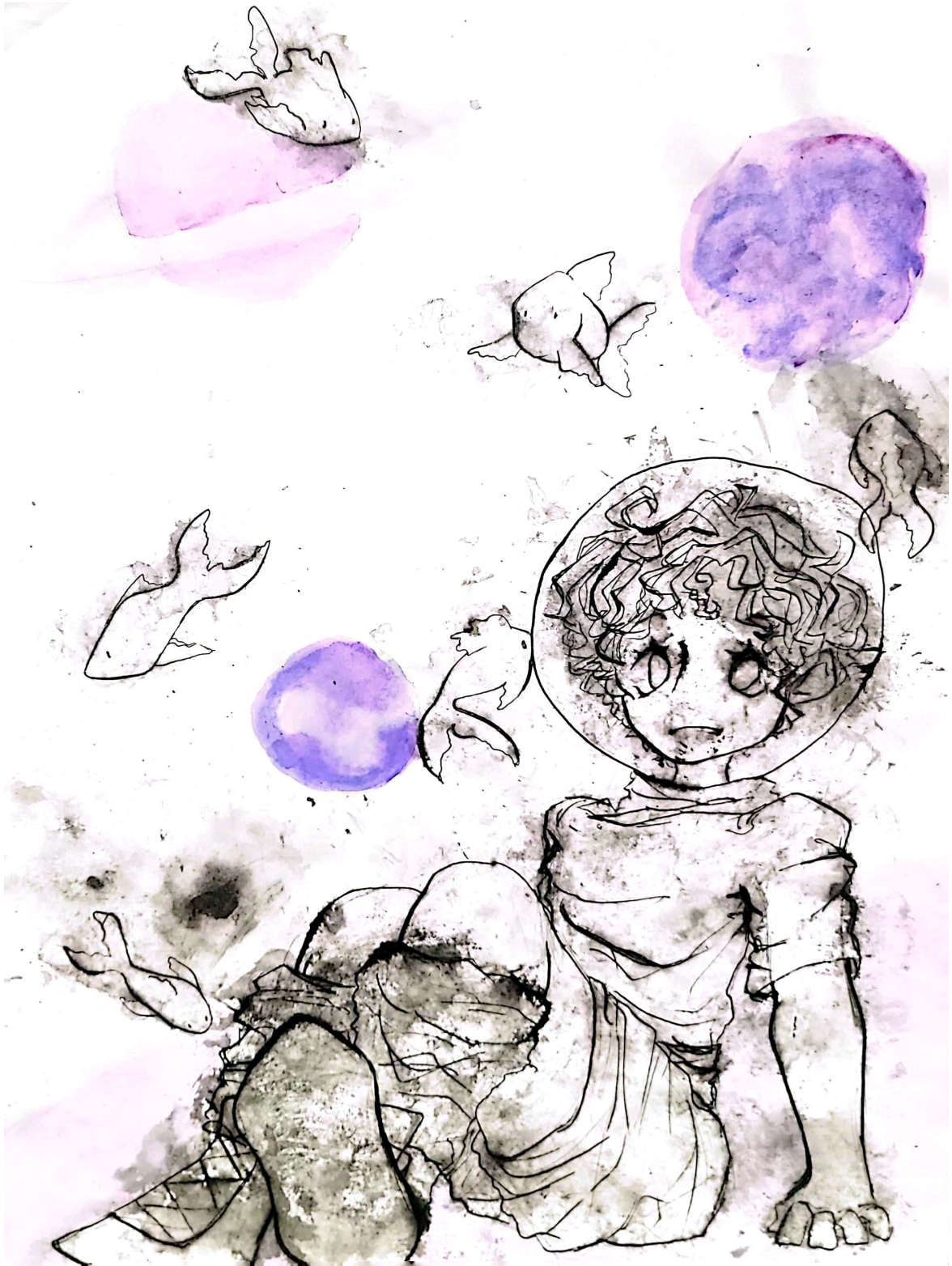


Ridgely Middle School
2022-2023 Inkling
Variations of Our Voices





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Inkling Staff Advisor: Mrs. Veronica Ramirez Pessaro

Members:

Ace Angelos

Eliza Anisiobi

Mars Barker

Lily Brown

Luke Depew

Louis Hoppe

Phoebe Kofsky-Schumpert

Charlotte Luzar

Oliver Luzar

Will Mace

Madeleine MacNeil

Brooke Mortzheim

Arabella Mosson

Zehra Mukkaddem

Olivia Nepomnyashchiy

Tracey Odiwuor

Ellika Olewnik

Neha Paraniham

Sylvia Rowland

Hannah Sampson

Sage Stegman

Mae Stevens

CH. 1:

SHADOWS INTO LIGHT



Life in the Dark-Hannah Sampson

People surround me
But I am still not free
People surround my zone
But I am still alone

I am separated from the best
And darkness swirls around me
Darker than the light around the rest
I live a life in the dark, I see

Someone please bring back the light
It feels like an endless night
Life in the dark
Is not a walk in the park

I wish people would see
What a life in the dark really is
And that it is not as easy as using a lock and key
And that it is harder than taking a quiz

My life is now all black
Leaving me to find my way back
To the normal life I had
Before everything went bad

Eerie Fog - Hannah Sampson

By the time you see that
The fog has risen
It has already become a cloudy prison
Trapping you inside
No escaping, no matter how hard you have
tried

Acting innocent
Acting magnificent
But in reality
It can take away your sanity

So seek it out if you dare
But beware
The only thing the fog can be
Is to trap you there, never to be free

Lost in the Night –Hannah Sampson

Being lost in the night
Is not what it seems
Some say it would give you a fright
But those are all dreams

Being lost in the night
Is being without light
It doesn't mean not knowing where to go
It means not having any glow

Some may think in a different perspective
And go the regular way
But to me that is a little defective
And that is just what I say

And to me
All that I see
Is that the meaning of lost in the night
Is that you are without light

Dead Or Alive-Hannah Sampson

Are you dead or alive
That is what I want to know
Did you survive
Or have you gone below

Are you dead
Or are you alive instead
Did you live through the crime
Or have you fallen from your climb

Is it too much to wonder
If my friend has gone under
Or if they have lived through
And developed a new view

Lost in the Night—Ellika Olewnik

I run. One word guides me:

Home.

I have to get there, away from this monster.

This monster that killed my brother.

We were just reading our favorite book series, Crimson Chaos, out loud in our backyard.

Then we heard a snarl and a werewolf sprang out of the bushes.

I tried to save him, but it was too late.

The creature had turned to face me, and I ran into the forest.

I have been running since.

I run smack into a wall.

Since when has this been there?

The werewolf catches up to me.

I panic. There's nowhere else to run.

It's on me in seconds.

I smell its horrible breath.

It smells like rotten fish.

Will this be the last thing I ever smell?

It raises its paw to strike.

But instead of killing me, the paw starts to talk.

"Get far away from this dragon," Char said. "They're the most dangerous when they're hurt. It makes them tend to act out."

I know the line. It's from Crimson Chaos.

But if the werewolf is the dragon, then it must be hurt.

Where?

It raises its paw again, and I spring out of the way.

It growls at me.

Then it opens its jaws.

Instead of biting me, it speaks.

"If you want me to become little,

You must answer my riddle.

Answer correctly or face my snout:

What is easy to get into but hard to get out?"

"Ummm... A hot showe?" I say.

"No," it growls.

Then it grows *bigger*.

"Goodbye, child," it says, and raises its paw once again to strike.

Lost in the Forest by Ariana Rizwan

Part 1:

In the Halloween day I was coming home from school in late afternoon. It was very dark, and I was walking alone. I saw a big bright moon in the sky. I had never seen such a bright moon before. I followed the moon which led me to the forest. Many minutes later.... it became very quiet. The forest was spooky and there was that big moon. I didn't know how to get out of the forest. I knew I was lost. But the big moon was always there with me. I lost track of time. I kept walking. Finally, I saw a house that looked empty. I went close to the house and knocked the door. Nobody came to the door. I realized that the door was unlocked. I went inside as it was getting cold. I saw some old family pictures in the walls. There was a young girl like me with her parents in the picture. I thought I heard something upstairs. Seems like someone was talking. I went upstairs. There were three bedrooms. I think one of the bedrooms belonged to the girl. The girl has many books just like me. The bed was nice and clean, even though nobody lived here. I was so tired that I fell into sleep. I woke up from the sound of a crying girl. I saw the girl who was sitting on a chair in the room. I asked her why she was crying and where are her parents. She said that her parents died from fever, and they were still in their bedroom. I was shocked and didn't know what to say. She said she was waiting for someone to come for her. I asked her when did her parents die. She told me they died in the winter of 1822. "How was that possible. This is 2022.", I thought. I was scared. I told her that we could go out to get some help in the morning. She said she was also waiting the sun to rise but the sun never came. It was always night in this house.

Part 2:

I went outside and I saw something that was flying. I got closer. I saw a dark unicorn- it has wings. The unicorn ran away from me. That was like the most beautiful unicorn I have ever seen. I went inside and told the girl that there was a dark unicorn.

The girl replied, "I have seen the dark unicorn before. The dark unicorn eats a special type of grass which is black. But the best black grass is in the middle of the forest."

"Okay, I will find the grass myself."

I walked out of the house and walked for an hour. I found the magical grass and I needed to go back to the mansion. I went back to house, and I found the unicorn. I gave the black grass to the dark unicorn. The unicorn gave me two potions. In the potion it said "*Drink the potion to go back to your time*". I ran to the mansion and gave the girl the potion. We both drank it. We went to our time. I went back to my house.

Part 3:

One year later, it is time for Halloween. After a long walk around the forest, I saw the bright moon again. I followed it and found the girl's house. I saw some people working on farms. Their dresses were different. They talked differently. I realized I went back to 1822 again. I found the girl.

The girl waved at me and said, "Hi, it is you again!"

I said, "I went back in time again."

"Oh!" said the girl.

"I guess I must wait for someone to rescue me. For the next 100 years!"

The End!

Untitled—Joseph Zhang

Infinite Void.
I am shrouded in darkness.
Desolation eternal.
Where is the light?
A far off horizon,
Long it tarries,
Dancing with Night.
Then a beacon,
Shining rays.
Truly,
I am enlightened!
Luminosity.

On Halloween Night—Sawyer Meyer

The dark silky mist
Glides carefully through the air
Of dark water vapor it consists
It moves so free, it doesn't have a care

I see dark shadows cast on the walls
The creatures of night
To the moon they call
They give everyone a fright

On halloween night
Monsters roam among us
They hide from anything bright

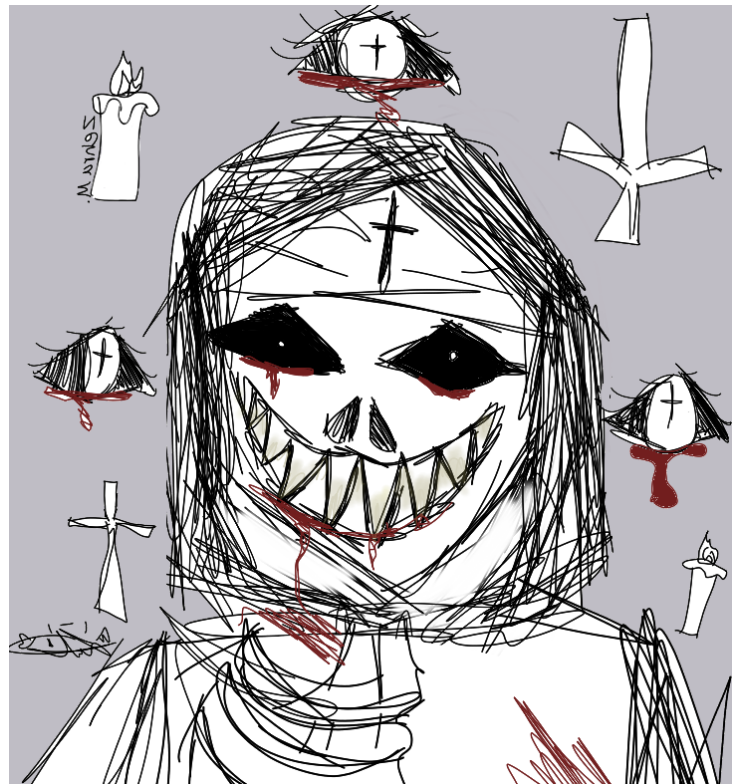
On halloween night shadows revive
They escape their dark corners
And fly through the dark night
Until sunrise

The Fog--Mae Stevens

It is all around me now
Swirling, Twisting, Constricting.
I feel as if it will suck the life from my bones,
Will take the beat from my heart,
The breath from my lungs

This fog
Thick and dark
As if it will swallow me whole,
No way out
All around me now calling,
Come closer..
Closer....

But no.
I struggle to escape
To be free, to flee
From this monster,
Something made of eternal darkness,



In the Distant Future-David Yuan

"The world doesn't revolve around you," they said, and, "You can't always get what you want."

And right after they say that, they get exactly what *they* want.

Who they want.

How many times have they told us that we are being constantly attacked, that they are only *protecting us*, and then immediately enforced a new set of laws, set up only so that we can do less, and they can do more? How many times has the grandfather clock played its eerie chime, its pendulum blade swinging back and forth, stained with the blood of our supposed "enemies"? How many times have people been taken in the dead of night, dragged away by mysterious men, their lives stolen from them, *stolen from us*? Where is the old lady that used to always be outside watering her garden? Come back, your flowers are dying! Where are the neighbor kids that used to always play games in the neighbors' backyards? Come back, you've left your bats and balls and hoops out on the grass! Where are you? Come back! Where have you gone?

Where is Luna? Where is Jackson? Where is my son? *WHERE IS MY SON?*

How many times will they do this to us? How many times?

How?

Many?

Times?

I'll tell you. *Enough times.*

"Why would you want to oppose us?" they say behind their lecterns, dressed in their uniform beige overcoats. "We are only *protecting you* from the harm that constantly surrounds you, from the danger that you are too blind to see."

"Why would you know what's best? We have the experience. Your minds are not as fine-tuned or keen as ours. Frankly, your delusions are, quite often, *ridiculous.*"

"You know, to think in this way is dangerous to our society. We can not tolerate you insensibly disagreeing with how the most qualified authorities decide on how the world *obviously should* be run. Yes, to have such a mind is dangerous, and if you can not tolerate *us*, then *we* can not tolerate *you*. And if that is the case, then we must act with you accordingly."

But *I don't care* anymore.

I don't care what they'll do to me, because I've had enough.

And *I don't care* what it will take for me to get back what I've lost, because they've taken *nearly everything we have.*

And I don't even care if they end my life for trying, because they've already taken every ounce of it away from me.

Shadows in the Light -Clara Pontone

I sit and stare at the unfamiliar thing plastered upon the walls.
It is a copy of me, but twisted and wrong.
Whenever I fall and scrape my knee, my shadow becomes a solid beneath my feet.
It drinks up the blood.
And it becomes stronger.
Soon I will lose control.
Soon I will lose it all.
I lose the light.
My shadow has become too strong.
It sucks the life, and my everything out of me.
I feel no more.
I fade away into the consuming black.
Though I know, I'm never coming back.
The light I used to know is gone.
And now I wander.
I wander forever lost, within the dark.
My face covered by shadows.
I am bound to this twisted nightmare, forever.
There is no escape, I am now a demon of the night.
The light is gone forever.
No one is safe or free.
This twisted nightmare has left us all scared and broken.
What do we do when no light shines upon our face.
We fade away, into the black.

Eerie Fog-Ellika Olewnik

All I see are vague shapes
All I hear is blood curdling screams
All I smell is death
All I taste is blood

The Maiden in White –Eliza Anisiobi

A ripped-out page in a journal, dates to 1692: *“CAUTION! The Maiden in White is a lady belonging to an old tale told to young children in the late 1600’s.*

“Finish your dinner! The Maiden in White will find you!”

Eventually, she became more than a tale when young little boys and girls started going missing after hearing about the lady in white.

She gained the name because of her unusual cloth, a plain white dress. She had dark black hair, untidy and dirty because she lived in the woods. They suspected her of being a witch but could never catch her to hang her.

To hear of the Maiden in White was unfortunate. And to encounter her... you would never be seen again. Not even bones.”

* * *

There once was a little boy named Henry. Henry lived in a small wooden house on the west side of Salem village, Massachusetts. Henry was a troublemaking boy; he refused to do his schoolwork and go to church, a risky move for him to make. If he wasn’t the perfectly obedient and religious seven-year-old boy that the Puritans wanted his mother to raise, then she would be deemed a witch and hanged.

So, she did everything in her power to ensure that he fit perfectly inside the box, blending in with the perfect Puritan standards. And one of the ways she hoped to accomplish that was by telling her son terrifying stories.

“The Maiden in White,” Henry’s mother started, “she ate troublemaking little boys like you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She was a witch, Henry. They live and breathe in bad energy. I believe you know all too well what happens to witches.”

He did. Henry remembered the early morning of June 10. He had expected to play outside with his friends Mary and Elias that day. But when he looked out his house window, he saw a horrifying sight. This was the day Bridget Bishop was hanged. Henry watched as the ladder she was balancing on was kicked out from under her as she pleaded her innocence. As the ladder was removed, Bridget fell, the rope tied around her neck closing tightly around her throat. She was dead in minutes. Henry understood the consequences of acting out, and he understood what his mother was trying to do for both his and her safety.

But little seven-year-old Henry Bond didn’t listen to his mother. And so, the story goes that he slipped outside of his bedroom window late into the night to meet with his friends in the village woods.

The woods were eerie and empty that night. Not even a deer, a fox, or a squirrel could be heard. Something was off, but Henry was oblivious to the signs and marched right into the woods. There, he met his friend Elias.

“Where is Mary?” Henry asked. “Don’t tell me she’s too scared to go!”

“I believe so Henry,” Elias said, “the consequences for her are much graver than the consequences for us.”

Henry huffed, “I guess you are right. Are you not also scared though Elias?”

Elias laughed, “You think I would be scared? What’s there to be scared of? The little kids’ tale, the Maiden in White?”

Before either boy could say another word, they were interrupted by a sweet singing voice coming from deeper within the woods. It resonated through the woods, coming from one singular point and spreading out like a wildfire. It was a beautiful adaptation of Henry's mother's favorite sonata that she always hummed while cleaning the house.

Dum dum dum-dum, la la la-laa.

Henry was in a trance. The lady's sweet voice circulated through his brain, mesmerizing him. Henry left Elias to continue deeper into the woods, anxious to find the voice. Henry wasn't aware of his surroundings; he didn't realize that Elias too had heard his own mother's favorite sonata. They were both under the spell of the Maiden in White. And so, both Elias and Henry blindly trudged into the woods, past the bones on the wet forest floor, past the dead bodies hanging in the trees, ignoring the smell of blood wafting through the moist air.

Eventually, they reached a tree. Standing in the middle of a small patch of daisies, it was unusual, but majestic. It was like the elder of all trees in the whole forest, humongous, standing tall above the tiny figures which are humans. But Henry and Elias didn't notice the tree, all they could focus on was the lady in front of it. A lady in a plain white tattered dress, with unkempt dark black hair, with the palest skin. The lady of nightmares that haunted all little kids' dreams. The maiden of witchcraft which blinds all children's visions.

The Maiden in White.

The Maiden stopped singing when Henry and Elias treaded closer to her, unaware that she was the lady of the very story both their mothers had told them before. she looked down at the little boys and smiled.

"And who are you, my dear friends?" she asked .

Henry and Elias spoke in unison, "Friends?"

"Why of course child. I know who you are, Henry and Elias. I know both your mothers favorite songs. I know your dreams and aspirations. I know your fears." She paused, then stared into the boy's eyes, "Doesn't that make us good friends?"

"Yes, I suppose so," They both said. Henry and Elias were gone. Their minds were corrupted and they couldn't think for themselves. It would almost be over, just as hunger ceases to exist when you're dead.

"Why, aren't you feeling quite peckish as of now? I know I am," The lady questioned. But it wasn't a genuine question. It was more like a statement that only had one answer. "Wouldn't you boys like some food? I can prepare some for you."

"Sure!" The boys exclaimed. They smiled and followed her hurriedly as she reached into the circle of white daisies and grabbed a latch from within the grass. The maiden pulled on the latch and it created a hole in the dirt floor where the grass should've been. Through the hole you could see a cleanly kept house with shining pristine lavender walls with a wooden dining table in the center of the cozy house. Placed on it was a nicely prepared meal, the smell wafting out of the space for the kids to smell from the outside.

Henry and Elias traveled downward into the house. The moment they touched the house inside, the grass door shut behind them. And a second later, began meshing in with the ground once again.

Henry's book closed first. Then Elias's. Their story was over.

Mary quickly ran to the forest. It took way too long for the coast to be clear when she could sneak outside. First she had to finish all her homework and dinner, then she had to wait for her parents to fall asleep. Which took FOREVER!! Mary was almost sure that Elias and Henry were gone, she was probably too late. She sprinted to the entrance of the forest where they said they would meet up, and when she reached the area she skidded to a stop. Henry and Elias weren't there. She looked around, behind the trees, under the bushes, up in the trees, hiding behind a house nearby. Nowhere to be seen.

"DANG IT!" Mary stomped on the ground, furious. The one time she could prove to her parents that she was brave enough to discard the rules and it was taken from her. She was about to pull out her special notebook from her coat pocket. A small notebook which she recorded all the tiny little details in her life onto, and which she was about to record the past events onto until she heard a crack from underneath her feet. Mary looked down, it was a fallen twig. She bent down to peer more closely at it, something seemed off, it looked suspiciously like a knife... Suddenly, a lady appeared right in front of her. She was sporting a long white tattered dress, and had dark black hair and pale skin. She had the softest smile as she looked at Mary. And when the woman spoke, her words were enchanting. Mary had now met the Maiden in White.

Where are Elias and Henry you ask? Well, their books closed a few minutes ago already. They are lost.

"Hello dear." The maiden said. "Why are you upset?"

Tears built up in Mary's eyes. "My friends left me. Or I left them, It's hard to explain."

"Oh, Henry and Elias? I met them a while ago, such good children, they told me all about you, you know. They wouldn't stop talking about how your favorite color is blue, you love berries, and how you love writing." The lady smiled.

"Really?!" Mary's eyes lit up. *They couldn't stop talking about me?* Mary thought. *This maiden must be a holy god sent from another universe!* Mary was under a spell now too. A different spell, a spell created by her own illusions. Mary had always been quite the eccentric child. She had trouble distinguishing right from wrong, real from fake, danger from safety. And it showed. The Maiden in White would use this aspect of Mary to her utmost advantage.

"Oh, yes." The maiden said. "Unfortunately, they went home already. But they'll tell you all about their adventures tomorrow. You better get home now, your caretaker will be worried."

"OK!" Mary jumped up and ran all the way back to her house, waving good-bye to her new mysterious goddess friend. *The beautiful lady was so amazing!* Mary fangirled. *She made me feel better at once, just like magic.* Mary was falling deeper and deeper into her delusion. But whether the Maiden in White had to trick her victim or not, the result would end the same way. In a fate worse than death.

When Mary reached her doorway, she peeked behind her to see if she could see another glimpse of the pale skinned woman. Nothing. The lady had already disappeared. Mary huffed in disappointment, then quietly opened the door and made her way inside her house. What Mary saw next slightly frightened her. Standing right behind the dining table that made up the majority of the house's first floor area was a woman. A woman unlike her mother, who had never focused this much on Mary's eyes. The new woman stared into her eyes like she peeked into her soul.

Mary had now met... ERROR! ERROR! I cannot depict the woman now standing in front of Mary. Something is interfering with the system.. SHHHHHH! *It's no fun to have an omniscient narrator now is it? You're going to spoil the ending! And I can't have that, can I?*

Mary stared at the mysterious lady right back. She had pale skin, blue eyes, black hair tied back into a bun, and a fairly dirty white dress. She looked just like the beautiful lady back in the woods, except this lady could never compete with the other one's glory.

"So, who are you?" Mary asked.

"Oh, my apologies." The lady stated. "I am your new nanny, your parents are on a last minute vacation. They have gone... skiing?"

Huh.

"Skiing, nanny?" Mary questioned, puzzled. "I've never heard of such things. Is it some kind of fantasy training perhaps?"

The new lady smiled innocently, then "secretly" rolled her eyes when she thought Mary wasn't looking. "Let me phrase it this way... I guess those words are just a little 'ahead of your time'? No matter though, I am your new caretaker and your parents have gone to an opera house. If that makes it any easier for you."

"Works for me!" Mary giggled. "I like you, you're quite funny. *Maybe this new lady isn't too bad.* Mary thought. *Maybe she can be the sister of the goddess in the woods, maybe not the sister, the assistant?* "By the way lady. You look the same as the beautiful woman I just happened upon in the forest. Are you the same? You look the same."

The lady ignored the question and instead started fiddling with her hair and staring at Mary's.

"Come here dear, let me tidy up your hair. It looks quite messy from all that time you spent in the woods." The caretaker left to go to the kitchen for a second. Why? Mary wasn't quite sure.

Mary looked up to check her hair. It was quite messy! Mother wouldn't be proud. She walked to the chair at the dining table where the woman was standing a moment before and sat in it. She pulled out her little writing book and pencil while she sat there, waiting for the lady to come out of the kitchen.

When she finally did, she wore a big smile on her face.

"Why are you so happy lady?" Mary asked.

"Because dear child," The lady started. "Because, to be honest with you, I despise children." And she took a knife to Mary's throat.

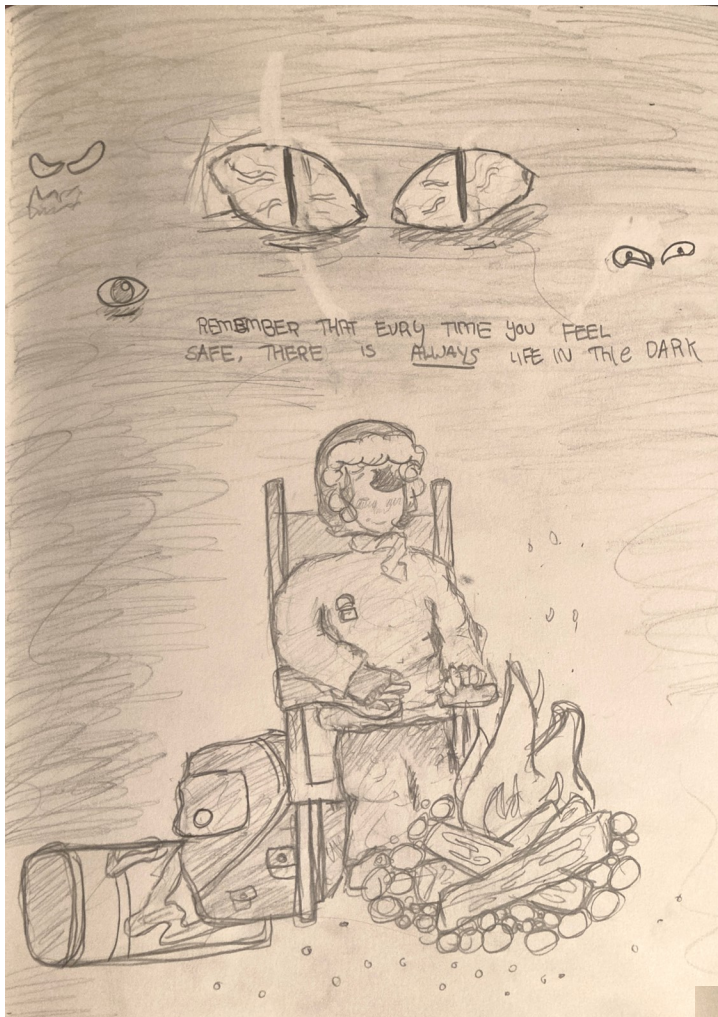
Darkness.

* * *

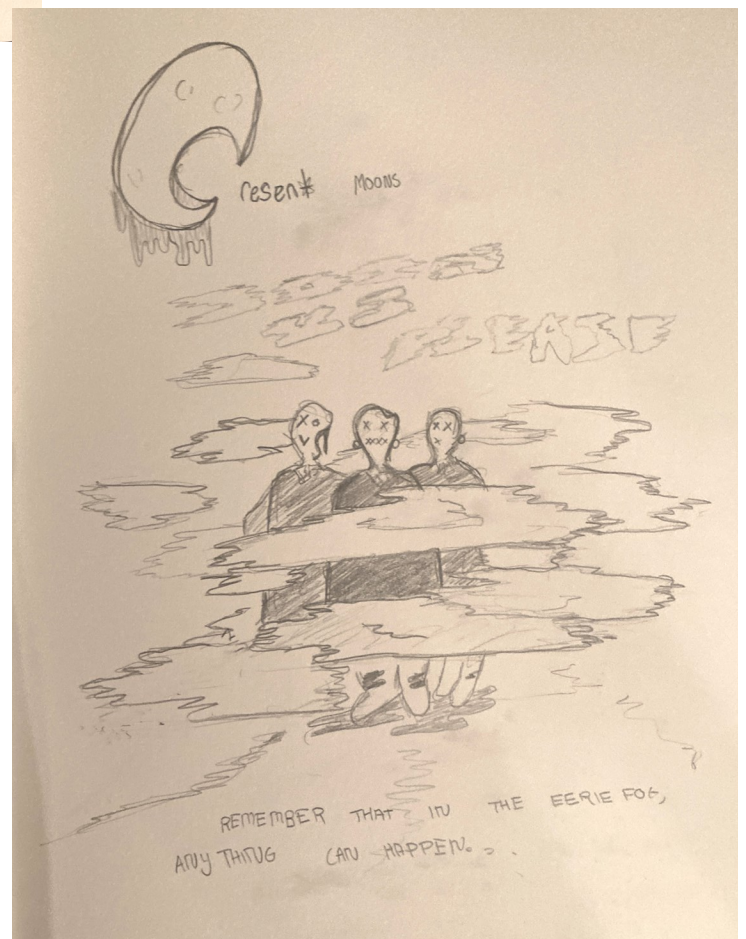
A reporter on a "strange phenomenon" show in 2022: *Hello kids! We are back with another thrilling story. Here in Massachusetts, we have decided to take a look at old Salem Village where we got a call from suspicion of a ghost! Spooky right? Haha! We have all the right equipment here, don't worry. Oh! And I'm here with my good friend, May! She's wearing a nice white summer dress right now and her black hair in a bun, always so fashionable. Anyways, as we enter the house, you can see the corpse of the ghost we are looking at today. We found this corpse in the woods, and we brought it all the way up here for closer inspection. This was the feared, "Maiden in White." They eventually found and hanged her in the late 1800s. Ok, entering the house now, OHHH, a journal! This could be good! Ok, ok, May, listen to this. It reads:*

"Dear mother,

The Maiden in White has a twin."



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We in the Darkness-Mars Baker

Have you ever thought about what comes next? What is after the world in which holds the light? Well it's darkness, regret, fear. What is next is this place of eternity. A place in which no light can stretch to. The dull shade of corruption, where all seem to forget. Forget what was before or what is after, as the light was the sedative for the pain we all held. So when shadow takes hold we are relieved of the neutralizer and are finally able to recognize the weight of which our sorrows bring us. As this sorrow of our pitiful existences reach us we choose not to accept our woe but burrow in the dejection of the past. Choosing to forget, forget everything. even the parts that shimmered like gold in our memories. Those parts then became dull to the bleak reality of our past, a place in the light. So we choose to forget the warmth and the comfort of the rays of light that once hit us instead trading it for neglect. As we drown in the black fog of forget we lose everything that once made up ourselves. We could be anything yet we are nothing as we only exist as the back we live in. So stay in the light for as long as you can. For what is next is a life in the darkness, a place of eternal sorrow and forget.

The Voice of the Fog-Michaela Kostakis

It was a normal October evening in the town of Salem and Jane ,a normal college student, was walking back to her apartment just off campus. She and her roommate Sophia say that they're hungry and want to get something to eat, so they texted their friends (living in the dorms) that they were getting something to eat at the dining hall. They make their way back to the campus and find their way down to the dining hall, grab a few slices of pizza, and find their friends sitting at a table. As they're eating, one of their friends starts to tell a scary story because Halloween is coming up soon. It went like this... "a long time ago not far from here there was a girl. She was said to be a witch, she never used her potions to hurt people but the townspeople were afraid of her. One day the townspeople had enough and they had her hanged. Just before she was hanged she said her last words "YOU WILL REGRET THE DAY YOU CROSSED ME!" Her family still made sure she had a proper burial and no one has ever forgotten her last words. Everyone laughed and moved on. After dinner Jane went for a walk. Some fog started rolling in as she entered the graveyard that she always walks through. As she walked she heard a voice. It wasn't recognizable what they were saying but the voice seemed to be repeating the same sentence over and over again. Jane didn't think much of it but the fog was making it harder and harder to see so she decided to turn back. As she was walking back the voice was getting louder and louder and Jane was getting more and more scared so she walked a little faster but the voice just kept getting louder.as she was nearing the exit of the graveyard she began to realize what the voice was saying "They will regret what they did to me" and then Jane looked up and saw the face of a little girl ghost, and Jane ran as fast as she could all the way home but it seemed that now the voice was coming from the fog. When Jane got to her apartment she locked the door and went straight to bed. At 3 am Jane hears a knock on the door and goes to open it, when she does she sees the face of the little girl's ghost with fog all around her. Jane let out an ear splitting scream, fell to the floor and was never seen again.

Annabelle—Mae Stevens

October 30th, 1972 - night

Today was absolutely terrible. I failed my math test and my boyfriend broke up with me, but I am trying to keep my hopes up for tomorrow because it's Halloween! I decided to go with my friend Anabelle. We might just dress up as zombies for fun but we aren't sure if it will make us look like little kids, we are in 7th grade anyway. Anyway, every year we go on a huge loop around the neighborhood and there is this one house that gives out full bags of skittles and caramel apples! Then we go and eat the apples and put the skittles on top! I have always loved Halloween. Oh my! It is almost 11:00. I better get to bed and prepare for tomorrow. You know what, I am going to dress up, that's the whole point of Halloween right? Being something that you're really not. Well, that pretty much wraps it up for today. Over and Out!

October 31st , 1972 - morning

I am SO excited for tonight! But sadly I have to get through an entire day of school before that. Oh! And by the way me and Anabelle and I are officially going as zombies! So I also decided that I was going to take a recorder to let you witness my Halloween night firsthand (even though I am writing to myself!) ! Oh! My mom just called me down for breakfast, Over and Out!

October 31st , 1972 - after school

Ok, hi! Right now I am in my room getting my costume on! It is so authentic, and my mom is doing my face paint to make me look like a zombie! I am going to meet Anabelle in front of the book store so we will be with each other all night and after we trick or treat she is going to stay for a sleepover. Well I have to go now but when I get to the book store I will start recording for the night.

Crrr, Beep..... Hey me! I am here with Anabelle and we are going to start trick or treating! Ok so this first house is super creepy, they have all of these really realistic decorations!... Knock Knock.. Hello?

Trick or treat!

Oh! Here, I have some little chocolates and caramels!

Thank you! Ok on to the next house! Oooh! This one has this mechanical Grim Reaper thing that is going on in their yard, it's super cool! Well I am going to cut the recording and then pick it back up when things get mildly interesting. Beep... Beep... Ok so I am back and I am recording because I am sort of freaking out right now. So Anabelle went to call her mom telling her that she would be sleeping over, she forgot to this morning. But she has not come out from behind these trees for like 30 minutes and I have checked to see if she is there but she isn't. So I have been looking around to see where she is and I just can not find her anywhere. I think that I am going to go to the small lake that is by the edge of town. No adults ever go there so she could be there with a boy or something and not want to tell me.

Ok well I am going to cut the recording and bring it back when I am there. Beep... Beep.... Ok, so I am at the lake and I didn't realize that it would be this creepy, ok so I am going to walk around the lake and the area surrounding it, if I hear anything I will go and check it out..... Ok so I have been walking for a while but I heard a rustling in the bushes but it keeps moving around the lake. Oh! There it is! Ok I am going to go check it out..... AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeppp.....

1 hour later

2 hours later

30 minutes later

Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep... Creeeeek..

Honey, are you awake? Hey mom, yeah I am.

Are you ok?

Yeah I still feel a little shaky and light headed but I am mostly ok.

Well it is only normal for you to feel like that after seeing something as terrifying as that.

Yeah when I saw Anabelle I had this one when I just wanted it not to be her but her brilliantly bright yellow eyes gave it away.

I am so sorry honey, they already took her off to the facility, she will be gone in a matter of months.

I just can't believe it.

Believe what? That she was a Tracto Plasmero?

Yeah I could have never thought that she was one. Creek..

Hello?

Yes doctor?

Zosia will be good to go in about an hour.

Ok where were we? Oh yeah, She had the sweetest smile and the prettiest eyes. She was always happy and loved to hang out. When I saw her with those large green scales and that big forked tongue I just couldn't believe it. When I looked at her for too long and I couldn't move, I thought that I was a goner.

Well then thank god we found you just in time. You have no idea how happy I am that you're ok, I love you Zosia.

It was just so terrifying when she looked at me with those eyes, I knew that the Anabelle I knew was gone forever.

Untitled—Spencer Parsons

As they walked down the hallway of the house, the wet rotting wood creaking under their feet the two cops looked at each other. The walls were a mix of blue and gray covered in blood red stains. The wall paper had been bleached at the top by the yellow lights too dim to properly light the scene of the crime. There was a cold body slouched over itself at the end of the hallway. The body used to be an old man but now he was missing a limb and his eye was on the wooden floor. He had tons of stab wounds where a dull knife had been forced into his chest. Clearly someone had been overcome by anger.

“It’s a shame what happened,” Darren the older cop said.

Mark the younger one responded, “I wonder if he ever deserved such a painful death.”

The old cop said, “It’s not likely, few ever deserve to die. Especially a retired man just living out his days in peace.”

“Someone probably needed something,” Mark said. “Revenge, greed or both caused his death.”

“If only people could just get along,” Darren replied with no sign of emotion on his face.

“I know what you did.” Mark accused no hint of worry in his voice.

“What do you mean?” Darren questioned quickly.

Mark joked, “I’m not just talking about breaking your diet.”

“We’re at the scene of a crime that you’re accusing me of causing, why are you joking?” Darren said.

“Well I thought I’d lighten the mood,” Mark said unscathed. “You know it’s hard to talk to a murderer.”

“You’re going to regret saying anything,” Darren said sharply, his tone raising.

“You’re going to regret killing that man,” Mark said, his voice increasing almost at a yell.

Darren retorted, “I’ll get away with it as I always do.”

Mark didn’t respond as a bead of sweat ran down his face.

“Don’t worry I’ll make it quick,” taunted Darren.

As they walked down the hallway of the house, the wet rotting wood creaking under their feet the two cops looked at each other. The walls were a mix of blue and gray covered in blood red stains. The wall paper had been bleached at the top by the yellow lights too dim to properly light the scene of the crime. There was a cold body slouched over itself at the end of the hallway and two more who looked like cops slightly closer up. An old man accompanied by two cops. One of the cops was an older fellow, he had a mix of gray and black hair and a few wrinkles on his forehead. The second had neatly combed brown hair and looked young probably in his twenties. And while the old man had died expressionless, the younger one had died looking at peace with a smile on his face. Both cops however shared a bullet hole in their chest surrounded by blood. Clearly the two cops had fought.

“I wonder what happened here?”

The Weirdest Halloween Ever -Emmalee Houston

I see my chance to escape and run. Run like nothing is stopping me. But there's a problem. Something is.

But let's start from the beginning. My name is Charlotte. My parents left me on my aunt's doorstep one day when I was young. I never knew why. I wasn't left there alone though. I had my twin sister. Scarlett.

So, here's how it all started. I was woken up by an aggressive knocking on my door by Scarlett. She was yelling at me to get up or else I'd have to walk to school by myself. I got up, got dressed, and ran downstairs for breakfast. I shoved my food into my mouth and ran outside to catch up with Scarlett. You see, today isn't just any school day, it's Halloween. That means that instead of doing boring stuff in school all day, we get to do a bunch of fun stuff.

Once I caught up to her, there was the usual "There you are!" from Scarlett. I cannot even really describe what happened next. I was walking across the street when I heard a furious engine running. I turned to look, and I did a bunch of stupid things all at once. First, I ran away from the nearest sidewalk. Second, I didn't even run, I jogged. I heard a huge screeching sound and then I felt pain. It felt like I was stung by something. I looked over and the car had stopped right in front of me. It did hit me, but I didn't feel a thing. Scarlett ran to me and dragged me to the sidewalk. And the next thing I know, I'm in a hospital bed.

The hospital let me out early since I didn't show any horrible signs. I went trick-or-treating with my friends and went home. I couldn't sleep that night. I just felt really energized. Like my battery was at 100%. For one of the first times in my life, Scarlett was trying not to be annoying. That felt weird. I decided to take a walk by myself. As soon as I couldn't see the house, Scarlett came running. She said she had a bad feeling inside. Little did I know that she was right.

I heard a rustle in the trees and looked up thinking a cute little squirrel would cheer me up. Instead of seeing cute and fluffy, I saw horrifying ugly. A bunch of rat-like beasts that were huge were hanging from branches in the trees. I leaned over to tell Scarlett, but instead of saying something quietly back to me, she screeched and ran. I quickly knew to follow her. All at once, the giant rat beasts started flying together in a black cloud. I ran as fast as I could and soon caught up to her. But then she started getting tired and slowed down. The beasts started to catch up to her. I reached back, grabbed her hand, and ran like lightning. I soon heard engines roaring though I never saw a car.

We made it home and it's like everything was back to normal. Except for the fact that I never lost any energy. Then I remembered how I felt that car's shock earlier today. Maybe it wasn't a shock, maybe it was an electrification. My aunt was yelling at us that we were grounded. Just like any Halloween!

The Trail of Mist Part 1 - Luke Depew

“GEORGE!, JOANNE!, WAKE UP”

George was startled awake by his mother calling from downstairs, the golden morning sun shining through his bedroom window. He looked over at his clock; it read 6:00AM.

“I thought we were leaving at 7, why did she wake us up at 6?” he thought to himself.

He then slid out of bed and rubbed his groggy eyes. George looked in the mirror: 16 year old with shaggy brown hair, ocean blue eyes, and a tall and skinny body.

His father then opened the door and said “Get dressed, we’re leaving in 5”

George’s father was a rather overweight, and average heighted man. However, he had very sharp facial features, and some faint gray streaks in his dirty blonde hair. His eyes were a fairly bright blue and he had a freshly shaved face.

“Okay” George replied as his father turned away and closed the door.

George quickly threw on a pair of gray sweatpants and a navy blue Penn State sweatshirt. Penn State is his dream college, even though his parents want him to go to college some place close like Seattle University. He then got his tennis shoes on and ran to the bathroom to grab his toothbrush and toothpaste to bring with him on the trip.

As he walked in, of course: there was Joanne putting on makeup for no reason.

“Y’know, I don’t see why you’re putting makeup on: we’re going to be in the car for 4 hours” George exclaimed.

“Well you never know when some boy decides to peer out the window and I just happen to be in his view” Joanne countered.

Joanne was 18 and had long, straight, jet black hair and ocean blue eyes like George’s. She was quite short and had a bit of a unibrow forming that she for some reason didn’t seem to notice.

George rolled his eyes, grabbed his toothbrush and toothpaste off of the counter, and left the room. He then proceeded to head outside and into the car. His father was in the driver’s seat waiting for him.

“What’s taking your sister so long, she’s been up since 5!” his father asked.

“She’s putting on makeup, getting ready like she’s going to a dinner date!” George answered.

“Man, girls sure are something.” his father said.

“Yup!” he replied.

And after waiting for about 15 minutes, Joanne, and George’s mother finally stepped out of the front door. As expected, Joanne looked like she was about to go to a party, while their mom looked like most people would in the morning: baggy eyed and sluggish. Their mom sat in the passenger seat, and Joanne sat in the back next to George. All their luggage and supplies were back in the trunk, and they were ready to hit the road.

George slept through most of the car ride, but he was awoken when they started driving on a rocky dirt road. He looked out the window and all he could see was trees: trees, trees, trees. They blocked out the light from the sun. The family drove on that road for about thirty minutes until they reached a small clearing. The family was quite literally in the middle of nowhere.

“Alright!” their dad said, “Up and out!”.

The family got out of the car and helped to unload all of their stuff. The sun was now high in the sky and it was time to set up camp.

Their father worked to set up the tents, their mother was setting up an area for a campfire, and George and Joanne worked to gather and chop wood for that campfire. The two of them scouted the area until they found a downed tree, they then grabbed their axes and began chopping.

Joanne sighed, “Ugh, I hate camping” she mumbled.

“Oh get over it, it’s only three days,” George replied.

“Yeah, and that’s three days too many!” she argued back.

“Whatever, I’m sure you’ll end up being fine, you always end up enjoying these trips, you just don’t wanna admit it” he exclaimed.

Joanne let out a “hmpf” and continued chopping wood in silence. Although she was a girly girl, she was really good at chopping wood; probably even better than George. The two of them worked at hacking the wood and when they returned to the clearing, the tents had been set up, and the fire area was ready for wood to be lit, and people to gather.

“Hey, since we’re all done and we’ve got some time before dinner, do you guys wanna go on a hike?” their father suggested.

“Why not?” George replied.

“Sure!” said their mom.

“Ugh.” complained Joanne.

The four of them then walked over to where the hiking trails were, there were three trails; the left one was named the Blueberry Trail, the middle one the Strawberry Trail, and the right one the Trail of Mist. The Trail of Mist’s entrance had caution tape blocking it. Their father pulled out a pamphlet and observed the different trails.

“So the Blueberry Trail is about 2 miles and takes you to a nice view of the hills, the Strawberry Trail is 5 miles and takes you to a river, and the Trail of Mist seems to go deeper into the woods and there actually isn’t any mileage listed for it” their father explained, “I say we go on the blueberry trail; we don’t have enough time to hike 10 miles, what do you guys think?”

Their mom, Joanne, and George all nodded their heads in agreement, and they set off on their hike. They went uphill for what seemed like over an hour until the hill finally plateaued. After walking for just a few more minutes, they had reached the end of the trail with a stunning view.

The rolling hills that went on for as far as the eye could see were painted with pine trees that had a

green-blue hue to them. The four of them took in the sight for minutes on end and took many, many pictures.

Their father decided that they should head back as they needed to start preparing for dinner. They backtracked and hiked down the hill which was not tough in the slightest and made it back to the campsite in no time.

Their mother lit the fire and began preparing ham and apples for the family. As that was going on, George, Joanne, and their father practiced their archery skills on trees. Shot after shot, the sweet smell of apples wafted through the air and caught their attention. Dinner was ready.

The three of them set their bow and arrows down and walked over to the foldable plastic table they brought and sat down. Soon after, their mother came to the table and set everyone's delicious dinner in front of them. By the time anyone got their plate, they immediately started devouring the food like they hadn't eaten in weeks.

Once dinner was done with, the sun was low in the sky and casted a golden light on the trunks of each tree. The family gathered around the fire and began telling horror stories. All of them were clicé up until their fathers. The stories George's father told were always good; they couldn't wait to hear this one.

"Okay, so I'm sure you guys saw the caution tape blocking the Trail of Mist, right?" their father exclaimed.

The rest of them nodded their heads.

"But, I'm sure you don't know why; so, every night, a thick mist covers the trail, and those who are unlucky enough to get caught in that mist, die. No one truly knows why this mist has caused this, but those who had made it out alive reported mysterious figures that surrounded them and attempted murdering them by throwing knives and shooting arrows at them." their father told them. "But, once most realized what was happening, it was too late; they had already become disoriented and didn't know which way was out, so most ended up heading deeper into the forest. Almost all people that go into that trail never come out," he continued.

That story left George with a chill running down his spine. This would definitely give him nightmares.

"Anyway, it seems like it's about time we all go to bed," their mom suggested.

"Good idea" Joanne agreed

George and Joanne walked over to their tent and layed down on their sleeping bags as their parents did the same. However, as time kept ticking by, George could not sleep for the life of him. He had been staring at the roof of the tent for hours on end counting sheep, and yet he could not fall asleep.

"It must've been that nap in the car" he thought to himself.

Joanne stirred and whispered "Yeah, I can't sleep either... maybe a little walk will tire us out".

George agreed and the two of them quietly left the tent and began walking. They eventually reached where the path split into the trails and they stopped in their tracks.

"Y'know, I'm curious to see what's on the Trail of Mist" Joanne exclaimed.

“Are you joking?!” George whisper-yelled. “Did you pay attention to dad’s story at all?” he continued.

“Oh please, don’t be a baby, it’s totally fake; the caution tape is probably there just because of a downed tree” Joanne argued.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right” George agreed.

And the two of them ducked under the caution tape and set off on their way down the mysterious trail. It was all as per usual at the beginning. Until something odd happened; as the wind blew it seemed to be faintly saying “Turn Back”. However, the siblings ignored it and kept on walking. But suddenly, a mist began rolling in and this really started to concern George; it was just like the story.

“Hey Joanne, I think we should turn back now!” George suggested.

“Yeah, I agree, I’m honestly kind of scared now...” Joanne replied.

Since this awkward feeling kept getting deeper, the two of them turned back around and started walking back... but they didn’t seem to be getting closer to the start of the trail. The features of the trail were unfamiliar. Maybe they went the wrong way? So they turned back around and still, nothing familiar. The mist only thickened as time slowly passed by.

George then felt a presence other than his sister’s... it felt ominous... it felt sinister. His heart dropped to his stomach and he started picking up the pace. He made sure to keep his eyes on his sister in case anything were to happen. To his surprise, the mist thickened into a fog and he could barely see in front of him. However, his sister was right beside him making comments stating that she was okay. This comforted him.

But suddenly, he heard a faint rustle in the plants. His walk turned into more of a speed-walk and the amount of fear he was experiencing was so intense that he could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins and his legs felt like jelly. Another rustle, and this turned into a jog, and then another, and he was running. His sister faintly cried while running beside him. And suddenly he saw a flash of a dark figure, and this run had finally turned into a full on sprint. He was truly running for his life.

He kept sprinting until he heard a blood-curdling scream from his sister. But it wasn’t right next to him, it was from a distance. He stopped in his tracks in true petrification, cold sweat dripping down his forehead. He didn’t know what to do, where to go, or what to even think. He just did the first thing that came to his mind: and that was to run back for his sister.

This sprint was even faster than the last one. He saw flashes of a figure, then another one, and then another. He didn’t let this scare him. He had to find and save his sister. These flashes turned into clear images running far beside and ahead of him. He saw one with something on its back. He assumed it was his sister, and immediately started targeting it. The other figures had taken notion of what he was doing and began shooting arrows and throwing knives made of finely carved wood at him.

He knew that no matter what got in his way, he had to reach his sister. He gradually got closer and closer, until he could see the figure more clearly. His sister was definitely on it’s back and she appeared to be knocked out. He got closer, and closer, and closer until he could just barely grab his sister's hoodie to pull her off.

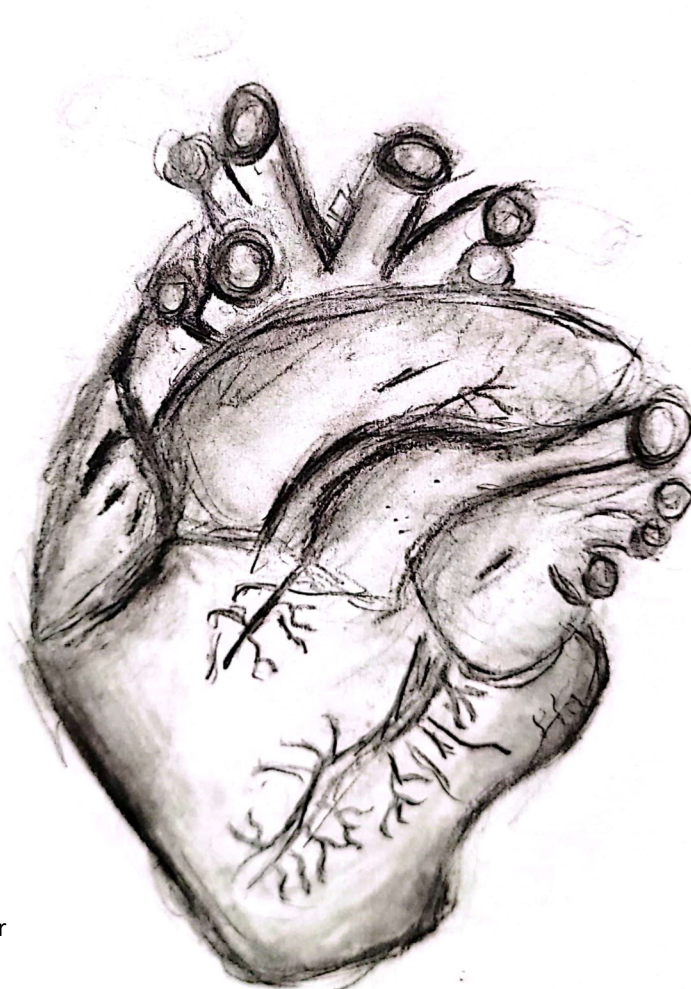
But of course, as he had lost focus of his surroundings, the worst that could happen, happened. One of the knives that another figure had thrown, pierced right through George's chest.

He tripped and fell to the ground, his face smashing on a rock. A look of utter shock and pure terror was spread on his face like peanut butter on a sandwich. The figures didn't even bother to take one look back, they left him; stranded.

George rolled over onto his back, blood came gushing out of his chest, while even more blood ran down his face. He could tell that he was near death. His muscles became weak, and he couldn't keep his head up anymore. His vision became blurry and red, a loud ringing noise pounded on his ear drums.

And alas... it all went dark and silent.

TO BE CONTINUED



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1

I rode a truly stunning horse. Preto was his name. The dark dapple gray type of horse with a midnight black mane. He was brought to this kingdom for His Majesty, wild, not broken. When His Majesty first rode the beast Preto, he was promptly bucked off and, dare I say, humiliated. I saved the horse from His Majesty's indignation and learned him some manners for his own good. Of course, His Majesty did not want Preto anymore, so I took the beast to be my own personal stallion.

It was Preto who brought me on my journey. I was requested by His Majesty himself for this adventure and, being a loyal subject of the king, I complied. I was gifted the finest tack and armor for Preto and received a great deal of vittles too. His majesty's only requirement was that I return with new knowledge. Knowledge of bordering empires, traitors, witches; threats to the kingdom's power and such.

With a "Ya" and a kick to the side, Preto was off. I was the dramatic sort myself; the exit was more for show. We did not, of course, maintain a gallop for long.

His majesty's land stretched on for leagues and his castles lay comfortably in the center. I did not reach a destination of my aid for many days and many nights. And it was far more than a week before I met a soldier giving me a cold stare who, upon further examination and some deduction, was guarding the border of a Northern kingdom that was not His Majesty's.

"Good day," I said to the man, "From where do you hail, sir?"

He replied, but I realized with a sudden embarrassment he did not speak my tongue.

"You must pardon myself, sir," and I curtly nodded to him before Preto trotted off.

I saw many a soldier that day, all dressed in the similar fashion, though some mounted on beasts such as mine. With each man I passed, I dotted a mark of charcoal at the respective point on my map. The following day, I finally came upon a town, just inside the other kingdom's border.

I dismounted my beast and guided him into the small village. A young lady halted as I walked by.

"Good day m'lady," I nodded politely, "I hail from the kingdom that your village borders. I require to meet with a man of power."

Fortunately, this lady spoke my tongue, though an accent was prominent, "Eh, good sir, this is by no means a kingdom. And furthermore there are no 'men of power' as you say. You are lost, good sir? You require rest?"

"I require no such thing. Does this village hold a council."

“We are ruled by goodwill, sir.”

“This must be a nation of chaos.”

“No, sir. We are ruled by goodwill.”

“You seem to be in need of a fine leader,” I told the lady. An idea had come to me suddenly.

The lady gave me a slight smirk. Then she stared thoughtfully for a time before she said to me, “We have a leader. And this leader lives alone. Ah, you must meet this leader, sir.”

“I should recall-”

“Ah, you should not. Right this way, good sir.”

I reluctantly trailed behind the lady, Preto behind myself. After a long while of walking I came to find myself with many questions about this leader.

“This man is king of your village?”

“Yes, good sir.”

“And where lay his fine estate?”

“Right this way,” but she did not change course. I looked to the path we walked on but there was none. And no building lay ahead.

This was of no aid to me. I shifted my attention to the beast, Preto. He brought with him the vittles. I took a stale baguette and a knob of butter along with a slice of dried lamb. I rewarded Preto with eats as well. He had behaved well of late.

“Dear Preto,” I said to him softly with a sigh, “this shall be fun.”

2

I opened my eyes, but no light came to meet them. It was a time deep in the night. I had fallen to sleep of exhaustion. The lady was gone. I presumed she had left me to return to her home.

“Preto? Do you hear? I fail to see you.”

I did not expect the creature to respond, and no response did come, yet I found the silence quite uncomfortable. I did not hear the owl or the midnight insects that find their joy in noise-making during my sleep.

“Preto,” I repeated into the endless night. I rose to my feet but I could see nothing. The lady must have stolen Preto. And she left me no instructions to find her king. I had been fooled like a child.

I lay back onto the cold earth. But I did not let myself rest for long. I soon returned to my feet. I would walk to find the king of the village.

Hour followed hour. The sun never did rise. My steps became aimless, only achieving to tire me out. So I sat to the ground and called to Preto once again.

“Preto? Are you near? Do you bring with you provisions? I am famished.”

But Preto did not respond. Preto was surely lost forever. As was I.

The eternal darkness did not break as I walked more or slept more or sat and thought more. I had not seen light in more time than I could have counted without the aid of shifting daylight. My hunger grew steadily more, yet I had no eats to settle it.

I found myself calling to my beast Preto far too often. I asked where he was, where I was. I soon realized I would be more shocked if Preto found me than if I stayed lost forever.

Shapes of dim color danced in my sight. I did not know if they were a result of the dark or my own hunger, but they grew slowly in size. Some would resemble objects. I watched a hazy blue stallion rear beautifully before it faded back into an amorphous shape. Lavender clouds floated over a black landscape, but they too disappeared.

Once, I saw a small cat. The tip of its tail flicked back and forth. It stared into my eyes and I could not help but stare back. I halted and studied the image for some time before it started to rapidly increase in size and the cat seemed to pounce at me. I flinched and my heartbeat ceased for a second, but I soon remembered it was not real; it was just a vision created by my hunger and my bored eyes.

It was not until a time far into my emptiness when I found an object. It was nothing more than a rock, but it astonished me. My theory that I was alone had been disproven. I had a shared demise with a rock. I had found a friend.

I named the rock Preto for a reason that must be obvious. I spoke to the rock as I would speak to the stallion. I asked the rock the same questions and he gave the same answers. None.

“Preto,” I would say, “Do you know where I am? Preto? Do you know where I could find some eats? Ah, Preto, I am truly famished.”

I told Preto the thoughts wandering through my head. I grew more and more tired with each second that passed me. Even with the rock Preto, who I later came to call Petro instead, I still called out to my beast. I asked my stallion where he was. But it was not just him I spoke to when I said his name. I was asking the perfect prairie of a pure pitch black where it parted. Where real reality remained. Where everyday was no longer an empty eternity. Where time waited to turn back to today. And where the open world was awaiting without obscurity. Preto.

But for the most part, I spoke to a rock. Because I was alone. Because I was going mad and starving. Because I was lost in an eternal night and Petro was there, lost with me.

3

My life and my adventure had turned far too bland for my liking. I no longer had energy to move, so I sat and stared into nothing forever. This was how I would end, trapped here. The world could be living in harmony somewhere where I was not.

Concerns fluttered around my head. Petro certainly got an earful from me, and when my throat became too parched for speaking, our conversations became telepathic.

I believe Petro had a mind. I could hear his thoughts clearly. A rock's thoughts turn out to be quite interesting. Petro was glad to be my friend: a companion to me in my doomed battle. The rock could not move on his own and, though I gladly would have helped him, it was soon too much effort to lift a single finger. My throat had turned into a desert and there was a dragon roaring to me rather than a stomach rumbling.

Of course I must address the common idea that I would have been mad to speak with a rock. I may have been, certainly, but I do not believe I was. You see, a rock is an intelligent piece of lifeless material. It is brighter than a dog. A mere dog can not understand any human tongue, but a rock such as Petro, why Petro can read my mind. And I can read his. It is extraordinary.

And I did put much thought into this topic. I had more than enough time for that sort of contemplation. I questioned whether I was talking to myself or to Petro. Petro always agreed when I yet again came to the conclusion that I was talking to him. Of course, Petro always agreed with me, but it seemed to be his personality. Who was I to criticize such an intelligent being?

Petro did not start many conversations when we first met, but as time went on, he did so more often. Once, he asked me, or rather reminded me, about the stallion Preto.

Preto? I asked, *What must you know about Preto? I must admit I have almost forgotten about Preto.*

How can that be? asked Petro, *Not too long ago you spoke so often to him. I was concerned about his name's sudden disappearance from your speech.*

Preto has become but a memory in my thoughts. I have not seen him in such a long while.

Ah, I understand.

"Preto," I said, rolling the familiar name over my tongue. I had not spoken it in so long. I had not spoken any word in some time. Just the name of Preto sent me into a fit of coughing. I sat up, which took a great deal of effort. By the time I had laid back down, my throat felt much worse. Death felt closer than ever.

Pecans and apples were brought out to me. I do not know how, though; I simply looked to the side some minutes later and the food was there. I ate it like a beast, and, though it was quite a large portion, I had soon finished both the pecans and the apples.

“Do you know where you sit?” asked the lady.

I sighed and shook my head, saying in an exasperated tone, “I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“Do you not?”

“Now tell me, why should I?”

“Have you never heard of this prison?”

I turned to Petro, who, by some miracle, still lay in my hand. “What ever does she speak of? Am I a prisoner?”

But Petro did not respond. Petro was cold.

“Petro? Petro, are you well?” my heart started to race. If Petro were gone, I would have no one left. No one to share my thoughts with. I would die alone without a friend.

“Do you speak to a rock?”

I looked to the woman, “Do you know how to help Petro? He has gone cold. Has he left me? Please, help.”

But all the woman did was stare at me like I was mad. Mad for trying to help a friend? She had no sense.

“Please! Help Petro!”

“Petro is a rock? I speak to a madman.”

I looked around, but I saw no madman. I did not have time for this. Petro did not have time for this.

“He is my last companion.”

She sat staring for some time. At last, she instructed me to release Petro into the fog. He would supposedly land on a bed and be cared for. I was forced to trust her. It was Petro’s last hope. I gave him a light toss into the white fog. I did not hear the sound of him crashing to the ground. I hoped he was well.

“I assume you do not wish to stay here.”

“It would be helpful in that choice if I knew where I was.”

“You consider the choice to stay?”

“Certainly not.”

Petro, I said to the rock, how long have you resided in this darkness?

My friend, I do not know. Though you are not the first man I have met here.

Dear me, I expected I would have been.

No. Many have been trapped here, but no one I have met has escaped.

An escape?

Yes, certainly! I do believe there is a way to escape a life in the dark. You came here somehow, there must be a place where shadows turn into light.

4

An adrenaline rushed through me. It was but a second long, but in that second I stood. As the energy faded, I stumbled and almost fell back, but I was determined to remain on my feet. I took a weak step then looked to Petro in my hand.

Petro? Have you directions to the escape.

I am sorry, my friend, I have not the slightest clue.

I walked forth. My steps were slow and labored. Each breath hurt my throat severely. I took many breaks to cough harshly. I did not have a sense of direction, just a spark of hope. The dim imaginary colors still clouded my vision. Sounds had joined them, false as well. But something else was there. The shapes grew brighter and there was a defined rumbling sound. I would have believed the sound was just my hunger, but Petro seemed to think otherwise.

My friend, he said, what is the source of that sound? Is it you?

I believe so, I replied, but I did not know if I did.

The sound grew louder and louder and I realized with a shock that Petro and I were not alone.

“Hello!” I called out, my voice trembling and cracking. But my throat’s pain was not in vain. This time, I received a response. One I could hear, truly hear.

It was a quiet mew, almost lost in the silence. It was the sound of a cat. A kitten more likely

I tried to whistle to the cat, but my lips were too cracked. My fingers could not snap. My voice had given in. I could not speak. There was nothing I could do to ask the cat to come. Many moments passed. My knees were too weak to stand. I tried to take a step but I miscalculated. I forgot how to walk. I could not catch myself as I fell.

I collapsed to the floor painfully. Thoroughly exhausted and hoping the sound of myself falling would reach the cat. If only it had found me sooner. My joints had frozen. I could

feel myself about to fall into sleep. I tried to stay awake. I knew if I gave in I would not awake again. No one would find me and save me from my doom.

And miraculously, in my desperation, the cat found me. I could hardly feel it at my fingers, but I realized it was there. And when I opened my eyes this time, a hint of light reached them. I could see a small kitten's silhouette sniffing curiously at Petro.

5

The kitten pawed curiously at my hands. I could not shoo it away if I desired to, but I did not mind. My eyes stayed open but my sight was too blurry and my eyes too stunned to comprehend my surroundings.

A high pitched squeal came from above me. I was dragged by my shoulders, but I did not know where. My surroundings grew lighter and lighter, yet increasingly cloudy. More squeals echoed. Come to think of it, I had not heard an echo yet in this place. Suddenly, the brightening sky turned dark again as a swarm of dark, winged creatures came down near me.

“He requires drink.”

Water was poured into my mouth. I used far too much effort to lift my head and prevent myself from choking. It soothed my throat, but it was not enough.

“Please, more,” I said.

“He speaks.”

I was given water again, more and more until I could move freely again and I could speak well too.

I then sat up, blinking to restore my sight. A wolf sat before me. Looking up, there was an old woman on a golden throne, the kitten that had found me sleeping on her lap. I could still faintly hear the winged creatures flying about and every few seconds, I saw a black wing pierce the sky. And, about the sky, it was an eerie fog. I could not see past the woman's throne. It was dense, so incredibly dense that it seemed to be more of a wall painted with a cloud texture.

“Might I interest you in eats?” My attention turned to the lady.

“Interest me? Do you know,” I stopped and drank more water as my throat grew dry again, “how long I have been trapped in that horrid place? I do not. I am famished.” The lady stared at me as if I had not just given a perfectly clear answer and she was yet expecting one. “If you have eats, I would just about die for them.”

“Good.” Her voice was high pitched and light. She had an accent similar to the one of the young lady I had met earlier, but it was not the same.

“So I thought. This prison, you see, is an intricate one, created by a small, yet powerful, village. I have taken it upon myself to make this also my kingdom; I always wanted a kingdom. But, you must understand, I could care less for citizens of my kingdom, especially citizens such as you. I have myself discovered a way to free you to the open world, but, you must understand, strange things shall happen in your return. Even so, do you yet wish to leave?”

I thought on this. Strange things, she had said. To what degree of strangeness, I did not know. But I did know that I must leave. I could not stay and rot here.

“I wish to escape.”

“Then exit. Venture through the fog.”

I looked at her curiously. She had told me there were beds in the fog. Beds to care for creatures in need, such as Petro. Where had Petro gone if it were not to rest. Had I thrown him into nothingness or into the open world. He could not survive in the open world. He needed to be cared for. But, though I yearned to, I could not ponder this now; I had to escape before it was too late. It would likely never be “too late,” but, as I have previously stated, I am the dramatic sort.

I placed one foot past the fog. No harm came to me. I stepped completely inside. I could see only a cloudy white, but I could hear the winged creatures louder than ever. I stumbled blindly forward. My foot hit something on the ground. I reached down to find a rock. I was hopeful for a moment that it was Petro, but it was not; it was a fraud. I let it fall back to the ground and heard it break to pieces.

“Oh Petro, I shall never see you again.”

I walked for no longer than a quarter hour. At last, my steps ceased. A grassy stretch of farmland lay before me, dotted with small manors. Behind me did not lay the fog from which I had come, simply more manors and more plowed fields. And, of course, a horse galloping towards me. The dark dapple gray type of horse with a midnight black mane.

It was Preto. I called out to my beast. He seemed almost joyful to be in my presence again. It was unexpected, he was never the loving sort.

“Preto! You have been returned to me. Oh how I have missed. What a journey I have to tell you. You must listen. We shall ride back to His Majesty’s land; I shall entertain you all the way.”

6

My return was glorious. Likely not glorious to the few who noticed me as I galloped into my town, but glorious to me. I had made it through the dark and returned home to tell the story.

The day following my arrival, my funeral was held. I was mildly confused by this. Had not my family nor no one else noticed my return? I had walked into my home to warm greetings and much welcome. I was then informed of a solemn event to occur the following day. Many people came to bow before me and tell me how sorry they were for the loss I was suffering. But I had not the slightest idea what loss I suffered. No one I knew had fallen to death, no one had even aged a day.

On the day of my funeral, as I stood and watched the service honoring myself, I asked my mother what ever was happening. But she told me to hush. She told me I would understand when I was old. A man stood in front of the crowd and spoke of my life and how horrible it was that my body was not recovered, but it would not prevent me from having a proper tombstone. At that, I ran to the man and asked him if he did not see me or understand that I was still alive. But all he did was stare at me like I had gone mad, then declare it was grief seeping into my senses. How I could possibly grieve myself or be present at my own funeral did not seem to pass his mind. People again gave me their apologies for my loss as they left to return to their lives. I was not invisible to the people, they did not think I was any other person, but they yet believed I was dead. Heavy concern piled onto my confusion. Either I myself had gone mad, or the entirety of His Majesty's kingdom had.

As time went by, I started to believe the latter. I did not take any actions out of the ordinary from my daily life unless I was prevented from doing so by someone's strange behavior. And this behavior would go seemingly unnoticed by all other people. But I noticed. I noticed that I could not reach the market because of a lord's crashed carriage. But the lord was not the man, rather the beast who had pulled this carriage. I noticed again when the people of my village left food at the path before their house to rot. The smell was horrendous, but no one else thought anything of it.

And once more, when I visited His Majesty to inform him of my journey, I noticed he stepped down from the throne and had me sit upon it to tell him my story and advise him. I did not tell him my story, though. I did give him but one piece of advice.

"Do not venture to the North."

The End

Ch. 2

Middle School Musings



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Flying gracefully
the Jungles and coastlines give peace
Kingdom of the birds

—William Mace

The pride of the wolf
It stands on the mountaintop
Watching It's Kingdom

—William Mace

The moon shines at dark
A shimmering color comes
It will soon be day

—William Mace

Look up to the sky
Floating objects, broken space
Where are we all now?
--Sophia Argueta-Rivas

many lives in here
each ignorant of others
but tangled by fate
—Mary Curson

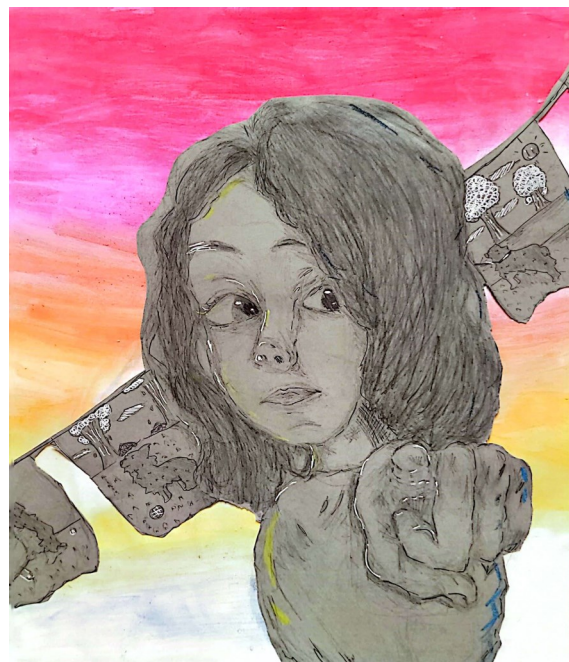
As I stare through books
Let my imagination flow
I don't fear this world.
—Louis Hoppe

How many more years?
I'm stuck in a loop called school
Mom, Are you proud now?
—Winkie Lin

Try closing your eyes
and see a world waiting
up for you, waiting.
--Kylie Forringer

The words keep going
Leading to an unknown world
I need to unfold
—Lyla Marucut

A day's hard work done.
Time to rest that working brain.
New day yet to come.
-Eston Rettkowski



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Nightshade and Hemlock—Louis Hoppe

Nightshade admired his friend, he was skipping on the stones, crossing the rushing river below that was about four feet deep in the lowest ditch of the river. Hemlock turned towards him after he crossed the river

“See! It’s not that hard!” Hemlock bowed before fully looking up at Nightshade.

“Are you sure? You’ve had practice before, and this is my first time even looking at this river.” Nightshade winced at even the slightest thought of crossing the river by the stepping stones, but he wouldn’t be able to see Hemlock if otherwise. “What if I fall?”

“Then I’ll swim to you! Or help you up!” Hemlock caught the hesitance in Nightshade’s eyes as he stared at the spaced stepping stones. “Look, if you don’t try, you’ll never know.”

Nightshade agreed with Hemlock’s statement, he calmed himself, ‘all I have to do is trust myself’. He jumped to the first stone, he looked at Hemlock, who blankly stared back at him. He stepped across the stones, one, two, three. He stopped near the middle of the river.

“I recommend going faster for the last few. The stones are too small to fully balance.” Nightshade balanced himself out before leaping to the other stone.

Crash. He slipped off of the stone and fell into the river. He was quickly trying to escape the rushing waters, but they were too strong, he couldn’t stop himself. Hemlock dove into the river, swiftly paddling through the rapids towards Nightshade, attempting to drag him over to the shore.

By then, the two of them were soaked, Nightshade could hear Hemlock’s voice repeat over and over in his head. It’s not that hard. Hemlock checked his breathing, luckily, it was normal. And his pulse? Slightly heightened, but that was normal from a ‘near-death experience’.

Nightshade’s body was facing towards the sky, he was lucky to not consume any water while he was being saved, any amount could bring danger to his life. He was lucky to have Hemlock as his friend. He set his eyes towards his friend, who was soaking and staring at the river. ‘Was he blaming himself for the harm?’

“Hey. It isn’t your fault.”

“But it is.” Hemlock turned from his hand towards Nightshade, “It is my fault. I— I never should’ve chosen this place in the first place. You could’ve gotten hurt, or worse, died.”

Nightshade wished he’d known everything, what the correct response to this situation was, how to swim, everything. But he didn’t, so he sat up, and quietly rested his hand on Hemlock’s shoulder. “I didn’t die, and that’s because of you.”

Hemlock looked across the river, looking at a small fawn and its parents, “I don’t think that now’s really the time for this. Perhaps we could postpone our adventure to tomorrow, but no longer, I can’t wait to show you the flowers.”

"See you tomorrow." Hemlock was smiling, grinning even, as he walked away, into the darkness. Nightshade walked the other way, the way that led to his house.

The pathway was a tan-brown color, and it led to the 'home' that felt very uncomfortable to go to each day, especially since he had been missing for an extra hour than usual, and he was soaked. He was ready for a good time, but the house wouldn't provide it.

"Where have you been? I was looking for you for the past hour to no avail. I checked the market, you weren't there. So tell me, where were you actually?" Nightshade expected this reaction from his mother, but usually it wouldn't cause him to choke up.

"I went to Domeville, and it was raining really badly. I was looking for three gifts. I checked every store, but I never found any of them." his mother looked at him, she was quite obviously skeptical, since he'd been lying ever since he started to meet up with Hemlock.

"Okay, but if you lie again, you're grounded in this house for a month. Do you understand?" Her arms were crossed, staring into Nightshade's dark eyes.

"Yes, ma'am." Nightshade hated calling his mother 'ma'am', but if she was satisfied with the story, he couldn't sabotage his chances.

"Now, go upstairs and wait until dinner is ready."

Nightshade rushed up the stairs and closed the door behind him before face-planting onto his bed with a sigh. He collected himself, and sat up, just to later flop down to stare at his blank ceiling.

He turned to where pictures in frames too expensive for him lay. One of the pictures depicted his father, a person he never got to know, and himself, about four or five years of age. Another, when he was seven or so, in a field. One, when he first met Hemlock, when he was thirteen, was surrounded by the most intricate frame made by Hemlock himself. And finally, one of Hemlock by the river, staring into the clear, calm, stream below him.

Dad, if you do return, please let this place feel more like home.

Nightshade closed his eyes, attempting to force himself into sleep, a good one, unlike the previous many others that only brought three to four hours of sleep.

Happened - Kylie Forringer

Something Happened.
One second I'm doing my homework.
The next I can't move.

I'm on the ground
It feels like someone cut my entire body in half.
I don't know what happened.

I can't feel my hands
My hands are trying to break free of this.
Nothing happened.

I'm afraid to open my eyes
My eyes feel like they're glued shut.
I don't want to see what happened.

My head is a spinning tea cup.
My head feels lightweight.
Someone tells me it's gonna be okay.

I hear sirens in the distance.
People are screaming my name.
I try to answer but nothing happened.

I feel the ground on my back.
People cry.
I don't know what to do.

My head is spinning.
My body is on the ground.
I have no idea what's going to happen.

Flight—Michaela Kostakis

In my car, driving and driving away from home
Anticipating my approaching adventure.
Headphones in but not really listening,
Just thinking about what's coming, what's next.
We stop with a slight jerk forward
I'm snapped out of my dream land.
We pick up our bags and head to a long line,
We wait,
And wait,
For what feels like forever
Until finally the lady at the desk calls
"Next."

We get through the first challenge a few bags lighter,
on to the next.
Another line to wait in.
At the end of the line we take off our bags and shoes,
We walk through a gateway and a cool soft breeze whooshes past me.
Done with that we walk to our gate.

"D4"
my dad says looking down at the paper
And we're all on the lookout
For the signs to get to our next destination.
"D!"
My sister calls being the first to see the sign.
We all follow her and before long we've arrived.
We still have some hours to waste,
So we grab some tchotchkes and chocolates.

In my head I'm still thinking about our *upcoming caper*.
Going to an unknown land so far from home
I can hardly wait.
Hours pass so slowly
It felt like a year had passed
But after waiting so long

I
took
flight.

Disappointment—Louis Hoppe

You're at the goal
Focus, Focus, I kick it
It bounced off the post.

Let this world be known under a disappointing name.
For this world has been all the same
By pointing and laughing at one down
Making others feel a great frown
And pretending that they are good for this town
I know that you care, that's why you came.

As you whistle that slight tune
I see you look at the moon
Why, you're soul is at unrest
And I know you feel deep regret in your chest
From this misdeed you did to the fewest
And this is shown in a small rune.

Why must you sing this song
That explains the right of your wrong
That makes others feel regret in their word
As you make them feel like a bird
As the others overheard
This is a bringing of a losing game of 'pong'."

Silence—Anonymous

If I needed to be quiet for happiness to find its way
Then I would, and I would very much be gay,
However, this isn't how life works
I guess it's just one of its "Perks".

I believe it helps bring happiness
But my mood and experiences digress.
For I've stayed quiet, even in times
Where it'd be better to speak, even if in confusing rhymes.

Like that one time, let it be known
Where this behaviour was shown.
On the bus one day, an instrument case hit my head.
And did I say a word? Not one was said.

So even though I received compliments
From my teachers, not one of the students
Would ever care to ask how I'm doing
So instead, I don't care about it, instead, I'm silently sobbing.

I can't speak aloud, especially when in crowds
For this unseeable thing shrouds
My well-being, hiding it away from peers
And I find myself being on the verge of tears.

Whenever a friend or family member does ask
"How was your day today?" I find it a hard task
For I've been pondering it myself all day,
Am I fine? Am I really okay?

So I reply with "I'm fine, how about you?"
Hiding my emotions of obliviousness and emptiness as though
it were déjà vu
Each and every day, and I listen to your rambles
While it is still fresh in my mind, stinging like brambles."

Cuz I Do—Neha Paraniham

Do you ever get that lump in your throat?
The kind that you can't swallow
that takes away your voice,
and it doesn't go away until the pounding in your head is louder than every what if and I could've.

Cuz I do

Do you ever feel like wiping tears away is useless,
because more will just follow and each ounce of sorrow that it carries feels heavier than the last.

Cuz I do

Do you ever feel like you are drowning in a sea of overwhelmed thoughts
and you forgot how to swim
like the surface gets further and further away
and rock-bottom is this familiar feeling?

Cuz I do

Do you ever feel like all the weight on your shoulders would cause the world to cave in if you didn't
carry it,
and the burdens are invisible so the universe just adds more?

Cuz I do

I'm learning to get rid the lump in my throat
And wipe away the tears
And swim when I'm drowning
And show the world the weight so that I don't have to carry it in my own

Do you ever feel like each step you take makes things better?

Cuz I do

I Hate—Neha Paraniham

I hate how people think racism is joke
Yeah it's so funny
So funny I cried in the girls locker room
so funny you were the only one laughing
So funny how you spoke in an accent
so stereotypical you thought it was accurate

And I hate how people think homophobia is a trend
I thought It was so cool when you denied my identity the second I figured it out
So cool when you tricked me into thinking I was less than
It was so cool when you told me god hated me as if love was sin as if love was a crime I couldn't commit

And I especially hate how people think sexism is flirting
I felt so admired when they didn't pass the ball in gym even though I was open right next to the goal
and played for five years
I felt so admired when you told me I was good...
for a girl
So admired when you asked me to do jumping jacks just to objectify me

I hate how you might not be joking
I hate how there's a chance your not doing this as a trend
I hate how it's possible this isn't your sick way of flirting

In Between—Neha Paraniham

I dream that I'll wake up and every expectation will fade away
That model minority will mean minorities who are models
And not some brown person blueprint
We are so stuck in this stereotype that
I am this and you are that
That white is good and black is bad
But what about the in between
what about the stories you don't read
And the lessons they don't teach
I'm tip toeing on the tightrope
If I slip if I trip if I hit the ground
I'm not the only one who falls down

If Trees Could Talk—Mary Mueller

Sometimes I wonder
if trees could talk,
What might they say?

'Sup Palm?
Hello Maple!
Howdy Oak!

What's poppin' Cherry?
Greetings Sequoia!
How are you Redwood?

Would they gossip?
Did ya' hear about Oak?
She's gone nuts!

Would they argue?
No! I lost my leaves first!
No I did!

You're a pine tree!
You don't lose leaves!
Would they sleep?

'Night Birch.
See ya' tomorrow Apple!
Would they cry?

Willow! Don't cry again! You're losing your water!
WAAAAAH!
Would they sing

With the birds in their branches?
Okay, Morning Dove does the bass line.
But that's my part!

No robin! You're doing the melody.
Would they party as the rain wets their roots?
Man! This punch is good!

Pine, that's rain water.
Oh.
Would they joke around?

Hey Dogwood! What's your favorite noise?
Oh! Well I really like the sound of -
No. It's a joke.

Oh. What's my fav - ?
For goodness sake, your favorite sound is barking!!
Get it? Since you're a DOGWOOD TREE?

Huh?
Nevermind!
And

Would trees
Have a say
In how

They are treated?
The way they are

Cut

Shredded

Chopped

Wasted

What might they
Say
To

YOU?



Does It Make Us Feel Better—Louis Hoppe

Does it make us feel better?

Murdering those considered “inferior”

How we bring our own ‘supremacy’ over those just as well meaning as us,

Those just as hopeful as us,

Those just as strong as us?

Does it make us feel better?

Hiding their thoughts and feelings

Under the lies of our assumptions?

Hiding who they are under a sheet of lies

We crafted in order to justify our actions.

Does it make us feel better?

Endangering, enslaving, executing the people that were once

Family, Friends, Neighbors,

For unjust reasons?

Simply because we blamed their unknown innocence.

Does it make us feel better?

Singing the praises of founding fathers

‘Wondrous’ men who were likely slave-owners

Hiding the hurts of the people they so hid away.

Hiding the hurts of innocent people, hidden by their race.

Does it make us feel better?

Hiding the truth about people we name heroes

Hiding the fact that they were murderers of us, human-beings.

Stealing the rich past of abuse of people

And replacing it with our lies of freedom.

After taking this into consideration,

I must ask the question.

Does it make us feel better,

Murdering heroes for standing up for what they believe in

Attempting to show our wrongs to the people we so dearly knew as heroes?

Sacrificing our sun-kissed associates

Simply for the purpose of satisfying our ancestors,

Just to inflict fear, submission, docility

Yes we need to express ourselves

But we mustn’t to the possibility of harming others.

What have we learned over these years?

From slavery, to being attacked with words, to still not having equal rights

We, as a nation who vowed for rights for the people

NEVER batted an eye towards the forgotten history

Never chose to tell the story of those we found ‘lesser’ of.

And even through these years,

We’ve seemed to have forgotten heroes unnamed and known

And their work, passion, life

Just to make their presence transparent

Just to make their rights be shown.

Hiding the history of humans

Denying lives spent on rights

And replacing it with woven writings.

So I must ask,

Should it make us feel better?

Anxiety-Olivia Nepomnyashchiy

anxiety-
is like having a stalker
who follows me everywhere
from the brightest days to the darkest.

anxiety-
is always going to be there
and you can't say anything to help.

anxiety-
"just ignore it"
i can't.

anxiety-
"just relax"
i can't.

anxiety-
"just breathe"
i can't
i can't
i just can't.

anxiety-
i can't just breathe or relax or ignore it or calm down
that's not how it works why
can't you hear my yelling
why can't you hear me?

anxiety-
is the devil
here on earth
and he won't leave.

anxiety-
is the darkness in between the stars
anxiety is angry at me
anxiety is killing me
anxiety doesn't stop.

anxiety-
just leave me alone.

maybe my anxiety is trying to protect me
and save me from the worst.
maybe my darkest point
isn't the darkest there could be.
maybe anxiety has saved me
from what could be so much worse.

or maybe it's my defeat.

Roses-Olivia Nepomnyashchiy

i see a rose
the curling red petals
and i reach to pick it up
stabbing, stinging, thorns
- it's beauty betrays me

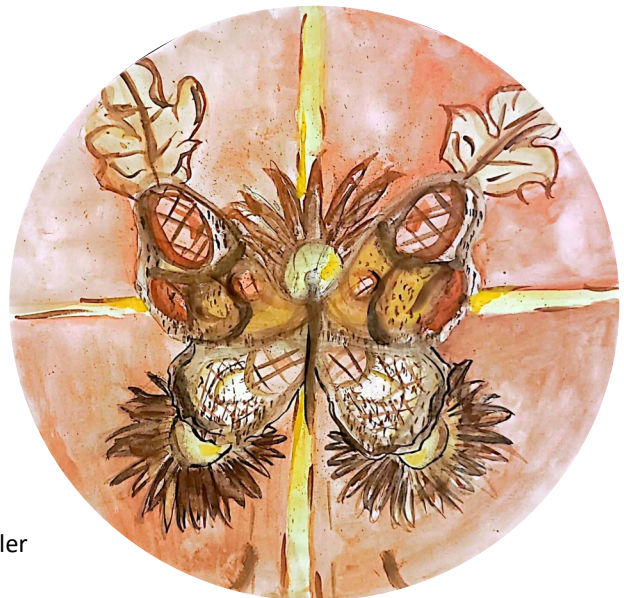
this is love,
this is love,
this is love.

it's like a broken promise
the promise
not to break me
not to shatter me

not to hurt me.

oh well
i guess
this is love.

i think



Me, Not Me–Mae Stevens

Some people write about make believe,
Some people write about the world.
But I want to write about me, about the struggles of my life
But no matter how hard I thought, I couldn't think of anything.
Maybe it's because I was tired
Or was trying to hard.
But I don't have big stories,
Stories about being discriminated,
About being hurt on the inside.
Or even the out.
But some people have those stories,
Stories that can move entire crowds.
Stories that make you want to believe.
Believe that the world can change,
That it needs to change.
And those should be recognized.

Inside Screams–Mae Steven

There is a door,
Through the door,
A person,
Grieving.
Everyone in some way,
Is grieving.
In one way or another,
Are screaming on the inside,
Wishing something was different,
Wishing someone was there.
But you must keep going,
No matter what the world throws at you,
You must keep going.

Light - Mae Stevens

There is a room,
In the room, a cord
On the cord, a lightbulb
Then,
A change
A switch
Then,
Light,
Not everywhere,
But here,
Right Here,
Right now,
In this small room.
Illuminated by one small light,
Pulsating,
As if it was alive.
Giving this small space light
Light that brings life,
But then again,
Light doesn't last forever.

Darkness Comes–Mae Steven

We live our lives every day,
Smiling.
But inside of us there will always be darkness.
We will always feel that pit,
And without realizing it,
Try to dig out of a deep pit of darkness
We all need to realize that people feel darkness.
Because it will come,
And no one can run away from it.

The Shark –Mary Mueller

When the ocean turns
The sand in my eyes
I began to realize
That you are with me.

Yes, you are there in the deep
And if the Shark caught you
Your blood would seep.

Do not go out far
To get
A bloody
Burning scar
Because the shark might get you.

So come out of the water
Your feet caked with sand
Rinse yourself off and take my hand,
For the Shark attacks in the deep.

The hot sand burns my feet
But this is better than a gruesome defeat
By the Shark.

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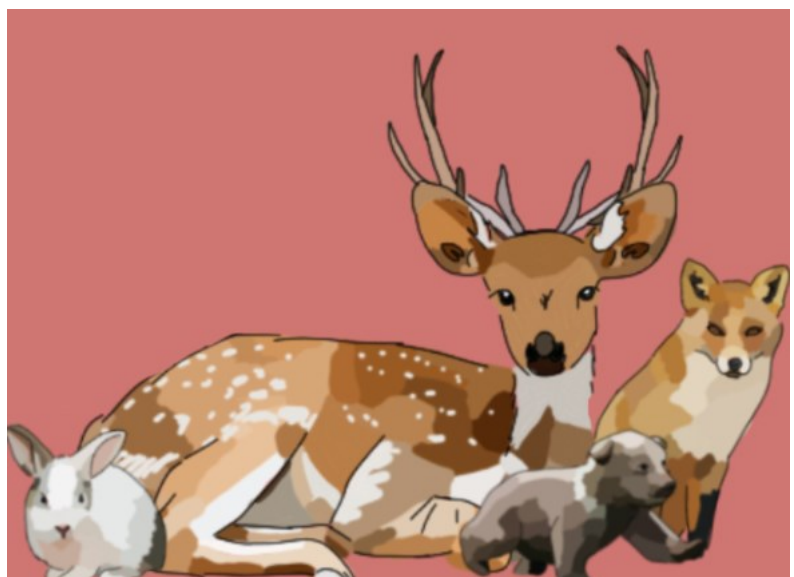
Scared in a City of Nature—Phoebe Hartnett

Night falls slowly as we walk in the wood
I feel that I'm being watched by a thousand eyes
My body is stiff as a tree and
Alert as a dog that senses something not good,

Then I hear it, its voice terrifying all those near
It screams loud in the dead of night, screaming, screaming.
I cry out of fear, fear that makes me run terrified for my life
My parents call me "Everything is alright, please come back here,"

We walk all the way to the bridge which is covered with debris
I'm proud I faced fear in the face.
Our braveness is the life of our soul
It lives in the giant shadow of our fear waiting to break free.

The fear in my body slowly sifts out of me
As braveness fills that hollow space
It took me a long time to realize
Our braveness only comes from the fear that used to live in you and me.



Sad—Louis Hoppe

I'm Sorry

If it's an apology of which you ask for,
Then I apologize for not being the provider.

If the words you're looking for are "I'm sorry",
Then you can look for another.

For I am not the silenced,
And I am not the one to speak,

And now I stand, staring.
For this is the only way to show courage.

You're the one that says I'm cleansed,
But I'm not the one you seek.

And now you look at me, glaring
Why I've never asked for a bridge.

If it's tears you expect
Then you know me too well

Yet this world is my sect
And I do not plan to dwell

On such sorrows you bring
As I watch you closely

So I shall newly sing
Of how I feel, oh so lonely.

So lonely
Yet so lovely.

In the wrong

They've argued that revenge is best served cold.
But why should one wait so long?

For this world has punished them greatly with such
an encounter.
So why am I in the wrong?

With the blood on my hands of those you seek.
Why do you question it as I walk along?

Why, now you've accused me of murder.

Such feelings that I feel that consume my being, genuine.
Such feelings that are oh so very strong?

And just because I've acted upon them, you think me a monster.
So why am I in the wrong?

I'm aware of such crimes that I've committed, much to your surprise.
Why there's so many, that I could write a song?

I've been silent and have been hiding such knowledge as I represent incorrectly.
Why must you constantly tell me I'm in the wrong?

Jukebox

That song, it always reminds me of when I've slept.
The eternal reach of death, halted only by the mere action of the sleeping brain.
It's always confused me, how something could act in its sleep until I met you.
Brain still working, yet blind to such changes around you.
Unless you do it on purpose?
As a defense mechanism I'd assume.
Just like how I'd hid my feelings of the death of my ancestor underneath my brain.
As a protection from sadness I'd presume.
The sorrow tears that I feel have finally been brought to peace and silence.
Yet the sorrows still haunt me as I speak, with my heart awakening to nothing.
Have I been asleep?
Only a mere morsel of myself remaining conscious, enough for me to live?
And if so, is it really savoring the experience of life?
Or is it merely a shell of the person one used to be, acting as a substitute until they return?

Sorry We're Not Normal—Neha Paranilam

Everyone said new normal no normal as if normal existed in the first place as if unique isn't a word that describes everyone and everything

Older generations ask mine why are you so stuck behind a screen

And maybe just maybe it's cuz a phone informs of our face was the only way to communicate when the world shut down for a hot minute and by hot

minute I mean 3 years

So sorry if face to face isn't the way we associate

The world was broken and our phones were our crutch so sorry if we are still learning to walk and sorry if we are still learning to talk the way you do

Things White People Tell Me—Neha Paranilam

I look exotic

I'm so lucky to have curly hair

People would kill for my skin tone

...or so I've been told

But my skin tone comes with a burden heavier than any weight you've ever carried

My curly hair tangles faster than they shot Rajan Moonsinghe

And exotic isn't a compliment it's a reminder that they watch my family at the airport

I'm not really Indian if my moms white

I don't look Jewish

And people think I'm Brazilian

...or so I've been told

But the only thing me and the Brazilian people have in common is our ancestors were colonized by Europe

Jewish isn't a look, I was going for beautiful brown goddess

But I guess I didn't hit it because you still don't think I Indian

and every drop of melanin in my skin is telling me different

Brown is beautiful but Beyoncé was right "Pretty Hurts"

and it hurt when innocent brown and black backs are shot

You can't take a bullet back

You were afraid of a man on on a run

You were afraid of a 14yr boy

You were afraid of a man driving with his girlfriend

...or so I've been told

Crows--Ellika Olewnik

As I wait for the bus
I watch crows soaring through the air
Their loud cries booming in my eardrums.
CAW
CAW
One's wingtip catches the sunlight
Glowing amber like the lamp in my mother's bedroom.
It lands on a nearby tree,
Which shudders and shakes beneath its weight.
Another one, to my left,
Tries to dig to bury tonight's dinner
But it's winter
And the dirt puts up a good fight.
Finally, the bus pulls up
And to the majestic birds
I whisper a short goodbye.

Lost Promises—Louis Hoppe

There lies many promises once sworn, broken
As if a small truthful token
That is required for such takes
And without one, it just breaks.

Their lands once forsaken
Now abruptly taken
Used for architecture widely known
And without their struggles shown.

Famous vacation points here
And yet history that lies near,
Not being taken into account.
By now they must've lost count.

And even with such majesty,
Lies an underlying tone of apathy
Of one's history lies ignorance.
And it shall repeat again perchance.

With sacred mountains comes
A general exclusion, as it sums
To hear an outcome of leaving.
By now we should all be seething.

Forgotten Souls—Louis Hoppe.

Our attention lay not in the direction of those we call 'Black'.
Our excerpts of certain events show them as
Enemies, cruel, monstrosities
Not who they really are.

These wrongful causations of hate were not shown
As being wrong, but simply
"Serving Justice."
To whom?

The room goes silent as we stare at the board
Horrific notes of our ancestors
Whether punished or punishers
Show up in front of us.

"Did we really do that?" A small child cries out.
"Not you... but your ancestors."
"Why?"
"We thought that because of their ancestry, they were lesser..
They weren't human beings"

If anything, WE were lesser.
Depending on our own actions
Depending on race to choose who got rights
And who didn't. Silencing their protests.

Fighting against protests that were nothing but peaceful
With hurtful weapons, washing children and adults alike
Into the wormhole of hatred. Yet, renowned to this day for
their actions
Were the very people who punished them and those who
faced them.

You could compare it to songs.
A somber serenade
Only shown to us through texts of people
Both misinterpreting and manipulating the words of the people.

Songs of freedom
That they had to sing
To be brought to a land they dreamed of
And to be saved from being slaves.

Songs of hope
For the changing day that stops for the worse
Through all of this development comes a cost
Of people yet wishing for the downfall of the human race.
"

This is My Poem—Grant Comoglio

This is my poem,
My poem lives and breathes in the things we see.
they hide from me like we're playing hide n seek,
Sometimes they come out and peek.
They hide like a mouse in a corn field,
It's not easy nor simple to find a poem.
But when they come out you'll see,
You'll see their true beauty.
Their in the sky the trees and even the seas,
In storms with a heavy breeze.
When you find your poem you'll feel free,
It will make you feel so much glee.
This is my poem.

Game Day—Josephine McNeeley

The non stop thought of failure haunting me as I try to sleep
I sprung out of bed, ready for the challenge I had to overcome
My breakfast packed with protein as I ponder
Anxiously anticipating in my room while I wait

I pack the whole world in my lax bag so I dont forget anything
In the car I sit there as quiet as a mouse, thoughts fill my head
The car ride feels like one million miles

We arrive at the field, so many people,
My heart sinks in my chest.
My teammates greet me with excitement and confidence
We warm up, my stomach swirling.

We huddle up, my coaches give us some words
of encouragement.
I step on the field,
The bright blue sky above
The green turf below
Only one game standing in my way

I feel a wave of excitement and anxiety rush through my body
My heart beating as hard as a drum
My blood runs through my veins.
I hear the tweet of the whistle, it is now or never!

Poetry—Aidan Price

Poetry
A cluster of words
Whose meanings can fly away like birds

Alliteration, always able to tie tongues
Assonance, forgotten often mostly undersung

Consonance, no reason, like treason for not enough to meet
Rhythm adds the beat, it really brings the heat

Onomatopoeia isn't that common, just appears like bang
Simile, like pop culture, it's oversang

Metaphor is a Robin, similes partner in crime
Hyperbole, infinitely easier to find than rhyme

Personification, the word screams at you
Oxymoron, you're the words dumbest genius, that's all you need to do

Repetition, repetition, repetition, what else can be said
Imagery shocks the senses like an AED, used when you're dead

Allusion, not illusion, we're not in the matrix Reeves
As this poem ends everyone will heave

Meet Day—Lyla Marucut

No yet prepared for the day ahead
I dream of the things that could be
The trophy I've always seeked
Or maybe a small victory.
I can see the shiny trophy just out of my reach
When I get there I start to become unsure
All the times I've practiced start to blur
I start to think that my dream may come true
Each event I get closer,
Like an astronaut reaching for the stars.
It's all riding on this
If I fall or I slip
It's all over so quick
Before I can blink,
I've achieved my big dream.
Sort of...
"2nd is first last"
Or so they say
The 2 on the trophy is screaming at me.
I feel as if I'm never good enough,
Now I'm a water balloon about to burst.
So overwhelmed by the feeling of failure,
But success is a lifetime away.
I have to get back to work
I guess

Memories—William Mace

Lasting longer than an ocean
All sewn and stitched together
I see this sea of memory
And when I take a dive,
Into these uncharted waters I remember...
Signs of peace, Swimming in sea
Driving boats, Game winning gloats
And above it all is that white house
Sitting at the top of ol' Eastlake,
And I remember...
Seeing it when lonely
trapped in a bad school day
I see that house outside
Up on the peak of the butte
And my soul brightens
Flaming like a torch
And it reminds me...
Of home.
And even if I dislike it now,
Because of the grumpy old man inside,
Who hates when I pear over his fence,
To see the soaring birds outside,
I still cannot deny
That it warmed my heart,
When I had a difficult day, and I could see...
My homecoming.

The Alphabet of Grief—Louis Hoppe

A is for alone, the name of the feeling you feel without them

B is for bare, how you feel about your life after their disappearance

C is for comfort, the thing that they gave you, but it is slowly going away

D is for distrust, in both your family, friends, and community

E is for envy, for those that haven't faced loss

F is for forgiveness, thinking you've done something wrong, and they've been punished for it

G is for guidance, something you seek, but could never find

H is for help, the thing you desire, but could never ask for

I is for interest, the thing you lose in all of your favorite hobbies

J is for judging, against the world, for it's the thing that's increased the most

K is for kindness, something you believe you aren't worthy of

L is for lament, for the one that you lost, and how you hadn't done much to help them

M is for the melancholy, that ravages your grief-stricken body

N is for need, the thought of how you required their existence

O is for obsolete, just like how you've felt since they've been gone

P is for pride, the feeling that plummets when their name is mentioned

Q is for quixotic, the description of the thoughts of seeing the departed one you loved

R is for realization, perhaps you might've found out how it has affected you

S is for sympathy, something people give to you, but it never stops you

T is for tumble, what your senses do after this catastrophe

U is for undermine, its emotional effect undermines other problems, making them arise

V is for vulnerable, what you feel others think of you after your reactions

W is for wishing, wishing that you never faced this problem

X is for xenophobia, for others you don't know whom show sympathy for it

Y is for yearning, for their appearance, even if it is brief

Z is for zeal, excited for when you finally are saved from this abyss"

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I see that house outside
Up on the peak of the butte
And my soul brightens
Flaming like a torch
And it reminds me...
Of home.
And even if I dislike it now,
Because of the grumpy old man inside,
Who hates when I pear over his fence,
To see the soaring birds outside,
I still cannot deny
That it warmed my heart,
When I had a difficult day, and I could see...
My homecoming.

My Thirteen Year Old Shoulders—Neha Paraniham

I can't wear my favorite shirt because a boy might get distracted. The math test is on the desk, not my chest. Last time I checked it's not my problem whether or not a boy gets an A on every report card because I do!

I'm not dressing provocatively I'm dressing confidently do they have a problem with me

Since when is my skin a sin please tell me

My body is such a crime
Lunch detention, 3 day suspension

So you sexualize my shoulders, MY THIRTEEN YEAR OLD SHOULDERS

You say these rules are here to protect me

You think I don't know that I can't wear headphones down the street
These rules are to protect me, but I can protect myself just fine.
You think my dad didn't put me in self defense classes at 5?

You say don't wear it if you wouldn't wear it to church

I don't go to church

So what do I wear?

Surely not the shirt that everyone complimented except you because it showed my shoulders

MY THIRTEEN YEAR OLD SHOULDERS

Onomatopoeia—Neha Paraniham

I learned my second favorite word in kindergarten

Onomatopoeia

So many sounds twisted on the tongue of my five year old mouth

In two seconds I learned to pronounce it

But it took you two months to get my four letter name down

And you can say Stella and Sophia and onomatopoeia but not my name huh

It's Neha not neya

It's Neha not neeha

It's Neha not nia

Onomatopoeia

second only to my name

The Lone Flower-Alexander Reynolds

All the flowers bloom in spring,
Red, white, orange, blue, yellow
All the colors sing;
There is one bud, sheepish and mellow.

All the others laughed and taunted,
Saying the flower is unwanted.
Short and stout the flower cowered;
Still the bud has not yet flowered.

Then in fall, the flowers wilt,
And the flowers think he will die,
But little do they know, his colors are going to fly.

While the flowers begin to tilt;
They look up in surprise!
The colors are so bright,
They can hardly believe their eyes!

In the middle of the plain,
A flower stands tall:
Shining its colors over them all!

"We are so sorry,"
They all say,
They mean it in every way
"Not to worry", the flower says

Looking down, above the rest,
The flower is like a king.
They all bow and crown him the best.
And this was his favorite thing

For Ever and Ever-Mae Stevens

Space,
An endless expansion of nothingness
But every now and then,
Once every couple thousand miles,
There is something.

Even Though I'm "Different"-Mae Stevens

You say I can't do this,
You say I'm not cool,
You say that because I'm a girl,
I'm not as good,
Not as strong,
Not as smart,
But you're wrong.
No matter your gender, your age or your race,
All people matter,
Every time,
No matter the place.

Untitled—Brooke Mortzheim

I dreamed so greatly I left reality
I lied so greatly I lost truth
I cried so greatly my world lost color
I lived so greatly I didn't know how to die

One Little Sliver-Mae Stevens

I raise a hand,
A sliver, just a sliver,
Of skin,
Exposed to the world,
Just a sliver,
Then in an instant,
"Sweatshirt on"
They say.
Because of a sliver.
A sliver of skin.

What Happened—Bella Brown

What happened to the girl in the sparkly dress that loved to dance?
What happened to the girl who ran and screamed?

Well, you told her that the sparkles were ugly and that she shouldn't wear them.
And so, you wounded her.

You told her that dancing was weird, and she needed to stop.
And so, you bruised her.

You told her to stop running because it made her sweaty, and sweating was gross.
And so, you bothered her.

You told her not to scream, not to shout, you told her to shut up.
To keep her opinion to herself.
And so, you quieted her.

You made her grow up when she desperately wanted to stay little.

You wounded her,
You bruised her,
You bothered her,
You quieted her,
You made her grow up.

And so, you killed her.

Real Friends Don't Whisper—Neha Paraniham

I hear you bad talk my friend
Behind her back
break girl code again and again
Like you don't know how to act

maybe you know I can hear you
But don't know that girl you just body shamed has been my friend since we were 5
And maybe you know she has been my friend forever
But don't know I'd still tell her
All your twisted lies

I honestly don't understand
How can you call yourself her friend
And say you hate her in the same breath
You underestimated our friendship
And I overestimated you

Butterflies—Neha Paraniham

Rainbow
A perfect paradox
Two contradicting thoughts
The sun and the rain brought beauty and love
And rainbows brought butterflies to my stomach
That girls so pretty I can't stomach it
But despite the butterflies
I always had this mantra
I'm not gay she's just pretty
And smart
and kind
And funny
And cute
And the list is too long to continue
So I just stopped repeating it
Now I say that girl gives me butterflies
not only because she's pretty
But because she's smart
And kind
And funny
And cute
And I don't care if the list is too long to continue
I will never stop repeating it

The Sound of Silence - Hannah Sampson

*Don't make a sound, some say
Be silent, they all say*
Words, thrown around without care
But people are unaware
Of the sound of silence
Beautiful, but unheard
Just like a little bird
Flying in the sky
Unnoticed and absurd
The sound of silence
It isn't a sound of violence
It's a sound of peace
A sound of beauty
The sound of silence
It is cast away
Just left out to decay
Underestimated and misjudged
And they have no idea that
The sound of silence is not ordinary
It is extraordinary

Secret Whispers - Hannah Sampson

Whispers in the dark
Quiet, but loud
Heard as if said aloud
Whispers, but still hidden
Secret whispers, forbidden
A sound in the night
But not a person in sight
Words passed between each other
Not meant for the ears of another
What is said, I fear
But I still want to hear
The whispers in the night
With no person in sight

Death - Hannah Sampson

One final breath
One final word
Bring it on death
I shall be heard
I take my last stand
The fate of the world in my hands
One final breath
One final word
The only thing that matters
Is what happens afterword
I will give up my life
Death really isn't that small of a price
What's the worst that can happen in the afterlife?
One final breath
One final word
Bring it on death
I shall be heard

Just Me-Mae Stevens

You say that's inappropriate,
You say that is wrong,
But my skin is not wrong.
My skin is me
Just me,
Nothing else,
A stomach,
My thighs,
My shoulders.
They are me.
Nothing else, me
And only me.
There is nothing wrong with that,
Nothing wrong with me.
So don't shame us for us.
Cause it's only skin,
It's only me.

Night—Angela Jomy

Silence fills my room
Darkness takes control
But yet I'm still awake

The streets are empty
The rest of the world has fallen asleep
But the moon is still awake

Mysterious, elegant, and delicate
She dances among the stars
Swaying all through the night

The moon is like a dancer whose performance is last
everyone has already left
So she dances although no one is watching

Open Your Eyes—Tracey Odiwuor

I am a strong, powerful, African American Woman!
Though, my community and I are not portrayed that way.
We are seen as threats, monsters, criminals, just because of the color of our skin.
More horrid names have been called to us than kind words.
Open Your Eyes.

We have been brutally abused, killed, tortured, and
discriminated for years upon years.
Yet, you turn a blind eye away from the problem
that has caused tears and pain of my people for centuries upon centuries.
Open Your Eyes.

I am not a threat; we are not threats.
We're all humans just like the rest of you.
Why can't you see and stand up?
You act as if it is far from your control, despite you being able to do so much too.
Open Your Eyes.

And see that a black child and their family is looked at suspiciously
as they walk down the street.
What have we done to deserve this?
Thinking a child would do wrongdoing just because of the color of their skin?
Open Your Eyes.

And see that Bobbi, a young black girl
on October 22, 2022, was accused of "scaring" her neighbor?
From his phone call to the non-emergency police line and I quote,
"There's a little Black woman walking, spraying stuff on the sidewalks and trees on
Elizabeth and Florence Road.
I don't know what the heck she's doing. Scares me, though."
And when asked for a description, Gordon Lawshe (the neighbor) told the dispatcher
that she was a "real tiny woman" and wearing a "hood."
Clearly being incredibly disrespectful and with racist intent
when all she was doing was helping her community
by clearing up the Lanternflies that were infesting the area.

You say and claim this is the land of the free,
but you dismiss any other skin tone that isn't like yours.
Open Your Eyes.

As you see my black people dying,
but all you do is text on awareness posts saying,
"Oh, how sad..."
without doing anything?
Open Your Eyes.

And see that George Floyd,
a 46-year-old man had a loving family that was shattered
after **8 minutes and 46 seconds**.
Yelling that he **CAN. NOT. BREATHE**.
The white police officer still putting force even after
George Floyd has been brutally murdered is sickening.

Breonna Taylor being shot and killed
in her Louisville, Kentucky apartment on March 13, 2020,
when at least seven police officers forced entry
into the apartment as part of an investigation into certain operations.
And there are many, many, more African Americans who have experienced these oppressions and have
been killed, wrongfully imprisoned, assaulted, and much more.
Open Your Eyes

And know we fought for our freedom for decades, centuries!
We are still fighting the fight.

Despite the end of slavery in 1865,
The oppression didn't stop.
We were separated from the whites with separate water fountains, restaurants, bus seats,
and it doesn't even end there.
Open Your Eyes
And know for a fact that we should not have any race over race,
We are all humans.
Why fight and oppress each other?
Either way, if you are White, Tan, Brown, Black, and so on.
We should all live in peace and never put oneself above another despite the topic.

Don't say, "It doesn't happen often."
Don't say, "I'm not involved in it."
Don't say, "It doesn't happen to me."
Don't say "It's not as bad today, then how it was back then"

Open...Your Own Eyes and realize that this is not just a wake-up call
...because this has been happening since 1526.
What we do today could change the future for a person of color.
Together, we can... no ...we WILL be the change!
Open Your Eyes.

Coping with Creeps—Neha Paraniham

Boys will be boys
He treats girls like toys
And I don't want him playing with me
So hands off please

My friend heard him joke about rape
But it's not a joke when your afraid
What am I scared of you ask
I'm scared he'll come up from the back

So I keep my eyes on him
Looking at him makes cry but I can't
And how can we tell if adults are on our team
If teachers can't hear us when we scream
How will boys hear us when we say no
News flash—they won't

There is a difference between
Don't stop and don't and stop
the difference is consent and dissent

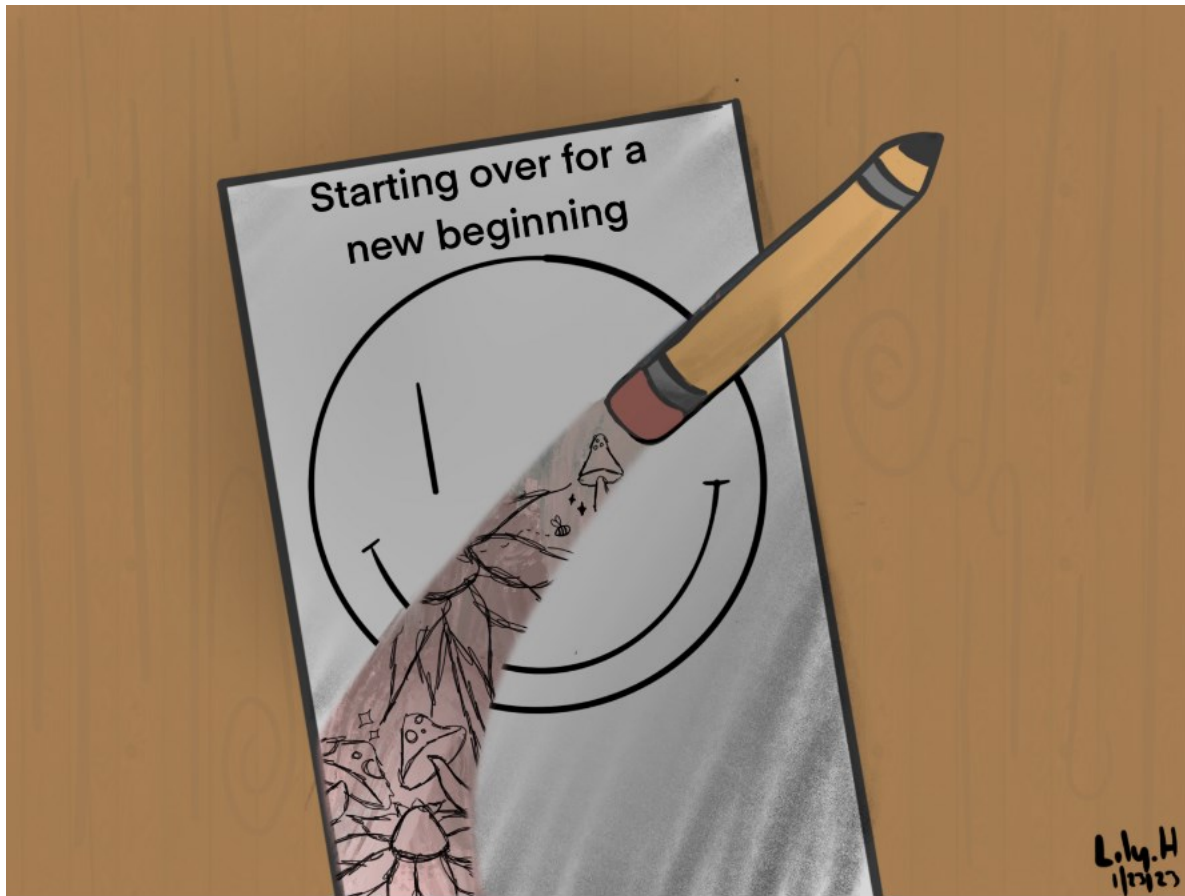
My Book (Banned)—Neha Paraniham

As a writer I want to write a book so powerful
that it's banned in Texas
So thought provoking
that Tennessee can't handle teaching it
I want to write a book so good it gets banned
A book that can open doors so intriguing they don't
want kids walking through them
Cuz they're afraid they might learn something
A book that passes the bectilea test
with flying colors
A book that shows more than one color
It has the whole dang rainbow
A book so brave it's not afraid to be honest
A book so moving they call it indoctrination
A book so true they mistake it for misinformation
When I write a book not only will
be in your local library but you'll see on the news
and in Florida courtrooms

Teaching to the Test—Neha Paraniham

I've read about the white guys fighting for their freedom
But what about all the revolutions that are **still** happening
And they taught me PEMDAS, and percents
But whens the unit of calculating the pay gap
It makes no sense
So when the lesson
When will they stop telling us to project and start telling us how to get our voices heard
Cause I can be the loudest in the room and they won't hear a word.
Why?
I can't tell you
They didn't teach me that part

CH. 3: THE ART OF STARTING OVER



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The Art of Starting Over —Ellika Olewnik

“Kits, your eyes have turned from blue to gold, and it is time for you to set out, start your own dens, and become true foxes,” Juniper’s mom said, the outline of her amber fur glowing in front of the sunrise on the top of the hill near her fox den. Juniper’s littermates, Thistle, Flynt, and even the runt, Russet, stood next to Juniper, eyes towards the sunset and the rest of the forest, waiting in anticipation for the sun to rise completely above the trees so that they could begin their journey.

“When you set out,” their mom continued, “you will face many challenges. But by using what I have taught you and your soon-to-be-earned experience, I have no doubt you can handle anything that might come your way.”

The sun was almost all the way up.

“So, farewell, my amazing, clever children. Remember your kithood and the lessons that came with it. Goodbye. Perhaps I’ll see you again someday.” Juniper’s mom shut her eyes and dipped her head, signaling that the ceremony was over. The sun rose fully above the trees and the kits bounded away.

“We’re FREE!!!” Flynt yipped happily as he tore down the hill. He had always been the most eager to leave the den.

Russet was cautiously walking down the hill as if every predator in the forest would attack him just because he wasn’t a part of the den anymore. He whimpered but continued down. Juniper knew that he had never wanted to leave in the first place.

Thistle was at the base of the hill, trotting along and sniffing everything in sight.

“Juniper, you’re never going to go anywhere if you don’t move your paws,” her mom said behind her.

Juniper squeaked, realizing she had only been watching her littermates, and then ran down the hill.

“This is amazing!” Flynt said as he sprinted to the forest, disappearing into the trees.

One kit gone.

Juniper looked up the hill. Russet was still walking slowly, but then he tripped on a root and tumbled the rest of the way down.

“Owww,” he groaned. “Well, I’m never going to find my new den if I don’t go,” he mumbled to himself. He raised his head, puffed out his chest, and walked into the forest.

Two kits gone.

“Mom never let us come this far down the hill! Well, I think I’m gonna make my new den somewhere with lots of plants and things to sniff! See you, Juniper,” Thistle said as she went into some tall stalks of grass.

Three kits gone.

Might as well follow my littermates. Will I remember this den? Juniper thought as she glanced back. *Of course I will. But I’ll create a new life. I’ll start over. Maybe find a mate. There are so many possibilities.*

Juniper’s mom looked over the crest of the hill and saw one last tail disappearing into the woods.

“Live safe lives, my little ones.”

Four kits gone.

The Art of Starting Over—Grace Kayingo

Finally, New Year has come.
So I can shed my skin
And peel of the remnants
Of an old me.

The Art of Starting Over—Estella Brown

The art of starting over,
a fresh, new clean slate
For not even my despise
can ruin this fine date

A chance to be new,
a time for forgiving
You get another try,
to feel you're once again living

So when you came to me,
asking to start over
All i could do when you left,
was smile, and look over my shoulder

The New Year— Michaela Kostakis

Pristine fresh snow,
glistens out the my window,
When I wake up,
in the new year.

When I step outside
I am hit
With the crisp cold wind.
When I sit in my sled
I fly down the hill,
My screams exhilaration fill the world,
As I take flight
in the new year.

The Wonder of Winter—Hannah Sampson

As the sun slowly rises
The rays shed light
On a blanket of white
The white mixes with gold
And so the wonder of winter unfolds
Ever since the rivers froze
The beauty of winter shows
When it stands big and bold
The wonder of winter will never get old
With the glittering ice
And snowflakes so precise
The winter snow
So soft and light
Bare branches covered with white
Such a beautiful sight
And so it is the time of the year
The wonder of winter is finally here

Cozy Brown Nook—Sage Stegman

i step outside
snow is swirling in the air
i think to myself
what is out there?
i take a closer look
there is only white snow
and a cozy brown nook.
i go inside
intrigued by what it might hide.
in there i see
something filled with glee
something that i can never unsee.

Frozen by Heart—Estella Brown

It was the start of winter,
when you broke my heart
There was nothing I could do,
it just tore me apart

Then you just said sorry,
when you saw the look on my face
You really hurt me, i thought,
as i stood, stuck in place

I knew then, i would never find love,
and I know that may not sound smart
But if you only had a clue,
How you froze me by heart



The Tongue—Luke Depew

Rain deluged down on Ray's car. Water poured like a waterfall down the windshield so quick that the wipers could hardly keep up. In front of him lay a long, empty highway that was poorly lit by tall street lamps. He drove slowly, trying to prevent the car from slipping and swerving to the side. The *"tap tap tap" of raindrops on the roof of the car obscured the sound of the radio. He had to squint to see what was ahead of him, his eyes sore from working in front of a computer all evening.*

He read the upcoming overhead sign *"Exit 28 A: 6th Street, Panora, 3 miles"*.

"Good", he thought to himself, "I'm almost home".

The already heavy rain began coming down faster and heavier. *"Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap", the raindrops went. It was now even tougher to see ahead of him. In fact, one could barely see ten feet in front of the hood of the car. He slowly crept down the highway, contemplating whether he should pull over or not. All until he saw a figure standing in the headlights, behind the curtain of rain.*

Ray stopped his car with a slight jolt. It was hard to make out what it was... a deer? a coyote?, he couldn't tell no matter how hard he tried. So he did what anyone else would: got out to find out what it was. He opened the door, and the sound of the rain hit him like a hammer; it *SHHHHHHHHH'd like a waterfall, each drop splatting the dark asphalt as a paintball would.*

He crawled out of the car, and was immediately drenched in the tears of the sky. His hair stuck to his head like it was glued down. He slowly walked forward to the hood of the car; the sound of his footsteps drowned out by the downpour. The headlights gleamed ahead like a lighthouse on a foggy night. And there was the figure, like a shadow that had a mind of its own. It just stood there, not moving.

"Maybe it's just some weird traffic sign or cone or something," Ray figured in his head.

But to his surprise, the figure started violently twitching. Ray jumped back in fear, while he watched the figure shake in a way that didn't seem natural. He watched helplessly as the figure got closer... bigger... scarier...

Finally, with the rain still pouring down on the both of them, the figure could now be seen clearly.

It was tall, thin, alien-like. It had a slimy, light pink skin, with what looked like splotches of dried blood scattered around on its body. Veins popped out like small mountains on its arms, legs and neck. Its feet and hands were webbed like a frog's. Its head however, was probably the most disturbing part. It had a single eye in the shape of a rectangle that spanned across its entire face, the eye had a gray mesh pattern similar to what you would see on a fly's eye. It had a psychotic smile with teeth sharper than knives. The smile went from where an ear should be to where the other should be. It stood like a human would, but with a large haunch. It opened its mouth and the tongue of a snake stretched out and licked its non-existent lips.

Ray stood there in complete terror, too stunned to speak, to move, to scream. It was like his feet were nailed to the hard ground, and he couldn't move if he wanted to. Adrenaline pierced through his veins, his heart beat went a mile a minute. His lips quivered.

The monster of a creature caught sight of Ray. It licked its imaginary lips once more, this time appearing more menacing. It took a few slow steps toward him. Ray, who was absolutely petrified, stepped back slowly, but then sprinted inside the car after it started picking up the pace. He locked the car in fear, and hyperventilated uncontrollably as he saw it get closer... closer... closer...

It latched onto the side of the car and attempted to tear off the door, with each attempt the metal of the car rumbled. Ray quickly hit the gas and drove off full speed for his life. Trembling with anxiety, he glanced at the mirror. That... *thing was still there, clinging to the side of the car with that treacherous smile*

It tried to pull the door off again, this time creating a large bulge in it. Ray almost jumped out of his seat in distress. His breathing and heartbeat sped up further. The creature tried one more time and finally ripped the door off. It threw the door behind and that door went tumbling behind them. The car swerved left and right. Ray struggled to get it under control while the beast slowly crept closer to the hole left from the missing door.

But suddenly, an idea popped into his head. Quickly, he unbuckled his seatbelt and jumped out of the car. He hit the ground with a *THUD*, and watched as the car uncontrollably drove away. Ray knew he didn't have much time before the creature came running after him again, so he sprinted the opposite way with all the energy he had.

He heard a loud "*BOOM*" from behind him. Figuring the car had crashed, he didn't look back. Ray knew that the monster was coming for him. He had to keep running. Fast!

It wasn't long before he heard a high pitched long shriek from behind him. The thing was coming, and he was out in the open, running for his life. He spotted a bush out of the corner of his eye. He immediately dashed toward it and hid inside of it. He waited and witnessed the shrieks getting closer... louder... all until the creature came into view again.

It was on all fours and running about as fast as a car would. It galloped like a horse and halted when it neared the bush. It knew Ray was there.

"But how?" he pondered.

The beast shrieked again, stood there for a moment, and then began stomping toward the bush he was hiding in. Helpless, Ray froze in place, breathing heavily while trying to hold back tears of fear. It got closer... closer... closer, and stooped down beside the bush. He could feel it breathing on him. Its breath was hot and smelled absolutely horrible. Ray was petrified, he couldn't move, he couldn't breathe.

"Run." it whispered.

As if a switch was flipped, he burst out of the bush and sprinted away again, refusing to look back. He heard the creature roar, and despite the downpour of such heavy rain, he could hear the thing following quickly behind him, "*thunk-a-thunk-a-thunk*". It galloped violently behind him, catching up to Ray with no problem.

Inevitably, the monster wrapped its warm, slimy hands around Ray's ankles and held him upside down. He struggled to try and break free from its grasp but it still had that death grip tightly around his ankle. The beast swung him around and threw him to the ground. Ray's ears rung with an unbearable high pitched noise. Pain shot through his throbbing head. No matter how hard he wanted to, he couldn't get up.

The creature approached him, stuck out its snake-like tongue, and wrapped it around Ray's body like a boa constrictor, so tight that he felt like exploding. He was lifted off the ground and brought into its mouth.

It bit down on him with its razor sharp teeth. His bones made a loud crunching sound. Ray yelped in pure agony, but that was soon cut off after it bit down on his skull and it shattered like glass. The monster ripped apart each piece of flesh in its mouth, enjoying every second of it. Finally, the creature swallowed and the remains of Ray dissolved in its stomach. It licked its imaginary lips in pleasure.

The creature began violently shrieking and shaking once again, and slowly began changing shape. It got shorter, more muscular, its face changed to that of a human's, its skin color shifted to a deep tan, it grew ears... human ones... Ray's ears. In fact, this thing had taken on the form of Ray. Molecule for molecule, as if he was copy and pasted. This 'new Ray' walked down the empty highway, in the pouring rain. It licked its lips, but not with a normal tongue. No...

It was with the tongue of a snake.

And Then It Was Gone—Hannah Sampson

You think you know everything, until you know nothing. And that's what happened to Layla. She had a life. Then it was all taken away from her.

The day was the same as any other day. The wind howled. The sun shined. Dogs barked and cars sped down the street. But something was different. The feeling in the air was different. More cheerful. Because today was New Year's Eve. The night you would start a new year. A new beginning.

Layla woke up in her bed with a feeling of peacefulness. She kept her eyes closed, cherishing the moment before you leave the state of restfulness and enter reality. However, her eyes popped open when she realized that it was New Year's Eve, her favorite holiday. She jumped out of bed, and started getting ready for the day, all thoughts of staying in her bed tossed out the window.

Layla stumbled through the day, preparing for the night's party. The only thing she could focus on was the fact that she had a chance to start from scratch. Like hitting the refresh button on a computer. Time slipped by, and soon enough, people started arriving at the party. She served drinks, brought plates of food, and helped the guests. But as soon as the clock chimed 11:00 pm, she sat down to watch the New Year's countdown show. Her favorite part of the holiday. Singers sang and dancers danced until finally it was 11:58. Everyone quieted down to wait for the countdown.

One minute until New Year. "The countdown is always fun." 30 seconds. Early and distracted Happy New Year! shouts were shushed. 20 seconds. So close to the New Year. "10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1! Happy New Year!" Confetti was thrown and lights danced around the room, the New Year at last. And yet still something was off. As soon as the clock stuck twelve, something changed in Layla. It was like a light had been turned off. Like a house that had lost its power. A new beginning in the New Year was bound to happen. Because the second that the New Year began, Layla lost all her memories.

One second all was there and the next, all was lost. Layla felt like her life had flashed before her eyes. As she hazily gazed up at the colors swarming around her, she felt more confusion than she could even begin to comprehend. Where was she? Who were these people around her? What was her name and how old was she? Her body and mind, just sort of... gave up. The last thing she saw before the darkness took over was concerned faces. Then it all went black.

Blazing white lights pierced through Layla's eyelids, blinding her as she slowly opened her eyes, blinking in confusion. Faces that she knew should have been familiar but weren't were softly calling her name, sympathy and pity on their faces. Layla realized her situation after a moment. The only thing that she could recall from the night before was that she had lost her memories, which also meant that she had had a life before, if she had been able to lose it. With that conclusion in mind, she finally faced reality and focused on the faces surrounding her. All of them breathed a sigh of relief when she focused on them. All these people probably thought she had fainted and was now back to normal. They all looked so happy that she had to burst their bubble.

"Who are you and what am I doing here?" The people around her laughed, probably thinking she was kidding. She wasn't. She couldn't remember that she was a twelve-year-old girl,

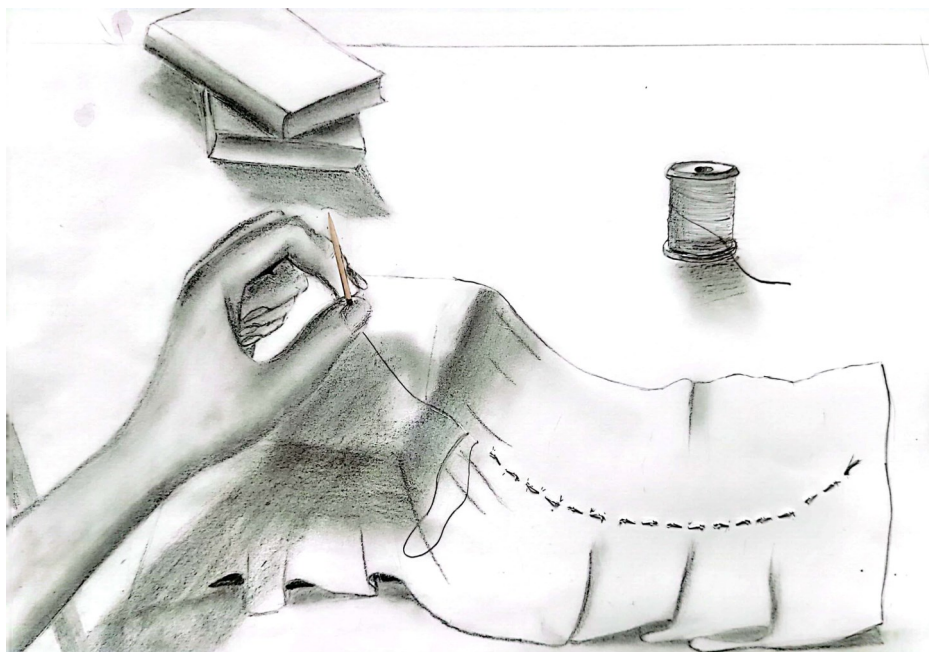
she couldn't remember anything about her life before, anything about her family. She couldn't remember what she looked like, how she acted, and what school she went to. She was clueless. And she had to do something about it.

Layla quietly shut the door of the house, supposedly her own house, as she had learned today from her "parents." Layla had tried so hard to be like her "old self," so her supposed parents wouldn't suspect anything. She didn't know anything about her life before it was taken from her, so she mostly stayed in her room, even though it felt like a cold empty room, not a familiar warm place a room should be.

She had thought she would get her memories back and everything would be back to normal, if her life before had been normal, but that's not how it turned out. Life isn't fair. So, she did the first thing that she thought of. She left.

As Layla got further and further away from her house, she began to lose the memories she had made before she lost them. She forgot that she had lost her memories to begin with. She forgot everything. Eventually, she was taken into a house with a nice family. She slowly began to gather memories from when she was apparently younger in this house with this family. She began to think she was part of the family. A new beginning indeed.

Something about this day felt familiar, yet it also felt anticipated, like she was holding her breath, waiting. Layla's brain swarmed with theories for why she would be anticipating New Year's Eve, as it was only the day before the New Year. However, as midnight crept closer, Layla started to feel less anticipation and more dread. She tried to busy herself with other activities, but some instinct told her to watch the New Year's Eve countdown show. It, for some reason, also felt familiar. At 11:55, she started to fidget. Something was about to happen, and it wasn't the changing of the year. At 12:00, Layla realized what it was. She felt a change in herself. Because in that moment, again, she lost her memories. Layla would always have a life. And every single time it would be taken away from her.



Wonder of the Forest - Sage Stegman

"Mom! Mom! It's snowing."

"What time is it?"

"6:30."

"It's so early."

"I know, but it's also snowing! Do you think I will be off of school?"

"Probably. How much snow is there?"

"I don't know what it is in like, inches but I can't see any grass or sidewalk or anything."

"Okay then, looks like you're having a snow day."

"Yes! Okay um, what's the most wintery breakfast you can think of."

"I don't know, frosted flakes?"

"Eh, good enough."

I ran down stairs and made myself a bowl of frosted flakes. We haven't had a snow day in a while so I was really excited, like really excited.

As soon as it started to get light out I went outside. Well actually, I put on a jacket and gloves and stuff, and I had to wait until 8:00, but then I went outside.

I immediately made a snowman. You know, why aren't they called snowwoman. Everything is about men, give women some credit. Anyways, so I made the snowwomen and then I was kind of out of things to do.

I now see how this was a really bad idea but I decided to explore the wood near my house. My mom always told me not to go in them but she was sleeping and I would be back quickly. I just wanted to see what it was like. I always figured it was creepy and that's why my mom didn't want to go back there, but as soon as I walked into the woods, everything got happier. It seemed brighter, the air was no longer bitter. It was really nice.

I took a short walk in the woods. It was really nice and refreshing. Even with bare trees and dead plants it was so peaceful and relaxing. After what felt like 15 minutes I turned around and started walking back. I noticed the sun was still rising which was odd because I had come outside at around 8 and the sun usually starts rising around 7 or 7:30. I kind of just shook it off. I probably just read the time wrong or something.

After getting back I went inside. "Mom! Can we go sledding near the school?" I called out.

"Lily? Is that you?"

"Um, yeah why wouldn't it be?"

"Where were you for so long? I was worried sick. I was so close to calling the police!"

"What do you mean, it's only 8:30, I wasn't out there for that long."

“Yea, 8:30 p.m.! You were out there for more than 12 hours!”

“What do you mean? I was out there for like 30 minutes.”

“No you weren’t! The sun is already setting! Where were you!”

“Setting?” I said quietly. “You are right. I’m sorry I scared you. I was at Sanaa’s house. I forgot to text you.”

“Please never do that again!”

“Okay I won’t”

I ran upstairs. What was happening. I was only out there for like, 30 minutes! Not 12 hours! Is this a dream? It has to be. Maybe it’s just an elaborate prank! It has to be! I’m just going to go to sleep and this will all be a dream.

So it wasn’t a dream. The first thing I did in the morning was go into those woods. There was just something about them that seemed weird. This time I wore my watch. I checked the time, it was 7:24. Then I stepped into the forest, counted to 5 and stepped out. It was now 8. I did the exact same thing again, and now it was 9:34. The first time I stepped in for 5 seconds 36 minutes had passed, this time 94 minutes had passed. How is that possible? I did it one more time. I stepped in at 9:35, counted to 5, and stepped out. This time it was 9:58 and 23 minutes had passed. How could the amount of minutes change so much?

I immediately called my friends to tell them about it. Of course they didn’t believe me so I invited them over to see for themselves. They honestly thought I was going crazy. I mean I’m not going to lie I thought I was going crazy too but I guess not.

As soon as they got here I brought them into the backyard. I showed them the time, we all stepped in, counted to 5, and stepped out. I checked the time again but it was the same.

“I swear it was working earlier!” I said. “Let’s try again!”

So we did, but it didn’t work.

“Stop trying to trick us into thinking there is some portal in your backyard that’s not going to work.” Sanna said

“But I’m not lying!”

“Sure you aren’t.”

After that they all left. I tried again on my own and it worked! It didn’t work with them. It made no sense.

I decided to go back into the woods and look around for more. I told my mom I was sleeping over at Sanaa’s house and I went back in. I knew it would get dark after anywhere from 5-30 minutes so I brought a flashlight.

After about 15 minutes it got dark. I saw something so strange, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. There was a village. Or I guess you could call it a small town. It was weird. How big was this forest?

I went and knocked on one of the doors. The houses were incredibly small. You won’t believe who answered. A gnome. A freaking gnome! What?

“What do you want, it’s so la-” The gnome stopped talking and looked up.

“Um, hi, I’m Lily. I was wondering where I am. Also why are you a talking gnome?”

The gnome ran outside, he looked terrified. I followed him all the way into the middle of town where he rang a bell.

“Human! Human!” He yelled. “This is not a drill!”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” I said.

But then everyone came running out of their houses screaming.

“Human! Human!” They all screamed.

“I promise I don’t want to hurt you! I’m nice!”

They didn’t care.

They all ran into a shed. There were about 50 of them. I was very confused. Were they hiding in there? But then they came running out, with pitchforks.

“Yeah, um, okay, I’m going to run now.”

I ran out of there as fast as I could. By the time I got back the sun started to rise. I snuck in through the back door and slept for 2 hours before sneaking back out and pretended to come back in after the sleepover so my mom believed I was actually there.

I needed to know what happened and why there were gnomes. So I went back into the forest. I went earlier so I didn’t have to be there when it was dark.

When I got there a gnome came up to me, he was the only one outside.

“You need to leave!”

“Why? Why are you guys gnomes?”

“You are the chosen one.”

“The chosen one?”

“Every couple of years when the chosen one enters the woods, time changes.”

“Change how?”

“I’m not exactly sure how or why. But if the chosen one goes far enough into the forest, this town will appear. When one of us sees one of you, we are supposed to, well, eat you.”

“What! Eat me!”

“That’s why you need to leave. People are going to see you! I hate that we do this but the people of my village love the taste of you. We have a huge feast when we catch one of you.”

“I need to leave! I’m sorry!”

I ran out of there as fast as I could. Let’s just say I won’t be coming back for a while.

The Art of Starting Over—Claire Han

I walked down the cold, cold, pavement, on a frosty January day. It was almost dark, which wasn't really saying much, since really, the sun set at five in the evening, and rose at seven in the morning. The reason that I was out was so that I could clear my head. My head's surprisingly full of too many things. Right now, I was thinking really hard about how to restore my friendship. I mean, you might think, 'Yeah, yeah, just another old broken friendship. It'll be alright in a jiffy, right?' Well, no. This friendship crisis was not "just another small little disagreement." I've had plenty of arguments with Colt. But, this one was different.

The cold was really getting to me by now. But, I ignored the frigid, numbing air, and kept on thinking. But, I turned towards home since it was getting darker by the second. As I kept on thinking about Colt, I kept on thinking of all the horrible things that I said. I mean, he did deserve it...Well, at that time, I *think he deserved it. Okay, so maybe I was too rude. But that's not as bad as what he said! Alright, I better start thinking of the-restoring-our-friendship part. I keep getting carried away by the past. Whew! Anyways, maybe I can send a note or something? Argh. I've been circling back to this idea for almost an entire week! Why is life so hard!* "Sil?"

I was startled for a moment before I saw Daisy, running up to me from behind. "Oh! Hi! What's up Daisy?"

"Hey Sil. I'm doing great," Daisy replied, out of breath. "I just saw you and thought I'd say hi."

"Well, the sun's going down soon. We should get home," I said.

"Yeah, you're probably right. Wait, Sil, look at me," Daisy demanded.

"Why," I whined, reluctantly facing her.

"Cause. Colt was kinda unresponsive and I know that you've been having some problems, ya know."

I didn't really know what to say to that, embarrassed that Daisy even knew about that. So, I just said, "It's all fine."

"Really?" Daisy said, not believing me.

"Probably," I replied, unconvincingly.

"Well, get it together Sil," she joked, making us both laugh.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be fine. See you at school?"

"Uh huh. See you at school. And have that problem solved." Daisy smiled. We reached the intersection crossing our two streets, so she went one way, and I went the other. By now, it was almost entirely dark. The sky was a hazy purple and dark navy blue, and a curtain of stars were shown throughout the night sky. Now, really feeling cold, I hurried home. Once home, I turned the key in the lock, with my almost numb fingers, and went inside, closing the door behind me. I placed the key in my special niche in the wall and took off my coat, gloves, hat, and shoes. "Silver!" a voice rang from upstairs.

"What!" I yelled back.

"Yay! You're home!" And my cute little brother cannoned into me, giving me a hug. "I was waiting forever. Why were you gone for so long! Can you play with me?" He added that last part with an even cuter voice.

"Oh my gosh bro. Give me some space. I'll play with you after I get my stuff done. Deal?" James grinned at me and ran off to find Lora, who was, by the looks of it, reading a book in the living room. After failing to get Lora to play with him, James turned to his stuffed animals.

"Oh, hi Silver," Lora said softly. Everything about Lora was kind and gentle.

"Hey Lora. Whatcha reading?"

"Little Women," she responded, briefly.

"Cool. See ya," I said. For some reason, the wintry season made me and Lora want to revisit *Little Women*. *I mean, that's winter for you. Anyways, after I reached my room, and finished all my stuff, which was really what I called writing stories and having time to myself, I went downstairs and was met by the inviting smell of dinner.*

"Hey Silver. Come eat dinner," my mother called, as I made my way downstairs. "Okay," I replied. Downstairs, the table was all set, and everyone else was already there. I took a seat between Lora and my mom.

"Alright everyone! Today's January 1st, a beautiful day, and the 1st day of the new year. We are starting on a clean slate. My mother, I mean, your grandmother, used to say that 'the art of starting over' was always the awesome thing about the first day of a new year!" my father exclaimed, as we ate through the lovely rice cake stew. As my dad made his speech, I thought of Colt, and our messed up relationship. Can I really start over and apologize?

The next day was a school day. Today, I would start all new and fresh. I didn't know how to, but I wanted to restore my friendship. *Buuut, that seemed a million galaxies away when I was most certainly Ignored as I walked past Colt in the hallways. After eating lunch, the afternoon flew by. Like, literally. Well, not literally, but you know what I mean. Even though it was the first day back from winter break, boy, did my teachers hand out so much work. And, not to mention, sooo much homework. So far, my day has literally gone like this: Wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, write an essay, do a bunch of math, take notes on whatever anthropology is, learn about the American Revolutionary War, eat lunch, and do more school. I mean, not the most fun first day back. Right?*

It was 38.65 seconds away from being two o'clock. Don't ask me how I knew that it was 38.65 seconds away from two o'clock. Well, now, more like 25.66 seconds. The point is, it was almost time for my speech. Oh, I didn't mention that before, did I? Anyways, we'll get to that part later in the story. I quickly ran through the speech that I had so painstakingly memorized, as a voice came over the intercom. "At this time, teachers, please take all the students to the auditorium for our beginning of the year assembly."

Our Latin teacher, Ms. Forsythia, told us to line up and led us to the auditorium.

Once there, I slipped out of the line and made my way to the back of the stage, getting a thumbs up from Ms. Forsythia, or, Ms. F. At the beginning of the year, Ms. Forsythia had specifically said, "My name isn't really easy to pronounce. I mean, it's on the harder side. So, you guys can call me Ms. F."

Backstage, I met our school's principal, Ms. Allard, and the vice principal Mr. Simon. "Hello Silver! Lovely to see you. Ready for your speech?" Ms. Allard smiled.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Awesome! You'll do great." Ms. Allard smiled, and so did Mr. Simon, who was a man of little words. Then, they walked over to where our counselor, Mrs. Reyes was standing, who was controlling the soundboard.

As the lights dimmed, and a spotlight found its way to the center of the stage, Ms. Allard, followed by Mr. Simon walked onto the stage as the curtain lifted.

"Good afternoon students! We are thrilled to see so many faces today at our traditional beginning of the year assembly," I heard Ms. Allard exclaim. "Today, we will do many things during this assembly. However, I would like to start it off with a speech, delivered to you by Silver Julian!"

And there she said it. My name. Ms. Allard looked expectantly towards where I was standing, and waved me over. Taking a deep breath, I walked onto the stage towards where Ms. Allard and Mr Simon were standing.

"You'll do great," Mr. Simon whispered, before he and Ms. Allard exited the stage.

That caught me off guard. Mr. Simon actually said something to me. But, I didn't linger on that. I took another deep breath and adjusted the microphone so that it was not too tall for me. Then, I started. "Today is the second day of the new year, 2023." I felt more nervous than I have ever been. "Um. This year," and then I panicked, I forgot the rest of the sentence that I was supposed to say. And then, I thought about what my dad had told me yesterday. Inspired by that, I knew exactly what to say and what to do.

"This year is a brand new year. Today is the beginning of a new page in our book." I continued to speak, searching for the familiar face in the crowd, and finding him immediately, sitting in the front row. Colt was staring straight at me with his deep, dark, coal-black eyes, looking the slightest bit guilty. I knew that I had only a few more seconds to speak, so, I finished off with, "My grandmother used to say that 'the art of starting over' was the best thing about a new year. So, whatever we might have messed up on last year," at this statement, I looked directly at Colt, who just stared back, a hint of a smile on his face. "We can start afresh. Thank you." And with that, it was finished. I had done it! As I made my way off the stage, a flurry of applause followed me out. Ms. Allard practically beamed at me, and Mr. Simon had tears in his eyes, for whatever reason which I could not comprehend. My speech wasn't that emotionally moving. Was it? Anyway, Ms. Allard made her way back onto the stage and started off the festivities. Meanwhile, I walked to where my class was sitting and sat down at an empty chair next to the aisle, jubilant. Not only was I satisfied with my speech, I knew that everything would be alright.

A few hours later, I was outside, waiting for my mom to pick me up when Colt approached me. "So, Sil, 'whatever we might have messed up on last year, we can start afresh.'"

I grinned at his statement. "Look, I really am sorry, you know," I said, for a good measure.

"Nah, that was last year. We both are sorry so that's all that it takes. Stop being so sappy," he joked, chuckling.

"Good?" I asked.

"Nope," he said. "Amazing," and he flashed his saucy smile at me.



Frozen - Sage Stegman

Frozen

I stood there Frozen

What just happened

Blood was gushing down

Why me

It was getting cold

I couldn't move

Nothing I did made me move

So I sat there

Scared cold and alone

I wanted it all to stop

But I was Frozen

Frozen

Frozen

Frozen

Frozen

Decomposition— Amara Cobb

My muscles ache

My skin buzzes

Carved through

From the inside out

Replaced with something, stronger

Is it even me that regrew

No.

And I can't wait to be something

New.

The Wonders of Winter-Alyssa Lookingbill

The Wonders of Winter

Have never been bitter

Full of snow and cold

As winter begins to unfold

There are plenty of stories to be told

Like the brisk windy air

Or feeling the wind blow through your hair

The need of winter coats

Or the fact that people hope

For snowflakes to fall

Whether big or small

Icicles are like natural lights

And are such beautiful sights

The wonder of the season

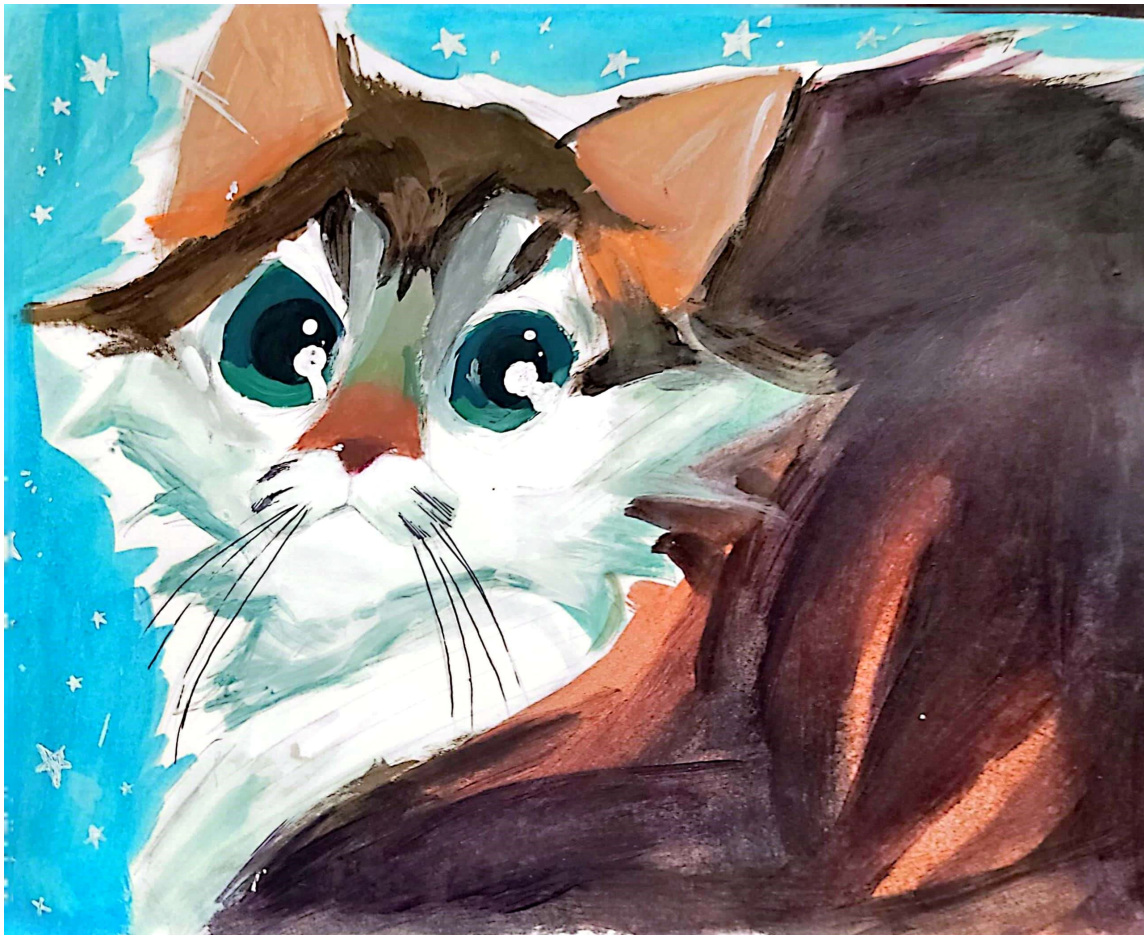
Is the reason

Not just for snow or the cold

But the beautiful winter that will unfold



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The Rewind-Mae Stevens

You think that every day is the same old boring thing. But you can't really understand, until there is nothing new at all. This is my story. It was 8:37 and I woke up to peel off my pajamas and put on a fresh outfit. A pair of jeans, washed and faded like normal. After that I put on a nice fitted tee with a cute elephant on it. I walked down my steps to find my mom in the kitchen making a stack of pancakes. That was weird. She never made pancakes! I sat down at the island and got a few of the perfectly golden brown pancakes.

"Thanks mom!" I said as I was marinating my pancakes in the syrup.

Once I was done with my pancakes I went to feed my dog, Boomer. He walked up to me with his bright face and fuzzy fur. I got him for my fifth birthday. He was small with a fluffy white face and tiny paws. I love him with all my heart. Once I was done feeding, and petting him, I went upstairs to brush my hair and teeth, and pack my backpack. I decide that today is a good day, so I put my hair into a braid, then wrapped it into a bun. I took my light blue toothbrush and my white toothpaste and started brushing. One minute, two minutes, and... done. I spit out the mixture of spit and toothpaste and walk into my room, and carefully place in my binder, computer, folders, and copy of Resistance in my bag. I sit on my window seat and look out at the snow covered streets of Woodsbrook.

I turn back around to survey my room. My window seat with its comfy pillows and padding on the bottom, my canopy bed with its lavender sheets and comforter, with my dresser at the foot of the bed, pressed against the wall, the fourth of my room with my big desk covered in unfinished poems and school work. Then I have my favorite part of my room, my library. Well, it's not a library exactly, but it's a fourth of my room that has 3 big book cases with my collection of books, and in the middle is a super comfy egg chair that had pillows galore and a throw blanket hanging from the chair, slightly messy but looking good at the same time. My room has big windows with a view of the town square.

I check the clock to see that If I dont leave in two minutes I will be late for school! I run downstairs, say goodbye to my mom and dad then sprint to the front of the house and leave. As I walk down the streets of Woodsbrook there are dogs being walked by their owners, stopping in the snow, and leaving it yellow behind them. I ran into a woman with a brown lab, only a puppy. The dog's name was Willow and the woman's name was Mia. She looked twenty or twenty three, and she had bright blue eyes and dark red hair brushed into a beautiful ponytail. She told me how she was going to the park to play with Willow. I smiled and said that I had to go. As I walked away from Mia and Willow I felt something land on my nose, it was a snowflake! It was snowing! And all of a sudden, there were millions of them, all falling fast toward the ground and quickly, collecting on the ground in small heaps. Then I realized that if it was snowing for another ten minutes then school would be closed! By that time the snow would be clinging to the streets. There would be at least six inches! There were already four inches! Another two! That would be amazing!

When I got to school, all the kids in my middle school were sitting on the benches and tables in the schoolyard.

I walked up to my best friend Lillia and said " Hey! Do you know when school will be canceled?"

With that, she said. " Well, they should be announcing it in like, five minutes."

And then, everyone's phones pinged.

"Oh! I bet that's the cancellation!" Lillia said.

As she checked her phone and I checked mine we were both making plans in our heads of what we were going to do for this snow day off.

“ Well, I have to go back home!” I say as I start the walk home.

As I passed the park I saw Willow and Mia playing in the snow. *Man, this is turning out to be a really good day!* I walked into my house and my parents were sitting on the couch watching a movie.

“Hey! Did you forget something?” my mom said.

” No. Actually, school was canceled!”

“Oh! I must not have seen the message! My phone is in the kitchen.”

As I rolled my eyes at how my mom never checks her phone at all, I walked to my room with excitement. I sat on my window seat and planned out my day.

1. Change into my snow day PJ's
2. Get a cup of hot cocoa and watch a scary movie
3. Cuddle up with Resistance, the book I'm reading
4. Play a board game with my parents
5. Write poems
6. Nap

After I finished everything on my list, I went down to the kitchen where my parents were making dinner. It was a pot of stir fry with some chicken on the side. I was sitting at the island with a glass of sprite and asked when dinner would be ready.

“ In about ten minutes.” my mom replied as she checked the chicken that was cooking in the oven.

I read my book on the island until dinner was ready. I sat down with my parents at the island and we ate the stir fry and chicken.

“ This is really good mom!” I say as I dig into my chicken.

“ Yeah! I saw the recipe on a cooking show I was watching earlier.”

I was eating my food, savoring every bite, until I was done. I had two servings!

“ Thanks again mom!” I said as I put my plate in the sink and started going upstairs.

When I was in my room I took a shower and put on my pajamas. I sat in my egg chair and started reading. After about thirty minutes it was eight forty five. I climbed into bed and fell asleep, thinking about how wonderful my day was. The next thing I know, I wake up to look at the clock and... it's 8:37? I think, well that's funny. It's the same exact time I woke up yesterday! I started getting ready and then looked down and, the fitted tee with the elephant on it? That was odd? I thought I put it in the wash! I wanted to put something else on but... I couldn't. I physically could not change my clothes from what I was wearing! I didn't know what to do! My mind was swirling. What was happening? I took a deep breath and decided to go with the flow, and figure it out later.

So I walked down stairs and ate the special pancakes my mom made, served my room, then ran to school and saw Willow and Mia on the way, then when the cancellation came I went back home. I did all of the things on my list and then had the great dinner my mom made, stir fry and chicken. The I ended the day again with reading for thirty minutes crawling into bed at eight thirty. I was so confused. I wanted to do different things in my mind, but my body was doing the same things as yesterday. And it kept happening, day, after day, after day. The same thing, every little detail was the same. The way that I bumped into Willow and Mia, and how my mom made special pancakes for breakfast. I couldn't believe it. How was this possible!? I knew that something was happening, and I needed to find out what.

On the tenth day of “The Rewind” as I was calling it, I noticed something, the way that Lillia looked at me when she saw me was different! I was so excited that something was finally changing! I went along that day, analyzing every little detail about my day to see if it was different. But nothing else was. Then I thought that I was seeing things, nothing would be different again. And that is all I thought, through the rest of my rewind day. But the new morning I woke up and... it was 8:38!

I blinked my eyes, I pinched my skin. I was so excited. And then again, the way that Lillia looked at me was different from all the other days, and I realized... it won't be this way forever! Every day something would change. One thing, big or small, would be different. But then I realized, that would take forever. If everything in the world had to change to something different, one thing a day, I would be here for years. And who knows if everyone else was living their normal lives while I was stuck in this “rewind” of one day for years and years! I went to bed that night thinking about how I could fight this. How I could make this so that one thousand things were different instead of just one. I didn't know what to do.

And that night as I fell asleep, all I felt was loneliness and despair. Because who knew. Maybe my life would never be fully different again. So every day one thing changed in my life, one day my mom stopped making pancakes, another we had pizza, not stir fry and chicken, and it went on like that for what felt like weeks, maybe even months. I had to count the days in my mind because my body was doing the same things over and over again. Until one day, everything was different! Except one thing. Me. Everything was different but I was doing the same thing every day. I didn't know what to do. How would I change? No one was talking about how I was, apparently it was normal. I felt shaky and nauseated. Then I realized, maybe I had slipped so far into this day that I couldn't get out. Maybe I just had to get myself to do something different. Everything else was, and my mind was.

So every day before I climbed into bed, I tried so hard to make myself clap, clap instead of just going to sleep. Anything. Anything different. I needed it. And every night I tried. I was slipping into my mind. Every day, I was having a battle that would not let up in my mind. Trying so hard every day that I had splitting headaches until one night... I was doing it!!! I was getting up and instead of going downstairs I sat on my window seat and then ran around my room. I was so excited that my body was finally free from this “Rewind”. The next day I did all of the possible things that are different. My life was different, and it was amazing. And I learned to be happy with things being the same old boring thing, because in reality, every day is always different

Heart of Glass-Mars Baker

On top of a shelf there lies a ballerina made of glass. With the elegance and grace only rivaled to those with flesh and bone. She lies there day and night, dancing to her own frozen song as she is left in peace to be admired by those around. Admired but never touched, never moved, as she is made of glass and if she is even so slightly touched, her grace will crumble down and she will be broken never to be of any use again. So they leave her alone to dance to herself and never change.

Soon over time the glass ballerina got tired of sitting there. Just sitting and existing was a boring thing, so instead of sitting there she would instead go and explore the world! So that she could see the beauty of the world and become even more beautiful herself.

She was placed in the middle of the room on the highest ledge so that all could see her beauty but not touch, for if she was touched she would crack. The world was so big around her and she could not get down from the perch that she was placed on as it was far too high for her to jump off. But even then there was no other way for her to get onto the safety of the ground to start her journey into the world.

As her only option would be to take a leap of faith she really did have to contemplate her options. But looking from her perch longingly she knew that cracking a little would be better than staying here forever in solitary. So instead, she jumped. Falling through the sky as the wind brushed against her and the air whipped against her. Almost feeling as if she was flying, but the reality of the ground kept her from doing so. But with the ground coming so fast at her she had to prepare and was only able to enjoy the feeling for a mere second. As the ground now lay so close, she took a deep breath and braced for the impact. The force of the fall cracked up her glass body and split the glass, almost cracking her in half but her glass frame remained intact nonetheless.

Though the crack worried her greatly with a large tear and smaller cracks running up and down her body, she was far too overjoyed to even notice the wound. She had made it down. Now her journey could continue. As she peered around the room she could finally see everything in a different manor, it seemed so new but at the same time everything was the same.

In light of all that her greatest achievement was that she was now down, on the ground she could now move freely and dance in any way, anywhere! So instead of just dotting around she started to leap and jump, dancing away into the world to explore and adventure even further. But what she didn't know was in her state of pure joy was that every time she moved and every time she leaped her beautiful glass was cracking and shattering ever so slightly, widening the tear she already had.

Leaping around and exploring was everything she could ever hope for, she saw so many new things and experienced even more than she could ever imagine. New places such as a large room with many comfortable large squares and a magic block mantled on the wall that displayed different colors and noises, that was her favorite room. Or the large squares in a different place that rumbled very noisy but provided much heat and felt fantastic to sit on.

But even though everything in this new world was beautiful and different, so much of it was tainting her, from cracks to scrapes and jabs and bruises to even splatters and dust coating her body. All these imperfections from this new world she was exploring, all of it was taking away her grace and beauty. Because now that she was not protected by the solitary of her pedestal she was vulnerable to every little thing, she was weak.

Not just weak but the world was cutting up her natural beauty and killing her. But existence was fun now! It was exciting!

If only it had never destroyed her. On a certain day, at a certain time, and a certain situation, she broke.

The impact of the world had finally caught up with her.

With a final leap the tear in her heart cracked fully, expanding into a formation of smaller gouges of glass and finally tearing altogether. Breaking her once beautiful body into a plethora of small pieces of glass, now littering the floor and creating a graveyard of glass made from her once ever so grateful form.

"Hey Mom, did you drop a glass!"

"No sweetheart why!"

"There's a bunch of glass on the floor in front of the stairs!"

As I looked at the glass I tried to figure out how all the little shards fit together, my mind putting them into different shapes and sizes. That was until I saw the little broken outlines of a glass tutu and realized it was the glass ballerina I lost. It used to sit on the top of my dresser in my room, how could it have possibly gotten to the bottom of the stairs, and how was it even broken?

Instead of worrying too much about it I just brushed it off as the cat and went to get the broom to clean up the mess.

Too bad it broke, it really was one of my favorite decorations.....

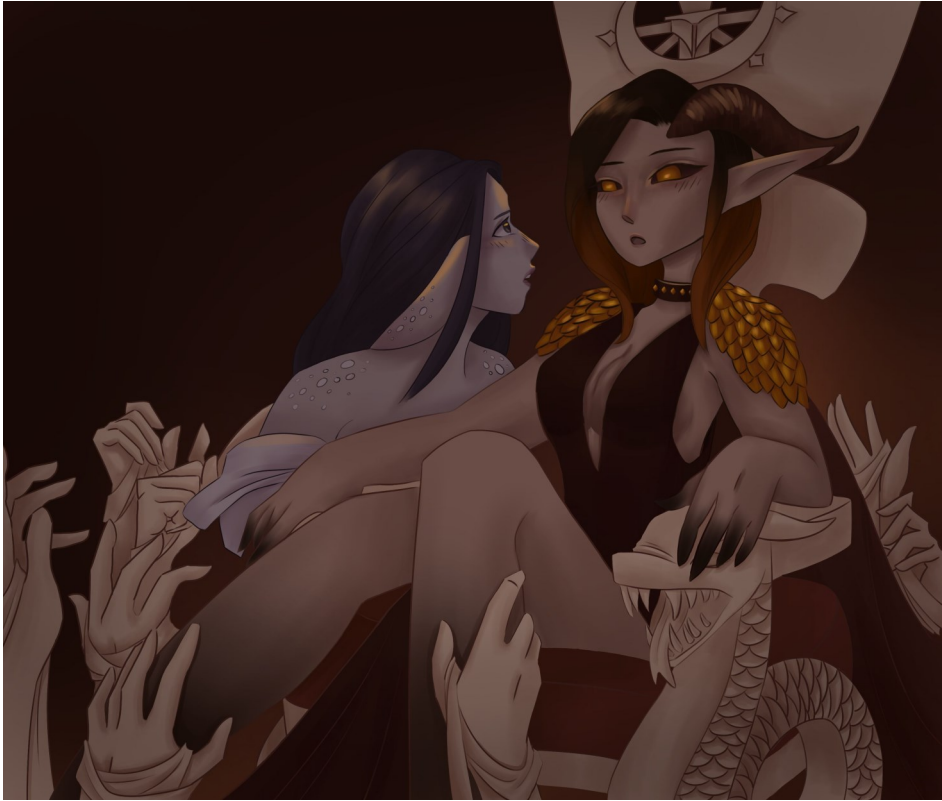
Wait, I can glue it back together. I just need to get some glue and figure out how to put it back. Hold on, this could work.

A few hours later, a whole lot of glue, and some trial and error she was back together.

Though she didn't look as perfect and graceful as before, she was now unique and beautiful in her own way. She might have not even been a beautiful ballerina, but she could now entrance you with her patchwork of small cracks and make you stare at her as if in a trance. From the grace she once had to the beauty of the destruction that once enveloped her she was now a sight to behold.

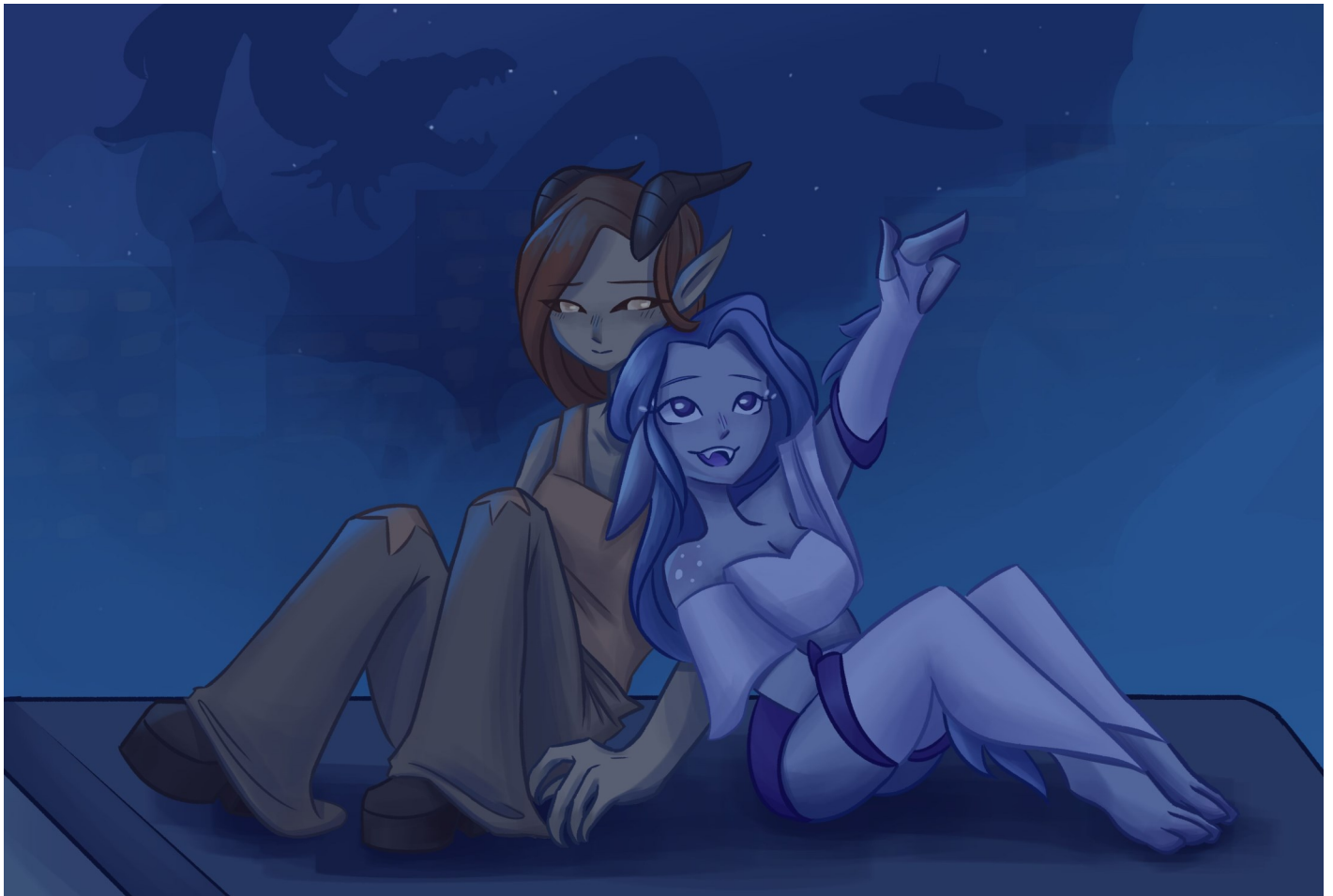
Sitting in the same spot as she once did, in the middle of the room for all to see. But this time she was even more beautiful and this time she was not as fragile. She was a masterpiece the ugly world had put together. A masterpiece that shined bright and new even in all her cracks and tears.

Ch. 4: Falling into Fantasy



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Bo—Charlotte Luzar

The sun has come
To greet the eyes
Of the critters on land
And of the birds in the skies
And to say “hello”
To the clouds all around
And the squirrels below
Who slept safe and sound
But now I am woken
With joy as I go
To visit again
My old friend Bo

She lives among flowers
The cut and the growing
She has a rock garden
And each one is glowing
The wind comes to greet me
As I walking through the gate
But it warns me not
To fall to the fate
Of my dear dragon friend
Who sleeps under the sun
Already done doing
All to be done

I dance with the wind
As squirrels love to do
And with regret in my heart
Do I leave so soon
Bo did not wake
To see my come by
But I’d expected she wouldn’t
For asleep does she lie
She needs her rest
So much did she do
She helped all those
Who needed her to

I love her home
Her home in the heart
Of the lion and the mouse
And the hawk and the lark
A dragon brings fire
To all places she goes
A fire of love
And a fire that shows
That shows she was there
That her blue scales shown
In the eyes of the frog
And the eyes of the toad

The moon shines through the dark
But little light comes to my nest
Up in the tall tree
Towering above the rest
For a rock lies at my door
Like a stone before a tomb
So I can think in silence
Without the sound of gloom
Below on the ground
Tears are cried
For a great beast who
Gave its great life

It has been one year
To the very hour
When that great beast
Fell from a great tower
Its wings failed to work
Burt to a crisp
From wrath of a dragon
And the flames that it spit
The beast crashed to the ground
Cracking the town
In zig zagged line
That spread all around

The town was broken
Its hope and the stone
That had kept to together
And now kept it alone
From the other towns down
The broken old street
That used to be close
But now were a feat
Not just to reach
But to see
From the island the town
Had now come to be

So tonight the people
Weep and they mourn
The beast who they lost
And their town that is torn
I could weep too
For the beast was good
And did for me
What no one else would
It smiled at me
And offered me gifts
And to the top of my tree
It gave me a lift

But this beast is not mourned
Behind the stone at my door
For the beast is not dead
I’ve seen it before
I know that it lives
And smiles today
As I conjure a plan
To find it again
I hear the wind

Lily pads bob up and down
Dancing on the river
A frog hops one and two
Then jumps in as I shiver
Wind of autumn tosses my fur
Ruffles it like Bo did
Then brings me back to my
thoughts
To think back to what Bo said
Where did she go
To take her rest
And sleep far into
The morning brightness

Was it the clouds
For them I have found
To look like a bed
To rest ones head
Or was it the lake
For there the earthquakes
Makes baths of bubbles
To wash away troubles
Or was it the meadow
Where one could let go
Of every sorrow
Until tomorrow

But Bo never hired
Of where she slept
Bo scarcely slept
Bo scarcely wept
She had her troubles
But they didnt shake her
When she was stopped
There was a shake in Earth
For she kept it moving
And kept it grinning
With that love
Did she keep winning

I saw the sun
And it saw me
And its fiery eyes
Looked to be
Weeping with
The knowledge of
The death of Bo
And the death of the love
That she gave to all
But its not gone
With her memory
Lives her song
She's alive in those
Whose lives she changed
She's alive and happy
As the grass on the plains

A Planet Up Above —Diya Kot

Akira POV

Hi, my name is Akira and my life is a living hell. It is April 28, 3048 or at least that's what it said on the Dusty Prison wall. I'm in my dusty old cell right now which has a toilet, a paper thin mattress, and dead mice. Now I know what you're thinking, *ewwww why do you have dead mice in your cell?* Well, here's the thing. I'm a vampire, I need the blood to live. Humans call me a disgusting creature. I don't care though, it's just how I grew up. I'm 27 now and I was born into this suffering place. A place they call earth. It's a prison to me.

I was born in 3021, July. The day? I'm not sure. No one ever told me. I was born in this very cell. As long as I can remember, I have been cleaning up after the human prisoners. Been questioned about "creature abilities," and been tortured by humans if I disobeyed them. I work 100-120 hours a week, get 5 hours of sleep per day. And I get only 2 mice per week for blood. It sucks but that's life. I have lived this life for 23 years since. I never went to school. All I know is what my mom taught me.

I have so many scars on my stomach and back from starvation and beatings for protesting. I have always dreamed about escaping this and going to Ultron. The planet of hope. The only way to get there is through the air tunnels though.

Serena POV

Hello, my name is Serena and I'm a fairy. Just like Akira, I was born and brought up in this prison. My cell is just like Akira's except without the mice. Our lives are the exact same and both of us hate it. Both of us, along with all the other fairies, have all dreamed about escaping, but none of us have ever tried. Our mothers have told us about these things called air tunnels in space and about a beautiful planet called Ultron. The only way to access these tunnels is to first escape the prison which is hard enough, then navigate through umm.. Earth which I have never ever seen besides this prison, and then access the air tunnels. The only way to access these tunnels is to say an ancient prayer which we have all memorized since childhood. Our mothers have made us memorize this prayer just in case one day, just in case someone yearns freedom so much that they put their life on the line to escape. Though you must say the prayer in the night facing the north star.

Where would they escape? What are the air tunnels? Let me explain. The air tunnels are a way to get around in space. They are invisible to the human eye. But to Fairy's or Vampires, we can see them clearly. They are tunnels in space that allow you to get from planet to planet. Of course humans don't know about them. You walk through them to get to where you want. There are guides to help you if you need assistance. Obviously they are not humans either. They are angels. A group of people who believe that everyone/everything should be free and happy. You can walk, run, hop, skip or really do anything in these tunnels. They have a strong foundation and have existed for longer than anything.

My mother also told me about a planet called Ultron. She says Ultron is a planet with all sorts of beautiful creatures such as fairies, vampires, goblins, witches, and various other cool creatures. She says it is a planet where we can be free and feel like we belong. My mother also tells me that Ultron was the place her grandparents were born.

But one day her grandparents got curious and tried exploring space outside the air tunnels which turned out to be a huge mistake as they were spotted by humans and captured. That's how I ended up here and that's how many others did too.

Akira POV

Over my 27 years in this filthy place, I have finally come up with a plan to escape. I have a plan A and a plan B. Hopefully Plan A works cause I really don't want to have to do plan B.

During free time outside

"Hey guys, can you all come here for a second."

All the fairies come up to me with a bored look on their faces.

"Whats up," Serena says with a smile on her face.

I wonder how she is always smiling.

"I've got it. A plan to escape. Now before you say anything let me explain."

"Hold o-,"

"Let me finish my plan and then you can speak. Okay so I was thinking that maybe tomorrow, during our free time outside, the fairies can distract the prison guards while the others help me climb up the wall. If this doesn't work then I also have a plan B. During dinner time, what if the fairies and I get into a pretend fight. Then the fairies smear mice blood on me to pretend I'm injured so they take me to the hospital room. There, I will make my escape."

The fairies looked at each other in confusion.

"But what about us, when will we escape?" one fairy says.

"Don't worry guys, if you help me, I promise that I will come back for you."

"Even if this plan does work, what will you do after?" another fairy says.

"I'll find the safest way to Ultron, come back and save you guys."

"How are you so confident this will work?"

"I'm not, but I need to try, it's our only chance."

The fairies looked at each other and soon came to an agreement that they will help me. Yay!!!

But here comes the real hard part, trying to do this all without my parents noticing. If they find out about this, they will ground me for life and will always have an eye on me. They would never let me do this but I know I have to.

Serena POV

Right now it is 10 minutes before our action time and I am so excited as well as nervous. It is amazing that Akira is finally going to attempt to escape but I am worried that something might go wrong. But even after all this, what must be done must be done.

Akira POV

It is recess now, and I am so nervous. I give the signal to the fairies to go distract the guard.

"Ouch...I need help, I think I broke my leg," one of the fairies said.

"Mr. Guard my leg, help me."

The guard looked at her and slowly walked over to check her leg.

This was my chance, I told Serena to give me a lift. The next thing I knew, I was over the wall. I heard no shouting or screaming on the other side so I assumed everything was okay. I was happy I didn't need to do plan B, but what now, what should I do?

Serena POV

It has been almost 1 hour since Akira left and now her parents are questioning where she is. I tell them they have nothing to worry about and that she is just hanging in another cell. Though that is a terrible lie it was the best I could come up with. At Least for now, we are safe since no guard has noticed that Akira isn't here anymore. Let's hope it stays like this until she comes back. Let's hope she does come back.

Akira POV

Right now I'm wandering around the streets of Earth unnoticed. Now all I have to do is keep myself hidden until night and find the north star. Once I spot it, all I need to do is say the prayer. Right now I see a building which says Mcronalds or something like that. I learnt how to read in a prison cell so as you can guess it is not that great. I see people with a stick in their mouth and smoke coming out of it. That must not be good for them considering smoke was coming out of their mouth. As time went on, the sun started to set. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. How were these humans ignoring this sight? You had to be lucky to see something like this.

It was about 9:00 pm according to a clock and the sun had now fully set. I looked up in the sky and saw gleaming stars.

"Now, where is the north star?" I said to myself.

"Whoah!!!!!"

"So pretty!!!"

As I was trying to locate it, I remembered my mom telling me to find the Big Dipper. The two stars at the end of the Dipper's "cup" point the way to Polaris, which is the tip of the handle of the Little Dipper, or the tail of the little bear in the constellation Ursa Minor. I looked up and tried to find the big dipper. I had never seen it before, but I made a guess and followed my moms instructions. A little while later, I thought I spotted it. So I started praying:

אני מבקש חופש. מנהרה שיכולה להציל אותי יחד עם מיליוני אחרים. בבקשה, קח זאת כהצעה
ופתח את דרכי

Before I knew it, there was a glowing floor right beneath my feet going into space. The hard part was done. Now it was up to me to walk this long journey and make it to my destination.

Akira POV

WOOOOOW!!!! This is SOOOOO COOOOOOOL. I feel like I am in heaven, literally. I see streaks of purple, pink, blue, green, yellow streaks of energy all around me. I feel like I am floating. A couple meters ahead of me, I see wings. As I walk closer I see that it is an angel.

"Where are you going my dear," the angel says with a voice as sweet as honey.

"Umm... Ultron."

"Well in that case, follow the green and purple path, it will be about a week long journey and there will be other angels guiding you on your way."

And just like that, she was gone. I tried finding the green and purple route and soon found it. As long as I followed this path, I would be good and on my way.

Akira POV

7 days Later

As I walk along, I suddenly start to feel a sharp pain in my stomach. I realized I had not eaten for 7 days straight. Despite my pain. I kept walking until I needed a small break. I sat down and closed my eyes thinking about how things are going to change. Before I know it I am asleep. After what felt like just 1 minute, I felt a tap on my shoulder. When I opened my eyes, I saw a werewolf.

"Hi, my name is Gondolph, I'm a werewolf, do you need any food or assistance?" he asked

"Hi.... Food... Do you have blood by any chance," I ask with doubt.

"Sure thing."

I thought he was kidding until he vanished and came back with 3 dead mice in his hands.

"Here you go."

"T-thanks," I said, sucking the blood out of the mice. *God, it tastes good.*

"Where are you headed?"

"Ultron."

"Ultron, you're very close. It is only about an hour walk from here."

"Really?"

"Yup, come and walk with me."

I stand up while holding the mice and start to walk with him.

Akira POV

After walking with him for about an hour, we were finally there, Ultron. It was even more beautiful than the sunset I had seen earlier. It was a purple planet with amazing tall buildings and technology more advanced than human technology. There were robots zooming around, fairies fluttering while looking at their reflection at any mirror they could find, vampires complaining about the amount of garlic in their food. It was amazing. When I stepped on the soft grass barefoot, it tickled my feet a little. A vampire saw me and came up to me.

"Hi, my name is Sully, and you are?"

"My name is Akira."

"I see that you are a vampire, where were you born?"

"In prison. On Earth."

"Oh dear. I am very glad to see you here. Where we belong."

Sully took me around and showed all the beautiful sights of Cynia, the country we were in right now. It had beautiful gardens and meadows with grass that felt like silk and flowers with colors as bright as the sun. She also gave me a place to stay. It was a small apartment but a great upgrade from the dusty cells. The best part was that it actually had a real bed. Not just a thin mattress on the ground, but a real bed. When I entered the kitchen, I saw that the cabinets were packed with food and the fridge was full of blood. Perfect.

"Thank you so much."

"No problem sweetheart. If you need something I'm next door."

Sully left the room and I could not be any happier with the apartment. Ultron really was the planet of great joy. But sadly, my journey wasn't over, I still had to go back to earth to rescue my friends and family. My parents are also probably dying on the inside. I'm gonna have to embark on the greatest challenge of my life to bring them to Ultron.

Serena POV

3 weeks later

I can not stop thinking about Akira. It has been over 3 weeks and I really don't want to think that she isn't going to come back. But I am full of doubt. Life has been even worse without Akira here to brighten up the mood when needed, or to sing a song or to do anything really.

After dinner I come back to my cell and lay down on the mattress. A second later, I was fast asleep.

3 Hours later

As I am dreaming about how miserable my life is I feel a little push.

Akira POV

After 3 weeks on Ultron, I decided to come back to the prison so I can bring my parents along with Serena to safety. The journey through the air tunnels was a lot faster since I had a robot to ride on. I brought 3 extra robots with me for both of my parents and Serena. My robot, which I named Fifi, helped me over the wall and into the prison without getting caught. As I walk through the hall all the bad memories come flashing back. But I have to stay focused. I go to Serena's cell first and pick the lock with a lock pick. I enter and see her sleeping on the mattress. I gently give her a push and she wakes up and looks at me with shock.

"Your back, I didn't think you would actually come back."

"Shhh.... Keep your voice down. Let's go get my parents and let's get out of here."

We slowly walk down to my parents' cell and enter carefully. I woke them up and they looked so relieved to see me alive.

"Thank goodness you're ok," my dad says with relief in his eyes.

"What were you thinking?"

"Mom, calm down and hush your voice. Now let's get out of here."

We slowly walk out of the prison and the robots help us over the wall, again. The robots were made in such an advanced way that to human made cameras they would appear invisible so no alarm would go off. Anything sitting on it would also appear invisible. It looked like a motorcycle except it could fly and was made from much more advanced technology. It also went SUPER fast. On foot it took me about a week to walk through the air tunnels but on the robot it took me 1 hour. Yah, it goes that fast. It was night at that time so I looked up, found the north star, said the prayer, and we were off.

Serena POV

20 years later

All the fairies and I are now safe on Ultron, thanks to Akira and all the guides in the air tunnels. I met the love of my life here who is a Vampire and his name is George. A lovely guy. Akira also is retired from saving people and lives happily with her partner named Gerold. We no longer do any dirty work. Instead, we are now free on this planet with the nicest people I have ever met in my entire life.

THE END



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Alien Experiment-Hannah Sampson

This world is not what it seems like. Everything was created by some unknown beings some time ago. Everything is fake, a hologram, except for one thing. And that one thing is me.

It all started one night in June, the full moon shining brightly down at my mom's apartment window. My mom was out for the evening, leaving me alone for the night with my dog. I'm used to it. My dad died a few years ago, and since then I've learned to care for myself. I was reading my book on the couch, not wanting to stop turning the pages, even though it was way past my bedtime. But Mom wasn't here to tell me to go to sleep. Besides, I'm fourteen years old. I'm getting too old for a bedtime. Suddenly, for some reason, the white glow coming from the window turned red. I jumped out of my seat, causing the book in my hands to fly off into the darkness of the apartment. I ran to the window, looking outside at a truly horrifying sight. Right where the moon should be, there is a giant glowing, Error sign. My breath caught, and I started hyperventilating. It couldn't be my imagination. I ran to see if my dog had noticed anything, not realizing that he was a dog and wouldn't have any idea of what was going on. But when I reach his bed, there is only a red, glowing Error where he should be sleeping. I sunk to the floor, just then realizing how alone I might be in this universe.

I walked out of my apartment door and turned around in a circle, staring at the doors next to mine. They all had a glowing Error right in the middle. What was happening? Was everything in my life fake? Was I the only one who could think and act for myself? Suddenly, I heard voices slowly getting louder and footsteps thumping up the stairs. Panicked, I ran into the nearest door, a closet. As soon as I entered the closet, out of sight, the voices reached my floor. I peeked out of the tiny hole in the door of the closet to see the most horrifying sight I would ever see in my life. Aliens, a ton of them, talking in an unrecognizable language, standing right by my apartment door. They looked like normal human beings, except for one difference. These creatures had, not green or blue, but yellow skin. Why would the aliens be gathered around my door of all doors? Then the aliens shifted, and I got a better look at my door and figured out why. My door was the only one that didn't have Error 505 in the middle. I was also probably the only person not in control of these aliens. But why me? I was just a normal teenager trying to make my way through middle and high school. There is nothing special about me. Actually, I take that back. I have this one memory from when I was a baby that is foggy and uninterpretable. I can vaguely make out an unfamiliar hallway and weird looking people. Now that I think about it, those people in my memory sort of look like the aliens I am looking at now. Why would I have seen them when I was a baby? I sighed. So many questions, so little answers. Suddenly, the aliens started moving away from my door. Right to the closet where I am hiding. I freaked out, desperately trying to find a place that I could run to, a place to hide, anywhere. Anything so the aliens don't see me. Wasn't there a secret passageway in the apartment for maids in this closet? I frantically looked around, trying to find a different door to get out of here. But it's too late. The aliens had already reached the closet and opened the door, finding me cowering in the corner, hoping beyond anything that they wouldn't do anything to me. When the aliens see me, I can see a change in their eyes. There was something different about them than the cold eyes I had seen before. Their eyes almost looked softer. But then I moved. I stood up, thinking that it was safe too. That was the moment that I realized that everything that I had thought

about them earlier was wrong. There was no sympathy in their eyes anymore, only fire. As they lurched forward and took hold of my arm, dragging me from the closet, instead of fighting back, I looked for answers. I looked into my captor's eyes again, looking for something, anything. And there it was. Deep in his eyes, I saw a hint of worry and confusion. I wasn't supposed to be here. I had figured that out by now. But this proved that the aliens must not know why I was here either. All they knew was that I wasn't controlled by them like everything and everyone else on this planet. And now that I think about it, they were right to turn on me. For all they knew, I could be a serious threat to their species.

Suddenly, the alien carrying me stopped abruptly. I jerked forward, almost falling out of his grip. But he held on, making it impossible for me to escape. An alien next to me took a sack and slipped it over my head, obviously not wanting me to see where we were going. I felt the alien carrying me start going uphill, as I started to slip backwards, and my alien was going slower. I had a hunch that we were going on their spaceship that got them here. After a few endless minutes of me being bounced around the hallways of the spaceship, I heard a door open and close, and the sack was pulled off my head after we had entered the room.

Blinding white light pierced my eyes through the fake windows, impossibly bright for something so fake. I saw the alien next to me gesture towards a chair on the opposite side of the table that was in the room, and I obeyed, not wanting to take my chances. An alien marched through the door, the leader I assumed from the badges on his jacket. He sat down in the chair across from mine and dismissed the aliens that had found me. He started speaking in a weird language that sounded like gibberish, and when he finished, he stared at me expectantly. I stared back at him, and I must have had a blank stare because he sighed and wrote something down on his clipboard. He then switched to English, thankfully.

"I am going to ask you a few questions. We have an idea of who you are, but we need to be safe. Answer the questions honestly and there will be no reason for any harm. Lie, and we will find out." I gripped the seat of my chair, inwardly freaking out. It was hard to not lie when there were literal aliens sitting in front of you threatening you.

"First – who are your parents?" I took a second to answer. It had been so long since I had said my dad's name, I had almost forgotten it.

"River and Nick Wernwater."

"I see. Any chance you were adopted?"

"I don't think so. My mom has never really talked about anything from when I was younger." The alien scribbled something down on his paper, even though he obviously would remember everything I said.

"I only have one more question. And I need you to answer this very honestly. Trust me, I know when people are lying." I don't know why I believed him so easily, but I could sense it was true. I could not lie.

"Do you remember when you were young at any point being somewhere that doesn't make sense, somewhere perhaps that is totally different from this world?" I was not expecting that question. Nor was I ready for my answer.

"Uh...I... I do have this one memory. It's foggy though."

Between gasps for breath, he explained, “We are so sorry for the inconvenience. We didn’t realize the situation when it was right in front of us! It’s so funny!” I just sort of stared back at him, very confused. He saw my expression and started to explain in more detail, “From your answers you just gave us, I am pretty sure that you are one of us.” I blinked, mostly confused rather than surprised. Was I one of these aliens? I didn’t have time to think about it, as he started talking again.

“You might want to know what happened tonight. Well, we created this planet as an experiment. We wanted to see what would happen with other beings, obviously made by us, left alone. We live on a different planet about 500 light years away. You must have snuck on the spaceship that was taking the beings we made here a long time ago. We started this 13 years ago, so you would have been young.”

This was too much to take in for me. I mean, he was telling me that my entire life was a lie because I snuck aboard a spaceship and came here! But I had to accept it. There was no other option. The head alien stood up and opened the door for me to walk out, even though I had no idea where to go. He called an alien and told him what he had figured out, then led me through the ship showing me around. After an hour or two, he broke the news to me.

“You’re going to have to come home with us. We have to fix the error that happened on this planet, and we can’t have anyone here when that happens. You need to come home.” My heart sank. I knew this was going to have to happen at some point, but I never expected it to happen so soon. My life was gone. But maybe it was time to start a new one. Maybe it was time to finally go home.

Down in the Woods—Adrianna Hila

Down in the woods that nobody knows,
Down in the woods where the ivy grows,
There lays a dragon in her nest,
Resting, before her final test.
One day she will fade away,
Her children will weep,
But she will sleep,
Only a shadow.

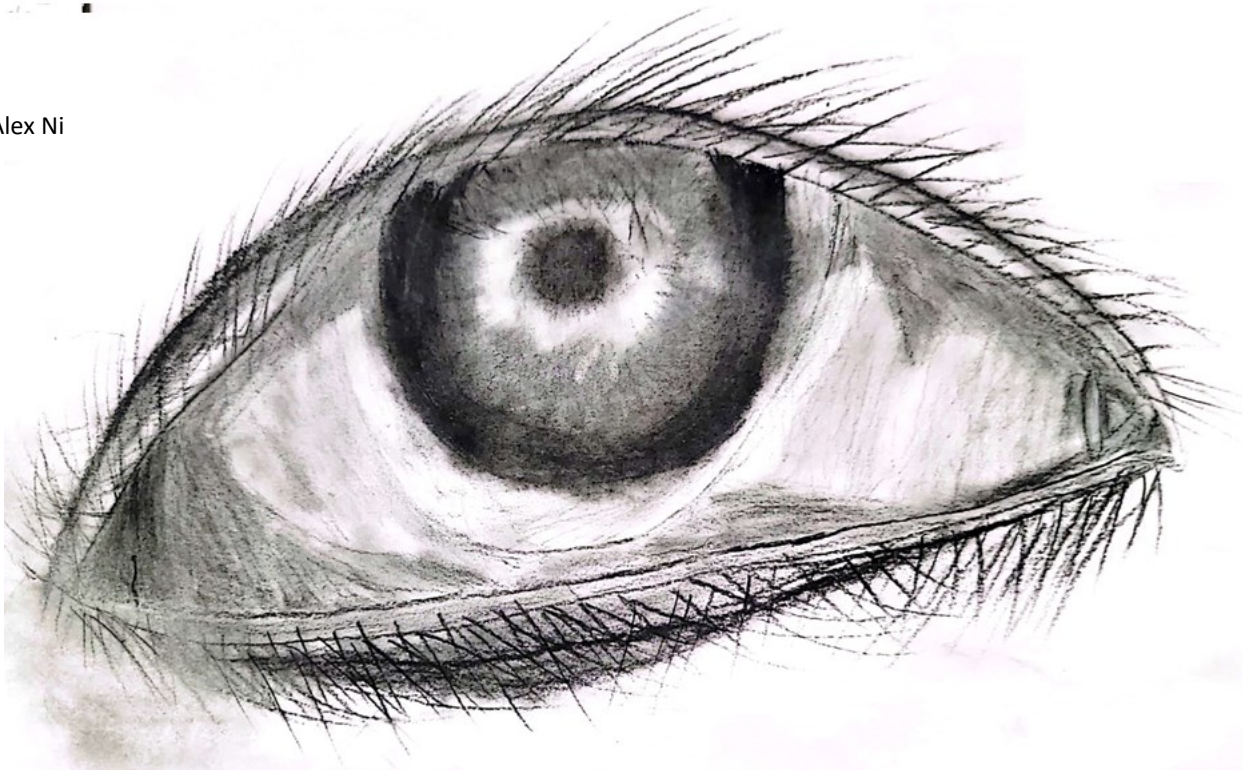
Fairy Tale—Alyssa Lookingbill

When I'm home, I can zone out and imagine
Put my nose in a story and play
With princesses, knights, and kings
A life I've never lived

In fairy tales I could be as weird as I want
And it's not weird at all
In fairy tales there are always happily ever
after
Or is there?

Fairy tales are all made up
Or so I'm told
But my life could be one too
If I don't believe it all

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I See a Kite Flying—Ace Angelos

Every work week is the same. I wake up, and I see the boy who flies his kite every morning without fail. I pick my phone up from the charger and check the messages that I may have gotten from my family. There's never any messages from my family. I put my phone on the sink counter and I get in the shower, the temperature the exact same I set it every morning. I follow the same steps every hour, every day, 5 days a week, 4 weeks a month, 12 months a year. There's never something new, so I never change my routine. If something goes wrong, I never notice until the routine is disrupted again, if I forget my phone then I'll only realize when I need to call my boss that another employee died.

I get in the car with my two children and drop them off at school, they walk around to the back door, there's renovations in the front. I drive to work feeling hungover and starved, and my boss makes sure to yell at me for missing a deadline. Oh well, what else is new? I get through the draining day, getting my hopes up for the numbness I'll be met with when I open my glass cabinet once again.

I drive home and it feels like something is wrong. I didn't see a kite flying this morning. My phone is still on the sink counter. I miss the turn for my kids' school, I make a u-turn but I still feel disoriented. They had a field trip today, to a Gettysburg exhibit an hour away. We almost make it home when I hear a strange sound- the ringing of a phone. How could my phone be ringing? I didn't see a kite flying this morning, and my phone is on the sink counter. I ask my son to give me the phone that's ringing, but he doesn't respond with a phone in his hand, and instead asks why his mom couldn't pick him up today. I find this odd, especially considering my wife left 4 years ago. I tell him it's not funny to joke around about that, but he persists. I didn't see a kite flying this morning, and my phone is on the sink counter. I ask him again to hand me the phone, the ringing now stopped, and he asks why I need his phone. My son doesn't own a phone. I didn't see a kite flying this morning. Maybe I'm tired, maybe I just forgot that I got him a phone for his birthday. I'm about to take the turn onto the crowded street we have to get through to get home, and I found out that yes- I am tired. Tired enough to confuse red for green. Tired enough to crawl to the backseat and recognize the children as my own. Tired enough to forget that my kids were off school today. Tired enough to forget that the Gettysburg trip is on a Tuesday, not a Monday. And tired enough to kill two kids who wanted to know why their mom didn't pick them up.

I didn't see a kite flying this morning, my phone is still on the sink counter, and I just killed two kids. My son didn't fly a kite this morning because my son never woke up.

Ruby Robbins—Ellika Olewnik

One earbud in my ear, one earbud in Ruby's. *Crazy Train*. Ozzy Osbourne. *Technically*, we're not supposed to be listening to music.

But our seventh-grade history teacher, Mr. Adams, hasn't noticed yet.

Forget I said that.

"Atlas Owens and Ruby Robbins! Are those the wireless earbuds I see? I would *hate* to have to take them away from you."

I reflexively reach for my ear, but Ruby catches my hand before it lifts off my desk.

"Of course they're not! Do you really think I'd break the school rules, sir?" Ruby asks Mr. Adams. In all the time I've known her, she's been the kid that *every* teacher likes, meanwhile I've been the one who doesn't fit in... Well, anywhere. Not even with the teachers. So while teachers tend to regard me with suspicion, they usually ignore me whenever Ruby's around. She's gotten me out of more messes than I can count.

"I don't think that *you* would, Miss Robbins, but I'm not so sure about Mister Owens," Mr. Adams responds.

"Oh, Atlas? No, don't worry about him. I think he puts more effort into his hair than into breaking the rules."

No, I'm not one of those kids who spends an hour in front of the mirror each morning trying to get their hair absolutely perfect.

The reason Ruby said that is because...

My hair is blue.

It's not like a natural blue (that would be really weird, wouldn't it?). I dye it constantly. Always royal blue, because although she won't admit it, Ruby loves the color.

And, I mean, I do, too.

Mr. Adams laughs. The bell rings, signaling the end of the day. I stand up, start walking, pull out my phone, and see the latest news.

"Tensions Erupt As Controversy Over Whether To Leave Earth For Another Planet Increases Every Day". I roll my eyes and look at the next headline.

"Scientists Hypothesize That Outside Masks Will Lose Efficacy In Protecting Against Earth's Toxic Atmosphere In The Next Few Years". That reminds me. I grab my mask out of my backpack and put it on.

A few years ago, some kid in some city had a coughing fit after just stepping outside. People had known that the atmosphere was getting worse and worse, but they didn't want to do anything about it. They figured someone else would take care of the problem for them.

The kid died three days later. It was considered a tragic accident.

Still, no one did anything about it.

And then this story repeated over again. And again. And again.

No one was convinced yet.

After about 200 atmospheric deaths, the President of the United States died. And then the Prime Minister of England. And more leaders of more countries.

People realized that while the first few deaths had been random, the leaders' deaths were not.

Except they didn't think that *all* of these deaths were from the environment- they thought they were planted by foreign governments. Countries turned on each other, suspicions grew, peace shattered.

The best part?

The governments *believed* this. Battles and wars have been fought, but we just call it the Toxic Air War.

Some people also call it WWIII.

At some point during all the chaos, someone realized that we needed something to protect us against the air- so masks were made, kind of like the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

No one has figured out who or what *really* caused the leaders' deaths.

"Atlas, hurry up!" Ruby says through her mask. Even with the face covering, I can tell that she's smiling. I also realize that she still has my earbud. She runs ahead.

"Ruby, wait up!" I yell.

Instead of hearing her laughter, I hear screaming.

And then I hear a big boom.

* * *

There's a shrill whine in my ears, but otherwise, I'm okay. The sky is orange and the ground is brown. There's debris everywhere, and I don't see anyone else standing like I am.

I also don't see Ruby anywhere.

"Ruby! RUBY! RUBY, WHERE ARE YOU?!?" I scream. I see the earbud Ruby had on the ground near a fallen tree. I see an arm poking out from underneath the tree.

Please, please don't let it be her.

I try to lift up the tree, but it's too heavy.

"HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" I hear a scream from behind another tree. It's Ruby. I sigh in relief, but then I realize that she's probably hurt and that I need to go help her.

"Ruby, hold on! I'm coming!" I yell back to her. I reach the tree. Her left arm is bent at an odd angle and her right foot is not moving.

"Atlas..." she mumbles, losing whatever energy she had when she yelled to me.

"Ruby. Ruby! I know it hurts, but you have to stay awake, okay?" I shake her lightly, trying not to hurt her. I've heard about people who fell asleep in crises like these and never woke up. I pull her up, putting her arm over my shoulder.

"Ruby, I need you to walk with me, okay? You can lean on me, just walk," I say.

She stumbles, but she's walking. By some miracle, there's a car in the parking lot. I've never actually driven a car before, but I've driven a golf cart. Ruby and I walk (slowly) over the car. Somehow, it's unlocked and the keys are in it. I lay her down in the back seat, shut the door, and climb into the driver's seat. I shift the gear into drive, put my hands on the wheel, and push down on the pedal. I press too hard, though,

and have to hit the brake in order to avoid slamming into a tree. Ruby groans in the back. I try again. I don't push as hard this time and we go at a reasonable speed. There's a hospital not too far from here. I take out my phone (keeping one hand on the wheel), trying to use the GPS, but the screen is cracked and it won't turn on.

"The hospital's just past Second Street. I'm assuming that's where we're going," Ruby groans in the back.

I forgot about how she memorized the location of a bunch of buildings back in fourth grade.

"Thanks," I say. I head towards Second Street.

* * *

The rest of the drive is pretty much silent, aside from the occasional whimper of pain from Ruby. The sky clears up the closer we get to the hospital, but it's still not blue. A police officer pulls me over after she sees me (a thirteen-year-old) driving a car. She looks angry, but when she sees Ruby, her expression changes to a concerned one. She opens the back door and gently lifts Ruby out. She motions for me to get out of the car and open the door to hers. I do, and she puts Ruby down in the backseat.

"Just hop in front," she says. I climb into the passenger seat and shut the door. The officer does the same. Since we're so close now, I can see that her uniform says M. PRICE.

"Don't worry, kid. We'll get your friend to the hospital very, very soon," Officer Price says.

"Thank you," is all I can say.

"How did she get hurt?" Officer Price asks.

"You mean... You don't know?" I say.

"Don't know what?" she responds.

"That our school got blown up. And that the sky isn't blue anymore. Have you not looked up?" I say. I probably shouldn't be this disrespectful to a police officer, but I'm upset that no one's heard about the explosion.

"The weather channel is saying that there's a tornado watch. We all assumed that's what it was," she says.

"Well, it's not. Can you call other officers and have them go look for survivors? I don't know the school's address, but it's called Deer Valley Middle School," I say.

Officer Price turns white.

"Umm... Are you okay?" I ask.

"My daughter goes there," she tells me.

"Some people probably survived?" I say, attempting to cheer her up. "What's her name?"

"Claudia," Officer Price responds.

I know Claudia Price. Or at least know *of* her. How could I not? Everyone knows her, and loves her. No, it's not because she's one of those "popular" kids. She's kind, brave, smart, and just an all-around good person.

If she's gone...

I shake my head. There *has* to be hope. For Ruby, for Claudia, for everyone.

* * *

We spend the rest of the ride in silence. It's not a very long drive, only about fifteen minutes, but it feels like forever. When we reach the hospital, I practically fly out of the car. I open the back door and reach to pull Ruby out, but Officer Price says, "I'll carry her."

I nod. Ruby's eyes are half-open, and I quickly look away.

"Stay with me, kid," Officer Price says, then seeing my reaction, adds, "Don't worry. She'll be fine."

But I can tell that she's not sure she believes herself.

We walk to the hospital's entrance. It doesn't take long for people to notice us. A nurse rushes over and takes Ruby from Officer Price.

"Wait!" I say.

"We need to get her to a doctor," the nurse says.

"Can I come?" I ask.

"Are you family?" the nurse asks.

"Well, no, but-" I say.

"Then you can't come. Just wait outside, okay?" the nurse's tone immediately softens. I sit as the nurse takes Ruby down a hallway.

"I don't think I ever got your name," Officer Price says behind me, making me jump.

"It's Atlas. Atlas Owens," I say.

"Atlas. That's a cool name. But now that we're all settled, do you want to give your parents a call?" she asks.

We're definitely *not* "all settled" but I nod anyway. She hands me her phone. I dial my mom's number. It doesn't ring, but goes straight to voicemail instead. I leave her a short message telling her that she'll be hearing something (I don't say what) on the news soon and that I'm okay. I hang up and hand the phone back to Officer Price.

"She didn't pick up. Actually, it didn't even ring," I tell her.

"That's weird," she says, and looks at her phone. "I don't have Wi-Fi, so maybe that's why?"

* * *

After a few hours (and many failed phone calls to my mom), I fall asleep in the lobby chair. I wake up to the voices of two nurses.

"Should we wake him?"

"No, let him sleep. He'll get up soon enough."

"I'm awake," I inform them, and stretch. "How's Ruby?"

The nurses suddenly won't make eye contact with me.

"*How's Ruby?*" I ask again, more forcefully this time. After a few seconds that feel like eternity, one of the nurses finally speaks up.

"She... She passed away about an hour ago."

I sit there in shock for a moment until my brain finally catches up.

“Y-you’re lying. You have to be,” I say, knowing how stupid I sound but feeling a need to say it anyway.

The nurses shake their heads.

“We need to know her full name, and if there’s anyone we should contact,” one says.

“WHAT? YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW! YOU TELL ME THAT MY BEST FRIEND’S DEAD AND THEN GIVE ME ALMOST *NO* TIME TO PROCESS?!” I scream at them.

“We need you to calm down-” one starts.

“NO! WHY WOULD I-” I stop talking when someone firmly grabs my shoulders. Officer Price.

“Atlas, I know you’re upset, but we need to contact your friend’s parents. Right now,” she says.

“I’M MORE THAN UPSET!” I yell.

“Atlas...” she warns. I don’t know why, but something about the way she says it calms me down.

“Her name’s Ruby Robbins,” I say and tell them her parents’ numbers, surprised that I can even remember them (or talk without screaming) right now. The nurses nod and walk away.

* * *

Officer Price guides me to her car. She asks for my address, and I tell her. She turns on the radio. I honestly don’t think I’ve ever listened to a radio station before. Too many newer, better options for music. She changes it to a station that’s at the end of some rock song.

“Well, that song has so many memories behind it,” the radio announcer says, and then laughs. “Here’s another throwback for you old-school people out there!”

I recognize it instantly. *Crazy Train*. I quickly switch to another station.

“Not an Osbourne fan, are you?” Officer Price asks, then sees my pained expression. “Sorry. Did she”-

I nod.

I turn my attention back to the radio and realize that I tuned into a news station.

“...the tragic accident at Deer Valley Middle School. Authorities are not sure of the cause, but there are already 18 known deaths and more are missing. The explosion also caused the cell towers to go down, so don’t expect to call anyone soon, folks.

“For now, there is only one known survivor, Atlas Owens, but we hope (and believe) that there are more out there.”

I shut the radio off. I have no real hope, only dread. This will probably turn out like the toxic-atmosphere coughing fits: there will be more and more until people start blaming each other. Lines will be crossed and wars will be waged.

And as much as I hate to involve myself in it...

I will find out who did this.

And they will pay.



© Winkie Lin

The Eye by Hinata Takahashi

Shiplog: Orion

Day 1

Landed on an unknown landscape. It has been a week since the ship's side engine malfunctioned. Got caught in a planet's gravitational field and had to emergency-land. Found water ice nearby, and used it to obtain drinking water. Perhaps I can find materials to fix the Engine. I have no hope of getting back home, as I went through a wormhole, and there is no way to find the same one again. I will have to set up a life here, or at least a more habitable planet than this.

Day 2

This is my second day on this planet. I explored the surrounding area, and found some curious variants of what seemed like moss, but with a reddish-purple color. I wonder if this is edible. I am running out of food, so I will need to find some local food sources soon. As for shelter, I am living in the *Orion* for now.

Later in the afternoon, I caught a glimpse of some kind of shadow in the distance. It was hard to see, but it seemed like a sign of life. I was a little suspicious, because I do not know what kind of organisms live here. Hopefully they are not hostile.

Day 3

My food stores are running out. I explored a little farther than before, and found a sort of "forest." The moss-like organisms that I had found yesterday had sprouted all around enormous pillars of stone, making them look like trees. A very peculiar behavior.

As I ventured further into the forest, I heard a sort of soft humming sound in the distance. I looked around, but found nothing. Interesting. I spotted a few insectoids, captured them, and took them back. Perhaps they are edible.

Day 4

I feel like I am being watched. Whenever I turn to do something, I feel an eye on my back. It's always there. I do not know what is causing this, but I am always on edge.

I found that the insectoids I captured yesterday are edible indeed. I boiled them on a metal plate and ate them. They weren't too bad, considering my current situation. The food I had on the ship is running out, so I need to conserve it.

I have lost hope of a rescue team coming to help me. I am millions of light years away from my home planet, and, even though I had sent out a distress signal, it would take millions of years for the message to get to home. I will just have to continue living here.

Day 5

The humming sound is there again, closer this time. Something is still watching me. I glance around nervously once in a while, but there is always nothing. I am getting a little uneasy.

When I went to collect water, I saw shadows on the horizon again, two of them. They looked just like the shadow I saw a few days ago. I am starting to think that maybe these shadows are the ones watching me. I will have to be very cautious.

As I came home in the evening, I discovered something both intriguing and alarming. A single square footprint, etched into the gravel next to the airlock of the ship, which I now used as a door. They have discovered my base.

Day 6

I am taking apart the *Orion*. The shadows have discovered my base, so I must relocate. Hopefully they are not watching. I am getting a little worried. I don't want any conflict with these beings, so hopefully they will leave me alone.

I created a sort of sled in order to carry more pieces of the ship. I walked through the "forest" for the whole day, and found the perfect spot near the end of the day. I used the pieces of my ship to set up a shelter. I left a few pieces back at the site of the original shelter, so I will go back tomorrow.

Day 7

I spent the morning collecting more insectoids for food. I captured them in jars, sort of like how one would capture a firefly. They don't taste excellent, but they are better than nothing.

I went back to the site of the original shelter. And what did I find? Nothing! The scraps of metal that I had left behind had disappeared! The scraps weren't that important, but I felt that something wasn't right.

I looked around in confusion. Then, something caught my eye. A footprint. A single, square footprint, just like the one I saw the day before I departed. This was not good. They clearly knew I was here.

I must not panic. If I do anything rash, who knows what will happen. I must stay calm, and have a clear mind. I went back to my new shelter, and fell asleep right away.

Day 8

I woke up to a humming sound. It's the same sound every time. This time, however, it's louder. Closer. I slowly creep out the back door. There is nothing. I walk around the shelter. Then, I walk around it again. Nothing.

The humming is gone. I feel something watching my back. I whip around. I could have sworn I saw something whip into the shadows. The shadows are getting closer. Hopefully they are just curious...

Day 9

This morning I woke up, and looked out the window. I saw a horrifying sight. A giant red eye was staring right back at me! I blinked, and the eye was gone. Terrified, I sat there trying to process what I had just seen. There was that humming sound again. It grew fainter and fainter until it disappeared all together.

I stepped outside with my blaster raised. Another footprint. They knew the location of my new shelter as well! It seems I am still being watched. Likely the shadows are watching me this very moment, as I sit inside my makeshift shelter writing this down. There must be some connection between the shadows, the humming, and the sight I saw through the window. The Eye.

Day 10

I set out on an expedition to find what exactly the shadows were. I will find where they are coming from, and why they are watching me, following me. I trekked over mountain after mountain, crossed a valley, and walked past the outskirts of what looked like a desert. Since the gravity here is slightly weaker than on my home planet, it was easier to walk, and I got relatively far.

Late in the afternoon, I spotted something in the distance. An ominous, purple spire. Something about this “monolith” pulled at me. I walked closer. Past some rock-trees. I finally got there. The monolith was bigger than I thought. The sun was going down, so I set up camp next to the structure.

Day 11

Woke up in the middle of the night. I am writing this as I listen to a loud humming sound. Still the exact same sound as what I’ve been hearing for a long time now. The humming is getting louder still. I peek out the window ~ _ _ _ _ ~ ~ - - -

The Eye. It’s here. It’s staring at me, through the window. The unblinking eye. I stand up. Something is pulling me. Something is pulling me towards the Monolith. Part of the spire opens up, and I walk in. It has me now. I am writing as I am walking. The words in my mind are going into the book. Strangely, I do not feel fear. I do not panic. It is as if the sight of the Eye, and the pull, consumed all fear within me. I am merely walking.

I must resist.

You are now mine.

Who are you? What are you?

I am your master.

I can’t stop walking.

I am making you walk. You can do nothing.

Yes I can.

Let’s see you try.

I- I can’t...

Exactly. You are my first servant. The first of many to come. I will use you to conquer the universe, one being at a time. Eventually, all will be mine, just like you are.

N- Never!

Do I have to keep telling you? There is nothing you can do.

Let’s see about that.

Resistance is futile. Fate has decided that you will be mine. You cannot avoid the inevitable.

I can try!

You do not understand. Escape from my grasp is impossible.

...

Now you see. With you, I can do great things.

So you're just going to use me for yourself?

Oh no. The world will prosper under my rule. I shall flood this planet with Sulfuric Acid, the liquid of life...

That's deadly!

Not to me. It seems you still don't understand. My kind will be the rulers of the world.

Why do you keep saying that?

I have an audience.

What... What are those things?

My pawns. I didn't have any servants like you, so I created some temporary ones. The Shadows.

Were they the ones who were watching me?

I sent them to keep an eye on you. They are only illusions.

What about the footprints?

That was me. I am the only one that exists. But now, you are my first existing subject.

I'm not your subject!

You will be soon. I have sent my brothers and sisters to distant planets. They will get subjects there. And one day, we will meet. To send more of our kind out to other worlds. This is only the beginning, small human. And now, your soul will have to be destroyed.

Wait, what?

It is part of the process. Your body needs to be a soulless shell in order for me to control it.

I- You can't do that!

My grasp is tightening. It is almost time.

I... can't see...

You do not need to. You are now mine.

No!

Say it.

I-

SAY IT.

I- **I am now yours.**

Marlor—Charlotte Luzar

1

You must understand something. There are three universes; the Eastern Universe, the Western Universe, and, the universe that you humans live in, the Common Universe. Between those universes there are two different sets of laws of physics, trillions upon trillions of galaxies, and more stars and planets than the amount of numbers that dragons have named (which is more than humans have if you're wondering). I must tell you that you have by far more animal species than any other universe does.

In the Eastern and Western Universes, known by the inhabitants as the Twin Universes, there are many plants, but aside from them, there are only gnomes, elves, and dragons. Not the fire-breathing or water-controlling dragons that don't exist of course, but the normal, powerless ones. In the Eastern Universe lives the Eastern Dragons and the elves. In the Western Universe lives the Western Dragons and the gnomes.

The gravity in the Twin universes is strong, much stronger than the Common Universe. A planet the size of, say, your average successful empire would have the gravity of Earth. It was on a planet just like this that there lived Marlor, Noron, and Linro. They were triplets, but Marlor was the one who was to inherit their father's land. Their father happened to be Emperor Erasmos of Milliere.

The day was warm. Autumn was near enough for the blue trees surrounding Milliere Manor (which was not actually a manor but a beautiful house larger than a castle) to be edged in a golden-orange. Marlor stood on a balcony, looking out over the forest and to the dusk sky above. There, on the starry canvas, dwelled a dark red planet. It was a large dragon kingdom. Not what you would call friendly neighbors. The Monarch's name was Axtonnos. He was, to say the least, a Western fellow in Eastern territory. The dragon was as red as his planet with yellowed horns creating a crown around his head. His eyes were like the dark gray clouds of a storm. He had large wings, much unlike Eastern dragons, with black scars running down the inside.

But Marlor almost never saw him, so he did not care to think of him. He turned and walked back into the room behind him.

2

Not long after that evening, Noron, Linro, and Marlor were strolling through Milliere Manor talking about this and that as careless princes can.

"You know the dragon that I met with the other day," Linro said. He was the tallest, but only by half an inch. He had silver hair like Marlor, but aside from that he looked more like Noron, "The blue dragon who claimed she could cure the Orange Willow trees of the disease she claimed they had."

"Ah yes her," said Noron. Unlike the other two, he had dark brown hair, the same as Erasmos.

"I believe she was a fraud," stated Linro.

"About time you figured that out. You know sometimes you're as oblivious as—"

"She was Baiji of Otaria Sea on the planet of Otariania. Wanted thief for stealing..." and on and on Marlor went. He was like that. Silent until there was something he knew that no one else did and he would go on and on for quite a long time as his brothers rolled their eyes.

Marlor was not known for being the cheery prince that gives out sweets to little children and walks around smiling and chatting with townsfolk. That would be an appropriate description of Linro.

Marlor was not the prince who was the general of any army and had mastered every aspect of fighting. That would be an appropriate description of Noron.

After one conversation with the crown prince, it would be obvious why he was chosen to be emperor one day. For one thing, he was intimidating. His silver hair had a mysterious black streak down one side. He was always deep in thought with a very serious look on his face. He was also extremely intelligent. He knew about all of the inner workings of not only Milliere, but many neighboring empires as well. He was convincing and stubborn, able to negotiate to get his way with anyone. Marlor could use a sword too. Not as well as Noron, but he could fight.

When Marlor finally finished his speech about Baiji of Otaria Sea, he left an awkward silence between the triplets. They were on their way to visit the throne room on the request of their father. The double doors were just ahead of them, golden with engravings of all different types of beautiful plants. The guards in front reached out and pulled them open for the princes.

Noron and Linro gasped. Before them was not the throne room, the throne room was gone. What they stared into was the blue forest, crackling as it burned. The guards turned to see what had happened and looked to be equally shocked. They said they had heard nothing.

Noron turned to look at one of the guards. He stared at him in a way like he had seen him before but just couldn't remember his name. And then his face changed, "You are not a guard. You are Sir Alkaios. Are you not? I seem to remember you lost on a mission to the Dragon Empire of the Western Dragon Axtonnos. I have never met your captor. Why are you here? Did you escape?"

"He has been allowed to live by Axtonnos in exchange for something," stated Marlor, completely sure of himself, "Likely something for one of Axtonnos's schemes. Axtonnos has never seemed to like Milliere."

"That is true your highness," said the other guard, Sir Adami in a high, raspy voice. "Sir Alkaios and I have committed treason against you and we deserve the punishment for our crime."

Marlor stared at Sir Adami and thought. But he could not say anything before the roof caved in upon the scene, a giant claw picked up Marlor, and flew off to the Empire of Axtonnos.

3

It was many weeks before Marlor awoke. He was lying on the cold dirt floor of a cage made from unnaturally-growing stalactites. There seemed to be many other cages in the strange cave, but at a second glance, Marlor realized that they were all rooms. And something was moving in one of them. He watched it as it slowly came closer and closer and finally came through what seemed to be a doorway of one of the rooms.

It was Axtonnos and by his side was a gnome, tall for his kind, but extremely tiny next to the giant dragon. Axtonnos walked up to Marlor's cage.

"Hello, little Marlor," he said. His deep voice sounded bored.

Offended, Marlor stood up straight and tried to make himself as frightening as he was to everyone in Milliere. "Why are you keeping me prisoner?"

Axtonnos just laughed, "Don't worry little Marlor. It's nothing personal. You see, I'm an old dragon. Well, not really, you could say I'm a middle-aged dragon. I'm also an emperor of an unconquerable empire. I get bored easily with nothing to do, so I like to mess with happy little kingdoms."

"Empires," Marlor said.

"Ah yes those too. Now that I have properly destroyed your little kingdom--"

"Empire."

"Yes, yes, now that I have destroyed your happy little kingdom, I can move onto the next kingdom."

When he spoke, Marlor could feel on his face that Axtonnos's breath was abnormally hot, as hot as the breath of a dragon from a human myth would be.

"Where are you from, Axtonnos?"

"That's Emperor Axtonnos when you're on one of my planets. But to answer your question, not from any universe you know of."

"I know about the Western Universe."

"Well good for you but that is not my home."

"I know of the Common Universe too."

"Congratulations, I don't live there either."

"But... you're not from here..." Marlor stared blankly, thoughts rushing through his head.

"Anyway, little Marlor, I'll be leaving. I'm actually going back to my home, funny we were just talking about it," and with a soft chuckle, Axtonnos prowled out of the room, the gnome hobbling behind him.

Almost a year passed by in the large, stalactite cage, lonely except for the gnome coming once a day with food. The gnome never spoke though, it just set down a plate of food and some water then left. Most of the time Marlor had enough to think about to keep him from being bored. His father must be gone, which would mean that he was now Emperor Marlor of Milliere, or whatever was left of it. Marlor wondered about his brothers as well. They could be gone. Or they might be living in the rubble of Milliere. But more than he thought of his family, Marlor wondered about Axtonnos. How he had attacked the empire so efficiently and without notice. A fire like the one burning in the blue forest would take more than a few hours to start. And what had he meant when he said "one of my planets." According to Erasmos, Axtonnos was ruler of only one empire. And it was not an unconquerable one. Either the dragon was messing with Marlor, or he was truly more powerful than any ruler in history, and that gave Marlor more than enough to keep him thinking.

Of course, loneliness did overcome Marlor at times. There was nothing in the small cage, and no matter how much he tried to break the stalactites imprisoning him or the dirt underneath him, everything seemed to be made of rock.

After more than a year of being alone, Marlor noticed the gnome's figure moving through the rooms again. He would've thought nothing of it, but the gnome had already visited that day. It was an odd fellow. It looked to be fairly old, but it always wore the same dirty white cloak and pale green tunic, like a mad scientist going out on an expedition.

"Hello! Why are you here?" Marlor called out to it.

"Oh. You," its voice was deep with a foreign and unrecognizable accent. It would have sounded disgusted if it were not perfectly clear that disgusted was just the gnome's normal tone. "I believe I was coming to speak with you. Well, speak to you mostly. It would please me if you would do little speaking. You are Milliere of the Marlor Empire, are you not?"

"Marlor of Milliere Empire."

"Do not correct me, you annoying, tiny, little elf."

Marlor looked down at the gnome, confused and slightly irritated at being called tiny and little.

"Who are you... Sir?"

"Doctor! Not Sir. Dr. Eapen if you must know. You have no respect for your elders do you?"

"My apologies Dr. Eapen. May I trouble you by asking what you needed me for."

"Ugh. You slaughter my name with your disgusting accent. Also, no, you may not ask me anything. You may answer my questions and that is all. Now, I'm sure you're wondering what I needed you for. Well, I, like any sensible gnome, despise the dragon I... assist and I would like to escape from... assisting him. For eternity. Now don't even think of asking why I don't just leave on my own. This ugly cave is impossible for a... short gnome to leave. But, I have done some measurements and a few calculations, and if you somehow escaped from your cage and lifted me up to the opening of this cave, and then I pulled you up from the ledge

with a rope, we could both escape and make our way to the planet of Velodona. Or I would go to Velodona anyway. You could go wherever you wanted. And, lucky for both of us, I know how to get you out of that cage. But don't ask me how because I will not tell you. I do not trust you elves. So are you in or out? Oh, and, just so you know, we haven't got all the time in the universe to escape. The dragon will be back in less than a week. I will give you the night to think it over, though I can't see any benefits of staying here for the rest of your life. Good day elf."

4

The gnome was the opposite of trustworthy. But it was also Marlor's only hope for returning to Mil-liere. So in the time he had to think of the gnome's plan, Marlor made his own plan to convince the gnome to keep its promise of freeing him as well.

When the gnome came the next day Marlor asked it a question, "If I help you escape, and escape myself of course, will you help me reach the planet I would like to go to?"

"Do you understand simple instructions? No questions!" Marlor stared into the gnome in such a way that made it say, "Fine, I will stop with you on the planet of your choice. Now say either 'yes' or 'no.' Will you help me escape?" There was a short silence as Marlor waited for Dr. Eapen to notice. "Oh and of course escape yourself of course. I would never leave you behind, good elf."

Marlor grunted at the gnome's unnatural change of tone. It would certainly abandon Marlor at the first chance it got, yet he grudgingly responded, "Yes. I will escape this cave. And of course help you escape as well. Then you will see me safely to the planet of my choice."

"Oh very good, very good!" and something like an evil smile appeared on Dr. Eapen's face.

Not too long later, Marlor had hoisted the gnome onto the ledge and, as expected, it cried out, "Well that was not such a smart decision! Have fun here all alone. Say 'hello' to the dragon for me. Food's in the kitchen which is the third turn to the right down the fifth hallway."

But Marlor knew what to say, "Do not worry Dr. Eapen, I'll say 'hello' to the dragon for you. I'll also tell him where to find you so he can bring you back here to keep me company. Then you'll be back to the beginning. Well before that actually, he'll probably make it harder for you to escape and you'll have to make a whole new plan to escape."

"I- well- you annoying little elf. Give me your hand." And as if it had been that simple all along, the two of them were free from the cave.

5

The cave was high enough up what seemed to be a mountain that they could not just hop down lightly but before Marlor could think about how to get down, he was lost looking out at the sight before him. It was stunning. A huge foggy city lay ahead. Almost every building was made of red stones held together by a deep red colored mortar. Every few buildings there was a shop with a black awning outside.

"Homarus," stated Dr. Eapenn, "This is only the second time I have ever seen it. Now, do not ask me how we are to get down, see there is an awning right below us. We can just bounce off of that to the ground and we'll be fine."

Marlor blinked, then looked at Dr. Eapen, "Pardon me?"

Dr. Eapen laughed, "Ha. I am kidding. You are stupid you elf. I know how gravity works."

Marlor gulped, and nodded slowly, not amused by the joke.

"We will use the same rope I pulled you up to this ledge with. Retrieve it from my pack."

Somehow, Marlor had not noticed that Dr. Eapen had brought a pack, but it was quite large compared to the small gnome. Inside, Marlor realized Dr. Eapen was quite prepared. There were more than a few sacks of coins, plenty of food, clay cups for water, and many random machines that Marlor did not know the purpose for.

“It does not take this long to find a single rope,” Dr. Eapen told Marlor impatiently. “Are you robbing me?”

At last, Marlor found the red-dyed rope. He tied it to a heavy stone, then slowly and cautiously climbed down it.

“Now, don’t even think to ask me what we are going to do in this city!” but Dr. Eapen didn’t need to say that. Marlor had long since given up asking questions. “We will now find a traveling sales-dragon willing to take us to the planet you have hopefully chosen by now. It won’t be too difficult to find one, I’ve read of plenty.”

And off they went to find a dragon. It took much longer than expected to find one.

She was a young, lavender dragon who introduced herself as Chira. She sold many different types of gems and asked if they were interested.

“Hello,” said Marlor, “I’m Mar-”

“He’s Mardrick,” interrupted Dr. Eapen, “and we’re actually looking to fly to two locations.”

“Oh, of course. Are you trading or paying with coin? My, my what a surprise, I barely ever see elves and gnomes nowadays. What a shock.”

“We will be paying with coin. How much.”

“For two locations, fifteen silver. Thank you fine sirs,” and the dragon scurried around to pack up her tent.

“Why did you tell her my name’s Mardrick?” Marlor whispered.

“Everyone knows Marlor, crown prince of Milliere. You’re supposed to one day be the ruler of this empire’s enemy. You think she’d fly us around if she knew that. I expected you would’ve thought that through. From now on, you are Mardrick.”

“Oh,” Marlor muttered.

That evening Dr. Eapen bought dried meats and fruits to last them until they arrived at the planet. Then they set off into the night sky, heading through the darkness. Far in the distance Marlor could see the small bright dot of Milliere.

6

“So where are you two headed again?” Chira asked, “I don’t believe you have told me yet.”

Marlor looked to Dr. Eapen. Finally, he said, “We are headed to the planet of Milliere. Then Velodona”

“Milliere? What an odd place to go. I heard our emperor recently destroyed it. Why might someone want to visit such an awful place?”

Marlor flinched at his home being called an “awful place.” It was a lovely place with a beautiful blue forest and lovely little villages scattered about. No one had ever called such a place awful, but it was obvious that after an empire was burned to the ground, however lovely it was before, it would earn the title of awful.

Thinking quickly, Marlor made up a reason, “I am curious. I would like to see if the emperor really did the damage to our enemy that he claims.”

Dr. Eapen nodded, then added, “I would not like to stay there long though, so we will leave without him after a day or two. If that is okay, of course. You’re the one flying after all.”

“Oh, anything is fine. I have all the time in the universe.”

For the rest of much of the trip, Chira rambled on and on about her life. It was interesting enough. Her father was a high ranking officer in Axtonnos’s army, though he didn’t do much at all since Axtonnos’s kingdom was never at war. Both of Chira’s sisters followed her father’s path but Chira did not want to. She wanted to own a shop like her mother but travel like her father. Thus she became the traveling sales-dragoness she

is today.

The gnome shared some of its story too, but not a lot so as not to give away that it had escaped from the emperor himself. It said that planets in the Western Universe would spontaneously explode leaving bits of the planet all over space. Dr. Eapen was originally from a lovely village built on one of these planet pieces. The gnome left to search for a friend who was taken away by a dragon and never returned home. That is what it said anyway. Marlor suspected that Dr. Eapen was the one taken away by a dragon.

When Dr. Eapen finished speaking, Chira looked expectantly at Marlor. He didn't know what he could say without giving himself away. He likely would have sat there awkwardly forever if Dr. Eapen didn't change the subject, only half unnoticed by Chira.

7

It was noon a week later that they finally landed on Milliere. Marlor stared at the rubble of Milliere Manor. And rubble was all there was. Surrounding the Manor was the blue forest. Burnt completely. And beyond that was the town that took so much pride in being so close to the Manor. Even Chira was silent in the midst of the ruins. Like somehow she knew that this place was everything to Marlor.

"I have found some edible plants. We will eat them and fly to Velodona," Dr. Eapen, sure enough, was holding a fistful of vegetables. They were almost all of the ingredients to a dish Marlor knew.

"I can make something to eat," he said, "I know a good recipe."

"Fine by me. I can't cook. But hurry up, this place is not exactly a wonderland."

"It used to be," Marlor said, then quickly added, "Or so I've heard. This is the first time I've visited."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. I'll look around for valuables."

Marlor was about halfway done with a delicious soup dish his mother had taught him when Dr. Eapen called out to him.

"You might want to see this," he said. And after Marlor didn't respond he added, "It may involve the royal family."

Marlor dropped the plant he was holding and joined Dr. Eapen. Sure enough, a military style fort had been built. There were two rocks acting as tables with broken plates and ripped tablecloths on the table. In the corner was the bottom half of a broken vase holding sweets. His brothers had been here for a while. They had just disappeared. Marlor looked around, wondering if they had left any clues as to where they had gone. They hadn't, but Axtonnos had. Claw marks that were almost invisible before were clear on the burnt ground. Axtonnos had been here and taken Noron and Linro.

"Chira," Marlor said slowly, "do you think after you take Dr. Eapen to Velodona, you could bring me somewhere?"

"It'll cost you, but I can take you anywhere. Of a reasonable distance of course."

Mardick looked to Dr. Eapen, silently begging for him to understand.

"Oh," Dr. Eapen finally gave in, "I can pay for his trip. How much?"

"Another fifteen silver."

"Done. Now I'm off to Velodona. Is the food ready?"

"No, I will finish preparing it."

They ate the vegetable soup at the table made by Noron and Linro with a spot outside for Chira who could not fit inside the fort. Marlor would be alone in the Milliere Empire for a month. Unless of course there were survivors here. That is what he decided to find out.

Chira and Dr. Eapen left in the evening for Velodona. The next morning, Marlor left the Manor ruins in the direction of the closest village.

Marlor had not been to this village nearly as much as Linro. It was called Rissororia after Emperor

Risso who founded it. It had flowery orange willows in a beautiful and perfect contrast to the blue forest surrounding it. The stones making up each building had golden swirls running through them and the tiles of the roofs were made with stone leaves. But the no building was identical to the one next to it. Each house and shop was a different shape, some twisting abstract shapes, some perfect squares.

Marlor walked down the road towards Rissororia and was shocked to see people strolling through the streets, dejected, but there nonetheless. Marlor picked up his pace, then broke into a run, going at full speed towards the beautiful village. When he reached the first house the woman tending to the garden stopped and stared.

“Prince Marlor!” Her cry attracted many stares towards the lost prince.

“Prince Marlor!” someone else shouted. And soon what seemed to be the entire village was crowded around a smiling Marlor. It was the first time in a long time he had smiled. Duchess Sepia and Duke Mestus, Marlor’s aunt and uncle, stepped forward and embraced Marlor.

“You have survived Axtonnos?” Duchess Sepia said, “We thought you were dead like the Emperor and the princes.”

“Th-the princes, Noron and Linro, are dead?”

“Well, I suppose they could be alive if you are. Prince Noron and Prince Linro were taken away by Axtonnos only a week ago. We all saw the dragon’s great figure here in the village.”

Marlor let out a sigh of relief. He looked around and saw that Milliere was not lost. There was still hope for the wrecked place to become beautiful again. But with that hope came pressure for Marlor to fulfill it. The whole village was watching their prince, now their emperor, wondering what he would do. So he took a deep breath to calm his sudden nerves and turned to his aunt.

“Would it be too much to ask you for breakfast? I have not eaten yet today.”

“Not at all.”

8

Duchess Sepia was a smart enough elf to know that Marlor did not want breakfast, he wanted to speak of Axtonnos and the princes without the glares of everyone in Rissororia.

“What would be the point of just destroying the royal family and leaving the rest of this empire unharmed?” Marlor asked, more to himself than to Sepia.

“Of course because with no one in charge, how would the people be ruled? The empire would’ve crumbled if you hadn’t returned.”

Marlor gave her a questioning look and shook his head, “Well of course he’d expect that someone like Duchess Elanid or you would step up to rule.” Duchess Elanid was Emperor Erasmos and Duchess Sepia’s sister. She was married to Duke Kyrillos and they lived far from the Manor on a Millierian moon called Tatkert.

The duchess tilted her head, “Now why would we do that? Your father was always meant to rule, not us. Why should we take charge instead of him? I have a hard enough time governing just Rissororia and you know Duchess Elanid could never rule Tatkert if it weren’t for Kyrillos.”

Marlor could only stare at the duchess, “You’re saying if you were the only one left to rule Milliere, you wouldn’t?”

“Of course I wouldn’t.”

All at once Marlor realized that the people of Milliere had put too much faith in the royal family. And just as Axtonnos expected, the empire would crumble without their emperor. No one would take over. No one would know what to do.

Now Marlor didn’t know what to do either. He had to find his brothers, but he couldn’t leave Milliere to Duchess Sepia or Duchess Elanid.

Finally, he spoke again to his aunt, “Who is the emperor of Cinereous. We are on good terms with them, are we not?” Sepia was not only the duchess, but also the ambassador of Milliere, chosen over Elanid for being far more friendly.

“It is a dusty blue dragon named Aquillutaq. He is friendly enough, but a bit... grumpy.”

“Send for him, I would like to meet with him next week.”

“Next week? That's fairly soon.”

“Then tell the messenger to travel fast.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Finally, Marlor sighed, he knew Sepia was curious. “I will leave to find my brothers in a month. A dragon named Chira will carry me back to Axtonnos's empire where I will search for them. I would like to leave Milliere in the hands of someone I can trust before I leave.”

“I understand. I have already given you many reasons not to trust me.”

Marlor never meant to offend anyone when he spoke, but he often did. He did not mean to say that he did not trust Sepia at all, just not with Milliere. She said herself she would never rule the empire. But she was offended all the same, making Marlor feel guilty.

Marlor gave a weak apology and an awkward thanks for breakfast and left to walk back to the Manor ruins. He was stopped many times by small children asking him to tell them stories of all the dragons he's fought and all the wars he's won. But all he would tell them was that he had to go find another dragon.

When he got back to Noron and Linro's fort, he sat down on the dirt floor and put his head in his hands. Being the Emperor of Milliere was never a difficult job for Erasmos. But Marlor had ruled for less than a day and he already didn't know what to do. The perfect emperors of Milliere, many generations of Marlor's great grandmothers and grandfathers, had destroyed Milliere's hope in anyone but their monarch. Everyone trusted that the emperor or empress would choose one of their children to rule next and only that child could grow up to be the next great emperor or empress. Not even Noron or Linro would rule the broken Milliere when Marlor was believed to be dead.

9

Aquillutaq arrived nine days later to meet with Marlor. He brought with him both his sons, Aqpik, a small maroon dragon, and Qigiq, a pearl colored dragon. They both seemed to be strong leaders, competing for recognition from their unamused father.

The meeting went fairly well, but at times Marlor felt like he was being interrogated by the Cinereous king and princes. Eventually Aquillutaq agreed to leave Qigiq to rule Milliere until Marlor returned, as long as it was within two years. Then Aquillutaq and Aqpik left for their ash gray planet.

Marlor did not expect Chira back for three more weeks. Velodona was a two week journey from Milliere, slightly more than four weeks round trip. But the next morning as Marlor was walking back to the Manor ruins from Rissororia, he could see the lavender dragon flying fast to the ground. He was not far from where she landed. He ran to her confused. With her was Dr Eapen, who was not supposed to return to Milliere.

“What are you doing here?” Marlor asked, “has something gone wrong.”

“You're not going to be happy,” said Dr. Eapen.

“And frankly I don't care,” Chira started, and Marlor could tell she had either figured out or had been told that Marlor was not just coming to Milliere to see what had become of it. “You are not Mardrick are you? You are Marlor, crown prince of Milliere. How dare you ask me for help. How dare you even come to Axtonnos's Empire. Homarus did not do anything to deserve you evil prince to walk through its beautiful streets. How could you even get into the empire? You could not fly yourself there. Is there a traitor from Axtonnos's empire that brought you there? I will turn you into the emperor himself and you will be thrown into his prison. As for your friend, I don't know where he's from but he is an accomplice. I-I- I will not bring you

anywhere. And no refunds.”

Marlor stood looking into the dragon's sky blue eyes, then he turned to Dr. Eapen, “You covered your own hide but could not keep my secret.”

Chira butted in again, “What, were you plotting an evil scheme against my home. I will end this. I will, I tell you. Then I will become more of a hero than my father and my sisters.”

Marlor faced the dragon again. “Look around you. Does it look like Milliere has plotted something evil against Axtonnos’s empire, or the other way around?”

Chira did look around. Her face changed just slightly, and all she said was, “Axtonnos does what is good for his empire.”

“As do I,” Marlor told her.

“Then why is your empire in ruins?”

Marlor bit his lip, and, with difficulty, said, “Because Axtonnos is stronger than me.”

“I cannot help you. I will not help you. Your empire does not like mine.”

“We had nothing against you.”

“I won’t turn you in. I will leave you and your friend here and fly back to the city of Homarus.” She turned to fly away but Marlor stepped forward.

“Chira-”

“Stop, you will convince me to help me. I am gullible and I know you can convince me to turn my back on my home.”

“Not on your home. The people of Homarus and all the cities in Axtonnos’s empire are lovely people, it is only Axtonnos who is evil. If you bring us to the entrance of his cave we will ask nothing more of you.”

“No.”

Dr. Eapen spoke for the first time, “You could just pretend like you are tuning us in, just do it in a way that we can escape.”

“If you want to escape, why are you going to the entrance of Axtonnos’s cave?”

“My brothers are prisoners there.”

“I will not.”

“We will pay you.”

“How much do you have?”

“Five hundred silver.”

Chira was silent. Five hundred silver was a small fortune.

“Fine. I will leave you at the entrance of Axtonnos’s cave and you must promise me I will never see either of you again.”

“I promise, said Marlor.

“I promise as well,” said Dr. Eapen.

“Good. We leave tomorrow, I need to eat something.”

She started down the path to Rissororia, leaving Marlor with Dr. Eapen and the slight fear that she wouldn’t return.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Marlor asked Dr. Eapen, “What did you say.”

“I was making conversation and I mentioned you as Marlor. It was a while before she realized and I tried to cover up my mistake but she turned around and headed straight here. I- I’m sorry.” The gnome’s accent sounded as prominently disgusted as ever, but Marlor could hear the change of tone in it.

But it didn't last long, "Now you annoying little elf you have caused me so much trouble. If I don't get to Velodona soon I will abandon you and your journey and find a dragon who will take me. No stops along the way, just a straight path there. And I will enjoy my freedom. Now I would like food as well. Do you by any chance have something here or must we follow the dragon to whatever that town is?"

"I have soup in the fort. I am not hungry; you may have the rest."

Dr. Eapen walked to the fort leaving Marlor staring off to nowhere.

10

Early the next morning before much light shone anywhere, Chira took off into the sky with Marlor and Dr. Eapen. It was a less pleasant trip than before. Chira flew fast, eager to go home, and she spoke little. Marlor told Dr. Eapen about the happenings of Milliere, but Chira shied away from any conversation. She would say when she was hungry and Marlor or Dr. Eapen would silently pass her food, but that was all.

In a week, they landed in front of the bland stone entrance of Axtonnos's cave.

"I will never see you again," Chira said, "promise me that again."

"I promise," said Marlor and Dr. Eapen in unison.

"And take care," Chira barely audibly whispered.

Marlor and Dr. Eapen turned to the cave entrance. They walked to the edge and looked down. It wasn't what you would call a small drop. Marlor jumped down first, since he was taller and it would not be so bad for him. It was a painful landing, but bearable. Dr. Eapen jumped down second, with a heavy fall into Marlor's arms. As soon as he let the gnome onto the ground, it stared at him with disgust saying, "Get your hands off me you annoying little elf." But he said it a little too loud. Both Marlor and the gnome could tell Axtonnos had heard.

Sure enough, the dragon's great figure could be seen moving about in the stalactite rooms. Behind him came both Noron and Linro, stunned by their captor.

"I see little Marlor has returned. Even after I destroyed your kingdom--"

"Empire!"

"Kingdom," Axtonnos said with a snarl, "Why is it you return?"

"My--"

"Oh right the princes. How could I forget! My newest entertainment. My, my, I say, I knew I could get you back. And you brought my servant! How generous of you little Marlor."

"Neither I nor Dr. Eapen intend to stay long."

Axtonnos smirked, "Now why should I care, prisoners don't get what they want."

At that, Axtonnos lunged forward, grabbing for Marlor and the gnome, but he was stopped when, at that moment, a tiger lunged at him. Now, no one there knew it was a tiger, they didn't know what a tiger was, but I assume you know what a tiger is and that is what lunged, or rather jumped on the dragon. The dragon was not harmed by the big cat, but it threw him off. He shook his great his with such force to throw the tiger to the wall, but in midair, it no longer was a tiger, it was a lavender dragon.

Axtonnos was taken aback, "Who are you," he asked the dragon.

"I am Chira. My father works in your army as do my sisters."

"And you work for my enemy."

"I do not work for your enemy. I have chosen to help Marlor. He is a good emperor who works for the good of his empire. I wish to be able to help him in his journey to find his brother and reestablish Milliere." Chira looked to Marlor. Marlor nodded. "Thank you," said Chira.

“Well, well, you’ve brought back-up little Marlor. A little lovely lavender dragon can do nothing for you. I will still do as I intend.” He stared at Marlor for some time. Marlor stared back, letting his questions about the mysterious dragon roll through his head. “You know what, you seem to be curious. I will show you my empire, the full empire that you are now official prisoner of.”

But before Axtonnos could do anything, Chira grabbed Marlor and flew out of the cave with him. She then hovered a good distance from the cave, with the entrance still visible. Many minutes passed silently before, finally Axtonnos flew out, carrying Noron, Linro, and Dr. Eapen. Chira followed the dragon as he flew an intricate course and finally reached a large forest with giant red trees. At this, Chira turned around and flew back to the bland cave.

“Why didn’t you follow him?” Marlor asked when they landed.

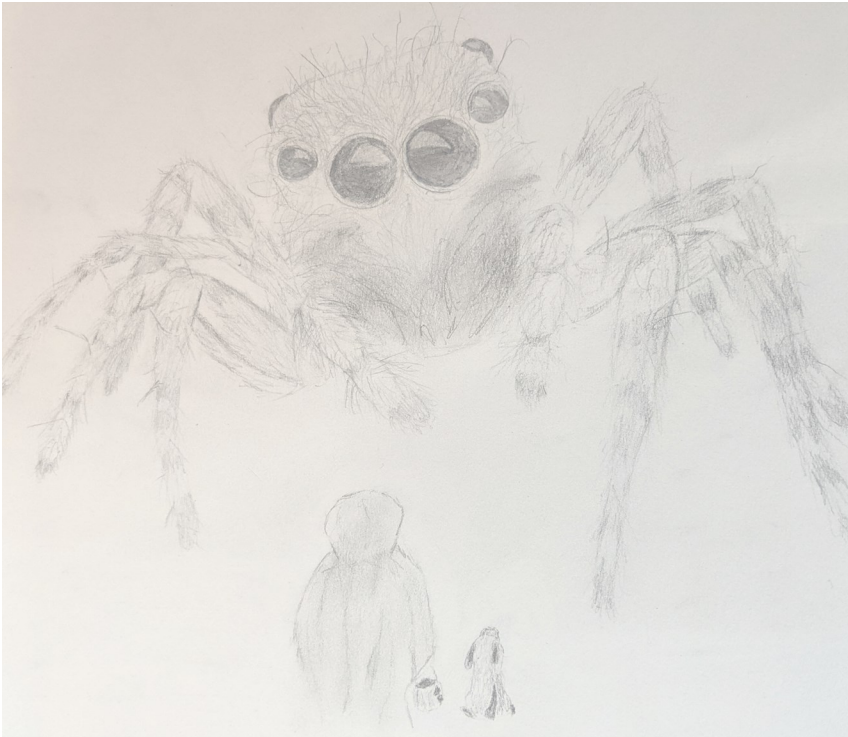
“I know where he’s going.”

Noron

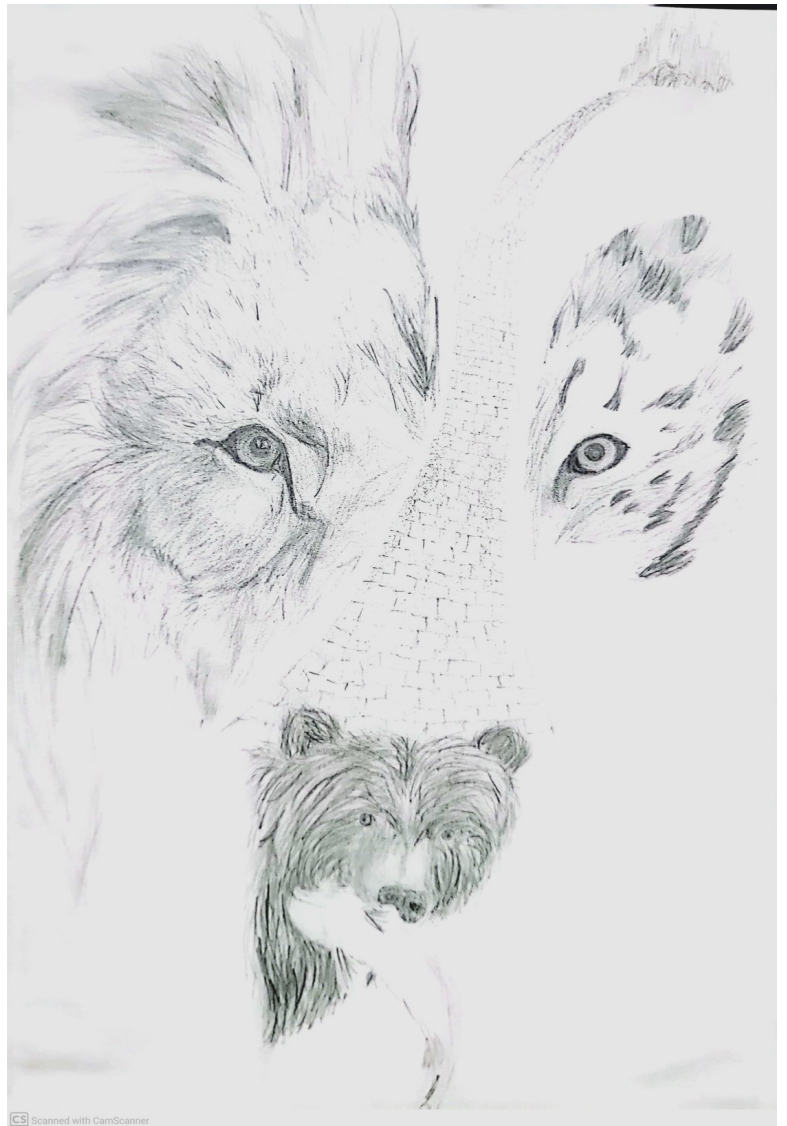
I must do my part to record this. It seems to be the logical thing to do. I always carry a small notebook, though it has few entries. I have torn the pages with words out and I will start again with the story of what happens to Linro and me in our kidnapping.

We were about to dine in the fine fort we had built when the great figure of Axtonnos came out of the sky. He didn’t say much, just found us and carried us off. He brought us to his cave, with many large rooms made of many large stalactites. It would have been beautiful if it were decorated and illuminated properly, but the dragon had no sense of taste. We did little in the cave. We were not locked up. The dragon let us cook our own food. It was not horrible. After a few weeks, we heard talking outside. It was Marlor. We had expected he would come. There was someone else with him. It sounded by its voice to be a gnome and its appearance would later prove that right. But a deeper voice spoke to Marlor. Deeper, but a female voice. The dragon did not hear the voices yet. He did not have the excellent hearing of an elf. Soon enough, we could hear Marlor and the gnome entering the cave. The gnome said something that Axtonnos heard and the dragon made us follow him to see his “guests.” Marlor spoke to Axtonnos defiantly no matter how much the dragon mocked him. He was braver than Linro or I could ever be and he stood tall as a statue as Axtonnos lunged at him. His friend, a lavender dragon named Chira, arrived to save him at the last second in the form of an odd creature that is not from the Twin Universes. And when Axtonnos went for Marlor again, Chira brought him away. I have not seen him since. I do hope that he is doing better than us.

Axtonnos has brought us to a strange place. We have traveled through what seemed to be a port to the Western Universe, but that is not where we are. We may be in the Common Universe, but I don’t think we are. I have seen no creatures except for dragons. Odd dragons with glowing scales. We travel through this vast place going seemingly nowhere though Axtonnos flies fast. There is not much else to say so I will leave it at that for the time being.



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The Siren—Luke Depew

The ominous black waves crash upon the rocks of the shore. Fog creates a curtain so dense, so thick. As if the clouds from above had fallen to the ground. And although the weather today is unfortunate, I must row out and do my day's work.

The sea slowly swells, and then rhythmically recedes. My boat calmly rocks right... and then left... right... and then left. Wind weakly whistles while the creatures crawl and swim below. It isn't long before I lose sight of land. And all there is to guide me is the compass in my hand.

I grab for my rod, but all that I feel is wood. Damp wood.

"That's weird," I think to myself, "I swear I brought it on the boat."

I turn my tiny boat around and begin to row back to shore for my fishing rod, but land is nowhere to be seen. The more I row, the more anxious I get, frantically looking at my compass only for it to spin out of control. It is only then that I hear a voice...

a woman's voice...

and it's singing,

singing the most melodious tune I've ever heard.

I row, row, and row, my oars splashing in and out of the water as I look for the source of this ethereal, divine voice. It gets louder, clearer, hypnotic. I see its shadow in the mist. It looks like a seal? No, a dolphin. **Wait**..., no, a Mermaid.

I paddle as close as I can to see it in its full glory. And there it is. Long, wavy, dirty blonde hair that was long enough that it reached her lower back, eyes bluer and more vibrant than the sea on a warm, summer day, skin flawless like glass and sunkist, and a scaly, shiny, lavender colored tail.

The Mermaid lay across a smooth rock jutting out of the sea while she sings her song. She notices my presence, we make eye contact, and she waves, and then beckons me to come over. Mesmerized, I row over to the rock she lay on.

She holds out her hand and says, "Come on, I'll help you."

I oblige and hold it, and the Mermaid helps me up onto the rock. But once I am on and attempt to let go, her hand only squeezes mine tighter.

"I would like it if you could let go now." I say politely.

Instead of letting go, though, she begins to laugh. Laugh uncontrollably. And that laugh begins to transform... transform into a cackle. A maniacal cackle. Confused and panicked, I try all I can to yank my hand out of her grasp. I feel a sharp pain in my wrist and realize that the Mermaid now has claws, and she is digging them into my wrist. I yelp in pain as the claws puncture my skin and five trails of blood trickle to the tips of my fingers and drip down to the surface of the rock.

Still cackling, her skin turns pale, her hair transforms into fins running along her back, her face becomes hollow and gills appear on her cheeks and neck, her eyes turn jet black, and her teeth become sharp like knives. It is only now that I have realized the terrible mistake I have made. And it's too late to escape.

She slides into the sea, pulling me under with her. She swims downward and drags me behind her while I thrash, desperately trying to escape. She then uses her other hand to lacerate my skin, and she grins while a cloud of blood flows out of my left shoulder. She continues to leave scratch after scratch, and I become dizzy and lightheaded. I forget to keep my breath held and inhale the bloody sea water around me.

I helplessly cough and cough and cough with all the strength left in me, losing the little air I have left. My consciousness begins to fade. She sunders my limbs, one by one, with each bone making a terrible crunching sound. I want to cry, but I can't. I want to scream, but I can't. I look up toward the surface, one last time, longing to be back on my boat, but there is nothing I can do. The evil face of the Mermaid— no, Siren, is there, and then gone.

And all there is?

A Void.

Three Mighty Kits

"Fable! Oww! You're on my tail!" Mythia, a fox kit, wailed to her sister.

"Sorry," Fable said unapologetically.

"Come on, be nice," their brother Legend said.

"To the *runt*?" Fable asked.

"Yes, to the runt," Legend said.

"Whatever. You're no fun," Fable said.

Their mother, Adira, walked into the room.

"Children! Your First Ending Ceremony is in 30 minutes! Why are you fooling around?" she said.

Now you may be wondering, "What is a 'First Ending Ceremony'?"

Well, it is not something that foxes do.

For you see, these were not really fox kits. They were Mighties, almost all-powerful creatures that fed off of the energy of others. They were only fox kits since their mother had been in a fox form when she had given birth.

Adira knew that all of her kits were fairly powerful. But she was worried that the runt, Mythia, might not make it past childhood. While she was more magically capable than you or I will ever be, her powers were nothing compared to her siblings'.

And, well, sometimes play gets rough, or an accident happens, or...

She would be deemed too weak to survive, and her siblings would decide that it was time to put her out of her misery.

Dear reader, you must remember that Mighties are not like you, or your species.

Forget what you know and discover that survival of the fittest is how their life works, how it has *always* worked, how it *will* always work.

But back to the story.

"You'd better be ready in 20 minutes. Fable, look at your fur! Legend, did you dive under the couch again?" Adira said. She wasn't able to scold Mythia, however. Mythia had been waiting for this day for her entire life.

She hadn't been living very long, but she had been waiting nonetheless.

Her sleek black fur shimmered, the white tip of her tail did not have any hint of dirt on it, and her bright electric-blue eyes were shining.

Yes, she'd been waiting for a very long time.

* * *

"Welcome, younglings, to your First Ending Ceremony," Adira said. The three kits sat up a little straighter upon hearing this.

"Today is the day when you will become true Mighties. Leave your childhood behind and embrace your adulthood. You will go in order of age. Fable, Legend, and finally, Mythia," Adira said.

Now is probably the right time to explain what exactly they had to do. Mighties are not like you or me, so their rituals are a bit more intense. Mighties get their power by taking it from other beings. So the First Ending Ceremony is when they “end” something for the first time.

“Fable, step forward,” Adira said. Fable complied, and a ferret appeared in front of her.

“This should be easy,” she said.

In order to steal a creature’s power, you must steal their essence. Every Mighty does things their own way, but there are two main ways of doing it. One of them is taking their essence when they are still alive. The other is taking their essence after they have died. The second way still hurts their soul, so it is a painful experience for the victim no matter what method the Mighty uses.

Fable chose to do it when the ferret was still living. She, being the eldest, was the most powerful, so it was over within a matter of seconds.

Mythia still heard the screams.

Fable stepped back and joined her siblings with a smirk on her face.

“Legend,” Adira said, “step forward.” He did. A capybara materialized in front of him.

“No,” he said.

“What do you mean, ‘no?’” Fable asked. Her mother shushed her, but was just as curious.

“I mean that I won’t kill this capybara, or anything, ever. So, no.”

Mythia had heard of Mighties failing their First Ending Ceremony. She had heard about ones who did it by accident, ones who weren’t ready, even ones who had died in the process. But she’d never heard of someone who just *didn’t do it*. It was unheard of.

“Forget about him. Just kick him out,” Fable said.

Adira glared at her, making her shut up.

“Legend, you don’t want to do this,” Adira said.

“Yes, I do,” he replied.

“Very well,” Adira sighed. The capybara disappeared. A tornado of dust rose around Legend. When it settled, he was not there anymore.

“W-what did you do with him?” Mythia asked.

“What I had to. Now, Mythia, step forward,” her mother said. Trembling, she walked away from her sister. She closed her eyes in preparation. When she opened them, a small puppy was in front of her. It was a gray chihuahua with purple eyes.

“Who are you?” it said, staring up at her.

Mythia now understood why Legend had done what he did.

But she also understood that she wouldn’t be like him.

“My name is...” she started, but couldn’t finish the sentence. She remembered an old fable. It was from something called “Greek Mythology”. It was about a witch who hid a sailor on her island when he wouldn’t stay of her own free will. The witch’s name was Calypso. It meant “to conceal”.

Mythia decided that she would conceal all of her feelings and do what she was here to do.

“My name is Calypso,” she said.

And then she did her job.



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Once in a Lifetime—Mae Stevens

February 13th, 2023 - 7: 32 am Julia

I don't want to get up. I know that I always say that but today is not my day. I stayed up way to late watching movies and eating popcorn. I roll over and check the clock. " Oh no. "

" It's Friday the thirteenth. " Last Friday the thirteenth I couldn't find my sneakers, and after school I tripped on the sidewalk and fell into a pile of mud. And then my phone pings.

Gracie- Hey Julia! How are you?

Julia- im fine hbu

Gracie- Fine. You know today is Fri the 13th right

Julia- yeah im hoping that nothing goes wrong today

Gracie- Well, see you at school!

I start packing my bag, when my phone starts ringing, but it's not my usual tone. " Huh. That's really weird." I think to myself as I pick up my phone and look at the number, and it's not one that I have seen before. I just shrug it off, it's probably an advertisement.

But all of a sudden a voice comes through the speaker. " Hello Julia. I see that you know what today is. Last time, it was bad. But this time, it will be worse. I'll see you later." Beeeeeeep....

Oh my god. What the heck just happened. I know I didn't hit that accept call button. But if I didn't hit it, then who did?

I walk back downstairs with my bag, not taking my mind off that call. I sit down at the table and start eating te bagel that mom made me. " Mom, have there been any, creeps in the area recently? "

" Not that I know of. Why do you ask "

" No reason..."

" You're going to be late Julia, now go, go." She shoos me off and I roll my eyes and walk out the door.

" Bye mom." So off I go, walking to school, knowing that something is definitely wrong.

8: 30 a.m. Gracie

I don't know what got into Julia. For the past hour since we got to school she has looked paranoid.

" What's wrong Julia?" I say we walk to Mr. Langums history class.

" Nothing is wrong Gracie."

" Oh come on. I can tell that today being Friday the thirteenth is scaring you."

And then she stops in her tracks, turns to me and says, " I got a call this morning. My phone was ringing and I thought it was an ad so I sat it down on my bed, and then the call went through. It was this man's voice, it was deep and gravely. They said my name, and that they would "see me later" and I'm scared."

And that's when I realized, I have to do something, I have to help her. Besides, it was probably a prank call, so I tell her that.

" I don't know if I believe that." she says as she starts walking again.

" And you know this how? " I retaliate.

She looks mad at me. "You know when you get one of those gut feelings? Well that's how I feel right now. I just know that this was not a prank. This, is real. And we need to hide." she shoots back.

And then I know. I have to stick with Julia. No matter how far this goes.

10:24 a.m.- Julia

I got Gracie to believe me. At first, she thought that I was lying but after some convincing, she believed. The thing is, I have no idea when this person is going to strike. I don't even know if they are real. It could have been a prank call. But I know that I have to be careful. Or this person will find me. But maybe he already has. I see someone with a dark hood standing in the alcove by the vending machine. As I start thinking how they could be behind all this, my phone rings. That same tone from this morning. And I pick up.

" So I see you and your little "friend" are going to hide. I have no interest in your little friend. So I want you to know that there is no hiding, I will find you." Beeeeep.

Then I realize that it couldn't have been the person in the hood, he wasn't talking. I don't know. Maybe I'm just paranoid. I know that I need to get my mind off of this subject, so at free period, I take a walk in the garden that's outside the music wing. When I got outside I called Gracie and asked her if she wanted to come out with me. But she said that she had tutoring during free period. So I walk out to my favorite spot. It's hidden behind bushes and trees. And in the middle it's a little alcove made of plants. I sit on the ground and close my eyes. I hear a rustling, it's probably an animal I think, but it grows closer and closer until I feel a bag over my head, my whole body. I scream, but it is muffled by the fabric. They found me. And there is no way to escape.

12: 59 p.m.- Gracie

Julia isn't picking up. It keeps going to voicemail. I think of where she could be. Wait! I know! She said she was going to the garden. She told me about her hiding spot. She's probably just sitting there and putting her phone on silent. Good thing my tutor is gone. So just in case, I walk outside and go to Julia's hiding spot. When I get there the only thing there is her phone. And that when I know something went terribly wrong. I know that Julia would never go *anywhere* without her phone. And then I remember the calls. Julia had told me about the second one. They said that they would find her. So they probably have her! I don't know who to go to. My teachers? The police? Her parents? Other kids? Let me think through this. Teachers could do something right? Call the police. If I called the police they probably wouldn't believe me. Ok, teachers it is. I run inside and go to my biology teacher's classroom. I know that she would believe me and do something about it.

As I sprint in ,her mouth angles down slightly. " What's wrong Gracie? "

" Mrs. Sool! You know my friend Julia? "

" Why of course! "

" Well during free period she went out to the garden and I think someone took her! Her phone was on the ground and she never goes anywhere without it. She got scary calls today that said that they would find her and she couldn't hide. I don't know what to do. I need your help." During my recap of this whole day I start to cry and Mrs. Sool stands up and walks over to me. " You're going to be ok. I will call the authorities and we will find her. I promise ."

1:36 pm— Gracie

I hear sirens. After Mrs. Sool called the police. I have been sitting in her room , waiting. When the police arrive people look out the window and whisper to each other.

An announcement comes on the speakers: " Gracie Widson? We need you to come down to the principal's office."

I am frozen except for the slight nod of my head. I stumble down to the principal's office and when I get there all of the officers are sitting in chairs by the principal's desk. They asked me what the voice in the calls sounded like and how Julia felt about it. I tell them everything I know about the calls and where she was. Once they get every detail from me about where she was, they start to get up " We need you to lead us to where she was." I nod and start walking towards the door to the garden. When we get there they ask where the phone is.

"Oh! The phone! It's in my pocket."

" Can we have it please? " they ask.

I pull it out of my pocket and give it to them. One of them spoke into their walkie to ask for more officers to check out the area that Julia was sitting in. They found a strand of her hair and a small piece of burlap.

"Classic." one of the officers says.

"Classic what?" I ask.

"A classic kidnapping. I'm afraid your friend was taken", the police officers says with a slight frown.

"Will you find her?"

"We are going to try as best as we can."

"Ok."

I feel sick to my stomach. What if they never find her? I think I need to find her myself. I know it might be dangerous but I need to find her. We are best friends, we've known each other for almost our whole lives. And I *have* to find her.

February 14 - The next day - 8:37 pm - Police transcript between Officer Wheeler and Gracie Widson.

"Hello Gracie."

"Hello Officer Wheeler."

"Now I want you to know that this conversation is being recorded. Is that ok with you?"

"Yes, it is."

"So, as you know, Julia has been missing for a day now. We need to know everything you know so that we can find her, or try to."

"That morning Julia and I were talking about how it was Friday the thirteenth. She was worried about it. And then she got that creepy call."

"Can you tell me what she told you about it?"

"She said that she thought it was a scam call so she put it on her bed, and then the call went through. Apparently the person said that he knew that she knew what that day was and that he would make her life terrible for that day. But I guess it wasn't just yesterday. Who knows how long this person will have her! And then when she got to school she was freaking out about the call. Then she got the second one. Apparently it said that he knew that me and her were going to hide and that there was no escaping because they would find us, well, find her. They said that they had no interest in me."

"That's very interesting. Did Julia seem happy about this?"

"No. She was really scared. She wanted to clear her head so she went outside during free period. She asked if I would come but I had tutoring. She went outside and that's the last time I saw her. I tried calling her but it went to voicemail every time."

"We looked into the phone and we couldn't track the number. From this we can tell that this person is much smarter than they seem. Is there anything else that you think might be important?"

"I don't think so. I mean, Julia didn't tell me anything else."

"Just to clear this up, you have no idea who could have taken Julia, correct?"

"Correct."

"Thank you very much for your time."

Later that day - Mrs. Elrod (Julia's mother) -

I'm worried out of my mind. My dear Julia has been gone for a whole day now. The police are coming over to talk to us about how they are going to approach this problem, as they're calling it. I never would have thought that something like this would ever happen to this family, and I surely don't know why someone would want my Julia. She is my only child and I tried so hard to keep her safe and now she is gone. I need them to find her. *Ding Dong!*

"Oh that must be the police! Honey, come here!" John calls from the kitchen.

"John?! The cookies aren't done yet !" I say and run to the kitchen where I see he is pulling the cookies out and setting them on a nice tray to cool and be eaten.

"Oh. I see. You put them in earlier. Thank you sweetie." he looks to me and rolls his eyes a little.

“ You have to stop pretending that everything is ok. I know that you are crazy worried and you can’t hold it in. “ He looks at me with sympathy, even though that's *our* girl, not just mine. “You should probably go get the door.”

That is when I realize that someone is knocking very loudly on the door. “ Oh! Yes, yes. “ As I unlock the door and gently swing it open I see a woman officer that looks to be about my age, in her early thirties. She has a dark brown bun piled on the top of her head. She has a kind smile and waved a little as I usher her into the foyer.

“ Hello Mrs. Elrod. My name is Officer Arelding. I came here to discuss what we have found about your daughter Julia. “

I nod my head. “ Yes. Here, come sit in the living room. I made some chocolate chip cookies to lighten the mood. “

She sits down at the end of our sofa, Julia’s favorite spot. I sit down in the armchair across from her. In a minute, John walks out from the kitchen and sits down in the armchair beside me.

“ So as you know, Julia went missing yesterday at school around twelve o’clock. She went to a spot in the garden that she frequently went to. Her phone was left on the ground. Our tech department searched the phone for the number, but everything about that had been swiped clean. We are trying as hard as we can to find Julia, but there is nothing that we could use to trace anyone. We will be searching the warehouse on Arch street tomorrow. The only thing that might be of any interest is that last night there was a breach in the security. There was a figure that was rushed by the surveillance camera. We aren’t saying that it was her or anyone that might have taken her but we wanted to inform you. I’m afraid this is all the information that we have. Thank you for the cooperation, and the cookies. “

After everything she says, my heart is beating and I just want Julia back, I just want her to be home, with me, safe. “ Thank you very much for coming over. We very much appreciate it. “

She stands up and walks to the door. “ I will give you a call if you have any information. I suggest you do the same. “ she smiles wearily and walks out, the door slowly closing behind her.

February 20th, - Police log of the disappearance of Julia Elrod-

Name : Julia Anne Elrod

Date and time missing : Friday, February 13th, 2023

Gender : Female

Hight : 5,5

Weight : 138

Last seen in the garden area behind Grant Willam High School

February 22nd, - Gracie -

When I get home from school, mo greets me at the door. Instead of saying hi like usual, I push past her and run up to my room and flop onto the bed. In minutes I’m crying. All I can think about is what could possibly be happening to Julia right now, if she is scared, horrified. I just wish that she was here right now, that I could pull her in for a hug and whisper into her ear that everything is going to be okay. That one day she won’t have to think about what she had to go through, well if she ever comes back. No, I can’t think about that. I can’t even bare to think about what my life would be like without her in it, but I know what it feels like. I’ve been living that reality for nine days and I don’t know how much longer I can take it. I care so much about Julia, more than anything else in the world. I just, I need her to be here, I need Julia.

April 1st - John Elrod -

I don’t know what to do. Mary has been sitting in the arm chair looking out the window for days. She only get up to go to the bathroom, I bring her food but she barely eats it and she sleeps there, right in that chair. I miss her so much. I know that I don’t show it but my heart is shattered, a million pieces spread throughout me like a spider web. But I can’t show that pain, I need to be strong for Mary, for Julia’s friend Gracie. I feel and ure go just go out there and find her but I know that I need to wait, let the police do their job. I just have to wait, wait and hope.

April 5th - Officer Wheeler's Log -

We have a solid lead on who might have taken Julia. There is a man that has been apprehending children all around the world for months, but the kids have always been found and taken back. The man goes by the name of Jack William and he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for the murder of a woman of the name Jackie Rivera in the year 2004, and was released four years ago. The kidnappings started four months later. We believe that he is very dangerous and should not be approached. We checked the warehouse a week and a half ago, result is clear. Any other information will be updated into the system within a few days.

April 18th - Jack Williams -

This girl is not as helpful as I thought she would be. I need her to transport the minerals to the edge of the warehouse so that they are ready for deportation. No one can know that I have her here. All the other teens I took got away. I need to get these materials to Denver so that the next part of the train will take the minerals farther, and once they get to Manchester, we will never be stopped.

9:46 pm, the next night - Gracie -

I am getting ready for bed, pulling on my pajamas and brushing my teeth. When I pull back my covers, all of a sudden I hear a noise from outside. It sounds as if someone is running. I walk to the window and look out. I look out and a wave of terror hits me as I see a dark figure chasing someone down the street. And it looks like Julia! She has long brown hair and is wearing the same outfit that she was wearing when she went missing, only it is slightly dirty and there is a rip on her nice floral blouse. The one she loved so very much. I snap back to the present, and being the person I am, instead of calling the police I run downstairs and fly out the door. I run as fast as I can, my lungs stinging and my muscles screaming. I grab onto Julia's hand and she screams, the sound piercing through the air like a bullet.

"Don't worry Julia. It's me, Gracie."

She looks at me like a child, something I thought I would never see her do. I pull her onto the lawn and into the foyer. I want to sit down but I know that I have to go farther. I quickly lock the door and go upstairs, pulling Julia behind me and sitting her down on the bed like a rag doll.

"Julia, oh my god. oh my god, oh my god, oh my god." She looks terrified and it makes me want to cry. "Julia. Talk to me." She looks at me, and then I realize what she must have gone through, and I can't even imagine, and then she mumbles something just so that I could hear it.

"I just want to sleep." so I pull back the covers and let her climb under, and in a minute or two, I hear her snoring softly. But I remember, my parents! Julia's parents! I need to tell them. I rush into my parents room and vigorously shake them awake.

"Gracie, what is wrong?! " My mom looks at me with shock and concern.

"It's Julia! I found her! She was running away from someone and I saw her, I ran outside and grabbed her, then pulled her inside. She got into my bed. She is there right now and we need to get her parents NOW. "

Once she hears what I've had to say, she jumps out of bed, her night clothes rustling and runs into my room, a look of concern on her face. "Oh my god. It really is her. Gracie, I need you to go call the police. I'm going to call Julia's parents."

I nod my head and get my phone, dialing 911.

"911, what's your emergency? "

"Julia Elrod has been missing for two days and I found her outside my house running from someone. I got her inside and she is asleep in my bed right now. I'm her best friend, Gracie. We are calling her parents and they're. "

"Ok. We are sending officers now. "

"Thank you. "

The phone beeps and I stand there, not knowing what to do, so I walk back upstairs and I see Julia sitting up-right in the bed, my parents huddled around her. She looks distressed and worried. I walk over.

"Hi Julia. Everything is going to be okay. We will find this person that took you and make them pay. But for now, are you okay? "

"I think I'm ok. I feel lightheaded though. I have barely had anything to eat at all for, what's it been, I don't even know?"

"The police and your parents should be here in a matter of minutes." My mom says, and with that the doorbell rings.

"I'll get it." I say and walk downstairs worrying that it is the person that was chasing Julia. I look out the window next to the door and see the police and Julia's parents. I swing open the door. "Hello! Come in, come in. Julia is upstairs in my room."

It looks like Mrs. Elrod is crying and Mr. Elrod is holding her arm.

"Why don't you go up and see her for a little while and we will talk to Gracie." A police officer says, nodding to the Elrods.

"Thank you very much." Mr. Elrod says, ushering Mrs. Elrod up the stairs.

"Here, come sit in the living room." I say as the officers walk behind and take a seat in the middle of the sofa, while I curl up in the egg chair in the corner of the room.

"Now I heard that you were the girl to find Julia."

"Yes I was. Me and Julia have been best friends for a very long time."

"Now we need every detail about what happened so that we can try and find who was chasing her and if they took her."

"I didn't see them at all. The only thing that might be of relevance was that they had short hair. I don't know what color though."

"Okay. Give us a call if you think of anything else important." I nod and the officers stand up and walk upstairs, me trailing behind them. When I walk in my room, I see Julia's parents standing around her, like a big human bubble.

"How is she doing?" I ask, slowly walking toward them all.

"She's ok. Not hurt. But she is very scared and frazzled", her mom says, a look of sadness on her face. One of the officers walks up to the bed with surprising calmness.

"Hello Julia. I hope you are feeling well. We want to know if you are okay with us talking right now or if you want to wait until tomorrow when you are less tired and comfortable."

She looks around, contemplating, but her mother has already decided for her. "She will wait to tomorrow."

She looks at my mom. "Jennifer, would it be okay if we stayed here for the rest of the night?"

"Of course."

"Thank you." She looks at my mom with such gratitude and I realize how she must feel. Her child was missing for almost three days.

"Is it okay if I talk to Julia Mrs. Elrod?"

"Of course Gracie!"

I walk up to Julia and sit down on the bed. "Hey Julia. How are you?"

"I'm good. Thank you so much for grabbing me outside."

"It was no problem. I would do anything for you."

"Me too." She smiles for the first time tonight, and that is all I need to make me happy.

7:39 - Julia -

I wake up and there is an unfamiliar blanket that is piled on top of me. There is a leaf in my hair, my clothes are dirty and my sleeve is torn. Then I remember what happened last night. How Gracie saved me and my parents are asleep on the floor next to Gracie's bed, the one I'm in now. I sit up and I have a headache right away.

Mom wakes up and smiles. "Hi, honey. How are you feeling?"

"I feel good. What happened last night? I don't remember details."

"The police want to interview you later. Around ten o'clock."

I nod my head "okay" and get out of bed. I don't know what to do so I just go downstairs where I find Gracie sitting on the sofa with a book in her hands.

"Hi Gracie."

I see her jump slightly and then when she realizes it's me, she smiles. "Good morning Julia." She pats the seat on the sofa right next to her, motioning for me to sit down next to her. I sit there and curl up next to her, her warm skin next to mine.

"How are you feeling Julia? "

"I'm okay. "

"Do you want to talk about it? "

"No. I just want to be here right now. "

"Okay. " And with that, we sit in the silence for what seems like an eternity, me sitting right next to her, snuggling close like a child. But I like it here, in this silence, where the only sound is our breathing, and the soft sound of the page of Gracie's book turning. I close my eyes and without realizing it, drift off into peaceful sleep.

8:00 - Gracie -

I really care about Julia. She is the nicest and most wonderful person. I cannot believe that something like this happened to her. She's been asleep for about twenty minutes and she is pressed against me, her warm skin tingling against mine. I'm reading my book when she stirs. She yawns and it makes me smile.

"Hey Julia. " She smiles back and rubs her eyes. " Whats that smell? "

"My dad is making bacon in the kitchen. " She sniffs the air and for some reason I feel a rush of energy and rap her in a hug. She pulls me to the ground and she hugs me back.

When I let go she is smiling sadly. " Whats wrong? "

"Nothing. I'm just so happy to be back. "

"Wells hen are you going to talk to me bout it? "

"After the police interview. " I smile and nod my head. "

Wanna go watch a movie? " Julia says.

"Do we have time? "

"Yeah. I'm not hungry anymore. I snuck a bunch of food last night. "

"Okay. Let's go upstairs." We get up and walk upstairs, wen we get to my room me and I flop onto the bed.

"Do you want to take a quick shower?"

" Oh, I guess thats a good idea. " She walks into the bathroom and about ten minutes later she walks back in in jean and a red sweatshirts, and thats when I realize that the clothes are mine.

"Is it okay if I wear this?" she says grinning.

" Well you already have it on sooo... "

" Is that a yes? "

"Yes, it is a yes " She grins again and flops on the bed next to me. I turn on the TV on my wall and put on a movie. After a while into the movie Julia has moved right next to me, her skin again pressed right next to mine. It feels like sparks and tingles. I try not to look, but in my periphery and I see her smiling.

9:45 - Julia -

I am in the car, my mom driving. I'm looking out the window, amd the only thing that I am thinking of, is Gracie. But I am nervous to talk to the police. I have been trying to shove the last three days in the back of my mind.

"How are you feeling? "

"Mom I'm fine. You have to drop me off at the doors so that I can talk to the officers. "

"I'm so very sorry about what happened. I love you. "

"Love you mom. " I unbuckle, open the door and walk outside and then into the building.

" Hello Julia. Follow me, the room is right over here. " The officer opens the door and leads me inside.

10:00 - Transcript between Julia Elrod and Officer Turner -

" Hello Julia. "

" Hello. "

" Now as you know, this interview is being recorded. "

" Yes. "

" We are here to talk about what happened three days ago. "

“ Yes. “

“It seems like you are nervous about this. I want you to know that nothing you say here will be released to the public. Now, will you tell me about everything that happened? “

“Yes. I was sitting in the garden when I heard a sound, and then there was a bag over my head. I screamed but no one heard me. I felt someone pick me up and set me down somewhere, I think that it might have been a car or truck. We drove for about thirty minutes I think, but it could have been more. The person picked me up again and we went through a door, into what seemed like a warehouse. He sat me down and pulled the bag over my head. “

“What did the man look like? “

“He had wavy black hair and dark blue eyes, he was wearing a dark green t-shirt and ripped jeans. He didn’t tell me who he was but he was very mean. “

“Mean like how? “

“Well he barely fed me, only cold canned beans, and he would tell me to do things, and if I didn’t, then he would hit me. I did that for almost three days, but that night Gracie found me I got out. While he wasn’t looking, I ran out of the warehouse into the dark street and tried to run to my house, but ended up at Gracie’s. The man was chasing me when he saw that I got outside. At one point he grabbed my arm and I felt something sharp on my shoulder, he had a knife and had cut my shirt, and my skin. I didn’t want anyone to know. “

“Are you okay? May I see the cut? “

“Yeah you can. “

“That doesn’t look good. You need to get that checked out. Tell your mom to run you to the hospital on the way home. “

“Is that all? “

“One more thing. Do you have any idea where you were? “

“I think I was at the Warehouse on Arch street, but I’m not sure. “

“Of course! “

“Of course what? “

“Well a few days ago we saw a figure run past the camera the night before you were found. It might have been your captor. “

“I tried to run that night but I hit a dead end. I just said that I was lost in the warehouse. You should check there. “

“ Is there anything that he said to you that night? “

“Well... there is one thing. He said that he would find me again. “

“Okay. We will look into everything you said. Remember to check that shoulder. Have a good day. “

“You too! “

11:00 - Julia

I walk out of the hospital and my shoulder feels as if it is pulsating. They looked at it and it was infected, on account of me leaving it for a day. They had to open it and clean it out, then they wrapped it in a bandage. I know that Gracie is going to freak out about this.

11:15 - Gracie

I can’t believe that Julia was stabbed and didn’t even tell me. I know that she knew I would make a big deal out of this but I had no choice. We go up to my room and I put on a movie, one that Julia picked and she curls up next to me, and within minutes she is snoring softly with my arm around her. She should have told me. But I can’t think about it now. I just have to make sure that Julia is okay. I let her sleep, but get up and get out my phone. I find the number I’m looking for and hit call. It rings four times before the person on the other side picks up.

“Officer Wheeler, Hey. “

“Hello Gracie. What can I do for you today? “

“Well as you know, my friend Julia has been back for a few days and she just came home with her shoulder in a bandage, I just wanted to make sure that you know that she was stabbed by the person that took her. “

"Yes I do know that. We are trying to find and locate who might have, apprehended Julia. "

"Okay. Is there anything that I could do to help Julia? "

"There is one thing. "

"What is it? "

"If you could talk to Julia, get some important facts out of her. I know she tried hard to tell us things but we don't have all the information that we need. Some people close up with the police, but I believe that you being her best friend, can get something out of her. "

"Okay. I can do that. Thank you very much Officer Wheeler. "

"Your welcome Gracie. " He hangs up and I slump into the beanbag chair in the corner of my room.

I walk over to my side table to get my book and read while Julia is asleep, but all of a sudden, I hear Julia talking to herself. " Stay away from me you monster! Who even are you? I just want to go home! "

I look over at her and she is gripping tightly onto the duvet under her. I quickly sit on the bed and touch her arm. She wakes up with a start. " Gracie? "

"Hey Julia. I would ask if your okay but... "

"I know. "

"Do you want to talk about it? "

"Yeah, yeah I do. "

11:25 - Julia

"It all started when the man took the bag off my head. He had wavy black hair and dark blue eyes, he looked scary too. He wasn't nice to me either. He would yell at me a lot and he would hit my arm if I did something wrong. He gave me canned beans for food and small amounts of water in a little baby cup. Me and him were the only ones in the warehouse for those three days. He made me do things that took a long time and were not fun to do. He would make me haul boxes across the room for him and then put them back. I never knew what was in those boxes but they must have been important because I was never allowed to look in them. Some days he would say that he was going out for a little bit and that he was going to lock the doors while he was gone. I didn't have a bed, but there were some burlap sacks in the corner of the warehouse so I always slept there. The man went somewhere near the entrance at night, there might have been a mattress there, I'm not sure. There was only one time I ever heard his name, I'm not even sure that was his name. He was on a call with someone and he thought I was asleep so he put it on speaker phone. The person on the other end said " ...*Jack Williams*... " I'm not sure who it was though. It could have been anybody. That night, the night you found me, he was in another part of the warehouse and I decided to run, to get out. I ran to the front door and pulled open the latch, thank goodness it wasn't locked. Once I was outside I just started running as fast as I could. I didn't dare to slow down or stop. And then I heard another set of pounding feet and I froze. The steps got closer and I started running again. Right before I turned onto your street he grabbed me by the arm and well, you know. I pushed him off and turned the corner and when you came out I didn't even think. I was so scared when you grabbed me. I thought it was him. I don't remember the rest of the night. It's all blurry in my head. So yeah. That's it. That's what happened. "

I stare at Gracie and her eyes are open wide, her mouth ajar slightly.

"Oh my gosh Julia. I'm so sorry. I promise that nothing like that will ever happen again. "

"I know that. The thought still scares me sometimes though. "

Gracie pulls me in for a hug and I wince as a sharp pain shoots through my shoulder. " Gracie? "

"Yeah?

"Would you let go? "

"Um... yeah, why? "

"Your sort of crushing my shoulder. "

She lets go instantly and looks embarrassed. " Oh my goodness, I am so sorry. Uggg, I am so stupid!

"Hey, It's not your fault that I got stabbed! " I said it as a joke but I could tell that Gracie didn't take it as a joke. "So, do you want to take a walk? " I say to try and lighten the mood.

" Um, sure! "

11:42 - Gracie -

A while after we set off for our walk we walked passed the warehouse and there were police cars *everywhere*

"Whoa..." Julia mumbled as she looked at the scene in front of us.

"I know right! I wonder what's happening! "

And then we both see him at the same time. "Oh my god. " Julia says.

"What?"

"That's *him*." I realize what she is saying and then try to grab her arm and pull her away. She doesn't resist.

We burst into Julia room, I look at her and my heart crumples. She looks terrified and sad at the same time, she might even be crying.

"Oh Julia. I'm so sorry. "

Julia just sits on the bed, in silence. I embrace her in a hug and she weeps silently into my shoulder, her tears rolling down her cheeks and onto my shoulder. I guess her mom heard because she peeks in the door with a concerned look on her face.

"Whats wrong?" Julia's mom says.

"We were on a walk and, well lets just say that we saw someone *bad*."

"Oh my."

"Yeah."

"Would you like me to leave you guys alone?"

"f you wouldn't mind. "

"Of course not."

" Thanks Mrs. Elrod." She gently closes the door behind her and I hear her footsteps as she walks away. Julia stops crying and escapes my grip, slowly collecting herself.

"Julia..."

" Would you go? Please? "

" Julia.. "

"I said go! "

"Okay. Just let me know if you want to talk about it. "

"I will. Bye Julia. "

12:38 - Julia -

I feel really bad about snapping at Gracie but I just needed to be alone. I can't even bare to think about him, let alone look at him, *see* him. I still remember exactly what happened in that warehouse and it still feels like a dream, but I know it isn't. My shoulder aches and all I can think about is what it was like before all this, when all I had to think about was my grades. My parent have been making me see a therapist and it helps but I can't shake that feeling that this is part of something bigger, something more important then me. Then I get a text from Gracie:

Gracie: Hey, I know your still mad at me but I needed to tell you something. When you were telling me all about what happened, I was recording it for the police. They said that they needed it to find who did it, and I guess it worked. And I stoped it once you were done talking, I promise. You can be as mad at me but you want but I needed to tell you. I'm sorry.

At first, I'm furious but then I realize what Gracie did for me. She made sure that the police could find " Jack Williams " and I won't have to worry that he will find me again.

Julia: thank you

Julia: im not mad i promise

I let out a breath and I wonder how Jack Williams feels right now, what he is thinking, what he thought in those months I was there. But for now, all I have to do is be a normal teen, just wait for what happens next, and hope for the best.

The End



Whispers in the night –Diya Kot

“Let's go back, I don't have a good feeling about this.”

“Shut up Anne, stop being so paranoid, it's time we escaped that living hell.”

“You know what happened to my parents when they went for a night walk in the woods right, Noah?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know your parents went missing in the woods but that was 10 years ago.”

“Aren't you a single bit afraid that something very bad may happen if you enter the woods in the middle of the night.”

“Why should I? It's not even like your parent's dead bodies were found in the woods so they must have moved somewhere else or something.”

“Don't you hear yourself, my parents loved me, and they would have never left me.”

“YOUR LUCKY ENOUGH YOU EVEN MET YOUR PARENTS.”

“IT'S NOT MY FAULT YOUR PARENTS ABANDONED YOU.”

“SHUT UP YOU MORON.”

“YOU'RE CALLING ME A MORON.”

“YEAH, YOU WHO ELSE.”

“ALRIGHT LEAVE BUT DON'T CRY FOR HELP WHEN YOU ARE IN TROUBLE.”

“FINE, NOW GO BACK TO THAT PRISON AND REMEMBER NO ONE WILL BE THERE TO PROTECT YOU WHEN YOU GET BULLIED.”

“ALRIGHT MORON IT WAS NICE KNOWING YOU.”

“COULDN'T SAY THE SAME FOR YOU.”

Authors POV

Anne and Noah are both orphans who grew up together at Fermen Orphanage. Noah never knew his parents since they left him on the steps of the orphanage 15 years ago. Anne moved to the orphanage when she was 5 years old. Her beloved parents went missing in the woods and their bodies were never found. Anne was assigned the same room as Noah and as they grew up together, they became best friends. Living at the orphanage is like living in hell as they get showers only once a week, only 2 portions of food a day, 3 glasses of water, and a thin mattress to sleep on. Anne was always mistreated at the orphanage because of her thick glasses and dark skin. But Noah did not care how she looked and always defended her.

(10 hours ago) Noah POV

I hate this place. It is filthy, dirty, and the conditions here are so grim. The only thing that is helping me get through this is my best friend Anne who is currently helping me do the dishes.

“I hate it here so much.” Anne said, irritated.

“About that, I was thinking we could escape tonight.” I said casually.

“Are you nuts, we could get into so much trouble if we were caught and where would we go.”

I explained to her my plan of escaping through the window and then running to the Life Ray Orphanage where many kids got adopted every day. At the orphanage they were staying in, kids rarely got adopted and the few that got adopted were young children. Noah and Anne at 15 years old had no chance of finding a new home here. At the new orphanage they were planning to go once they escaped, kids ranging from all ages were adopted and the orphanage was in a city where many families without kids lived.

Anne POV

I was at first very unsure about Noah's plan, but I soon gave in since I hated it here too. We packed the little clothes, food, and water they had and got ready for 9:00 P.M which was the time they set out to escape. Once the clock struck nine, we carefully opened the window and crawled out stealthily. We quietly climbed the fence and ran when we heard the alarm go off. After what felt like hours of running, we stopped to catch our breath. We made it out. I shot a wide smile at Noah who smiled back. But where to go now.

“You know the way to the orphanage, right?” I questioned “Right this way milady.” he said excitedly

I chuckled at his cuteness. After 30 minutes of walking, we stopped at the entrance of the willow woods. I felt a shiver down my spine. There was no way I was going into the woods at night and the memory of my parents haunted me then.

“Let's go back, I don't have a good feeling about this.” I said feeling terrified

“Shut up Anne stop being so paranoid, it's time we escaped that living hell.” he said back ignorantly

Anne POV (present time)

That was how the argument started. I ended up coming back to the orphanage and was greeted by a tight slap.

“WHERE DID YOU THINK YOU WERE GOING AND WHERE IS THAT STUPID BOY.”

Mrs. Nancy Shrieked

“He ran away” I mumbled . I felt another burn on my cheek

“GO BACK TO YOUR ROOM AND TOMORROW YOU GET NO FOOD AND HAVE TO DO ALL THE CHORES.” she roared

I quietly went to my room and sobbed the whole night. Not because of my punishment, but because my only friend was gone.

Noah POV (Present time)

I was walking through the pitch-black woods thinking of how my best friend or should I say ex-best friend betrayed me. It was damp, wet, and I could hear the grasshoppers dancing around in the night.

“You dare come here.” an airy voice whispered

A chill went down my spine. “W-Who is h-here, show y-yourself” I stuttered

“You should have never shown your ugly face here.” another voice whispered.

“H-huh” I stood there frozen not knowing what to do. Was I dreaming? I had to be. I kept walking for about 30 more minutes with the feeling somebody was following me. I kept looking over my shoulder about every minute even though I couldn’t see anything through the blackness of the night just to make sure. Just as I thought I was safe; I felt a big thud on my chest making me fall on my butt.

“You should have left when you had the chance.”

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH”

Anne POV (In the morning)

“You could have saved him and your parents but you’re just too afraid, aren’t you.”

“B-b-but I was 5.”

“What about the boy, he was there for you but you abandoned him.”

“STOP”

Chuckling, “So ignorant, I hope he survives but I really doubt it.”

“AAAAAHHHH”

I woke up and realized I had been sweating in my sleep. Tears started falling from my eyes.

“It's just a dream, calm down.” I told myself

Anne POV (A week later)

This last week has been the worst week of my life. Mrs. Nancy is making my life more miserable than it already is, the kids are picking on me again because of my glasses, and sadly that’s not the worst part. I have been feeling devastated since Noah left. I have no one to talk to either. No one to cheer me up in this prison. A few days before, I overheard the counsel talking to the police and how they were starting a search for Noah. I became scared for my friend. What would happen to him? Would he be, okay?

Noah POV

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH”

(One week later)

I woke up in a large dark wet cave after what seemed like an hour. I was trying to remember what happened and it struck me.

“W-what is g-going on, is a-anybody here.”

I became terrified after remembering what happened.

“Why didn’t I just listen to Anne.” I cried

“I’m so stupid, I’m so stupid, I’m so stupid.”

After feeling pity for myself, I realized I was lost in the dark woods, I had nowhere to go.

Anne POV

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU CAN’T FIND HIM,” I screamed at the police officer

“I’m sorry ma’am, but your friend shouldn’t have run away.” he said back casually.

I felt burning rage. How could they just give up looking for him. The poor boy was lost in the dark and God knows what’s in those woods. I stormed into my room and left. If anybody could find him, it would be me. I had to take one for the team. Just as I was climbing the fence, the alarms rang.

“Not this again.”

I ran. I ran as fast as a Cheetah. Nothing was going to stop me from finding my best friend even if it meant I had to go through the dark woods.

Noah POV (2 hours later)

I don’t know what to do. I’m lost in these stupid dark woods, and no one is coming to find me. But the only thing I’m praying for is for those ghosts to disappear. But I had to admit, they kind of looked familiar.

Flashback

“AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH”

“Leave boy, you don’t want to face the consequences.”

“S-s-s-s-stay a-a-away.”

I saw an airy figure in front of me. Actually two. A male and a female.

“Leave, boy, and never return!” The male figure said.

I fainted out of shock, what had I seen?

Anne POV (2 hours later)

I had made it to the woods, and I had this tingle in my stomach. I had to fight through it.

“NOAH.....Are you here?”

No luck.

“NOAH.....WHERE ARE YOU?”

“I can lead you to your friend.” a female voice whispered

“Huh....Who’s there?”

“You don’t remember us, what a shame.”

Another male voice said, "Why did these voices sound so familiar?"

Why wasn’t I scared of them? “W-who are you?”

“5 years old.”

And then I realized who they were. No, it can’t be, they were dead. “M-mom, d-dad.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I thought you were dead?”

“We are.”

Suddenly, a white glowing figure appeared in front of me.

“Mom?”

Another one appeared

“Dad?”

“We'll take you to your friend, but promise me one thing, never come back.” “Why?”

“This place is dark and dangerous, you're lucky me and your dad found your friend before any other spirit did.”

Noah POV (1 hour later)

“NOAH”

“ANNE, ARE YOU HERE?”

I saw a small girl coming towards me. Anne, she came for me. But wait, what were those creatures behind her.

“Anne, b-behind you.”

“Meet my parents.” she said normally

No wonder they looked so familiar. They looked exactly how Anne described her parents at the orphanage.

5 years later (Author POV)

Anne and Noah still remember what happened five years ago. They ended up going to Life's Ray Orphanage and getting adopted by a family together as they were inseparable. They started dating a year after and got married 3 years later. Noah is a successful lawyer and Anne is a teacher. They could not have gone this far if it weren't for Anne's ghost parents who helped them along the way.

