, collected, stern, and strong. You had to be a good liar. Something Wade couldn't be.

Wade was good at following orders, but could never seem to be able to put on a fake smile like Mortimer. Both sisters excelled in every topic, able to keep up with their noble responsibilities. Wade, however, couldn't maintain a proper public image. Nobles wished for perfection; they craved it. This affected how the public saw her, and the public eye was truly powerful since it created influence over the empire and made them more useful for their emperor. Their attention was priceless; Wade knew that. She knew she needed to change the public's opinion of her. What were they lacking? What was holding them back? How could she dispose of her burdens? She started to fall behind. She started to shine less. But Mortimer? She moved forward and excelled at delegating both responsibilities. Yet she still stayed behind to stand next to Wade. This enraged Wade. She didn't need pity—she didn't want pity. Once, Wade messed up a document with ink. Instead of being reprimanded by her parents, Mortimer took the blame. She was barely reconciled for Wade's idiotic mistake. Wade then realized what was holding both her and Mortimer back. Each other.

What would happen if Wade kept falling behind? Would Mortimer abandon her? Who would make the first move for their parents' acceptance? Wade knew she had to act fast. Mortimer

didn't. Mortimer thought that they were one and the same—that they could be the first to lead together. As long as they continued to carry themselves high, they couldn't be a burden to each other. Wade never saw it that way. Both of them would suffer if she didn't boost her public persona. Being twins with the same face made the empire see her failings as Mortimer's, and vice versa. She needed to plan for an outcome where she was in control. Fortunately, the twins' names were the only distinction the empire acknowledged.

On the day of their *shared* debutante ball, Mortimer and Wade showed off their skills and knowledge to the other noble families. They showcased their ballroom skills, etiquette, and knowledge. Wade knew that Mortimer performed just marginally better. She knew what her parents would do to those who fell behind. She would become inferior like her cousins, her opinions irrelevant, and forced to kiss the dirt beneath Mortimer's shoes. So she lied. Prior to the debutante, she lied to their parents about needing their family heirloom. She had predicted that things would turn out this way. The heirloom was a mirror that, depending on the user's power, could hold anything and everything and could change into different sizes while remaining unbreakable. With very little convincing, she led her sister astray to the room where the mirror was a few hours after the ball had concluded. Mortimer thought that Wade had wanted to celebrate their success. They'd be the first-ever twin heirs to rule side by side. As they entered the secluded room, Mortimer stood in front of the mirror, confused as to why her sister had brought her here for their celebration. She turned to question her but felt the pain of a spear grazing her arm instead. There was a tumble, a fall, and a cut aimed at the hair. Mortimer would have succeeded in her escape attempt from the room. It's a shame she forgot about the attack range of the mirror.

The next day, Wade went missing. The rumor was that she was jealous of her twin and had run away. Considering that everything she owned was contained in her room, it made no sense. Not even clothes had been taken with her. It was chalked up to a fit of rage and anger that caused her outburst. Mortimer decided against any attempts to search for her, saying that the empire was more important. On her 19th birthday, Mortimer assumed the role of matriarch of the family after being married to the second prince of the elves. They were set to have a child soon, which would somewhat unite the two species. Over time, the family was constantly spooked by strange whispers and cries for help that they would always hear in the artifact room. Mortimer only assured them that it was just their imagination, assuring them she had everything under control.

Name: Huiling Zhang

Work title: Tuesday

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Award: Silver Key

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It was a Tuesday and my squad had been assigned a new position to supervise.

Our superiors took us to the sea. Tortured wind howled past our ears at the pinnacle of a high cliff and I could see the waves coming down against the broken, cracked rock at the base with a crazed fervor. It seemed a storm was coming soon; the sky was murky and the water was almost an obsidian black—but maybe that was from the oil. Someone swore as a gust of wind penetrated to the very white of our bones.

There we were led into a blocky, unassuming building. We descended into the ground, rock and soil surrounding us like we were in a mining area. After a flight of stairs, there was another, and then another, all twisting and circling around each other. Still, our superiors kept the same invigorated pace. Only the clatter of footsteps against metal echoed throughout that narrow cylindrical space, our guns bouncing against our backs.

After a few minutes, as I was on the verge of asking how many more stairs could the Earth fit, we abruptly stopped in front of a steel door inlaid into the wall. I realized the wall wasn't compressed stone anymore, but cold steel the same as the door. Our superiors pressed a keycard to a scanner close by and pushed it open after a green light and a buzz came on.

Inside, I could barely stop myself from gaping. The room stretched a basketball court's length above our heads and it continued further, eventually tapering off and turning to smaller hallways. But what held me and my squad's attention was the front wall, which was a glass window from the ceiling to the floor. Just outside the glass, close enough that I wanted to reach out and touch it, was the ocean. Down here, the water was not liquid ink from the factories

that rumbled along the shores, but a deep, rich blue that illuminated the entirety of the room, ripples of water reflecting onto cool steel wall.

We were instructed to position ourselves along the back wall with another steel door used as the reference point. Half of us would be on the left side, the other half would be on the right side. I took up the spot right next to the door.

Do not inquire or try to look into the circumstances of the operation.

Do not stray from your positions unless in times of emergency.

Go straight back to base when the next squad comes to replace you.

Those were the three instructions we were given before our superiors left. We assumed our positions and waited for the next eight hours to pass. Although we were to guard the door, or the room, or this entire place (instructions did not include what exactly we were guarding, or from), not a single soul came into that room aside from us and the team that we switched with. For seven days and seven nights that room was so silent sometimes I thought I knew what it felt like to be deaf.

Until I heard the deep whine of the sea.

I think my whole squad must have heard it. It came in random intervals, there was nothing predictable about it. In the early hours of the day, right after we would get back to base from the job, some of the guys would whisper that it was the ocean crying. The entire ride back from the station was silent, all of us lost in our thoughts as we looked outside at the sparse rocky desert. Our familiar camp felt like a "safe area" where the soldiers could try to make sense of the doom they felt inside that building. They didn't mean any, but as the squad leader I would give them a hard look to stop talking and get to bed. Our superiors had told us not to question what went down there and sometimes knowledge in these parts could kill.

My dissuasion of discussion didn't mean I wasn't curious. I was curious—deeply curious. The grip of curiosity had overtaken my mind and was determined to never let go. A kind of hunger grew in me and nothing could satiate it. When I woke up I would think of that whine and when I would try to fall asleep on that same cot, it would appear in my dreams. Every day at my station next to that door only grew this curiosity that gnawed deep at my gut.

It sounded similar to a yawn, like some *thing* had extended its entire jaw and let out the rawest part of its soul. It was like a longing moan that you could feel vibrating in your chest, reaching to every space inside your body. It was a great weeping and I strangely felt like weeping along with it whenever it would come and envelop the room in its sound. But, of course, it would go as swiftly as it would come and nothing would change other than a few side glances at each other, questioning if we were having hallucinations.

It was a Tuesday and the lights went out.

It was April 21, 3062 at 0100 hours, 2 hours until the end of our shift. The water behind the glass was churning—there must have been strong weather. Then it happened without much of a warning.

Bam, kaplowy. Something blew out and we were suddenly sent into complete darkness aside from the limited moonlight that managed to reach us through the disturbed water, hundreds of feet below sea level. There was a moment of silence where everybody seemed to wait for the lights to turn back on—until they didn't and everybody started yelling to each other.

I was supposed to regroup everybody as the squad leader.

I wasn't supposed to inquire.

I wasn't supposed to stray from our given positions.

I knew all of that and I still reached for that door, just like I had practiced in my dreams. My fingers grasped empty air until they brushed the cool, steel of the handle. Without another thought, I scanned my keycard and with a soft *beep* I pushed into the room that lay behind the door.

When I saw what was in front of me, I knew it was the source of the whine we heard every day.

It was a creamy white color with a pinkish hue. Smooth, shiny shell covered the majority of it with a multitude of legs on either side. I think I counted fourteen in total. Two antennae rose from the front of what I assumed was the head. The entire thing was massive and encased in an oval glass tank in the middle of the room. Glowing from the many tubes and blinking devices attached to its sides, it was an isopod the size of a school bus.

Isopods look like ocean bugs and many find resemblance to the cockroach, one of the few remaining insects that could be found in cities, and for some, in great multitudes. However, the isopod is a crustacean like how crabs and lobsters of the past are. I remembered seeing a double-page layout of photographs of crabs and lobsters in my Marine Life History class and they were a flaming red. Isopods are much calmer and less pinchier. At least, from what I've read. I've never seen one in person...until now.

I walked towards the glass slowly. The giant isopod shifted slightly and I froze, my heart in my throat. After it settled and didn't seem to be a threat, I advanced closer, one hand outstretched. The water had an almost fluorescent glow from the small ground lights that surrounded the tank, which I assumed were emergency lights. Even with the power outage, the dozens of boxy machines in the room hooked up to the isopod kept beeping and running.

My clammy palm attached to the cool glass and I bent down slightly to be level with the isopod's head.

“Hello,” I whispered, even though I knew rationally the isopod couldn’t understand me—but something about the way it stayed still made me want to believe it knew what I was, what it was on a larger plane.

A low, overwhelming whine warmed my core and sent shivers down my spine. My heart started to ache with that now familiar pain and I knew it came from the isopod.

“Can you hear me?” I whispered again, louder.

Another mournful groan echoed throughout my blood and I was sure I was talking to the giant isopod.

In that moment I was filled with a sense of immense sadness, close to how I felt when I heard the isopod’s cries from outside the door but amplified a hundred times over. This melancholy was an ache for a time I hadn’t known of, of a time that I didn’t live, and of one that the isopod did. I brought my head to rest on the glass and I realized I had started crying at some point, fresh wet trails dripping down my face.

The isopod moved all fourteen of its great legs and touched the glass where my head lay. Even though there was a barrier between us, I felt connected to this terrible, wondrous creature in an indescribable manner. It let another cry, shriller this time, and for once I could truly *see*.

I was a small thing, crawling on the sandy sea floor. Dozens of my kin crowded around me, keeping each other safe and compact. Every moment spent alive was the tiniest of satisfaction and every moment of food harvested was the tiniest of joys.

I saw the blue, blue ocean above a blue, blue sky. I saw the moonlit nights when baby turtles would hatch and crawl slowly, oh so slowly—painstakingly slow—, down to the water. I saw the

fish move like one entire being through colorful, breathing coral reefs in their playful manner, playing hide and seek with predators where the stakes were their lives.

I saw the very first opening of a clam, revealing its pearly treasure to the world. I saw the horrifying, empowering nature of a shark feeding on its prey. I saw the sulfuric eruptions creating an oceanic soup all the way down at the bottom of the sea. I saw the forests upon forests of sea kelp sway in the sea's breeze.

I saw the gift of life as a mother whale carried and birthed her son. I saw the tiny zooplankton riding along ocean currents, spinning in dizzying circles. I saw the end and beginning of brilliant, mindless jellyfish. I saw seahorses, sponges, manatees, krill, eels, stingrays, urchins, swordfish, octopus, flying fish, snails, dolphins, sea snakes, walruses, shrimps, crabs, lobsters, and isopods.

I saw the world turn from an aquamarine haven to a slow-poison, barren landscape.

I grew colder and lonelier as our colony's numbers dwindled down.

I grew colder and lonelier as the promised land of my mother turned into humankind's greatest sin and my waking world.

It was a Tuesday and I saw them all and I cried with that giant isopod because I knew they were gone and soon we would be too.