

CLOCKWISE

By Oliver L., 12th Grade

A shooting star whirls above my head. It's moving much faster than my own asteroid, allowing it the opportunity to grace my eyes for what might be the last time. I sit down in a relatively fitting groove in the rock surface, just slightly larger than my body. A small star floats past my brittle meteor - or rather I float past it - and I take a deep breath while gazing into the near infinite cosmos. It's likely the last time I'll look at this universe for... well, ever. After all, the big crunch is coming, and it's not much longer until this existence collapses into itself, marking the end of all things.

At least the end of all other things. I'm not exactly prone to death. In fact, I'm not entirely sure my existence is even capable of stopping to begin with. About nine-and-a-half billion years ago, an asteroid containing my body slammed into the celestial formation TRRA-64, and ever since then my consciousness has yet to cease functioning. I scarcely remember my infantile years. The sky was dark, still clouded and ashy from the asteroid's impact. At first I could see the corpses of large beasts strewn about the land, although they were swiftly coated with a thick layer of dust. Before long those skeletal remains had all but disappeared, and it was just me, along with some smaller mammalian creatures seeking refuge in tunnels they had burrowed out. It was a humorous solution to the extremely toxic air, and although I was far too large to fit in a tunnel crudely carved into the ash, my eternal lifespan not only removed the danger of the air, but the need to breathe altogether.

By the time I reached adulthood, I was quite bored with my surroundings. The local fauna wasn't much entertainment aside from a few pets I could keep around, and the novelty of the oceans wore off after the 400th square mile of blue. I was trapped in a truly uninteresting life, until one species sprouted into the world. They were mammals,

short, hunched over, and covered in fur. More notably, however, is that they shared features that almost identically mirrored my own. They walked on two legs, and had five full fingers, something I had only noted in myself up until this point. Soon enough, they were using those hands for more than traversal, and were instead utilizing them for more advanced feats of civilization. Tools, communications, all the staples of a society blossomed into existence. The small apes advanced quickly, eventually losing their fur and standing proudly atop the monuments they had built. The once-small creatures had earned my respect, a feat few others have achieved since.

I snap back to the asteroid, glancing briefly at a star next to me. The lack of air resistance, or air at all, makes flying through space at a thousand miles a second oddly relaxing. It's something I've always taken for granted, how peaceful the cosmos is. In their prime, the TRRA-64 inhabitants wrote some truly fascinating fictions about the monstrous terrors that could be lying in wait millions of lightyears away. As interesting as that would be, it's simple fiction, designed to tease the mind. In reality, the universe is a quiet, gentle soul that's perfectly content with housing all of us in it. I laugh to myself. Silently, of course, as my small rock is notably lacking an atmosphere. Looking into the dark blanket again, I take notice of the stars and galaxies too far away to measure, slowly fading into the void as the crunch catches up to them. Entities larger than life, almost too unimaginably massive to measure, blinking away just like that. I might be immortal, but I've never been able to conquer those beasts. Nothing has. Until this end, I suppose. Not even black holes - things destined only to destroy and ravage were safe from the collapse of the universe. I pause. If this destined death is to occur to every star, every planet, every being, why would I be exempt?

My heart quickens, a feeling I haven't felt in a few eras. What would happen when the crunch reaches me? My consciousness can't fade, right? I can't die, I'm sure of it. But... What if I don't die? At least not entirely. What if the crunch takes my body and leaves

my mind to an eternal solitude? A fate worse than death, to be sure. I panic. I jolt from the crater I was formerly relaxed in and start pacing. I can't die. I can't die! I've lived through crash landings at a hundred meters a second. I've never known defeat. Never been bested by the universe's inane attempts to kill me. But this is different. This is the end of everything. I find it hard to believe that whatever predetermining figure looms over our existence has made an exception for me. My heart is thumping hard enough to send tremors throughout my body, my silvery skin shaking in the aftershock of each heartbeat. I need to calm down.

Taking a few deep breaths - something functionally useless to me but calming nonetheless - I finally manage to lower my heart rate. I should think about this rationally. Judging from the distance of stars that are presently fading into nothing, I should have maybe a few hours before I too am consumed by the universe collapsing into me, if I even have that long. Relativity states that time will accelerate as a stronger gravitational force is placed onto me, meaning I might have far less time than I thought. Assuming that I'll die alongside everything else, that means that no matter what I do, as long as I stay in this universe I'm doomed. Hmm... have I run into any species that have figured out how to upload their consciousnesses to a different universe? If memory serves, the Loweks did something along those lines... living a life outside of their bodies. A few eons back, I remember discovering one of their "tombs": Mass graves of sleeping Loweks living an alternate life without a usual consciousness. In any case, it's my best shot. I just need to find the Loweks and convince those mortals to let me use their technology. Now the question is how to get to them in the short time I have left. I'd have to teleport, and the closest civilization with that technology to do that... the Nomans? Relatively close to my asteroid, residing primarily on BTHL-14, a small planet located within my current system. I position myself carefully on my lovely rock and say a quick goodbye, before squatting down, and launching myself upwards. The jump is powerful enough to shatter

the asteroid, and I zip through the void faster than any mortal would be able to withstand, facing squarely in the direction of BTHL-14.

The Nomans have a unique method of teleportation, one that I've always been intrigued by. Instead of relocating the particles of an entity to wherever in the universe one pleases, these little guys harness the energy of a black hole in order to rip a tear in the fabric of the universe and throw themselves through the wormhole it creates, providing near instant travel. I've never been a fan of using these portals, as they viciously disorient anyone that passes through. I prefer the method developed by those back on TRRA-64, but they stepped off the mortal coil long ago.

As I approach BTHL-14, I brace myself for landing, before cratering into the surface. Looking up from the ash remains of the structure I decimated, I see a Noman standing in front of me. Stout little creatures, the Nomans are short humanoids with creamy white fur. Their head somewhat resembles that of a goat, with three additional eyes looking at me with pure shock. I ask them where the nearest black hole station was, butchering the language as I do so. Not like I care about the existence of someone destined to die so soon. The Noman tilts their head and scratches one of their horns before pointing over a hill on the horizon. I leap over the deep purple surface of the planet to a small rectangular building on the other side of the hill. Heading inside, I take notice of the lack of Nomans in the area, meaning that I'd have to do the calculations myself. It wouldn't be an issue if it was standard particle-based teleportation, but the Noman technology has proved complicated and unwieldy in the past. Plugging in some rough coordinates was easy, the hard part was wiring the black hole generator to emit enough energy for the spacetime split. I connect the wires and transmit what I hope is the proper signal before opening the rift and jumping through. I experience a flash of white as my body ripples through the wormhole. I see what I can only assume are stars whizzing by me as I move thousands of times faster than light through the cosmos. Suddenly, I jerk to a stop,

and take in the absence of anything around me. I quickly realize the truth of my situation. In my rush, I had failed to put in the proper coordinates, throwing me into the vacuum of space with no method to escape before the inevitable.

I'm stuck. Nothing to launch off, no one that knows where I ended up. In regular circumstances I'd just wait a few thousand years to connect with a stray orbit and crash on some asteroid, but I don't have the time for that now. Only a few minutes between now and my end. My heart once more begins to race as my mind takes hold of what's about to happen. I look around, my eyes locking onto stars getting wiped from existence, close enough for a mortal's vision to comprehend. The end is really here. Everything is about to collapse. Not even me, an immortal being unfamiliar with the concept of death, will be able to survive the impending doom of existence. My efforts to circumvent it didn't work.

I will die. The several-billion-year lifespan I've held was about to be snuffed out, and I have no way of stopping it. My racing mind will finally be silenced. A true destined death. How is it possible? Death has never been a concern of mine, and I've always felt it useless to ponder the possibility. A part of me wants to be confident in my ability to survive the truest end, but another part of me knows that I can't. I think back to those creatures on TRRA-64. After their extinction, I made one last visit to the planet in order to see the ashes of my most respected civilization. What I found shocked me. Instead of finding the immortalization of the fear felt in their final moments, it instead felt serene. They had spent the last seconds of their existence enjoying life. Clutching their loved ones, laughing at a dinner table. I never understood it. Why wouldn't they be in pure terror? Shouldn't their last moments be trying to keep living? It never made sense. They had embraced their end with an odd acceptance. All my life, I've never had to worry about death, never once entertained the idea of what I were to do if I found myself meeting my end. After all, it was the duty of a lesser being to do so. A mortal's job was to prepare themselves for the end. And now it's my job. Interesting... I think I finally understand those on TRRA-64.

Why wouldn't I enjoy myself in the last moments of my life? Even better, why wouldn't I entertain the positives behind letting go?

I feel my heart rate slow. It's like I can finally give in to this rope that's been tugging on my neck my entire life. The end... closure... things I've never been able to achieve. Not once have I felt like I've finished a chapter of my life, never felt that I could actually feel complete. A book without a cover can never close, nor can the story it holds be told. The end is just that - an ending. Has my life truly been meaningless, despite its length? Has being immortal robbed me of the one thing that gives me life? I feel an intense calmness wash over me. The end is just one more thing to enjoy about the life you've lived, and nothing lasts forever. Who really knows, maybe time is circular, and in a trillion years in the next universe another asteroid will hit another world, and another immortal will be born into the rubble. I look up at the star closest to me. The edges ripple and cave into itself before it too ceases to exist.

I catch my mouth forming a gentle smile as the crunch quickly approaches me. The warmth of the end steps into my life as I feel the weight of the universe bear itself to me. I see a flash of color, the entirety of existence all at once, before my vision ruptures, and my thoughts can finally rest in eternal silence.