



# TEEN CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST COLLECTION 2026

## This Year's Winners:

Gianna Hoyer

Hannah Jackson

Rayanna Smith

04832/dp/7-26

## Dear Readers:

I am delighted to offer you this collection of poems and stories from the 2025-2026 Akron-Summit County Public Library Teen Creative Writing Contest.

We received many fantastic poems and stories written by young Ohioans this past school year.

Our team of six librarian judges had a difficult time choosing their favorite three of the poems and stories we received this year, as they were all very creative and clever. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as we all did.

I have edited the entries slightly for spelling and punctuation, but I have left the grammar and content intact.

I would like to thank the judges for participating, and especially all of the wonderful young authors for submitting their work. I know the judges and I are excited to see what you all write in the future.

Sincerely,  
**Susan Russ**  
Intermediate/Teen Librarian



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**Poems**



# Judge's Choice

## *Five Senses*

Gianna Hoye

Do my coils anger you?

Do you see my palms, a lighter color than the last, and get nauseous?

Do you see my complexion and taste in your mouth,

Even for a moment,

A flavor of distaste?

Does the way I speak annoy you?

My vernacular, rich with culture, coursing through my veins,

Doesn't it make your blood boil?

I mean, if it didn't, then 400 years seems like a short time.

Then 6500 souls wouldn't still be attached to that rope,

dangling without care in the wind.

Do my golden hoops swaying from side to side,

The "spiders" on my eyes crawling along,

The "claws" on my hands scratching,

Make you sick to your stomach?

My mind, engraved with stories from long ago;

in these, a history so deep that erasing pen would be easier than

erasing these feelings of disgust.

My heart drums along to the rhythm of your beats

The beats that shake and twist the narrative that try to open my eyes

And see your version of how I should act:

Less angry,

Less loud,

Less distinctive,  
Less proud.  
In taking part of what you deem as 'decent,'  
I'll lose these parts of me, to make sure not to anger you.  
My soul is a temple  
Inside it holds ancient artifacts of times  
When my beads shook to keys older than me,  
My knees scraped, a symbol of a child at play,  
My shoes worn, these are the memories I mourn,  
When I look at my reflection and see  
My destiny written out for me.  
The sounds of sirens engulf my ears,  
As it might be the last sound I'll ever hear,  
But before those moments, before I disappear, I remember.  
The smell of hair grease, lathered deep inside,  
The taste of smoky essence, of cookouts, at night.  
The choir's notes, all strong and proud  
The singing along of the passionate crowd.  
These are the details that I once looked past, but in crude moments  
These are the details that will always last.  
So if my words,  
My taste,  
My sight,  
My sound,  
My touch,  
Anger you,  
Then look away.  
Just look away.

# Judge's Choice

## *Happiness*

**Rayanna Smith**

Stop searching for happiness, create it.

For so long, I treated happiness as if it were misplaced.

Maybe in another halfway, another person, another version of me.

I kept thinking it would arrive with something dramatic,

A text, a college acceptance, a perfect body, a good drink,

Someone choosing me loudly, love.

Happiness never knocked on the door.

It turns out, it was quieter than that.

It was in making my bed when I didn't want to,

In going outside instead of scrolling, In taking an everything shower,

In forgiving myself for not being who I wanted to be by now.

I waited to feel complete before I started living.

Happiness is not stumbled upon,

It's not set up,

It doesn't turn up one day.

It's created.

Brick by brick. Habit by habit. Choice by choice.

Joy is not a hidden treasure to be discovered,

It's a choice to be made.

You plant it.

You water it, even on the days when you don't feel like it's growing.

Foster a strong relationship.

Engage in a meaningful habit.

Take action over thinking.

Start creating happiness within yourself.

# Judge's Choice

## *In the Mourning*

**Hannah Jackson**

When the sun comes up tomorrow,  
And you hear the songbirds in the trees,  
I hope it wakes you up,  
And it annoys you.

I hope you roll over in bed,  
With your face all tear stained,  
Puffy eyed,  
With a dry mouth and a scratchy throat

And I hope you find the strength to get up  
and close the window  
Instead of giving up again  
And closing your eyes.

I hope you drag yourself  
Across the dirty carpet,  
Barefoot and stiff,  
And you shut the window Instead of shutting  
out the world.

I hope you make yourself look in the  
bathroom mirror,  
Even if the tile is cold,  
And the light hurts your eyes,  
And you realize that you haven't brushed  
your teeth in a day or two.

And I hope you'll get cold enough that you  
take a warm shower,  
And wash out the matts in your hair,  
And the dried makeup off your cheeks,

And the sadness off your soul.  
I hope you eat breakfast.  
Even if it is just coffee and toast.  
I hope you wipe the crumbs off your face,  
And the bitter taste of despair off your lips.

I hope you go out to light a cigarette  
And you're forced to listen to the songbirds,  
And look at the twelve o'clock sun,  
And see the mail piling up in your mailbox.

I hope you go out and get it,  
And you finally pay the now past due bills,  
And you read the cards that they sent you,  
And I hope they make you feel something,  
Even if it's sad.

I hope you finally water the flowers they gave  
you  
And you read the card  
And it makes you tear up.

I hope you go lay down in bed,  
And wrap yourself in your grief,  
Which is whatever is left of my love,  
And you cry.

I hope you cry yourself to sleep.  
And you don't bother to get up again until  
morning.  
I hope you get up again,  
Even if you're mourning.

***Alarm Clock***  
**Dodger Johnson**

The crazy clock went beep, beep, beep  
It woke me up from a deep sleep.  
So I took out my big baseball bat,  
And knocked that dumb alarm clock flat.

***Autumn***  
**Adriana Gajdosik**

Softly the leaves blow  
Caressing the earth below  
In red, golden glow.

## *The Ballade of the Spy*

**Lucia Gadjosik**

The Ballade of the Spy

Deep in the darkness, I gently trod.

As far into the forest as one may

I crept, leaving no print in the sod,

To where the foe's fire-lit camp did lay.

Among the grass and fern, away

from the flame's piercing glare,

At the edge of their camp, I did stay,

Pondering how things would fare.

Strapped to my back neither sword nor rod,

but an old rick rifle lies at bay.

Suddenly, a voice I heard (thank God)—

"Come," a sturdy aged man did say,

"To my own tent at once, do not delay!"

Then a young soldier ran to the commander's  
lair,

And I crept closer, becoming gay,

Pondering how things would fare.

"You must understand, Jerry Cod,"

The commander said. "War is no child's play.

You praise old soldiers with much laud

But what of those buried beneath hard clay?

If you go to Pieden's Mont today,

'Tis the dead man's fate that you may bear."

Now, with this news, I left their camp  
(hooray!)

Pondering how things would fare.

Envoy

I spied on the enemy's camp, and before day

I told this tale, while my Commander,  
General Gare,

Stood grave as the shadows hung gray,

Pondering how things would fare.

***Beautiful Danger***

**Sadie Kline**

Wonders in a swirl,

Hole of fear and curiousness.

It's an unknown phenomenon.

Racing adventurers excited to jump in.

Luring us in to attack,

Pouncing at the chance to swallow us.

Only the bravest will survive.

Over the waves,

Lies an unknown nightmare.

## ***Beneath the Mask***

***Brielle Connor***

|                                                          |                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Not all flowers are treated the same way                 | Not all masks are deemed beautiful                             |
| The ones deemed best are put on display                  | Some are bright and loud                                       |
| Perfect red roses shine                                  | While others are plain and quiet                               |
| While wildflowers are cast aside                         | The “pretty” masks are favored in noise and light              |
| Thorns seen as the painful part                          | While the “plain” are tucked away in silence and shadows       |
| Hidden away so the petals can shine                      |                                                                |
| But what if the thorns make the flower ideal?            | We all wear an invisible mask                                  |
| Mirrors come in all shapes and sizes                     | One that hides who we truly are                                |
| We use the ones we deem best                             | But what if we let that mask fall?                             |
| We see the mirror every day                              | We are flowers, mirrors, and masks                             |
| But as soon as there’s a crack or chip of paint?         | All of us have imperfections we want to hide                   |
| We cast it aside for a “prettier” one                    | But in the end beauty will always fade                         |
| We see ourselves in the mirror                           | And imperfections cannot stay hidden                           |
| So perhaps when it cracks we see the cracks in ourselves | We focus on the outer beauty                                   |
| But what if it’s good to recognize our cracks?           | Never seeing the person within                                 |
|                                                          | We look only with our eyes and see the lies                    |
|                                                          | As we judge again and again                                    |
|                                                          | But what if we stop judging and finally look beneath the mask? |

## ***Cleats That Never Fit***

**Jana H Afify**

I used to believe  
that if I practiced long enough,  
the field would finally choose me.

In high school, it did.

At least on paper.

My name was called first.

I stepped onto the field  
with the starters.

The whistle blew.

The game began.

And still...

I felt like I was borrowing someone else's  
place.

Other girls grew into their jerseys.

Their confidence

loud and natural.

They didn't look at the stands  
after every touch.

They didn't shrink after a mistake.

I did.

My first year of high school,

before every game,

I searched the bleachers.

Rows of faces.

Parents with cameras ready.

Mine were usually empty seats.

I told myself it didn't matter.

That starting was proof enough.

That I was strong enough

not to need applause.

But club was different.

Sometimes we were late.

Not traffic late.

Not accident late.

Just late.

Because my father said

it wasn't that serious.

Said I wasn't even that good.

Said club was just for fun

so it didn't really matter

if we showed up on time.

I would pull on my jersey  
in the passenger seat.  
Tie my cleats in the parking lot.  
Jog onto the field  
already apologizing with my eyes.

And still—  
I started.

I played almost every minute.  
Barely touched the bench.

But none of that seemed to count.

After games,,  
in the quiet of the car,  
there was that silence.

Not proud.

Not impressed.

Just... underwhelmed.

Like I had confirmed  
what he already believed.

Some people are meant to shine, he said.  
Some people should find something else.

Like I was trying to force myself  
into a shape  
I was never meant to be.

I started every game  
but never felt secure.  
Like one mistake  
would prove him right.

I measured myself  
in missed shots  
and heavy passes  
and the way my chest tightened  
when I saw him watching.

Almost fast enough.  
Almost strong enough.  
Almost worth the drive.  
And the worst part?

I believed it.

I started to lose my spark.

And yet something kept me going.  
I'm not sure whether it was my team,  
my coach,  
Or my love for the sport.

So..

I kept running anyway.

Even when doubt ran beside me.

Even when love felt one-sided.

Even when I wondered

if maybe he was right.

But when the ball met my foot,

for half a second,

the noise stopped.

The world narrowed

to the rhythm of my heartbeat

and the sound of grass tearing

under my cleats.

In that moment,

I wasn't late.

I wasn't lacking.

I wasn't the disappointment.

I was just a player

who loved the game

more than the game loved her back.

Maybe I was never the most talented.

Maybe I wasn't what he pictured.

But I showed up.

Even when it didn't matter to anyone else.

Even when it was "just for fun."

Even when I feel like I don't deserve it..

and stepping onto the field anyway..

was its own kind of courage.

And even if I outgrow this game one day,

even if I finally choose something else,

I will always know

I didn't leave

because I was afraid.

I left cleat marks

proof that I was there—

starting,

struggling,

I showed up.

And maybe that

is the part

no one ever saw.

Staying.

***Dear Little Me***  
**Victoria Martin**

Dear little me,  
I want to wish you farewell.  
It seems we've only just met, but you're  
already on your way.  
I want to express my sorrows in knowing we  
will never meet again.  
It's like the story has just begun but it's  
already at its end.  
We'll see each other now only in our biggest  
dreams,  
When I dream to be you and you dream to be  
me.  
While you run toward the future, I'll hold  
onto the past.  
I'll reach for you and you'll reach for me,  
But there's no going forward and there's no  
going back.  
We are trapped here, worlds apart, having  
nothing of each other but what we hold in our  
hearts.  
There is no dream big enough to bring us  
back together, I guess we'll just be stuck in  
our  
dreams forever.

So much of us is made of each other,  
I have the longing of the past, you have the  
tears of the future.  
Perhaps someday we can meet hand in hand.  
You'll do all I wish I did and I'll do all you  
can't.  
I hope all your dreams come true,  
For the sake of not just the past, but for  
future you.

***First Light***

**Sadie Kline**

Colors swirl in the dying night sky,  
A candle whispers in the early morning,  
Nothing can stop tomorrow from coming.  
Deer start roaming around the open field,  
Lying out of sight, a cat pounces for his meal,  
Early mornings can be so beautiful.

## ***Guilt and Forgiveness***

**Phoebe Ledbetter**

I know how guilt can eat you alive.

I see how it changes me into someone I don't even recognize.

I can smell the guilt rotting me from the inside, slowly eating me away.

I hear the words "it's not your fault" yet they don't seem to register and my mind stays stuck in  
the same loop.

I taste the bitter flavor of what I gave you that had intended to be sweet.

I know how guilt can eat you alive.

The emotion is disgusting.

I remember when if I made a small mistake that I could still be carefree and simply move on  
while still learning from it.

I wish that mindset could have lasted forever.

I dreamed that one day the guilt would stop being so gluttonous.

I know how guilt can eat you alive.

I know how forgiveness can nurture you.

I see how my spark comes back, I look in the mirror and know who I see.

I can smell the flowery growth from within me that feeds my soul.

I hear the words "it's not your fault" and I can finally understand their truth while still taking  
personal responsibility.

I taste the sweetness of the forgiveness that I had denied myself by forcing the same bitter  
taste in my mouth time and time again.

I know how forgiveness can nurture you.

The emotion is freeing.

I remember when if I made a small mistake that I could still be carefree and simply move on  
while still learning from it.

I wish I had realized that mindset had never really gone away.

I dreamed that one day forgiveness would be sustaining.

I know how forgiveness can nurture you.

## ***Hobbies***

**Lorena Morkaw**

Paper

Ink

Clusters of notebooks

filled with words,

dusty shelves

and low light;

A moving hand.

Yarn

a needle

a hook of two colors,

black screws wrapped in brown,

blue scissors with sharp ends,

a purple row counter;

A moving hand.

White keys

soft sounds

black keys,

a sheet of paper

turned into music

and lilting notes;

A moving hand.

A pencil,

papers,

and an eraser that molds

willow thin sticks of charcoal

a white utensil for merging

the graphite lines;

A moving hand.

Sweat  
Blue mats swept with  
white lines,  
fluid movements  
and the shouts  
of the coaches,  
sweeping in beneath  
a stance;  
A moving hand.  
Reading eyes  
terse,  
angry,  
loud,  
strange,

new,  
peaceful,  
sweet  
characters  
to flip the page for;  
A moving hand.  
Words  
Speaking  
Laughing  
Leaping,  
and smiling,  
and crying,  
A moving hand.  
Until it moves no more.

### ***Holocaust***

**Janu Padmarajaiah**

Minute by minute,  
Hour by hour,  
Day by day,  
One by one, they left. But where?  
I watched them leave, my friends, my relatives. They were gone.

Ima said they were just going on vacation. But at night I heard screams as sharp as a thorn.

Week by week,  
soon there were only 4 of us in class.  
All my best friends were gone, I was alone.  
Second by second.  
I heard Ima screeching, she said it was time.  
Minute by minute.

I had a mask over my head, I couldn't see anything.  
Someone gripped onto my arm,  
Was I going on vacation soon too?  
I knew vacations didn't need masks.  
Ima's stories fell apart in the darkness.  
I started holding onto her lies like it was hope.  
I wanted to ask where we were going  
But my mouth forgot to speak.

Hour by hour.  
I could no longer hear Ima's voice.  
My throat hurt from calling her name.  
Maybe she was on vacation, somewhere without me.  
Day by day.  
I made a friend.  
She said it was useless to have hope.

She said we were going to die anyway.  
I tried to remember faces, voices.  
Who spoke loud, who had a quiet voice,  
I stitched their faces together in my mind and tried to keep it in my memory.

Second by second.

I felt my thoughts slow down.

Each one felt heavier than the last.

I stopped waiting to be taken somewhere else.

Maybe this was it.

Minute by minute.

I couldn't count the days anymore,

I lost track.

It felt like the world was moving on without me.

Hour by hour.

The screams started to become louder.

Signals of who was alive and was fighting for us.

Second by second

I tried to remember Ima's voice

To remember what it felt like hearing the voice of a person who loves you.

I learned that hope doesn't shout.

Hope hides in the smallest places, within us.

I counted as minutes went by,

I counted for the people who couldn't count anymore.

For the people who screamed so loud it left a permanent ring in my ear.

Minute by minute They erased what we left behind at school, our homes, our streets,

But they could not erase what I believed.

What I carried inside my chest.

Hour by hour.

They waited for me to beg,

But I didn't.

They mistook my silence for surrender,

But they were wrong.

Second by second.

The grip on my arm came back.

I tried resisting, but they never owned me.

Minute by minute.

My heart stopped, but the counting did not.

My body weakened, but my mind did not.

I died awake, knowing this:

Someone would ask what happened,

But the truth existed.

I existed.

Hour by hour.

I died full of names,

Of proof that we were here.

My body disappeared,

But someone else would start what I never got to end.

## *Hope Thrives*

**Alazay King**

A nation will fall  
when fear becomes power  
Six million slaughtered not by disarray  
but by design

This is not that atrocity.  
History never repeats itself  
but asks something of us

because people prevail  
beyond where walls deny

We build lives where doors are slammed  
We bring languages, love, and faith  
beyond camps  
beyond cages  
beyond imaginary lines they call borders

Memory is not despair.  
The past has not come to an end  
It watches how we express, how we vote,  
how simple it is for fear to learn a new  
uniform  
while calling itself essential.

The trains were not first.  
A door sealed closed,  
A family forced to wait,  
A rule circling in.  
Nothing loud or dramatic.

We say, "this is different"  
But by the time the engines start,  
History will have broken its golden rule,  
And repeat itself.

It begins with neighbors being told to turn a  
blind eye,  
A name crossed out.  
We are taught silence is safety Along with  
masks and guns.  
Yet, the hands that build the wall will fall,  
As others reach across with courage.  
And in those quiet acts,  
Hope thrives.

Stronger than any border  
Bolder than fear.  
What history is asking of us is simple.  
Who is here today,  
And who will be a message tomorrow?

## ***How Could I Compete***

**Madison Montgomery**

How could I compete, I say, staring back at my own reflection.

How could I even begin to describe my best friend?  
well – the first word that comes to mind is *pretty*.  
anyone could agree with that.

she's that friend  
who gets hit on in public  
while I'm standing behind her,  
watching people walk by  
and give me *the look*.  
the look of pity –  
pity because I'll forever be in her shadow.

I don't think I've ever been described as *pretty*.  
ask someone, they'd say:  
“oh, she's funny,”  
“yeah, she's got a good personality.”

I'm tired of it.

I'm tired of the fact  
that she has a good relationship with her mom.  
I'm tired that her grades are perfect  
while mine keep slipping.  
I'm tired that she's JV captain  
while I've worked so hard  
just to get pushed aside.

I'm tired that she doesn't even have to chase a man –  
while I've always been the one doing the chasing,  
never the one being chased.

*Imaginary*  
**Gianna Carozza-Tyler**

When something is imaginary, it's not real  
I have to remind myself that as my imaginary friend visits me again  
He's not imaginary in the way small children imagine their friends  
Because he's not a voluntarily imagination  
He is a vile construction of the mind to make me feel more relaxed with the nightmarishness  
of all of this  
He sits on the edge of my hospital bed and takes my hand with the IV.  
Even if I wasn't drugged out of my mind, I know he would still be here.  
When something is imaginary, it flexes the oculus in ways that it shouldn't be flexed  
It walks the line between what is known and what wants to be known  
I can almost feel the warmth in his nonexistent flesh  
His garbled voice rings in my ears  
About how I am so brave  
And how I will make it out of hell alive  
Because even the devil made it out of hell alive  
And that is when I knew that when something was imaginary, it was just your brain lying to  
you.  
Especially being in the place that I was  
Without a single visitor except for my mother for months  
The great poets always write about what happens after you've lost your mind, but they never  
say  
what happens while you're losing it.  
They never speak of this imaginary, lying world that you build

Outside of the romantic era now, instead of in asylums, you build it in sterile, white hospital rooms like I have.

My imaginary friend sits in one of the empty chairs beside my bed now

Leaving an impression like the long -lost Jack griffin

And for a moment, just a moment I swear, because I am a weak-minded human being, I listen to

my imaginary friend

As he tells me, his voice becoming less garbled, of the beauties of the outside world.

The sunshine, the rain, the taste of cakes and of kale, the sounds of birds and cars, and of everything I have missed as the leaves turned red, then became naught

And for just a moment, I accepted that when something is imaginary, it isn't just a cruel trick of

the mind to ease the madness

It is the reality our heart desires

***Intertwined***

**Layla Danilo**

I've seen love  
A pale night sky cast over eager hearts  
Intertwined  
Busy with  
Nothing  
Nothing  
Nothing at all  
Estranged are the fears of the lonely  
For this room hears bellows of laughter,  
Euphoric voices  
Intertwine  
Love need not be of grand gestures  
A chariot who's slain  
And seen the bloodshed of many  
Just the gentle lowering of branches  
So you may get the ripest fruit

***I Swear I Studied***

**Johnathan Mazzarella**

I studied for 3 hours.  
Okay, my work was open for 3 hours.  
When the test started, my brain said, "New  
phone, who's this?"  
Every answer looked right...which felt off and  
really suspicious.  
So I picked "C."  
Statistically, that felt responsible.  
  
The End.

## *My Flame*

**Tylin Penna**

With determination, a flame never dies out,  
hope is a blazing fire that burns once you get  
to close.

but it can ignite the match in your soul. even  
in the coldest of rooms, a flame remembers  
how to live.

The attempt to put out and erase this fire

It flickers at first

a whispered prayer,

Somebody being snuck food,

a name spoken when silence was present

So small it almost disappears,

yet it's stubborn enough to stay.

They put out our sparks.

They deprived our light

They fed the wind with fear.

Still, our flame learned.

What begins as a tremble

becomes warmth.

What begins as warmth becomes an  
influence.

Fire is not loud at first.

It grows by refusing to go out.

And when the walls finally became  
transparent,

when the smoke lifted enough to see the sky,  
our fire was already there

alive in survivors,

alive in names remembered,

alive in the promise that suffering

would not have the final word.

They tried to end people.

Instead, they taught the world this:

Hope is a flame.

And when one flame is protected long  
enough,

it becomes a raging fire, burning everything  
in its wake.

## ***My Small, Dark Mountain Cave***

**D'Anna West**

I've seemed to have found a cave, a mountain cave, a small damp mountain cave.

A small damp mountain cave that I can fit in perfectly, but why would I spend my time in a  
small damp mountain cave?

Because I'm exhausted. Exhausted from climbing and crying, trying to make it to the top, a  
stupid mountain top that I'm tired of trying to climb.

I'm worn out so I'm staying in a small damp mountain cave that I treasure dearly, it protects  
me from my thoughts, my hopes, my dreams.

For my dreams are only at the tippy top of the mountain, the part I'm scared to reach.

The thought of falling, the ice, the snow, it scares me but my small damp cave keeps me safe.

But in the end I know I can't get what I need or want in a small damp cave.

## ***Oh, Say Can You See***

**Victoria Martin**

Oh say can you see,

In the dawns dreadful nights.

What so strongly we failed, those who sought a glimpse of light.

Whose broad stripes choked us instead of sending us rescue

Whose bright stars scorched us when we looked towards their virtue.

O'er the ramparts we built, to capture those who found home.

And the sirens red glare, the gunshots bursting in air,

Gave proof through the night that our pain was still there.

But say does that star spangled banner still wave.

For the land of the coward and the home of the enslaved

***The Pickleball Club***

**Brittany Eichert**

Paddles nicely clank

Balls quickly bounce

Music loudly chimes

Teammates communicate happily

Laughter noisily roars

Children play excitedly

***Prinsengracht 263-267***

**Liam Wallace**

The war came.

We are Jews.

We have a hiding place upstairs.

Building where father had his business.

Amsterdam, hinged bookcase.

Darkened windows and a cramped bathroom.

Sounds of the church tower and a barrel organ.

Small rooms, lots of people.

Sad, lonely, quiet, and depressed.

Dark and gloomy.

We are gone, the room upturned.

Painful silence and a bound diary.

## ***Sugar and Salt***

**Savannah Green**

Love is just like sugar

When you first try it you are very little

It is sweet and makes you feel good inside

It's a comfort many look for everywhere nowadays

Lots of people get lost in the sweetness and find it addicting

Always wanting to find more of it, getting lost in it's sweet flavor

Savor that taste while you have it

Hate is just like salt

Most people don't know when they get their first taste of it

But it seems it has always been there

When too much is consumed it leaves a bitter taste

Some people like it though

That bitter taste of salt

Sometimes people like it so much it becomes all they are.

For some people it comes naturally to have both and that is alright  
The bitterness of the salt is supposed to bring out the sweetness of sugar  
But for it to still taste good it needs to have balance  
There might just be a little too much of salt  
And it might be hidden behind the curtain of sugar  
The notes may read as sweet at first  
Then then you taste the salt  
The hate might just be hidden below the surface that of love

Some people can tell the difference between the two  
And to those who can, I applaud  
Because a lot of people can't find the distinction  
And when they go to taste the sweet sugar they crave  
They end up with the bitterness of too much salt  
Sugar and salt look the same  
They get confused for one another by first glance  
Do *not* make the same mistake with love and hate.

***Summer Breeze***

**Savannah Green**

Watch as the trees sway with ease  
While taking in the warm summer breeze

Kids running around without a care in the world  
Playing in the grass, will you watch them twirl?

Soon the leaves will start to fall  
Something that you cannot stall

So while it's here why not celebrate  
Create your memories, do not wait

While you can go, roll in that field  
A happiness only experience can yield

While you are a kid, go have fun  
Go play with your friends in the summer sun

Being a kid will not last forever  
So while you are young, go have that endeavor

While you take in that summer air  
Appreciate it while it's there

Feel the breeze running through your hair  
And when you get that sense of deja vu, you will know from where

While taking in that warm summer breeze  
Please recognize that this is a moment you cannot freeze

There will come a moment you cannot and will not foresee  
Make the most out of it and fill it with glee

While you are in this life, please have fun  
Because once you are gone you will have another one

Soon your spirit will be in the breeze  
I mean to cherish the times like these

When I mention the breeze running through your hair  
I'm talking about time because it will run down just as fair

When you finally think back about that moment of glee  
Will you remember that little bee

It does its job to pollinate flowers  
It does its job for hours and hours  
The moment may last for minutes to hours  
But how you spend the minutes is what make it truly ours

Thats how fast the moment passes It goes just as fast as the moment lasted

If you do see that bee, Its a tiny detail you might not see

But it might someday mean the world to you and me

That summer breeze will come and go

But when it's gone forever, will you know?

Will you disregard and push it back

Until your world finally goes black

Will you look in the past and remember that tree

Where when you were five, you scraped your knee

You cried and bled, but it was okay

For you still enjoyed the rest of your day

When your time on this planet has come and gone

Do you really want your life to be what you dwell on

When it is time for you and I to leave

Will you be ready and relieved

OR

Will you turn to your life and want to go back

Just to be turned away because your time has passed

There will come a time when you're old and frail.

And you finally dream about that old summer air

***Time***  
**Hannah Jackosn**

The time will come

All your life

It has been getting ignored

When with sadness

By family

You will notice yourself

By friends

At your mirror

Even by doctors

In your mirror

Your getting worse

You will see yourself

But trust me

Becoming sadder

It will get better

And sadder

You will get better

Until your declared depressed

You matter a lot

By the doctors

Your strong

By society

Don't forgive those

That have hurt you

***Time Keeps Moving,  
I Can't Make it Stay***

Get rid of those things that remind you of  
those that who have hurt you

**London Chapman**

You will find people that will not hurt you

Time keeps moving, I can't make it stay  
The clock reminds me of all that I lose  
I feel my childhood slipping away

There are amazing, trustworthy people out  
there

"Apply for scholarships today!!"  
I swear just yesterday I was in my terrible  
twos  
Time keeps moving, I can't make it stay

You just have to keep looking and staying  
strong for yourself mainly

My mirror shows my innocence going astray  
Afraid of all the paths I didn't choose  
I feel my childhood slipping away

You will find good love soon.

Photographs showing friendships that didn't  
stay  
All of the opportunities I just didn't use  
Time keeps moving, I can't make it stay

When I was younger I could just play  
Work was my favorite thing to refuse  
I feel my childhood slipping away

Now I'm older, my memories turning gray  
I wish I could see the world in brighter hues  
Time keeps moving, I can't make it stay  
I feel my childhood slipping away.

## ***Watching Deer by Dusk***

**Lucia Gadjosik**

Watching Deer by Dusk  
When dusk is not so dim,  
nor daylight quite so bright;  
When sunlight streaks through boughs,  
In beams of golden light.  
Then, 'neath th' foliage of shining trees,  
Auburn shadows creep;  
Here dwell the doe—buck—fawn—  
This leafy land they leap.  
Gently walking over springy grass  
or smoothly over sodden leaves,  
Cared for are they by their Creator,  
Watching like a deer—unseen.

## ***What is America? A Poem***

**Tegan Sobieraj**

America is propaganda through politics; it is a nation built off immigrants and people with different backgrounds. Through color, size, gender, sexual orientation, and everything between.

We need to remember before we were the states, divided by imaginary borders and laws, we were all one. And at the end of the day we should live for the land, by the land, and with the land.

## ***What Should Be***

**Marissa Halsey**

It was fate that made me this way,  
Only to tear apart everything I could've been.  
I was destined to process as  
Always hovering on the border of what should be,  
And what really is.

What should be...is perfect.  
What should be...is flawless.  
What is...is far from that.  
*I should be smarter.*  
*I should be a better singer.*  
*I should be prettier.*  
*I should be a better friend.*  
*I should be more compassionate.*  
*More helpful. Understanding. Forgiving.*  
*I should be... I should be... I should be.*  
Never content with what is,  
Forever paying attention to what should be.

I feel trapped, like a bird in a cage.  
Trapped in expectations, trapped in standards and comparison.

Expected to be flawless.

Forced to do everything put upon me perfectly.

Constantly comparing myself to everyone around me.

Not only constant comparison, but constant worry.

Constant fear,

A thought every second I breathe.

Breathe in, *I'm not good enough.*

Breathe out, *I'll never be what's expected of me.*

It's tiring but I do it every day.

Every hour.

Every minute.

Every second.

There is no big reason for feeling this way.

Just lots of little things that pile until the weight nearly crushes me.

Friend drama. Family issues. Friend drama. Family issues.

All together resulting in many, many feelings shoved down.

Like a trash compactor, both crushing me and making my feelings small.

*I should learn to be better at managing my emotions.*

*I should tell people how I actually feel.*

*I should feel the "right" things at the right times.*

The more "shoulds" I discover, the more inadequate I realize I am.

No matter how hard I work at should be,

I always remain what is.

Standards change once I meet them.

"There's always a way to be better."

“There’s no such thing as perfect.”

Never good enough, never perfect enough,

Hardly strong enough to keep on pushing.

Although I never give up, it’s like it doesn’t count.

I’m drowning in what is,

Instead of floating in what should be.

Should be is a perfect world.

Should be is what I dream of.

What is is a sad reality.

A heartbreaking realization that nothing

Will ever be

What it should be.

## ***Witch Hunt***

**Emma Roke**

The sky burned red.  
The grass crackled like dry leaves under her feet.  
The world wasn't supposed to be this way.  
Her once lush green hair is now thin and gray.  
It's dying, just like the world around her.  
Her skin was once healthy and soft, but that has gone too.  
It's now cracked and dry, like the once-green grass.  
Her eyes are still a soft gold, but they are faded, faded like the tired animals she passes.  
The animals just watch as she is dragged through her once-healthy home.  
"I'm sorry," their eyes say.  
"It's not your fault," she whispers back.  
It was never their fault.  
People. That's who they should be blaming.  
They were the ones, who, instead of listening, tossed her to the  
guards and told them to burn her.  
"Witch!" they screamed.  
"Witch!"  
Because people are scared of things they don't recognize.  
Even if it was something familiar all along.  
How many years ago was it that she saved them from a drought?  
Only ten. Surely someone remembers her. They must.  
She didn't even do anything.  
Well, that's not entirely true.  
But she never hurt anyone.  
A little boy had wandered into the forest alone.  
Tears were rolling down his small, soft cheeks.  
He stumbled, ready to slip into a ravine of deadly thorns.  
She had reached out with the roots of the trees, and she caught him.  
He blinked.  
He didn't see her net of roots.  
He didn't see the ravine.

All he saw was a girl, her hands outstretched as if casting a spell.  
“Witch!” he screamed, scrambling back.  
“Witch!” She tried to correct him, to show him the truth, but it was too late.  
His mother had heard him.  
The woman alerted the village, and the witch hunt began.  
She hid in a hollow tree, terrified of the pitchforks and torches they wielded.  
They found her, though. They saw a girl with thick, leafy green hair, and they saw a witch.  
It doesn’t matter if her hair was lush only because the forest was healthy.  
It doesn’t matter if her bright gold eyes gleamed with terror and innocence.  
All they saw was a witch and that was all that mattered.  
They grabbed her, and the sky burned red.  
They marched her to the pyre, and the grass became crisp and dry beneath the villager’s feet.  
They tied her to the wood.  
They sparked the flames to life.  
She screamed in agony, and the trees joined her, howling, wailing, shouting,  
yelling, bawling.  
It seemed that the trees were telling them to stop! Stop this pain!  
The forest caught fire, and soon all of nature was joined together in a chorus of screams.  
No one stopped the fire.  
Everything kept burning, burning, burning—until nothing was left to burn.  
All of nature died that day.  
The fire was a mistake.  
For now, the sky burns red.

# Short Stories



## ***A Fright to Remember, Or Forget***

**Sadie Kline**

“NO!” I scream when the two kidnappers drag Dylan out into the dirty blood-stained floor. As I watch them beat him, I think about why I can’t see his blood. The men bring Dylan closer. I look in horror as I see his disfigured body with wires sticking out from it. I scream as loudly as I can, Dylan’s body begins to contort and grow into this huge and terrifying being. I let out another scream, as he comes closer to me. His huge hands rip me out of my chair and I can only think, my life is over.

## ***A Hundred Days of Sorrow***

**Keleasha Proudfit**

I am not a bad person. Am I perfect? Of course not. But I wouldn’t consider myself a bad person.

That’s why I refuse to believe any of the news reports about myself that I keep hearing.

The first one I saw was two Saturdays ago. It was raining and all I had planned was to stay inside and watch tv. I didn’t watch the news a lot, but this story caught my attention because there was a picture of me on the screen.

“The identity of this individual is currently unknown,” droned the television, “but it is known that they are wanted for multiple counts of vandalism.”

Ridiculous. I had never vandalized anything in my life.

The footage showed the brick walls of my local grocery store, covered in colorful scrawls of the nastiest language I had ever heard in my life. The picture of myself kept flashing up on the screen. It was incredibly blurry and showed mostly just a black, shadowy mass, but undeniably me. The shape, the body posture... it was me, I could sense it.

Well, I decided that after that it was best to just avoid the grocery store. I could always just order the food online anyway. No harm, no foul.

The only harm that came from that little story on the news was the anger I felt at seeing myself falsely accused. Usually, when I felt angry, it was small enough that I could ignore it. But not this time. Nope, this time called for the fanny pack.

The fanny pack was my secret weapon, my little tool visible to only me. I kept it with me at all times, and whenever I was too angry, I could just take that anger off and shove it down there. The whole process was quick, easy, and mostly painless.

There we go. The anger had been shoved down deep, next to where I had shoved the last big anger I had felt last Tuesday, when the cashier at the checkout line at the grocery store had insulted me.

With the anger safely stored away, I got up from the tv to find something to eat.

That was the first news report. After that it just kept getting worse.

The next one was a report about me crashing out the windows of the local chain fast food store. *"I hated that place anyway,"* I thought as I tucked the anger away.

After that came a report about me breaking out the windows of someone's car. Then I stomped out someone's garden. Then I think I might have killed someone's cat.

It kept going and going, and my list of public places to go to kept getting smaller and smaller. Smashed the PO Boxes at the post office, tore up a shop at the mall, burned a bookstore- that one hurt the most, I loved that place- the list went on and on.

The oddest thing about it all was that, the places I did go, no one seemed to point me out. There was no, "look, it's the girl who keeps destroying public property for some reason from the news story!" When I walked into a building. It was like no one noticed.

Then one day, about four days ago, things started to go south. The previous day I had left my mom's house in a fury after getting into a fight with her. And then when I turned the news on the next day, I saw it.

The report said that I had smashed out her windows, tore up her yard, even broke into the house and smashed her porcelain gnome collection, which had been a gift from dad.

This time, seeing the report didn't make me angry. It made me afraid.

It got worse and worse. I blocked my mom's number, and then had to block some of my friends' after I trashed their apartment. I couldn't go to work either, that place was destroyed too. I was losing allies one by one. Even my boyfriend Jonas was targeted, and at this point I hadn't even talked to him in a week. Eventually I just smashed my phone. And pulled down my blinds. And locked my doors.

Now here I am, huddled up on the floor, wrapped in a blanket, being informed by my tv that I had burned down my old middle school, bulldozed over my grade school best friend's house, and even trashed my grandmother's place, which wasn't even inhabited by my grandmother anymore, it was inhabited by some dude named Melvin.

I watched and I wept. Were my family and friends okay? I didn't even know if they were alive or not. I felt sick just thinking about it. What had I done to them? **How** had I done it to them? I hadn't even left my house, and yet it seemed as if my mere presence, my mere existence had destroyed them.

I heard a clatter from my window. "*Oh no they found me,*" I thought as I jerked upward.

More clatters. "Who's there?" I shrieked, grabbing a nearby book to hurl at my opponent. The tv droned in the background, naming more of my atrocities.

I crept out to the kitchen. There was nothing there.

I turned to leave, but as I turned, my fanny pack cluttered to the ground. It had become so empty lately, probably because I hadn't been putting much into it. I have been more afraid than angry lately.

I bent down to pick up the pack. As I stretched out to grab it, I felt something on my neck, something that felt unmistakably like a breeze, a light breath of fresh air. Except my window was closed.

I spun around and screamed. Setting in the windowsill, leaning against the boards I had put up as cautionary measures, was a shadowy, dark figure. It wore a galaxy hoodie and a pair of jeans. It had no eyes, no hair, no nose, just an unsettling grin poking out from amongst the dark, murky black emptiness I suppose was its face.

And it was me.

The figure leaped at me, tumbled over me, and snatched up the fanny pack. It giggled with glee and began to dump the contents out... except there were no contents. It whined and screamed like a frustrated child, then hit me on the arm.

"Ouch!" I shouted, and a flicker of anger flared in me.

Another sicking giggle broke from the creature's throat as a dark, fluttery mass floated out of my heart. It reached out and yanked it away from me, causing me to scream even louder.

"Goody!" It squealed in a voice that sounded like nails on chalkboard mingled with soft thunder. It threw the shadow in the air and gobbled it down. Then it leaped over me once more, making a dive for the window.

"Who are you? What are you doing?" I screamed at the figure's back, not sure if I would get an answer but hoping that I could at least deter it from whatever awful things it was planning to do next.

The creature whipped around at me and stopped, looking as if it had forgotten to do something important. It looked me up and down, then licked its lips thoughtfully. Finally, it broke out into a horrid, wicked grin.

"I'm your anger." It grinned. "And right now, I think you are angry at yourself.

With this, it lunged itself on me, scratching me, bruising me, beating me until I was lying on the floor, consciousness fading.

The last thing I remember seeing was that awful creature fade from the window, clutching my fanny pack in its awful claws, laughter erupted from its awful, awful grin.

Like I said, I am not a bad person.

## *A Love to Cost a Kingdom*

**Nydia Stallings**

It had begun from fear. Mistrust. Manipulation by those who thrived in division.

Aurelia's voice softened.

"So you let generations grow up hating each other... over suspicion?"

Neither king answered.

Because she was right.

The throne room doors opened.

Henry, still guarded but unharmed, was brought forward at Cedric's demand.

His eyes found Aurelia instantly.

She stepped beside him.

"The treaty states the heirs were to unite the kingdoms," she said clearly. "That means Henry and I."

Gasps.

Cedric looked at his son carefully.

Alaric looked at his daughter.

Henry stepped forward.

"I love her," he said simply.

No politics.

No pride.

Just the truth.

Aurelia lifted her chin. “And I love him.”

The two kings stood in silence – decades of pride between them.

Finally, Cedric spoke.

“If the marriage proceeds... the rivalry ends.”

Alaric exhaled slowly.

“And the assassination?”

Cedric’s gaze hardened. “We will investigate it together. This time.”

A long pause.

Then—

Alaric extended his hand.

Cedric took it.

The court erupted.

Henry was freed immediately.

And as Aurelia rushed into his arms, she whispered against his shoulder,

“You were right.”

He smiled softly. “About what, my lady?”

“Promises can end wars.”

The courtyard of Zephyrian Castle had never looked more breathtaking.

White roses climbed golden arches. Silken banners of *midnight blue* **and** *silver* intertwined with *black and gold*, the colors of Ashyn and Zephyrian woven together for the first time in history.

Nobles from both kingdoms filled the marble terrace.

Some smiled.

Some whispered.

Some watched far too carefully.

At the end of the aisle stood Prince Henry Grant of Ashyn – no longer imprisoned, no longer accused – dressed in a deep navy coat stitched with silver flames. His usually confident composure wavered slightly as the music began.

Because she had arrived.

Princess Aurelia Winsor stepped forward.

Her gown was unlike anything the kingdoms had seen before – not traditional white, but a flowing obsidian silk dress threaded with gold constellations. A tribute to Zephyrian night skies. Her dark curls cascaded freely down her back, crowned with a delicate gold circlet.

And when Henry saw her—

He forgot how to breathe.

King Alaric escorted his daughter forward.

His expression was solemn... but no longer hardened.

When they reached Henry, Alaric paused.

He looked at Henry long and hard.

“If you break her heart,” Alaric said quietly, so only Henry could hear, “no treaty will protect you.”

Henry met his gaze steadily.

“I would sooner break my own.”

Alaric studied him another moment... then placed Aurelia’s hand into Henry’s.

For the first time, the two kingdoms applauded together.

The High Priest raised his staff.

“Today, we do not merely unite two souls,” he proclaimed. “We unite two kingdoms.”

Henry turned to Aurelia, his voice soft but unwavering.

“My lady... from the first moment you refused to speak to me, I knew my life would never be simple again.”

A small ripple of laughter passed through the guests.

“But I would rather face a thousand wars than a world without you in it. I vow to stand beside you – not above you. To choose peace when pride tempts me otherwise. And to love you openly, not in the shadows.”

Aurelia’s eyes shimmered.

She inhaled softly.

“Henry Grant... you were reckless enough to love me when it was forbidden. Brave enough to take blame that was not yours. And patient enough to wait for peace.”

She squeezed his hands gently.

“I vow to rule beside you with compassion. To remind you of gentleness when the world grows harsh. And to love you – even when our crowns feel heavy.”

The priest smiled.

“Then by the authority of both crowns... I pronounce you husband and wife.”

Henry didn’t wait.

He pulled her close and kissed her – not rushed, not secretive.

Open.

Proud.

The courtyard erupted in cheers.

Doves were released into the sky.

And just like that–

The rivalry officially ended.

As the feast began and music filled the evening air, Aurelia felt Henry’s hand tighten slightly around hers.

“Don’t look,” he murmured under his breath.

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because Lord Marcellus hasn’t applauded once.”

Across the courtyard, the Zephyrian advisor stood stiffly, eyes cold, and a thin smile.

Peace had been declared.

But power does not surrender quietly.

Henry leaned closer to Aurelia.

“Whatever comes next,” he whispered against her temple, “we face it together.”

Aurelia smiled softly.

*“Always.”*

The feast below was alive with music, laughter, and clinking glasses.

But Aurelia needed air.

I needed quiet.

Without a word, she slipped her hand into Henry’s beneath the long banquet table and gently tugged.

He raised an amused brow.

“Stealing the groom already, my lady?”

“Come with me,” she whispered.

They slipped away unnoticed, weaving through torch-lit corridors until they reached the highest balcony of Zephyrian Castle – the one overlooking both kingdoms’ borders.

The night sky stretched endlessly above them.

For once... no guards.

No courts.

No politics.

Just them.

Henry loosened the clasp of his royal cloak and exhaled deeply.

“I think I preferred berry picking,” he admitted softly.

Aurelia laughed – the same soft giggle from the woods, but freer now.

“You nearly caused a war over berries.”

“Worth it,” he said without hesitation.

She leaned against the balcony railing, moonlight brushing against her dark skin like silver paint. Her curls glowed faintly beneath the stars embroidered into her gown.

Henry stepped beside her.

“Are you afraid?” he asked gently.

She considered the question.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Of ruling. Of failing. Of letting our people down.”

Henry nodded.

“I am too.”

That surprised her.

“You are?”

He smiled faintly. “A king is expected to be fearless. But the truth is... I only feel fearless when I’m with you.”

Her breath softened.

She turned toward him fully now.

“And what if one day,” she whispered, “our kingdoms disagree again?”

“Then we remind them,” he said quietly, brushing his thumb across her knuckles, “that we chose love when hatred was easier.”

The wind shifted gently around them.

Aurelia rested her head against his chest.

For a long moment, neither spoke.

The world felt distant.

Small.

Peaceful.

Henry tilted her chin upward carefully.

“No crowns,” he murmured.

“No crowns,” she agreed.

He kissed her slowly – not the urgent kiss from the masquerade, not the defiant kiss from the wedding altar.

But something deeper.

Steady.

Certain.

When they pulled apart, Aurelia smiled softly.

“We really did it,” she whispered.

Henry brushed a curl from her face.

“No,” he corrected gently.

“We’re just beginning.”

Below them, the music swelled again.

But above – under the endless Zephyrian sky – there was only quiet.

And two rulers who had once been forbidden... now standing side by side.

**One year later....**

Peace had held.

Not perfectly – there were debates, disagreements, stubborn nobles – but no war.

Under the joint rule of Queen Aurelia and King Henry, Zephyrian and Ashyn had begun to change. Trade routes reopened. Markets blended. Festivals were shared.

And the people... were hopeful.

Henry had learned diplomacy.

Aurelia had mastered strategy.

Together, they were stronger than either kingdom alone.

But something else had changed too.

It began with small things.

Aurelia rising later than usual.  
Lingering fatigue.  
A hand resting absently over her stomach.

Henry noticed.

Of course he did.

One evening, as golden light spilled into their private chambers, he gently took her hands.

“You’ve been different,” he said softly. “Is something wrong?”

Aurelia hesitated.

Not from fear.

But from awe.

She guided his hand slowly... carefully... to rest over her abdomen.

Henry froze.

His blue eyes lifted to hers.

“Aurelia...”

She smiled – nervous and radiant all at once.

“I visited the royal physician this morning.”

Silence.

Then—

“You’re certain?” he breathed.

She nodded.

“We’re going to have a child.”

Henry actually laughed – a breathless, disbelieving sound – before pulling her into his arms.

“Aurelia,” he whispered against her hair, “this child... will never know rivalry.”

Tears shimmered in her brown eyes.

“They will know unity,” she said softly.

Henry knelt in front of her then – not as king.

But as a man overwhelmed.

He pressed his forehead gently against her stomach.

“I promise you,” he murmured quietly, “you will grow up in a world your parents fought to heal.”

Aurelia brushed her fingers through his hair.

For the first time, the future did not feel frightening.

It felt full.

Weeks later, standing side by side on the palace balcony where they once escaped on their wedding night, they addressed both kingdoms.

Henry’s hand never left hers.

Aurelia stepped forward first.

“Our peace was only the beginning,” she said clearly.

Henry smiled warmly.

“And now, it becomes permanent.”

When the news spread through the crowd, cheers rose louder than they had even on their wedding day.

Because this child would not just be royal.

They would be proof.

Proof that love had rewritten history.

Later that night, back beneath the same starlit sky where they once stood uncertain and newly married, Henry wrapped his arms around Aurelia from behind.

“Do you think they’ll have your curls?” he asked softly.

She smiled.

“Or your stubbornness?”

He chuckled against her temple.

“Hopefully your wisdom.”

She leaned back into him.

“No matter who they become,” she whispered, “they will be loved.”

And for the first time in generations—

The kingdoms slept peacefully.

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And for the first time in generations—

The kingdoms slept peacefully.

An hour passed.

Then another.

At one point, a sharper cry echoed through the chamber doors.

Henry stopped pacing.

He closed his eyes.

“Please,” he murmured quietly to no one and everyone. “Let her be safe.”

A guard shifted awkwardly nearby.

“Your Majesty, she is strong.”

Henry nodded — but his hands trembled.

An hour passed.

Then another.

At one point, a sharper cry echoed through the chamber doors.

Henry stopped pacing.

He closed his eyes.

“Please,” he murmured quietly to no one and everyone. “Let her be safe.”

A guard shifted awkwardly nearby.

“Your Majesty, she is strong.”

Henry nodded – but his hands trembled.

And then–

A cry.

Small.

Sharp.

Alive.

The doors opened slowly.

The midwife stepped out first, smiling warmly.

“Your Majesty,” she said, bowing slightly. “You have a healthy child.”

Henry didn’t wait for permission.

He rushed inside.

Aurelia lay against her pillows, exhausted but glowing in a way no crown could ever replicate.

In her arms...

A tiny bundle wrapped in gold-and-silver silk.

Henry approached slowly, as if the moment might shatter if he moved too quickly.

Aurelia looked up at him with tear-bright eyes.

“We did it,” she whispered.

He knelt beside her.

And when he saw the baby –

Dark curls are already soft against a tiny head.

Skin warm and radiant like Aurelia’s.

Eyes slowly blinking open...

Blue.

His breath broke.

Henry gently took the child into his arms, holding them like something sacred.

“Hello,” he whispered shakily. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Aurelia laughed softly through her tears.

“Already emotional, Your Majesty?”

“I faced your father in open court,” he said quietly. “This is far more overwhelming.”

She smiled.

“What shall we name them?”

Henry looked down at their child.

“A name that belongs to both kingdoms.”

Aurelia nodded slowly.

“Call them...Felix.”

Henry’s eyes softened.

“Feliz Grant Winsor,” he repeated.

A star bridging two skies.

As the sun rose over both kingdoms, church bells rang.

Messengers rode across Zephyrian and Ashyn lands announcing the birth of the first united heir.

People gathered in the streets.

Merchants closed their stalls.

Children cheered.

Because this child was not born into rivalry.

They were born into peace.

That evening, as Aurelia rested, Henry stood by the balcony holding little Orion in his arms.

“You will never have to sneak through forests,” he murmured softly.

“You will never have to love in secret.”

Behind him, Aurelia watched with quiet joy.

Their story had begun with rebellion.

It had grown into unity.

And now—

It had a future.

Years passed.

Not perfectly. Not without trials.

There were disputes in council chambers. Harvests that failed. Storms that tested the castle walls. Moments when old fears tried to whisper their way back into noble hearts.

But war never returned.

Because whenever tension rose, the people only needed to look toward the palace balcony.

There stood King Henry and Queen Aurelia.

Side by side.

Always side by side.

And between them, little Orion – growing taller each year, curls wild in the wind, blue eyes bright with curiosity – living proof that love had rewritten history

Henry never lost the softness that once made him kneel in the dirt to pick berries beside a girl who barely looked at him.

Aurelia never lost the quiet strength that allowed her to stand before two kings and demand truth.

Together, they did more than unite kingdoms.

They changed them.

Zephyrian's golden banners no longer hung opposite Ashyn's silver flames.

They flew intertwined.

Trade flourished.

Festivals blended music from both lands.

Children grew up learning stories not of hatred...

But of courage.

Of a princess who once said, "*We can't.*"

And a prince who answered, "*Trust me.*"

One evening, long after Felix had fallen asleep, Aurelia and Henry returned to the same balcony where they once stood as newlyweds.

The stars were clear.

The air is gentle.

"Do you ever think about that first day?" Aurelia asked softly.

"The berries?" Henry smiled.

"The absurd rules."

He slipped his hand into hers.

"I would break them all again."

She laughed softly.

"Even knowing everything we went through?"

He turned to her, older now, wiser... but looking at her the same way he always had.

“I would wait a million years for you,” he said quietly. “In every lifetime.”

Aurelia rested her head against his shoulder.

And beneath a sky no longer divided by borders...

They stood in peace.

It ended in unity.

In vows kept.

In a child born into hope.

And in a love that was once forbidden...

But became the very foundation of a new world.

***Dear You (My Dearest stranger and Reader)***

**Calleigh Johnson**

Dear you (my dearest stranger and reader),

If you are reading this, then I am no longer here.

Gone from rooms and mirrors from breath and warmth, unreturned to the earth in whatever way it saw fit. Buried, burned, or scattered. However it happened, this letter survived me, and now it belongs to you.

My name is Maia Perice, and this is my story.

In 2024, I was in a car accident that cracked my life open. Metal screamed, glass flew, and time, so sure of itself, stalled. I lived. That was the miracle. The second truth came quietly after: I would not live long.

Funny how close you have to come to the end before you realize how little of yourself you were ever allowed to be.

Before the accident, my life was already written, just not by me. I was raised to believe that one day I would marry a man, work a ninety-five, have two children, and quietly replicate the life handed to me. I did marry him. A man chosen more by expectation than love. I wore the dress, signed the papers, and told myself this was happiness, or at least what passed for it.

I was wrong.

I was unbearably, devastatingly unhappy. Yet I thought that was the price of being a woman: endurance disguised as purpose. Bills instead of dreams. Silence instead of joy. A life that fit neatly into boxes while I disappeared inside them.

The accident changed that.

When doctors told me I was living on borrowed time, something inside me finally rebelled. If time was no longer guaranteed, then neither was obedience. I divorced him. I left everything familiar behind. I chose myself, for the first time, and moved to Chicago.

There, I found a house filled with light. Morning sun spilled through wide windows and painted my walls gold. I ate microwaved dinners on the couch, watched Friends reruns, and felt peace settle into my bones. It wasn't glamorous, but it was mine. And for the first time, I was not surviving. I was living.

Then I traveled.

I chased skies and oceans, stamped pages with places I never thought I'd see. I jumped out of a plane once, ended up in the newspaper for it. I laughed at the absurdity of it all. I kept journals, proof that I had been here, that I had felt deeply and freely and without apology.

I was happy. Truly, undisturbedly happy.

Now, as I write this, my body is growing tired. The doctors call it a miracle that I made it this far. I call it a gift. And gifts are meant to be passed on.

I have no family left to give my things to, so I leave them to you, the next keeper of this house, this space where I learned how to breathe again. Before you unpack your boxes or rearrange the furniture, I ask you one thing:

Do you believe we only live once?

If you do, I understand. I used to believe that too. But I learned something in the aftermath of wreckage and revelation:

We only die once.

We live every single day.

If your dream is simple...love, stability, a quiet life with someone kind, then know this: I am unimaginably proud of you. A fulfilled life does not have one shape. Just promise me you'll choose it, rather than inherit it.

Keep my journals safe. Let them remind you that it is never too late to begin again.

One last thing, perhaps the strangest.

While I drifted in and out of consciousness after the crash, I heard a voice. Soft. Certain. It may have been my mind grasping for comfort, or something far greater. Either way, I chose to believe it.

I leave you with the words that carried me through the rest of my days:

We only die once.  
But we live every day.

With all the love I learned to give myself,  
Maia Perice

## ***Destined Path***

**Arju Gurung**

*To my dearest friends and the love I hold deeply for them.*

*These stories are real, and they are in us and always will be, you know where you are.*

*Who you are. – River*

It was raining again mixed with a foggy night in New Orleans. This didn't stop the shops and citizens. They remained busy despite the heavy weather and cold air that followed. Somewhere, in a small thrift store, that seemed to be ignored by the world, Sky Winkskin wandered through the isles. Her hazel eyes landed on an oval mirror. The corners edged with fake gold that seemed to be rusting. Through the mirror she stared at herself, freckles covered her face. Her caramel hair was tousled from the rain. She started to gather her disheveled hair until it was in a ponytail. Except instead of a hair tie holding it, it was her hand. She stared at herself for a bit more until her eyes left her reflection and shifted towards a short girl with a: facial structure like a deer, ocean shore eyes and her *very* hard to miss, styled hair. She had onyx hair that was curled loosely at the ends. It was in a low bun that had braids securing the root.

"Sky, you need to braid it. You have lovely wavy hair, not to mention it's thick. *God* gave you that hair to put it in a braid! Make the most of it before you start to go bald in your late 30s!" The girl spoke giving advice to Sky, although despite her good intentions Sky rolled her eyes releasing her hair from the grip of her hands. "Well if it was up to me, I'd rather be bald than handle this rat's nest that I was given for hair." Sky groaned, her voice laced with annoyance. "Anyways Lyn, it's getting dark we have to find something for this project." Lyn's spark died down inside her eyes. She had completely forgotten that the only reason they were here was to search for crafts and items to add to their collage project. "Oh yeah. Forgot. Let's go get River then, she was looking at some old clothes that were like—completely out of trend...."

Lyn searched through the isles. Her eyes went past the hangers, shelves and old people walking slowly.

Finally they landed on brunette strands. “River!” Lyn called out, River turned her head. Her eyes glinted in their depths of endless black. “Quit shouting Lyn oh my god you’re gonna kill me, anyway look at this thing i found! Looks tough.” She gestured her hands and told Lyn and Sky to come forward, which they did. “It’s a cute kitty!” She said her voice was high pitched as she held a black clay sculpted cat that had white streaks on its center. “Ms Leonard will love this. I can practically hear it already!” River giggled, her mind wandering to the amused look on the: plump, petite and greying lady’s face. “Oh this is adorable! Such a nice touch! Never in my 800 and something years of teaching have I seen a detail on a collage that looked as amazing as this!” River mimicked sarcastically. Lyn and Sky were giggling at River’s attempt at an impression. “Let me see the thing.” Sky said, her voice still playful as she reached to grab the sculpture. “It looks like a tuxedo cat don’t it? Funny thing, speaking of cats....” she paused her last few words coming out in a snort. “They have funny faces don’t they? Whoever is the creator of everything, anything. They decided to give cats such small and cute faces, while making them a predator.”

Suddenly before River and Lyn could respond to Sky’s statement she winced, dropping the clay sculpture. Luckily, River with her sharp senses quickly grabbed the artifact, her hands clenching around it tight. “Oh my god, is everything alright Sky?!” Lyn asked with worry poisoning her normally gentle and relaxed tone, Sky clutched her abdomen, hands grasping at the ends her stomach was cramping. Painfully. It was like everything was trying to come out all at once. “M...m-my...argh! Dammit, my stomach!” She said as she grabbed a shelf for balance. “It’s cramping.” She managed to say.

“Maybe you ate something bad or your stomach did somethin’ funky.” River suggested, her dark eyes filled with concern, as Sky slowly let go of her grasp on her abdomen, she gave River a curt nod. “Maybe... it came and went in a second. Is the sculpture okay?” Sky asked, her eyes squinting as if to investigate any damage that may have been evident “Here I’ll pay for the sculpture.” She said as she reached for it. “No, it’s fine I can pay, I need to separate my 20 into some change anyway. Since you’re not feeling well, you take the cat and go home. Just bring it to school tomorrow with the rest of the collage.” Lyn told Sky, grabbing the sculpture. “We should head home anyway, it’s pouring out there. Ma is gonna be mad if I’m out for any longer.”

“Alright then....” Sky agreed. *Reluctantly.*

The next day, the air was cool and humid. The atmosphere after the rain was always peaceful. Lyn and River were skipping their way to school. “I hope Sky is okay.” Lyn said fiddling with the keychain of her backpack she was upset that Sky wasn’t going to be coming, Lyn knew she felt unwell but she couldn’t help but wonder about the cat sculpture. “Well, until she gets better we can forget about the cat.” She added on, a warm breeze passed by that made both River and Lyn’s ponytails sway. “It’s a shame really, I really wanted Ms Leonard to see that darn cat.” River shrugged as she sped up her walk pace, “But time has its way, and nothing is in its path.” River said her black loafers hit the dirt pathway with each step she took. Even as River said those words she could feel a sense of unease that lingered in her gut. Despite this, she chose to ignore it. “Honestly though, yesterday it seemed like

something was eating her stomach, based off the expression on her face last night.” River whistled.

“She probably feels worse, well I mean she didn’t come today.” Lyn suggested, then suddenly she heard rustling noises, something was moving into the bushes. “What is that?” She asked, pausing her movement and looking towards the bush next to the forest beside the path they walked. River stopped just short. “Oh so you noticed.” River had already seen the bushes rustling, she’s always been a sharp girl, her senses were keen, she was the gut out of the three of them. Her eyes turned to where Lyn was looking. “I glanced at it a few times; it’s been walking with us for quite awhile actually.” River shrugged, her eyebrows lifting up slightly to show a bored expression. “Really and you didn’t tell me?! Although it’s a bit creepy...” Lyn said in a hushed voice stepping back a bit to distance herself and the bush. River followed behind. “I suspect it’s a–” Before River could finish her sentence a fat orange tom-cat leaped out the bushes startling them both. “A-.a..cat.” Lyn finished the sentence for river as her eyes lit up. “Awww! Lookat’chu!” She cooed, smiling with teeth and all as she approached the cat going to pet it. To her surprise before she could put her hand on its head to pat it, it threw up.

River let out a laugh as some of the mushy brown vomit landed on the fingertips of Lyn’s hands. *Serves her right*, she thought quietly amongst herself. “Well now that’s just nasty!” Her words came out in chuckles and Lyn had a shocked expression on her face. “Eughhh!... No way, no way!” Lyn gagged, quickly getting away from the cat and shaking her hands, eager to get the chunky bits of vomit off her hands. “Disgusting!! Disgusting!” She squealed.

Rivers’ eyes fell on the bigger piece of vomit on the dirt path. She bent down as the cat licked its paw. Purring, like it was proud of what it had just done. There was a white piece of...metal in the vomit. Had the cat eaten something it shouldn’t have? River grabbed a skinny stick from the side. And began to poke the vomit trying to get the brown stuff off the strange thing, the cat stopped licking itself watching her poke it as if it was confused on what she was doing. “Eww! River that is. . .disgusting, what are you doing?” Lyn asked, sharing the same weary confused face with the tom-cat. River didn’t respond, instead she focused on whatever she was doing, from Lyn’s perspective all she could think was *she is not doing this right now*. “River come on! Quit, we’re gonna be late for lessons!” Lyn pleaded. “Stop.”

“Be quiet Lyn for mother Teresa’s sake.”

River responded sounding annoyed, finally she picked out what she was trying to get. “Ah– ha! This poor cat swallowed a white key.” River looked proud as she patted the ginger softly, the cat leaned in purring affectionately. “You didn’t mean to vomit onto sweet Lyn did you?”, *mhhmeow* it replied back. “A key? It swallowed a key? Aw poor thing! Where cha find this key?” Lyn said, bending down. The tom-cats ears went back, in airplane mode. “Okay I think it has a problem with me....” She assumed with an uncomfortable tension in her tone.

“No silly, look there’s something coming this way. He hears it.” Lyn looked up, getting up from the cat’s level. “Really? Does it have a friend?”

The tom-cat hid quickly behind the two girls, its tail sticking up straight as it let out purring that clearly indicated it was uncomfortable. “Sounds more like a foe.” River mumbled stepping back, the cat and lyn Followed behind.

“Dont think you can just go hiding behind their graces after stealing my key.”

A masculine voice called out. It was deep and elegant with a hint of gentleness to it. A black cat emerged. It had a collar of sparkly diamonds around its neck, and underneath the chain of beauty you could see white streaks of fur in the center. The black cat was abnormally large for a cat. It was slim and had longer limbs than the average cat. “A ta–talking..CAT!” Lyn and River said in unison their eyes were large and the shocked expressions on their faces looked very similar. “No no, just hallucinating....” River muttered, rubbing her eyes. While the black cat and the girls stared at each other it bought enough time for the ginger tom-cat to run off scared.

“Stupid kitten, anyway, pardon me. River Thompson, thank you so much for grabbing my key for me.” The black cat said, giving a nod as it sat and waited for her to drop the key. “Oh right. Im real, yes im a talking cat, I should introduce myself, please excuse my manners your graces.” It bowed its head just a bit, the chain of gems glittering together making a noise. “My name is Atropos, Atropos the end. It’s what I’m called in my motherland.” *Atropos*...River wondered, her eyes still wide as she put the white key onto the ground. Lyn on the other hand had her jaw dropped six feet and under. “M-m-...my n-name.. I-is-.” She stammered, her words all over the place. “Lyn Reyes, yes I am familiar.” Atropos nodded. For some reason you could almost see a smile despite the void like fur. “Y-you..H-huh?” She paused, raising an eyebrow. “Where exactly is your motherland? Atropos....”

River said suspense filled her tone as she looked towards Lyn who looked back at her. Their eyes exchanging words. *We have to get out of here!* Lyn furrowed her eyebrows, eyes darting to the path that led on ahead of them. *A talking cat. We have to stay.* River rolled her eyes. Despite being fearful a bit Lyn sighed, giving up on trying to negotiate. River was hard to convince and bargain with, even if it was Lyn doing the convincing and Lyn herself was the best persuader she knew. “Elsiya, why of course.” Atropos spoke as his paw gripped the white key, claws unsheathing. His eyes stayed on the two tho. Something about them intrigued him. Especially River. She was staring at him like she could see through him. “I am a spirit guide. And have been for centuries. I actually was born with the first elf of elysia. When your very kind shared stories of...the ‘Catsith’ I believe. Although I’m in charge of guiding the souls instead of stealing them.” He let out what sounded almost like a laugh. The girls couldn’t tell whether he was laughing or purring.

“How do you know our names? Have we met?” Lyn asked, leaning down to his level. “Have we? Well certainly. I’ve known you since you were just starting to form in the Elysian Tree roots.” He said, sounding sarcastic. Lyn’s face scrunched up. “Dont joke you cat, im serious!” She scoffed. “So am I ma’dam.”

“Yeah and I’m the queen of England!” Lyn stood back to her average level of height then tightened her backpack on her shoulders. “Now if you excuse us, me and River here have lessons.” Atropos walked in front of them, blocking the path. There was silence and then River spoke, breaking the breeze of awkwardness. “Wherever this Elysia of yours is, it’s not on the maps. And we *will* be late for our lessons.” She said, grabbing Lyns wrists and walking closer. Ready to kick the sarcastic cat if she must. “Oh but you must ditch the lessons, your graces.” He purred, bowing his head a little bit down once again. “Afterall Sky Winkskins is

waiting for you both. In the treehouse of Lyn Reye's backyard." Lyn's eyes widened. "What?!" Atropos nodded, looking confused. "Yes it is necessary and you two must come along."

"How can we trust you?" River said, looking suspicious. "Oh you two are so... Never mind. This trick must convince you otherwise I have no choice." Lyn looked mad for some reason and River looked tense. Suddenly Atropos was gone and there was only a small clay sculpture on the ground; the gem collar was also left behind. It was the clay cat sculpture from the thrift-store all of them had gone to! "No... Actual.. WAY!"

Lyn screamed and River swore the branches from the forest trees shook. "You were the sculpture!" River gasped as she watched the sculpture grow in size then Atropos appeared and the cat sculpture was gone. The gem collar popping back onto his neck. "So?" Atropos asked before grabbing the key with his mouth. "Oh no we believe you alright." River muttered out. Lyn on the other hand looked like she could faint out of pure shock. Atropos let out a curt nod. "So you two take me up on my offer then?" He asked. "If you are asking about school! Then No-." Lyn spoke out loud but River was quick to cut her off. "YES! Yes we do." Lyn gasped, her eyes widening. "River we can't just...what?!" She was baffled and clearly felt betrayed from the look on her face. Atropos lifted his head up to look at Lyn with an observing gaze. "Curious, *very*. Shall you two talk?" He asked, swallowing the white key. River and Lyn at the sight of that looked disgusted. Especially Lyn, all she could feel was confusion, weariness and anything but the familiar feeling of whimsicalness. "We have to go, besides nothing important is on the agenda, did you not just watch him turn into the sculpture from yesterday?!"

River grabbing Lyn's hands once again. As if trying to persuade her into wanting to learn more. "This is supernatural and clearly we're involved!" She added on but as she looked into Lyn's eyes she could see the untrusting glint in their depths. "River I don't know...." She barely spat out. "Its just so much I mean a talking cat, that can shapeshift?" Lyn's eyes fell back onto Atropos a tense unwavering gut feeling lingered. Rivers' eyes furrowed at that. "No it's not so much but you and I both know it's happening. And we have to check up on Sky. We'll be together. *Whatever happens*." She promised and the tension in Lyn's eyes slowly began to falter. "Fine...fine we'll go." She said turning to Atropos who went back to being on all fours. "Lovely. Well lets carry on then?"

The air was thick, all four of them were in Lyn's treehouse in her spacious backyard. Books were splattered across the wooden plank floor and both Lyn and River stared at Sky who looked nervous, her hair was messy and her clothes wrinkled like she just got out of bed. Atropos was sitting on a record player, waiting for someone to speak. His eyes landed on Sky who took a big sigh and gave a curt nod. "You three are very important, if not here, in Elysia." Atropos said, his elegant voice washing over the silence, completely overtaking it. "What is this Elysia you speak of?" River asked. "It's where your souls came from. Not this body. No, you three were the gifts promised to Elysia centuries ago. But since you three have been very late to the cataclysmic era you guys were to save us from you three were like ants because of the damage the event did to the land. So right before your form could take place,

your souls were sent to earth.” He said it like it was nothing. “Um. Excuse me?” Lyn was quick to respond, clearly not believing the story. “I know, I didn’t believe him at first either.” Sky tried to add on but Lyn spoke again not allowing her to even get a few more sentences in. “Well how did he make you believe that? *What* did he prove to you?” She asked, there was no way they believed that hippy dippy story. “Let them explain.” River reassured Lyn, her hand going to go on her shoulder. “I *am* asking them to explain.” She clapped back. “Well let them.” River said, matching her attitude. Lyn rolled her eyes, eyebrows slightly dented because of how often they furrowed. “Well, go on.” She urged Sky and Atropos. “I went with Atropos to this reality called... Elysia, it was all so... dark, like– all the knowledge of the land had been corrupted! He took me to this tree. And I saw these fetuses. Three exactly three. Not fully developed yet. They laid in the center of the tree. And for some reason it felt familiar. Really familiar. And it felt right to believe Atropos.” Sky explained her voice filled with unwary, her hazel eyes flicking to each one of them. “And thats... yeah. But the fact that there’s another reality other than our own out there is astonishing you guys!” Lyn didn’t respond to Sky’s words. It was clear there were many things running through her mind. Atropos brought his paw to his mouth, licking it, then he spoke. “Yes and the reason why we are in Lyn Reyes treehouse. It is because we want to make a port between the two worlds here.” Once Atropos finished speaking, Lyns face was scrunched up. “No way!” Lyn basically growled. “Do you know how bizarre it is to even ask that question?!” Sky sighed and looked towards Atropos who gave a yawn and stretched before laying down back on the record player. “There is no other secure place. You see, Elysia takes energy from human manifestation. But so do some creatures from Elysia. Are you all familiar with ravens?” Atropos asked, once they all nodded he resumed. “They are from Elysia actually. We call them Mirelunes, silent grief. They were born from the Cataclysmic era during its early stages, they break the border between Elysia and Earth very *very* often. Anywhere we place the port will only lead to conflict.” He assured. “In fact they might be listening in right now.” Atropos turned his head to the treehouse window. “But if a port is made between multiple people, then it is practically inaccessible unless all are present.” After Atropos finished speaking. They all looked towards Lyn, she was feeling pressured and upset that she was dragged into all this. Her eyes said what her mouth didn’t. *No*. After a moment of thinking she parted her mouth, even though she felt unsure she remembered what River said earlier. *Whatever happens. We’ll be together*. “Fine!” She mustered out and Atropos nodded.

“Lyn....” Sky whispered, seeing through her, there was guilt in her gut but she couldn’t make out why she felt guilty. Was it because Lyn was being forced and peer pressured? Was it because she was also taking part in that? While Sky harbored those thoughts in her mind, Atropos was gagging, after a minute or two he threw up the same white key that he swallowed earlier. Expect there was no vomit or icky stuff on it. Just the white key like it had never been swallowed in the first place. The girls looked a bit disgusted. “This key is gonna turn into an unseeable port, there are many ways to open a port.” Atropos explained jumping off the record player. “You guys either sacrifice something each time, it can be anything, like a grain of rice. Or you could use a word. But keep in mind it will only work when all three of you are present, so if one does everything right and it doesn’t open, you need to fetch the other two. Understand?” He asked, looking at all of them carefully. And for once it was like he was serious. The diamond collar on his neck glittered as he walked towards Sky.

“After the pact is done, and you guys choose to enter the world, there are some beings I would like you to meet. But you guys will have to enter soon enough.”

His last words were menacing, almost sounding like a threat. This made River’s mind filled with conspiracys, she put her palm up. “Why? What happens if we don’t go in anytime soon?” She asked. It was the question that had been fueling both Lyn and Sky’s mind. “Simple really. Elysia crumbles and all energy goes back to Earth. Bombarding it with energy so high, so much that everything could suffocate. That’s the fastest way everything gets chaotic, the slow way is the creatures of Elysia have no choice but to come to Earth. Which in result will create a very weird dynamic. One race lives. The Others die. Elysia is fueled by energy, and so is all its life.” Atorpos watched the shock and threatened look on their faces. “Its no matter, you guys have had a destiny change. It’s only fate, I don’t doubt you three one bit.”

“Let’s make the port, and fast. I’m anticipating my mom coming back from work. She’ll kill me from missing school....” Lyn shivered, the thought of her mom yelling at her and taking away everything she enjoyed doing to punish her, she honestly couldn’t even imagine what she’d have as an excuse. *Oh yeah mom, I was stopped by a magical talking cat and now he convinced me to ditch school and astral project!* Bizarre, so bizarre. Lyn still couldn’t understand the whole concept. Meanwhile Lyn worried her guts off. River’s mind ran with possibilities that things so simple like energy was being sent to a whole nother reality that was feeding off of hers. “I think we should use a word. A good one.” Sky butt in, running her hand through her hair. The treehouse was silent, it was like a cool but hot atmosphere. The trees were swaying with the wind. “How about, anemoia. Because it’s exactly what this is.” River nodded at that, smiling with teeth and all.. “Nostalgia for a time that you never been. That’s good, okay let’s use that then.” Atropos nodded at their words. Then he pushed the white key into the middle of all of them. “Once I finish chanting you three will close your eyes and say the word in unison. Got it?” They agreed.

He slowly began to speak, his tongue slurring words. His tail wagging fast and swiftly behind him. “Nexilis–animus... arcanum...–Anam cara! Bound by the bridge Anam Cara!” Right when he paused, they shouted out. Closing their eyes. “Anoemia!” The girls yelled in sync quickly enough, their ears started to ring. “Dont open your eyes. The thread is unrolling.” He assured. After a moment they opened their eyes seeing a patch of endless void floating in the center of them. “Only we can see it. If the port was to break, that means the key has been stolen. But the key is hidden in the depths of soil. There is such a low chance. Remember all three have to be present. The bridge will remain visible to the members, but it won’t allow you in by yourself. As it is bound to all your souls.” Lyn’s jaw was dropped to the floor once again, River’s eyes were filled with wonder and sparks of growing curiosity while Sky looked excited. “Magic is real!” Sky squealed, both hands going up to her cheeks. “Where does this void lead to?” River asked, her hands reaching out to touch it but they stopped just short. “To another set of treehouses in the Yarrow Forest. You’ll see. It’s one of the only ecosystems that isn’t heavily affected by the cataclysm.”

“Why don’t we go now? I mean we already skipped school!” Sky grinned, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “It’ll be awesome!” She exclaimed pointing towards the large void in the center of them. “Yeah. We can’t stay here and wait, because my mom comes home

soon.” Lyn added on, Atropos amused by this agreed with no hesitation. “That wouldn’t be a problem. But I have to warn you, the Yarrow Forest is a very humid place. You might want to change out of these uniforms.” He nodded towards River and Lyn. “You guys can borrow some of my clothes, come let’s go inside.” After Lyn had said that, she was already on her way down the ladder, her hand reaching to grab the keys out of her pocket. She skipped towards her backyard door, unlocking it. River and Sky followed behind.

Afterwards, they emerged back, River had her hair braided tightly, loose strands falling just slightly from her hairline. She was in a black tanktop and jean shorts, now wearing Lyns leather boots. Sky and Lyn on the other hand, Sky had changed into one of Lyn’s jeans otherwise she looked the same. Lyn had worn a skirt with shorts built in, her hair in a neat bun. Matching with the skirt she had a floral off shoulder ruffled shirt. She carried a backpack that looked full but not heavy. “Okay. Let’s go, we have to be back before school is over!” Lyn stated her hands on her hips. One by one they climbed back up the ladder into the treehouse where Atropos was sitting on the record player once again, waiting for them. His yellow eyes opened and he jumped off the record player then began to stretch. “Now. We shall begin?” He asked, earning a nod from them. Atropos then jumped into the void, and Sky with no hesitation ran in the void and she disappeared along with the black cat.

“Oh my god.” Lyn said, taking deep breaths. “I’ll see you there.” River giggled before running into the void as well, her form nowhere to be seen anymore. It was just Lyn now. Could she really do it? Yes she could, she closed her eyes and ran into the void, her movements filled with tension. Then when she opened her eyes she ran out of another black void almost falling on Atropos, he shrieked and ran out the way fast until she got ahold of her balance. She looked up to see River and Lyn staring at her with a smile. They were in a treehouse. But it was abnormally large, there were weaved hammocks, tribal decorations and a huge cauldron in the middle decorated with vines and all sorts of funny flowers. What caught Lyn’s eyes was the big red moss carpet. But as she looked up. Her eyes lit up in shock.

“N’ealm, Ne’filite and N’oxtrya, please excuse the mess in our se’hu.” Said a very soft voice coming from an abnormally tiny feminine creature that had wings as large as Atropos for her little body. She has a pixie cut and multiple eyes. She had on sapphire pebbles as a form of clothing. “Ne-? What?, I’m sorry we are Sky an-.” Sky tried to correct but Atropos spoke in between. “Well that may be the case but to the life of Elysia you are N’ealm, Ne’filite and N’oxtrya. A name given to you and a name they know you by.”

River’s eyes sparked with curiosity. “Really? Amazing!” She said as she bowed a bit to the red creature. There were multiple that were looking at them, all seemed to be female. “We are fairies, and this is the main se’hu of the yarrow forest, we awaited you for long your graces. All of the fairies were at the tranquility ceremony. Although it had been too late...has Atropos told you? It’s very stressful to think about... Did I tell you my name? They call me Kepe. I can’t believe the prophecy was real, you guys really are humans!” She said fluttering around the four overwhelming them as she stressed, her voice quickly became high pitched. Kepe squealed in adoration, “Give them a rest. But she’s right, this is the main se’hu, where your treehouse port leads to. These fairies are very aidful and any questions you have you may ask them. Their queen is away, so there is no meeting her anytime soon. But thank you Kepe, but I believe we should get going, and they *are* on *very* limited time.” He nodded to Kepe who blushed in embarrassment. “We hope for your victory!” Kepe and the other fairies

said which confused the three. "Victory...." Lyn mumbled before nodding. "Thank you." She responded. With that Atropos led the girls to the outside of the se'hu. Kepe turned to another fairy. "At last, justice has come. For Elysia." She said all giggly.

"My head is all so fuzzy inside." Sky said jokingly towards Atropos, her hand going up to her forehead. "Same thought when I visited Earth, strange ways of living." Atropos responded. They were now outside of the Se'hu, they were shocked to see a bioluminescent forest. The trees were huge but the tree they were on was in the center and thicker than all. There were multiple other treehouses and fairies stopped what they were doing to look at them, some in shock. "Excuse them." Atropos said as he continued to lead the way, a bit annoyed by the staring but he knew they were history. "N-not at all. This place is beautiful." River mumbled as she followed Atropos along with Lyn and Sky.

"Hey, they said something about victory. What's all that about? How are we meant to win victory over this cataclysm? What even is the cataclysm?" Lyn asked, bringing up something that had been bothering her mind for a while. River's eyebrows raised. "Yeah how can we? We're just humans." She added on. Atropos looked at them with an observing glance as he continued walking; he thought of what to say. "Since ancient times, humans and earth have always been adored by the life of Elysia. One day the stars aligned, Elysia's moon crashed into Earth's second moon, jeneu, we called it. Because it was the closest to us." He explained, "That still doesn't--" Lyn tried to overstep. "I'm getting there, your grace." Atropos sighed a little annoyed by the interruption. "Then the prophecy was made by the spiritual leaders, some doubted it. But it came true. Now the cataclysm event happened a decade ago... Elysia began to lose its energy and some land became corrupted, it was like our motherland had grown a thorn and that thorn began to act on itself. Then shortly after it spread. Creatures like the elves began to turn their back on nature, and we rejected instinct. Like a cursed knowledge entered Elysia; then the corruption burnt the Elysian tree branches. The sacred tree, we call it Dilu Erentu. The heart." Atropos's voice took a turn as they had now left the group of treehouses. Sky and Lyn looked at River who gave them a signal by putting her hand to where her heart was. *He's getting emotional.* She spoke without speaking. "It's what connects all of us. When half of the branches were poisoned, many of our species died out due to the burning pain.

Some joined the elves believing there was no hope. And now that's where you three come in!" He masked his hurting voice with a joyful tone. "You three are gifted with special abilities unlike any humans. Although we don't know what they are, when your souls began to develop there was a core in them unlike any other ones. Resting in the center."

"I'm sorry, I can't imagine losing your planet." River said as she paused, taking in the surroundings, the planet was beautiful for sure. The huge plants and ambient sounds they let out. As if sensing a piece of hope. Sky seemed oddly silent as if processing everything. Atropos thanked River silently while bowing his head. "We should be nearing the Elysian tree soon. Sky has seen it once, but I want to show you two the damage, *and the last we had of you girls.*" They continued to walk for a while longer, Elysia was beautiful. The biodiversity was huge and unlike Earth. But then everything began to die down once they reached the end of the yarrow forest. Just nearby they could see grey, lavender type of grass, it looked nothing like the green and vibrant wet grass they were walking on. "Dead land." River said, pointing towards the area. "I know, I saw it when I first came although I never had walked past it,

Atropos just took me to the tree in a blink of an eye.” Sky said brushing her hand through her hair making it go back. “A flock of Mirelunes are there, picking onto the soil.” Atropos purred leaping ahead as they came across a puddle that had little to no water. They crossed it and slowly approached the dead area. A bunch of Ravens were standing on a dried land, some on branches and large red rocks. They seemed to notice as the group approached, their black heads turning to them. “Dont look them in the eye.” Atropos warned as he led them through. The three tried to keep their heads forward but Sky instinctively looked one odd one in the eye. It was a moment of shock but she turned her head away quickly.

“N’realm.” She heard the raven say. Although she seemed to be the only one who could hear it. Once they passed through everyone seemed to be feeling uncomfortable. “That was scary. It was like every single ounce of positivity I ever felt had come back in all types of forms. The bad ones.” Lyn shivered. “Yeah, such an odd concept. The Ravens were awfully quiet despite playing for the other team.” River added on her eyes meeting Atropos. “Im not sure of that either, I was ready for them to attack. But they kept their peace. Very odd for mirelunes to do.” He said, sounding confused himself. Sky was nervous, her eyes flicking back to the dead area where she swore the ravens were still looking at her. Atropos could see something was wrong. “Is there anything you would like to announce? Sky.” He asked, sitting down as the very cool toned colors of Elysia’s sun rays reflected back onto his collar of diamonds. River and Lyn seemed confused by the question since they couldn’t suspect anything wrong within Sky. Sky on the other hand gave a very focused look to Atropos, her eyes squinting. “No, why would you ask that? Nothing on my mind.” She responded back in a very ominous manner. It was as if her demeanor had shifted in just a breeze. Atropos looked suspicious. “Very welluh.” He purred his eyes leaving hers. “It just seemed like you were...confused.” He added on continuing to walk forward, Lyn followed behind but River stood still, her eyes on Sky. But without saying anything she moved her body, trailing behind Atropos and Lyn. “Hold that. Atropos I actually *do* have something to say.” Sky shouted. Atropos paused, his head slowly turning, his tail started to move softly. “I figured.” He responded. Lyn stopped as well, turning to River to spare a glance. “Huh?” She mumbled.

“Tell me Atropos. Do we *have* to follow our destiny? The fate you all picked for us?” Sky spoke, her words not showing a clear message onto what she was feeling or what she meant. “Answer me, what good is human help to corruption? It truly won’t be gone even if we put our best efforts.” Atropos didn’t respond. He was silent in fact looking astonished by the question himself. “Sky, what?” River asked. “What are you trying to say?” River stepped closer as if Sky had taken a huge step back. Mentally River felt like she did. “Do you have an answer, Atropos? You saw the dead land we just walked past, what good are we to a reality that can’t be helped by its own. If we are destined for this, there’s no way out of it huh?” Sky continued on, completely ignoring what River had asked. “N’realm, you can’t be questioning fate are you?” Atropos finally spoke, just to quickly get talked over by Sky who seemed to have more passion in her voice now. “So what if I am? And my name is Sky, it always has been.” She said turning her back to them; Atropos felt a pang of fear, but it went as quickly as it came. “You’re doubting yourself. You saw it for yourself, you are one of the three, worshiped almost like Gods! You choose to turn your back now? Before you have even begun? You have a destiny, and fate cannot be changed. It’s your choice to go through it with doubt or with pride.” He responded raising his voice. “You are not a slave to our soil but rather a child of the stars.” Sky looked scared but there was something else she was masking in her eyes. *Trouble* River

could sense it easily, Lyn seemed to have caught on as well. She took off her backpack and grabbed a water bottle from it, handing it out for Sky.

“You’re letting the heat get to you, Sky please.” Lyn pleaded, her eyes roaming on her face, trying to catch every detail. “No Lyn! It’s not the heat—it’s me! *I CAN’T* do it!”

Sky yelled at her as she stepped back. Before anyone could react suddenly a large heavily feathered bird-like creature flew in from the sky. It looked almost exactly like a bird except, its head was replaced with that of a young maiden. The maiden had curly nappy hair that was as red as a blazing lily torchflower. “HARPY!” Atropos shrieked, his claws retracting. The girls didn’t have time to react, especially Sky who looked up too late. The Harpy latched its large orange claws onto Sky’s shoulders picking her up swiftly from the ground and into the air. Lyn let out a terrified scream. Sky’s eyes were wide and she reached out for them. River couldn’t muster or process fast enough to say anything. Lyn’s scream grew louder as she closed her eyes. “Oh my god...SKY!” She wailed, suddenly long stretchy thin white roots like branches emerged from the distance, where the corrupted land was, it scared off the ravens they began to croak and fly off as the roots came out from the dead grass. They tried to latch onto the harpy’s feet, they succeeded but in the end the harpy flew off, Sky was still struggling as she moved her legs around desperately.

Once Lyn had stopped screaming the roots died down going back into the soils of the dead land. “Sky...Lyn what did you just do?!” River gasped, Lyn looked confused. “Sky just got taken—huh?!” She asked, confused, “What did I do?” she said, holding her hand to her chest. “You just summoned dead roots out of that mirelune fested area, that’s... amazing what you just did there! When you screamed...!” Atropos said his collar glittering, and just underneath you could see his white chest fur. “I did what?!” Lyn gasped. “Hold on guys, Sky is literally GONE! That thing flew in and took her!” River butt in, her hands going up to her head, clearly stressed and worried. Her eyes said it all. “Harpies. That one probably took Sky back to its nests in the mountains. We must get to someone in order to help her. Perhaps he will help you.” Atropos nodded towards Lyn. “We must act fast.” Atropos said running ahead, River and Lyn wasted no time, no time at all. Both of them trying to match Atropos’s pace. River’s head snapped towards the Elysian tree, it was huge. Really huge. They passed it but River’s head stayed behind her shoulder. The bark was a lovely pale grey and seemed to take a spiral shape in the patterns that ran along the stumps to the dark sparkling branches. What caught her eye was the three barely developed fetus bodies in the center, a thick clear substance separating them from the outside air;*so it was true* she thought amongst herself. *That’s us.*

Meanwhile, Sky had been dropped off in a large nest, the redhaired harpy staring at her in adoration. “So it’s true, N’ealm has returned to us? Well ill be damned! Elysia can hold its ground?! I heard it all!” Sky looked terrified, her voice was raspy, like that of an old woman despite her youthful but ugly appearance. A few more stuck their head all up in Sky’s face, one with short curly hair that looked like the nest itself spoke. “Too bad she’s all bones. Otherwise I’d really think this darn reality had a chance.” This earned a laugh amongst them. The red hair spoke again. “No believe it or not, that pesky cat, Atropos brought N’oxtrya and N’efilite along as well!” She cursed, her voice filled with hate. “I don’t understand why he

doesn't turn to corruption! It did us harpies good." She added, "Besides Goll...." She smirked, turning to the black haired harpy. "Hes the last of his species with him on our side were practically already drifting to Earth!"

She snickered an evil glint in her eyes. "Aello, it isn't easy. That's like going toe to toe with the king of helheim!" The black haired harpy responded her eyes going back to Sky. "Now who's ready to watch one of the saviors of Elysia be downgraded to my DINNER!" She hissed, flapping her wings while letting out chirps. "NO WAIT! PLEASE!" Sky shouted, shielding her face cowardly, her hands clenching into her palms. "I have a proposition for you all!" She screamed, backing up. In reality Sky had no idea what she was going to do, what proposition was she going to make?! This was all to save *her* butt! "Yield!" The black harpy named Goll said, her wings in the air making a gesture that made the other harpies back off. "Elysia's spawn has a deal does she?" Goll smirked. "And what is your deal? N'ealm, enlighten us." She said as Sky crawled deeper into the nest. She didn't say anything, she crawled more towards the end of the nest. "I- I can help you. You...you want power over Atropos and the prophecy? Let me help you." She said not thinking. "You." She pointed to the red hair harpy that took her from her friends earlier. "You saw what Lyn had done. Well what N'eflite had done, she almost dragged you out of the free wind with the roots that were supposed to be dead!" She was basically out of air, her chest was heaving, her cheeks flushing into a light red.

"What good is your help to us?" Goll asked, quick to intervene. "What good is a little girl like you? With hair too big for you and a body with only bones." She gave a up and down look towards Sky who had her eyebrows furrowed now. "And you? You all are basically starving over here, with the dead grass and soil should you falter." She clapped back, although she was scared, she was more upset that they had dared to insult her while they were the most hideous creatures she had ever seen, Elysia *had* water, and if it didn't then they would have an excuse for looking so dirty and nappy! "We are doing just fine." Aello said her wings covered her mouth area as she brought it closer to her chest. "Well you could do even better, thrive better. With my help." Sky said standing up her eyes looking down from the nest, they were definitely above the clouds for sure, there was no doubt that the mere thought terrified her.

"You have a destiny to fulfill. *Be the savior of Elysia!*" They cackled. As their heads turned to each other laughing in a very unsettling way. Sky started to feel anger boiling in her gut. She felt humiliated, she wasn't a little girl, she wasn't a weak girl. She definitely wasn't weak, that was for sure. She was anything but *weak*. "If the elves had found-!" Before they could say anything more, Sky grabbed the red haired harpies' wings, gripping the feathers tightly. The harpy let out a shriek when Sky snapped her wing. For a split second black fire had started to spread all over her wing, before it reached her chest Sky let go of the wing. The fire stopped. The snarky and hellion personality of Goll was now completely gone; instead it was now replaced with cowardness. She shrieked as her wing started to bleed out. She stumbled as the other harpies hissed and panicked. She fell off the nest and Aello swung down to catch her bringing her up back to the nest. "M-M...MY WING! SHE BURNT IT OFF!" Goll yelled tears falling from her terror filled eyes.

Sky didn't know what she had just done. She was confused. Black fire had just burnt off Goll's wings, and all it took was some handling.

Prior to what just happened, Sky put back on the tough facade, even though she was dying inside she still eased her way in, like a hyena taking nibbles off the lion pride's prey. She stepped back, watching the shocked faces of the harpies, some looked like they were about to flee. Aello raised her dirty wings as if standing toe to toe with Sky. "Like I SAID!" She yelled. Her voice filled with shaky tension. "YOUR CHOICE! Live or *DIE* WITH ELYSIA." Her voice was like lightning to them. It rang their hearts out of their bodies and back in with her glare. The harpies looked at each other, then back at Sky, then towards Goll who looked not even a *breath away from death*.

They were scared. Definitely. Sky could almost crack a smile but she forced herself not to. *Who's weak now? Pesky birds.* She thought in her mind even though she wanted to say vulgar things to their ugly faces. The harpies continued to murmur to themselves. Before Aello stood besides Goll and nodded to them all. "Tha statouim masi sas!" She said her yellow, bird feet tapping amongst the branches and sticks of the nests. Sky had no idea what she said but it delivered a powerful message to the others. "Tha statouim masi sas!" They repeated. Then Aello turned to Sky. "We will stand with you, Ne'alm." She then let out a loud squeal and chirp, and just in a few minutes the wind started to feel different, clouds were getting pushed left and right and to Sky's shock more harpies flew in all repeating the same chirp. It was so loud Sky had to cover her ears, her hair began to move with the wind. Flowing back as their wings blew air to them. "No way."

During this time, Atropos had been leading River and Lyn somewhere. "Are we there yet?!" River huffed, out of breath completely. He turned back to look at them. "Almost, I can feel Anwir." He replied more to himself than the girls. *What did he mean by Anwir? Who **was** Anwir?* They saw a city come into view, it rested on a hill. The sun of Elysia began to set and the city was the only one that would continue to emit light, for it looked bright enough to act as the Elysian sun. They made their ways to the entrance where the gate was decorated with withering flowers, they were big and looked out of the ordinary. "How beautiful." Lyn awed taking in the city in front of them. The gateway had a pure white calcite bridge that led to huge canopy homes, there were ivy like vines but not quite draped over the railings. The entire city looked lushful, there were mushrooms that had their snouts bent down and a lantern shoved up them to give light. There were gold tapestries everywhere that lined the streets as decorations. What was most beautiful to them was the large waterfall in the center, with huge waterlilies there to aid the stream's beauty. "Welcome to the city of Aeonion, eternity, this gorgeous city was originally called Ne'emuanara. Before the cataclysm... nevertheless when this cataclysm is gone for good Aeonion should be restored to its former glory."

Atropos said, skipping towards the calcite bridge. "It was even more beautiful than this?" River doubted, her eyes slowly going to meet the darkening sky. "Atropos, does time work the same in Elysia? It's dark and me, Lyn and...Sky;We should all be going home." She asked, they were supposed to be back before school had ended. And she was sure if it was dark here then-! "No need to worry, it's barely been an hour on Earth since I fetched you two. Elysia's sun goes down much faster." Atropos said. "We are getting to the city center. Look out for the children of the dryad." He warned before leaping ahead faster. "The whut whut?" Lyn questioned, *children of the dryad?* Could they be like the fairies? She wondered, her mind

going back to the nice and overexcited red skinned and tiny creatures.

But as they approached those thoughts were crushed, there were tall both feminine and masculine olive skinned creatures roaming, speaking to each other, laughing. They had long fluffy pointed fox ears that were green and had tips of brown. Some had yellow tips. They had a human-like face but freckles covered them in the most beautiful way it could. They looked like they were kissed by the sun itself. They had similar hair colors but were very distinguished from the variation of styles. They wore weaved and crocheted clothes, and just when Lyn and River thought they couldn't look any more shocked, they realized the beings had hooves as feet! Once they walked closer, the children of the dryads seemed to pick up on them. Their vibrant and colorful eyes went wide, and some even rubbed their eyes. "N'efilite and N'oxtrya!" They said in unison. Some from afar who were shopping and looking at items turned their heads to look. River and Lyn both had flushed cheeks, they couldn't help but be embarrassed. They both waved and gave an awkward smile. The stars began to bloom in the night sky, and also apparently in the children of the dryad's eyes. "*You came! You all came! Where is N'ealm?! My goodness Elysia fights back!*", "*I can't believe it! They came after so long!*" Those words of hope filled both Lyn and River's ears. They were all counting on them. They approached closer, with adoration in their eyes when Atropos stopped them. "Dont get near, we have business, forgive me;But N'ealm has been kidnapped and no distractions can be in our way." He said getting in front of the girls once again. The children of the dryad were all shocked. Whispers broke out amongst them *N'ealm?! Gone! How can this be!?* They said, sounding worried. River cleared her throat. Silencing them in an instant without meaning to, their long ears perked waiting to hear what she had to say.

"The harpies took our beloved Sky and your hope, N'ealm. But, don't freight, because your motherland is fighting back, that is why we are here." She said raising her fist, she was nervous but she might as well act the role because these people, these beings trusted her. And she should trust them. *It was only right.* Lyn smiled a bit at River's speech. She put her hand on her chest. "Shes right, stand and fight with us! Those who turned their back on their motherlands shall be the ones to falter with this cataclysm!" Lyn added on. Her eyes filled with an unwavering defiance. The children of the dryads burst into cheers. Circling them. Atropos watched as he stepped back, a small smile evident from his whiskers, he shook his head but deep inside he was happy. Happy that they would bring peace and he would be here for it. To witness the birth and death of the cataclysm.

*Later* after the cheers and crowds, they stepped inside a shop that had a rusty old wooden sign that wrote, "welcome!" It looked like an apothecary shop once they entered, it was filled with plants and canned jars of gosh knows what. There were spilled books on the ground and a very messy spiral staircase. There was a dryad child who came running down when he heard the bell ring for a new arrival. He was much taller, blonde hair that was short and frizzy, he smiled. "Well if it isn't Atropos and- MY GOD! IS THAT NE'FILITE AND N'OXTRYA?! IT IS SUCH AN HONOR TO MEET YOU BOTH!" He squealed, he had freckles only on his nose and his ears perked as he made his way over. "My name is Asaemon! What brings you to a lowly shop like mine?" He grinned big with his crooked teeth showing and all. He let out his hand waiting to shake theirs, he had wooden woven bracelets and cat scratches on his long hands. "H-hi? Call me River, this is Lyn." River nodded, not shaking his

hand, but Lyn did. "We came here looking for Anwir." Atropos said. "After all he owes me." he whistled as he jumped onto the staircase railing. "Dam it, why do you remember things for so long, Atropos?" Said a cheeky voice; A skinny and long black cat emerged out behind the counter. He was smaller than Atropos, and his eyes were like flies. Large and endless light blue. He retracted his claws. "Are you talking about a fight? Cuz I will bust you up." He said purring and stretching his long skinny limbs.

"No Anwir, turn behind you." Atropos suggested jerking his onyx tail to River and Lyn. Anwir shifted his head and then he laughed, an unwary sound, he bowed his head. "Ne'filite and N'oxtrya. Greetings."

River and Lyn shared a glance but gave back a curt nod to the cat. "This is Anwir, he is a matagot, and he's also a liar so do not listen to his foolish questions or statements, Now. Asaemon here takes care of Anwir, they have a blood pact, Anwir gifted him the ability to be able to craft any medicine he desired. In exchange Asaemon gave up blood." Atropos paused, seeing the discomfort in River's eyes. "So you're saying you want us to make a blood pact with him? Like selling our soul to the devil?" She shook her head. "No, no way." Atropos sighed. "Your grace, I don't want you to make a blood pact with him, that is my part. I want him to grant you the ability to have total control of your power, and yours soon to reveal." He turned to Lyn then to River. "And Asaemon, It would be so kind of you to lend Anwir to us." Asaemon shrugged. "Sure why not? In fact I'd be more than happy to let this bloodthirsty beast here tag along! I want nothing but the best." He smiled, he seemed very happy, for someone who was living in the cataclysmic era he looked the least affected by the fact. "If it helps the saviors of Elysia, then go for it. In fact, take this glutton off my back." He joked earning a laugh from River and Lyn; Anwir scoffed as he went up the stairs a few. "Fool, don't know what he's talking about." He turned to face them all. "But I would be more than happy to help you two, possibly even N'ealm's lost case." Anwir smiled, they couldn't really tell but he was a hairless cat and they could see every movement he made facially. River's eyebrows shot down as he brought up Sky. "She is not a lost cause, anything but that." Anwir didn't bother to respond to that, the exchange of River and Anwir created a heavy tension in the air, Asaemon noticing this he cleared his throat to bring some light in the mist. "Would you all like some passionflower tea?" He asked hands on his hips. "Oh of course, I love tea. What is passionflower tea?" Lyn asked, nodding, "I've never had passionflower tea." Asaemon started to go up the spiral staircase. "Then let this be your first." He said disappearing upstairs, it was just Atropos, Anwir, Lyn and River downstairs until Asaemon called from above. "Are you all coming or not?" Lyn ran up the stairs and Anwir followed behind; River stayed and Atropos did as well, "He doesn't mean it. He's always been the joking type." Atropos assured trying to see anything that River was hiding. "Hes right in a way." River replied, her voice low and accusing, "She just turned her back on us, over her doubts. What was more important? Us? I think not." Her fists clenched slowly by her side and her head was down a bit.

"She was scared, and I admire her for fighting back against her fate. But don't keep your doubts close." Atropos advised. Going up the stairs before stopping to look back at her. "I mean it." He added one last time before joining the others. River took a deep breath and then let it out. "I mean it!" She muttered mockingly, but she knew doubting herself wouldn't do anything to bring Sky back. After thinking to herself she heard the laughter of Lyn and decided to go upstairs.

The next morning came fast, Lyn had been the first one awake, she rubbed her eyes going to the window since it still looked pretty dark outside, to her surprise there was a large storm cloud above the city, and lightning was striking on a high mountain, she noticed some dryad children watching from the window like her. The city looked gloomy, much different from the bustling whimsy vibe yesterday, she turned to Atropos shaking his body slightly, his diamond collar making a clattering noise. He opened his eyes reluctantly. "Hm?" He questioned, tail wagging a bit in annoyance. "Look, it's unusually dark outside. The sun is all covered up." Lyn told him, hands going to grab her backpack that was resting next to a dark red futon. The noise of it all woke up River. "Is it morning...?" She groaned, sitting up and stretching. Atropos leaped and stretched his limbs, letting out a wide yawn, his yellow stained fangs showing, wanting to see it for himself he jumped onto the purple and teal window sill, his eyes taking in the dark weather before a worried expression took over his face. "I fear this isn't just any weather changes." He mumbled, "What-?" River said, rubbing her head, "Anwir come on, we have to act today." Atropos called out to the sleeping matagot who rose with a purr. "What is it?" He said with an annoyed scoff. "Asaemon were going to be leaving now, thank you for your hospitality." He said as he jumped down the spiral staircase. Lyn followed as River slowly got off the futon, she felt lightheaded and confused, everything was so sudden. She couldn't process it in time. Anwir and River both went down as well. They had no time to fully be ready as Atropos slid out the door.

"Why is he in such a rush?" Lyn asked as she opened the door, it was quiet outside, like something bad was going to happen. They could feel it in their gut. River trailed behind the two with Anwir matching her pace right on her trail. "Where are we even going?" River said huffing. "I haven't even woken up fully!" she said as she stopped her hands on her knees, she was out of breath already. I mean everything was so sudden and rushed. "Atropos the blood pact!" Anwir shouted, stopping with River. The dryad children from the windows waved to them. Some lifted their windows and yelled. "Schlem! N'efilite, N'oxtrya!" River turned to Atropos who was staring at the mountain where lightning was striking. "What did they say?" River asked. "Good Luck." Atropos responded his voice filled with weary, "Anwir we must do it now, right now. I fear you may have been right." He mumbled turning towards Anwir who nodded curtly. "What? Right about what?" Lyn asked taking her backpack off to grab a water bottle and hand it to River who chugged it. Once her mouth released the opening of the plastic bottle she threw the empty thing aside. "You're gonna do it now? In the middle of the street? The pact?" River asked her palm pressed against her forehead as if measuring her temperature. "Yes there is no time, believe me." Atropos said, "Besides we only know of Lyn's power and so far to me it looks like Sky found out hers." He walked over to Anwir, then he held his head up high.

"Smart." Anwir acknowledged, his paw going to grip Atropos's collar of glittering diamonds. "Where do you want me to extract it?" He asked; something about the way he said that question made River and Lyn infer that he didn't usually give the freedom of a choice to the usual. "The leg is fine but make it quick." Atropos said quickly, not even stopping to ponder the thought. "Lyn don't watch." River said, covering Lyn's eyes but Lyn shoved her hand away. "Stop that, it'll be quick." River took a big gulp as Anwir took apart one diamond from Atropos's collar. The sharpest one. Then *SLASH!* Atropos let out a whine but it went as quickly as it came. Anwir then smudged Atropos's blood on the diamond before he pressed it against the skinny and stretchy black skin on his own chest. River and Lyn watched in

amusement as the diamond slowly submerged in his chest. The matagot's eyes turned into a lighter blue, almost glowing. The dryad children watched the scene unfold, some backed off a bit into their canopy houses. It was silent now, besides the sound of wind and the thunder on the mountain ahead. Then Atropos spoke, saying things River and Lyn didn't understand. It was in a different language but it didn't sound like the ones the Elysian folks spoke.

Surprisingly the wound on Atropo's leg healed fast leaving a developing scar. Atropos stood up straight again before giving a nod towards Anwir who looked like he had just been hydrated again. Atropos then turned to River and Lyn staring at them. "I'm afraid Sky is currently helpless right now. I'll explain everything on the way." Atropos told them as he leaped ahead, Anwir on the other hand waited for the girls to follow Atropos then he trailed behind them.

Besides all the confusion and pangs of fear River and Lyn felt; they had a gut feeling that the news was gonna be worse than they were expecting. As they stayed close to Atropos not straying from his lead the wind got stronger, it was a warm breeze but the atmosphere was starting to get even more gloomy than it already was. "What is it? What did you need to say?" River asked curiously, stars behind her eyes. *Come on, what's the big deal?* She thought impatiently. "Not too long before I came to get you N'oxtrya; I came to Anwir and told him, if anything was to go wrong or you three were to separate, I would make a blood pact with him. To the best of my abilities and beyond I would aid you three. Anwir tell them your vision." River's head turned to look behind Lyn, towards Anwir as she kept moving. "When Atropos came to me. I saw the night before, that one of the three was to falter and be the downfall and the heir of the cataclysm corruption. I warned him and now it looks like that vision has *manifested* itself into reality." When Anwir finished explaining they had left the city. But a flock of ravens flew over them, on the way to the mountain. "Mirelunes...not a great sign, let's hurry our speed." Atropos panicked.

They approached the lightning struck mountain, as they got closer it looked more like a hill but it had sharp edges and a stony surface. "How are we gonna get up there?" Lyn said, her head was lifting to watch a bunch of harpies gather. "Harpies...what could they possibly be doing with Sky...?" River added onto her question as if she should've pondered that first. "Vice versa. What could Sky be doing with them?" Anwir said as he leaped around, then latching onto one part of the stony edge. "Same thing!" Lyn scoffed rolling her eyes, there was a feeling in her gut, it wasn't going away but rather growing. She turned to River. "*We're in this together.*" River whispered, Lyn closed her eyes holding onto that thought. "No time for cozying up." Atropos said as he jumped up with Anwir his claws unsheathed. River and Lyn took a deep breath as they gripped onto the stony surface and struggled to climb. They were both running out of breath and groaning. "There was no alternative?!" Lyn scoffed, almost breaking a sweat. Atropos and Anwir were already up; they didn't respond. Suddenly they heard Sky's voice. "If you're here to convert me. It ain't working so beat it unless you're asking for a death-wish."

"Fool Atropos dead by *you*? I heard it all." Anwir snickered; Lyn and River, who were still climbing, hurried up and River swore she scraped herself. It was a stinging pain in her palm but she didn't question it. She felt betrayed and she couldn't fathom to think what Lyn was feeling. River had an angry look on her face when she saw Sky. She was on the back of a Harpy. A nappy black haired harpy with an ugly expression, almost waiting to attack, there

were multiple other harpies that were flying around, some coming in and some coming out of a dark pit in the middle of the valley. There were these elf looking like creatures, long deformed ears, and all had messy hair. They were in barely any attire. They had on what looked like leaves and mud. But they had on floral headwears. They didn't pay any mind to Atropos and the rest. They seemed to be busy with something else as they passed each dead crop to each other and down the dark pit. "Sky." River said her voice loud and accusing. "EXPLAIN YOURSELF!" She added on, her eyes basically throwing daggers at her. "Save it!" Sky spat back pointing a finger to her, the finger engulfed in black flames. "You can sink into this soil like a cicada before Atropos's paws! I won't have my destiny chosen for me." Once she set her finger down the flames calmed down, there were clouds covering the once beautiful and soft sky, a dark aroma in the air. Atropos stepped forward, "There is still time, N'ealm." His voice was soft, like he was begging her.

"My name is SKY." Sky snarled, almost lunging off the harpy. As they quarrelled Anwir took note of Rivers posture. It was tense and slightly hunched. Her breathing was rigid, coming out in big puffs. Lyn was watching it all unfold her eyes softening as she saw the disregard in Sky's eyes, she too felt betrayed, she felt upset that Sky could've been swayed easily. Atropos walked forward, he knew Sky was going to attack, but it looked like River was going to as well. "You team up with these harpies. With these traitors and think that the energy dead belongs to you? So you become a traitor yourself? What is the reason? How do you benefit?" He asked his frame toe to toe with Sky's as she got off Aello's matted feathered back. "She gets satisfaction! There is no other reason she's doing this!" River blurted out her fists clenched hard by her side to the point it was turning almost white. "You're wrong. I get benefitted with the wind and song of freedom." She said her gaze still focused on Atropos's wandering one. "Freedom from what?" Lyn said, stepping closer but Sky raised her palm, her fingertips engulfed in that black blazing fire once again. "If you have to ask, you don't understand." Sky replied, her hazel eyes shifting to where River was. She was tensing up, real fast too. River felt like there was a fire in her that needed to be put out, along with the black fire on Sky's fingertips.

Suddenly, without any other thoughts and thinking. River lunged towards where Sky stood. Aello flapped her wings and shrieked behind her. "YOUR LIVING IN AN ILLUSION! YOU'VE CHOSEN YOUR **PATH** SKY!" River yelled and with nobody expecting it, her hands went up and crossed, it looked like she was crossing her arms for no apparent reason until the ground began to shake and four decaying creatures clawed out of the dirt. They didn't breathe nor did they seem to be zombies. Atropos was shocked as he lunged out of the way. The decaying creatures seem to be moving according to River's command, Atropos watched as River moved her fingers. "Shes moving like...like a puppeteer." He inferred. "A What?!" Lyn gasped her hands going up to her mouth to cover it in shock. Despite the sudden attack from River, Sky on the other hand was quick to react. She didn't hesitate to defend herself, and wasted no time doing it either. She was still very flawed with the control of her flames. Anwir could see, in fact he'd been observing her, trying to figure her out. What he had noticed was the amount of times Sky had flinched right before her flames could come back out. Sky ran towards the puppet like decaying creatures. She touched the fuzzy mold-like texture on one of the puppet's head, the puppet was immediately cut off from River's connection, however the puppet had been moving, it was now dead again on the dirty grass as it burned in the

voidlike fire. "Give it up River!" Sky yelled doing the exact same thing to the other puppets. Leaving none left. River looked shocked, she stepped back and looked at her palms, seeming more concerned about what she had just done; She recovered quickly, doing the same thing with her arms, crossing it and watching as more decayed creatures crawl out of the dirt. "If you can't be overpowered, then you'll only be...outnumbered!" River spat back trying her best to do what she could.

"Shes slipping! Atropos I thought after you made the pact we had total control over what we could do!" Lyn said, her hand dropping from her mouth to her chest. She was scared, her friends that she loved more than anyone else were fighting and here she was, just standing there, she wanted to do something but she wanted to do it without hurting Sky. Without hurting River! But from the looks of it she didn't know if she could even get close enough to hurt either of them. They were very powerful. "Do something...Atropos." She pleaded towards him, but she did not look at him or Anwir. Her eyes were solely focused on the two. River kept on bringing up the dead while Sky burnt them to a crisp. "River won't stop until there are no more dead to come back up." Anwir commented. Suddenly Aello, the harpy that Sky had mounted, had a strange posture as if she was going to attack and join in the fight.

Lyn was the only one to notice and the moment the harpy was going to take flight she screamed trying the same trick she had done the first time. To her surprise it still worked. The dead and pale roots immediately came out of the ground; they looked stronger on this land. More thicker. But dead, all the water had dried out of them. All the energy.

The roots snatched onto Aello's yellow and dirty bird feet. Lyn had a theory, if she stopped screaming the roots would stop moving. Maybe if she acted like she was screaming. *Yelling*. Yeah that'd be right. She thought as she paused her shrieking. "YOU STAY RIGHT THERE!" Lyn said immediately after. She walked closer to the harpy, River and Lyn who were busy quarreling paid no mind to what was going on, lost in the midst of their own chaos.

She kept on insulting the harpy, while the roots attacked it and tried to tear it apart. The pale roots plucked Aello's feathers and she whined and moaned. Atropos watched this, his eyes glancing towards the elves, then he saw them make their move.

They quickly marched, coming closer to where they fought. "ANWIR NOW!" He yelled and at the same time he did. Lightning struck. Hard, Anwir opened his mouth and all the three saw was a blinding white light.

There was some silence, River stopped turning to look around, everything seemed frozen in time, the elves weren't moving, not even a speck of air hit their face, Sky turned. Anwir didn't move, Atropos seemed frozen as well like everything else, Lyn, River and Sky along with her harpy Aello seemed to be the only ones that were able to move. "What happened?!" River said as she skipped back, distancing herself and Sky. "He trapped us, that's what!" Sky said as she spun back as well, she was starting to sweat. She might reach her limit if she continued. "That's who you all trust? A destiny trapper?" Sky accused, she lifted her palm, which was dripping with the corrupted sparks of her fire. She aimed her arm towards River. "I have chosen my path, that may be right, but I won't let that path be disturbed by obstacles like you." River let out a harsh bark of laughter. "Really? Like me huh--well you can go and shove that statement up your--!" Before River could finish Aello who was getting assaulted

by Lyn's dead roots Picked up Lyn by her arm with her large mouth. "H-HEY! GET OFF!" Lyn protested, River gasped. "Lyn hang in there!" Lyn was screaming in pain. The roots tightened on Aello's wings, more roots began to shoot out as Lyn screamed and cried in pain. "You IDIOT! DROP HER! THE ROOTS REACT TO HER VOICE! YOU'LL KILL YOURSELF TRYING TO KILL HER!" Sky said, gritting her teeth. She jumped over Anwir's frozen body, then she went on Aello's back. She burnt some of the roots. But her fire went out suddenly. Then it flickered again. She looked confused. *Is it rejecting?!* She panicked inside. Without unwavering, she had no choice except to jump off Aello and grip onto Lyn's other arm bringing her back down. There was a large cut across Lyn's arm, her hair was tousled and she backed off falling on her rear.

River swept in and pushed Sky off. "Changing your mind?" She asked, there was a harsh tone in her voice. "No thanks, I'd rather change your...FACE!" Sky let out a cackle that seemed almost forced, before her burning hot fire could touch Rivers face. "SKY stop!" Lyn barked out, she was almost losing her voice and it definitely impacted her. Roots quickly gathered from Aello's wings and feet to grip onto Sky's feet and arms, preventing her from moving any further. "Lyn get these things off of me!" Sky roared, River who was sweating and on the brink of exhaustion, gasped for air before crouching and digging her hands in the soil, she then swiftly moved back and lifted her arms up her fingertips moving in an hypnotizing way. "I hope this makes a difference." She muttered to herself. Two more decaying puppets rose up. Aello fell behind Sky, she had lost too much blood. She was too weak to go on, Sky burnt some of Lyn's roots. Lyn was still saying things to see if she had a change of mind, but Sky didn't budge. River's decayed puppets gripped onto Sky's arms and held her in place.

Having enough, Sky's flames finally exhausted themselves, her fingertips were crisped. She was breathing heavily. Her eyes darted glares at both of them. "Theres still time, Sky." River said, holding her hand out. Sky closed her eyes and took a moment to answer, she felt angry, so angry. "Theres no time left for you to tell me what to do."

River looked towards Lyn, who was staring at Sky with sympathy. "Maybe, you have always been stubborn." Lyn commented, her hand going to grab her shoulder. "So let me be stubborn. Leave me be." Sky clapped back, still struggling just a bit. River, who was already stressed, held her tongue. "You are thinking with your brain. Which is not you, never you. Think with this!" She yelled pointing a finger to her chest where her heart rested inside. "With your heart! Think of me and Lyn, we have been with you since we could barely form words, our souls even longer!" Her voice was filled with passion and a slight beg, because she wanted this to end. She wanted to end the tension between them three. *She wanted her friend back.* "Enough with this crap!" She head butted one of the puppets and pulled herself out of the roots.

Lyn and River quickly tensed up again. "You two don't know what I need! What I want! Who I am!" She stepped back, and tears began to spill from her eyes. "This is one of my last chances to prove myself! I won't give that up, and you won't make me!" As she began to yell, clouds of black began to come from all over, the soil, the sky, and everything else that was around. But the biggest provider was Dilu Erentu. The tree of Elysia;Where their barely developed infant bodies lay. There were massive dark clouds coming from the tree, and it was all being fed

into Sky. She groaned in pain as she harnessed all the energy. Her fingertips began to twitch and Lyn backed up grabbing River's wrist. "What–Sky...." River said under her breath. *Can we catch a break?!* Sky had no thoughts on her mind, all she could do was absorb the foreign dark energy. She felt like she was traveling through a black hole. She could also taste the energy. It tasted bitter, she moaned and whined, her body trying to fight back. She parted her lips to say something but all that came out was deep and heavy breaths. "Stop it...Sky!" Lyn watched as Sky's tears dried up the moment they came out of her eye, it was like her body was changing.

River and Lyn felt like they were hallucinating. They backed up. She started to grow taller. Her nails started to sharpen and she writhed in pain. "She can't take it! River what do we do?!" Lyn panicked, her voice was hoarse from screaming to control the roots. Suddenly Atropos from behind started to move, River heard the movement and turned her head fast, "Wait a minute, I thought time was frozen!" She said as Atropos leaped in front of them. Standing in front of Sky. "Back up!" He yelled, "Time *IS* frozen! I managed to wake up before everything else. Anwir should wake up soon as well."

"You both have done your part, now let me." He said and removed the diamond collar from his neck using his mouth. The white fur in the center of his chest began to glow. The dark energy going towards and into sky began to shoot towards Atropos. It all went inside the center of the white fur, Sky groaned even more.

"Dont hurt her please!" Lyn begged, wanting to reach out and hug Sky's form. "I–...I think he's the one going to get hurt." River said, pulling Lyn into an embrace. "It's okay. Everything will be fine." She comforted, although she craved comfort as well. Sky twitched and writhed on the ground, her face rubbing against the soil. "ARGH–...AH!" She cried out. Atropos continued to collect all of the energy. There were moments of silence, Lyn covered her eyes, collecting all the tears and sniffles in her palm. "I just want to go home...." She stammered over her words. "I want to go home too." River responded, trying to hold back her own tears. Suddenly the writhing and crying of Sky stopped, Atropos fell to the ground roughly, with a sharp purr. River and Lyn ran to Atropos. His eyes were soft, His pupils dilated. He looked completely drained. River picked him up and put him on her lap. "Atropos...Are you okay?"

He didn't say anything, he took deep breaths, his head turning to Sky's limp form, who was staring at them with guilt.

"I'll go check up on Sky." Lyn said as she rushed towards Sky. Wrapping her in an embrace. River slowly pet Atropos. "Thank you. For everything" Atropos said to her finally, his elegant voice now all vulnerable and soft. He was purring, almost in an empty way. "Thank *YOU*." River said a tear falling onto his stomach. "Answer me, are you alright?" She asked. "No, barely holding on." Atropos responded, his voice cracking. "Dont joke, be serious." River mumbled, she thought he was being sarcastic.

"Im serious, it's too much for me to handle. All this energy." He choked out his paws gripping onto her lap. Although his claws remained sheathed. "May it go back to Elysia, Pure.

May it go back when I decompose into the Elysian tree's roots." He took a deep breath. Then closed his eyes. A moment of silence passed. "Atropos." River muttered.

No response.

"Atropos...." She shook him softly. Yet again despite her nudging, he didn't budge. Her eyes started to well up with hot tears once again. "Atropos please!" She begged, but she knew no matter what, no matter how many times she begged and pleaded. He wasn't going to wake up and guide them like before. "Atropos...." She trembled her hands going up to her face as she let the tears finally fall. Footsteps came up behind her. "River...Atropos is he?" Lyn asked her eyes wide, Sky was behind her, her eyes drained, she reached out to touch River but she thought she probably shouldn't. "Hes gone." River said, wiping her tears. "He sacrificed himself for us, for Elysia." River said her voice was quiet. "Oh Atropos." Lyn gasped, her voice starting to quiver and tremble. "It's my fault. It's all my fault. I'm so, so sorry." Sky said, crouching down to touch Atropos's still warm form. "Forget it...." River said her eyes softened when she turned to stare at Atropos in her lap again.

Suddenly Anwir's form came to life, he no longer was frozen in time. He made his way and stared at the three, then at Atropos. His expression shifted. "Goodbye old friend." He said softly. He knew it was coming after all, and there was no other way he would've wanted it. Nobody could change the mind of 'Atropos the end'. His decision was final. "Reality's going to revert back to normal. Thank you, from Elysia." Anwir said his eyes never leaving Atropos's body.

River stood up as Sky picked up Atropos holding his now so frail body close. Lyn followed behind, she looked traumatized. Anwir finally reverted the reality back. His eyes a light blue glow once again. The wind flew by fast and The three girls could hear the sound of clocks ticking and hand moving. Suddenly when they turned around to face the edge of the cliff. The harpies were nowhere to be seen, the elves were being held tightly by...centaurs. There was a large population of creatures staring up at them in adoration. The children of the dryads were there, The fairies, there were even more of the matagot cats. Ravens were watching from afar as well. To their surprise, everything they ever heard from fairy tales, every creature they have ever heard of, were all there. The gloomy cloud had been lifted.

They burst into cheers and applause. It was loud, it caused vibrations amongst the ground. Sky split more tears as she held Atropos close. River was silent, her eyes wide, they were all busted up. Dirty face. Messy hair. Disheveled clothes. Definitely not the look for presentation and cheers. As the cheers died down Sky stepped closer to the edge and held Atropos's body high for everyone to see. "Everyone of Elysia!" She yelled, her voice loud and clear. "Atropos! May he rest in the soils of his motherland! And may Elysia hold this child close to its heart! FOR HE SACRIFICED HIS LIFE FOR THE JOY OF OTHERS!"

There was silence, then they all held their hands, even those without arms improvised. "*For Atropos!*"

They were back at Lyn's treehouse by the time Elysia had retaken its corrupted nature back. Everyone was silent, the rush of adrenaline had left. Sky looked guilty. And she was.

She felt horrible. Anwir closed the void back up. “Atropos, he...he made a different pact with me. He not only sacrificed himself, he knew Sky was going to devour the energy, absorb it. He made a pact to turn himself into the magnet for that energy. When the time came, he told me he would be the one to leave. He was clever.” Anwir said as he sat on a record-player. “I thank you all. I can’t enough. Atropos has trusted you all. Deeply.” River looked towards Sky and Lyn. “He lives in Elysia, and we’ll tell his story.” She said as she went over to Sky, pulling her into an embrace, Sky quickly wrapped her arms around her. “Till the end of time.” Sky whispered back softly.

Anwir nodded as he jumped off the record-player. He rubbed his head against Lyn. Purring before he stood next to a wooden plank pillar in the treehouse. “It’s farewell then.” Lyn sighed. “Not forever of course, never forever. Elysia awaits you, soon. *Soon.*” Anwir said. “*Notice the mystic and it shall notice you.*” He walked through the pillar and didn’t come out the other way.

## ***Helen’s Journeys***

### ***The First Journey***

**Lucia Gajdosik**

#### Chapter 1: The Teleporter

It was a mess. Li had never seen such a mess at her friend’s house before. The place was scattered with bolts, bobbins and, horror of horrors, needles. Those made Li suddenly very cautious. She picked her way with much precision, knowing one misstep and the silver metal would be right through her toe.

Her friend was sitting in the middle of the room, humming happily. She held in her hand a metal box to which many bolts had been attached to numerous screws driven through. She sat peering and twisting the bolts attentively, giving no notice to her friend who

had just entered the room behind her. She knew, of course, that her friend had entered, yet she gave no sign of it.

This was the first time that Li had been to her friend Helen's house, and she had not expected this at all. She looked around, rather shy now. She started to stammer nervously, "Uh, hello—Helen?"

"Li!" Helen cried out happily, getting up from her project.

"Oh, Li, just look at how well it's turning out! We can go set it up right after dinner."

She smiled at Li, excited. Then, as quickly as she had got up, she dropped back onto the floor and continued twisting several bolts.

Li sat down on the floor next to Helen. She peered at the shiny, metal bolts Helen kept twisting and sprinkling with a purple powder.

"What are you making?" Li asked.

"I knew you'd say that," Helen replied without looking up. "And—"

Helen paused, looking around carefully. Turning her gaze to Li, she stared at her warily.

Li glanced back fearfully. Had something bad happened?

Suddenly, Helen broke into a grin. She leaned closer to Li and whispered eagerly, "I'll let you in on the secret, if you don't mind coming along with me."

"Coming along where?" asked Li.

"On a fine adventure—I've finally managed to make up one."

"You still haven't answered my question, though."

"It's a teleporter."

"Like the ones in the science fiction movies, right?"

Helen sat back, aghast. "You think those are teleporters?"

Honestly, I don't know what those movie makers were aiming for, but

unfortunately they fell quite short of a teleporter. Now, these things are rather easy to make, which is what makes them so hard to figure out. Inventing this one was—well, let's just say it was very delicate work. I'll finish this up soon, though. Just watch and see.”

Helen carefully placed her delicately designed box—or teleporter—onto the driveway.

“You ready?” Helen asked Li, straightening up, full of anticipation.

“Ready,” Li replied.

Helen had asked her to pack everything that they would possibly need for their journey, and Li now had everything properly gathered in a black bag that was currently hanging over her shoulder. Rope, knives, matches, dried food, and a blanket bounced around inside.

Li was hoping that she hadn't forgotten anything. Not that it would matter much. At least, Li thought so. She didn't really know whether to believe that her friend had invented a teleporter.

“But it honestly doesn't matter,” Li thought to herself. “If it is true, I am all ready, and if it isn't, so what?”

Li glanced over to where Helen was standing and resolved to wait and see.

Suddenly, Helen started brightening visibly. She stood with a big smile on her face, her special grin, which meant that she had discovered something amazing. She put her hands on her hips in satisfaction.

Before her and Li was a dazzling sphere. The sun gleamed and sparkled like a diamond at every angle. The world around them

seemed to grow dim and pale.

Li marveled, "This is so unreal."

Helen tried to step through the mysterious sphere above the odd box, but in vain. Nothing happened. Then the sphere vanished from sight and the girls never saw it again.

"No!" Helen screamed angrily. She kicked the box passionately.

Purple powder rained down like her rage; the box lay beyond repair.

Li felt tired, and as she swayed her head began to swim. She felt herself falling down. Down, down, she fell. Everything was a blur and a horrible dream, a dream that filled Li's eyes with watery tears.

Helen's hand grabbed her arm with more strength than the poor girl had felt in her life. Suddenly, all things stopped.

## Chapter 2: Secret Creatures

The air felt musty. Somewhere overhead a car sped noisily. The sound of water dripping slowly could be heard. All was dark and dreary and dreadful.

Exactly what Helen wanted. Exactly where Li had promised to go. And Li would follow her friend anywhere. So here they were.

"Quickly and carefully," her friend murmured quietly to Li.

She crept stealthily along the slimy walls. Li followed faithfully.

They seemed to be in a sort of long tunnel, through which shafts of light occasionally shone through from above. A small stream of water trickled near their feet. Bits of trash were piled around, or fluttered sadly about the dim corridor. It was a lonely, forgotten place.

"Where do you think we are?" Helen asked, puzzled. She looked around, sniffing the air. Li glanced above, to where the light streamed in through some kind of grating. She almost thought that she could

glimpse the sky, floating far, far, away. Suddenly, a thought came to her.

“Helen, I know where we are. We are under the road,” Li declared, pointing to the light overhead. “Where the light comes in is actually the drain grates for the road. I think we might be able find a ladder that goes down here. You know, like the metal ones built on the sides of walls?”

“Wow, you figured that out fast, Li. I’m so glad you came along!”

Helen cried happily.

She took Li’s hand, and they began snooping around for any sign of a way up onto the street above. The two girls searched for twenty minutes. Up and down the wide tunnel they searched. As time progressed, they began to search more frantically. Finally, they came upon a small passage about three feet wide, situated randomly in the side of one of the walls. The dim light around them stopped at the entrance of the chasm; beyond it was as black as a wolf’s den.

“Let’s go,” Helen said determinedly.

Li asked wisely, “But what if it’s a trap? Suppose we couldn’t get out once we went in.”

Helen considered this for a minute. Suddenly, she slipped inside the crack. Li, afraid of being left both behind and alone, quickly followed her inside. It was a dead-end passage. Li settled down at the end of the fissure near Helen, who was urging Li to keep quiet and hide her face and hands. “Our skin shines in the dark, Li. If we hide our hands and faces, we might be able to be passed by without attracting notice.”

Just then, a group of people came up. They walked leisurely

along but made little noise, so as not to provoke the anger of their leader or look impudent. They chatted silently to each other in Chinese. Helen was quite baffled by it all, but Li listened carefully, making note of everything they said, especially the words of two certain deep and stern voices near the end of the group. She knew a bit of Chinese by speaking to her uncle. Here is what she heard, with dots where she missed what they said or couldn't understand it:

"... You know he wanted it so much..."

"Well, once we send those invisible creatures we'll have enough things..."

" Money and pay and what else? You know Cray could never stand them, and by...I doubt we will end up on top, if you know what I mean..."

" Yet things are quite fine. After all, business with CVZ in the United States is always problematic...but things seem to be going smoothly now at least."

"Look, Han, we send the U.S branch of our secret society, that CVZ, those invisible creatures for them to do their business with, and then what...He never could."

"...so where do we have to be tomorrow?"

"The main subway, by the embassies...great frogs...five minus eight..."

When the men had passed Helen jumped up and began to pursue them, but at a distance. Li also stood up, dumbfounded, still pondering the conversation. Suddenly, she realized Helen had gone and, with a start, ran out of the crack and back into the tunnel to follow her. She caught up easily (they were both good runners).

She said to Helen, “Where are you going?”

Helen whispered back, “They know the way out and soon shall we. By the way, did you understand what those men were saying?”

### Chapter 3: The Vice President’s Kindness

“I’ve found it,” Li cried out happily. “It’s over by those gardens.”

Helen’s sneaky grin appeared on her face and her eyes began to dance. She stood thinking, while Li waited in anticipation. A little while before, the girls had climbed out of the musty tunnel and realized they were in China, in the capital city of Beijing. Helen and Li had felt hopelessly lost in such a big city. Then, Helen had proposed that they look for the U.S Embassy and find someone to tell their plight to. The girls were now in a small alley, hidden behind a wire fence covered in ivy. A small plastic wrapper flew by in the wind. Helen began to speak.

“I think I have it all figured out. We’ll have to sneak in because we don’t have any paperwork to show the people in the embassy. If we lay low by those gardens until someone opens that gate by the front, we can dive in quick as a wink and creep along the edge of the fence. That will hopefully cause some disturbance, and then people will come by the front entrance to investigate. When that door opens, we shall bolt through the door, past the security guards, and remain for a while in some hiding place until we can regroup.”

“Sounds very likely that we’ll get caught,” Li added thoughtfully.

Helen replied firmly, “It’s the only plan we’ve got. If you can think of a better one soon, then do so. You are probably right about this plan ending up badly, but we have to do something, and I’m going to try it—we can make it work.”

Li wasn't in the mood to argue. "Alright then, let's try it," she said as cheerfully as she could. So off they went. Helen decided they should split up to avoid suspicion. Li wasn't too thrilled about that, but she decided to do it for Helen, who knew much more about "adventures" than her. Winding along through the crowded streets past the motley buildings, she felt a strange sensation of excitement rising within her. "If we just stick together, everything will be alright, at least for the time being," she thought to herself.

She made her way down the breezy alleyway to where the gardens were situated. The back door had been carelessly left open by the gardener earlier that morning. Li slipped through noiselessly and crawled across the cool soil beneath the giant, bulky bushes. Suddenly, something warm touched her skin. Li stifled a gasp as she beheld a girl with wavy brown hair and sparkling blue eyes: Helen. Helen's cheek was smeared with potting soil and leaves were in her hair.

"Ready?" she asked Li.

They stationed themselves behind the gate. It was time for their long wait. The sun slowly moved across the sky, its heat beating down painfully upon them. Honks and shouts and roaring engines sounded in the background. Li wasn't used to long watches, as Helen called them, but she tried to put her best face on this tiring affair. She played in the dirt for awhile. When she got tired of that, she looked up at the clouds and tried to see if she could find any pictures in them. She sighed wearily and began to get drowsy. Far off she heard a gate creak.

Suddenly, she felt a huge yank on her arm. Helen dragged her,

stumbling and panting, through the new opening. Li heard shouts and commands sounding dangerously behind her. She ran in full fear of her life. She didn't stop to think, but tried to run past Helen, who was holding her desperately in between an old shed and some boxes. Li pulled and pulled, but Helen held her wrist firmly. Teeth clenched and full of panic, Li gave a final thrust and broke free of her captor.

"Li, what on earth are you doing? Come back!" cried Helen behind her, her eyes full of worry.

A minute later, a band of security guards bursted through the front entrance. They saw a girl of about thirteen years of age, with dark brown hair, slyly sneaking around the sort of courtyard in front of them, trying to follow something. Then suddenly, a streak of black and green, with lighting speed, crashed right through them. They failed to grasp it, and it stumbled halfway down the steps. The Head Security Guard saw it trip and fall, with clumsy maneuvers, and then lay still at the bottom of the stairwell.

Almost completely evading any notice, the first girl nearly managed to sneak past them. Yet she proved unsuccessful in this endeavor. Albert, a quick man, neatly scooped her up and laid her gently on the ground. In less than five seconds, a dozen men were on top of her and held her securely down.

Helen didn't show any resistance. She was simply hoping that Li had made it. She was rather angry with Li, though.

"She had to go and flunk everything," she thought to herself, mad. "And whenever she gets caught she'll go ahead and say everything about us. And if things don't begin to get any better, I'll have to tell."

Filled with these thoughts, Helen started to act defiantly. She refused to answer any questions until a “later time” as she put it. So the guards picked her up and began to make her descend the stairs. Meanwhile, Li had a bit of an adventure of her own, which proved key to the success of their entire journey. If it wasn’t for this next escapade, Li would have never written this story.

When the guards were trying to catch her friend, Li slowly got up and crawled down a small hallway next to the stairwell. A big goose egg was forming on her head. Li’s whole back was covered with bruises, and her legs felt trembly beneath her. Such danger, which Li had never dreamed she’d be in, seemingly surrounded her on all sides.

“Why did I do this?” she moaned softly. Everything began to seem to be just a dream. Her head started to sway.

Suddenly, she felt that she was being followed. A hasty glance back revealed the two guards sent to capture her. With a little yelp, she jumped up and began to run. The next moment, she ran smack-dab into a closed door at the end of the hall. Faintly, she heard footsteps from behind the door, approaching it.

“This will all be over soon,” she thought sadly.

The door opened abruptly. A tall man in a suit stood gaping at the small girl curled up at his feet. The security guards clamored up panting.

“What is the meaning of this?” the man asked in a business-like manner. He looked intently at the two men.

“Please, sir, this young child has tried to break into our embassy. She was with another girl whom we have taken into custody,” the

younger of the two said respectfully.

The man commanded, "Bring the other child here, along with the Head Security Guard. I'd like to talk this out with him."

He motioned for them to leave. The two saluted and went off briskly to fulfill his wish. He sighed, and then smiled. He looked down at Li, shivering beneath him. "What may your name be, child?"

Li looked at him intently. "Please," she cried, and began to pour out her heart. "We didn't mean any harm, honestly, it was all simply a huge mistake. We didn't have any paperwork, we simply didn't know how to find any, and we were in such a horrible mess. It was all so terrible, and we were going to have a fine adventure, but then things went from bad to worse and—"

"And we're still having a fine adventure," an encouraging voice sounded from behind her. Helen stood with a determined look on her face, between two guards. "Sir," Helen said, turning to face the tall man in the business suit. "My friend and I would like to speak to you alone."

The man surveyed the girl carefully. He seemed to be thinking deeply. Suddenly, Li realized that he was actually trying to suppress a laugh that was about to burst out any minute. She stood up and began to giggle. Their eyes met, and Li gave him a warm smile. He smiled back, understanding. He addressed the Head Security Guard, "I wish to speak to these children for a moment. Please notify Mr. Williams and watch the hall entrance. I will discuss things with you shortly. Meanwhile, the scene is over, everyone may go back to their jobs. Proceed please."

The guards saluted and began to carry out the commands. The

tall man showed the girls into his office. He gave them nice cushioned chairs and then seated himself behind his desk.

He leaned back comfortably and said, "Alright now, tell me everything. I am the Vice President of the United States and am here for business. No need to be afraid, you know I had kids of my own before. Sweet little lads, but they had plenty of tales of mischief of their own. Not that I excuse any mischief of any sort. That must be clear. It is a very serious thing to try to break into another country, and this place is considered American soil. Your parents can be punished by law. Now proceed to tell me everything."

Helen gaped at the man. She seemed unable to process what she had heard. Li began to bounce up and down gleefully. "Oh, Helen, this is perfect! He is exactly the right person to help us." She smiled at Helen, pleading.

Helen sat up straighter. She looked about in her usual manner.

Then, unexpectedly, she nudged Li and whispered, "Go on, you tell him."

"Me?" Li whispered back, surprised. All of a sudden, she felt the Vice President's eyes on her. Quickly she began to talk.

"Yes, um, it's quite the tale to tell. We, me and Helen that is, happened to find ourselves creeping along under the street one June evening. It was a terribly dirty place...."

#### Chapter 4: Stealth in the Subway

"No time to lose," Helen said energetically. She surveyed the surrounding area. "We can take the upper hand. Do you remember what to do?"

"Yes ma'am," Li replied, saluting. Some time before, they had been figuring out what to do about the secret creatures Li had heard

about. The Vice President had taken great interest in what they had to say, for apparently he had heard rumours about a secret organization in China. It was rumoured that this mysterious organization was trying to ship something to the United States, something which could potentially cause huge harm. Yet, since the reports were few and vague, the Vice President had decided to wait until further notice. To his relief, Li and Helen had uncovered the truth in the rumors and told him all about it. Now it only remained to stop the secret organization—if they could.

Originally, after Li had told their story (excluding the fact about traveling in a teleporter for Helen's sake), the Vice President had wanted to bring them back home and let his security guards handle the job. It had been a rather awkward moment for Li; luckily, Helen came to the rescue.

The girl asserted that their home was far away. Shrugging, she had told the kind man that she indeed didn't know how to get home. With a toss of her hand, she said that herself and Li were in China for a purpose, although they had been brought to Beijing without their knowledge. It was in everyone's favor to let the two girls to do what they could. To help.

Helen then began to speak fervently that she felt it was their duty to carry out the mission. It was probably for this very reason that they had found themselves in China. Plus, she continued, they were just children. Who would suspect them? It had taken a lot of arguing, but Helen had made it clear that she would not be left behind. However, the Vice President only decided to let them go—and it was a miracle that he did—when he saw Li's soft, pleading eyes reflecting clearly the

gentle girl's faith in their mission. Li had known, without doubting, what she was meant to do, and she was given permission to do it.

So, after some dinner and a good night's rest, the two adventurers had set out to combat the mysterious society and their invisible creatures.

"Remember, stay calm and everyone's as blind as a bat, Li," Helen said, winking at the young girl whose role the entire endeavor depended on for success. Li winked back and began to walk solemnly down the steps into the metro. Helen followed slyly at a distance behind her. She soon made herself disappear into the large crowd of people.

Floating from here to there like a butterfly, Helen watched Li. She watched as the pretty girl greeted the suspected man. He had a large suitcase; it seemed strangely heavy. Helen watched as the young girl talked happily to the unsuspecting man. Meanwhile, she crept closer. Helen watched as the friendly girl, her dear friend Li, distracted the calm man with her speech. Helen was now slowly unzipping the suitcase.

It surprised Helen and Li that everything was going so smoothly. Helen knew that the three security guards that the Vice President had sent on the mission were already stationed around, awaiting the moment when they would jump out and secure the assaulted man. Helen just needed to open the suitcase and grab whatever was inside. But at that moment her thoughts vanished from her mind as a great bubbling forced her to turn her attention to the suitcase she was unzipping. Inside the suitcase was a—great—growling—formless—

mass. Suddenly, creatures zoomed out of the opening that Helen had just unzipped with lightning speed and dispersed throughout the subway.

Just like that, they were gone.

## Chapter 5: Hiding from Unseen Creatures

Helen stood dumbfounded, but she had just enough wit left to grab Li and run. As they dashed across the subway, Helen observed with pride Li's smart and wary maneuvers. People stared suspiciously as the two children flew past. One man, with a brown coat hanging off his shoulder, tried to stop them—and failed.

Helen led Li to some perfectly situated tables in a cafe, and the girls slid under. They crouched, shaking, hoping they could stay hidden at least until the security guards could catch the man as well as the—.

“The what?” Helen thought to herself. She looked around, suddenly aware of an unseen presence.

Li nudged Helen and whispered with growing dread, “Helen, I think...those creatures...I know what they are.”

Helen looked at her curiously.

“You do?” she whispered back.

Li nodded seriously. “They are foxes. Ordinary foxes. But they have been modified so that they are invisible. Those men did something with the poor foxes, something horrible I'm sure, and now they are like that.”

“How do you know?”

“I happened to see one that was only semi-invisible; I am certain it was a fox.”

Helen leaned back stupefied. “That’s amazing you figured it out so soon.”

Li smiled. “We are going to get through this, together.” Then she added, “What do you think we should do now, Helen?”

“Run!” Helen commanded. She swerved quickly to the right and nearly hit her head on the tabletop. In a few minutes, Helen was out of sight. Li felt fur brush past her hand. She squealed and jumped out of the way, unfortunately hitting her poor head against the unnoticed tabletop. She stumbled briefly; in less than a minute, though, she was rushing madly to find Helen. It was in vain, however, and Li knew it, but she desperately needed a friend, she couldn’t be left alone in a busy, unknown place.

The whole metro was in utter chaos. In one corner the security guards were confronting the desperate man. He was ready to begin a fight. In another, unseen creatures spilled coffee all over the floor and littered the tables. In another...

“Li,” a girl hissed, “we have to hide! These animals are attracted to us! Hurry!”

So they began their most serious and (Helen later thought) most thrilling game of hide-and-seek. One girl dashed from counter to counter barely taking notice of anything else. The other slipped in and out of the crowd, appearing here and there; she led the invisible creatures away from the innocent pedestrians, all the while keeping an eye on her friend.

The whistle of a coming train sounded. It was the 10:30 a.m. train to Sinjing. Soon people would be flooding into the subway filled with unseeable creatures. A disaster was ensuing.

“Li,” Helen said when the two had settled together behind a small

potted palm to rest, “what is that on your hand?”

“Oh this?” Li replied, looking down at her hand. “Well, this was the hand that one of those foxes brushed against when we were sitting under the tables at the cafe. I’m not sure what it is though. Some sort of white powder.”

Helen took Li’s hand. She peered at it closely. She swiped some powder off, exclaiming “Oh, but I know what this is! It is aclunium phosphate, and it can make things look transparent in dim light. That is what the men must have put on the foxes! Aclunium phosphate!”

“But how do we get rid of it?” Li asked.

Helen’s face appeared to glow visibly. She slid her hand into her pocket and pulled out a bag. When it was opened, purple powder could be seen filling it. Li gasped.

“You still have it! The purple powder! That made us teleport!” Li was bursting with excitement. Helen held the bag up in the air.

“I shall now answer your question about the teleporter,” Helen declared, standing up.

“This,” Helen said solemnly, “is what made us teleport. It is a mixture I made. It contains fricanium, heliobeta, nacine chlorine, and five other such ingredients. The heliobeta can react with alclunium phosphate, making it lose its transparency. We can use this mixture—”

“To make the foxes visible!” Li cried, adding “Then everything will be set right again!”

But as she said it, Li noticed that Helen was looking at her sorrowfully. Li began to feel bad that she had ever spoken. She asked innocently, “Helen, what’s the matter?”

Helen murmured unhappily, replying, “Li, our adventure is over now. Yes, we can sprinkle the purple powder on the foxes to make

them visible. And it won't make them teleport—I tested it already; the powder only makes humans teleport—but... well, you see, in doing so we will teleport. We will go back home. This is the end of—everything.”

Li listened attentively as her friend spoke. The girl looked long at Helen: Li was thinking. Finally, she said encouragingly, “We can have another adventure. We’re sure to find one. I know you will, after what happened yesterday. But I think our parents might be worried about us. We’ve been gone for almost 24 hours, and Mother must be missing me like Penlope missed Odysseus in the Odyssey.”

Helen stood up and bravely approached the place where the unseen creatures were gathered, where lie her destiny. Li followed her friend as faithfully as when they first arrived. It was the moment; the grand moment had come, when all ends. Purple powder showered around the invisible foxes and the two girls. The foxes yelped as powder hit them, dissolving their invisibility like the dusk when the dawn nears.

Li felt herself begin to descend rapidly. Down, down into the darkness she went. But she was not in a horrible dream. As she descended she was in a pleasant thrill, in lovely sunshine. Helen was with her, and as the two held their hands together gently, all things stopped.

## ***Monster Hunter***

**Laura Johnson**

“The time has come to attack.” Monsters had begun flooding the city gates, destroying everything in their paths. “But we shall die a gruesome, bloody death if we fight. It would be better to run.” I tried to reason with my general. He was a big man, whose face was covered in many jagged scars. He is a strong warrior, who has killed many monsters and gruesome creatures throughout his long life. “We need to try,” He said, staring off into the mobs of monsters,

“If we don’t, the city will surely be obliterated.”

“But,”

“Go now, and destroy them” the general told me with a stern tone.

Following his order towards me, he signaled to the troops to attack.

Monsters have always been a huge problem for us. Tiny ones are pests, but big ones, like these, are a danger to this world. All the monsters, of many sizes, their appearances differ greatly. They were all the colors of the rainbow, and more. They had all kinds of horns, fur kinds, wings, body shapes, different amounts of limbs, and much, much more.

They came from the forest, which no one ever dares to traverse because of the monsters. They lie and thrive there. If you ever set foot inside, before you could process what is happening, a monster would grab you violently, lift you near their mouth, and your life as you know it would be over.

I desperately want to stop the monsters. I want to make peace with our kind. But how exactly? They steal all our crops and kill our animals, even destroy our own homes. What are we even supposed to do about these gruesome beasts?

As I think about all this, I mindlessly attack and kill a monster. I keep fighting and fighting, but it’s useless. Soon enough, my blade, a long iron sword, was caked in a sticky, dark, foul smelling blood. Screams echoed in the distance.

The battle was over. The monsters have won. The army is gone, except for me and three others who are still fighting. Everyone either fell on the ground, lifeless, or they ran away. I watch, helplessly, as comrades get torn apart and thrown to the side.

This is no life I want. I want to be happy, to have a family, and to never, ever, have to worry about the monsters.

I run, I run to get away from the mess, I run to live another day, I run for hope. After many days of travelling alone, with no one to keep me sane and grounded, a town appeared before my very eyes.

Entering the town, there are many people about, heading to and from jobs. School children were heading to their homes after what seemed like a long day of learning.

After spending the night at the local Inn, I wandered around this town. It's full of people, wonderful people. They had apparently made peace with the monsters, but they have to give them food during the winter.

For a while, I worked hard to help the town. I suggested that I teach them sword play but they refused my offer. They were no warriors, not like me. They were a people of peace and happiness. I had to help this town so the people wouldn't even have to face starvation because of the greed of the monsters.

Day after day, I studied maps of the forest to attempt to learn where I could hide. Unsurprisingly, there were maps of the town, but none of the forest, why would townsfolk need to map a forest?

What I do learn is about their leader, but only what the townsfolk know, which isn't much, but is something, I learn all the monsters are greatly harmed by even the slightest touch of iron. My sword is perfect. I got the blacksmith to sharpen it to be as lethal as it can.

Long after the sun had set, I stumbled into the inn, exhausted from the day of preparing.

\*\*\*

The sun rose as normal. The deep blue sky faded into fiery orange, then a golden yellow following sun. Pink clouds were scattered around the sky. Some stars were still visible, small specks of light in the sky. The cool, fresh air greeted me. Birds began to sing their sweet, sweet melody. The whole sight was breathtaking. I couldn't stand there for long, I had to get to work. I said my goodbyes to the people who had helped me, unknowing if I'll see them again. The shadows from the trees were long, inky pools of darkness, it seemed as if I could fall into them and never resurface again. With that thought, I shivered and placed my foot into the forest.

It was honestly beautiful. The green leaves danced in the wind, flowers blooming, mushrooms were scattered around, hiding on the logs and trees. I saw some creatures scurry about. It was surprisingly calm and peaceful.

Scanning the forest, I noticed that there is a winding, faded, and overgrown path here. Maybe it leads to the home of the leader. It must. Following the path led me through many, many perils. When I finally reached a clearing, it felt like I was dying. As soon as my breath was caught, I looked around this strange clearing.

Foliage was around, bushes, flowers, mushrooms, shrubs, and much more were surrounding a huge rock. Wait no. It's not a rock. It's a fortress. The fortress was solid stone, carved with intricate designs, and covered with ivy. The door was wooden with a huge, realistic face staring right at me. It can't be alive. No. It just can't. That wouldn't make any sense. Upon a closer look, there seemed to be no mouth, the door was either unfinished or whoever made it never wanted the door to possess a mouth.

It blinked at me! The door blinked! I was stunned. Frozen. Unable to move. What the...?

I shook it off. No. Just no. Doors can't be alive. That's not how the world works. Am I just falling into madness?

Stepping closer, I turned the door knob slowly and entered. The hall was stone, just like the outside, but more smooth and had jewels encrusted within. The carpet was red, ruby red. It reminded me of blood. The blood of my family. The blood of all who have been killed by the monsters.

My terribly scarred body shook. My mind went to their places. Many other places. Way different than our realm. I felt my mouth tug upwards into a smile. Oh how it hurt!

As soon as it started, the havoc ended. What just happened to me? My jaws hurt so much from that broken, disfigured, horrible smile. I need to get out! I need to run!

No.

I can't.

No when I'm this close.

I'm this close to killing him.

The monster.

The ruler.

I NEED to.

He is right in front of me. I can do it. For my home. For my family. For everyone who has ever had their life taken too soon by these, these things!

Unsheathing my sword, I opened the next door. The door to the court room. The door to my fate. My choices have all led to here, to this very moment.

The door opened with a creak. Light blinded me temporarily. When my eyes adjusted, I could see the source. A ball of light in the misshapen mess of a crown upon a disgusting, horrible, slimy, evil beast.

With sword in hand, I rushed up to him and slashed. He fell to the ground, surprised. I had the advantage. My sword was iron and I struck first. His skin sizzled from the iron. Before he could even process what had just happened, I screamed and sliced him across his face. I watched as his eyes glazed over. The monster King was dead. I have won, but why did it feel so hollow?

The rest of the night was a blur. I'm not even sure of what happened after that. The next day, I awoke in the Inn. Exhausted.

My head was pounding. I instantly sprung out of bed, gathered my supplies, and ran. I ran all the way back to my old town, secretly hoping that it was all a nightmare. When I arrived, it was in even worse condition than when I left.

The buildings and homes were complete rubble, many monsters scurried around the place. My home was gone. My past life, before this mess, was gone. Destroyed. I fell onto my knees and screamed. It was a piercing loud scream.

I could feel ice seeping into my veins, fueling my anger. I would make the monsters pay for as long as I live. Death will meet them, but slowly take their lives.

I screamed again, but this time fueled me with anger. I wanted revenge for the life I could have had! There will be no peace from now on. NONE! They will pay!

With a scowl on my face, I walk off into the distance, ready to exterminate these monsters one by one. I will make sure of that.

I am the Monster Hunter!

No-one will get in my way ever again.

## ***Nira Nyxadon, Unlicensed Assassin***

**Anna Falitico**

### *Prologue*

March 23rd, 2010

A name. A string of letters chosen by your birth giver for them to gargle out when your attention was requested. The only reason you are alive and given a name is to prove you were born. That you exist. That your parents' choices were made for a reason. The name given to me, Nira, given to me by the so-called hippies that my birth givers were.

I had always been seen as a strange child, unable to talk from birth, barely even able to babble as a babe, only emitting pitiful screams and cries as an infant. But despite the shortcomings of my parents' poor life decisions, my mind was sharper than most could ever perceive.

At the age of twelve, due to an issue with my parents' drinking choices that caused them to send themselves to a premature grave, I was sent to a prestigious high school where the children paraded around like peacocks that flared their money like feathers. And though the foolish children had minds which could barely comprehend a proper pencil sharpening technique, they took it upon themselves to poke fun at my lack of speech. Many things were thrown my way, including but not limited to, hateful language, books, rocks, and the occasional other unwitting student.

Though the world I was born into was not of a peaceful kind. There were those who would prefer to watch it burn, and those who keep it as it was. There were humans blessed by beings beyond our control with unimaginable power. But it always seemed quite foolish the choices they made with their abilities. Saving other humans from a complex gone up in flames or aiding an individual in their fight against an inherently evil force for nothing in return? A foolish decision made by foolish individuals. The mere thought of not making a dime in return for causing the safety of others was one of the few concepts I found puzzling. And if the creature of the beyond blesses you with a gift, why use it for the temporary meaning of good?

At the age of thirteen, I was approached by a substitute teacher after an unfortunate academic suspension I received for defending myself against a foolish junior who tried to attack me with a weapon. He was an unassuming man with hair that had an incredibly unreliable amount of hair gel that didn't manage to contain the full proximity of his wavy hair. He would fidget with his tie, moving it exactly six centimeters between every sentence he spoke to me. While I was determining how to communicate to this man who was clearly not understanding the American version of Sign Language, he suddenly wrapped his tie around my mouth and nose. It had quite a sweet smell, almost floral. And that was the last moment I remember. And how I ended up in my predicament.

And though the mere idea that I could have missed something that might not have landed me in this unfortunate scenario made me feel unintelligent, there was one thing I reminded myself of.

I'm not stupid.

\* \* \*

My head felt groggy as I awoke in a cold, metallic room which smelled of regret and, as to be expected, metal. A man stood in the corner of the room, watching me as if I were but a creature for his entertainment. Another human entered the room from a seemingly empty wall, whispering something to the first about 'the child's judging eyes' which caused a tinge of insult pang against my chest, as I had not even begun to judge the fools.

The substitute from before, now significantly less greasy and without a tie, entered from yet another door, which began to seem like a poor design error I decided to ignore.

"Well, well, well," the substitute who would most likely be arrested in any other scenario said in a cheerful tone that did not seem to belong in such a place as the domain I was in.

"It is truly an honor to finally meet you, Miss Nyxadon. A very high honor indeed," I felt my eyes narrowing into slits. I wished to tell him off, remind the man that flattery would get him nowhere in any situation, but that deemed itself pointless on account of the situation I was in, and the mere fact my vocal chords were never fully developed.

"The silent type I see," his cheerful voice rang through the room like a cowbell in a monastery. "Nonetheless, I, assistant director Kevin Lopael, have a proposition for you, young one," he walked by me to a desk which seemed to have appeared from nowhere, yet another questionable architectural choice. As he passed he patted my head as if I were nothing but a puppy. I wished I could scream at him, tell him anything that would convey my dislike of his mocking affectionate gestures, but I could only think to myself. I'm not stupid.

He came back into my line of sight holding a paper with many small words which were impossible to read without a magnifying device.

"You see," Kevin began, "we've been watching you for a long time," I gave him a look that said that was off-putting and not selling his case. "And while we watched you, we discovered something," Kevin seemed to pause for dramatic effect. This only fueled my ever-growing hatred for this man.

"You would be a great fit for our team!" He shouted. The other men in the room let off a few party blowers in unison, further adding to my own annoyance.

"You are an incredibly special person, Miss Nyxadon. You can't say a word, yet skipped the entirety of elementary school. And you've never scored higher than passing in a physical exam," he paused yet again, giving me a smile that seemed to know my ploy. "Yet you could defend yourself against a group of five students, all larger than you, using only a pencil. While they had heavy quality knives," he leaned in closer, I could still smell the hair gel clumping on his forehead. "Why is that Miss Nyxadon?" His voice was questioning yet confronting, as if he had planned this for many months. We stayed locked in eye contact for a long moment, approximately twelve minutes and thirty two seconds. The entirety of the time, Kevin seemed as though he expected me to respond to him, which felt like an oversight on his part.

He seemed to realize the absurdity of his decision as he mumbled to himself about 'trying to get the mute girl to talk'

"Anyway," he awkwardly began again, "we are an organization of individuals who aim to, for lack of a better analogy, eradicate the evil in the world. For a price of course," I gave him a questioning look. I had a suspicion for what he was implying, but it didn't seem true.

"I understand your confusion, Miss Nyxadon, but as you have probably noticed there are some people in this world who are," he paused, "well... less than interested in humanities survival. If you catch my drift," I did, indeed 'catch his drift', but questions still hung in my mind.

"Well, Miss Nyxadon, do you accept?" he held his hand out to mine, implying a simple shake would seal this deal, but I wasn't planning on going down without a decent explanation, nor was I planning to give my life away to a mystery organization with mysterious motives.

A few moments of silence passed, neither of us moving, before he seemed to receive the message.

"Ah. Understood," he said calmly, though something underneath his tone made my skin feel as if it were crawling, "I wished we could do this the easy way, but I do suppose we have to go about this in a more threatening manner," he waved his hand to the other men in

the room. After a few moments there was the flash of blurry old security footage, a date from months past displayed across the edge. I felt a hint of panic rising in my chest.

The footage played. It showed a figure in an old, bloody school uniform being dragged to a back alley by two larger figures. The larger figures punched and kicked the smaller figure, knocking to the ground. Blood began to seep from their nose, dripping onto the pavement. For a moment it seemed like they had given up.

But only for a moment.

Their hand reached for their pocket, grabbing an old, sharpened pencil. Within seconds, the pencil had gone through the eye of the first student. The second one seemed to scream for help, only to be strangled by a tie. The first student kept grabbing at the small one, seemingly begging for mercy, moments before a book bashed their head in and they fell to the ground.

The small figure stood silently above the two, seeming to be shaking with an intense adrenaline rush. Once the rush began to drain, they smiled, looking up at the camera before taking the pencil from the first student's eye and shoving it into the camera. It paused in the exact moment before it went offline.

My face, covered in blood, a mix of my own blood and the students, a smile larger than I had ever realized I was possible. I had gotten sloppy.

"Those boys were never seen after this," Kevin's voice rang from behind me, cold and calculated, the warmth replaced by a tone he did not seem capable of. "We know you got rid of them. So here is our deal," he paused as he walked back in front of me. "You join our organization, and no one ever finds out what actually happened to those two,"

He set the contract on my lap, holding the pen out for me to reach. It felt wrong, foolish, stupid. But truly, I was backed into a corner.

What was I supposed to do?

*Two years (nine months and twenty six days) later*  
(trust me I counted.)

January 18th, 2013

2:47 am

Thirty-seven cases in the past two years. I had a body count higher than the average hero gained in their entire career within the span of two years. School became an afterthought once I had taken on my third case. There was no excuse for the times I came to class after the bell had rung with 'ketchup' stains on my uniform. Director Kevin and Director Amy had me removed from the school, telling the administration that I would benefit more from their 'special program' as they referred to it. The special program involved being

taken across the country, gun training, proper body cleanup, and how to act innocent if ever questioned by the cops.

I had gotten used to the constant metallic smell, the knowledge I could never wear white again, the eventual gnawing guilt that kept me up at night. All came with the job. It all came with the fact I couldn't ever leave. I was trapped in a hell of my own making.

The job came at two thirty-three in the morning. I lay awake in my bed, battling with the natural insomnia that came with the job when Kevin's assistant, an annoying boy who was barely older than I who went by the name of Mathew, decided it would be a fantastic idea to tackle my door as if he were in the middle of a college football game.

"Oh I'm sorry!" he stumbled in, splintered wood now lying across my pristine floor, "did I wake you?" he stumbled over to my empty desk and threw a thick file onto it, causing a rather loud thwack to echo itself through the room. I felt myself sighing as I reached for the tablet I was given to communicate.

"I. Already. Awake." the electronic voice read out painfully slowly as if each word were a struggle for its supposedly ingenious mind.

"Oh good!" Mathew beamed, practically bouncing like a toddler who had ingested a far greater amount of caffeine than recommended. "Then you can start your work as soon as possible!" he practically squealed.

"Quiet," the tablet read out again, not fully capturing my annoyance at the situation. "You. Wake. Other. Rooms,"

"Right, right, sorry, sorry," he reached for the knives I kept stored in my closet. "Do any of these need sharpening?"

"No. Touch."

"Come on, Nira! Stop being so protective of them. It's just a few knives. You won't die without them," At the exact moment the words left his mouth, he ran his finger across the blade. Blood began to drip from the cut.

"Stupid. Why. I. Say. No." I continued pressing the buttons before standing to take the knife away, leaving the tablet abandoned on my bed.

"These things are sharp!" Mathew said as he placed his finger inside his mouth. I gave him a look that conveyed how unintelligent his statement was. He grumbled to himself, speaking of how I 'didn't have to look so rude'. I decided to throw a punch at his shoulder. Not enough to harm him, but enough to remind him I was mute, not deaf.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry. Anyway, director Amy said she wants you in the debriefing room at nine sharp," I reached for the tablet.

"I. There. Eight." The tablet announced.

“As you always are,” Mathew trailed off, sitting himself onto the bed as I began to place my knives back into their sheaths. There was a silence that stretched on. In the two years I had known Mathew, he had never truly been the type to stay quiet. Always questioning, speaking up when I was incapable of such, never backing down from a challenge, but it seemed so strange. How someone so loud could be so caring.

“You know, you don’t always have to be early to briefings. Amy isn’t all that strict about it,” there was another pause, “director Amy. Forgot her title for a second,” he let out a slightly nervous laugh followed by more silence. The only sound for a few moments was the sound of the knives sheathing, and my closet door sliding back in place.

“I never understood why we needed titles for everyone,” he muttered. “I’m assistant Mathew, there’s director Kevin, director Amy, and then there’s you. Assassin four-eleven. So strange. Why do you get numbers while I keep my name?” I reached for the tablet again.

“Gave. Name. Up. Number,” the buttons played out. The sentence didn’t seem to rationalize with him, as he gave me a confused look.

“What’s with that tablet? I feel like I can never understand what you’re saying. It’s only basic words. It makes you sound stupid.”

“I. No. Stupid,” I tapped quickly.

“I know you aren’t, Nira. It’s just that voice. It sounds like if a dishwasher had a child with a microwave oven,” I felt myself smiling in spite of the world that we lived in. The constant danger, the deaths I had caused, the fact he himself hadn’t been born into the best situation. And yet, here he was, constantly smiling, his robotic arm catching the light in a way that made my heart flutter despite the fact it shouldn’t do so. There were a few moments of blissful silence before he spoke again.

“When we’re older, I’ll give you a better way to talk. Maybe even help you fix your voice! I’d love to hear how you’d sound without a toaster speaking for you,” he chuckled. As he did, I reminded myself of the situation we were in. Two unwanted, naive, careless orphans, brought into a world of pain and murder.

“Wishful,” I tapped the button, feeling the cold wash over my body as it had done many times before.

“I know,” he trailed off, “I know it’s wishful. But maybe someday, Nira,” he stood, quietly walking to the door. “Have a little hope,” He muttered, the same soft smile on his face. But hope got you killed. And Mathew knew that.

January 18th 2013

7:56 Am

“Nira,” Director Amy spoke calmly, sitting at a completely metal desk. I nodded, migrating to the same location on the floor as I did frequently.

“Early as always, I see,” She spoke calmly, drinking coffee from a wine glass with her name engraved and the inscription “Don’t talk to me until I’ve had my milk,” below it, a custom gift from Director Kevin. I nodded again, reaching for my tablet to speak.

“Yes.” The electronic voice rang through the small room.

“Must we do this dance daily?” She spoke calmly, setting the glass down onto the table, a faint smile on her face

“Yes.”

“I see,” she trailed off. “I suppose we should begin our briefing,” she sat straighter, reaching for a stack of papers next to the desk. It was as thick as her hand and seemed to weigh the same as a brick.

“I assume you are aware of Professor Dinglehopper, correct?” I nodded. “And I also may come to assume you know of Slayerburst?” Yet another nod. “Well, we have been contacted by his agency and they have said Professor Dinglehopper has been a thorn in their side for far too long,” I reached for my tablet.

“I. Kill.”

“Yes, indeed that is correct Nira. You are to kill the man and then contact Slayerburst so he may be given the credit,” I nodded yet again. “You will set on your way once the sun has set. I trust you will be thorough?” One final nod

“Good. Then you may leave. Good day, Nira,” I nodded.

January 18th 2013

9:12 pm

The gloves were tight and sticky with my sweat, my hair tied up then placed into a hairnet to keep all and any evidence away. The mask was sticky as well, making sure no DNA would get on the body. I slid my hood up and began my mission.

The wind was cold and flailing my cloak around and spewing snow into my eyes, but nevertheless I trudged on. The building was huge and obnoxiously flamboyant, a deep purple with neon pink glowing from every corner, the kind of shade that would burn your eyes. I scaled the building next to it, searching for an entry point. There was a clearly marked oversized vent opening that had been left slightly askew, surprisingly large enough to enter

through. As I slipped in I noticed the shaft had been dusted, almost as clean as an average floor. There were markers on the walls, directing to different rooms. It seemed quite peculiar, but I began to follow the arrow leading to the ‘study’.

The study was empty but filled to the brim with books with a desk full of blueprints sitting at the center of it. There was an obvious ajar door in the wall, leading to what seemed to be a secret lab. I began to open the vent cover. I expected a squeak of some sort of alerting sound but there was none. I again thought it was quite odd, as if it had been greased beforehand.

I landed on the carpet in the study, making sure to smooth any wrinkles that my feet may have created. The door sat slightly ajar, a golden yellow book clearly sticking out as a handle from between a green and a navy blue book. I slipped into the crack, making sure to leave no trace that I had ever entered.

The lab was huge. Tall ceilings, large machinery, smaller pieces scattered across the floor in a disorganized fashion. It caused a chill to run down my spine only for the chaos of the disorganization. There was a quiet humming of several generators coming from a corner. Plugged into them was a comically large laser, glowing green. I gazed into my reflection, watching my covered face then glancing back to the door. Only then did it cross my mind.

*“This is a trap,”*

The door slammed shut and locked itself, the fluorescent lights flickered on temporarily blinding me as an ominous, overly dramatic cackling came from the far side of the room.

“YES INDEED SLAYERBURST! YOU’VE FALLEN RIGHT INTO MY-, wait you aren’t Slayerburst,” Professor Dinglehopper cackled before pausing. I was not the six-foot-four man with bleach blonde hair and red eyes he had expected. I was five-foot-two and, as Mathew had once put it, ‘looked like a trash bag came to life and became a rapper’. He himself wasn’t all that appealing, large brown eyes, black hair that clearly hadn’t been washed in a long time, a tight fitting spandex uniform with a big letter [idfk Q ig] in the center and boots that looked like they were cutting off his circulation.

“Who are you,” he stared at me. All I did was blink. “I said, who are you?” He began raising his voice. The only response he received from my end was another blink. “FEAR ME CHILD AND SPEAK! WHO ARE YOU?!” His voice thundered and echoed off of every wall in the room. Yet again, he received no verbal response from my mouth.

“**WHAT ARE YOU, DEAF? SPEAK CHILD OR-** oh crap, wait,” there was an awkward pause, “you’re mute aren’t you,” I gave a single nod to follow his statement.

“Oh heaven have mercy I’ve been screaming at a mute kid,” he began pacing, placing his head into his hands. “I may be evil, but I draw the line at ableism,” he stopped before placing his hands on my shoulders, leaving his fingerprints on my clothes.

“Did Slayerburst send you here? I always thought he would stoop so low,”

*“No you fool,”* I thought to myself, *“my agency sent me. Slayerburst only hired us,”*

“Ah I see,” he muttered to himself, “Slayerburst hiring others to do his dirty work. I had

assumed he would get so lazy,” that caused me to pause

*“How did he know what I was thinking,”* I kept my face neutral. He smirked, seeming to respond to my thoughts as if I had spoken them.

“It’s a gift young one. Now tell me, what is your name,”

*“Four-eleven,”*

“Hon, that isn’t a name. That’s a string of numbers. Try again,” his voice was calm and collected. I tried to keep my mind focused on the mission, so as to not give away my birth name.

“Ah. Here to kill me I see,” he said, an almost accepting smile crossing his face, “you’re to give Slayerburst the credit for the kill? Shame,”

*“Shame? Whatever does he mean by that,”*

“I mean, why kill someone and not take public credit? Just imagine it! I, uh... four-eleven,” he muttered under his breath “such a strange choice for a name,”

*“Not stranger than Nira,”* I thought to myself. A smirk grew across his face.

“Nira! Such a lovely name for a,” he paused for a moment, his eyes crossing my trash bag attire “‘lovely’ girl. But that is beside the point!” He stood tall, removing his hand from my shoulder. “Imagine it! I can just see it on headlines, billboards, news stations! Nira killed Professor Dinglehopper! Would put Slayerburst to shame, don’t you think?” We stared at each other for a few moments in complete silence.

“Don’t you think, oh wait,” he placed his hand back on my shoulder, “don’t you think?”

*“You’ve repeated that three times now,”* I thought

“I know, I know. Shame on me for forgetting that the child about to slaughter me is mute,” he dramatically placed one hand on his forehead in mock dismay, while the other stayed firmly on my shoulder.

*“You’re like a canary on a windowsill after a long day of work. Chirping it’s song, not realizing it’s giving away everything,”*

“How poetic. Such a way with words,” he wiped a faux tear from his eye. “Though I suppose it is a threat on my life. Shall you follow through now?” He let go of me, taking a step back. I pulled a dagger, disguised as a pencil from the inside pocket of my jacket.

“Ah. Disappointing. I thought you had more to say. But I suppose if you must go through with it,” he spread his arms out. He closed his eyes and dramatically leaned back, feigning dismay and sorrow.

“But if you must do so... do it quickly. The pain will be too much to bear for my poor aching body,” he dramatically closed his eyes. “Oh, I can already feel the knife in my chest! Do it quickly, or I shall die of sheer anguish before you even graze me,” he gasped. The room

became silent apart from his aggressive, dramatic breaths. I stared at him, watching his overzealous movements. After a few moments he placed his hand on my face.

*"This is the most difficult performance I've ever had to watch,"* I thought. He gasped dramatically, his hand flying to his chest while the other remained clinging to my face.

"Such criticism for my performance! You bring me such sorrow young Nira,"

*"Four eleven,"*

"Darling, your name is Nira. Not some dull string of numbers. Plus, you're a child. And one who's made some poor life decisions at that," he glanced over my trash bag facade. I quickly pulled my knife to his throat, threateningly pressing it against his neck as a warning. He seemed shocked for a moment, but that expression quickly faded into laughter

"Such a feisty little thing, aren't you!" He lifted me into the air as if I were nothing more than a simple house cat.

"You know, I'd keep you around if you weren't so bitey," he flicked the hood of my cloak off from my forehead. "Though I suppose you could be trained," he chuckled to himself. In return for his comment, my hand found its way across his cheek. He froze for a moment before bursting into laughter.

"Right, right, you aren't slayerburst," he chuckled, "just a child with attachment and trust issues," I felt my face get hot as I glared at him. It was a strange feeling I hadn't felt in years. He began to laugh, pulling the mask from my face with an expression I couldn't read. His eyes weren't tough and villainous as they had been before, but something else I couldn't understand. I tried to stop his hand before it could pull it completely, but I was not able to. He Moptossed it onto the table as if it were trash.

"There we are," he said in a somewhat soft tone, setting me onto the floor, "much easier to breathe now, isn't it? I could tell you didn't like how it clung to your face," we stared at each other for a long moment, both seemingly trying to understand the other. The air in the room seemed to grow warmer as a smile grew across Professor Dinglehopper's face.

"I've had an idea... a possibly horrible one, but an idea nonetheless," he reached for a paper and pencil, a sly smile crossing his face. "What if you... become my apprentice," he began drawing a quick contract, "if you don't kill me, I will train you in arts I've known for decades!" He held the paper up as a trophy, a large, giddy grin spreading across his face similar to a child with their favorite candy.

"And of course I'll pay your agency for your services. Most likely more than you've ever received for a murder," he laughed before picking me up again and spinning me around in his arms.

"Now how about you take that little contract of yours to your agency and show it to the big boss, hm?" He giggled like a giddy school girl, pushing me back to the door. "See you in a little bit Nira," he shut the false door in my face as I stood there holding a poorly drawn contract. I could hear him still giggling behind the door, treating this as if he was a kid with his favorite treat. I took a moment to stare at the sheet. My name, Nira, written with small hearts

surrounding the words at the top. I felt something in my chest squeeze as I read it.

January 19th 2013

12:38 am

"I, big boss, am willing and able to give agent four eleven, also known as Nira, to Professor Dinglehopper. Professor Dinglehopper will pay a generous fee for the services of Nira. By signing this contract you will be accepting the payment in the enclosed envelope\* given to your door guard and allowing Nira to gain training and knowledge at my expense.

Please sign here: \_\_\_\_\_

\*also enclosed in the envelope is enough to give Slayerburst a refund for his attempt on my life," Director Amy read aloud for the room to hear. Mathew sat, fidgeting with his prosthetic while Director Kevin sat next to Director Amy with his head on her shoulder.

"How much money did he enclose," Director Kevin questioned, rereading the paper. Director Amy leaned and whispered into Director Kevin's ear, causing him to choke on his spit. "Really?!" Director Amy nodded, a small smile playing across her lips as it often did with Director Kevin's antics.

"I'm completely fine with her learning from him," Director Amy muttered, "especially with this level of donation. It's higher than we've ever had from a patron," she lifted her gaze to match mine "that is, if Nira is willing," her eyes flickered with knowledge as she watched me reach for my tablet.

"Yes," the voice echoed off of the walls, its mechanical tone causing my teeth to grit.

"Very well then," The directors both took turns signing it before handing it back to me "return this to him when you desire to," Amy stood as she spoke. "Now if you'll excuse us, we were trying to sleep. Have a good night you two," the room became quiet as they left, Mathew and I watching each other. There was an almost sorrowful look in his eyes.

"So you're leaving," he finally spoke up.

"No," the button announced. I watched the relief wash over his face followed by his signature beaming grin.

"Great. I thought you'd be gone forever. And there's no way I'd let that happen. I'd lock you in my closet if that was the case," he ran his hand through his jet black hair as he laughed. I could hear the nervous tone underneath it. "I know you're not going to be gone forever, but I'm still gonna miss you," he trailed off. We stared at each other for a good few minutes in silence before he slowly pulled me into a hug. "Just stay safe Nira. I don't know what I'd do without you," he practically whispered, his voice cracking as he spoke. I wanted to tell him I would be safe, that some old man couldn't lay a finger on me, but like always my vocal chords did nothing. I allowed myself to nod, a silent promise to keep to his word. He reluctantly began to let me go

“I should go to bed,” he muttered, “and you should probably go deliver that note,” I nodded. “Goodnight Nira. See you tomorrow?” I nodded again, a slight smile making its way on my face. His lit up once again in return “see you tomorrow,”

The walk back to the building was colder and windier, but the clothes I changed into were doing a better job than the trash bag uniform. Twenty miles from the agency, barely a sweat breaking on my forehead. The offices below Professor Dinglehopper’s building had its back door cracked open, a note sitting taped to the handle. “For Nira, when you return. Floor 12,” a small heart was drawn on the corner. As I walked the stairs, I heard my own breath followed by the clicking of the heel of my boots against the metal flooring. As I reached the twelfth floor, I heard quiet piano music. The door made a small creaking noise as I entered.

“Hello Nira,” Professor Dinglehopper said as he stood from the piano bench, now in cloth pajamas and a cartoonish night cap. “Glad you could join me. Now,” he stepped closer, taking one of my cornrows in his hand, “who did your braids?”

### ***1, 2, 3 Go!***

#### **Hadley Parks**

Ivan and his team raced straight ahead on their practice track. They came to a stop at the end of the track. Ivan’s team was preparing for the Minnesota state car racing championship. If they win this race, they will win \$10,000 dollars!

“Woah! That’s enough to buy new parts!” Said Ivan.

“That’s right, Ivan. And we need that money.”

Ivan’s team was very low-funded and didn’t have the highest quality parts and equipment. The team got out of their cars to circle the coach.

“Okay, boys, we will drive the full 6 miles around the track.” Coach Nate says.

He turns around to the pit stall to see if Mia is ready. Mia gives him a thumbs-up. She coughs.

“Ready, Nate!” Mia says shortly after.

“Okay, let’s go, team!” Coach Nate replies.

Ivan’s team got back into their cars and slowly drove to the main track. They got into position and waited for the Coach to count them off.

“1...” Coach started.

“2...” He continues.

The tension builds. Ivan is very excited. He looks over at his best friend, Percy. They give each other a thumbs up. They look back at the coach.

“3!”

They zoom down the track. Every turn makes them feel like their helmets will fall off, even though they were tight on their heads. Hank pulls into the pit stall to get his car fixed. He has the worst car.

“Hey Hank, what needs fixing now?” Mia says in a jokingly sarcastic tone.

“My Engin...” Hank says

Mia laughs. She coughs.

“I’ll get to work.” She says.

She opens the front of Hank's car to see what was wrong.

'Ugh, your engine overheated again.' Mia said.

Mia went to turn on the heat to divert the heat from the engine and had Hank sit at her desk. She pushed the car into her repair station so she could switch out some of the parts.

"I'm sorry," Hank says with guilt.

"It's not your fault, Hank, it's your stupid car's fault," Mia said, putting all of her focus on Hank's car.

The rest of the team is still racing. Zooming down the track, they should be untouchable at the race if they keep this up.

"Good work, boys!" Coach Nate yells to the boys.

Eventually, they make it through the 6 miles. They meet up with the coach.

"Good job, guys, we should win for sure!" Said Coach Nate.

"I really hope we win!" Said Lucas.

"Me too!" Said Percy.

Coach Nate looked among the team and noticed Hank was missing.

"Do you guys know where Hank went?"

The team all pointed at the pit stall. Coach Nate looked over at the pit stall and saw Hank

walking out with all of his stuff.

“Hank’s car broke down again!” Mia yelled.

“Okay! You guys can head home. Sleep well for the race tomorrow.” Said Coach Nate.

Ivan and Percy walk home together every day to and from practice.

“Do you think we are going to win the championship?” asked Percy.

Ivan took a minute to think about it. He was unsure. Hank’s car kept breaking down, Mia sounded sick, and Coach Nate sounded stressed.

“I don’t know, maybe.” Said Ivan.

Ivan was stressed himself. He was known for being anxious about big things like this.

“I just hope we win so Hank can get a better car!” Said Percy.

They laughed about Percy’s joke, but the joy was short-lived.

“Well, we’re on my street, so I should get home. Bye Percy!” Said Ivan

Percy waved and kept walking. Ivan walked into his house to see his mom in the kitchen making dinner.

“Hi honey! Did you have a good practice?” Asked Ivan’s mom.

“Yeah,” Ivan replied.

Ivan walked over to the counter to get a plate of food that was sitting there. The plate had spaghetti and meatballs on it, covered in cheese. He picked up the plate and went to his room. He had some homework he wanted to get done before his race tomorrow. He started eating while writing his essay based on a book he had to read for his ELA class. He caught up on the book because he missed a couple of days for practice.

He eventually got done with his food and the essay and threw some pajamas on and fell asleep.

“Wake up, honey!” Ivan’s mother called.

Ivan jumped out of bed and threw on his uniform for the race. He checked his watch, and it was 11:43 am.

“The race starts in 1 hour!” Ivan said to himself.

He rushes downstairs to see his mom with a piece of toast and a brown paper bag containing his lunch. He grabbed the food from his mom and ran out the door. Percy waited for Ivan at the end of the block.

“Come on, Ivan, let’s go before we are late!” Percy exclaimed.

Ivan kept running to Percy and finally stopped. They started walking the rest of the way while eating their breakfast.

They got to the track and walked over to their team. When they got there, Mia was nowhere to be found.

“Where’s Mia?”

“Haven’t you heard? Mia’s sick, so her brother’s gonna be the repair mechanic.” Said Hank.

Ivan starts to panic. Mia knew everything about fixing the team's cars, and now her brother is doing her work.

"No, no, no, no, this isn't happening," Ivan says to himself.

Ivan gets in his car and prays that it will never need fixing.

"Hey by the way, I gave each of the cars an oil change beforehand," said Mia's brother.

'WHAT!?' Ivan thought to himself.

"Thank you!" said Coach Nate.

"Okay, okay! Let's do this! 1..." The referee starts.

"2..." he continues.

Ivan and Percy look at each other. They give each other a thumbs-up.

"3!"

Zoom! The cars race down the track. Left, right, turned around the corners. Six miles! But later in the race, one of the cars starts to swerve, it goes left, right, out of control. It goes VROOM! Into a bush. Another one off the track and into the side of the pit stall. Another car into the parking lot. Everywhere a car could go, it went. Two cars remained. One from Ivan's team, and another from another team. Head-to-head, wheels to wheels.

"PREPARE TO LOSE!" Said Percy.

"OH MY GOSH PERCY'S IN THAT CAR!" Said Ivan.

Ivan watched his best friend along with the rest of the team in awe. A shadow from behind the two cars comes zooming from behind and passes both cars and wins.

“No...” Ivan said.

Ivan’s team got second. If that other car didn’t pass the final two, they would have won.

All the team members from all the teams gathered around their coaches.

“Well, we tried and lost. But we still have what we have.” Coach Nate said.

Ivan looked disappointed. He looked at his mud-covered teammates.

“I guess.” Said Ivan.

“Hey, you did great, Ivan, no matter what you think.” Said Percy.

Percy wrapped his arm around Ivan and rubbed the extra mud off of his hands and onto Ivan’s shirt.

“HEY!”

“No bickerin’ boys, you all can go home and clean up now, see you guys next season,” said Coach Nate.

“Bet you can’t catch me!” Said Ivan.

“I bet I can!” Percy replied.

Ivan and Percy chased each other with the extra mud on them all the way back to Ivan’s house.

## ***Paper Cranes***

**Olivia Holland**

Allen leaned forward in the squeaky plastic chair, intently trying to read the thoughts of an indecisive person in the lunch line.

The cafeteria to Allen was nothing more than a foggy gray void. However, little clusters of paper cranes fluttered this way and that like autumn leaves. Occasionally, they would fly to an unseen object and unfold to cover it.

Meatball or ham? Make decision meatball ham.

The other paper cranes blurred as Allen focused on the writing covering the little crane skittering back and forth in the lunch line.

After a moment of watching, the little origami unfolded and covered the ham sandwich, before vanishing into wavering paper shreds.

“Too bad.” Allen noted.

Allen’s watch chimed the alarm he had set for 12:50 pm. And now for yet another excruciatingly boring meeting where nothing gets done but everyone gets blamed.

Lovely, he thought morosely.

He swallowed the last of his sub and got to his feet, grabbing the smooth wooden handle of his cane. Allen was pretty sure he didn’t need it to navigate this building, after working here for almost three years. Though technically classified as a superhero, Allen worked in the finance department, because nobody trusted a blind guy not to get shot.

Even if he could see people’s thoughts thirty feet away through solid rock.

Allen was jolted back to the present as his knee struck a table. He let out a hissed as the pain jolted through his knee and clutched his fists. It drove him crazy when people rearranged the furniture. Tables didn’t exactly have thoughts Allen could pinpoint their location by.

Shoes clicking on the polished tile floor, Allen made his way out into the lobby. He ran a hand down the wall until he found the elevator button. After a moment, the elevator chimed and the doors opened. Allen noted a collection of cranes rustling in the elevator as he stepped inside.

“I thought you were supposed to be busting a crime syndicate in Adorishire prefecture, Evan,” he said. “Third floor,” he added as an afterthought.

“Me too.”

The man who had spoken sighed as the door rumbled shut. One of the heroes who actually fought crime, Allen had heard that his power involved hearing for miles, but only while he was completely still. That was probably explained why he was fidgeted all the time.

“Someone tipped them off,” Evan said. “Nobody to fight, only a threatening note about the downfall of the Equalience Alliance etcetera, etcetera. Probably Endo’s doing, and the supervisor’s hopping mad.” Agitated cranes scattered around him as he made the remark.

Allen tapped his cane against the floor as the elevator came to rest on the third floor. “Well, bury me somewhere nice. Lots of flowers, plenty of sunshine.”

“What?”

“The finance people are meeting with the supervisor, and I’m late.”

There was a stunned silence from Evan as the elevator door opened. “I’ll start scouting locations, then.”

Allen gave a thumbs up as they parted. He strode down the carpeted hall to the meeting room, judging by the paper cranes fluttering around the room that everyone had arrived and was sitting at the long table except for him.

“Mr. Ken, if you could please be seated.”

The voice belonged to the supervisor, one of the heads of the Equalience Alliance, and Allen’s boss.

Allen stepped lightly around the table and took the last available chair. Thankfully, it was a good distance from the supervisor. Early afternoon sunlight shined through the glass windows behind him, warming his seat as Allen propped his elbows up on the table. The supervisor began the meeting.

Allen's attention quickly strayed. The meeting was mostly judgement disguised as encouragement. Allen wasn't quite sure why the finance department was to blame for all of the data breaches, but he was hearing all about it nevertheless.

Other people's attentions were wandering too. Cranes flew from where his colleges sat to the unfold across the clock in the corner of the room, their paper covered in scrawled words like 'frustration' and 'monotony'. A crane belonging to one fellow to a ways to Allen's left bore the phrase 'break window escape no.'

Then something caught Allen's attention.

A little crumpled bird drifted loopily from the supervisor. Allen leaned in slightly to get a better look at the fine print on it.

First floor done soon gun loaded notice no

Allen frowned. Crane thoughts showed up in many different ways, depending on why and how they were created. Allen had once even seen flaming cranes coming from someone who was asleep. But a crushed crane? Allen had come to understand that it meant the thought was being repressed.

An uneasy feeling seeped into Allen. He needed to get closer to the supervisor. The woman presenting droned on. "The finance department combined working hours this week are..."

Allen cleared his throat and raised a hand.

"Yes, Mr. Ken?" an undertone of annoyance laced the woman's voice.

Allen stalled with a friendly smile. "Mrs. Lyn, I just thought the statistics that you were giving would be better represented visually on the whiteboard."

He could practically hear the woman frowning as one of the woman's cranes zipped from Allen to the board bearing the phrase 'How graph?' The room sat in an awkward silence for a moment.

"Okay..." the woman said.

Allen smiled broadly and moved to the whiteboard. The woman continued with her report hesitantly.

It wasn't hard for Allen to tell where the wall was. Paper cranes with uncertain thoughts plastered it like the surface of a paper pinata. Allen slid his fingertips across the bottom rim of the whiteboard and picked up a marker. To his frustration, he didn't sense any more cranes coming from the supervisor.

Allen began to draw a rectangle for his graph. He searched frantically for what he should name it. The work week was forty hours long, so he decided to number the side from ten to fifty.

He sensed another crippled paper crane flutter around behind him. Allen turned his head a fraction, focusing on it.

Why move he know?

Several of his colleagues' confused cranes flew toward Allen, and he quickly angled himself back at the whiteboard.

Shoot, where did I put that graph... he thought. He ran his finger over the smooth surface of the whiteboard and found the subtle resistance from the marker's ink.

Allen puzzled over the strange line on the crane. Know what? What was the supervisor hiding?

Distracted, Allen filled in his graph. He was working on a second graph when another squashed crane flew from the supervisor down the hall behind him.

Device need hurry up.

The supervisor interrupted his thoughts and the woman's report. "Do you mean to tell us you've worked fifteen hours this week?" the supervisor broke in.

“Excuse me, sir?” Allen asked innocently, still not looking back. He realized he had not drawn the line exactly where he should have.

The supervisor sounded exasperated. “Please sit back down, Mr. Avron. I do not think we have need of your graphing abilities right now.”

Allen took a step in the direction of the supervisor, fingers suddenly tingling. “Sir, my last name is Ken.”

There. Another crane.

Wrong name Supervisor wake up soon Edno finished collecting data? first floor cabinet device out soon.

Allen was frozen for a moment, gripping his cane. Endo? As in the mafia of Tafita City?

Another crane rushed to the Supervisor’s hip and wrapped itself around a gun.

The man was about to draw it.

Allen dove at the Supervisor, striking out with his cane. He felt it connect with the man’s arm. The man, whom Allen realized was not the supervisor, struggled to unlock the safety on the on his gun as Allen landed on him. Allen struggled against disorientation as he tried to pry the gun out of his enemy’s hand.

People were yelling, and cranes were zipping around Allen’s head like a snowstorm. Someone was trying to pull him off the supervisor. Allen reversed his grip on the cane and whipped it at the person’s legs. The supervisor used Allen’s distraction to unlock his gun. Allen swung his cane back around and felt it crack the imposter upside the head as the gun fired a bullet into the ceiling with a deafening bang. The man groaned and went limp.

Allen leapt off of the false supervisor, launching himself towards the door.

“What are you doing!?” Mrs. Lyn shouted after him.

“Call security!” a male voice yelled.

Allen breathed hard, trying not to think about the chaos about to follow him down the hall. Nobody else had any idea he had just attacked a spy, and not the supervisor himself. If he couldn't prove himself, the best he could hope for was getting fired.

He raced toward the elevator before skittering to a stop. The stairs would be faster. He wrenched open the door to the stairwell and barreled down the stairs. His thoughts scrambled to keep up. Where downstairs could this data-stealing device be? Everything had seemed normal forty-five minutes ago.

Forty-five minutes ago, he had been wishing for a more exciting job. That seemed vaguely funny now.

Then Allen remembered the misplaced table in the cafeteria. He counted the stairs and jumped down the last three, whipping around the corner and running through the lobby and into the cafeteria.

Allen navigated to the misplaced table as fast as he could. It was pressed up against a counter that he discovered had cabinets in it.

Allen gripped the table and heaved it away. The cabinet door squeaked as he wrenched it open. He felt around breathlessly in the cabinet.

There. His fingers closed around a small walkie-talkie shaped object. Allen pulled his hand out and fumbled with the object, running his fingers over the surface.

A wave of paper cranes surged into the cafeteria as coworkers and security guards flooded into the mostly deserted cafeteria. Allen held up the device.

"The supervisor's false!" he called. "Edno is trying to hack our systems!"

People pulled up short, and Allen could sense surprise. The device in his hand was covered with so many attentional cranes that Allen could tell exactly what it looked like.

Several ITs took and examined the device.

A security guard rushed into the room. "We found the real supervisor locked in his office closet, bound and gagged!"

Surprise rippled through the room and Allen was largely ignored in the ensuing chatter. Cranes roared around him like leaves in a hurricane.

“Hey, do you know what happened?”

Allen hadn’t noticed Evan approach. He turned slightly in the direction of Evan’s confused thoughts.

“Mm, I think I just saved a lot of the company’s data from being stolen by Edno.”

“Come again?” Evan choked. “Do you think they’ll give you raise?” he added dryly.

“I think they’ve already forgotten about me, but...” Allen cracked a smile.

“But what?”

“But I fought the dark forces of evil and escaped a ridiculously boring meeting in the process. I think I’ll call that a win... although, maybe I should go back now and adjust that graph now.”

## *People Change*

**Ava Nye**

I got caught. I was so sure my plan was foolproof... I spent extra time covering my tracks, and I planned and planned, but I made one careless mistake. Where did it all go wrong?

Well, nine hours ago, I went to my husband's military ball. I dressed modestly in a simple yet elegant wine-red dress. I stayed quiet, following my husband around all night. I smiled, and nobody would have expected anything.

Behind my smile, my blood was boiling. During the ball, while everyone was dancing, I slipped away. I went to the ladies' room and changed my dress. I know it sounds odd, but it was a major part of my plan. The dress I changed into was much different; it was yellow with glitter, and it was less modest, it was going to grab attention. I walked back out, and everyone instantly noticed me. It was exactly what I wanted. While everyone's eyes were on me, the power was cut. When the power returned, my husband was dead.

My eyes fell upon him, and the devastation was immediate. I rushed to his side, falling to my knees with tears running down my face.

The people around me were confused and scared- good. I, of course, played my part as the hysterical wife. Why wouldn't I be hysterical? My husband lies on the ground dead.

Soon, the police and detectives arrive. Right away, I was questioned. However, my facade was convincing. "Officer, find the person who did this," and "I loved him." While hysterically crying, yeah, pretty convincing. I didn't lie, I had once loved my husband. This would've been his last military ball anyway; they intended to honorably discharge him. He knew this, and he turned very quickly from a loving husband to a drunk- well, anyway, it's hard to love somebody you don't recognise anymore.

The Law enforcement continued to question the suspects. In the end, nobody was convicted, and the investigation would be ongoing for several months. Over those months, I would be especially careful. I often would feign being sick to avoid social gatherings. As far as people around me know, I've never been a good liar. I made sure it was obvious they knew I was lying; they would look in my eyes and see an empty look. A look of somebody who's given up. They would assume it has to do with my husband's death, and they would leave it alone.

Police would continue to question me, "Ma'am, did your husband have any enemies?"

I would shake my head no, tears welling up in my eyes. I was good. I would wipe my eyes and

stand up, trying to change the subject. “Would you like some tea?” As always, they decline politely and awkwardly make their exit.

That had always worked until a particularly pushy young officer came along. He was tall with broad shoulders and had a subtle hint of stubble on his face. He was persistent. It was hard to avoid his questions. In the end, he was the one who had cracked me. He didn’t get me from his questions, no, he got personal.

He would unprofessionally ask me to dinner, and as I said before, he was persistent.

Eventually, I would agree. We would go to a nice restaurant, where we would engage in a light-hearted conversation. He was charming and well-mannered. It was hard not to fall for him. He would walk me home and get the doors for me. This would become a regular occurrence; he would get close to me in the following months.

Late spring that year, nearly four months after the death of my husband, we would be on a date. Not our typical date, it was different. We would stay at my home and watch a movie. I would watch as he laughed; the way his Adam’s apple bobbed was incredibly captivating. I can’t say I’ve ever been one to notice those sorts of things.

Then, the question came from nowhere, “Why did you kill your husband?”

My guard was down, and I was distracted. I had no way of stopping the words that fell from my lips, “He changed.” I had always been careful; how could I have been so foolish to fall for an officer who was investigating the death of my husband, whom I murdered?

It sounds silly, but truthfully, I would do it all over again just to see that stubble and those soft dimples. Love does indeed blind us.

I would soon be arrested, and a week following my arrest, I would testify in court. I would admit to killing my husband, but it would be ruled self-defence.

Then came the verdict: I would be sent to prison for thirteen years, but I had a chance of parole. In the years following, I behaved as well as I could; I did everything I could to get parole. It took 6 years, but I was released early for my behavior and my willingness to go to a psychologist.

Oddly, upon my release, I would walk past the officer who arrested me, and he would smirk at me as I walked through the doors. I smirked back. After all, we just got away with murder.

***Rainwater***  
**Olivia Holland**

Annette sat cross-legged on the floor of her bedroom, glaring at the glass of lemonade in front of her. She clutched her wand with frustration and tried again for what felt like the thousandth time.

She focused on the glass. Bernice had said it was important to avoid trying to manipulate the liquid as whole. Nobody could manipulate a node of water that big. Instead, it was necessary to think of the water as a lot of tiny points Annette could control and manipulate.

Annette willed the lemonade from the cup. Through the clear glass she saw it rise up. A thrill went through her. Now for the moment of truth. She forced the liquid up higher.

It shattered. The lemonade splashed back into the cup and onto the floor as well.

Annette sighed angrily, on the verge of tears. How was she ever going to get accepted into the academy if she couldn't master this? She swiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater, trying not to cry.

Annette had spent the last week trying to do aqueous magic. An understanding of and ability to perform aqueous magic, along with umbra, sonus and first-level inanimate supernata magic, were required to enter into the Mahotsukai Academy. If Annette was able to perform well enough in her entrance exam, she would be able to enter into one of the most prestigious magic academies in the United States a whole year before everyone else, just like her older sister Bernice had. She would study at Mahotsukai for seven years before she would be a real witch.

Annette felt something warm and fuzzy rub against her. She looked over and saw Mimi, her cat. Annette scooped him into her lap, making the bell on his blue collar tinkle softly, and pressed her face into his gray and white fur. Mimi had been a gift from Bernice, Annette's older sister.

“Every witch ought to have a cat, don’t you think?” she had said.

Olivia Holland

Page 2

As Annette gazed into Mimi’s expressive blue-gray eyes, she wished again that Bernice was here to help her with her magic. Bernice was graduating from Mahotsukai near the same time that Annette would take her entrance exam. Annette really wanted to succeed for Bernice.

Bernice would know what to do, Annette thought sadly, gazing at the lemonade, the liquid now calm and serene, as if mocking her. Bernice always knows what to do.

“Annette!” Annette’s mother called loudly, as she opened the door of Annette’s room. “Oh, sorry, you’re right here. What are you doing?”

“Trying to do aqueous magic.” Annette answered sullenly.

“You really should do that out-” Annette’s mother broke off as she saw the look on Annette’s face. “Oh, Annette. You shouldn’t worry so much about it. You’ll get it really soon.”

Annette bit her lip and tried to look a little less sad. “I don’t know, Shawna’s doing it, and she’s eleven. I’m twelve.”

Annette’s mother put her hands on her hips. “Shawna also couldn’t figure out light magic until she was almost ten. Things take some people longer than others.” Her voice softened. “You might not get it today. But that’s alright. You don’t need to take it all so seriously.”

“Maybe...” Annette said dubiously.

“Yes,” said Annette’s mother. “Definitely.” Annette’s mother glanced out the window and pointed. “See how nice it is outside? You should go for a walk. Sometimes it helps to focus on something else for a while. Why don’t you take Mimi to the park?”

Annette tucked her wand into her skirt pocket and sighed. “Okay,” she said.

Annette drank the rest of her lemonade and found Mimi’s leash. The lemonade tasted somewhat burnt after all the failed magic Annette had tried to work on it, and she

made a mental note to avoid trying aqueous magic on substances she was planning on drinking. Mimi was none too keen on the idea of wearing his leash, but eventually Annette got it on him, wiggly though he was.

Annette stepped out onto the front step and closed the screen door behind her. It was just the beginning of summer, and vivid flowers and dense bushes waved on either side of the pebble walkway.

Annette walked down the length of it, then down her short driveway and onto the sidewalk. The wind blew excitedly, ruffling Mimi's fur and Annette's brown hair. Annette looked up at the sky and saw some gray clouds a little to the west of her. It looked as though a storm was brewing.

Annette turned her attention to the sidewalk. She made it a game to step over the cracks, and she mostly succeeded. Unconsciously, her mind slipped back to Mahotsukai.

If only I could master aqueous magic, CRACK, I would only have sonus magic, to learn before the fall, CRACK. But if I can't learn it, CRACK, then I won't pass my entrance exam and I'll have to wait, CRACK, until next year or go to another academy. Father, CRACK, and mother and Bernice would be disappointed.

"No, Mimi!" Annette scolded suddenly, pulling him away from a violet growing on the edge of the sidewalk. "Don't eat that."

Mimi gave her a sidelong glance.

Annette and Mimi arrived at the park and sat down on a weathered wood bench beneath a big, old oak tree. She removed Mimi's leash. The sky had more gray clouds in it, and the warm gusty air felt slightly charged.

Annette gazed up at the huge tree. Its wide trunk was covered in moss and lichen. Above, its leaves created a great, mysterious, shadowy green canopy. Mimi wandered around the knobby roots of the oak, stalking a dandelion puff.

Annette picked up a little white flower and began to pluck the petals off it absentmindedly.

That was when disaster struck.

WOOFWOOFWOOF!

A large, slobbering dog came tearing around from behind the tree, baying and howling, barreling toward Mimi.

“No!” Annette cried, jumping up and trying in vain to grab her cat. Mimi, in a panic, scrambled up into the oak tree. The salivating dog pawed and scratched at the oak, barking his head off. “No, no!” Annette said again, trying to scare the dog away, terrified herself. The dog hardly glanced at her before continuing to bark.

Annette couldn’t think of anything to do. Just then, a boy her age rushed up from the same direction the dog had.

“Fred! Fred!” the boy shouted. He held the end of a ripped leash. “He gets loose all the time,” the boy told Annette, wrestling his dog away from the tree and slipping the part of the leash that was still good under the dog’s collar, both ends in his hands.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he said as he dragged the still barking dog away.

Annette stared dumbfoundedly at his retreating form, then up into the oak.

Mimi peeped at her from high in the branches.

“It’s okay,” Annette said sweetly. “You can come down now.” An uneasy feeling seeped into her. “Come on...”

Mimi stayed where he was.

Annette stared at him, realizing the issue.

“Come on, Mimi,” she begged.

Mimi tried to inch back toward the trunk of the tree. However, his claws slipped, and he scrambled back to a safe place on the limb. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Please come down, Mimi!” Annette said. “It’s going to storm!”

When Mimi didn’t move, Annette huffed exasperatedly. If Mimi wasn’t going to come down by himself, she would have to get him down some other way.

Annette reached into her skirt pocket. She looked around quickly, then drew out her wand.

Maybe I can use supernata magic. she thought. Annette hadn't learned how to do second-degree supernata, the kind of levitation used on living things, yet, but she did know how to do first-degree, levitation used on inanimate objects. Like Mimi's collar. Annette checked one more time to be sure that no one was watching. She wasn't supposed to do magic in front of normal people. When she saw that nobody was around, she pointed her wand at Mimi, focusing on his little blue collar. Mimi yowled piteously as he began to rise off the branch, dragged upward by his collar, which made his fur bunch up around his face.

"Sorry." Annette said apologetically.

Hope was beginning to fill Annette when Mimi's collar suddenly popped over his head. Mimi fell back onto the branch, and the collar dropped to the grass below him at Annette's feet.

Annette glanced down at the collar with mounting frustration and fear. Mimi glared down at her grumpily and meowed. Thunder rumbled, closer now. Annette frowned. She was beginning to get frustrated with Mimi. What if she used umbra magic?

Annette used her wand to summon the shadows from the nooks of the tree branches. She didn't have much skill with umbra magic, but hopefully it would be enough.

The shadows balled together into a dark mass behind Mimi. Annette concentrated. The shadows began to move toward Mimi, herding him toward a lower branch. Mimi saw them and stood perfectly still.

"Come on," Annette muttered, trying to stay concentrated. Umbra magic drained energy quickly.

Mimi suddenly bolted, but not in the direction Annette wanted him to. Instead of

heading downward, Mimi dashed higher up into the branches. The shadows rapidly disbanded as Annette lost her concentration.

Then she heard a flutter of wings. A hawk sat a couple of branches higher than Mimi. It edged a bit closer. Its shining eyes were fastened hungrily on the cat.

Annette tried to summon up the shadows again, but she lost concentration as the first drops of the storm began to fall around her.

She suddenly realized that she could lose Mimi. Annette couldn't go for help, because if she left, the hawk would surely get him. But what else could she do?

Rain began falling, slowly at first, then faster. Thunder rumbled overhead.

Annette clutched her wand, looking up miserably into the tree. She couldn't think of any way to get Mimi down. The rain soaked her clothes, and even Mimi, under the cover of the leaves, was quickly doused. He meowed miserably. The hawk cocked its head at him, moving a step closer.

"No!" Annette cried, trying in vain to scare the hawk away. "Go! Go away!"

The hawk paid no attention to her. Annette just stood there, helpless. How had she gotten into this situation? Bernice had given Mimi to Annette as a birthday present the summer before last. Annette couldn't bear the idea of having to tell Bernice she had lost him.

I'm such a failure, Annette thought miserably. I can't even save a cat.

Water dripped from Annette's hair and trickled down her nose. A peal of thunder rolled long and ominously through the troubled gray sky. Humidity had crept into the air and the ceaseless patter of rain surrounded Annette. Light seeped from the dull clouds above.

Then it hit her like a lightning bolt.

aqueous magic.

Annette steadily pointed her wand at Mimi up in the tree. She had to make this work.

Annette focused on Mimi's soaked fur. She focused not on the water as a whole, but on each tiny droplet. Every infinitesimal glittering diamond. She sensed them all in a way she hadn't felt them before. Each of them seemed to stand completely still, frozen, in vivid detail, reflecting the deep green light of the leaves and the gray light of the sky.

Annette gripped her wand.

The hawk leaned forward and jumped from his perch. Annette panicked and brought her wand up. Mimi shrieked, caught in the frozen water throughout his coat, and flew up into the air just as the hawk dove beneath him.

Annette felt her grip slipping. The water began to liquify. The hawk pulled up short and struggled to turn back around in the branches. Annette tried to grasp wildly at the water and almost lost her control. Then she remembered and forced the water back apart into tiny drops.

Mimi stopped slipping. Annette, concentrating hard, lowered him to the ground.

The hawk made one last attempt, suddenly dropping out of the tree like a rocket.

Annette reacted with a lightning-fast impulse. She pulled the rainwater from Mimi's fur and whipped it at the hawk. Inches away from the ground and Mimi, it exploded over the bird. The hawk fluttered and reeled drunkenly for a moment before beating its wings and shooting back off into the sky.

Mimi huddled in the wet grass, shivering. Annette retrieved his collar and fastened it back on him, along with his leash.

He looked up at Annette with sad, pleading eyes.

Annette rolled hers, trying to stay angry with him. "You stupid cat!" she said. "If you ever do that again..." She broke off, trying to stop a grin. She had done it! She had saved Mimi. What was more, she had used aqueous magic.

She gave a big mock sigh, and started off back towards their house, Mimi in tow.

Olivia Holland

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“Come on.” she said. “You can dry off when we get home. But you deserved every bit of that, I think. Besides, you’re dryer than me now.”

As the sun began to peek out from behind the clouds, Annette skipped along the shiny, wet surface of the sidewalk all the way home.

## ***Scorched***

**Lorena Morkow**

A man huddled in the crack between two stones, clutching the remains of a white dress. Ash polluted his brown hair, and scorch marks tracked up his arms. He heard the crackling of a raging flame behind him, consuming his town and the corpses of those he once held dear. Tears slid down his dirty cheeks, creating streaks down to his chin. That demon. Wrapped in red vein markings, and staring in contempt with golden eyes. It had burned down the entire town when everyone was gathered. The man curled around the singed and tattered dress.

He had been to be married today. The man squeezed the dress closer, trying to forget the demon that had burned all he loved to ash. Eventually, although he was not sure how long it had been, he crawled away from his hiding place. Despite knowing he shouldn’t, the man looked back at his home. He choked up to see its black ruins. The man quickly turned away, then, not knowing for sure what to do with it, placed the ashen dress gently inside the crevice

he had hidden in. Like a coward. The man steeled himself, first trudging, then marching determinedly. That demon would not get away with this. The man marched all the way to the next town over, a place called Tarow’s Edge. There, he found what he needed. The man did not bother to look at the sign as he barged into the armory, startling the only man inside, who was standing behind the counter. “By the Hands of the Nine, what happened to you?!” said the burly clerk. A name tag on his soot-stained apron identified him as Feth. “Well, Feth,” said the man dryly. “I don’t have a whole lot of time. What weapons do you have ready?” The clerk,

befuddled by this strange man with freshly burned arms stuttered: “I-I have a few swords, uh, some dual wield axes, and—” “I’ll take the axes.” Feth did not question, perhaps from that haggard posture, or the fury in his eyes. The clerk silently walked into the back, returning in short time with two hatchets, hilts wrapped in black leather. He passed them over the counter, and the man grabbed them, hefting them in his hands. Then the man reached into his pocket, pulling out a key and tossing it. Feth caught it against his shoulder.

whatever these are cost, take it from the eighteenth safe in Vormer's Bank." Or whatever was left of the place. Not caring for anything but the death of the demon, the man stalked out, a fire burning in his heart like the one that had ruined his life. It was not hard to find the demon.

Smoke rose from the blackened trees of Tarow Valley beneath him. Several civilians stood on the bridge, remarking at the strange thing they had seen flee down there, skeins of scarlet across its pale skin. The man strode down the pathways to the Valley's forest, not bothering to hide his axes. No one got in his way. The man descended into the trees following the putrid stench of smoke. He had to remind himself, however, that this demon could turn flesh into ashes with a touch. That had been what had happened to his... his... The man choked up at the thought of his recently proclaimed wife. Then he soldiered on, the flames of revenge stoked even further. When he arrived where he had seen the smoke originate, he did not find the demon. It found him. The man turned just in time to see the backhand. He spun midair, back hitting the firm wood of an oak. The hard ground shoved the breath from his lungs, his hatchets falling beside him. The man attempted to stand, but winced at the sharp pain in his ribs. He looked up, his eyes the only thing he could move. A creature so pale it looked like death stood over him, arms marred by red skeins. Twin horns grew from the skin on his forehead and swept back into its humanlike brown hair. Two golden eyes seethed, fixed on the man struggling to stand. "So you want to kill me?" asked the demon, the murder, as the man rose unsteadily to his feet, axes clutched so hard his knuckles bled white. The creature circled him, a hiss escaping from between its pale lips. "Well you don't want to." It growled.

"Set your ven—" It was interrupted by a roar as the man charged the demon. Skill was something that the man had little of. But rage? Rage thundered through his veins with all the fury of a wildfire. As the demon turned aside to dodge the charge, so did the man. The devil snarled as blood from its wrist burst forth, catching fire moments from touching the air. The man heaved as he was hit square in the stomach. A boot to his chest sent him tumbling back, but the man refused to drop his axes. He only made it up to one knee before he vomited onto the grass. But the man had no time to kneel there and puke, as the demon was advancing

and quickly. Bloody drool dripping from his lips, the man barely put up an axe in time to block red, burning claws. The wood and leather hilt set flame and the man dropped it before his hand burned in consequence. But the other axe? The man gritted his teeth, then buried the second hatchet right into the pale neck of the demon. It screamed a sound darker than murder, stumbling back, hands with skeins of red pressed to its wound. The man limped towards the dying demon who now bucked on the ground, its pale skin flaking off as it was burned from the inside out. At last, the thing stopped thrashing and laid there, hissing from its fangs. "And so the curse continues on..." The light in its eyes dimmed and a breath passed its lips, red and orange sparks and a mist the color of sunset drifting lazily up. The man clutched his stomach, watching the demon turn to smoke. Yet whether or not he noticed when the scarlet mist crept into his mouth, who can say? The man's skin cracked as skeins of red scrawled up his arms, past his elbows. Horns sprouted from his forehead, curling back into his hair as his eyes bled a powerful gold. His heavy breathing shifted into a deep growl, and the axe in his hand erupted into scorching flames. But they didn't burn him. The man hissed through canines now long, and he felt a need in him. He had to burn something. People. The man—now demon—cast its new eyes to Tarow's Edge above. And got ready to burn.

## ***Sizzling Scales***

**Gabrielle Hoye**

As the moon replaced the sun and the sounds of people became muted by the brick walls of homes, most of the animals retreated into the cozy barn. Feed and straw flattened under the horses' hooves, and their eyes grew heavy, with today's work finally catching up to them. Nearby, a small lake stilled and reflected the twinkling pattern up above. The serenity of night, however, was juxtaposed by the endless stress of the fish below.

I swam, from coast to coast, mind racing with worry after swimming with the school. Their talk of the return of King Golin scared me bubbleless and in defense my eyes refused to shut. My tail ripped from left to right, disturbing the flat surface. In the midst of my panic, I didn't sense my mother's irritated presence and swam right into her, knocking us both sideways.

"Gup, why are you still awake? And your pacing is waking the coral," my mother explains in a monotonous manner, clearly missing the comfort of our cove."

"Mamman, you don't understand! We could end up scale-less on a pearl plate!" I rush out, clearly distraught.

"Woah, woah—slow down. Are my gills filled with bubbles or did you say we could end up on pearl plates?" my mother asks, laughter creeping up her throat.

"Yes! A pearl plate! Laid out for consumption," I whine, lying on my side, mimicking my plate position.

My mother's fins fly to her face before erupting in laughter at my antics. "Gup, you need sleep. The king no longer fishes here—not after the caviar gave him worms last winter." My mother consoles me, while putting a gross depiction of the deworming of King Golin in my head. She guides me back to our family cove before petting my head.

“Get some rest, Gup! School will be here at 4 tomorrow,” and with that she swims up into her bubble hangar and I groan, dreading the next few weeks. The water warms with the sun’s morning rays, and I turn over, unprepared for the day. Impending doom sat in the corner of my mind as I feared today would be the day that I was...fished.

Dramatically, I kissed my rock. I waved goodbye to the swaying anemone, and looked above, waiting for the piercing metal of the outside world. I winced when I heard the mellow sound of the surface breaking, only to see the tonsils of the castle dog. I went through the whole day, anxiety eating at my scales like the ones above soon would.

The water’s surface vibrated as the horses galloped, heavy footsteps sending out seismic waves to the ones below. I brushed this off as normal, before hearing the agonizing scream. The scream echoed through the countryside, before it was replaced by the awkward bleat of a sheep.

“Ba—aaa—a,” the sheep yelled, clearly in distress. All of the farm animals turned their heads at the sight and most of the fish swam to the top to see the commotion. Our eyes widened as we watched King Golin shrink into an awkward sheep, legs bowing and voice scratching.

Oh no. A part of me worried that this would lead to corruption within the homestead. Yet another part of me relaxed as sheep can’t fish.

I was pulled out of my thoughts, however, when a stream of neon blue and green streaked the sky above. “Were they battling?” I thought as the horses neighed out, also now in distress. I swam around the lake to get better glimpses, and tried to yell out for Maman, but she brushed me off.

“Stop talking about getting fished and pearl plates. We all know I look better on porcelain anyway,” Maman said, brushing me off with a chuckle.

“No, Maman! You don’t understand, there is a ba—” I was cut off by a stinging poke to my side. Panic set into my body as I was whisked upwards and into the cool air above. I screamed. I writhed. None of this worked as I flopped back and forth on the ice plates.

“Look at this fish. Just dancing on the ice like a figure skater,” the big one said, flashing his many teeth. The conversation was cut short as an echoing zap deafened the atmosphere. The king turned sheep yelled for attention, but was laughed at by the crew of men in leather armor.

“King Golin, I sentence you to a life of instagram! Frolic away to your doom,” the short one said. Magic lifted the sheep into the air, and with a zap, he was gone. I felt my skin drying out, my last vision being of the sharp blade—the blade that would dissect me onto that cursed pearl plate.

That night, the men had a delicious spread of fish—and an agonizing night of indigestion.

### ***Something is Better Than Nothing***

**Leo Ledyard**

Her alarm blares at 6:30 AM, making her roll out of bed. Her room is painted green, a TV in front of her queen size bed. The spot where her baby dolls used to be now was a vanity. Speaking of the vanity, she goes up to it to do her skincare. She picks out an outfit, the one her parents disapproved of but she loved. At 6:50. she goes downstairs and her dogs greet her by licking her feet. She yells at Tate to stop and gently kicks Zara off. She eats her breakfast of eggs and toast and her moms drive her to school. -2- You roll out of bed at 6:50 AM, ignoring your alarm that is set for 6:30 AM. The necklace you used to share with her stares at you from your wall. You look away. You go to your cluttered dresser and put on your usual eyeliner and lipstick. The popular girls, even her, who used to be your friend, make fun of you for it but you love it, and you don't let them bother you. You put on your outfit, with a shirt from your dad's old band that no one actually knows. You put Pop-Tarts in the toaster at 7:15. (You want to start waking up earlier, but don't feel like it because you stay up until 11 writing and barely can get out of bed as it is) Your mom drives you to school, stopping to pick up Paige, one of the people in your carpool. -3- She greets her friends before morning meeting, rushing past the person who had occupied the title of 'best friend' since preschool. Now it belonged to Nina, who was prettier and more composed and didn't wear shirts she cut over a sweater with holes in it. Her former best

friend reads a book, almost catching a glimpse at her. They don't, because they stopped doing that. Most of the time. Hey, this chapter isn't about them, hush. She rushes to her seat as the time hits 8:00 AM. The principal runs through the normal announcements, and then they are released to 1st period. One of the only classes she has with the person who knows her house like the back of their hand. -4- You walk into 1st period and cover your ears, because the boys are being too loud. They always are, so you tell yourself you should be used to it. Their jokes are funny, but you can't laugh. Audrey runs past you and apologizes, and you would have believed her if not for the massive smirk on her face. You sit down in your seat, next to the boy you used to have a crush for some reason, also next to the girl who half of your friend group has a crush on. (and you go down a rabbit hole in your mind of: why are we all obsessed with crushes?) You see her, your former best friend, talking to Audrey. Despite how popular she is now, there are some people who don't like her. One of those people being Audrey. Audrey doesn't like you, either. But many people don't like you, so that's normal. Your teacher tells everyone to get in their seats, almost bored. He probably is. Being a English teacher for a bunch of middle schoolers must not be very exciting. You open up your book and zone out. Next thing you know, your teacher (Mr. Smith. Not a very interesting name.) is calling on you. You have no idea what you're learning or what question you have to answer, because what even is the RACE strategy? You shrug and the whole class laughs, even her. You roll your eyes and put away your book, but once you see that Mr. Smith has gone back to the whiteboard. you bring it back out. Once again, you zone out, lost in the world of dragons and mages and gay vampires. Soon, the bell rings and you continue on your day. It flashes forward to math. Your least favorite class; the long-term sub you have...sucks, to say the least. Before class, while he's out printing worksheets, the classroom buzzes to life like bees. You overhear the person you used to be best friends with and hang out with afterschool, talking about her upcoming party. She goes through the list of people that are invited. Your name doesn't appear. You didn't really expect it to, but a lot of people are invited. Even that one kid who draws on his desk and makes fanart of your English and math teacher (Yes. Mr. Smith and Mr. Manuel. Mr. Smith has a husband and is 50 years old, while Mr. Manuel is 68 years old.) doing...questionable things. You go to sharpen your pencil. You hate having it unsharpened. You brush back her. She cackles with Nina and Gina, like witches or something. Gina is one of her new friends, too. You roll your eyes and go back to your seat, because why should you care? Why do you care? Your math teacher, Mr. Manuel glares at everyone and they rush in their seats, giggling. He starts talking about polygons or something, calculating the area of a triangle, and you zone out, focusing instead on your computer, which is open under your desk. Mr. Manuel doesn't notice. Before you know it, the bell rings and you walk out of there with no understanding of what you just learned. Finally, lunch. -5- She sits down at the almost full table by the windows, AKA the popular girl table. She sets down her Stanley and asks Nina if she has any food to spare. Nina says no, which somehow gives them the signal to cackle like banshees. She looks over at the small table that housed the person she used to know so well, and their friend group. Also the random 5th graders, and the freaky-fanart drawing kid. She looks away, biting into her Uncrustable. Her table is alive with chatter and cackles. Someone throws an orange across the table and Gina falls out of her seat laughing, which is a daily occurrence. Her phone lights up. (She isn't allowed to have it, but she sneaks it in.) Mom. "I know you aren't good friends with them anymore but I want you to invite them." She doesn't need to say their name, her daughter knows exactly who

she's talking about. "Fine, but I thought you said 40 guests was enough?" She sent a GIF of a dog side-eyeing the camera. "Yes, but you should reconnect with them. You were best friends since preschool, remember?" She puts her back in her pocket and doesn't respond. -6- So, this is a pretty huge time skip. Two weeks. Her party. You were shocked to hear you were invited. You also deflated when you realized, none of your friends had. For a second, you thought about dressing what society considered 'normal', but you would be doing it for everyone else, not yourself. So you dress in a thrifted sweater with holes in, and you put a neon yellow shirt on underneath. You also wear jorts (it's May, so warm enough?). The party is at your former friends grandpa's house, which is gigantic. Probably good it's so big, there's 40 people coming. Your mom drives you over, looking hopeful at the thought of her inviting you to her party. You walk over to the dance floor. The person you used to be best friends with walks over. She thanks you for coming (with an added 'um'), then sashays over to Nina and Gina. Wow, there's a lot of people here. Some random kid you knew from preschool, the fanart kid (who is currently trying to get a group of boys to play 'spin the bottle' with him. He, you think his name is Levi or something, acts like he's joking, but you don't think he is...) Rose, who the birthday girl (you honestly find it weird when people call someone that) literally had the biggest falling out with is somehow here, and also Danny, who tried to assault you in first grade. You go over to the food area. There's a lot, and you are kind of a biggie and get carrots (Which she loved. And they're also, like, healthy.), chips (The unhealthy kind, they're Doritos), cheese and crackers (Your dad hates cheese, so this is the only chance you get to have it.), and a cookie (Chocolate chip, but don't worry, there's probably an option for people who can't have chocolate). The peanut butter cookies looked enticing, but you decided not. Out of the 2 cookie options, you loved chocolate chip. Rose walks up to you. You didn't even talk to her when she was still friends with your former friend, so you're curious why she's coming up to you. Rose asks you why you're not hanging out with 'the birthday girl', she mocks. You laugh, and then laugh quieter and tell her you aren't friends with her anymore. Rose tilts her head and asks why. Your only explanation is that you just... grew apart. Rose doesn't accept this. She tells you that you was her best friend, she would blow off plans with Rose to hang out with you, and that you couldn't just throw all that away. You stopped, cookie halfway to your mouth. You said that she didn't care about you anymore. She had found her own friends, her own story. Rose rolls her eyes. You stomp away, not wanting to continue in that conversation. Rose shrugs and calls out after you, but you ignore her. She says that sometimes, something is better than nothing. You ignore her. You go up to who you assume is your former friend's grandfather, the one whose house you're at and ask where the kitchen is so you can refill your water. He gives some vague directions and you go into the house, dodging the large group of people by the door. -7- She shouldn't have trusted him, it was dumb honestly. But it still felt like the worst betrayal ever when he said he didn't like her. So she did what she always did. She ran. -8- You lean against the counter, sipping your glass of water. Then, strangely, she runs in crying. Wait. Crying? That's not normal for her. She never cries. Not anymore. She looks up at you, mascara streaming down her face. "Reese," she says shakily. But not like a question. More like acknowledgement. "Juliette." You nod.

You don't need to say anything else.

The silence, for once, is enough. Something changed that day.

You aren't best friends again, but there's something. You won't have sleepovers every other weekend, won't work together for every group project, you certainly won't eat together. But there is something. In smiles when she laughs at your joke quietly, in brushes of your hands when you pick up her pencil that fell, in glares from her when Nina makes fun of you, in rainy days where she texts you, "What's up?", in late nights when she sends you a video ("The fandom is too peak to die but too small to revive"), in it all. Sometimes something is better than nothing, and in this case, it is.

## ***The Blue Fox***

**Lorena Morkow**

A hunter tracked a myth. Through the snowy mountains and wintery forests he searched, pulling warm clothes closer around himself. In his left hand he clutched the only proof he had that the myth existed. A lock of blue fur found by his younger brother. His sibling hadn't remembered where he had found it and died only a few days later. Their sick mother was drawing nearer to death every day, and she had said only one thing could save her. The blood of the Blue Fox. The Hunter settled into a crevice in the mountain to rest. He'd been following phantom tracks and ghost trails for weeks. The Hunter opened his canteen, leaning against the wall of the crevice. And immediately fell backward. Bewildered, the Hunter sat up, going back through what he had at first thought was a wall. He put his hand back through it, marveling at the illusion that had fooled his vision, but not his sense of touch. Holding tight to his blue fur, the Hunter ventured into the crevice. The walls and ground of natural stone faded into brick mosaics, and the tunnel became a hall. The Hunter trudged along, tiring quickly because of the provisions on his back, and the axe on his hip. At last he reached a round room at the end of the hall. Light hit the center from an indecipherable place on the ceiling. The Hunter stepped into the middle, a dragon trapped in a spider's web sprawling beneath his feet, depicted in stone. "Hello?" he called, words echoing. The glint of a mirror caught the Hunter's eye. In it was a fox with four eyes and fur as blue as the sky. The Hunter found himself disturbed that his reflection was replaced by the fox. "Greetings, Hunter," said the fox. The Hunter touched his axe, but he was not sure how to reach the strange fox inside of the mirror. "What have you travelled so far for, Hunter?" "My mother is dying. I have come here to cure her." "Ah," said the fox, "she is dying of the Silencing Death" The Hunter paused. The Blue Fox was right.

"I can save your mother," the fox proclaimed. Its four golden eyes glimmered as it spoke again. "However, you must do something for me in exchange. "Climb to the peak of the Asuth'reth, the tallest mountain for which this country was named, and retrieve the blackest stone, so dark it looks to be a piece of night itself. "If you do this, I shall heal your mother."

The Hunter clenched his teeth. "I will do it" At this, the Hunter set off at once. He left the hall into the cold, then marched, determined, to the base of the ever-looming Asuth'reth. The Hunter braced himself, then started to climb. The biting wind threatened his life as he clambered to each ledge, his fingers ragged. When he at last dragged himself the last few feet to the summit, he collapsed in exhaustion. Yet in his eyes was a spark of victory. For there was the stone that could save the life of his ill mother. Darker than the deepest shadows, the stone lay, smaller than the Hunter's fist. Taking in as much breath as the thin air would allow, the Hunter rose onto his feet, balancing on the mountain's peak. He crouched, prowling cautiously to the stone that sat precariously by the sheer drop that was the side of the Asuth'reth deemed unclimbable. The Hunter reached, then clutched the stone in his gloved hands. At that moment, a powerful gust of wind hit the Hunter like a sheet of steel. The Hunter cried out as his boots gave way, making him slip. He slid from the edge, barely catching himself. The Hunter dangled from the edge, desperately gripping the ridge. He found a foothold and was about to pull himself up when another murderous gust hit him in the face. The Hunter's grip failed. He plummeted down, down. The Hunter smashed into the hard ground. Darkness. When the Hunter came to, he groaned loudly and went to turn to his stomach. The pain almost knocked him out again. Oh by the Hands of the Nine. He couldn't feel his legs. The Hunter looked up at the sky, part of which was blocked by the walls of the valley he had tumbled into. He gritted his teeth, then turned over. And began to crawl.

His right arm was mangled, but he still had his left, clenching the black stone within it. Every move was agony as he inched towards the valley's exit. The Hunter felt light-headed, yet he dragged himself further. As he reached the valley's end, he collapsed in the snow. He was so tired. And so very, very cold. "Oh," said a voice, so familiar, the voice of a fox. "So you retrieved the stone. Most die before they obtain it." It sighed. "No matter. Your soul will taste just the same." The Hunter, lips blue, with broken limbs and coated in frozen blood, found that he was too tired to even move. There, he died, buried beneath the snow. Near a day later, the Blue Fox slipped into an old woman's home. She had been sick for weeks. The fox stood at the edge of the woman's bed, watching her sleep. Its four golden eyes seemed to smile at her. "You have sacrificed to me two sons." said the Blue Fox. "You knew they would die, but still hoped their souls would be payment for your life." The fox softened its voice. "You were correct in your assumption" The very next morning, the Hunter's mother was awake and well, more limber than she had ever been, despite her old age. The townsfolk whispered that it had not been the Asuth'reth, but the evil Blue Fox that had taken her son's lives. Yet they might realize, if they could see the flash of gold in her eyes... Who the real demon was.

## *The Castle of Feather Ridge*

**Davina Proudfit**

Bump.

Bump.

Bump.

That was the only sound Viven heard on the long wagon ride to Wellson, the town where this Olivernson fellow is supposed to live. Well she also heard the horse neighing and birds chirping. And the occasional cart or wagon that passed and the children's quiet groans or soft snoring. So actually she heard quite a lot but the wagon bumping on the highly damaged road was the loudest sound. She was worried. Specifically about what this Olivernson fellow was like. She and the children had been bounced from one police station to police station to the funeral to office for the last seven months since the fire that took the children's parents and other family members.

That whole time she hadn't seen this Olivernson fellow once. He wasn't even at the funeral or funerals. She hoped he wouldn't be some kind of deranged maniac that never leaves his home.

With one last bump, which Viven knew she'd feel in her back in the morning, the wagon halted. Ambrose stirred and woke up. Alma woke up with a bump from her twin brother, whose shoulder she had fallen asleep on. Ulysses, the youngest, was asleep in Viven's arms for he was only two.

"We're here" Viven said, trying to sound excited while stretching the best she could with Ulysses in her arms.

The children let out a tired groan as the sad party climbed off the wagon.

"Thank you sir." Viven said politely as she paid the driver.

"You're welcome love." The man said gratefully, taking the coins.

"Alright where are we going?" Viven said, looking down at the small paper in her hand as the driver drove away.

The wagon had stopped at a good sized town. In front of the town was a good sized sign that read : "Welcome To The Town Of Wellson."

They were in the right place now all they had to do was find the DarkClaw estate. The legal man had not given very detailed instructions. So they pretty much had to knock on every door. Viven sighed.

"Ok what now" she said mostly to herself.

“We could try asking for directions nanny Vi.” Sweet little Ambrose said standing only on one foot. He hurt his right foot when the fire happened.

“That’s a good idea Ambrose.” Viven said with a smile. “Excuse me ma’am!” Viven called, spotting a lady at the market.

Viven ran over to the woman with the children following not far behind.

“Yes my dear, are you lost?” The middle aged woman asked kindly.

“Sort of ,we’re trying to find a place. Do you know where the DarkClaw estate is?” Viven said, showing the woman the small paper.

But, the woman didn’t need to see the paper; she knew exactly where Viven was talking when she heard the name. She stared, horrified, for a long moment.

“You want to go there!?” The woman finally said, looking at Viven like she was crazy.

“Yes, do you know where it is?”

“I do but I would not advise you to go there especially with children.” The woman said with a glance at the children.

“Why not?” Viven said with worry rushing to her.

“That’s a terrible place, believe me. They say a terrible old hunchback lives up there. Some even say he takes children in the night. If you need a place to stay you can stay with me.” The woman said, shaking her head.

The children looked over at Viven with wide eyes, Alma with fear and Ambrose with curiosity while Ulysses just looked bored.

“Can they prove these rumors? Have any children gone missing?”

“Well no but he never comes down from there. He’s unnatural.” The woman said standing in front of Viven.

“If you can’t prove them then they’re just rumors. It’s very wrong to assume about someone without any proof. Now can you tell me where the DarkClaw estate is.” Viven said, trying to tell herself that rumors were just in fact rumors.

“You don’t want to go there-”. The woman started.

“Tell me where the estate is.” Viven interrupted.

The woman gave in and pointed towards the mountains in the distance. At first Viven saw nothing but trees climbing up the side of a mountain and a rickety road leading upwards. But, then she followed the path up the mountain to the old black castle on the side of the highest cliff. The old castle was made of nothing but dark gray stone with a large window, covered by a current of some kind as far as Viven could tell, overlooking the town. Every window was pitch black without even the light of the sun breaking through.

Viven stared wide eyed up to the old estate. Fear gripping her heart of the fact that is exactly where she and the children were going to stay.

Viven swallowed hard. She stood frozen in fear for a moment ,but then shook it off. She wasn't going to let hearsay and rumors get to her.

"Well thank you." Viven said to the woman and then turned back to the children who were looking at her like she was crazy.

"Yes, that's where we're going." Viven said, grabbing Ambrose's hand while holding Ulysses in her arms.

Ambrose grabbed his sister's hand and the small group started off. They paid for a wagon ride up the mountain road and were off to the one place no one wanted to go to.

"Nana Vi, is that estate haunted?" Alma asked, voice sweet as sugar but at the moment flat as a floor.

Before Viven could answer, the wagon driver spoke. "The only thing haunting that castle is the hunchback that lives up there. You better be careful little lady or he might eat your children." The man chuckled.

Alma gasped and hugged Viven while Ambrose glared at the man and Ulyess remained half asleep and uninvolved.

"Do you find that enjoyable? Scaring children?" Viven asked, pulling her charges closer to her. "From what I've picked up this whole town is filled with superstitious judgmental people that think just because someone doesn't like being around people and is a hunchback that makes them a crazy murderer! There is nothing in that castle that is going to hurt you. Do you understand me?!" Viven snapped at the driver.

He turned back to the road not looking Viven in the eye for the rest of the trip. The children set up straight as Viven wished she believed her own words.

## ***The Crucible: Baptism of Fire***

**Tegan Sobieraj**

The final line of this stupid play is won out by the only person in the class who wasn't asleep or off in space. Everyone shuts their books and sighs, turning to talk to their friends about anything else other than the play. After having to switch "aye" with "I" too many times really can mess up a teenage girl's mind. Without even looking up from my notes, I could feel his eyes on me. "Does anyone have any options on that final line? I mean that was a brutal gut punch!" Mr. Rogers said, trying to act as if this wasn't as boring for him as it was for everyone else. I glanced up at him, and my cheeks immediately burned with a fiery red. He leaned his head in my direction, trying to push me to answer. I raised my hand quickly, but not fast enough that people would think something was up. "I think Abigail is the one to blame, I mean how hard is it to not sleep with a married man? And then she went on to kill a bunch of people? She sounds like she would be in a mental hospital about now." I said, with a small smirk on my face. I mean how hard was it to sleep with a married man? I mean kissing is a whole other ballpark, and it is not like I was working for Mr. Roger's wife or anything, I barely even know the girl. I met her once or twice, and she seemed so uninterested in him. I know I would never look at him like that, even during the times when I don't stay after class with him, I still always show him how much I'm thinking about him. The most annoying voice ripped through my daydreaming, "Well, how could Abigail be the villain when she was groomed?", I turned my head around and looked at Mae Boyd, she would raise her hand all the time in class and take the best notes, but she didn't have the same relationship with Mr. Rogers like I did. "What's grooming? Last time I checked, Abigail wasn't a dog.." I glanced back at him to see if he was going to laugh at my joke, or even smile at it. He looked more worried than humored, but once he saw when I was looking he plastered on a smile. But from Mr. Rogers, a smile was still a smile, and especially for me, it was a bit more. "Grooming is when someone in a higher position of power-" was all Mae could get out before Mr. Rogers cut her off, "Now..let's not stray too far away from the question at hand, how did you guys feel about the final line? Duncan? Landon?", my eyes were still on Mae, I wondered what she was going to finish saying. But, after he asked his question, I turned back to face the front. His gaze fell on me, but this time it wasn't the nice, kind stare I was used to looking into, this time it was as if his eyes were vacant and just voids of what once were his doe like brown eyes. Mae's half baked answer was looping around in my head, like the excuses I make when I come home late after school after being with Mr. Rogers. The conversation kept going, but I felt like time had stopped for me. It was as if something smacked into my body and my spirit was just floating around the classroom. I didn't even care about the conversation happening anymore, even if it was about why John Proctor was good or bad or whatever is in the middle. Even the bell going off didn't get me to stop with my void of thoughts, Blair had to knock on my desk, "Bell rung", she said not even wasting a second to spare for me to say 'thank you' before she walked out of the classroom just leaving Mr. Rogers, Piers, Thea, and me. Piers was making fun of Thea, and she was looking helplessly at Mr. Rogers but he looked lost in his own worry to care. I skimmed over Piers and Thea, but I was also concerned for Mr. Rogers, so I stepped closer to him and put more space between the two other students and me. Piers and Thea eventually walked out of the classroom and behind

them I walked over to close the door. Mr. Rogers looked like he was trying to busy himself with whatever he could so he wouldn't have looked at me. "You know, if you give me a pass I can stay a bit longer.." I said in a sing-songy like tone as I slowly walked towards him more with a stupid smile on my face. He was silent, and instead filled it with shuffling through papers and keeping his eyes down and to himself. I walked closer to him so I was right next to him and I reached out to take his hand, "Wyatt..what's wrong?", before I could even think fully about what I said, he pushed off his desk and the papers went flying. "Oh my God! Alice, I am a married man. You can't keep this up". My eyes went wide, and as I looked into his it was filled with fire, and that rage felt like it was piercing my whole body, bit by bit. He lifted up my hand off his and pushed it to my chest, his hands felt like rope around me, it was like when his hands were on me I was held back and was just on display for him. "You need to stop this, now. I could lose my reputation over this. My name would get ran through the mud.", all of his words felt like buckets and buckets of water being spilled on me. The words flooded my brain, and went down to my whole body, and it latched around my mouth. "My wife cornered me last night and questioned why I was staying at school so late. Alice, I have kids..I have a whole life in front of me. I can't have you ruining it.", he kept talking while I was trying to swim my way up from the constant downpour he was dumping on me. There was a knock on the door, the knock was my life line, but Mr. Rogers' demise. When I turned away from him and towards the door, it was our principal, the school's resource officer, and my guidance counselor. "Mr. Rogers, we would like to speak to you. Alice Walsh, if you like to speak to Mrs. Moore, you're more than welcome to while we wait for another officer. At that moment, it felt like my spirit had hit my body ten-fold. Mae's question and almost answer made sense now. All the after school meetings, and quiet 'I Love You's', or the locked doors. All the secrets, and lies. I felt like I was watching Abigail talking to John about their affair in real time, but not only was I watching it, but I was in it. Maybe I hated Abigail so much because I was her. I was a teenage girl who was used and misunderstood, but I knew that I was going to be the villain in my own story. I took a fast step back from Mr. Rogers and ran over to Mrs. Moore, doing what other girls and guys couldn't do, especially Abigail Williams.

## ***The Dark Pit That Surrounds My Bed***

**D'Anna West**

I'm jealous of my younger self, of the me that felt joy, no no, of the me that felt sorrow, the me that was able to have manic episodes, the me that was allowed to cry and wait for my mom to come home, but now she comes home later nay, she comes home the next day.

I'm crushed by the weight of the debt life gave me, like iv been scammed into buying something I never wanted, I never asked to be born but im expected to have perfected it as if I had been doing it for over thirty years but iv only been doing it for sixteen.

Sixteen times I've aged, sixteen times I've failed at dying, sixteen times I'd failed to narrowly escape life, these loan sharks chase me as if I were a diver , invading their privacy, but all I wanted to do was float above the water to get away from it all, but I never learned how to swim.

Sixteen years of being taught but never learning, sixteen years of having words but never speaking, sixteen years spent on earth being expected to evolve when it took hundreds of years to figure out that hurting people is wrong, and some still dont know so how can I be expected not to hurt people.

The urge to tear through flesh fills me, the urge to cut and stab and thrust and slice, to bite, to taste, to experience, to be free, out of this skin, I treat people how I want to be treated, so as the thoughts fill my head how could I possible not want to hurt myself.

How can I die, when I never knew how to live, and how do you learn how to live when the sweet sultry voice of death calls your name, the sound of a mother you never had, one that you can love guilt-free, the sound of a place where I do not have to make decisions, where the debt of life is paid, but you can only pay for life with life. Mine must have been expensive because the people around me won't let me pay for it.

It took me thirty minutes to get out of bed, it took me one hour to get out of bed, it took me three hours to get out of bed, it took five hours to get out of bed, it took one full day to get out of bed. It's getting longer, my bed is the only place I feel safe, I feel me, I feel whole.

It's taking longer to get out of bed as the black pit around it grows, it stretches farther and farther, above me below me, inches to feet to yards to miles, it takes my hunger my energy my patience, it will only retreat once I ruin my life, once the patience runs out, once my temper runs hot.

It's got my whole world in the center, and when I'm inside it, on my bed, it blocks out that heavy bearing weight, sleep, yes it's the closest I can get to death, it will have to do, maybe when I wake up the pit will be gone, and that beautiful voice will save me.

## *The Dust Bowl Girl*

Alice Harmon

Dear Diary, Today was really hot. Ma was just about fried in the boiling sun, cooking. Not like it's different from any other day, though. It's really shocking that she can manage it. Pa said that the heat's gonna go up 15% next week. We must be at 1,000% right now, if that's the case. Not everybody's sad about it, though. Mr. T's made a living selling precious ice. Cold, fresh ice. Clumped together, freezing water. The thought becomes my constant companion in these sweltering days. Somehow or another, I must get it. Pa says I gotta man up. When I point out that I'm a girl, he only shakes his head. My little sister Harlow doesn't mind the heat, because it's the sand that frightens her, putting her life at risk. My little brother... is no longer with us because of the dust. They both have asthma, but not Pa, Ma, or me. Get the picture? I don't know what to do if she has to be out in a dust storm. Or if the dust ever makes it into our home.

Dear Diary, I got into a fight today. Peter Walsh had cheese and ham for lunch, a rare delicacy. 'Said he'd give it to me if I drew him a house. I drew one for him. He didn't pay. Pa says it was a worthless fight. When you look at him, a scrawny boy with a mean side, missing an eye, dressed in rags and eyes on the prize, how could you imagine me fighting him? A short, redheaded girl with horrid blotches and freckles all over her, short shorts, and a too-tight blue tank top is no match for him! Everyone was surprised that me, Meg, a mostly good character, would ever be involved in this. Peter Walsh's goons gave me a nasty bruise after. I ain't gonna try that again. He ain't worth it, that thief.

Dear Diary, I can't go anywhere. I'm grounded for the fight. "Pointless," Pa said. "Worthless," Ma said. "You're so stupid," Harlow said. They say this about the fight, but I disagree. He lied. He took my pay and didn't give me my item, which is stealing. At least I'm still here. Peter Walsh's father sent him to a boarding school for fighting a girl. He's lucky. He's out of the dust. Out of the storm. Out of the heat. Out of this miserable, horrid torture we call our home. Out of what murdered my brother. Another dust storm is going to happen today. I can feel it in the air, thick with tension. Dad doesn't believe me. But I see his worried look as he lands his gaze onto our crop, dying. A dust storm may mean no harvest. We prepared, despite Pa's thinking. Rakes in the garage? Check. Clothes away? Check. Harlow in the basement, the safest place for her asthma? Check. We are ready. But the waiting is far worse than the outcome, for the air is clouded in fear. So clouded, that neither peace nor hope can grow.

Dear Diary, the dust crept in last night. Into our home. It reaches our only set of dishes, gone now. It reached the only drawing of my little brother, gone now. It even reached Harlow, down in the basement. But Harlow fought back. She's alive, at least for another day. Gone is Mr. T's house. And gone with it is Mr. T. After seeing his home destroyed, he fled into the wilderness, in despair and agony. His beautiful ice is gone. I can just imagine its cool trickle, running down my back. I want it so bad. And now, I will never get it. Ma has little time for ice, though. Half of our belongings are gone, pelted by so much dust, they broke. Pa's wheat is half gone. "What will we DO???" Harlow cries. "Hush," Ma says. I feel like I can't do anything. Ma needs me to get her another box of dust-coated belongings. Pa needs the watering can.

Harlow needs her inhaler. And yet, I'm stuck. Paralyzed to my bed. Ma is screaming, Pa's grunting, and Harlow's crying. Somehow, I find strength. I give Ma another box of dust-coated belongings, Pa the watering can, and Harlow her inhaler. I'm tired. I need water. I've gone a few days without it, but today, I received it. Beautiful, cold, clean, fresh water. Harlow gets some, too. She cries for more. Harlow, at 8, should be over this babyish behavior. As her crying and screaming continues, I grumble. Ma outta spank her. But she dosen't. Pa outta scream at HER, let HER know how it feels. And I outta say something. But we don't. And life goes on, as it should. All is good. All is (sorta) well.

Dear Diary, Ma is sure excited. She bought me a book about math. It's way too complicated, confusing, and hard to understand. But it makes Ma happy, even though I can tell it was worth a ton of money. Pa wants me to stay here, make a living selling wheat, like him. But Ma wants me to be a rich doctor, away from here. Living in a grand old house, with servants! I think that's going a little far, even for a doctor. But seeing as I really don't want to stay here, I will go by Ma's way and learn math. Even if Pa is mad at me. But what wouldn't I give to trade this book for ice! As I read this confusing math, I have a golden image of the ice I will buy once I am a doctor. Dear Diary, We learned about frog dissection at school, except we didn't get to dissect frogs because Carol ate 'em. She was starving, and nothing smelled worse. Carol's kicked out of school, and thank goodness. I really don't want to share a locker with someone who eats frogs. Harlow's crushed, though. She loved Carol, even though she's 12, an older kid. I'm 11, soon to be twelve in exactly 1 month, 2 days, 6 hours, 5 minutes, and 32 seconds. But who's counting? Pa didn't think I was right, what Carol did. He was so downright mad, he started cursin'. But Ma said, "She was starving, honey. That could be us pretty soon." That shut Pa up. Not sure I would've done good in frog dissension. I don't got great vision. Pa's face is scarcely more than a smudge.

Dear Diary, There was a health screening at school today. Real doctors came. I need glasses, so says the lady in white. Pa's plum mad. "Glasses are too expensive." Ma's writing to some rich relatives in India. Hopefully, they will provide the financial backing for them. In the meantime, my grades are suffering 'cause I can't read nothing on the board. Pa don't care care, but Ma sure does. She still ain't forgotten of that doctor dream of hers. She yells to me about them each night, F's and D's. However, all that yelling must've done me good, because now I got my grades to a passn' C. Ma says I ain't never gonna be a doctor if I don't. But I see her proud smile as she looks at my grades.

Dear Diary, Them fancy relatives wrote back! Enclosed in the letter was money, enough for the cheapest pair of glasses. I see Pa lookin' at it all day. He wants it. I can see it in his eyes. I can see it in the way he walks, the way he talks. I, too, wish I could trade it for Mr. T's ice. But gone is Mr. T, and gone is the money. In its place is an ugly, mole-brown pair of plain glasses. Plain like my clothing. Plain like my name. Plain like me. Ma wants me to write them a thank-you note. I want to write them a no-thank-you-I-hate-this note. But I must abide by what Ma says, or face the dire consequences. It's not fair. Peter Walsh's goons gonna call me ugly, but they won't fight me, not after what happened to Peter Walsh. Their hatred of me is so strong. I see it in permanent ink on my sorry excuse for a locker. I see it in a swiped lunch, a shove in the hallway. I see it in me.

Dear Diary, My birthday's today. I'm 12! Pa got me a hair clip, Ma shoes. But the real gift is the break in the work, the extra water. Oh, the water. Harlow ain't git me nothn'. She has to stay in

the basement, because her asthma's really bad. Ma wants to take her to a doctor, but Pa says we ain't got the money. Oh, well. Harlow's alive, which is more than you can say for some of us. Anyway, the best birthday gift would've been rain. I was so sure it would rain today. It smelled of rain. The clouds hung heavy. And yet, there wasn't any. No ice, no rain, nobody to help. Worst birthday ever? I think not. I love how happy my family was. I wish it was always like that...

Dear Diary, We got a new iceman today. Or, rather, ice WOMEN!!!! Her name is Mrs. Perry. She sells ice on the weekends, but on the weekends, she teaches us as the new schoolteacher. A female teacher!!! I can hardly imagine what change this will bring. Could I be a schoolteacher? Sounds better than a doctor or a farmer, that's for sure. The best part is that if she doesn't sell enough ice on the weekends, she gives it to US!!! Too bad Harlow can't have any. HA! Shoot, now I feel like a terrible, horrid, selfish person, but it's not like I can bring her any. Sometimes, I steal her water, too! Sure, I feel horrid. But hey, I'll do whatever it takes to survive, I'll do. Harlow will just have to man (Or, as I say, girl) up. Dear Diary, HELP! I can't do it all! Ma just got a new job meaning... I have to do all her work, + my own! Not to mention I'm picking up all of Harlow's slack! I'm staying up till 1:00 am and waking up at 5:00 am just to get it all done, plus school and homework! I want to drop outta school, but Ma won't let me. I feel like my family's future is resting on me and UN's shoulders. Did I tell you about UN? He's our tabby cat. He was stealing our food 'till we made him ours. Now he eats our mice, and a splash of water. We call him UN because we couldn't agree on a name, so UN stands for UnNamed. Ma has sure got a soft heart for him. I wish she'd look at me that way.

Dear Diary, Pa is thinking of Harlow too much. He's been neglecting his farmwork, spending long evenings in the basement with Harlow. As usual, I have to pick up his slack. I don't know what Pa would do without her. She's a princess to him, a beautiful maiden in need of rescuing. If she's a princess, I'm a mule. Set to work day after day without any care about it. Set to do the work other people are too lazy to do. I get the least water. I have to give up my very few toys to Harlow. I have to shovel dust in and out. I don't get enough sleep. I don't get to have a doting family. I don't deserve it. All I get to do is constant work, with no stops or breaks. Lucky me. I hate doing work.

Dear Diary, A boy was in the wheat this morning. We didn't spot him till it was too late. He had a whole wheelbarrow full of the wheat, and he slipped away with it, Pa's gunshots ringing in the distance. I was really scared. Pa got so mad. He was cursing and drinking all afternoon. I stayed out of his way. Should I walk by him, I would get a smack on the bottom and a drunken yell. Ma was braver than me, talking to him, trying to calm him down, but that boy had lit something fierce inside Pa. Ma cried. I had never seen Ma cry, not ever. This was a woman who gave birth to me in the middle of a dust storm, a woman who has twisted the metal of a gun, one who has never cried. I hate Pa for doing this.

Dear Diary, Pa left us. He took himself and Harlow last night, while me and Ma were asleep. He took her right under our noses. Ma searched all day till her feet were blood red and burnt. I wanted to go, but Ma wouldn't let me. I miss Harlow already. I miss her already. I miss her gentle laugh, the way she looked after an asthma attack, like she was about to puke, but yet strong and resilient. I love her. I just wish she would come back. As Ma drifted off to sleep, I

made my decision. I was going after Pa and Harlow tomorrow. Ma may try to stop me, but she will not. I'm a lady on a mission, and nobody will stop me.

Dear Diary, I started early in the morning, packing nothing but water. I ran into the dust as it swirled around me. The burning heat beat down on me and I ran through the dust. By afternoon, I was still running, but much slower, feeling extremely beat. Then, suddenly, I see it. A small, dug out hole in the middle of a dust storm. Gasping for air, I ran in. The sand fills my lungs, almost chokes me out. I peer into the hole, and there they are. Neither are moving. I put my hand on their chest. They are breathing. Pa's leg is bloody with teeth marks, indicating he was attacked. I drag them out. I drag them home. When Ma sees us, she screams. Before I can protest, she puts us all in beds with giant goblets of water, the most I've ever seen in my life. She is shaking and sobbing. I drift off into sleep.

Dear Diary, I awake for a short while, only to have water and food shoved into my mouth, and strong medicine. Ma must have visited the doctor, the one Pa said we didn't have money for. I dozed for a while. When I awake, I receive more water, more food, more medicine. I beg for any news of Pa and Harlow, but Ma won't tell me. A boy I don't know gives me more medicine. In weak, feeble words, I croak out, "Who are you?" He smiles and says he is our new hired boy, working for food. The one that took our wheat. He says he made the medicine himself, that he's always wanted to be a doctor. I fall asleep, listening to his canned hopes, his glorious dreams, ones that will never, ever come true.

Dear Diary, I'm fine now. So is Pa and Harlow. It was the medicine. That boy saved us. He also does all our farmwork. Well, not him, exactly. The machines he creates. I feel so stupid. He's obviously going to be a doctor, if he ever gets out. Harlow would make a great stay-at-home mother. Mom is a farmer, as is Pa. But me? I'm utterly useless, worthless to everybody. Maybe it's true that I can't do anything.

Dear Diary, Nothing.

Dear Diary, Nothing.

\*\*\* One year later...

Dear Diary, I'm sorry I gave up writing with you: There was so much going on, with the new baby Ma is about to have, I haven't had a minute of rest. The boy has been adopted by us, and we call him Samuel. No longer a hired boy, he is now a member of the family. Ma and Pa whisper downstairs every night. They call us down to look at houses, apartments, and condos. I don't know why.

Dear Diary, We had a family talk last night. We are going to California!!! The place where many go to escape the Dust Bowl. We have a ticket to a ferry tomorrow, an apartment there, and a new school I can go to. I need to pack now. But how do you pack up a life's worth of memories? In California, Ma will be a cleric in a hotel, Pa a bank accountant. I will pack my glasses, protection goggles, diary, pillow, and blanket. That's all I have. I'm so nervous. Will I make friends? Ma says the other girls in California have never had to suffer. They have never fought a boy, never seen somebody die, never done anything like that. Will I ever be able to fit in?

Dear Diary, On the ferry now, Harlow is extremely seasick. Me? I love it! I know what I want to be. A sailor, living a life of adventure at sea. I would love to sail the ocean blue. Sure, it's not like being a doctor or a mom, but I'm glad to have something I really, honestly want to do, not just something that I feel like I have to do because if I don't, I'll starve. America, California, here I come! Dear Diary, Everybody is talking about me at school. The story gets crazier every time they tell it. I fought a boy. (True.) I was in the Dust Bowl. (True) I murdered somebody. (NOT TRUE) I was a hero because I saved my little sister. (True.. Blushing here) People pretty much stay out of my way. Here are the people I think might be good friends: JoJo - Good because she is super popular Claire - Also super popular Joseph - CUTE!!!

Dear Diary, JoJo thinks I'm weird. Claire gave me a disgusted look. And Joseph doesn't even know I'm alive. I miss the Dust Bowl. Sure, it was harder, but I wasn't an outcast. Peter Walsh's goon's didn't like me - but they didn't like anyone. Samuel and Harlow already have tons of friends. On top of that, JoJo REALLY has it out for me. She calls me, "Toilet cleaner girl." She and her friend laugh, and I hear them say something like, "Tomboy weirdo." Whatever that means. I cried myself to sleep that night.

Dear Diary, I might just have some friends here. Marge and Bethany are really nice to me, and we hung out today. Gotta go. Middle school is a rough place, but I'm glad I now have friends.

Dear Diary (I can't believe I used to call it that!), Ha! It is strange to look back on my diary as a child. My life is so much better now, but that experience will be a part of me forever. Marge and Bethany are still my best friends, as well as Tiffany and Claire. JoJo never came around, too bad. The new baby, Brad, lived in California forever, so far. I am now 41. I have one child, a girl named Desert Rose. I married a man named Peter Walsh, who I didn't start to fall for until high school. Harlow became a bank accountant, just like her father. Samuel wasn't really famous for a long while until he started Amazon and became a billionaire. I'm a sailor, and own my own boat. Peggy Gourmet Anderson, Out!

## *The Epic of Eleanor of Elsindor*

**Adrianna Gadjosik**

“Where is my brother?” Eleanor anxiously inquired.”He went hunting with you and your brothers, did he not? Then why do you return without him, weary and spent? Were you worsted in the woods? Please tell me what has befallen!” She gazed at Denith with distress as he regarded her plea.

He had dreaded this moment. Denith loathed the very hour that he must reveal to Eleanor that her brother Arian was taken captive by the kingdom of Elsindor’s most hated foe. That while hunting, they were overtaken by masked men of the caverns, who at the very sight of their deadly weapons, all men but few quivered with fear. Denith sighed painfully.

“Your brother,”he struggled to form the words,” Will never come back, for where he has tread none go and return alive.”

“So the Lord of the Caverns has taken him then?” Eleanor gasped with horror. Denith nodded,”Alas, I and my brothers, Darin and Dor, escaped only with great difficulty.”

“Woe then to the kingdom of Elsindor that it should loose as great a son as Arian son of Aaron, but as for I, a darkness has descended upon my heart that cannot be healed except in his returning.”

Then Eleanor wept so that Denith could not comfort her, and sadness, too, coiled his heart so that it choked him. For Arian was Denith’s dearest friend.

Denith soon left the house where Eleanor was. She looked down the road watching him leave. She sighed mournfully. Eleanor started to recall the times when she and her brother were young and their mother and father still alive. “Now I am the only one left,” she thought dryly.

Eleanor walked into her room and opened the chest in which she kept her most prized possessions. There, among other things, was a small harp that Arian had made for her in the summer of that year for her seventeenth birthday. She took it out of the chest and fingered it lovingly. Her fingers wandered over the strings, playing a sad song that softened the room around her. A faint ray of sunshine escaped the gray clouds and fell upon her long tresses, turning them from a soft brown to a deep gold. The harp went silent as the faintest glimmer of hope pierced her heart. Eleanor stood, looking out her window as the darkness lifted and was replaced with a grim determination. She lifted her head. Eleanor knew now what she would do.

"Yes," she said aloud, "I will follow the dark road that lies ahead. I will save you Arian, even if I should perish in the attempt."

Eleanor carefully laid her treasure back in its chest and locked it. Then, feeling overcome with weariness from all the uncanny events that had marked that day, she cast herself upon her bed and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Eleanor awoke the next morning and began to make plans for the quest. It could take as long as three weeks, through dense forest and rough terrain, to get to the secret entrance, so she would need to pack a fair amount of supplies to last her. She deemed that it would be wisest to leave at night so as to escape the questions of inquisitive neighbors. She had one problem, however. Eleanor needed someone to look after the house while she was away, for growing up in a well-to-do family, it was a fair size and could not be simply left alone.

"I suppose I could ask Denith or one of his brothers to take care of it," she thought doubtfully. "However, it would have to be planned so that they know nothing of where I am headed. For if I tell them, it shall seem that I am asking them to accompany me on this perilous journey, and I would never bring someone into such a danger unless they willingly offered. Or worse, though less likely, they will try to prevent my going at all."

For a long time Eleanor tried to find a solution to her dilemma. At last, after much frustration, she decided she would just ask Denith outright to look after her house. She would not give any details. All she would say is that she is undertaking a long journey and needed someone to keep an eye on her house. He likely wouldn't ask any questions. At least, she hoped.

The next morning shone crisp and clear as Eleanor went out to accomplish her errand. It was the end of September, and the leaves had just a touch of crimson and gold. It lightened her mood to see them fly gaily across the fields, heedless of the world around them. She skipped as she came to the threshold of the house where Denith, Darin, and Dor lived with their aging mother and father. Eleanor briskly knocked on the wooden door.

"Good morning Eleanor!" Darin greeted her warmly as he opened the door.

"Good morning," she politely replied. "I have a few things to say to Denith; do you mind getting him for me?"

"Of course," Darin assured her. He briskly strode across the hall in search of Denith. After a couple seconds, Darin returned with Denith at his side.

"What is it, Eleanor?" Denith questioned, his blue eyes dancing with delight. He was happy that Eleanor seemed to have gotten over his news so fast and was back to normal.

"It's just this," Eleanor began. She then stated that she was going to be gone for a couple of months and needed someone to look after her house. "Could you?" she requested.

Denith gazed at Eleanor quizzically for a few seconds. This was not like her to leave out details like this. She was undoubtedly hiding something from him. He looked at Eleanor for a few seconds longer, studying her face and all she had said. Then the horrible reality dawned on him. Could it be possible that she planned to leave to find her

brother herself? Eleanor was daring and unlike many girls he had known. In addition, she loved her brother and had an unquenchable spirit of adventure. Without a doubt, Denith believed that Eleanor would be willing to risk this hopeless venture, even if it meant her death. At last, Denith looked at her and beheld her with admiration for the aspiration.

“Eleanor,” Denith said calmly, “You wish to find Arian?”

Eleanor gasped with surprise that he had guessed and nodded.

“Then you will not go alone, my brothers and I shall help you,” Denith smiled at her, and with her bright eyes glistening, she smiled back.

“Is everything ready?” Dor asked.

Eleanor nodded. It was midnight, and she had agreed to meet Denith and Darin at the edge of the village. Dor would stay at Eleanor’s house and wait there till they returned. He was a little disappointed that he would stay behind, but he knew someone had to stay, and he was the youngest after all.

Eleanor wore a common brown dress, and around her shoulders she draped a dark, forest green hood. She held a slender bow of yew. Eleanor slung a quiver full of feathered arrows across her shoulder. Lastly, she slipped a cleverly carved dagger into a belt that she strapped around her waist.

“Farewell,” Eleanor said solemnly. The door gave a clunk as it locked. Eleanor vanished into the darkness like a phantom where her fate awaited her. She ran as swift and silent as a owl down the ominous streets, passing looming shadows as she went. Eleanor knew every nook and cranny in the town, and the darkness did not blind her vision, for her eyes were keen.

She soon saw the figures of Denith and Darin waiting and beckoning to her.

Eleanor approached them cautiously, making sure no one saw her. Darin nodded to her.

“Did you see anyone?” Darin whispered.

Eleanor shook her head and pulled the cloak closer around her for warmth.

“Good,” Darin encouraged, “Denith decided we will sleep once we get under the cover of the wood, so we only have to walk two leagues before we rest.”

“I guess we better get started then,” Denith said cheerfully. He slung a bag across his shoulder and handed a lighter one to Eleanor.

The first part of their journey went well. The sliver of moon shone bright, and gave the soft fields a silvery look. They made good speed as well, stopping for only short amounts of time and walking swiftly as they traveled. Their feet made no sound on the still grass.

After about an hour, Eleanor began to see the first trees of the forest lightly touching the horizon in the distance. As they got closer, the trees grew taller in appearance, standing erect with a sort of menacing air about them. They stood like guards, concealing unknown secrets within and despising all who came. When Eleanor was young, the forest was a haven of amusement: a mere playground in comparison to what it felt like now. Yet she was undaunted, for the spirit of adventure was deep within her blood, and nothing could hold back her determination to save her brother.

“We will rest here,” Denith decided. Eleanor looked to where he had gestured and saw a large, slightly hollowed boulder next to a moss-covered maple, that could act as a convenient shelter for the rest of the night. Next to it, Eleanor lit a small fire to warm them against the frigid night air. After they had eaten a frugal meal, Eleanor and Darin cast their cloaks upon the ground close to the glowing embers so they could stay warm as they slept. Denith did not do this, however. Instead, he climbed up a tree so he could warn the others in case danger came. They decided they would each take a turn doing this every night, in age order from oldest to youngest; first Denith, then Darin, and at last Eleanor.

When morning came, the sun was behind the clouds, and the wood was pale and misty. Nevertheless, the three companions continued deeper into the forest, always going straight. If their calculations were accurate, in less than a fortnight they would

reach the Willowglass Stream, a long river to which the north of was the treacherous caverns.

In the forest, Eleanor's senses were sharpened. The air was so tense that the slightest movement alerted her, and the mere crack of a twig made her clasp her bow tightly. The fog made things eerie, turning the harmless birches into looming shapes. It was soon the eighth night of their travels, and Eleanor lay dozing on the moss-covered turf. Yet something wasn't right. Eleanor tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep.

"The ground is likely just uneven," Eleanor reassured herself sleepily. "After all, if there is any danger, since Darin is on guard tonight, he will rouse us, and we shall not be taken by surprise."

She tried to reassure herself with this thought, but she still felt uneasy, like something was hanging over them. After a few minutes, Eleanor dropped off into a troubled sleep.

When Eleanor awoke, she knew immediately something felt wrong. Her arms felt twisted and there was an unusual sensation in her legs, almost as if she were standing. Eleanor opened her eyes and then quickly closed them again in astonishment. Eleanor had seen a large fire, and around it sat men in the most hideous masks she ever saw, with black deviceless shields at their sides.

"The masked men of the caverns must have found us during the night and tied us to trees in our sleep," Eleanor thought dismayed. "They must have knocked Darin out; otherwise, he would have warned us."

Eleanor scanned the area to make sure no one was looking. She then felt her waist with her hand to see if they had taken her dagger. Luckily, they hadn't tied her arms behind her, so she could move her arms around with some effort. To her delight, she felt a long object with a handle, hidden under her cloak. In their hurry, the masked men must have not thoroughly inspected their prisoners, so they had took Eleanor's bow and quiver, but had not touched her dagger. Pleased, Eleanor quietly slipped the

dagger from its sheath, and carefully began to free herself from cords that that bound her. The sharp blade effortlessly split through the rope, releasing Eleanor from its clutches.

“I must hide,” Eleanor thought, “If I stand here for much longer, I will be discovered, and all hope of an escape will be gone.”

Eleanor examined the tree in which she had been bound to. It was a tall elm with thick branches, that could easily provide a quick place to hide. She nimbly caught hold of the branch lowest to the ground and effortlessly swung up, agile as a cat. Eleanor climbed about midway up the tree, then carefully moved a cluster of fire red leaves away so she could see better. She stood silently, carefully listening to her sneering, black-eyed captors, spying on their every move.

“We made a great catch last night, my fine friends,” cackled a cruel voice devouring stolen food.

“You’re right about that,” another snickered. “I can’t wait seeing their scared faces when they wake up and realize what they’re in for!”

One sallow-faced man clenched his fists, “By the time I’m finished with them, it will be too late for them to cry out for mercy.” He rubbed the sore spot on his head that Darin had struck when he tried to bind him.

“We aren’t hurting the prisoners yet!” The captain bellowed. “I’m sick of patrolling these awful woods and want to get back to the caves as quick as I can. There, you can torture them as much as you like, and maybe I can get a break for once from having to deal with you idiots.”

At this, many eruptions of disapproval and chaos broke out among the men and some of them started to jeer and throw insults at the leader, complaining that he was too compassionate with their prisoners and needed to harden up.

“Well, you’ll at least let us have a thorough search of them, since we barely did anything last night any way. After all, we only took some of their useless weapons, we

didn't think to check if they had a little money or jewels on hand."

Before the captain could respond, five men jumped up and ran over to the tree where Denith was tied to. He had just woken up in time to hear the whole conversation and was not pleased to be at the mercy of a gang of ruthless men, tied to a tree, and worst of all, to have no chance of escape. The men cut his bonds and he fell heavily to the ground with a thud. His body was numb and sore from standing the entire night, and he felt a burning desire for a drink and perhaps a little food to go with it. But no, he had to lie there while a bunch of greedy vagabonds pawed at him, eager to find something valuable and take it from him. Luckily, he didn't have anything of value on him, for the little money he did have was of little value, so he had no fear as far as that went. It was Eleanor that he feared for. Around her neck was a small white jewel, embedded in a disk made of solid gold, on which the back of was carved a delicate flower, the symbol of Eleanor's family line.

Many years before, Eleanor's noble grandfather, Adrian of Elsindor, had gathered an army of brave, willing men to not only attack, but to destroy the evil lord of the Caverns of Callous and demolish his wicked servants. Sadly, the attempt was a failure. However, much damage was done to their foes, and it had hurt the lord's pride. Therefore, whoever was of Adrian's house, the evil lord would bitterly kill in remembrance of that humiliating war.

This thought did not comfort Denith as he anxiously recalled the heirloom within Eleanor's possession, and the certain death that awaited her if it was found. He had not seen her escape, and for all he knew it was only a matter of time before it was discovered.

Before long, the brigands were convinced that there was nothing of worth left on Denith, so they securely tied his hands and started looting Darin instead. They were soon disappointed however, finding only one small penny, a pocket knife, and couple wood shavings to satisfy their greed.

"Perhaps that little lady might have a ring or two," remarked one of the thieves

hopefully,"Women are greedy creatures, they just can't resist a bit of jewelry."

One of them jeered at him,"Well if you're such an expert on girls, then maybe that thick head of yours can remember where you tied the pathetic girl."

"Right over there. Where else?"

"Well then look, because she's obviously not here." He glared at the other darkly.

The first man looked, and to his amazement no one was there. Had he just imagined that he had tied someone there? It had been dark the night before, and it was quite plausible that perhaps they all just thought someone was tied there, but in reality they had just captured two individuals.

"Perhaps there were only two prisoners and we all just imagined there were three," suggested the criminal, explaining his theory.

"Or maybe she escaped," the other yelled,"And now all our dreams are gone because of you!"

At this, total chaos broke out and every one started screeching and roaring and throwing accusations at each other. Each thought the other responsible for Eleanor's flight.

"Silence!" The captain thundered; total silence followed,"If she's gone, she's gone and there's nothing we can do about it. If we imagined her, then there's no reason to start arguing. So everyone shut up, and get a move on. We have a two days journey if we hurry, so get the prisoners, and get moving!" The leader made a harrumph sound as he completed his little speech.

The men reluctantly agreed and roughly tied Denith and Darius together so they could head their way back to their secret lair.

Eleanor, hidden in the golden foliage, had viewed the entire event, and was well pleased with the happenings down below. It was simple; all Eleanor had to do was follow the men of the caverns, and they would lead her right to her destination. As for rescuing her companions, since she still had her dagger, Eleanor could easily cut their cords while the men slept, as long as they weren't watched too carefully. Eleanor hoped

all would go well.

As the masked men hastily made their way to the caverns, Eleanor silently followed, unseen in her pursuit. Eleanor nimbly sprung from branch to branch, staying cautiously hidden behind the leaves of the trees and camouflaging carefully with the environment. Eleanor's friends depended on her success.

Two days had passed, and they were drawing uncomfortably close to the caverns. Darkness and shadows slowly crept into the men's camp as Eleanor patiently waited for night to wax. She would not attempt to rescue her companions, unless the night altogether concealed her actions. At last she was satisfied with the pitch black conditions of the woods, so she silently slid down the trunk of the tree, aware of every sound and shape around her. Eleanor crept up to the tree in which Darin was bound and thoroughly scanned the area. The coast was clear. Eleanor firmly pressed her hand over his mouth. She wasn't sure if he was asleep or not, but it felt safer to make sure Darin would make no sound by covering his mouth with her hand. Eleanor swiftly drew her knife and deftly started hacking at the cords, heedful of any noise that might arouse someone. Darin fell in a heap on the earthen ground. Eleanor hastily crouched down and whispered softly in his ear.

"Wake up Darin! I have come back to rescue you and Denith. We do not have much time to spare, so make haste and hurry!" Eleanor urged.

Darin quickly opened his eyes and sat up, carefully taking in his surroundings.

Finally, he turned his head and his grey eyes locked on Eleanor.

"Where were you?" Darin replied, brushing his fair hair away from his face, "You were gone the morning I was captured, and our captors were convinced you were gone."

"Well I have returned," Eleanor reassured, "And I shall willingly tell you everything later, but not now, for I must go and release Denith."

Darin smiled and nodded in agreement. He stood up and clasped the limb of the tree and energetically swung up.

Eleanor walked over to Denith and did the same to him as she had to Darin. It was a bit more difficult to rouse Denith than it had been to wake Darin, but besides that, all went well and soon they were all safely hidden boughs of a tree.

“What is your plan?” Denith inquired.

Eleanor nervously inhaled. Her idea was daring and possibly dangerous, and she was not sure Denith and Darin would approve.

“We cannot enter the caverns by the main passage because it will probably be well guarded.” Eleanor affirmed.

“Then how will we get in? There is no other entrance save the main one.” Darin interrupted.

Eleanor lowered her voice to a barely audible whisper, “There is another way.”

The two boys leaned closer.

“There is a way that few know about, that I have been told of long ago. According to what I was told, If you follow the perimeter of the Caverns of Callous, you will eventually come to the side that the Willowglass River passes. There, you will come to a place where there is a small pass in the rock about thirty feet high above the ground. Unfortunately though, the rock in that area is very smooth, and has few holds, so climbing will be difficult and the chances of slipping are high. It is worth risking our necks for however, for there is no other way.”

They were all silent for a moment. Each one of them was weighing the possibilities and their outcomes.

“It sounds like the only option we have really,” Darin decided thoughtfully, “After all, we can’t risk getting caught again, so we must be more wary in the future.”

They all agreed that it was worth a try, so they silently crept past the camp of the masked men, cautious to make no sounds. However just as they were about to pass the last of the men, Eleanor couldn’t help but indignantly notice that the last one had her bow in with his things and had scattered all of her beautiful arrows all over the ground. So in the end, they ended up retrieving at least Eleanor’s stolen weapons.

The trees started thinning as they neared the caverns, so they could no longer travel in the cover of the trees, but had to walk instead. Also, the ground sloped downward making it hard not to slip. Nevertheless, they were swift, and in only a few hours, at last, they started to approach the ominous, the loathful, and most dreaded Caverns of Callous.

At first it was just a pit of blackness in the distance, but soon its features were defined and it awakened a sense of horror and despair in the hearts of those that looked upon it. For the first time in her life, Eleanor felt hopelessness creep into her mind and poison her thoughts. In that moment it was solely her love for her brother that kept her going and stopped her from abandoning her quest.

The three travelers trudged on around the caverns, keeping a safe distance from its base, lest some unseen danger come from it and take them off guard. The cold wind bit at their ears. The cold stones, piled around the area, brought no shelter from the cold, merciless wind.

They soon reached the base of the ledge they were to climb. Eleanor's blood ran cold just studying it. It was as bad as they expected, for the wall was a sheer drop from the top and with their fingers cracked and numb, it would be practically impossible to ascend. At the top, the entrance to the passage stared down at them like a cruel black eye, smirking at their discouraged faces below.

"Well," Darin decided, "If we are going to attempt it, we need to try now before we are caught."

Eleanor nodded. It was true, they were running out of time.

Denith handed a rope to Eleanor, "You should try first."

"Why?" Eleanor inquired.

"You are lighter than us, so if you fall we can catch you," Denith explained, "In addition, you can likely climb better too."

So it was decided. Eleanor tied the rope around her waist so her hands would be free, then she started to feel the base of the cliff for any holds or cracks she could use

to scale it. She found some, but they were not very good, and it was difficult to hold on. Every inch climbed was a struggle to gain.

Eleanor was almost at the top, she just needed to hold out for a few moments longer and it would be a success. After all, by now she was too high to be able to fall without breaking a rib.

While Eleanor was thinking about this, she felt a tiny object hit her head.

Confused, she looked up. Eleanor saw a small pebble plummeting in mid air coming straight at her. This time it hit her shoulder, and Eleanor saw a drop of blood streak her shoulder. Another one hit her in the head, making Eleanor feel lightheaded. Slowly, Eleanor started losing her grip. Panicking, she looked down for a second and started to feel dizzy from the height. Then all at once, every thing became blurry as she fell. Eleanor opened her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. When she had felt herself falling, she had quickly grabbed a small branch that had grown out of the wall and swung her arm and grabbed another projection, saving her life. After breathing hard for a few seconds, she attempted the climb again, this time successfully reaching the top. When she got there she lay on the ledge for a few seconds, exhausted.

"Are you alright?" Denith called out from below.

"Yes!" Eleanor shouted in reply, "I tied the rope to a rock, so you can all come up now."

"Good," Denith said cheerfully. He tested the strength of the rope with satisfaction.

Denith and Darin were able to reach the ledge without much trouble and soon they stood all in a row staring into the yawning black opening ahead that they must enter.

"I never thought that one day I would actually be entering these caves," Eleanor murmured, "Perhaps with a little bit of luck, we just might make it out too."

With their weapons ready, they plunged into the smothering darkness.

They walked on in utter darkness, until torches started to dot the place with a

dim, ominous glow. The flames danced and flickered, creating leaping shadows of terror upon the walls. They knew that Arian, if he wasn't dead, would be held captive in the dungeons at the very depths of the caverns. Therefore, if they came to a place where the tunnel parted, they always took the path that lead downwards.

At one of these points there was a door. It was not the ugliness of the skull that adorned it that appalled them, rather it was the menacing voices within that made them cringe. The two boys hurried on, but Eleanor paused for a moment, trying to resist a sudden curiosity to know what the voices were saying. After struggling for a few moments, she relented and put her ear to the door.

"We have done what we could my Lord," a familiar voice stated, "We looked everywhere for the escaped prisoners, but we found no sign or trace of them. However, we still have some of their weapons, so perhaps we can find out whom they belong to, from the devices ingraved upon them."

Eleanor was shocked. It was the voice of the captain that had captured them in the woods. How could he have come here so fast? She knew she should go before she was found, but she just could not back away from that door. Then a voice came from the door that made Eleanor's blood chill and her heart stop.

"Let me see their things," a shrill voice hissed. From the sounds inside Eleanor could tell he was examining their weapons.

"The bow and the axe have the same device," the cold voice observed, "Thus, two of your prisoners have a relation of some sort, possibly brothers. Now, let me examine these arrows." Eleanor then remembered with a sickening dread that she had not taken back the arrows that they broke, but had left them.

Suddenly, the voice gave a blood chilling shriek of disgust. "Arrows belonging to a heir of Adrian of Elsindor!" the voice, filled with hatred, continued, "If you do not find me the descendant of that vile Adrian, you shall all die! So be quick and go."

The door swung open and Eleanor's evesdropping was revealed. Eleanor lifted her eyes and beheld her foe, the Lord of the Caverns himself. He was indescribable in

his hideousness, from his skeleton like hands, to his deformed figure, and his monstrous face. For a second, Eleanor just stood there, struck dumb with horror. When Eleanor came to her senses, she quickly fit an arrow onto her bow string and let it fly. The arrow hit one of the men that stood there in the arm, before she realized her mistake. Eleanor turned on her heel and ran without looking back.

“After her!” the Lord commanded, “Do not let the heir of Adrian escape!” Ten of the men that were with him ran swiftly after her.

Eleanor ran as stealthily as she could, listening to the hard footfalls behind her. She wished she had not loosed her arrow, for her arrow was identical to those that the lord was examining, so she had revealed her identity when they saw it. At least if they caught up with her she could shoot them without worry, but this thought was not very reassuring to Eleanor, running through the twisting passages.

“I must lose them!” Eleanor panted aloud, “If I make a diversion, there might still be hope of rescuing Arian and getting out of here alive.”

Just as Eleanor said this, she came to a point where the path split into two. Now was her chance to lose them. She quickly threw a stone down one of the corridors and ran down the other, hoping that she had chosen the one that her companions went down. Eleanor slid into the shadow of the wall and listened, her life depending on the success of this distraction.

After many nerve racking minutes, the angry shouts slowly died away and Eleanor breathed a sigh of relief.

“If Denith and Darin went down the other path, they are in grave danger,” Eleanor shook her head with shame, “However, if they went down this passage, then all I have to do is go down it and I shall find them.” Eleanor preferred to believe the latter was true, so she optimistically continued down the descending pathway.

Eleanor eventually came to a stop in the path, and there was nowhere to go, but through a large iron door at the end of the tunnel.

“This could must be the door to the dungeons!” Eleanor concluded excitedly, “If

this is where Arian is held prisoner, then the object of our quest is nearly completed! I hope my companions are within,"She added hopefully.

Eleanor leaned on the door with all her strength and it started to creak and groan in protest, opening slowly. The door finally swung open. As Eleanor walked in, a sad sight met her eyes. It was a long hall filled with the many cells of groaning prisoners, miserable and suffering. Eleanor walked by each one, pitying each helpless captive, wishing she could ease their pain.

Eleanor was carefully examining the prisoners in search of Arian, when she noticed two figures next to the last cell. Could they be Denith and Darin, or were they jailers? Eleanor was not sure. She quietly crept up to them, careful not to be seen. One of the men turned around and saw her. Eleanor gasped and stumbled backwards. "There you are!" one of the young men shouted. He ran forward and grabbed her by the arm.

Eleanor looked up frightened.

"Darin!" Eleanor exclaimed.

"What happened to you? We were walking when we simply noticed you were gone." Darin asked with concern.

"I will tell you later. We must get out of here as quick as we can, for we are being hunted."

Darin looked at her quizzically for a moment, then he decided to change the subject.

"We found Arian."

"You did? Where is he?" Eleanor questioned eagerly.

Darin gestured to a cell in Denith's direction,"He is lying in his cell unconscious.

We were just about to try to force the door open when you came."

Eleanor walked over to where Denith stood, and gazed within the metal bars.

There lay her beloved brother, the one whom she had toiled to rescue and went through many perils to save. One of his blue eyes was black, his fair hair hung limp, and his handsome face was streaked with blood. From the dark circles under his eyes, Eleanor

could tell that he had not slept in days. However, despite the hardships he underwent, he breathed. There was still life in him.

“How will we open the cell?” Eleanor inquired, keeping her eyes on Arian.

“We were going to break the lock by hurling ourselves against the bars.” Denith replied.

Eleanor shook her head, “No, that would make too much noise. Here, I have another idea.” She took the dagger that she had lent to Denith and carefully began to pick the lock with the tip.

“Do you think that will work?” Denith inquired doubtfully.

Eleanor shrugged, “I am not sure, hopefully it works.” Suddenly, there was a small clink, and the cell door swung open.

Eleanor walked in and touched Arian’s arm tenderly. She gently shook him in effort to rouse him.

“Arian,” she whispered, “It is Eleanor.”

Arian stirred and opened his eyes. “Sister,” he replied.

“We have come to your rescue, Arian.”

Arian looked up at her and smiled tenderly, “I knew you would, Elen.”

Eleanor said nothing, but smiled back through her tears.

“It was miserable here, Elen,” Arian closed his eyes and grimaced at the memory of torture, “My whole world had collapsed, sometimes I even feared you were dead.” He tugged at her hair playfully, “But you made it, right? Though it was most likely because you brought Denith and Darin along.” Denith was Arian’s best friend.

Eleanor teased him back, “What would you have done if I brought my friends along?”

Darin replied for Arian, “We are your friends Eleanor.”

“Besides, the mission would undoubtedly not have been successful.” Denith teased in his turn.

At this, they all laughed merrily, yet Eleanor knew that what Denith stated rung true. Eleanor could not have gotten this far without their help, without their courage, and without their supportive strength. Deep within her heart, she also believed that somehow they would succeed, and that despite the hardships, they would make it out of the caverns together, and someday they would even make it back to their homes, better friends than they were before.

### ***The Island***

**Tess Huffstutler**

A cool breeze blew through the trees and grass, making the forest look like it was alive. A small child walked through, looking for food. He felt like he had always lived there, in the cave inside the cliff with carved stairs leading down to the white beach with crystal-clear water, with the beautiful forest full of flowers and animals bordering the beach on one side. He couldn't remember anything else. The steep cliff cut off the edges of the beach and the forest, so he couldn't get around it. He seemed to be on an island. There was a fresh-water stream running through the forest and going into the ocean. The stream went into the cliff also, but the hole that it went through was so narrow that even he couldn't crawl through it. There were also many birds, rabbits, and other small animals in the forest and fish in the sea, and even flint for making fire. It was paradise.

As he searched for food, he gazed up at the cliff rising into the clouds and wondered what was up there and if the cliff went any higher. But soon his mind drifted back to the forest, and he started running through the woods again, continuing his search for food and was again content with staying where he was.

These thoughts of the world beyond his part of the island would run through his mind many times over the course of a little while, and then for a period of time he would forget about the top of the cliff, and then remember again. In one sense he was happy and content, and in another his curiosity was overpowering his desire to not leave.

The boy grew up quickly, and over the years he honed his survival skills. The sea provided food, and so did the forest. Often, he enjoyed taking long walks and sitting by the stream to think. Occasionally, he would wake up to a new stock of clothes and food, placed carefully in a pile on the beach. He often wondered where it came from, but never saw anyone during the night. These mysterious gifts occupied his mind for many hours, but he concluded eventually that he would never know. He also started trying and tried many times to climb up the cliff, but never succeeded for a long time. His mind wandered to the cliff increasingly often as he got older. The climb was difficult since the cliff was very steep and smooth. He became stronger and stronger as each day, he tried again. And one day, he was finally able to make it to the top!

When he first stood above the clouds on the grass on top of the cliff, he was startled by the number of strange noises he could hear. For the first time in his life, that he could remember, he heard people talking. The boy looked around him in amazement at a city with a marketplace, brick buildings, and stalls filled with many things like clothes, jewelry, flowers, fresh produce, spices, and more items crowding the sides of the streets. It was all so unfamiliar to him. As he walked through, people talked to him in a language he couldn't understand. He stumbled past booths and alleyways, noticing several people watching him closely. He stopped to catch his breath and was soon approached by more vendors walking the streets. Overwhelmed, he forced himself to shake off the peddlers and push on through the crowded streets. Then he noticed some people having a fight and many people angrily negotiating over prices. This was entirely foreign to him. His life on the island had always been peaceful. The atmosphere of the city was busy and chaotic, and he could not have felt less at home. With growing uneasiness, he watched as someone flipped a table full of spices and clouds of dust flew into the air. It startled him, and as the dust settled, everyone around him immediately started violently pushing and shoving each other. The constant action made him feel both intrigued and disappointed by the world above the cliff.

He kept walking, and quickly got to the edge of the city. He was now on the other side of the island, where there was a path leading down to a harbor. Since the cliff bordered the waters from edge to edge, his home wasn't accessible from this side of the island. However, he still wanted to explore it! The water felt like the first recognizable thing since he had left his home. He walked down the path, admiring the lush ferns, flowers, and tall grasses, leaning over the edge of the path as they were softly blown by the wind. He took his time, careful not to slip and fall down the steep mountainside. When he got to the docks, there were many ships unloading and being loaded, people frantically running around with crates, and sailors trying to recruit the people passing by to join their ships. He saw a small rowboat, and something about it seemed familiar, almost as if he had been rowed somewhere in it before. He noticed its owner sitting near it and staring at him in a strange way, almost as if he knew him and expected him to say something. He quickly moved on after that. He was still puzzled by the people here, and didn't want to have any interaction, and also, the sun was setting, and he felt a longing to return home. Before he did, though, he decided to explore a little bit more.

He walked across the harbor to where he had come down and went back up to the city. He walked through the streets, looking in the shop windows and thinking about going in. Then he decided to go into a store that sold watches and clocks, although he didn't know what they were. He curiously looked around at the shelves and was careful not to touch anything. The shopkeeper said, "If you aren't going to buy anything, you need to leave. My store is crowded enough as it is." For some reason, he could actually understand her. He hadn't been spoken to ever, or at least he had thought he hadn't been. But the language she spoke was different than the language of the other people in the city and made him wonder how he understood her. But he decided to think this over somewhere that at least wasn't in the shop and hurried out. As the crowd thinned out and the noise decreased, he felt it was time to return back to his cave. He had seen enough. He looked back at the city, then climbed down the cliff, feeling uneasy about his strange experiences, and silently vowing never to return to the city again.

He reached his home at twilight, shivering inside the cave, going out to look at the stars. He sat on the beach, reflecting on the encounters with the people looking at him in the city, the man with the rowboat, and the shopkeeper who he could understand. All of it felt muddled in his mind. He decided to sleep on it and ponder it in the morning.

The next day, he woke up and had some water from the stream, then decided to gather some fruit from the trees and bushes in the forest. His thoughts turned to the people in the city. Why were they looking at him? Did he seem unusual to the rest of the crowd? Or were they just curious about a newcomer? He decided he wouldn't be able to know. And what about the man with his rowboat? The rowboat had seemed so familiar, but he couldn't place why. And the man had looked at him in such a weird way, but he didn't have a clear memory of any person coming to his island or being at any other place before. He felt the same way about the woman from the shop.

Over the next few weeks, these thoughts slowly faded from his memory. Soon he could barely remember the details of what had happened. It felt like it had all been a dream, and since he didn't want to ever go up again, he decided it was not important and sort of made himself forget the experience.

And as time went by, he never really thought about the city again. He became older and older until he started to become paranoid and distanced himself from thoughts of other people. Years passed, and he became almost completely reliant on the still regular stocks of food and clothes left on the beach. He started to grow old and weak. The monotony of his routine days led him to feel complacent and uninterested in anything other than his little world at the base of the cliff. All of this went on the same way until one day.

With the usual amount of clothes was a letter, which he could somehow read. It seemed to be the same language as the one the woman in the shop had spoken to him so long ago in the city. He didn't remember learning to read, but he supposed it didn't really matter now. The letter went like this:

*To the man from the island:*

*This letter holds the truth about why you are here and why your life has been away from other people. Please prepare yourself so you are not in danger of being too startled.*

*Soon after you were born, your parents died. We took you into our organization and decided to use you in an experiment we had planned. We specifically picked out this place because it had all the essential things you needed to grow up with, including water, shade, food, and a temperate climate. We brought you to this island as soon as you were old enough to survive by yourself, but we also made sure you were well provided for by leaving the clothes and food. We wanted to find out how a person would live and what they would do if they grew up by themselves but had a way to see others. We are dedicated to the study of human nature, so that we can better understand and inform the world about it.*

*Long ago when you went to the city, you met people staring at you in the streets and a woman in the shop who you could understand. They work for our organization, and the language the woman spoke and the one you're reading right now is one you learned when you were little. Many of the things you do not remember because all of this happened before you were six years old, and we also trained your mind in some ways to forget them. In addition, both the people and the shop manager were watching you to see how you would respond to being in the city for the first time! We've been studying you closely ever since you came. I'm sorry if this is a shock, but you need to understand that we couldn't tell you what the true purpose of your life was until we were sure you would never go back to the city. Now you are free to do whatever you would like now that our experiment has ended.*

*Signed,*

*The man with the rowboat from the harbor.*

***The Reason***  
**Olivia Holland**

The Reason

The boy cracked an eyelid. Soreness stretched through his legs and spine and arms. He was lying in the shallow water, curled up. He was tense all over. Cold, indifferent water rippled quietly around his ears.

What had awakened him? His eyelids were being dragged back down. He would go back to sleep now...

No. The boy's eyes popped back open. A dire urge haunted him. Time was running out. He had to get up.

The boy sat up gingerly, clothes streaming water. The wind hissed around him as he got unsteadily to his feet and looked around, his jacket dripping.

His eyes widened. boxes and crates towered into the sky all around, stretching as far as he could see away into the dim mist. Water pooled in the cracks and potholes of the shattered cobblestone ground— the water stood several inches above the street.

The sky was overcast. Clouds hung impossibly low, connecting with the fog.

The boy noticed something long, wooden object sticking out of a puddle several feet away. He walked over, his splashing footsteps oddly muffled, and pulled the object from the water.

It was a staff, a little taller than he was. It had a smooth, worn handle with a metal star attached to the top. Another instinctive thought came upon him. He looked to the boxes swaying in the half-light, their faint creaking and the wind the only things to be

heard.

Get to the top.

\* \* \*

“...I’m very sorry, ma’am...”

\* \* \*

The boy wasn’t sure why he complied, but he took up the staff and started looking for a way upwards. The premonition that his time was draining away continued to haunt him like a phantom. Some of the boxes were stacked unevenly, creating stairlike formations. The boy hesitantly climbed up on the waist high box. The wood was damp and rotten, but it held his weight.

He turned and climbed up onto the next box, and the next. The box towers were several boxes wide, but as the boy went higher, the box platforms became smaller. Most of the time, there was only one box that could act as a stair to the next level.

He was climbing up onto the eighteenth box when the boy misjudged the box he was climbing on and pushed it too hard. It scooted away from him before tumbling over the side of the tower. Fear gripped the boy as he stood in the center of the platform, heart pounding and hands clammy. A gale of wind swept through the box towers like an ominous warning and the boxes swayed sickeningly. There weren’t any boxes the boy could use to get to the next level. He was afraid to, anyways. He would fall to his death.

But he had to get up there.

Rain began to fall, airborne and stinging on the rushing wind. The boy shivered, looking out across the hushed, misty landscape. He could just go back to sleep up here... It didn’t really matter if he fell, anyways...

No. The idea brought an odd void of sadness with it. The boy couldn’t place an exact reason for why he couldn’t stop, but he knew he had to keep going.

The boy began to scramble down the box tower. The rain darkened the already damp wood, and the boxes soon became slippery. The staff made climbing down much harder, but the boy refused to put it down. It was important.

\* \* \*

“...We’ve done as much as we can, and I don’t think there’s much else we can do  
but wait and...”

\* \* \*

The boy hopped off the last crate and onto the ground. He glanced fervently toward the other towers. He took a half-step back in alarm as water rushed past his ankles. The Cobblestone streets were quickly flooding.

The boy saw another tower twenty yards down the street. It jutted like a pillar into the troubled sky, difficult to see in the slanting rain. That one.

The boy fought his way up the street. It was uphill, and the water seemed to be rushing in his direction. Each step became increasingly difficult as the water began to rise unnaturally fast.

Ten yards. The water roared around his shins.

Fifteen yards. It had risen to his knees.

Three feet. He wasn’t going to make it.

The boy jammed his staff down and thrust himself forward, throwing every he had into one last lunge at the bottom box. He grabbed ahold of it. He threw his chest over the side, yanking his staff out of the water. It clunked desperately against the box as he heaved one leg up.

The current wrenched at his other foot. He yanked it out of the rushing torrent of water, narrowly avoiding being dragged away.

The boy sat on the box for a moment, gasping for breath, watching the roaring, black water creep upward. It continued to rising as the downpour continued. Heavy darkness was setting in.

The boy shook his gaze from the memorizing current and craned his head toward the top of the tower. He strained to see where it vanished into the low hanging clouds.

He had to start climbing again. The water was swirling several inches below the top of his box now.

The boy turned to the next box, pulled himself up and got his feet over. The air was full of wind and the sound of moaning stacks. No lightning or thunder appeared, and the boy struggled to see in the twilight. His hands tingled, and he forced himself to only look up, although the creaking boxes told him to look down at the rushing waters.

He had gotten much higher than before when his foot finally went through a rotten box with a mushy crunch.

The boy tried to put his other foot on top of the box. The crate only crumbled more.

The boy struggled back from the box, heart thudding as the water screamed below him.

No, no, no.

This was the end of the line. He had done his best, but there was no escape for him. He couldn't see anything. He would fall into the darkness. The water would rise and swallow him up.

The boy was all alone. The howling darkness roared around him like a lament of grief and terror. The boy's time was nearly up; he could sense it. There was no real way to escape this sinister reality. He was trapped in a half-awake dream world coming undone. Nobody could save him.

He would go back to sleep. He knew he wouldn't wake up again. That didn't really matter.

He turned away from the box. Something in him suddenly surged up. Somebody was counting on him. Someone needed him to survive. He couldn't just—

The boy glanced back at the destroyed crate. The box he had broken was glowing faintly from the inside.

\* \* \*

“...We'll keep him hooked up until... but the damage is...”

\* \* \*

The boy pried up the rotten boards. A glowing ribbon sat inside the box, radiating  
a quiet warmth that illuminated the rotted wood.

The boy picked it up. A strange sense of nostalgia washed over him, followed by  
an urgency that coursed through his veins.

It would matter if he died. He wasn't alone. Somebody needed him. There were  
two people... he could almost see their faces...

The boy tied the ribbon to his star staff. He was close now, so close to the top.  
Over there, there was a box he could move! The boy rushed to it, prying it out from a  
smaller stack of boxes. It caused an avalanche of crates, but the boy darted away from  
it, ignoring the splashes of the doomed objects far below, his resolve hardening.

Around him, other lights began to wink in the darkness.

He used the smaller box as a step to climb up, then dropped his staff and got on  
his stomach, hauling the box up after him. The staff illuminated the narrow platform. The  
cloud swirled around him now. He began to climb above them.

The boy gasped as his head cleared the haze and he saw the sky.

A moon was suspended out over the sea of clouds, hanging low against the faint  
pink sunset. Stars were beginning to congregate in the sky. The torrential sound of rain  
far below seemed like a distant memory. Other crate towers peeked out of the wispy  
cloud banks. The boy could make out the silhouettes of other people standing on them,  
holding up staffs like his. A thousand more stars above the clouds.

Unsure and driven by some arcane instinct, the boy raised his star staff with  
shaking hands.

A moment passed before he saw it. A strange shifting mass on the horizon,  
underneath the moon.

A thousand white, flapping birds approached. They flew in graceful, looping  
circles, their swallow tails flicking in the dying light. They swooped low, catching up  
person after person. The boy gasped involuntarily as a bird's talons snatched him up by  
the back of his jacket.

He dropped the staff, and it fell end over end, stirring up the clouds as it passed through them, illuminating the darkness for one last breath. He didn't need it any longer. The world below disintegrated away, the clouds vanishing, the motion of the bird dissipating.

\* \* \*

The boy drew a deep, shuddering breath and opened his eyes.  
White sheets. They were warm. Beeping. Lots of beeping.  
Faces peered at him from behind blue medical masks. So many machines. A...  
hospital? What had happened? Where were they?  
The nurses parted, and his parents came into view.  
Tears of relief glinted from his mother's eyes, and his father released a long-held  
breath, the lines on his face smoothing away.  
The reason

### ***The Shoe in the Puddle***

**Lily Boelter**

Something was happening in the kingdom of Manebatte, something they had never seen before. And they had seen a lot, but nothing like this. Not before, nor ever again. It was mysterious. No one knew what it was, all they knew was that people were missing. There was no pattern to it. Peasants and nobles, young and old, men and woman; whatever strange creature had found itself inside the walls of Manebatte clearly did not discriminate. Of course it was never regarded as a pertinent issue until King William's very own son went missing. He deployed soldiers of the crown to hunt the source down, and to slay the foul beast once and for all.

I suspect you know what happened next.

The soldiers went missing.

The disappearances continued.

The King was in shambles. He sent out a royal decree:

“Anyone who finds the son of King William, alive and well, shall receive unsurmountable riches.”

But the poor child had not been found, and still the King was in shambles.

He lay on his vast canopy bed one night, wallowing in his dismay. The Queen stood at the other end of the chamber, gazing out of the window with an air of aloofness about her. Their daughter stood at the other side of the bed, consoling her father.

“Oh dear Lord, how could you be so cruel to me,” he whimpered, “to take from me my only child?!”

“But I’m your...”

“Shut up, girl!” the king hit back at the princess.

“Wife!” he yelled, bolting out of his bed, suddenly enlightened. “Fetch me my robe and slippers, I’ve had the grandest idea! U shall go out and search for my son myself! Surely I am far more competent than whatever professionally trained soldiers and bounty hunters had been looking before!” This king was now rather pleased with himself.

“Yes, my dearest,” the queen replied, with a tone that implied the man was all but dear to her. But the king did not notice. He tended not to.

Several minutes later, the king, the queen, and the princess found themselves outside the gate of the castle Manebatte, where a torrent of rain poured down on them.

“My God!” the king cried, but not with alarm or sadness but with joy. Pure and utter joy.

“Look!” he cheered as he pointed in front of them at a small puddle. In that puddle lay a shoe, soggy and worn and most importantly: small. This was indeed his son’s shoe.

The king was ecstatic, and naïve. “Look, wife! Look at this shoe, he must be here! I told you I could find him!”

He rushed over without thinking and picked up the shoe. And that’s when it all went wrong. The king began to sink. The puddle was not deep mid you; it should have only come up to the soles of his slippers. But it didn’t, and as the king slowly sank into the ground, that became horribly evident. Soon enough, the only thing that was left of King William was his shoe. Just a shoe in a puddle.

The princess stood and stared.

The queen smiled.

# ***The True Tale of Victor Frankenstein***

**Lily Boelter**

I'm sure you have heard of Doctor Frankenstein's story. My story, that is, but I can guarantee you do not know the full story. That pompous fraud Mary Shelley knew nothing, nothing I tell you! So I shall take the liberty of telling you how Frankenstein's monster, that vile, wretched creature, truly came to be.

It all started when I was studying the dark ar- I mean...sciences in Ingolstadt. There, I learned of the powers of the Lucky Charms. I toiled day after day over books and records and maps that may lead me to the sacred marshmallows so I might unlock their powerful secrets. I was consumed with this overwhelming desire to harness their abilities, to defy science itself. They all told me I was crazy. They told me that my research was a perversion to the ideals of science. But I did not care. Oh, how vain I was then...How foolish.

But I was right. The Lucky Charms did, in fact, exist. The Star, the Horseshoe, the Clover, the Blue Moon, the Unicorn and the Rainbow, the Red Balloon and, of course, the Heart. This power, no, this gift of life had to be harnessed. Though biology defied resurrection, I knew that the Charms defied biology. I only had to prove it.

As I sat in my laboratory that night, I pondered the power that I had acquired. I could give life, LIFE to whatever I pleased, organic or inorganic, the powers knew no bounds. But I knew that I would not waste it on any old, common, worthless, everyday *object*. No, it had to be mine. A creation of my own.

The next evening, I found myself surrounded by mismatched pieces of corpses. I gazed over them, like a proud father. One who was dripping with blood. It is safe to say that the owners of Rue Morgue would not be too happy in the morning, They did not know that all *this* was for science.

"SCIENCE!!!" I laughed maniacally as I stitched together pieces of my creation.

It was midnight when I had finished crafting the body, though it was not yet alive. That could easily be remedied.

I picked the Heart up off my table. An ominous thunder rolled over my laboratory, though the skies were clear.

I stood over the table where the monster lay, and slowly, I raised the Heart above my head.

"The power of Lucky Charms compels you! I shrieked.

There was a zap of electricity that struck the monster where his heart would have been, had I given him one.

“It’s alive!” I cried as the creature slowly rose.

I gazed into his eyes.

He gazed into mine.

I clutched the charm in my hand with terror, and let out a sharp, faint cry as it dissolved to dust.

But the creature still lived.

And the rest is history.

### ***The Vanishing of Hannah Wheeler***

**Marissa Halsey**

It was a rainy November night. Mrs. Frank Wheeler sat on the floor, her body taken over by sobs that echoed through the stillness. Beside her, Mr. Frank Wheeler offered what comfort he could, his hand gently rubbing her back. The window was open, letting in a cool breeze and splattering the floor with raindrops. With each thunderous crack that shook the air, Mrs. Wheeler’s cries grew louder, a heart-wrenching acknowledgment of a reality she could no longer deny, illuminated only by the blinding flash of lightning that swept through the room.

Hannah Wheeler was gone.

She clung tightly to her daughter’s favorite dress, pressing it against her chest, smelling the sweetness of the perfume that still clung to the fabric. Hannah was gone. Hannah. Was. Gone. The weight of this truth pressed heavily upon her, an unbearable reality she couldn’t force herself to face. Her daughter was missing, and deep down, Mrs. Wheeler understood the grim truth – the police would not find her. They had never found any of the lost children anyway. 797,500 missing children in America, and somewhere deep within her heart, she knew that her daughter would not be among the 97% who returned home. With a trembling hand, her husband helped her to stand, and together, they moved toward the telephone, each step a painful reminder of their shattered world. A steady dial of 911 followed, her fingers trembling as she faced the task of recounting the events of that dreadful night.

The year was 1997. The day was Tuesday, November 4. Election day. When detective Martin Hayes arrived at Frank Wheeler's house, he was greeted by a bawling Mrs. Wheeler and a somber Mr. Wheeler. He investigated Hannah's room. Dusted for fingerprints. Called and asked all of Hannah's friends and their parents if they had seen her. No one had.

As night fell on that cold, rainy Tuesday, Jenny Wheeler climbed into bed beside her husband, sniffing. Frank wrapped his arms around her, comforting her, telling her that everything would be alright, even though deep down they both knew it wouldn't ever be.

...

"Frank, where is the coffee pot at?" Jenny Wheeler called to her husband.

"Under the sink, darling, where it always is," Frank Wheeler called back, descending the stairs in his businesslike manner. Four years had passed since Hannah Wheeler had disappeared, and life had returned to normal. Almost.

The year was 2001. The pictures on the walls of Hannah still constantly reminded Jenny and Frank of their missing daughter. Her room, door locked, remained unchanged since her disappearance that rainy November night. No progress had been made on finding her. No clues. No word of her anywhere in America. Missing posters still hung in the town, tattered and dirty, each bearing the same question.

**Have you seen me?**

No one had.

"Okay, Jenny, I'm heading out. Goodbye." Frank yelled to his wife, followed by the sound of a door slamming.

"Goodbye," Jenny called back, silence surrounding her. The house just wasn't the same without Hannah. If it had been a Monday morning this time 4 years ago, Hannah and Jenny would have been leaving for work and school together. It would have been her senior year of high school if she hadn't disappeared. She was missing so much.

Mrs. Wheeler went to work and had a routine day. She made her boss a cup of coffee, looked at the blank walls of her office, and wrote three reports. It was an ordinary day. However, things took a turn for the chaotic when Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler reunited at home that evening.

"Honey, the phone is ringing," Mrs. Wheeler said.

"Okay, I'll get it," Frank responded, answering the call.

"Hello, Frank Wheeler. Who is this?"

The reply was indistinct. Mrs. Wheeler moved closer to catch what the caller was saying. The words seemed to shock Mr. Wheeler, causing him to drop the phone, his expression pale.

“Who is it, Frank?” Jenny inquired.

“I think you should hear for yourself,” Frank said hesitantly, offering the phone to her.

“Hello, Mrs. Frank Wheeler. Who is this?”

“Hello, Mother,” an older version of a familiar voice replied.

Mrs. Wheeler also dropped the phone in disbelief. It seemed impossible. However, when the voice spoke again, nearly identical to how it had sounded four years ago on that rainy night, Mrs. Frank Wheeler could no longer deny the reality that presented itself before her.

“Don’t you remember me?”

Hannah Wheeler had returned.

Frank Wheeler lunged for the phone, and within moments, he had slammed it back into its cradle. Hannah was gone.

“No!” Mrs. Wheeler wailed.

Her daughter was gone again. The weight of her absence was a familiar ache, dulling the sharp edge of the truth: Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler had murdered Hannah that rainy Tuesday night, just four years ago. Mrs. Wheeler would give anything- *anything*- just to hear her daughter’s voice one last time. A wave of grief, fresh and raw, just the same as the night they had to kill Hannah, overtook her. She fell onto the floor where the phone had once rested, sobbing into her husband’s arms. When they had to make that terrible decision on a cold November night years prior, they never imagined Hannah’s death would become so haunting, so persistent.

Although maybe Hannah had never died, Mrs. Wheeler thought through her tears. Because that phone call proved she was alive, out there somewhere. Which meant Frank and Jenny Wheeler had bigger things to worry about.

...

The year was 1997. Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler were seated at the kitchen table with their daughter Hannah, who had been acting... unusual. She seemed moodier lately, and Mrs. Wheeler had caught her muttering in a language she did not recognize, despite Hannah not being enrolled in any foreign language classes. Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler were becoming increasingly wary... and extremely anxious.

“Hannah, honey, we’ve noticed you’ve been acting differently. Is something wrong? Is there anything you want to share with us?” Mrs. Wheeler asked in a gentle tone.

“No, Mom. I’m fine,” Hannah snapped in response. Mr. Wheeler exchanged a concerned glance with Mrs. Wheeler, both realizing that something was very wrong. Hannah never reacted with such anger so something so small. Then, something even more alarming occurred.

“Mom, Dad, please help me. Something is wrong with me. I have blank spaces in my memory and **tons** of bruises without any explanation. I black out and act in ways I wouldn’t normally behave if I was myself. I’m scared, Mom. Please, help me. HELP ME!” Hannah suddenly cried out, struggling against the table, as if something was holding her to her chair.

“She must be possessed by something. I don’t know what it is, but we need to remove it. We need to stop her,” Mr. Wheeler whispered to Mrs. Wheeler.

Tears filled Mrs. Wheeler’s eyes, but she nodded slowly in agreement. It seemed to be in their best interest. Their daughter was suffering, and they felt compelled to stop her pain.

A week after the encounter, they decided to take Hannah to an old, abandoned cabin in the woods to do the deed. Jenny led Hannah inside, attempting to comfort her as she wept.

“It’ll be okay, Hannah.” Mrs. Wheeler tried to console her.

“Don’t do this to me, Mom. Don’t do this,” Hannah pleaded. She knew what was about to happen to her.

“DONT DO THIS! DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?” she burst out, and there was a change in her eyes. Something *evil* took over her.

Mrs. Wheeler stepped back, trembling, while Mr. Wheeler ignited a match and tossed it into the dry wood. Hannah screamed as flames engulfed her, and Mrs. Wheeler could not bear it anymore. She fled into the darkness just as a cold, harsh rain began to fall over the town of Stockbridge. Mr. Wheeler sprinted after her, his hurried footsteps splashing in the mud. Neither of them glanced back, both too desperate to escape the scene to confirm Hannah or her entity were truly gone. They never saw the downpour extinguish the flames, saving Hannah’s life.

Now, four years later, Hannah and the entity that had consumed her were prowling, craving only one thing: revenge.

## *True Happiness*

**Lily Boelter**

My daughter is dead. I couldn't even save her. I should have been able to save her, goddammit. I'm the smartest man on the planet. Any illness, I could've prevented. Flu? Gone. Pneumonia? Vanished. Hell, I reckon I could whip up a cure for cancer if I put my mind to it. But alas, my angel fell ill with something no amount of medicine could cure. Sadness. And as I saw my own child's hand gripped tightly on the blade that bore deep into her chest, saw her pale, lifeless eyes no longer gleaming at me with utter bliss, I felt as if I were the one with the knife in my heart.

That night, I paced across my bedroom, worried thoughts occupying my every moment. My wife lay inconsolably sobbing on the bed.

"She's gone you know," the woman said.

"Yes dear, I know," I muttered.

"I'll never see her again, you know that right?"

"Yes dear, I know."

"She was so perfect and young."

"Yes dear, I know."

"If only you had-" she started.

"YES I understand that, woman, so if you could cease your idle chatter and let me think for once in my godforsaken life it would be greatly appreciated."

She fell silent, but regrettably not for long

"You know-" she began.

I sighed.

"I'm going to my lab."

And that I did. For hours I sat there staring at equations and lab reports and data tables stacked one atop another and another. They brought little consolation. For once, I was devoid of joy.

Joy.

Huh.

What a peculiar little thing joy was. The fact that it, or rather its absence, could cause so much suffering and harm. If only my daughter was able to stop being sad, this wouldn't be happening to me. But alas, there was no conceivable way to stop the spread of this maddening, icy sadness.

Or was there?

Depression, though admittedly different in construct, was an illness just like the ones I had cured time and time again. Who's to say I couldn't cure this ailment? No one, that's who!

Godamnit I'll do it right now if it means no one else will die such a horrible death as my daughter.

And that's what I did. At least that's what I tried to do. But it took the life out of me. Days spent there. Days into weeks into months into years/ Long and painful and increasingly lonesome years. My research was the forethought in my mind. But it was impossible. No amount of anything would work. Nothing was good enough for me. I needed true happiness. Eternal happiness. The whole world with happiness for a lifetime of more. Much more! I thought I could never do it. But ten years later and well, here I am telling you my tale. I was sure I had done it. All the tests ran positive. At long last I was free.

I rushed out of my lab, and there saw my wife, on the sofa, unaware of the breakthrough I had made. She turned around and a sudden realization struck me. I hadn't seen her since I had been gone. Not once, and that became painfully clear on her now pale and sickly face.

We stared at each other for a moment. I slowly approached her and held a pill out to her in my hand, like feeding a wounded dog.

"How would you like to be happy again?" I whispered.

A single tear fell from her eye, "Please. I haven't been happy for 10 years."

I cringed. That couldn't have been how long ago our daughter's death was. How long it's been since I was gone. No, she must be talking about the time her father died. Yes, that was it. It had to be.

She took the pill. I waited.

"Well?" I uttered desperately.

"*This* is happiness?" she sneered.

"Yes of course it is, don't you know what happiness is?!" I snapped, now growing impatient.

"This is not happiness," she said decidedly.

"What do you mean, how could it not be, you dumb woman?!"

I was about to strike her when I saw a paper lying on her lap.

I read it.

It was my daughter's suicide note.

*"These past years I have never felt worse. There's no more joy in my life. Not sure if there ever was. Nobody really loves me. Not even my own father. I feel so...along. Dad is never around anymore. Always holed up in that lab of his doing. His big important work. Mom smokes a lot now because of it. My life is a living hell. Maybe the next one will be kinder to me. What am I even saying, I don't deserve to be happy."*

I stared at the note. My fists clenched. My wife let out a soft cry of alarm as she saw the paper crumpled in my hand and she lunged out to grab it from me but I pushed her away.

"I never loved her?!" I yelled indignantly. Why, that ungrateful girl never knew anything *but* love. Everything she could have ever wanted I gave her. That [uppy, a new phone, that ridiculous prom dress. It was all hers and more. Everything she ever did was because of me. What could she have possibly been missing?!

As if reading my thoughts my wife said, "She never had a father."

Never had a father? Never had a father!?! Of course she had one: me! She was just too sad to notice.

After that, I left. I left this abysmal home behind. Went off on my own to sell my revolutionary product to the world, because clearly, they all needed taught what *true* happiness was.

***Wildflower***  
**Sylvie Weight**

It had been exactly 1 year since Alexia Atwood's beloved mother died. Now all that was left were bones and the mop of red curls and starry green eyes she had left to her daughter.

Alexia kissed her unconscious father before wrapping her mother's blue silk shawl around her shoulders and going out into the soft twilight.

The sky was shot with pink and orange, complimenting the changing leaves. The breeze gave her hair a tug before moving past her, begging her to follow.

She did. Past the bubbling brook, through a battalion of oaks and to her mother's grave.

The huge rambling maple stood sentinel over the solitary stone. Asters, her mother's favorite flowers, added pops of colors here and there, making the whole scene a veritable paradise.

Alexia curled up with her mother's shawl, back against the maple, hand running along the embroidered wildflowers woven into the silk. The wind swirled around her, trying to dry the tears and quickly as they came from her eyes.

The longer Alexia sat there, the colder it became. But Alexia did not notice, for when she was with her mother, nothing in the world could bother her.

A bird's gentle lullaby lulled her to sleep as darkness fell and stars awoke from their slumber.

"Alexia." a voice whispered in her ear.

Her eyes fluttered open and looked into a pair of eyes, just like hers. Alexia smiled.

“Mama.”

\* \* \*

Winter blew her first frozen breath over the little village that night.

Krister Atwood found his daughter the next morning, at the grave of his wife, frost in her hair and a smile on her blue lips.

He wept.

### ***With Liberty and Justice for All***

**Katie Parsons**

A little girl, who is in 5th grade is waiting in the gym in a line with other kids waiting for their buses. She's talking with her best friend, they're chatting about what they did in class, their plans for that evening, when to go over to each other's houses and play, the kind of things that normal kids talked about.

As she's talking with her friend, a boy, who's in the same grade as her younger sister turns around from in front of them and asks her “What are you doing in this line?” she's surprised for a second before responding, “I ride the bus?” The boy, who was waiting for her answer looked confused and slightly annoyed. “No you don't.” “Yes I do” her tone grows a little more annoyed, afterall, she had been riding the same bus since kindergarten and sat in the front seat everyday with her best friend. “I've never seen you on the bus before” the boy replies with a smirk on his face. “Well I sit in the front seat, I get on before you do” she replies, growing increasingly annoyed. “Well you're just an illegal immigrant who's going to get deported back to Mexico where you belong” the boy says confidently. She sits there, stunned, it only takes a second before the tears start welling in her eyes.

Her best friend says something to the boy, but she doesn't hear, his words keep replaying in her mind as tears stream down her face. A teacher, who noticed the commotion walks over, she kneels down to the girl sitting on the floor, her best friend hugging her, trying to help. "What happened?" The teacher asks, her voice filled with concern. The girl explains through tears what happened, the parts she can't finish, her best friend finishes for her. The teacher looks shocked, kids are starting to stare. The teacher walks back to where the other teachers are to try and figure out what they should even do. They don't know, these are elementary school kids afterall.

Eventually their bus arrives to take them home, the little girl stands up, trying to wipe her tears away as she walks to the bus. She can't think of anything else as she climbs onto the bus. She looks down as she does so, she doesn't want her bus driver to see she's been crying. The whole bus ride home, she's silent, her best friend sits next to her, her arm wrapped around her. As soon as the bus reaches her house she leaves and runs inside as quickly as possible. She throws her shoes off at the door, rather than going and saying hello to her Abuela in the kitchen, she runs straight to her room, throwing her backpack on her bed before burying herself deep into her closet. She lets the tears start falling down her face as she holds onto an old stuffed duck and Hello Kitty plushie. She rocks herself back and forth whispering to herself "I'm an American citizen, I was born in North Carolina, my parents both served in the Marines, I'm an American citizen, I was born in North Carolina, my parents both served in the Marines..." She repeats these words over and over again, trying to calm herself down, but nothing helps.

After a while, her parents come home from picking her older sister up from cross country practice. When she doesn't go find them to say hello, they quietly walk into her room, sitting down outside of the closet. "What happened baby?" Her mom said, her voice soft. "He- he called me an illegal immigrant" She said, choking on her tears "He- he said I-I was going to be deported back to Mexico where I belong" she says, finally getting the words out between ragged sobs. Her parents share a knowing look before her Mom continues "Why did he say that baby?" "He never saw me ride the bus before" She cries out before continuing to cry into her stuffed animals. "Where does he live?" Her Dad says, finally speaking. "on the road that goes to the pond" she says, sniffing as she tries to calm herself. Her Dad gets up without another word and walks out of her bedroom. Her mom pulls her out of the closet and onto her lap, hugging her as she wipes away the little girl's tears. "It's okay, you're safe, and you are not going to be deported, okay?" Her mom says, her voice soft and caring. The little girl nods, still trying to calm herself.

After a few minutes her Mom takes her outside to the driveway where her Dad is waiting. They start driving, her parents having her direct them to the boys house. As they pull in the driveway, she shrinks into her seat, the boy's words replaying in her mind. Her parents step out of the car, knocking on the door of the house. The boy's grandparents come outside, it turns out he lived across the street, he just got on the bus at his grandparents house because his parents had work in the morning.

Her parents talked with the grandparents for what felt like forever. Soon enough, the girl's mom asked her to come out of the car, his grandparents gave her an apology before making the boy come outside to apologize. The whole thing felt rather fake to the girl. The drive home was silent, though it was only a minute drive. After getting home, her parents sat her down, they told her that the boy had likely heard his parents or grandparents talking and that's where he learned to say things like that. They warned her that even though this was wrong, there would be a chance that other people would say things similar to her.

The girl went back to her room confused. How did the boy even know she was half Mexican? Her name didn't have a hint of Spanish in it, she didn't have an accent, she barely even spoke Spanish. As she grew older she would realize that her skin was darker than most of the white kids at her school. She stood out. There was no telling what other people might think, say, or even do to her because of this. She always thought that everyone should be treated the same. She grew up with the golden rule, treat others how you want to be treated. So why would someone do this? All because they never saw her on the school bus? It made no sense to her little mind.

When she went back to school, the boy got in trouble with the principals. He was made to apologize to her, it was very lacking in any sincerity. She would find out later from her younger sister that he had to sit out on recess for a day. One single day, and a fake apology. That's all that the boy received in terms of punishment. She knew it wasn't fair, that what he did was wrong and nobody should ever say something like that, yet that's all he got? Where was the justice? Where was the fairness?

As she grew older, she began to understand. The boy's family was very proud to display a sign in their front yard over who they voted for in the election. She began to understand that not everyone sees all people as created equal. She began to understand that liberty and justice for all wasn't always true. She began to see the world differently. She was quick to pick out and avoid kids who were known for saying things like what that boy had said to her years ago.

The older she got, the more she was exposed to the real world. The more she was able to realize that people of color had the disadvantage. She realized that immigrants were often painted as dirty criminals. She learned that the words with liberty and justice for all meant nothing when it came to the minorities. Those words were created for people who were "better" than people like her. There would be no true justice, no true liberty unless there was someone who would actually stand up for those less fortunate.

Today, she spreads awareness about real issues within the country through her school's speech and debate team. She hopes to become a teacher so that she can make a difference with the future generations, hopefully teaching them the true meaning of acceptance, the true meaning of liberty and justice for all, and not just the cover words that they're taught in kindergarten.

This story is personal to me, because this is my story. When I was in 5th grade, these words were said to me by a boy my little sister's age because he had never seen me riding the bus. This wasn't the first time someone had said something like that to me, but it was the first time I truly realized what those words meant. That day shifted my entire perspective of the world. Hopefully, my story will change someone else's perspective for the better too. One story isn't going to change the world, but maybe it can change someone else's perspective. Maybe it will help to start bringing back meaning to liberty and justice for all.



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