



1000 Worlds

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1: Earth

After twelve years working in the tax office, Bice is so good at imagining she's somewhere else that her letter opener rattles past the envelope, knocks over the Kinder Surprise figurines on her desk, and shatters reality.

2: Provincial stinky swamp

Bice is a mail carrier. You can tell right away by her steel-toed boots, safety goggles, and gas mask. She marches toward the post office. Holes open up beside her in the mud. Occasionally, one sucks in an unwary specimen of the small purple waterfowl with a smacking sound before the descending mud fills it again. Everything is a little sleepy here, even evolution. The holes carefully avoid Bice's path. The corrosive putrid gas that the swamp continually belches out billows sulfur-yellow through the reeds, but around Bice, by some strange whim of the air currents, the swaths part. A spiked predator fish bursts from the mire, and rises meters above her - no need to worry, the multiverse still needs her - chokes on a fishbone and sinks back, floundering violently. The shadow of the floating ox, which is photosynthesizing for them via the breathing tube, falls on the destination of their route: a crooked hut, half-sunk in meter-high weeds. The post office of this provincial backwater looks as if it had already collapsed, and they had merely decided to continue using the randomly created hollow space under the rubble. She bends down under the door beam that hangs at an angle. The light from the sump projects luminous patterns through the slanted boards onto all surfaces - on her reflective coveralls, it shines so brightly it dazzles. Her eyes protest. Between ceiling-high, crooked cardboard towers, a figure in a shapeless sack dress stands puffing a floor-length pipe. Her skin is dark, and a meadow of long stalks and scattered wildflowers sprouts

on her head instead of hair. Bice turns her eyes back to the room. Wondering what this place smells like. The warm rubber of her mask hermetically seals off her sense of smell from the outside world. There's a rumble behind her as the ray struggles with its own buoyancy until, on its second attempt, it finally dives under the door beam and resumes its ancestral place above her head. The maneuver wasn't exactly quiet, the whistle person stares at her. Bice fumbles at the back of her head for the Tzethu license she rented for the trip into this world. Pushes up the small chip in the slot in the wide headband of her aviator goggles. With a soft click, the B57 license lifts out of its slot like a finished piece of toast. Don't believe anything. Don't associate. Okay, here they go.

"Good luck." A strange sensation in her mouth as the new chip causes her brain to translate the familiar thought into an unfamiliar movement. "Do you have any mail for me?" Her voice sounds muffled through the mask. She pulls her passport log from the breast pocket of her coveralls.

"May I see?" the pipe person asks. It's an experience every time, suddenly understanding languages you never learned. Bice shows her the passport log without letting it go.

"Wow!" the voice sounds from an unexpected direction next to her. From where...? Her eyes linger on the gnarled potted plant on the cardboard box

next to her. It seemingly peers over her shoulder into the passport.

“Hello,” Bice says.

“Crazy delivery history,” the plant says.

“I’m afraid we only have four,” says the pipe person, rummaging through one of the stacks of boxes.

“Never mind.” Less than five is inefficient shit, but what can you do. Bice turns back to the potted plant.

“Postman, too? Which section?”

“No, no. Just passing through,” says the plant. It looks intriguing. Is it moving, the relief of a branching structure can be glimpsed through the milky skin, a hydraulic moving apparatus? An eye blinks from each of its leaves.

“Wants to send itself by post,” comes the voice of the pipe creature, muffled, from between the boxes. “Been standing around here forever, though. To be fair, you’re the first messenger through here this week.” An infrastructure problem? Here? In this hub of the worlds? Bice forces her cheek muscles into a neutral

position. She steps up to the stack of boxes and accepts what is offered by the hand extended in invitation. The first item - a stack of documents? - is wrapped in yellow, aggressively stapled paper. The second is a white cardboard box embossed in gold.

“Where do you need to go?” she asks the plant, looking at the address of her two shipments. Aerocity twice. Glorious, efficiency.

“C-34-F.”

“Not my direction, but I can take you as far as the nearest world travel agency. I’m sure you’ll find someone there who’s headed to C-34-F.”

“Yes, please! Who knows when the next messenger will stray here...”

“Here, this too,” comes a muffled sound from the stack of boxes. A hand holds out a lump to Bice - is it wrapped in fish skin? Her gaze lingers on an address line. Great...

“I’m not doing that. This is a world without atmosphere. I need special equipment for that, would cost me the fee for an entire route, it doesn’t pay off.”

Hopefully, hopefully, the fee will be enough for two shipments to get out of here.

Strips of light flicker across the boxes. "I'll take the other two with me."

"You're not from around here, are you?" asks the pipe creature. It rises among the packages, brushing the dust from its stylish potato sack.

"Why?"

"Your risk analysis. These shipments would have a higher probability of arriving if I set them on fire."

Bice raises her eyebrows until they bump into the underside of her aviator glasses. "I haven't gotten a paper in a while..."

"Aerocity is in the middle of a crisis zone. Political tensions are so thick you can hardly breathe. Fragile ceasefire." Ah, inconvenient. War means poverty, and poverty means bad jobs, especially in an expensive industry like hers. She looks thoughtfully at the yellow envelope. It seems to have been lying here for a long time, because the fee is outrageously low, and the delivery date is merely "Good luck" scrawled on the package. Irritating. But she really needs the fee, otherwise, she'll have to lower her standard of living. No more eating or something.

“You’re overestimating this crisis if you think it could prevent me from delivering a shipment.” Wow, she sounds convincing. She lifts the pot. The pipe person shakes her head so violently at Bice’s words, that her stalks bob. She takes a deep puff from her pipe. Wisps of smoke rise.

“I hope so. I have so few customers here, I can close up the store if intercosmic shipments get lost under my jurisdiction.” Bice waits for the signature and carefully tucks her passport log back into her breast pocket.

“I don’t lose shipments. Would you help me and put the package in my backpack? Would prefer not to drop it off, my life support is on it.” She taps behind her back on the loop through which the breathing tube of the float ray runs. “Bottom compartment.” There’s a tug on her backpack. Then it gets a little heavier. The whir of a zipper. Feels good, some weight after the financially frightening emptiness. She extends her wrist. The whistle person pushes a syringe into the valve of the tubing system that covers Bice’s jumpsuit. Slowly, the white-hot liquid pours into the hose, turning the unpleasant yellow glow into a marginally less unpleasant green. Dinner is saved. She turns off the valve, bobs up and down, and checks the backpack fit. Are all zippers properly closed? Flicks against one of her earrings-.

“I would strongly advise against it,” says the pipe person. “But in the twelve

years I've been doing this job, I've never met anyone with a flawless log except you."

"Neither have I," Bice says. The plant's leaves lower a little. Bice mentally notes the gesture under relaxation. The pipe person nods.

"Good luck." Thanks, she will have. She bends back out into the swamp from under the slanted door beam. Glaring brightness surrounds her. "Goodbye!" she calls into the now dark doorway. No intention of ever coming back here. Far too many fascinating areas out there that she hasn't seen yet. She puts her head back. It takes a moment for her pupils to adjust to the brightness out here again. Behind her, a loud pock, yes, her hovering bark isn't much of a learner. A happy wave runs around its edge as she helps it through by giving the hose a quick tug under the door beam. Let's go.

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Mud splashes under their steps. At the moment, the energy is barely enough for the visa fees of the next larger world. But there are no other options in the medium term, as thin as the worlds that don't kill her immediately are scattered here at the ass end of her Tannhäuser range. She urgently needs to find a world travel agency. Mind you: those who get intercosmic mail often send some.

Crisis or no crisis, Aerocity is a bigger city. Hopefully, one of the recipients there will get her a job that pays enough to get away from this maze of nested micro-worlds. She has a rough idea of where her destination is, just as one has a rough idea that the spleen is probably somewhere in the torso. The world code indicates that she needs to move west to find the convergence zone. The plant under one arm bobs up and down with their steps, and the ray drifts above them. The bony dorsal fins of a few predatory fish spin through the mud like gears, but none venture near her. Holes open beside her in the mire, but they carefully avoid her path. The world bends around her conviction of being unstoppable.

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The morning is frustrating, for the crook of her arm is empty, as it has been in recent worlds. She tries to dry her moss-damp hands on the moss-damp coverall. It's dark, the plant groans as if it hasn't been watered in weeks, but what the heck, it's always dark in some worlds, and her watch points to run under the flame of the lighter.

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They're making a good time. Because she's a passionate mail carrier, of course,

and not because they've really waded through a lot of mud by now, and Bice has definitely slept one too many nights with wet feet on a damp cold moss island, and running keeps you warm. Definitely not because of that. Ahead of them, a pale sun rises out of the haze.

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"That's the wrong direction," says the plant.

"Do you want to come or not?" asks the herb-bearded mud sifter, standing low on his punt's pole. Bice takes a big step. The boat sways beneath her feet. She folds herself into the middle of the nutshell. Careful not to break her nails on the rough wood. Who knows when you'll next get hot-pink glittery nail polish out here. The mud scraper signals to his colleagues in the boats towed to the stern. Slowly, the chain of boats starts to move.

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"So we'll risk it?" the mud sifter asks his colleague in the adjacent boat. The conversation is only moderately interesting. Bice looks at the half-overgrown river arm. Of course, they're going to take this new, mysterious route - this shortcut - because it's probably the reason her travel documents told her to

take this supposed detour.

“This is a terrible idea...” the plant mutters. “Never leave the trail cords. They write that in every guidebook about this area...”

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They reach the small port a full day ahead of schedule.

“Did you know that?” the plant whispers to her. Bice makes a vague motion.

“I tend to get lucky.”

“And you don’t question that?”

“Sweetheart. There are so many incredible possible fates. From a purely statistical point of view, I’m sure some people only have good things happen to them. Why not me?” The plant averts all eyes. Ah, she understands the implications of such concentrated faith power. Is she a journalist? Diplomat? “Don’t worry. As long as you’re on the road as my broadcast, you’re safe.”

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“Protect yourself, please,” Bice says.

“Protect yourself from waaaaa...?” - And jumps.

“The impact!” There’s a clatter, the pot is flung from her arms, slithers across the balcony, trailing a trail of earth, and rolls over the opposite ledge. She scrambles after it. The breathing tube she’s detached from her backpack in barely annoying fiddly labor dangles against her head.

“Ahhh! I think I broke a little branch...” it echoes up to her. Yes. That’s what it’s like to climb through half-sunken swamp world cities. But hey, it’s better than being hit by an angry - what the hell is that anyway? A moss buffalo? - getting eaten. Bice nods sympathetically to the violently salivating herbivore, who pines for the now unreachable potted plant on the other side of the railing. Hey, where did that pot end up? Is that a signpost? Does it say ferry port?

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The ferry is a welcome change from the bumpy trails, sudden banks of acid fog, and almost getting stuck in the mud. And while she clears out her entire backpack to find a band-aid for his branch - the shirt, change of bra, five pairs

of underwear, 5 pairs of socks, microfiber towel, menstrual cup, a roll of toilet paper, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, condoms, a bar of soap, pen, notepad, lighter, bandage, duct tape, crap, just two nom bars, folding pot, drinking tube, Swiss pocket spoon, and finally, of course, at the bottom, Band-Aids - Stares incredulously at the decadently upholstered seating and the iridescent little wings sticking out of the cream mountain next to the straw, on which Bice has just spent half her fee. The tubes on the suit glow yellow again. Bitch, she always deserves to travel first class, but today she can afford it.

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The longer they travel, the more the world behaves as if it were drunk. All of nature decides to bloom in brutal disregard of the growing seasons listed in Bice's travel documents. Suddenly everything is full of pollen, seed pods shooting through the air like blanks. Bice tightens her goggles and walks whistling across the land bridge, which should be meters deep underwater at this time of year.

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The dead tree kindly topples just in time for them to balance around the rotten piece of the footbridge.

“I don’t believe it...” the plant mumbles, and honestly, this is getting repetitive.

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As always, the convergence zone announces itself through strange, wild impressions that appear before her inner eye. A helmet-shaped pressure pain has settled around her head, like after a long plane ride. Either the ubiquitous swamp gases are the cause, or they are now very, very close. Anticipation boils up in her belly like milk in an unattended pot. More impressions spill into her consciousness: Wooden planks, gears. She crawls off the dock on her butt, legs first into the mud, until she sinks to her ankles, then to her knees, because here, the pressure on her skull becomes more violent. Her brain is now firing uncoordinated impressions like a lightning storm. Organ pipes. Rotating hammers. She stretches her arms, closes her eyes, and pushes against reality. It gives a little under her fingers, like a thick nylon membrane. She could possibly tear reality apart at this point. Instead, she runs her fingertips over it, groping, alert. She has to wade a little deeper into the swamp, the mud clinging heavily around the legs of her coveralls. Then she feels a loose spot, high above her head. She has to stretch. It feels like a hole in a sloppy seam of a poorly made garment. She can slip her hand through it. She runs the edge of her hand downward, pulling the two layers of reality apart. She opens her eyes. A bit of neighboring world dusts her. She uses her second hand, a balancing act because the

pot is still stuck in her elbow. The chirping and croaking of the swamp hang over clear in her ears, but warm light falls from the hole. Her hands, which pull reality apart, deform, undulate, and throw wrinkles together with space-time. Will her body eventually show signs of this process? She carefully puts one leg through the gap. When nothing happens except for the usual feeling of dissociation, she pulls it back and sticks her head through instead. To her satisfaction, she glimpses a shred of association prohibition sign in the skull-crushing headache of competing realities. Excellent. Looks like civilization from next door. She carefully pulls reality a little further apart so that she fits through it, complete with pot, backpack, and ray. Benches and hazy light. It takes her some force to stretch the hole wide enough, and thick mud begins to squeeze through the gap. With one leap - damn, it is hard to pull your legs out of the mud - she climbs through. The hole snaps shut behind her, the headache disappears as if a nerve pathway has been cut, and the sounds of the swamp stop. Mud slaps the floorboards. They stand in a new world.

The end... for now.