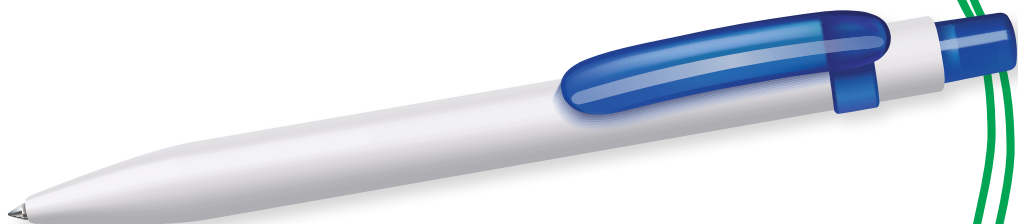


It's All WRITE

★ 2021 ★

Short Story Writing Contest for Teens

MIDDLE AND
HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS



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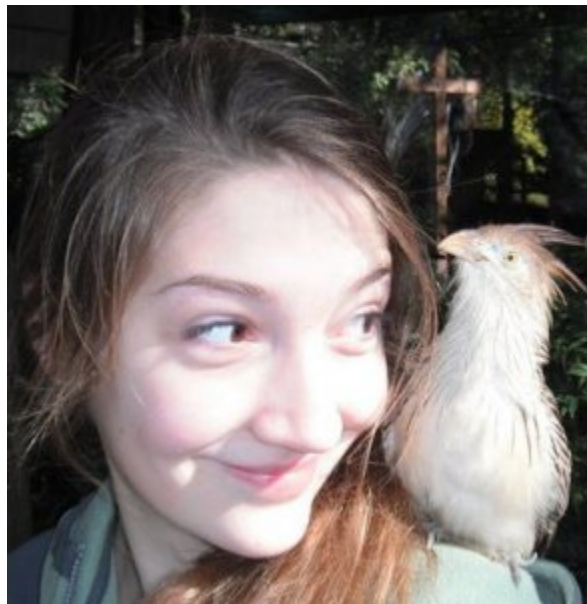
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These stories are included in their original format and text, with editing made only to font and spacing.

A special thanks to the author who ranked this year's winning stories.

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Middle School Winners

First Place: Treason

By Faith Lustig

I don't have much time. There is nothing left to do. The war is over. And we lost. / lost. My lieutenants are gone, dead, or driven into hiding. I have been captured, and I will die soon.

I told them I would lead. That I would win back what has been taken from them so many times. I told them that I would give them a ruler who would truly help them. It wasn't just talk, either. Our country needs freedom and I tried my best to give it to them.

I really thought we would win this time. I've seen several failed uprisings over the span of my nineteen years. I've known men who have seen more than a dozen. I thought this one would be it. The last one. The one that would free us, give us the liberty we haven't seen in almost a century.

Throughout my life, I've seen many people die for this cause. My father, for one. My brother, too. Men who would rather be killed than surrender. Good men, and bad ones. Brave women who fought for their sons and daughters. Children who didn't even understand what their parents were fighting for, but refused to give them up for anything.

Our country has been in turmoil for decades, under a line of tyrants. On the day my father and brother were hanged for high treason, I made an oath. An oath that would end when my people were free. I regret not being able to fulfill it before my death. Nothing would have made me happier than to dethrone the man who has killed thousands of my countrymen without mercy, in the name of the kingdom's safety.

My cell is as cramped and disgusting as it could possibly be. The hands that have killed ten of the most influential lords and nobles in the kingdom are finally in chains. They are shackled above my head, the metal cutting into my wrists. My feet barely touch the ground, putting all of my weight on my shoulders and wrists. A form of torture in itself. I guess they couldn't wait to make me suffer.

I didn't get a trial. Leading a full-scale rebellion seemed to be enough to convict me. And stating on multiple occasions that I'd rather be drowned in sewer water and eaten by fish than live any longer with our current king. I could have thought of several things much more offensive to say, but because I'm so nice, I decided to keep my contempt in check. I thought it would be worth the wait, and that I'd be able to finally let it out through a sword.

Through the thick bars of the window, I can see the sun coming up. Not much longer to live. At nine a.m., sharp, I will be publicly beaten, then hung. Quite a painful way to die. I can't say I'm looking forward to it.

I find my thoughts drifting not to the defeat, my capture, and the killing of my men, but to something I'd almost completely forgotten about. Apple trees. We had an orchard many years ago, before my father's lands were taken. I haven't eaten in what I guess to be almost two days, but as I think about those trees, I can taste the crisp fruits as perfectly as if I had just bitten into one. I remember picking them for hours with my brother, Henry. He would lift me onto his shoulders, where I could reach deep into the branches, where the ripest apples would be. I can picture the sunny days, when the breeze would lift my skirts around me, whipping my hair into my face and rustling the branches.

The image in my mind shifts to the faces of my family. Henry and I looked so much alike. Our looks alone identified us as O'Connors. We both had the same tan skin and our parents' big eyes. I had my father's clear blue irises, and Henry had my mother's gray-green ones. We had the same tall build, although he was much bigger and stronger than me. His hair was the same spun-gold color as our mother's, who died when Henry was ten and I was barely six, old enough to remember her, young enough to not be much affected by her loss. I have the same deep brown hair as my father did, a woodsy and rather uninteresting brown.

As I wade through the faded memories of my family, a humbling question appears in my head.

Will I be forgotten?

Not by history, of course. I will be painted as either a martyred hero or a murderous rebel. I do not doubt my fame, which might be better described as infamy. I'm sure I'll have a page in some book, somewhere. But that isn't what I worry about now. I worry about being forgotten as a *person*. I have no idea if there is anyone left alive who remembers *me*. Not the stories, or the legends, although there are quite a lot of those.

I hope someone out there will remember me as all I really am. A girl, a friend, someone who simply wanted her neighbors to be safe and happy, who didn't want war and suffering, but had to fight anyway. As a citizen who wanted what was best for her country, but got a little lost trying to find it.

I wonder if my father would be proud of me. My father, before his downfall, had actually been a nobleman. His lands were taken away after took the wrong side of an important

political issue, going against the king and his lackeys. This put him in the king's disgrace and sent our whole family down with him. My father had always tried to represent the people, and the king's obvious shunning of their well-being showed him that a change was desperately needed.

And so, the family business began. My father, along with Henry, who was twenty at the time, started again one of the most dangerous games in history. They led an underground movement, trying at first a more peaceful strategy, by attempting to win over influential nobles and spreading stories of the king's selfishness and clear disinterest in the good of the kingdom.

The plan almost seemed to work, until a betrayal left their efforts completely devastated and many of the participants for dead. Including my father and brother, and several of my closest friends. The traitor was one of the king's counselors, someone we thought for sure was on our side. He had realized that leaking our plan to the king would bring him more wealth and would put him in the king's spotlight. He wasn't wrong. He's now the king's right hand, and my father and his friends are dead.

To be clear, I didn't do all of this for revenge. I would never stoop that low. Although I would certainly have enjoyed making the men who ordered so many deaths suffer. I didn't pick up my father's sword simply to avenge him. Believe me, many more people would have died by my hands if that were the reason.

I did do it for my people though. But not just for the tens of thousands who have been killed for the same cause over the years. I did it for the people who still live in my country and for the ones who will live here in the years to come. I did it because I didn't want any more

people to suffer as I did. To have to watch their friends and family die uselessly for simply trying to make their towns better places to live in. I did it because I wanted to help. And even though it didn't work out for me, I don't regret it. I gave my life for something I believed in. That's all anyone can ever do.

So, as the sun rises and my death inches closer, my fear melts away. My death will be painful and bloody, like the many I've seen before. I will not leave this earth peacefully, with kids and a loving husband, with the life I had tried to give to others. I always knew, somewhere deep down, that I would not have a serene life. And as I fell deeper into what I knew to be treason, I prepared myself for all kinds of pain. The pain of losing more friends, people close to me. The pain of war, of rebellion. The pain of death.

But I'm not afraid. As I walk to death, I will look my king in the eyes and see what I was fighting for. I hope that my death will show him his faults. I hope it shows him that something must change if teenagers have turned into killers and people are willing to sacrifice everything they had for this.

I have made mistakes, strewn farther from the path than I had ever intended. But as the door to my cell whines open, and as my shackles are unlocked, I know that I am ready.

Second Place: A Collection of Colorful Poems

By Acadia Kincaid

Rainbow

Most of them laugh

when I tell them about my friend.

Some of them avoid my eyes, anxious

when they realize I am serious.

For comedy

they ask me what she looks like again.

So I retell.

She is not one color

like you or me.

She is rainbow.

That is when most of them leave.

School

You are so weird.

What is wrong with you?

Did you hit your head?

Students secretly whisper. Sometimes
they yell.

I never pay attention
to them.

Because why

is it so bad

to believe

in something good?

Snow

Me

and my friend

lay in the

soft

white

snow.

We stare

up at the blue sky

letting snowflakes fall

on our faces,

melting from our warmth.

Everyone should be out in the snow.

My friend says.

I agree

They are probably inside on electronics

afraid of the cold.

My friend puts her hand up to the sky

letting snow pile

in her palm.

The snow turns to water

dripping down

the sides

of her hand.

What a shame.

She tells me

New Girl

There is a new girl

at school.

No one talks to her

because

for some reason

you have to be

accepted.

And though

most students are soon accepted,

I never

was

3 Braves

New Girl is brave.

When she

is shunned

she keeps her head up,

unlike me.

New Girl is also brave

because she sits

next to me at lunch

like no one else has.

My name is Aesira.

She smiles.

Aesira is brave.

Especially

Tell me about your friend

Aesira asks.

I hesitate.

I did not want another

person to laugh

or think

I'm crazy

especially Aesira.

But

I will tell Aesira

Especially

Aesira.

Further

The wind blows

hard.

I stay

next to Aesira

holding my jacket

close.

Aesira laughs

Don't get blown away!

I don't tell her

that sometimes

I feel so light

I would already

be gone

like a dandelion seed

floating

away

and

away.

Everything

Aesira is at track practice

so I sit under a tree

alone.

I call my friend.

Yes?

She asks.

Aesira is gone.

I slump

into the tree.

You could do something.

My friend points out.

But I am not good at everything as you are.

My friend frowns.

Everyone can be good at everything,

you just try.

Bike ride

I ride my bike today

with Aesira.

We stop

to take a break.

She takes a sip of her water

and I ask

Do you believe in ghosts?

She thinks

No.

Hm, I find most people don't believe in things

they are afraid of.

I tell her.

English

I have to read a book

for english.

Funny how they call it

english,

we don't learn english;

we write.

Funny how I can write,

but I rarely want to speak english.

But In The

Flower petals

open

and the sky

is blue.

Aesira much rather the spring's beauty

but in the summer

the sun

shines, radiant,

and of course

there is no school.

And in autumn

the trees are artists.

I do not like calling it fall

because

we should rise.

In the winter

white sparkles everywhere,

the frost chilling our bones

making us

thank

our warmth.

But in the spring

flower petals

open

and

the sky

is blue.

The Room

This time

the room is colorful;

painted

for happiness,

though happiness

is not

what I feel.

Pain

pain

pain

is what the walls

should be painted.

Smile

My parents

are not here

so my friend

sits

at the end of my bed.

Smile

My friend tells me.

It is too hard

I reply

slowly.

Life is hard,

but you should go through it

with a smile.

Whisper

Nurses surround my bed

and my parents

whisper, worriedly

as if

I can't hear them.

I try

to open my eyes,

but it is

so

so

hard.

Better

Aesira is here.

She cries

with her face

in her hands

in a white chair

beside my bed.

I feel better

I tell her

even though

I do not.

She looks up

and wipes her eyes.

I hope

she tells me

you always feel better,

a thousand times better.

Her tears

run down her face

pouring onto her shirt.

You will get your shirt soaked

I tell her

and I smile

because life is hard

and Aesira makes it better.

Times

Sometimes I sleep

through night

and day.

Sometimes I stare

up at the ceiling

never

falling asleep.

Sometimes I want to talk

and sometimes I feel mute.

Most of the time

I do nothing.

Most of the time

I want to do everything.

You Won't Be Lonely

There are flowers

next to me

and there is Aesira smiling

next to me.

Who are the flowers for?

I ask her.

You, silly!

She laughs.

Thank you.

I smile.

She nods

I had a question for you.

Yes?

You said your friend is rainbow,

not like you or me.

I'd like to learn to be rainbow too.

Is there a way?

She asks.

Of course there is a way!

Anybody can be rainbow,

just most people don't see it.

Aesira nods

thinking.

You will have to meet my friend.

She will like you and will be lonely without me.

I tell her.

Aesira looks hurt.

Don't worry

you won't be lonely

you will have my friend.

Aesira's afterword

In english

we learned

how to write poems

and my friend

taught me new ones.

Third Place: Revenge is Sweet

By Sanica Rao

Adaline Vernier sat at her table, drumming her fingers on the mahogany wood. She was waiting for someone, glancing at the door every now and then, peering out of the windows. Her face was set in a serious, grim expression as she checked her phone for the thousandth time, re-reading the text that set her plan into action.

Hey, you wanna catch up sometime?

yea, I do

Meet me at the italian restaurant at 5th street tomorrow

sure

Then, later:

I miss you

Adaline internally gagged. Disgusting. Of course, she had no plan to “catch up” with Julian anytime soon, but giving him a false sense of security was crucial to her plan. “When’s he gonna get here?” said Noah, dressed as a waiter. He pulled at his apron, looking extremely uncomfortable. “You think he ghosted you?”

“I’m still a Vernier, aren’t I?” she said, her voice loaded with annoyance that wasn’t quite directed at her brother. She turned back to her phone, brushing her dark locks out of her eyes. “He knows that he didn’t steal *all* my money.”

“True, true.” said Noah, dropping the subject. They were the only ones at the restaurant, which might have looked suspicious, but this place didn’t usually get very many customers. It was a quaint little italian dine-in, bright and airy. Ill-fitting for what was about to happen inside.

“For what it's worth, Addy, you look beautiful.” A pale, red-headed girl around Adaline’s age turned to her, sitting at another table.

Adaline gave her a slight smile, ignoring the use of her hated nickname.

“Thanks, Beatrice, but let’s focus on the matter at hand.”

“Of course.”

“You all know your roles, correct?” Adaline asked. Her accent slipped back into her voice, as it always did when she was stressed or angry. And now she was a mixture of both.

Her father had always compared her to a cobra. Exotic, beautiful from a distance, but when angry?

Dangerous.

Fatal.

“Of course.” said Noah. His friend, Javier, stuck his head out from the kitchen and echoed Noah.

“He’s here.” said Beatrice, peeking out the window. The words sent a flood of adrenaline through her veins. Sure enough, a man around Adaline’s age with

blond hair and gold dripping off of his neck and wrists was walking toward them, a slow, lazy expression on his face. Adaline shot Julian a death glare that he luckily seemed to miss.

“Positions, everyone!” she called, turning back to her posse. Noah and Javier ducked into the kitchen and tried to act busy, while Beatrice turned back to her table, opening a book, her back facing the front door.

She fidgeted with a ring emblazoned with a rose crest, the symbol of the Verniers. A nervous habit. The double doors swung open, and Julian sauntered inside. Adaline smiled at him, beckoning him to her table.

“Hey, Addy.” He had even more of an accent than she did.

“Hi, Julian.” said Adaline, inwardly cringing at the nickname but being careful to show him her (fake) happiness. “It’s nice to see you after all this time.”

“Me, too.” His face fell. “My condolences for the loss of your father and your.. gold, I hear? Word travels fast around these parts.”

He was still a wonderful liar, but he could never fool her. “Thank you. And yes, someone stole our gold from our deposit box in the bank. Not a huge loss, but we suffered all the less.” She stared at him, watched him fidget under her gaze. This was.. amusing.

She leaned back, smiling. Julian seemed to relax. He ran a hand through his hair.

“You look well off.” she said, gesturing at his gold chains and his watch. “Father left you his fortune, right?”

"Yes, though I would give all of it to have him back." Julian said, sorrow in his voice, his face falling. *Another lie.*

There was a brief silence. Words seemed to be hanging at the tip of Julian's tongue, as if he was reluctant to speak.

"Adaline, I want to apologize for what I did-" His speech seemed to burst out of his mouth, his words fast and hurried. It didn't seem to be an act, a show, but that didn't matter to Adaline. Not anymore.

Adaline waved her hand dismissively, smiling, while her mind roared with fury. *You cheated on me, you-*

"Water under the bridge, Julian. You just weren't interested in me anymore."

Julian frowned, disbelieving, before breaking into a grin. "So you forgive me?"

"Of course." said Adaline. She beckoned for Noah to come near the two, then looked at Julian. "Shall we order something?"

Noah walked up to her. "What will you like, ma'am?"

"A coffee, please."

Noah looked at Julian, who said, after a pause, "Same as her."

He doesn't recognise my own brother, thought Adaline. He's more stupid than I thought.

Noah scurried away, but not before shooting a death glare at Julian that he thankfully didn't see.

"How's Beatrice?" she asked, turning back to Julian.

"Oh, I broke up with her a few days ago. We just didn't... mesh anymore, you know?"

His accent got thicker. Honestly, he was so easy to read.

Not to mention a complete jerk. "Really?" she asked, making sure to act intrigued.

"Yes." he said, leaning forward in his seat. At his expression, Adaline had to tell herself not to get up and run far, far away from there. *It's all part of the plan*, she tried to convince herself. *The plan to get what was rightfully yours.*

Thankfully, Noah was back with their coffee.

So it starts.

"Here you go, ma'am." said Noah. "Sir." His last word had a little more poison than was normal for a waiter. But Noah seemed to catch himself, and scurried away after giving them their coffee and sugar.

Julian watched him go, looking suspicious. Adaline inhaled sharply.

Does he suspect..? She twisted her ring around her finger, trying to calm herself by running her thumb over her family crest.

"This place has the best coffee *ever*, Jules." she said, trying to bring his attention back to her.

Julian paused, searching her expression, then smiled slightly. "Really?"

"Yes!" Fear made her put more honey into her voice than she would have.

A flash of suspicion passed his face as he looked down at his coffee.

Adaline watched out of the corner of her eye as Julian tried to slyly switch the two mugs.

Adaline exhaled. *Thank the gods.* She picked up her mug and held it out to him. “You know I like it black.” She took a sip.

“And I will never understand why.” Julian said, apparently satisfied that Adaline hadn’t tried to poison him. He dumped some fine-looking sugar into his coffee.

Adaline set down her mug and took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. *This is it. This is definitely it.*

Julian gulped down his coffee.

Adaline pressed a button on her watch. A timer for 10 minutes started immediately.

All lightness and sugar left her face, replaced by a stony, ice-cold gaze.

Noah and Javier stepped out from behind the kitchen and took off their aprons.

Julian fidgeted, not meeting her eyes.

“You know what you did, don’t you?” she asked.

“Addy, what’s going on-”

“Don’t act like you don’t know.” Poison crept into her voice.

“What..? I-”

"You were the only one who could have stolen the keys to my safe deposit box. You were the only one who had the keys to my apartment." Adaline leaned forward. "The day after you left me, the day I found out, you headed to the bank with my keys. You took my gold.

"She looks at her ring, nonchalant. "But I'm not worried about that, Julian."

Julian stared. He was scared, she knew it.

"Inside was a tiny bottle. Full of pills. You didn't notice it, you just took everything in the box and left."

"That bottle was labeled, "Medicine". In my handwriting."

He was silent. Frozen with fear. Adaline didn't care if he knew now.

9 minutes left.

"You knew my father was sick, didn't you?" Emotion crept into her voice.

"You knew.

"You could have given the medicines back. They were the only ones of their kind, they take years to produce. You didn't know that, but you're not stupid.

You must have figured out that these medicines will cure Father's illness. Why else would they be in my top-security deposit box?

"We would have let you keep the gold. We Verniers have enough of it."

He met her eyes, searching for any mercy, any love that she still had for him. He must have found nothing, because he looked as scared as ever. Frozen at the sight of the cobra.

"I suppose you remember when father told us about his will? 'The Verniers have never given their fortune to a woman, and they never will.' One of the last things my father said."

"I'm the oldest." She glances at Noah. "My half-brothers aren't Verniers. So my father left his fortune, worth more than a billion US dollars, to my fiancée. You."

"My father is dead. You killed him, and in turn, inherited his fortune."

"And then you cheated on me. And ran. Ran with the money that should be mine."

Julian gaped at her, then closed his mouth. He seemed to realise Adaline's wasn't his "Addy" anymore.

"You're right, of course." Julian said, his accent thicker than ever. "But it's *my* money now. There's nothing you can do about that."

"You're mistaken." Adaline said, smiling. "Noah?"

"Noah?" Julian echoed, then finally recognising her brother. He seemed to come to his senses. "..This.. It was all a set up.."

"Finally." Noah said dryly. He handed Adaline the forms. She turned to Julian.

"These are forms that will transfer all of your money and property to me." Adaline said. "You will sign these."

Julian laughed, but there's fear in it. "Why should I?" But he already knew by now. She could see it in his eyes. She took a deep breath. "Because what you poured in your coffee was

not sugar. It's a special Peruvian substance that tastes exactly like sugar, except for a tiny difference."

"The Peruvian Powder is fatal within 10 minutes of digestion."

6 minutes left.

Realisation dawned on him.

"WHAT!?" Julian shouted, jumping out of his chair, but Noah's faster. He locked the front door while motioning to Javier to force him back in his chair.

"You wouldn't- GERROFF ME!" he roared. Javier let go, but fixed his gaze on Julian.

"It will be a lot easier for you if you just calm down, Julian." Adaline stared him down.

"Blood circulation and all that. Anyway, I have in my bag the antidote to the poison. I will give it to you, on the condition that you sign the forms first and never talk to me again.

"Julian's eyes darted around, glancing at my brother and Javier. "I'll sign the forms after I take the antidote, not the other way around-"

"You are *not* in a position to debate, Julian. You have..." Adaline checked her watch.

"Four minutes until your throat constricts and you suffocate."

He paled. It wasn't a good look on him.

Adaline handed him a pen and slid the forms toward him. He took the pen from me.

He signed the forms.

A wave of relief fell over Adaline, rushing through her veins, calming her. She didn't know how tense she was until now, when she finally had what was rightfully hers.

Two minutes left.

"Give me the antidote." he said, panic in his voice.

She gave him a tiny, blue pill. He swallowed it.

"Before you leave..." Adaline said. "Beatrice?"

She got up from her table. Julian hadn't noticed her in all the chaos.

"Bea..?" he said, his voice small.

"You see, I'm part of a very rich family too, Julian." Beatrice drawled, her voice cold and mocking. "You cheated on me, as you did Adaline. You stole from me, as you did Adaline."

"We can't let you steal from anyone else again, Jules." Adaline said, getting up. "Their hearts and fortunes must be protected."

One minute left.

Julian's shaking with fear. "But.. the pill.."

"Do you know what a placebo is, Julian?" Adaline asked sweetly, her voice like honey. She bent over him and in one swift motion, tugged a gold chain from his neck.

Julian was frozen to his seat. He knew that he'd been double-crossed. "You didn't..." he whispered.

"Yes." she said, her voice hard as stone. "I did."

30 seconds left.

She reached into his bag and pulled out his inhaler. Julian's had severe asthma since he was a child, his attacks are bad enough to kill him. Adaline could almost imagine the newspaper headlines now: *Former holder of Vernier fortune dies from asthma attack! Ex-fiance now has all his money!*

She turned to leave, her dress swishing behind her."

Nice touch, Adaline." Noah whispered, holding the door open for her.

"I know." She clasped the gold chain around her neck. It's hers now, anyway.

15 seconds left.

She nodded and took one last look at Julian. Adaline narrowed her eyes, a look of sheer hatred contorting her usually beautiful features.

"Pitiful." Adaline spat. Beatrice laid a hand on her shoulder and steered her out of the italian restaurant.

0 seconds left.

First Runner Up: Unparalleled

By Neil Whittier

I wake up every morning to a world unparalleled. Yet that's not the first thing that comes to mind. I don't acknowledge how brightly the sun is shining, or the remarkable but now regular feeling of the wind waltzing by. What might be for some an especially handsome morning is just another day to get through in my mind.

Sitting through traffic brings up a recurring idea in my brain. Purpose. As I think about what I am meant to do on this Earth, I don't marvel at how beautiful the grass peeking out from a crack in the sidewalk is. The idea of hope and nature standing tall against a man made world doesn't cross my mind. Instead, I continue to wonder about purpose. Why am I here? What am I supposed to do to have a fulfilling life? Do I have to invent something? Change the world? But how? An endless barrage of questions about having a meaningful life. And per usual, I get overwhelmed by these questions.

To stay on topic, I had a bagel for breakfast. Breakfast was normal, nothing special. I tend to view the world as nothing special, and I've really just gotten used to it. I may come off as a mean person with a cloud over my head, but I don't consider myself to be an Ebenezer Scrooge type person. I like to think that I am relatively kind to people. But In the midst of lively conversations, I often find myself silent, yearning for someone to pull out a crystal ball and tell me what I am supposed to do for the rest of my life. But that won't happen.

I have reached my destination. The Sunny-Side-Up Assisted Living Home looks pretty dismal, but the name suggests otherwise. The light tan bricks try to create a cheery, welcoming

mood. And even though I'm sure they want people to associate a positive connotation with Sunny-Side-Up, it doesn't make me feel very happy. There's always a musty feeling on the inside, and it always smells like flowers. It always cheers me up a bit to smell the flowers, because that means that some people still care about these old people, even if they're not what they used to be.

My grandmother Helen has been on death's doorstep for months now, and even though I should be very grateful that she's still with us, it just makes me more sad every time I see her. As I see her, it takes me back to the time we were hiking in Colorado. The wind whipping across both of our faces cruelly, yet gently. She looked at me and said "I love being here with you". I remember it so vividly, and would give anything to get back to those wonderful memories. Things are so much different now. She calls me Joe, the name of her late husband. My name is not Joe, and I think she is clinging on to any memory she can find from her time on Earth. So it does make sense that memories with Grandpa Joe would be most occurrent, but that doesn't make me any less melancholy when she doesn't remember our walks through the park, and our many rounds of rummy that we would play every time we were together. Even though she doesn't remember me, I still make it a point to visit her once a week, because somewhere in her heart she might recognize me, even though she can't express that in words.

Angelina is the caretaker that I see most often when I go to see Grandma, and she always treats Grandma like a queen, and I really appreciate that. Angelina has a way of taking even the saddest of times and sprinkling a bit of joy and light into them. It doesn't seem to faze Angelina that Grandma calls her the name of my mother, so I try to not mind either when Grandma doesn't remember my name. Even though Grandma's mind may not be in full bloom

in her later years, I still try to see her as the person she was years ago, always caring for me and about me.

Every time she speaks, whatever she says, it always has a warm layer to it, and I feel that. The name Helen means “light”, and when she says “Goodbye, Joe!” as I head out of the room and my brief visit ends, I couldn’t think of a better name for her.

The trees are barren, as they tend to be in February. Instead of looking at the trees as one of the many wonders of nature, I simply pay attention to the fact that it is too cold out and the idea that those trees really do look more vibrant in Spring. The trees just make me sad, as I see them as a perfect analogy to Grandma. They used to be so vibrant and vivacious, and then as time passed, the leaves started to fall off, much like Grandma’s memories. Unlike Grandma’s memories, these leaves will be back in good time.

There’s even more traffic than before on the way home, which leaves me more time for my mind to wander. What does the world need? How can I change the world for the better? I realize that the world needs more people like Grandma, and I figure I should tell her that, after all, she could pass any day now. It would mean so much to her.

I head back to the tan bricked facade of Sunny-Side-Up Assisted Living Home, heading inside for my weekly visit. This time, it’s oddly more quiet than usual, and it feels like what I imagine a forest would feel like without the owls and the crickets. I go over to Grandma Helen’s room, and there’s Angelina standing in the room whilst Grandma appears to be sleeping. Something doesn’t feel right. “What’s going on?” I ask Angelina. “It’s her time,” is the response.

I know what this means, and even though I knew it was a strong possibility, it doesn't make me feel any better. As I think through all of my memories with her, I almost don't want to. I don't want to feel more pain. A thought parades to the front of my mind, and I listen. When I look back on her life, I don't wonder about how much she's accomplished. I remember the positive way she went through life, and the way she made people feel.

I think about the way I make people feel, and it makes me sad to think that I have not been as nice to people as they have been to me. Grandma looked at every moment of life like she looked at our hiking trip, appreciating every second of it, because tomorrow is not promised. I can not fail to appreciate the beauty of our world, because Grandma never did. Right now, I decide that I will notice the many beauties of our world, and strive to look at the world as it really is, an everlasting showcase of beauty. My thoughts about purpose are important, and I will still strive to make an impact on the world, but that will not be the most important thing that people remember about me when my time comes.

I wake up every morning to a world unparalleled. And now that's the first thing that comes to mind. I acknowledge how brightly the sun is shining, and the remarkable but now regular feeling of the wind waltzing by. What might be for some an especially ordinary morning is another day full of opportunity in my mind.

Second Runner Up: The Crab who Saved the World

By Darcy Marcoux

One night, not long ago, a crab named Snap Shellington III was living his day-to-day life. He had a wife, Coral, and two kids, Bubbles and Clawdia. They lived under the sea, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, in a coral reef. One day when Snap had a day off from work and his kids were at school, a strange crab appeared out of nowhere. A bright light shone as he arrived in Snap's house. This stranger was an old crab with a long white beard.

"Hello," the strange crab spoke in a deep, booming voice, "I am Sebastian V. I have traveled through time, and I need you to help save the world."

Snap looked at Sebastian like he was crazy, which he probably was, "Who-? Why-? What?" Snap had so many questions, "Why are you here?"

"As I told you, you need to save the world. The humans are barely surviving on the surface and are on the brink of war; you must stop them. If you do not, the human race will die, and so will most creatures on Earth."

After a pause, Snap asked, "Why me?"

"You are special, Snap. Only you can complete this task and save the world. You are the chosen one." Sebastian's echoing voice made the words sound important.

“Ha,” Snaps chuckled, “Yeah, right, I’m not special. I’m just an ordinary crab with an ordinary life. How do you even know the world is ending?”

Sebastian shivered, “I have seen what no crab should see. I have traveled through time and seen the end of the world. Nothing survived except a few lonely birds.”

Birds. Snap hated birds; he lost many family members to them. He could not stand the thought of those monsters surviving, “Do you have any proof?”

Sebastian pulled out a futuristic tablet from his shell and tapped the screen a few times with his claws. A video appeared on the screen of fire and chaos. People screamed; humans and animals raced across the streets. After one final explosion, everything went still. Another clip appeared of Earth from the sky’s view. Everything was grey- no water, no trees, no life. *No* Snap thought *what happened to my beautiful world?* Snap came to a realization, and his eyes widened, “I can’t save the world! Look at me; I’m a crab! Have some human save the world; I can’t do it.”

Sebastian sighed, hobbled over to Snap, and placed an arm around his shoulder, “You can do this, Snap. I’ve seen it; you can save the world.”

Snap collapsed on his couch and began to think things over. If he saved the world, that would be good. He would be a hero. *But what if you die, what if you fail?* A voice in the back of his mind kept doubting himself. Snap would not let his world die, his family, his life. Snap stood up and walked over to Sebastian, “Okay, tell me what to do.”

Sebastian grinned, “I knew you would come to your senses. The first step is training.”

Snap and Sebastian spent the rest of the morning working on fighting techniques, learning about computers, and preparing to rise to the surface. Snap packed a bag of all the necessities, some food, wire cutters, a blanket, a photo of his family, and a tablet from Sebastian. He shoved his bag into his shell. Snap began to doubt himself again, but he pushed away all fear and doubt from his mind and swam out of his home. He could hear Sebastian call, “good luck!” from behind him as he swam up to the surface.

The air was icy against Snap’s face. The waves slapped at him over and over, and he dove beneath the water to avoid the ocean’s fierce waves. He swam to the closest beach, which, luckily, was deserted besides a few people in the distance. Snap looked around, then crawled up the sand towards a building labeled **BellumTech** . As Snap approached the building, he noticed revolving doors. *Great*, he thought, *just what I need right now* . He scurried toward the door. A man was walking toward him, fast. Snap slid out from under the man’s foot, panting. *Wow, this is one crazy world* . The man pushed the revolving doors, and Snap sprinted after him, just making it in the door before it swung closed. Snap, barely keeping up with the door, ran in a semicircle, and then escaped the revolving prison into the building.

There were so many people. Feet stomped all around him, and he shook in his shell. Before he knew what was happening, Snap was soaring through the air. After being airborne for what seemed like forever, Snap crashed down to the ground. A sharp crack split through the bustling air. Snap’s instinct was to stop and go back home, but he was so close; he could not quit now. Snap limped to the closest shoe and clung to the shoelace with all the strength left in him. Snap was lifted up, then down, then up, then down. The man who’s shoe he was on had

boarded an elevator. There was a high-pitched *ding*, and the doors closed. Snap gasped as the floor shook and rose. He had never felt so alive.

The doors opened to a long, deserted hallway. Snap knew he was in the right place. He ran down the hallway, checking each door that he passed. *No, not that one, or that one*, he thought, *here!* He had arrived at the computer center. Snap squeezed under the door, which was not very pleasant, and plopped in front of a lot of technology. Tens, maybe hundreds of computers were lined up, and there were giant technological boxes that Snap did not know their name. A few humans worked diligently on the computers, so Snap quietly snuck along the wall to one of the boxes. There was a small hole in it, barely large enough for Snap to fit in. Snap took a deep breath, trying to ease his nerves, and shimmied through the hole into a world of wires, outlets, and technology. Snap reached into his cracked shell and pulled out the wire cutters. There were so many wires; Snap was not sure which one to cut. There was a red wire with a skull on it, a blue wire with a water drop on it, and a yellow wire with a lightning bolt. Snap decided that the red wire must be the one that was sending the war messages. Snap held his breath and snipped the red wire. Nothing happened, then there were shouts.

“Hey!” one of the humans working on the computer called, “what happened?”

The sound of a chair scraping against the echoed through the quiet room, and Snap knew he had saved the world. *The humans must have been sending messages to different countries, which must have resulted in the war*, he thought, *since I disabled the messages, they won't fight!* Snap did a little happy dance, then shimmied his way out of the box. He could see all the humans staring at the computer and yelling at each other above him.

Snap made his way back to the elevator, then back outside. When he reached the beach, he took one final look at the above-ground world. He would miss it here; maybe he would take his family there one day. A child came running toward him, screaming, "Crab, crab!" Snap dove into the water before the child's grimy little hands could reach him and swam back home. Before returning home, he stopped at the hospital to check on his shell. Cracks covered the surface, and he had to have it replaced. Though he missed his old shell, he liked his new one more. It was more colorful than his old one.

He swam back home to find his family anxiously waiting.

"Where have you been?" Coral asked angrily, but she was clearly relieved, "We were worried about you! Don't do that again, okay?"

Snap grinned, "Okay, I won't." He and his family entered their home, and when Snap looked back, he saw Sebastian in the distance. Sebastian gave a thumbs up, then swam away. Snap floated into his house, "I think I know the perfect place to spend our vacation."

Middle School Honorable Mentions

Caroline's Christmas

By Brynn Bodily

It was late Christmas Eve in the small city of Dunkley, Idaho, and everyone was filled with the holiday spirit. Bright Christmas lights were strung across storefronts, while small, yet dazzling, Christmas trees stood proudly in the living rooms of cozy homes, and inflatable Santa Clauses and reindeer furnished their lawns. Snow fell like confectioners' sugar atop the roofs of town, while children laughed and made snow angels in their own winter wonderlands one last time before going to bed with giddy hopes for the next morning.

Caroline Mietzner, owner of a small bakery, was closing up her shop, ready to head home. She quickly scanned the room, until she was satisfied that everything was neatly in its place. With a flick of the light switch, and a quick turn of the open/close sign, she closed the door and started home to her apartment.

Her apartment was rather small, as she lived by herself, yet it was homey. She wasn't particularly old, only forty, but she had never married or had children.

Feeling a bit hungry, she rummaged through her cupboards looking for something to eat, when at last she found a box of spaghetti. After filling a pot with warm water to boil and setting it on the heat, she searched her fridge for spaghetti sauce and thought back to several years ago. Usually Caroline and her family (everyone from cousins, aunts and uncles, to great-grandparents) would have a Christmas Eve party with a filling dinner of bread bowls with soup and more. While it sounds simple, the Mietzner clan went all-out on such occasions. They made bread bowls of every kind: wheat, whole, sourdough, rye, white, buttermilk, cheddar, any type

of bread you can think of was there. Then, the soup. Caroline's mother would slave away for hours on end, conjuring up the tastiest and most flavorful soups. She would make chicken noodle soup for the kids, creamy onion bisque, piping hot cheddar and broccoli, clam chowder, and a lasagna soup- just for Aunt Edna, who wouldn't eat any other soup.

And it didn't stop there. All the women would be on kitchen duty, making their specialties. Grandmother made sweet yams in a caramel sauce with mashed potatoes. Aunt Edna would bring homemade grape juice in glass canning jars, filled to the brim with the sweet, purple-y juice, while Caroline's paternal aunt, Emma, delighted the family with her Christmas pudding and green salad. And Caroline's Great-Grandma would complement the salad with her homemade ranch dressing. After dinner, everyone would enjoy a slice of blackberry pie (so juicy it would stain your mouth for several days after) and creamy vanilla ice cream, courtesy of Grandmother.

But that had all ended for Caroline when she moved from Vermont to Idaho, several years back to pursue her career. A job had opened up for her at a bakery, and after a few years, she was able to start her own confectionery store.

Caroline had gotten so caught up reminiscing, that she hadn't noticed the water boiling, until several fat drops of hot water splattered onto her hand. Scolding herself for not paying attention, and rubbing her hand gingerly, she added the noodles and determined she would not get distracted with memories until after dinner. Whenever Caroline baked one of her treats for her bakery, she always linked them with a memory. Her customers didn't know it, but each

dessert was sentimental- a part of her childhood. She had moved to Idaho, away from her family, and brought traces of home with her in her desserts.

When dinner was finished and she had cleaned everything up, Caroline plopped down onto her favorite chair. Cotton batting spilled out of tears in the worn and tattered hazelnut leather. It was falling apart, but was almost a sin how comfortable it was. She had bought the chair used when she first moved to Idaho, for only fifteen dollars, which, in some ways, explained its condition. It reminded her of her grandfather's chair. Every year, the week before Christmas, he would dress up as Santa Claus, and interview each of his grandchildren, determining if they had been good that year or not.

Typically after her Christmas Eve dinner, Caroline would pop some popcorn (her mother's peanut butter recipe, and a hit at her bakery) and watch her favorite holiday film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. But not tonight. Tonight, she was content to wrap herself in a large, fluffy blanket and walk herself down memory lane, while the fire crackled in the hearth.

Caroline started speaking slowly, as if to an audience, "I can remember those golden memories, as if they had happened only yesterday."

She continued, "Daniel and I would be up before the crack of dawn to wake up Mama and Papa, though we knew better than to wake Mama at three-thirty in the morning. We would talk, speculating what gifts Santa had brought. That is, if he had already brought them. We woke up pretty early.

“But Ryan, like a good older brother, would remind us to focus on other things, ‘Caroline, Daniel,’ he’d say, “Don’t you know what Christmas is about? Think of the gift of love and family.’ But Daniel and I knew he wouldn’t wake up at three-thirty just to tell us that.

“Then, when dawn finally rolled around, like one’s luggage does at the airport, all three of us would go knocking on Mama and Papa’s door, so hard we’d almost knock the door down, and beg them to let us go down and see the presents.

“But before we could do that, Papa and Mama would have us go around in a circle, saying one thing we love about each other. Mama encouraged us to say something different each year. We usually said the same thing, anyway.

“At last we’d march down the stairs to see what Santa had left us. The gifts were always to our likings. Papa would get the latest book from his favorite author, while Mama got a pretty necklace or two. Ryan would also get books. He loved to read anything he could get his hands on, even non-fiction, though he didn’t like the books Papa got. He preferred tales of adventure, stories of King Arthur, or of pirates searching for gold. And I would get a doll and a new dress, sometimes it was satin, other times velvet, but it was always beautiful. Daniel, the youngest, would get a kit for a model plane or car. And candy. We all got candy- enough to feed the whole neighborhood for Halloween. We got everything from practical candies like nougat, coconut ice, peppermint creams, peanut butter bon bons, taffy, and homemade caramels to adventurous sweets like strawberry shoelaces, mac and cheese candy, and hot-sauce flavored jelly beans.

“After Santa’s presents, we’d have a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs, fresh bacon, and chocolate waffles, as well as toast piled up with marmalade, and a cool glass of eggnog. We’d eat like it was the first meal we’d had in days. Our plates grew so tall with stacks of food, we’d call them *mountains*.

“We’d then open a gift from Mama and Papa, which were always coats and boots for outside. Mama and Papa got new coats, too. Then we’d all head out while Mama prepared hot cocoa for us. We’d build misshapen snowmen, that we were so proud of. We’d spend a good hour or two chucking snowballs at each other, only stopping when the exhaustion prevented our arms from moving any longer.

“Afterwards, we’d go inside, have hot chocolate, and hand out family exchange gifts. Mama always knew who everyone had, as everyone would go to her for help, except for the person who had her; they would go to Papa.

“Then Papa would bring out a box wrapped in red and gold Christmas wrapping paper for everyone to open. And every year it was a new board game. We’d spend the next half-hour learning the rules, and then another hour playing it.

“After the game, Papa’s sister, Emma, and her husband, Jack, would come over with our cousins Autumn, James, and Jenna, who happen to be the same ages as Ryan, Daniel, and me. We’d all head out for the snow again and have contests to see who could make the best snow angel. Then we’d split into teams, use ice coolers to make snow blocks, build snow bases and have another snow ball fight.

“But all too soon, Mama and Papa would call us in for an early dinner, which was always pizza from a local pizza shop, because it was always open on Christmas.

“After we’d had enough slices each to feed an army, we’d have more Christmas pudding leftover from the night before.” Caroline paused. The pudding was her aunt Emma’s recipe, but many years ago, she had been taught to make it. Now, she sold it at her bakery. She didn’t just love it because it tasted good. She loved it because it was one of the many tastes of home.

She resumed once more, “The adults would then talk for awhile, and all the cousins would play together- until two special guests would come. Grandmother and Grandpapa would ring the doorbell, dressed as Santa and Mrs. Claus, bringing one last gift for all of us.

“Then they’d gather us together, like a cowboy herds cattle, and read the nativity story from the Bible, only finishing because we’d start to drift off. Then Aunt Emma and Uncle Jack would start to leave, and the rustle would snap us all awake, and we would beg to let Jenna, James, and Autumn stay for a sleepover. And Emma and Jack would eventually relent.

“So Jack and Emma would tuck their kids in, covered in blankets on the living room floor, and Grandmother and Grandpapa would give us a kiss goodnight. Shortly after we’d all fall asleep, excited for the next Christmas to come again.”

Caroline finished with a wistful smile, “Those were the good days, weren’t they?” She thought to herself. Now, thirty years later, she fell asleep once more in the living room, her thoughts full of blissful memories.

Of Rust and Sky

By Norah McCormick

It's been many years since I stumbled into the woods that day. I was just a boy then, maybe eight or nine years old at the most. I don't recall what, or who, exactly directed me to wander as far as I did. Maybe it was destiny. Maybe it was fate. But by whatever means or manner I arrived there so long ago, it granted me an experience I will never forget.

My bare feet padded along the damp grass floor of the forest, tree after tree after tree. Everything looked the same to my impatient eyes, and I had become perilously lost over the past few hours. The sun was high in the sky as thorns poked my feet and the branches scratched my face. But I fancied myself a brave adventurer at the time, and brave adventurers don't fear getting lost in the woods.

It was early in the afternoon, just as I was beginning to get desperate, when I heard it. Music, high amongst the treetops, so strange and faint that it could easily be mistaken for the wind against the branches. Being the child I was, I followed the sound in search of its maker. I followed the music through the thicket, into a clearing, where the tune flowed with clarity in the misty air. And that's where I first saw him.

He was a boy, about my age by the looks of him, perched in the boughs of a tall oak tree. His skin was tan from the sun and his hair was long and so pale it was almost white. He was playing an unfamiliar stringed instrument of sorts, and as he turned to face me I saw that he had blue eyes, as bright as the summer sky and slit like a cat's.

“Who -- who are you?” I remember calling to him, a courageous act considering my timidity at the time. He blinked at me with his strange blue eyes, and with one graceful movement, he slung his instrument over his chest, leapt from the branch in which he had been sitting, and landed with scarcely a sound on the leaf-carpeted ground in front of me.

“Who am I?” he echoed. He had the strangest voice, high and breathy like the wispy clouds in the summer sky, but still entirely present and beautiful beyond belief. He laughed, and it seemed to resonate all across the forest. “I go by many names. ‘Spirit Child’, ‘Ghost’, ‘Hey you there’, ‘Oi, kid’. Most call me Lore, it’s easier to remember.” He shifted on his feet slightly, examining me from head to toe. “But as it would appear, I am the Boy of the Forest, and you are a Boy of the City.”

I was speechless as one would likely expect of someone in my situation. Finally, I piped up, “...I’m Connor. You have weird eyes.” Lore laughed again, and the sound made me smile despite myself.

“I like you, Boy of the City. I can’t say that’s one I’ve heard before.”

I took in the Boy of the Woods’ pointed ears, his strange clothing, the way he seemed to blend perfectly with the forest around him. He looked quite like an elf from one of my storybooks, I decided.

“What was that song you were playing earlier?” I questioned. “Did you write it? What was it called?”

Lore shrugged. “No, not really...it doesn’t have a name.”

I blinked at him, confused. "Oh. So did your mum write it for you then?"

He smiled. "I guess you could put it that way! See, Mother Nature is full of songs. She sings to me all the time! All I do is listen, and then change it a little so people can hear her too."

I tilted my head at the boy. "I don't get it."

He shrugged again. "Here, let me show you!"

Lore took my hand, and together we climbed the oak tree and sat on the massive branch overlooking the clearing. "Listen," he instructed, bringing his instrument around to rest in his lap.

I strained my ears, trying to hear what the boy was telling me about, but all I could hear was the wind in the fir trees and the creaking of the oak. "I don't hear anything," I told him, frustrated.

He blinked at me calmly with those catlike blue eyes. "Anything?" He repeated.

"Well...there's the breeze in the treetops, and lots of forest noises, but --"

"And there you have it!" Lore interrupted, beaming.

"But that's not music," I protested. "That's noise!"

He grinned even wider, raising a finger to his lips to indicate silence. He closed his eyes, balancing cross legged in the bough of that great tree. The two of us were utterly silent, listening to the woods around us. Then Lore began to play. At first it wasn't noticeable, so well matched was it to the gentle whisper of the forest. Then the melody emerged, in perfect

rhythm and harmony with the very world itself. I listened to him play, jaw slack and unable to say a word. Finally the Boy of the Woods powered his instrument and glanced back at me.

“Satisfactory?”

“How did you --?”

“I told you. I listened. And then I played what I heard. It’s The Song That the Fir Trees Sing.”

I stared silently at Lore for a second, unable to wrap my mind around the concept. But I was a nine year-old boy, mind you, and such specimens of the human race have a knack for slamming their thick heads into a complex concept so many times, it begins to make sense.

“...can you teach me how to play?”

Lore’s sky blue eyes lit up with amusement. “Of course! It would be my pleasure.”

And so we spent the remainder of the afternoon in that clearing, myself learning the basics of Lore’s instrument and the Boy of the Woods himself teaching me. He was a remarkable tutor in that regard -- patient yet by no means patronizing. By the time the sun had begun to set, I’d learned how to play the very first line of The Song That the Fir Trees Sing, although my hand didn’t have the same lyrical dynamics as Lore. “I should probably be getting back home now,” I decided, handing Lore his instrument back and shimmying down the trunk of the enormous oak tree. “You should go home too. I bet your parents are worried about you,” I called to Lore.

The boy laughed and lay back in the branches. “Ah, but Boy of the City, this *is*

my home!”

I tilted my head at him. “In a tree?”

“In a tree, in a cave, the forest is where I live! But you’re right, you had best return to the City where you belong,” Lore sighed. “I hope to see you again, Boy of the City.”

“Connor.” I replied stubbornly.

“You’ll know where to find me then, Connor.” And with a grin and a flash of his pale hair, the Boy of the Woods was gone.

I blinked at the spot where he had stood, disoriented by his sudden departure. But eventually I turned and wandered back to my home in the city, where my parents greeted me with hugs and worried ‘where were you’s?’ and a warm supper. That night I tried to tell my parents of my encounter with the Boy of the Woods, and they listened and they laughed and they shared looks that said, ‘isn’t it great that our little boy has such an active imagination?’. At the time, I didn’t understand that it wasn’t that they *didn’t* believe me, but that they *couldn’t*. For at that age, their hearts and minds were old and rusted, and they could no longer comprehend such a strange and wonderful thing.

Season after season passed. Before I knew it, I was ten years old, and then eleven, and then fifteen. One could say I simply forgot about Lore, forgot about that clearing, but that wouldn’t be quite right. It was less that I forgot, and more....

That it wasn’t quite my time yet.

I was twenty-eight years old when, by whatever twist of fate, the time finally came.

I grew old, got married, had two children. I hadn't given thought to what happened in the woods for many, many years, but something stirred in the back of my memory, compelled me to take off my shoes and wander out into the forest just like I had so long ago.

Following the path I remembered taking when I was a child, I walked past tree and tree and tree and tree. They all still looked the same, even after twenty years.

Soon I came across the clearing with the mighty oak tree, and at once there was a quiet *thump* behind me and the sound of graceful footsteps. I turned around and there he was- Lore, The Boy of the Woods, looking exactly like he had the last time I'd seen him. Pale hair, tan skin, slit blue eyes the color of the sky. He smiled as he saw me, folding his arms casually even though he was nearly a foot shorter than me. "I knew you'd come back, someday."

He scaled the tree, reaching a hand down to help me up. I was quite out of practice when it came to tree-climbing, so it took some effort to situate myself on the branch next to him. "So," he asked me, tossing his pale hair over one shoulder. "....how's the city been, these past twenty years?"

I couldn't think of anything to say. How could one reply to that?

"You don't have to answer," He assured me. "I think I know well enough. The question is..." He brought his instrument around to rest comfortably in his lap. "Do you remember this?"

And he played that song from all those years ago, The Song that the Fir Trees Sing. I found myself humming along to the tune as tears slipped down my face. Lore smiled knowingly, and we turned to face each other.

For a split second, it was just the two of us, sitting in that old oak tree.

Eyes of rust against eyes of sky.

And for a split second, my eyes and my heart were the same clear, cloudless blue as his.

Then with a rustle and a whoosh, the Boy of the Woods disappeared once more,
leaving not a trace behind.

I haven't seen Lore since. Every once in a while I convince myself he was only imaginary, a figment of the childish mind to keep from boredom and loneliness. Yet sometimes when I let myself wander into that clearing, sometimes when I listen like he taught me long ago, I hear a voice upon the wind, the gentle strumming of strings. And although my heart is as banged-up and rusted as my parents' were when I was a child, I know, somewhere out there, a pair of sky-blue eyes is looking down on me with a smile.

THE END

Only a Dream

By Autumn Roberts

You arrive at the Circus, not entirely remembering how you got there. You look around at all the people; everyone's clothes are extremely colorful, and you wonder if you've accidentally stumbled upon a pride parade. There are so many curious smells in the air, all of them blending together, but somehow still separate. You find your girlfriend at a stand that sells swirled black and white flame-shaped cookies that taste like cinnamon, cloves, citrus, and innumerable other flavors; surprisingly, you can taste every flavor individually.

Once you've licked the last cookie crumb from your fingers, you let her lead you to a mountainous tent. It has a spectacular canopy that looks like a perfectly clear night sky, and when you look around, you can pick out a few constellations. As you walk through the fabric, it feels like walking through dry water which feels both amazing and extremely odd. Inside the tent is a gargantuan aquarium filled with bioluminescent white water and fish as black as night. The tent smells like the sea and when you look down, there's coarse black sand beneath your feet. When you enter, the only other person is a journalist, but as showtime nears the tent slowly starts to fill. Finally, once the last seat has been filled, a violinist in an iridescent purple dress shining like mother-of-pearl glides out of a small opening below the aquarium that you wouldn't have otherwise noticed. As she enters the tent, the fish assemble into a perfectly straight line, as if presenting themselves to their conductor. The line is so straight that you are unable to distinguish any one fish. As the violinist begins playing, both she and the fish start contorting themselves into gorgeously irregular shapes that flow perfectly with the music. The

music is almost haunting and at the same time it is the most beautiful thing you have heard in years, and you almost forget where you are. As she continues playing, the sand around the violinist begins to swirl, followed by the sand in the rest of the room.

When the sand settles, you find that you are in a forest filled with the music of the violinist, but when you look around you and your girlfriend are the only ones there. The light is a sort of green, and you can feel the sun shining down through the canopy. You look more closely and notice that in each tree is a door. Each door is carved with intricate designs of animals and plants and other symbols. You decide to open a black door with an elaborate white rose carved into it, although you almost open a door with hundreds of numbers and mathematical symbols carved into the wood. You enter a garden covered in white trellises smothered in burgundy roses and numerous colors of clematis. The flowers appear as delicate as spun sugar and smell like the garden where you first met your girlfriend. You wander around for a little while, and find a fountain with a statue of a woman riding on the back of a majestic golden eagle. The entire statue is climbing with roses, except for the glittering crown sitting on the woman's intricately carved hair. The crowned woman seems somewhat familiar though you cannot place where you have seen her and you soon stop trying to remember. You feel a drip of the fountain water on your finger and you lick it off without thinking. It tastes like the most wonderful candy and reminds you of a treat you used to make for your parents on Valentine's day. It is sweet and tastes a little bit like honey, but also has hints of lemon and rose. Upon further examination you realize that the water is slightly pink and reminds you of pink lemonade on hot summer days.

You continue to wander until you come upon another door that seems to be made entirely of cream-colored papier maché swans and roses. You give the door a timid nudge and it opens into a room filled with papier maché plants and animals. The animals are moving about as if they were made of flesh and blood, although they are either as pale as the moon or as black as night. The plants are so life-like that you almost lean down to sniff a white hyacinth with a very realistic bee humming around it. You pick a daisy and tuck it behind your girlfriend's ear, subconsciously humming the tune that the violinist was playing. You reach out to pet a life-size, moon-colored papier maché horse, and it dissolves into the same coarse black sand that was in the violinist's tent. You hear faint strains of the music from the violinist's tent and try to follow the sound, which grows louder every second. Everything else starts to dissolve into black sand that begins to swirl around you just as it did during the violinist's performance, although this time you notice that as the sand swirls it takes the forms of animals and people before dissolving into sand again.

BEEPBEEP BEEPBEEP BEEPBEEP. You hit your alarm clock with an annoyed grunt. "It was only a dream," you mutter aloud. "I don't have a girlfriend, and I definitely don't go to mystical circuses." You get up, throw on your scrubs, and hop in your car, hoping to get some coffee and a muffin before your 5:45 AM shift starts. After receiving the same corn muffin and coffee that you always get, you make your way to the front of the shop and, turning to open the door, see a flame shaped cookie on someone's plate. You go back to the counter, and ask the tired-looking server if you can have one of the flame cookies "that woman over there" has.

"I don't know what you're talking about, we have the same scones, muffins and breakfast sandwiches as usual, I don't even know if we sell cookies in the morning."

After walking around for a bit, popping your head into some tents, and spending more time in others, you enter a tent with hundreds of words printed on the fabric. The inside of the tent looks much bigger than the outside, though it's hard to tell because of all the other tents surrounding this one. Like the outside, the inside walls are covered with words, and you realize that they are in many different languages. The tent is sparsely furnished, with a few desks and dressers scattered throughout the space. Piled on the furniture, and hanging from the ceiling by thin silver threads, are round, milky-white, marble-like objects. On one of the desks, you find an index card printed with the words *"Eat as many as you'd like"* in twenty different languages. You pluck one from a string, and pop it in your mouth. For a few moments, it's as if you're in another world, you shiver as a story unfolds in your mind, until suddenly it's gone; the flavor of chocolate and orange lingering on your tongue. Your memory of the story is fading, but it had something to do with dreams, and circuses.

You jerk awake, and find one of the other nurses gently shaking you. He's the one with the black hair and glasses, though you could probably use that description for half the nurses, you think his name is Kyle but you can't quite remember. "Hey, sorry, I'm really tired today for some reason." you apologize, shaking your head to rid yourself of the fog clouding the edges of your mind.

"No problem, it happens to the best of us" he says, helping you to your feet "Dr. Miller needs you though."

You turn to your girlfriend to ask her what she wants to do next, but she's neither beside you nor behind you. Retracing your steps, you find your way back to the candy tent, but

she's not there either. You ask the man next to you if he's seen a tall woman with smooth chocolate brown skin and long purple hair, but he just turns away, seeming annoyed. You push your way through the crowd in front of the violinist's tent, calling out her name till your voice gets hoarse, head spinning and heart pounding.

You jolt awake to the sound of sirens and look around. Your dinner sits unfinished on the TV tray in front of you, and the sirens are coming from the TV show you fell asleep watching. You turn off the TV, and decide to leave your apartment to get some fresh air before you need to go to bed. You wait for the elevator for about ten seconds before your need to be outside takes control and you run down the stairs. You walk for about ten minutes, heading toward the park next to the apartment complex you live in. You come up on a camping tent right next to the sidewalk at the entrance to the park. You walk around it, looking for some indication of who it belongs to. Finding none, you peek into the tent and see a ticket booth set up smack dab in the middle of it. You walk up to it, and nearly jump to the ceiling of the tent when a teenaged boy with a spiky blue mohawk pops his head out of the window in the booth.

"How's it going?" the boy asks with an impish grin, probably having noticed your jump. "You're very dreary looking." he says this in the way someone else might compliment your hair.

"Um... thanks I guess?" you reply, looking down at your gray t-shirt and navy sweatpants. "What is this place, and why do you have a tent set up in the middle of the park?"

"Well," he laughs "if you have a small trinket you can give me, I can show you. Oh, and by the way, the name's Theodore, but you can call me Tom, I hate my name"

You dig around in your pants pocket and find a button.

"I left my wallet at home, I have this button, but-" Tom grabs the button with a gleeful laugh "Well, this is quite the button, it's so... ordinary. See I've always been at the Circus, my moms are performers, so I've grown up here. I love it when people bring me things from the outside world, things that aren't part of the Circus. Of course, if I don't bring in money once in a while, the manager gets upset, but whatever." Tom shrugs and gestures for you to follow him. He walks through the back of the tent, and you follow, a little confused, because that should lead right back out to the park. When you walk through however, you find yourself on a street facing the largest and most beautiful circus you have ever seen. Everyone's clothes are extremely colorful, and there are so many curious smells in the air, all of them blending together, but somehow still separate. It seems strangely familiar, but you doubt you've ever been to a place like this.

"Welcome to the Circus." He says, gesturing around, "This is where I've lived my whole life."

"How do you get tired of a place like this?" you ask, staring around in awe.

"Well, I'm not tired of it exactly, but when you've lived in the same place your whole life, it's nice to have something else." Tom turns to face you, and flips you a small round coin with a circus tent on it. "This will let you in all of the tents. After midnight, it will no longer be effective. I would recommend going to the aquarium tent toward the front of the Circus first, it's my favorite." With that, he saunters back to his ticket booth.

You decide to find the tent Tom mentioned, but find yourself wishing you had brought your wallet so you could try some of the delicious-looking food at some of the booths. At one

point, one of the vendors notices you looking longingly toward some flame shaped cookies, and tosses one to you with a wink. The cookie tastes like cinnamon, cloves, citrus, and innumerable other flavors; surprisingly, you can taste every flavor individually.

You find the tent Tom mentioned, and enter. It has a spectacular canopy that looks like a perfectly clear night sky, and when you look around, you can pick out a few constellations. As you walk through the fabric, it feels like walking through dry water which feels both amazing and extremely odd. Inside the tent is a gargantuan aquarium filled with bioluminescent white water and fish as black as night. The tent smells like the sea and when you look down, there's coarse black sand beneath your feet. When you enter, the only other person is a journalist, but as showtime nears the tent slowly starts to fill. The last seat (the seat to your right) is filled by a woman with smooth chocolate brown skin and long purple hair. She looks extremely familiar, and as the performer comes out, the music starts playing, and the sand starts swirling, you remember; she was somehow in your dream. The black sand settles, and you're back in the forest of doors.

Orange

By Evelyn Sprague

“Food and sleep! The biggest inconveniences of our lives. The production, processing, and shipping of food cost us major expenditures every year. Plants, like this one, create their own food. However, plants still depend on two things: the sun and freshwater...” Livia turned off the screen, tired of her instructor. Livia pulled out the small scrap of paper she looked at when she was lonely. Paper was rare and worth a lot of money. So, Livia used it for something special. All of the people she had ever loved had signed their names on this scrap of paper.

A blaring alarm filled the enclosure, filling Livia with alarm herself. Being off schedule in the Quarters could result in penalties. Most instruction facilities were hard to get into, but the government took pity on a couple orphans every year and shipped them off to nice facilities. Hurriedly, she tossed her perfectly balanced, nutritious grit into her mouth. Four tardies in one month meant a penalty. Two penalties in two months meant expulsion. Livia was on her first penalty, so she just couldn’t afford to be late.

“Another two seconds and you wouldn’t have made it,” said the fitness instructor. “Alright everyone! Jog in place. Go!

“Livia, next to me,” called the instructor. Gritting her teeth, Livia jogged next to him. A couple people sent her pitying glances, but none would dare voice their sympathy.

“Livia, pick it up,” the instructor called in a sing-song manner. Livia started to run in place. While everyone jogged slowly, they watched her run.

“Faster, Livia!” If she ran any faster, she would find it hard to stay in place.

Why is he so excited about this? thought Livia to herself.

“STOP, everyone! Livia, I’m not talking to you, keep it up.” Stupid instructor. “Everyone, head over to left field for cardio. Livia, sprint around the field. I want four laps by the end of class.” Livia almost sighed in defeat. The dust field was HUGE.

By the end of class, she had finished the laps and wasn’t looking too great. The dust would get in her lungs and make her cough. Although Livia had to admit, the dust cloud that sprang up after she ran was pretty cool. As Livia headed back to her rooms, she felt something different. She had never done something that strenuous before, coming out of it battered and tired, not to mention her blisters. But, she still had done it.

It was good to be back in her room again. Even if her stupid instructor wouldn’t leave her alone.

“Congratulations, Livia.” She heard the instructor’s voice from the screen behind her. Turning around, Livia stayed silent. “You were the first to be tested and you passed. The Quarter officials have been told of your advancement. We have ordered you a snack to balance you out. Oh, don’t forget to use the purifier!” The screen blanked out.

Livia wished she could have retorted back that she already had. She wished that she could have said anything. Livia traced a box on her throat. Her voice box, she imagined. It was almost like a machine that wasn’t on the right frequency. The truth was, she could speak. As soon as the words formed in her brain she tried to force them out. But they got stuck. The

words were just trapped there. Her mind was split in two; one part of her was afraid of what people would think or say while another part of her just wanted to SHOUT!

The food package arrived like her instructor said it would. Livia unwrapped it carefully, noting the lumpy shape. The same grit as usual, she thought, grimacing. It had a slightly different texture. Maybe it was grittier if possible. Out of habit, she ran a hand through her buzz cut. Food *was* really awful. Every single day she had to eat the same balanced meals. If she ate the wrong thing, she could seriously damage her body. There was no excitement to it or interest. Food was just energy.

There was a second container in the package. It was round like a ball and came with a set of instructions. What kind of food needs instructions? Wary now, Livia opened the container. Inside, was the brightest thing she had ever seen. The closest thing she could compare it to was the brilliant fire she had sometimes seen in a class. Now she understood the instructions. The bright, orange part was some sort of extra packaging. Using her small eating knife, she slit the vibrant cover where it looked stitched together. Now it was a pale yellow orb with peely skin. The next instruction said to slice down the middle. Livia gasped in surprise and amazement. This food was beautiful. It had ten segments, each holding hundreds of tiny pockets of liquid. The color was exquisite. It was almost like holding a ball filled with gold.

Livia dug her long fingers in the food and pulled out a segment. As she bit down, all of the little pockets popped in her mouth, letting their juice spill onto her tongue. It was tangy and sweet and Livia couldn't get enough of it. Livia was an empress living in the 2400s, eating her golden fruit of power, or maybe she was an angel and this was heaven. Livia walked over to the

screen, the sticky juice dribbling down her chin. Alas, her reflection told her she was only a mortal of little status, who still had to finish her Efficiency Class. Livia drummed her fingers on the top of the thin, metal sheet, moving her fingers down the side to the control panel. She turned the screen on; her instructor continued where Livia had paused before Fitness Instruction.

“...If humans could find a way to create our own food, what an opportunity for advancement and evolution! The past has shown us that when humans have solved ongoing life problems they can spend more time innovating for the future! We eat to live after all. Eating is a function that must be performed to sustain life. So when eliminating our need to find our own food, we can uplift our society to a new, efficient future!”

Flicking off the screen, Livia clutched her head, a confused headache caused by contradictions. Before today, she hadn't even known eating could be enjoyable. Is food really just a bodily need? Livia sat down on her bed, stretching her legs in front of her and her arms behind. What if there was more than just grit every day? She smiled at the thought of burning the food depot - along with all of their “food” stores. What if humans could eat food, like the golden ball, every day? She imagined a world where the golden orbs were taken for granted; only one choice among many. Is food really just something necessary for survival? It is needed, Livia concluded, but that doesn't mean it can't be something enjoyable, something that brings people closer together, something that “uplifts societies.” Food is something important that we could share. It is something more than grit. Food can be beautiful. Livia had to explain it to the world. Livia touched her throat again. Maybe Livia found it hard to speak, but she still had a voice.

It was impossible that after Livia had discovered such color the sky was just as gray. The pollution of previous generations dyeing the sky the somber color it had been for Livia's entire life. This was the reason why everyone had to use a purifier after being outside. Livia stood outside now, after finishing her own instruction classes, staring into the sky for dramatic effect. She had to be in classes during the day, but afterward she was free to be wherever she wished within the Quarters' boundaries. The wind whipped her bare ears, stinging them with cold. The dust, the sky, the metal boxes called buildings - it was all just so dismal. But the golden food orb meant something was out there. There was something bright out there for Livia to discover.

From her position, she guessed that the food depot was mostly empty. Few people were carrying the food crates in and out of the building. After walking inside, Livia could see that she was right. Only a few workers were packaging food containers and sorting them to go to the Quarters. Livia's instruction facility always saw their students as free workers, giving them tasks in places like the food depot. Livia had prepared her questions on a tablet that she handed over to one of the working students. Her fear of being criticized for not talking was always just below the surface.

"Uh, yeah, I packaged the orange ball." Livia showed him her next question.

"I don't know where it came from. These things just show up." He directed her toward the corner where a bunch of different things were piled in neat rows. Livia quickly sorted through them. Disappointed, she turned away. The rows contained different vitamins, supplements, and oils - not a single orange food orb. Livia reached into her pocket for the bright wrapper. She felt the slight indents, wondering why it was packaged with it. Slowly, she turned

it over to the pale, yellow side. There were markings on it that she didn't notice before. There were lines made by ink. The drawings were a little strange, a small image of a dumpster with wings and a curved line marked with circles and a cross. Dumpster with wings, Livia thought to herself. Flying dumpster. Could it be the cable car? The old transit system was getting pretty junky; almost like a flying dumpster.

Junky was a pretty big understatement. Livia watched the cable car come into the empty station. When the cable car came to a stop, only a few students got off. It wasn't unusual for students to take time to learn remotely. Some students were even instructed in their own homes. The cable car rocked slightly as Livia stepped into it. As the car started to move down the line, Livia clutched the armrests for her life. The trailer spluttered suddenly, shaking back and forth. Livia screamed silently. Embarrassed, she turned it into a yawn. She figured the lines on the orb's packaging were the stops on the cable car. She compared it to the route on the wall, holding it up to see if it matched. If Livia was right, the next stop might bring her to somewhere brighter like the food orb. The car jerked again. That is, if she didn't die first.

"Is this your stop?" Livia realized she had squeezed her eyes shut. Looking up, she nodded at the woman across the row who addressed her. Livia shook a little at the prospect of what she might find, but she was excited too for new possibilities. After the jerky stop, Livia grabbed the orange orb packaging. Livia stepped outside. In the distance, she saw a line of green.

Someday, when people will ask her what she found after getting off of the cable car, she will hand them an orange.

There is a place in a gray world, where a girl sleeps on a bed of soil. In this place where she sleeps the sky is gray, but someday it will be blue. Because the people in this place care about the sky, they replenish the soil with carbon dioxide, through taking care of the plants. The plants love this soil and the people love the plants. Everyday, the girl who sleeps on a bed of soil works to open the plant's wrappings to draw a map back to the world of green. Everyday, the girl who sleeps on a bed of soil brings a basket of these plants, wrappings stitched together with a map on the inside, to the people in the gray world. This is how, long ago, the girl found her way, through an orange, to hope. This girl's name is Livia, and she knows that food is a gift from the earth. Livia may find it hard to speak, but she doesn't have to. The whole earth will speak for her.

The Pearl Necklace

By Charlotte Long

June 21, 2020

Katherine pulled open the old dresser drawer, pushing the clutter aside and scanning for what she was looking for. Brushing aside the old brooches, she saw the box at the very back of the drawer, hidden in the shadowy corners.

Katherine smiled and pulled the case back out into the light. She blew the dust off the top and carefully pulled off the lid, placing it on the wooden dresser.

The necklace sat in the velvet box, just as beautiful and perfect as the day Katherine had first put it on all those years ago. She smiled, and carefully picked it up. She undid the intricate gold clasp, and fastened it one last time around her neck, remembering the night she had first worn it.

December 24, 1965

Katherine sat at the kitchen window, staring out at the snow falling down outside. The wintry scene was familiar in their small Pennsylvania town, but she never grew tired of watching the snowflakes fall.

She sighed and turned away from the window as the stomping of boots reminded her of what was to come the following day.

"How do I look?" Lawrence asked. He wore his old hunting boots, paired with the camouflage military uniform he had gotten a week prior.

“Dashing.” Katherine said, chuckling at the odd pairing of her husband and clean, well ironed clothes. It was a stark difference from the oil-stained flannel shirts he normally wore.

Katherine stood up, the old wooden chair scraping against the tiled kitchen floor. She made her way across the cramped kitchen to him. She smiled at him and brushed the dirt off his shoulders that he had somehow already managed to get on the uniform.

“Are you packed yet?” she asked him, pulling the casserole out of their small rusty oven.

“Yes ma’am.” he said, patting a single ratty old suitcase sitting by the screen door.

“Good.” Katherine said, opening and shutting cupboards as she looked for where Lawrence had misplaced the cutlery this time.

“Katherine-” Lawrence began.

“Ah, ha.” she interrupted, finding the forks and spoons where the plates ought to be. She pulled two of those down as well and placed them on the table.

“What was it that you were going to say honey?” Katherine said, placing the napkins and green beans next to the casserole.

“Kathy, you won’t be too lonely with me gone, will you?” Lawrence asked, taking his place opposite her at the dinner table.

“No, course not. I’ve got myself for company, and the deer and birds outside too.” Katherine said, pouring herself a glass of wine from the liquor store at the bottom of the mountain.

“At least tell me you’ll miss me.” Lawrence said, kissing Katherine on the cheek as he leaned over to scoop up some casserole.

“Of course, I will Lawrence. I’ll miss you with every beat of my heart. But alas, distance makes the heart grow fonder.”

“Yes, it does darling.” Lawrence said, smiling over at his wife. The Christmas lights twinkled merrily outside, reflecting off the new fallen snow and giving everything a warm glow.

The casserole, fresh out of the oven, tasted wonderful. Just as good as the many years prior Katherine had made it for their Christmas Eve supper. Yes, it should have tasted wonderful, but it, along with everything else in their cheery little home now felt bitter, knowing Lawrence would be leaving tomorrow.

Katherine frowned and Lawrence looked over at her concerned.

“What’s wrong honey?” he asked.

“It’s just, Christmas won’t be the same without you. Eating the cookies on my own, singing carols by myself, opening the presents without you there.”

“Well, there's no sense waiting till tomorrow, let's do all those things now while I’m still here.” Lawrence said.

“Yes, I think that’s a splendid idea, let’s celebrate Christmas today instead of tomorrow, it's just one day off after all.”

And so, Katherine removed the box of homemade sugar cookies from the cabinet, pulling off the layer of parchment and taking one for herself.

She handed one off to Lawrence, and he took a bite, leaving crumbs in his beard. Katherine laughed through a mouthful of dessert, as Lawrence shook his head like a dog and the crumbs spilled onto the floor.

“Come on.” Katherine said, playfully tugging him into the living room. She added another log to the fire, and the flames danced playfully in the hearth, reflected on the ornaments hung on bows of green.

Lawrence shuffled across the room and flicked on the radio. The static cleared, and a song began to play.

The Christmas tree glowed beautifully by the fire, with balls of silver, gold, and red placed on it with care and love. A glittery garland wrapped the tree in an embrace, adding shine to the otherwise dull green of the leaves.

“Remember that Christmas tree farm, down Abbot Lane? The one we worked on for all those summers?” Katherine said, reminded by the Christmas tree of the place she and Lawrence first met.

“How could I forget.” Lawrence said, walking back to the sofa and kissing Katherine on the head as he sat down. “We spent so much time there every summer you would have thought we enjoyed the work.”

Katherine chuckled. “We only spent so much time there because you couldn’t ever finish your work on time.”

“I was too busy looking at you.” Lawrence said, putting his arm around her shoulder.

Katherine rolled her eyes. "Oh Larry." she said.

"I finally got you to look back at me." Lawrence smiled down at Katherine as the snow fell outside the window.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, you did." and Katherine smiled back at him.

The room was quiet except for the carols playing on the radio as Katherine and Lawrence stared out the window together, watching the snow settle on the ground.

"Would you like to open presents now?" Lawrence asked, turning to look at his wife.

"Of course." Katherine responded. "I'll go first." she got up off the couch and plucked the present she had gotten for Lawrence out from under the tree.

It was a small package and fit on the palm of Katherine's hand. It was wrapped in pretty red wrapping paper, images of ringing bells printed on it. The whole thing was tied up with a silver ribbon looped in a bow at the top.

"Here." she said, handing the package off to Lawrence.

"To Larry, my dearest husband, from Katherine, your dearest wife." Lawrence read off the label. He smiled and pulled on the ribbon. The bow came undone and settled on the dusty wooden floorboards.

He pulled the wrapping paper off the package to reveal a miniature box attached to a small gold chain. He pulled it out of the packaging and popped the clasp to the box.

It clicked open to reveal a picture and quote, like a locket would.

The picture was of him and Katherine standing outside their little mountain home the day they moved in. The trees were full of color, reds, and oranges all covering them and the ground. Lawrence smiled.

On the other side of the pendant was a quote, "Home is where the heart is."

"So, you can always remember me and everything here." Katherine said. Lawrence smiled.

He tucked the chain and pendant in the front pocket of his military uniform and nodded.

They spent the next fifteen minutes opening presents from relatives who had sent them for the holidays. The new cookbook from Katherine's mom, the car catalog from Lawrence's brother Lynn, the adventure romance novel for Katherine to read. They smiled and laughed at each gift, though there were few, each one turned the house more into a home.

Finally, night had completely settled over the woods, and the fire was growing dim.

"Well, we'd better be off to bed, you have to get going at five a.m. sharp." Katherine said, standing up off the couch.

"I haven't given you my present yet though." Lawrence said. Katherine turned around confused.

"Larry, you hardly ever get me anything." Katherine said, taking a seat back down next to him.

“This time is different.” he said. Lawrence walked to the Christmas tree and pulled out one last package that was hiding behind the branches. Carols played as he sat back down next to Katherine and held out the present for her to take.

She smiled and took the gift, carefully unwrapping it as if it meant the world to her. The wrapping paper fell away to reveal a sleek white box with a logo printed on the top. Katherine frowned, wondering what in the world it could be.

She lifted the lid up to reveal a beautiful pearl necklace. The chain was done in intricately woven gold strands, and the pearls shined almost enough for Katherine to see her face in them. There were pearls upon pearls, too many for her to count on first glance.

She pulled the necklace out of the soft velvet cushion and marveled at the meticulous craftsmanship of the piece.

“How did you ever afford it?” Katherine said, noticing the pearls drop into a heart shape at the bottom. Lawrence just smiled.

“Do you like it?” he asked, looking over at her.

“Like it?” Katherine said. “I love it. It's perfect Larry.” she leaned over and kissed on the cheek, glad for one last gift from him before he left.

“Put it on Kathy, let's see how you look.” he said. Katherine undid the clasp, her hands fumbling the entire time, afraid she would break the gorgeous necklace. She slid it over her head and Lawrence did the clasp behind her. Katherine let her hair fall back down as she looked at the necklace.

It sat perfectly around her neck, and she smiled at the bottom few that formed a perfect heart.

“Care to dance malady, one last time before I go?” Lawrence said, bowing to Katherine and holding out a hand. She giggled at his unusually gentlemanly manner and took his hand. He pulled her off of the couch and they stood together, slow dancing in the middle of their Pennsylvania cottage.

The song changed, and the new lyrics began to play.

I’ll have a blue Christmas without you

I’ll be so blue, just thinking about you

It was a slow, soothing version, not the Elvis one the two were used to.

Decorations of red, on a green Christmas tree

Won’t be the same dear if you’re not here with me

Katherine looked up at Lawrence and gave him a sad smile. He smiled back at her, and both of them internalized the lyrics playing in the background.

And when those blue snowflakes start falling

That’s when those blue memories start calling

“Don’t forget me, okay.” Katherine said, looking at Lawrence.

"I never will. I'll be home before you know it, Kathy." Lawrence kissed her on the head, and she leaned her head back against his chest. They rocked back and forth as the song continued playing.

You'll be doing alright

With your Christmas of white

But I'll have a blue, blue, blue, blue Christmas

Katherine clutched the necklace that hung around her neck, wanting to remember this moment forever.

You'll be doing alright

With your Christmas of white

But I'll have a blue, blue, blue, blue Christmas

June 21, 2020

A tear rolled down Katherine's cheek as she unclasped the necklace and tucked it once more into the soft velvet. She shut the box with a click and nestled it among the depths of her purse. Katherine smiled and patted the bag.

She kissed Larry on the cheek as she passed the kitchen. He hadn't been the same since he got back from the war, even after this many years. The effects of the disease still lingered, but Katherine preferred that over the sickness having killed him, as it nearly did. But they had been

some of the only lucky ones and Katherine was grateful she never got that letter saying he was never coming home.

Katherine smiled as she walked through the old cottage house, the same one she'd lived in for the past sixty years. The rickety screen door shut behind her as she hobbled down the porch steps to her car on the way to the jeweler.

January 31, 2021

"Now girls, I've got one last present for you." Katherine said, carrying over the small velvet boxes.

"Ohh, Grammy, what is it, what it is?" Caroline, the youngest granddaughter, pestered.

"Don't be so annoying." said Jocelyn, the mature child, who was shushing Caroline and trying to keep her under control. Elizabeth, the last granddaughter, sat in the corner and didn't say a word. Though she, like the other two, was wondering what the last present was.

"Thank you, Grammy." they said, each taking a small box from Katherine.

"Now girls, open them all at once, ok." she said, taking a seat across from the three kids and trying to keep the waterworks at bay.

"What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked, noticing Katherine's odd behavior.

"The gifts I'm about to give you mean a lot to me. They're made from something Grandad gave me a long time ago. I wanted to pass it on to you while I was still alive to see your reaction."

“What’s so special about it, Grammy?” Jocelyn asked, puzzling at the small box in her hands.

“The fact that he gave it to me.” Katherine said, remembering that night as a few tears fell from her eyes. “It means a lot to me because of that.”

Elizabeth smiled and Katherine nodded, signaling for them to open the gifts.

The three children each popped the lid of their box open and looked at what it was. Inside each box sat a single pearl attached to a gold chain.

“The pearls each came from a necklace Grandad gave me. I went to the jewelry store and got a few removed to make a necklace for each one of you.” Katherine said through a few more tears. “Do you like it?”

“I love it, I love it, I love it!” Caroline exclaimed, squeezing her Grammy around the middle.

“Thank you so much.” Jocelyn said, hugging Katherine.

Elizabeth studied the necklace, holding the small pearl in her hand and wondering about the story behind it. She undid the clasp and fastened it around her neck, letting the single pearl rest on her collarbone.

“It’s perfect.” Elizabeth whispered, and Katherine was the only who heard. Elizabeth smiled up at her and although she wasn’t screaming her joy from the rooftops like Caroline, Katherine knew the girl loved it.

Elizabeth looked down once again at the beautiful gift, smiling with a quiet love at her new pearl necklace.

High School Winners

First Place: Black, Red, and Gold

By Claire Huchthausen

Elke had liked to watch the flag, running out in the wind over the green hills in swathes of black, red, and gold. Now, the whole village watched in silence, frozen in clumps, as Herr Vogt hauled it down. It fought him. The huge, heavy fabric made flat slapping noises in the wind as it descended in jerks. Herr Vogt flung it on the ground and stepped on it to keep it from flying away. Her mother gripped Elke tighter around the shoulders.

"I believe we're having a bonfire to celebrate our new *Führer*," said Herr Vogt.

"No," Elke's mother gasped. Elke craned her head around to look up at her white face.

"You can't—"

Elke's father clapped his hand over her mouth. "Gisa, we cannot say anything," he murmured. "Vogt let that flag fly illegally for a year. We can't say anything."

Vogt's flat eyes watched them. "The bonfire is tomorrow evening. Bring any other unpatriotic materials." He bundled up the flag and handed it to his daughter, Hannelore. "Put it underneath the books, so it won't blow away."

He hoisted the new flag. The village resumed. Back in their kitchen, her mama went to the sink and peeled potatoes, staring at the wall. Her papa sat at the table with his head in his hands. The radio in front of him continued to crackle about the army's oath to the new *Führer*. He switched it off without raising his head. Elke clambered onto the chair beside him and wrote on the slate she carried everywhere. When she finished, she pushed it over to him.

He took his head out of his hands and chuckled when he saw it. "Gisa, look what Elke says." He took the slate and read,

"Aus der Schwärze der Leibeigenschaft,

Durch die rote und blutige Schlacht,

In das Freiheits goldene Licht."

Out of the blackness of servitude, through red and bloody battle, into the golden light of freedom. Over the potatoes, her mama gave Elke a watery smile. She had taught Elke the rhyme about the colors of the flag—the old flag. The new flag had left out the gold.

Elke stared hard out the window at the new flag snapping in the wind. The arms of the swastika wriggled like a black spider.

There was just enough blood on the horizon to see by when she stole out of the house the next morning. The village slept. No one woke, even when the chained dog (who fancied himself guardian of the heap of wood, books, and flag) barked and growled low in his throat. Elke returned to the house with a large grubby bundle of fabric just when the sun gilded the rooftiles.

If Herr Vogt or anyone else noticed the flag had disappeared from the bottom of the pile, no one said anything. He lit the fire. Flames ate the voices of the books. They turned first to glowing embers, then to ash.

When Elke turned ten, she had to join the *Jungmädelbund*, the young girls' league of Hitler Youth. The village troop was led by two older girls, Hannelore Vogt and Margot Weber. Margot gave Elke a big smile, showing a gap between her front teeth. "What's your name, *Jungmädel*?"

Elke tapped her mouth and shook her head. She showed her name on her slate.

Margot's smile faltered, but she pasted it back on for the next new *Jungmädel*. She wore the same pasty smile while she taught them to march.

Later, when all the little girls were bent and sewing handkerchiefs, Elke heard Margot whisper, "Hannelore, is she even allowed to join? Is muteness a hereditary disease? People with hereditary diseases aren't allowed to join. See, in the handbook."

At the end of the afternoon, they made dolls from the scraps too small for handkerchiefs. (Margot: "But are we allowed to make dolls? The handbook doesn't say anything about making dolls." Hannelore: "Surely the *Führer* wouldn't object. The faces are white cloth and the eyes are blue thread.") When Hannelore came around with the needle threaded red for the mouth, Elke sat on her doll and refused to get up. Eventually, Hannelore let her take the doll home mouthless.

There was a baby sister who died when Elke was 11. She was just learning to knit, and she had made tiny misshapen socks for her.

Kneeling in her attic bedroom, she dug the flag from the bottom of her drawer. It was still smudged with dirt from its time in the woodpile years ago. Dust swirled in a crack of golden light. She opened the folds of the flag and placed the little socks inside.

When she was twelve, there was a baby brother, and a war. She made socks for little Rolfi, too. They were better this time because the *Jungmädelbund* (apparently muteness was not a hereditary disease) was knitting socks for German soldiers on the Eastern front.

Only the *Führer's* voice seemed to fill the scratchy radio now. "They gave me the radio so cheap, it was almost free," her papa commented. "But the speeches..." He ran his hands through his thinning hair.

The war slowed business in her papa's dry-goods store. Everything was rationed. When new clothes became scarce, Mama took in seamstress work and traded for food, or shoes.

After school, while other children played together in the hills, Elke liked to help Mama with the sewing. Elke was better at writing than anyone at school. But it was hard to make friends, talking with chalk.

They got extra rations when her mama's belly grew round again. When the twins, Gerda and Bruno, were born, Elke sewed tiny matching rompers from a half-threadbare skirt.

Only a month later, the letter came for Papa. He was drafted to the Eastern front.

They huddled on the platform, watching his train roar slowly away. Elke's arms were leaden from carrying Bruno. Mama held Gerda, and Rolfi hung on her free hand. Neither of them were able to wave goodbye. Elke couldn't even write her goodbye on her slate.

The winter wind froze the film of tears on her cheeks. Elke prayed some of the socks she had knitted in *Jungmädelbund* would make their way to papa. *Durch die rote, blutige Schlacht.* Through red and bloody battle.

The war wore on, and their clothes wore out. Gerda used Elke's old clothes, and Bruno used Rolfi's things from when he was small, but Rolfi seemed to outgrow clothes as fast as they could make them. Mama had to cut up one of Papa's shirts to make Rolfi a suit of winter clothes.

Papa wrote them a letter every week. Mama always retreated to the bedroom to read the letters first. Sometimes she would emerge with her eyes red. Those days she wouldn't let Elke read the whole letter. But one day the next winter, she came out with her eyes shining. "Your papa's coming home for Christmas!"

To get Papa's Christmas present, they hoarded their coffee ration for weeks. Mama had terrible headaches the first week, but she smiled weakly and assured Elke it was worth it. The first day of December, Mama traded the brimming coffee tin for a brand-new woolen shirt. She and Elke smiled for days. Elke liked it when Gerda and Bruno smiled back, showing their new teeth.

As Elke walked home from Hitler Youth the second week of December, the sky was black, there were uniformed strangers in the street, and the chained dog--the old flag-guardian--was snarling.

Dim light spilled from the doorway of the Weber house. The strangers exited, arms full of bundles. Margot Weber, her old troop leader, wrung her hands in the doorway as they flung the bundles in a waiting wagon. Margot saw Elke watching. Margot was *puterrot*—red as a turkey. "They're taking clothes for the troops," she said shrilly, as soon as the strangers entered the neighbor's house. "But they pulled *everything* out of the drawers. Even the undergarments! They had no decency, no respect--" She checked herself. She took a deep breath and pasted on her smile. "I apologize. It is our duty to the *Führer*."

A blast of wind tore through Elke's thin coat. They were turning out all the drawers. Their house would be next. She tore straight home and up the ladder to the attic.

The strangers knocked just as Elke stepped back into the kitchen. The four-armed spider was on their shoulders. They turned out the drawers methodically, from the top of the house to the bottom. Elke and her mother watched mutely as the strangers found Papa's new shirt. Even the children were quiet as they carried it away.

Elke climbed slowly upstairs and knelt beside her bed. She laid her head on the bulge in her thin mattress where she had stuffed the flag with the stripe of illegal gold.

Christmas came and went with Papa. Another Christmas passed, and the twins were walking, and Rolfi was running—everywhere. Elke had just turned 17 when a letter came from the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*, the Reich Labor Service.

She was assigned to compulsory labor at the munitions factory. The factory was half a day's walk away. They were sure she was proud to do her duty to her country and her *Führer*.

When she read it, her mama sat down in Papa's seat at the kitchen table. The battered old radio sat silent in front of her. Rolfi had broken it last week.

Papa was in Russia. Rolfi was running wild somewhere in the street or in the hills. Gerda and Bruno were wailing and fighting over a toy in the corner. Tiny baby socks were wrapped in the folds of a fallen flag. Together, Elke and her mother felt the weight of the air.

She wrote on her slate. *What a kind birthday present from our Führer.*

The factory was a belching black beast that filled her ears and lungs. They marched her around, showing her where she was to work, where she was to eat, where she was to sleep. They didn't give her time to talk until they dismissed her with a "*heil* Hitler." She didn't respond. It took a full slate of writing to satisfy them that she *couldn't* respond.

Hannelore Vogt, her old troop leader, was among the rows of girls that first night in the concrete dormitory. The older girl had been at the factory much longer. Soot stained the cracks in her hands.

Elke was fumbling with the metal and machinery at first. Hannelore worked beside her that first week, letting Elke mirror her movements, correcting her mistakes wordlessly. When Elke improved, Hannelore left her just as wordlessly.

The hot, dirty work choked her breath and choked her mind. The other girls yelled conversation or sang over the noise of the machinery while their hands flew. But Elke's voice was in her hands, and her hands were soon blistered red and stained black. While she worked, her hands could speak only to metal.

When she didn't work, there was no one who listened. One lunch break, someone stole her slate. Elke tried to grab it back, but her throat made strange barking noises when she was upset. The girls tossed it around the room and laughed harder. Elke caught Hannelore's eye. Hannelore looked away and said nothing. Elke got the slate back only after the bell clanged the end of lunch hour.

That night, Elke put slugs in Hannelore's bed.

Elke's own narrow, rickety metal bed in the dormitory was by a window facing the courtyard, where the Nazi flag flew. She slept with her back toward it. She thought of the rhyme she had learned when she was little: *Out of the blackness of servitude...*

Across the room, Hannelore shrieked. Elke smiled and shut her eyes.

That Saturday, she walked the long walk home over the green hills, her hat in her hand, sometimes running, letting the sun and wind run golden fingers through her hair.

She arrived that evening in time to help her mama cook supper. Mama kissed her cheek when Elke put Rolfi and the twins to bed, then headed straight to bed herself. Elke washed the dishes and started the mending. Rolfi was tearing the seams of his clothes. Gerda and Bruno's clothes—hand-me-downs from Elke and Rolfi—needed patches. The clothes wouldn't last much longer.

Elke fetched one more thing from the attic. She sat down at the table. The lamplight was dim, and her hands shook with weariness. But she took a breath and threaded the needle.

A few months later, the munitions factory was bombed. When the door of the bomb shelter was at last pried open, ash poured in like snow. The girls who had made it to the shelters in time wandered and coughed in the swirling grey.

Elke had dropped her slate in the courtyard during the rush for the shelters. She found it shattered beside the fallen Nazi flag. She picked up the biggest shard and clasped it in her fist,

then turned towards home. Behind her, the flag rippled weakly along the ground, half-buried under a pile of rubble.

Hannelore had died in the blast. They brought her body to the village a few hours after Elke arrived. Herr Vogt's grieving filled the street. The chained dog howled with him.

When summer afternoons grew long and yellow, the Allies rolled into Germany. One day, Rolfi burst into the kitchen, his narrow chest heaving. He clutched a large ball. "Look!" He showed her. "The Americans gave it to me. Out there." He pointed vaguely toward the hills. "They called it *orange*." He pronounced the foreign word carefully.

They split the orange five ways and sucked their fingers clean. "I remember having an orange, once," Mama said. The juice was like honey when the light glows through it.

The next day, the news cracked through the Weber's radio: Germany had surrendered. They kept quiet while they were at the Weber's, but at home, they whooped. Elke danced. "Papa's coming home!"

Elke took Rolfi, Bruno, and Gerda up to the attic with her. She took three small garments from her bottom drawer. She touched the baby socks left in the bare corner before she slid the drawer shut.

Mama put her hand to her mouth when Elke and the children came downstairs. "You saved it," she whispered, her eyes shining. "All those years ago. How--?"

Elke grinned and opened the door, motioning the children out to play. In the distance, on the road to the village, there were cars flying an American flag.

She wrote on her slate the old rhyme: *Out of the blackness of servitude, through red and bloody battle, into the golden light of freedom.* They watched the three children running out in the wind over the green hills, Rolfi in a black playsuit, Gerda in red, and Bruno in gold.

Second Place: Dameus

By Naomi Utgaard

The sun rose on the right-hand wall and turned the misty downs to gold. Where meadow met woodland, a doe and her fawns were grazing, and past the forest, a mountain chain rose through the pale blue sky, scraped the starry heavens, and tumbled into foothills on the back wall. Atop these hills stood a strange and magnificent city, filled with all the wonders of the ancient and modern worlds: the Eiffel Tower, the Hagia Sophia, the hanging gardens of Babylon, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, and thousands upon thousands of people - laughing and fighting, dancing and weeping, dressed in all manner of clothing. Chariots and trains and herds of buffalo traversed a windblown steppe on the left-hand wall, and a fleet of ships sailed across a dark and violent sea to a harbor in the tropics.

Wilson had never seen such an extraordinary mural. It was incredibly detailed and so seamless as to be disconcerting. Each scene melted into the next; he could not say where the walls, floor or ceiling began or ended, and he could not say how big the room was. It was one image, and could only be seen as a whole, from the comets and stars above to the individual blades of grass on the floor.

Mia Dameus had painted all of it herself - his new neighbor, the only other person who lived within half a mile of his house.

“Do you like it?”

He’d forgotten she was standing beside him. The mural had pulled him in; he felt very close to it and very far from everything else. It had filled up his vision and nothing else seemed

to be able to get in. Mia Dameus, though he supposed he could see her in his peripheral, was no more than a voice.

“I’m impressed,” he said, turning with an effort to face her. It was the best word for it. He was impressed, but not in the way people usually meant it. Not as a show of approval; his approval seemed altogether unimportant. It was not for him to pass judgement on the mural, not even to praise it. He was impressed; they had made an impression on him, in the way that dinosaurs’ bones had made impressions in the soft earth sixty-four million years ago. He was imprinted upon, permanently marked.

She smiled. “I can show you around if you’d like,” she said. She was coming back into focus now, and the mural was fading to the background.

Wilson blinked a couple of times. “I’d hate to be an inconvenience,” he said. “I just came by to introduce myself.”

“It’s no trouble,” she replied at once. “I never have company.”

He considered her offer. Besides her mural, there was something strange about his neighbor: she was pale, with penetrating eyes, and she hid her hair beneath a scarf that seemed much too big for her head. But there was something alluring about her as well, though he couldn’t quite place it. He looked at the mural again. Then he accepted the offer, and followed her across the room.

He was glad of his decision when they came through a door and into a hallway painted entirely with watercolors. It depicted another mountain range - this one of rocky, icy slopes and bluish-white snow. On the floor before them lay a narrow path. The effect of the watercolors was completely different from that of the saturated, vibrant acrylics in the main hall; it was

softer, muted, otherworldly. A sky painted milky blue seeped across the ceiling and down the walls, turning coral where it fringed the western peaks, and the faintest imprint of a moon touched the horizon. Wilson shivered. He bent down, and could only just make out the delicate paint strokes that told him the steep slope was not actually real. He reached out and touched the floor to find that what had been painted to look like open sky was, in fact, solid wood paneling.

“How incredible,” he murmured.

As they walked, the sky darkened and the moon rose. At the end of the hallway there was a drafty staircase, and at the top of the stairs was a room that had been painted to resemble the night sky. It was colder up here, Wilson was sure of it, and he could smell a sort of cleanliness in the air.

They stood upon a sea of soft grey clouds that stretched for miles in every direction and glided steadily across the sky. Above them, planets and stars twinkled and danced, and the fully risen moon illuminated the face of Mia Dameus as she turned to him with a smile. In the moonlight, she was slender and unblemished. Her pale eyes shone. She looked, he thought, like an angel.

The next room had an atmosphere entirely different from the previous two. It had been painted like the inside of a limestone cave - low-ceilinged, dimly lit, and steeped in a palpably humid gloom. Wilson felt a drop of something cold and wet on the back of his neck, and looked up to see yellowing stalactites bearing down on him. Beads of water clung to their pointed tips.

“Are these real?” he asked, watching one droplet swell, grow too heavy, and fall to the ground before him.

“Oh, yes,” said Dameus. “All of it’s real.”

As they walked, the cave grew smaller and narrower. Wilson had never liked tight spaces, and began to wish he was in the last room again, among the clouds in that marvelously wide and open sky. But then he saw that they were approaching a larger, brighter cavern, and quickened his pace. At the mouth of the cavern he froze, struck with fear and amazement at the sight he was met with.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” said Dameus.

Wilson opened his mouth but couldn’t speak. In the center of the cavern, lying on an enormous heap of gold and precious gems, was an incredibly detailed sculpture of a crimson dragon, horned, with bone-white spikes trailing down its back. It was asleep, nostrils flaring, head resting on its claws.

Mia Dameus tiptoed forward, giving the creature a wide berth as if taking care not to wake it, and Wilson instinctively copied her. He never took his eyes off the dragon, and hadn’t gotten halfway through the cavern when he tripped on a loose stone and fell. He looked up, puzzled, hands and knees stinging. Why were there real, solid rocks in this room? Especially, he noticed, hidden so strategically among the painted ones. His palms were bleeding and streaked with grime. He frowned, and touched the floor. It was rough and a little slimy, just as he’d imagine the floor of a cavern to be.

“How -” he began, but Dameus was not paying attention. She was staring at something behind him.

The sculpture of the dragon had begun to stir. A jade eye opened, blinked away the film of sleep, and narrowed its gaze towards him.

“Let’s go to the next room,” said Mia Dameus. But Wilson could only stare, transfixed, at the beast. Its muscles rippled as it sat back on its haunches and unfurled wings like huge, leathery sails.

“Mr. Wilson!” Her cry brought him to his senses and he scrambled to his feet. The dragon beat its wings and a rush of air slammed into them both, knocking him over again.

Mia Dameus took his hand in hers. They fled the cavern and ran through a series of dim, twisting tunnels until they came, panting and soaked with sweat, to an opening, and collapsed onto the soft grass. After he’d caught his breath, Wilson sat up and looked around. They were outside, on the bank of a fast-flowing river. Mia Dameus was barefoot in the water, bent over a boat tied to the dock.

She looked up at him and smiled, and he felt like he’d known her for years. “Are you alright?” she said. “Come and wash your hands in the stream.”

Wilson obeyed. The cold water was soothing. He splashed his face with it, washing away the dirt and sweat, and cleaned the wounds on his knees. When he’d finished, he felt better than he had in a long time.

“Are we in your garden?” he asked, looking around. He did not recognize his surroundings, or see the house anywhere.

“We are not,” said Dameus. Her back was turned, and he couldn’t read her expression.

“Why did the dragon come to life?”

When he asked this, she looked up at him in surprise.

“You startled her,” she said. “It was my fault; I should’ve told you to watch your step.”

Wilson frowned and opened his mouth, then seemed to forget what he’d been going to say and frowned again. “Yes,” he said absently. “You should’ve.”

Dameus climbed into the boat, and without asking any more questions he climbed in after her and they began to sail downstream.

The boat cut through the water swiftly and gracefully, and Wilson stood at the bow, the cool breeze gently tousling his hair. He could not recall how or why he was there, or if there existed anyone in the world besides him and Mia Dameus; and if he could, he had no reason to want to. His mind was filled to the brim, saturated with the nectar of experience, of sight and smell and sound and wonderful tranquility. It seeped into every crevice of his brain - the fields of strawberries and mint, orchards of limes and twisting basil plants taller than trees, the gardens bursting with milkweed and golden butterflies dancing from flower to flower, the musical splashing of the creek and the snap of the sail in the wind. An idyllic summer countryside in the English downs rushed past them, and then an autumn evening in Venice, and then an Arabian bazaar. Each was different and exciting, and yet each blended completely into the next. Wilson felt inconceivably happy.

The river slowed and narrowed into a pleasantly quiet stream winding its way through a city on the Aegean coast. They paddled to shore and walked through the cobbled streets, admiring the Mediterranean-style houses and their gardens.

Evening fell, and Wilson realized he hadn’t eaten all day. Mia Dameus led him to a house whose front door stood ajar. Strains of cheerful conversation and the smell of thyme and roasted lamb wafted into the street, and he hesitated for a moment, then entered.

He did not find himself inside a house, though, but in a flagstone courtyard. It was filled with music that didn't seem to be coming from anywhere. Under the shade of a twisting yew tree was a round table with five out of its six places taken. The people seated there looked up when he came in and greeted him by name. A beautiful woman approached him, dressed in white silk with a brooch pinned to her hair, and offered him a plate of grapes. He accepted them. Then she placed a hand on his back and guided him across the courtyard to the table. Before he took his place there, he turned one last time and looked at Mia Dameus.

She smiled at him, unwrapped her headscarf, and folded it carefully over one arm. Then she took a step back to admire the room. The yew tree had been difficult, she thought, but it had turned out alright in the end. It cast all the right shadows on the table.

She turned and left. The room was now complete. Seated in the previously empty chair was the painting of Mr. Wilson. His watercolor eyes shone in the light of the eternally setting sun.

Third Place: The Tournament of Crowns

By Ariana Paris

My mother died during childbirth. I don't remember her, but Father says she was the most beautiful woman he had ever met. I was said to look a lot like the late Queen of Scythia with my white-blond hair and gray eyes.

I inspected my ornate, cream-colored gown in the gilded mirror across. Its hem, covered with gold leaf and encrusted with strategically placed diamonds. It was a dress paid in blood money, our kingdom's main source of income; war. I looked like a princess, a beautiful, blushing bride. My frown deepened.

Father strode in through the door, never one to knock. Even with his hair streaked with gray and his face lined with wrinkles, he presented an imposing figure. In other kingdoms, his old age wouldn't be a problem, many kings ruled till death. However, Scythia was a warrior nation. Once the king was of the age where he could no longer fight on the frontline, he would step down, acting as an advisor for the next reigning monarch. King that is, never queen. My father was expected to have a son but after my mother passed, he never remarried. I was his only child, the last of his bloodline.

My father offered a gnarled hand. In truth, he should've stepped down years ago. It was why I wore this ridiculously heavy dress, suffering silently through my tightly cinched corset with a trained smile. I took my father's hand.

“Your hands look more like a warrior’s than a princess,” He commented. It was true, my hands were rough with callouses from wielding a sword. My father didn’t know how to raise a daughter nor a proper princess. It would’ve been my mother’s role. Instead, he raised me the way he would’ve raised his son; how he was raised. I was raised a warrior.

“Why can’t they be both?” I asked, tilting my head.

“Indeed.” He smiled slightly, “Still, please cover them, we don’t need to give your suitors the wrong impression, my flower.” I fought my scowl, if my husband couldn’t tolerate me being adept with weapons, then he had no place by my side.

I fetched a pair of delicate silk and lace gloves. It took all my willpower to not rip them to shreds.

We strolled through the columned hallways to the ballroom. Lyrical music streamed from the closed, grand doors, its sweet tune so at odds with the bloody game which would soon be held.

“Her highness, Princess Fleur of Scythia.” The herald announced.

Fleur. Flower. A delicate thing renowned for its beauty. I gazed at the dozens of men who stared at my form hungrily. My suitors. I lowered my eyes and gave a demure smile. The

thought of how they all would be dead soon comforted me. I would play the game. I would be their flower. It was a shame they wouldn't realize I was deadly till our wedding night.

I had no plan of sharing the throne with a stranger whose only qualifications were that he was a man. No, my beloved husband would be dearly departed after our vows. As they say, "till death do us part," but for now, I would be their shrinking violet.

Multiple suitors approached me and kissed the back of my hand. Some were young, others double my age. My kingdom had a tradition to choose the next king if no male heirs were present. Every warrior, noble, and prince in the land would have the opportunity to enter the Tournament of Crowns where they would fight to the death in a gladiator-style tournament. The prize? My hand in marriage and the title of King of Scythia.

After they greeted me, the suitors turned to my father, I was quickly forgotten. They only thought of me as a decoration. I wanted to scream in rage.

A pale, weasel-like man with stringy blonde hair leaned down and kissed my hand. "Prince Damien of Hibernia, a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Fleur," he said with an oily smile that made my skin crawl. The kingdom of Hibernia had been trying to make ties with Scythia for years in hopes to use our army in their feud against the Scotts. They must've been desperate to send one of their princes to gain my hand.

"Princess Fleur," a deep, smooth voice intoned, breaking me out of my thoughts. I looked to meet a pair of onyx eyes. The man glared at the prince. "You should address her by her title."

Before I could utter a word, Father strode up to us, "Orion, my boy. How have you been?" He asked. I did a double-take. This was surely not Orion, the gangly orphan boy that I had grown up within the castle. Like all boys, he was sent away at age 13 to a Scythian war camp. Though as I looked closer, I could see the similarities from my memory. He had the same messy, dark hair, caramel skin, and mischievous, black eyes, though he had gotten much taller and broader.

"I have been well, your majesty," he replied formally.

"Congratulations on the promotion." My father said.

"Promotion?" I questioned, breaking my silence.

"Yes, I was recently made Princep." I glanced at him, surprised. Princeps were usually in their 40's or 50's, battle-hardened veterans who would lead Scythia's troops to victory. There were eight Princeps in the kingdom, all on my father's war council.

"Youngest to ever be." My father replied, proudly, if he were his own son. "My flower, why don't you grace this young man with a dance?"

“Yes, father.” I took Orion’s hand and strode onto the marble floor; an elegant waltz played. Orion gave a low, graceful bow, then took my hand in his own and held my waist with his other. We began to dance. He was surprisingly nimble for his tall frame. I chuckled, remembering the clumsy boy from my youth.

“What’s so funny?” He asked with an amused smile.

“You.” I amended, “When we were younger, I recall you having two left feet.”

“And I recall you being equally as clumsy,” He retorted, “You did break every porcelain item in the castle.” I gave a short bark of laughter.

“You’d be amazed at what Scythian training does for your balance.” He glanced at me knowingly.

“Are you competing?” I asked, wondering why he would enter if he was stationed as high as Princep.

“No, Princess, I’m simply here on your father’s request. I have no intention to risk my life for something I do not desire.”

“Am I truly undesirable?” I teased. His eyes flashed.

“Princess, I think you know the answer to that question.” He raised an eyebrow, soothing my vanity. “I simply have no desire to be king.”

“You are truly an oddity; all men here desire the crown.”

“Ah yes, but do you desire the men?” He inquired, making me pause to think for a moment.

“No,” I concluded, honestly. “But that is of no consequence. To appease my people, I need to marry. Even if he ends up being a greasy, spoiled, stringy-haired prince.”

“If you were to find yourself with such an undesirable suitor, I am sure I can arrange an accident.” He smiled, wickedly.

“If I were to find myself with an undesirable suitor, I would arrange the accident myself,” I responded, airily.

He grinned, delighted and unperturbed at my dark words.

“If not the crown, then what do you want?” I questioned, intrigued.

“You’ll have to wait and find out.” He answered, mysteriously. He bowed as the dance came to an end, I curtsied in reply.

“Gentlemen!” my father’s voice rang, commanding the room’s attention, “The tournament will begin tomorrow at noon, prepare yourselves. Princess Fleur, any parting words for these brave men?”

“Best of luck to you all. May the best man win.” I smiled sweetly, none of the suitors noticed the sinister gleam in my eyes. They roared in response, their cheers filling the ballroom with deafening noise.

Orion leaned in close to my ear and whispered, “I look forward to whatever you are planning, Princess.”

I grinned, let the games begin.

The night passed quickly, and before I knew it, I sat in the private balcony, a glass of chilled champagne in my hand, as I watched the first battles begin.

I glanced down at the arena, my lip curled in distaste as the oily-haired prince walked in. He faced a large, burly general, who swayed on his feet, eyes unfocused as if he’d been drinking. In a matter of seconds, the general was on the ground, his throat slit in a bloody smile.

Father cursed, "McFadden bested by the Hibernian prince? Impossible."

"And yet it seemed to have happened." I stared dispassionately at the crimson blood that stained the pale sand. The next few matches played out, I tried my best to look engaged at the activity, but I couldn't help a yawn that escaped. This tournament was bloody alright, bloody boring.

I lurched from my seat as Orion and a blonde-haired noble entered the ring.

"What is he doing out there?" I whispered to my father.

He glanced back at me, a pleased look flashing across his face. This is the first time I had shown any interest in any of my suitors. "Competing." He answered, "he seemed to have had a change of heart last night."

Before, he had seemed adamant that he wasn't to compete. What had changed? I watched as Orion pulled out two scimitars, their steel gleaming dully in the afternoon light. His opponent drew an ornate longsword, its pommel encrusted with jewels and the handguard an intricate twist of precious metal. I stared at in distaste, who in their right mind would take that sword into battle? The gems added unnecessary weight and the intricate handguard would not withstand a single strong blow.

Orion was fast and agile; he twisted and dodged the swing of his opponent's swords. He parried a clumsy blow, his twin swords an extension of his arms. My eyes narrowed, his opponent's swings were uncontrolled and slow. The longsword was unbalanced and too heavy for the nobleman to handle. This would be over in moments.

Orion took advantage of his opponent's incoordination and darted forwards. He slashed his right sword upwards, gutting the noble from stomach to throat. His opponent fell to the ground, dead. The bloodthirsty crowd screamed their approval, rooting for the warrior of their kingdom. I stared at Orion with disbelief. I still remembered the boy who cried over a dead doe after his first hunt, who took the blame and beating for destroying a vase so I wouldn't get in trouble. He met my eyes and gave a deep bow.

The matches continued until the final two were standing across from one another in the arena, the fading sunlight casted a warm glow around their silhouettes. Orion and Prince Damien. The dark warrior and white prince.

Orion suddenly announced a single word that caused the rowdy crowd to fall silent, "Cyanide." His voice rang throughout the arena, Prince Damien stiffened. "Very clever. Either coating your blade or poisoning your opponent's drink. Maybe you would have slipped it into the princess' meal after your nuptials."

Prince Damien paled, but immediately fired back, "How dare you make such an accusation."

Orion raised a single dark brow, "If I hadn't tasted the poison and immediately purged my water, it may have worked." "Unfortunately for you, it didn't." He drew his twin scimitars and shifted into a fighting position with a lazy grin.

I knew the truth; he was bluffing. He may have thrown up the drink before the poison was fatal, but he was weakened. I watched it in the way his body swayed, and his breathing quickened. His caramel skin looked wan and sweat had already begun to bead his brown.

Prince Damien smirked, noticing Orion's bluff as well. "Well then, if nothing is amiss then let us start the match."

"Yes, let us," Orion replied with a grim smile.

I had to hand one thing to the prince, he was good with knives. Like a weasel, he was able to slip around his opponent's defense, slitting their throats. Orion redirected what would have a fatal blow. Even poisoned, he moved with predatory grace.

He slashed his sword towards the prince's gut. Prince Damien, caught off guard, barely dodged. They continued, trading blows, until it looked as if Orion couldn't fight any longer.

The poison must have reached its full effect as he dropped to one knee; his head bowed. Prince Damien grinned victoriously, strutting up behind the fallen warrior. His knife poised to stab him at the base of his neck. For once, I felt pure terror in the pit of my stomach. I did not want him to die.

I jumped and rushed to the balcony, leaning over the banister. Before I could scream for the match to stop, Orion surged to his feet, catching Prince Damien off guard. A double bluff. He spun and sliced off Damien's head, with a sickening thwack. The head of pale, stringy hair fell to the ground with a dull thud, his eyes still open in surprise. The body then crumpled, sending clouds of dust at the impact. Orion had won.

He turned to find my eyes and gave a lopsided grin. Like every match before, he bowed deeply which caused my heart to flutter.

My father rose from his throne and came to stand next to me, "The winner of the Tournament of Crowns and future king of Scythia, Orion!" His voice boomed, echoing through the arena.

The crowd went wild, showering Orion with cheers. The dark-haired warrior held up a single hand, exacting silence, "Thank you, your majesty, for the honor. However, I must refuse the crown." He stated, generating shockwaves through the audience. I inhaled with surprise.

"Instead, I believe Princess, or should I say, Queen Fleur, should take the throne as Scythia's sole ruler."

The crowd roared in outrage. There has never been a female ruler in the history of the kingdom. They were simply wives with a title.

Orion continued to speak, the crowd falling silent as if held under a spell, "If she can defeat me in a duel." I smiled, understanding his proposition, it would provide me a chance to prove to my strength so I could reign uncontested.

My father was incensed, his face purpled with anger, "You dare refuse my daughter's hand!"

"No," Orion said, causing my heart to stutter, "If she would have me, I would still like her hand in marriage. I would simply be her consort." I stared at him with wide eyes, his previous words echoing in my ears.

I have no desire to be king.

Ah yes, but do you desire the men?

You'll have to wait and find out.

"Daughter, your response?" Father asked, his tired eyes gazed upon me.

My eyes sparked at the challenge, “I accept.”

First Runner Up: The Laghaz

By Hanaan Kazia

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 12 Ayyar, 1421, 12:31 PM

SUBJECT: Only a few miles out of Laghaz Ghaba!

Rayah,

I am in Muedila! It is a strange little town, full of superstition and stories -- this one jida told me all about another town a few miles away that burned down a hundred years ago in some mystery. While everyone is friendly enough, I am getting many warnings to stay out of Laghaz, but doesn't that just make you more interested in what is there? How exciting it will be to go through such an ancient forest! I plan on recording everything to present when I come back home, of course, and I hope to discover enough to publish a paper! I hope that you're doing well. Please don't tell me that you're still worrying yourself sick!

Missing you always,

Iman

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 12 Ayyar, 1421, 12:39 PM

SUBJECT: RE: Only a few miles out of Laghaz Ghaba!

Iman,

Nothing could keep me from worry. Stay safe. If you don't write to me at least thrice a week, I am going to come to that accursed forest and drag you out myself.

Love,

Rayah

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 13 Ayyar, 1421, 4:11 AM

SUBJECT: First night/morning in Laghaz!

Rayah,

I reached Laghaz late last night. It is such a beautiful place! It's all so green, and these trees must be the tallest in the world, winding with huge canopies of leaves. Even though they appear to be the kind that shed near winter, it feels almost like a rainforest! I assume that there

are hundreds of creatures, but I have only seen small bugs so far. I have heard these birds, though. They sounded like seagulls, such mournful cries! I wonder if they are some type of relative to gulls, since actual gulls are surely not in such a place.

I also took some samples of leaves from the trees (almost as big as my face in the highest branches!) as well as sap. So thick it was, and a curious dark color, too. While I have had an interesting time, I have had little sleep, which is why I'm writing to you so early. Don't worry, though, I will try to rest soon!

Yours,

Iman

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 13 Ayyar, 1421, 8:02 AM

SUBJECT: RE: First night/morning in Laghaz!

Iman,

While I am proud (and a little surprised) (kidding, mostly) that you made it through the night, I beg you to be careful. All this tree climbing, animal finding -- you could get hurt, and I couldn't handle that.

For the spirits' sake and mine, do not do anything foolish.

Rayah

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 17 Ayyar, 1421, 1:18 PM

SUBJECT: How is it?

Iman,

I know that you're busy, but you haven't written in a few days, and I'm a bit worried. And I know, I'm always worried, but you're the one in a strange forest that's supposed to be cursed.

Are you doing okay? Have you found anything new?

Write me back soon or else,

Rayah

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 18 Ayyar, 1421, 7:42 AM

SUBJECT: RE: How is it?

Rayah,

I am fine, of course I am! I have only been exploring Laghaz, which is keeping me busy. There is simply so much forest, and I still cannot find those gulls! I keep hearing their cries when I try to rest. Sleep is still difficult, but I have been occupied with the tree sap. It is so strange: it doesn't solidify into amber, but rather stays in its thick, dark form. The color is difficult to discern for some reason, but I think it is either dark red or brown.

I will try to write more, though I might bore you.

Iman

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 18 Ayyar, 1421, 7:41 AM

Iman,

Oh, thank the spirits. Please be careful with all of those things, I couldn't bear for you to get hurt.

Write back soon,

Rayah

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 19 Ayyar, 1421, 9:01 AM

SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: How is it?

Iman,

I don't mean to bother you, but you always love talking (and I love listening to you, of course), so please message me soon. Please.

Rayah

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 20 Ayyar, 1421, 2:43 AM

SUBJECT: [NO SUBJECT]

I think I am beginning to understand why this forest is forbidden.

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 18 Ayyar, 1421, 8:16 AM

SUBJECT: RE: [NO SUBJECT]

Iman, what does this mean? Are you okay? Should I send someone over? Should I come?

Rayah

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 20 Ayyar, 1421, 8:42 AM

SUBJECT: RE: RE: [NO SUBJECT]

I do not just hear the cries of the gull anymore, it sounds like there are gusts of winds when there are none. Maybe I should rest.

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 20 Ayyar, 1421, 8:44 AM

SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: [NO SUBJECT]

Iman,

Spirits above, yes, do that. Your exhaustion must be getting to you.

Rayah

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 22 Ayyar, 1421, 3:08 AM

SUBJECT: spill

It is not exhaustion, I am sure now. The sap has spilled from its collecting container, it is all over my supplies. It will not become solid, it only seems to spread and multiply. The wind sound is louder. There is shaking.

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 22 Ayyar, 1421, 7:58 AM

SUBJECT: RE: spill

Iman, I think you should leave. I understand that this was your dream, to study Laghaz, but you said it yourself -- there must be a reason why it is forbidden. I'll meet you in Muedila, tell me when. I need to make sure that you're safe.

Rayah

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 22 Ayyar, 1421, 10:06 AM

SUBJECT: RE: RE: spill

I just realized, the sun does not penetrate through the trees' canopy. Isn't that strange? I think it's fascinating. Must be why I cannot sleep at the right times.

The sap spilled more, all over my food now. I don't think it's spoiled, it all only tastes a little metallic and bitter now -- isn't that strange, too?

Discovering all these things, I cannot leave. I need to find the gulls, the source of the winds.

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 22 Ayyar, 1421, 10:09 AM

SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: spill

I'm coming to Muedila.

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 22 Ayyar, 1421, 10:14 AM

SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: RE: spill

Do not bother.

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 24 Ayyar, 1421, 11:41 AM

SUBJECT: In Muedila

Iman,

I'm in Muedila. Please come here. I need to see you. This forest, it's not good for you.

Something is wrong. We need to talk in person.

Rayah

FROM: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

TO: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

DATE: 25 Ayyar, 1421, 2:06 PM

SUBJECT: RE: RE: In Muedila

Please, Iman.

Rayah

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 26 Ayyar, 1421, 5:15 AM

SUBJECT: skeleton

I have looked into the tree trunks, the branches. They are beautiful. I can feel the raised bones beneath them, see the pattern in the wood.

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 26 Ayyar, 1421, 10:56 PM

SUBJECT: RE: skeleton

It was not their sap I consumed, it was blood. I do not hear gulls and wind, I hear cries and voices. I am in a graveyard, a graveyard of beauty. The sap spreads through my stomach. I see it in my veins.

FROM: Iman al-Ghusan (ialghusan@mahjul.com)

TO: Rayah al-Rafiq (ralrafiq@mahjul.com)

DATE: 28 Ayyar, 1421, 12:00 AM

SUBJECT: RE: RE: skeleton

It is taking me, welcoming me into its home. I cannot smell or speak and my fingers can only type out this message, though they keep moving of their own accord. This, I do not mind.

DJKGHO#9724 tiGRHVKJDFET2U

KJGHS RG+\$(857ufh dvfUEIYQIUEY ggpg8eyt hgwgiuwyruiP

Some last thing in me feels like I should apologize. But I am not sorry.

EGIWR2i4'jrksH"TIY ROIKGHS {DSKGJHS YTOIWT FHDS [sglhGkJHGS987i

GHUIRYKSG

I am home.

Second Runner Up: The Last Great Dragon King

By Eric Lyons

The hour was late. The forest was pitch dark. Not that any of these things mattered to Shanger. If anything, he liked the darkness because it more effectively concealed his large form. Shanger was a hunter, and he was tracking his prey.

Crouching lower, he slowly stepped forward, his great claws scraping on a large rock. He quietly hissed, a puff of steam emerging from his nostrils, and withdrew. After a few moments, he slowly stepped again, further forward this time, and felt his paw sink into the soft earth. He grinned silently. His prey would never know he was there until it was too late.

At length, a soft orange glow emerged through the trees, and he advanced towards it. As he approached, he found that the light was coming from the center of a large clearing, where several bipedal creatures had constructed a large fire. A low growl escaped him. *Humans*. They were so laughably primitive that Shanger wondered, not for the first time, how they had even lasted this long. In this world, the strong survived, and the weak perished, and he considered himself fortunate to be part of the former group. He settled lower behind the shrubbery and watched them for a minute, assessing their camp, waiting for his opportunity.

He would give them a night they would never forget.

A lone soldier was making his rounds, taking the next watch of the night. He patrolled the edge of the clearing, obliviously passing by the spot where Shanger lay hidden. The hunter almost chuckled at the weakness of the human's senses. Perhaps sensing this small noise, the guard stopped, listening. He turned and peered closely into the vegetation. Suddenly, he caught sight of a pair of fierce, golden eyes staring at him, and his face went as pale as the ash of his

fire. He fumbled for his horn, hoping to raise the alarm, but Shanger leapt with a mighty roar out of the woods. He neatly pinned the man, his claw easily puncturing his armor. He looked up at the other soldiers, who were hurriedly rushing to draw swords and nock arrows, but their efforts were in vain. With another roar that shook them to the core, he charged, the light of the fire dancing off his brilliant green scales. The first two men fell to his claws, and a sweep of his tail sent three more sprawling. The archers released their first volley of arrows, but they all pinged harmlessly off of their enemy's emerald armor. Shanger paid them no notice as he plowed through entire units of soldiers with a single charge. Spying one man attempting to flee, he took a deep breath and exhaled a stream of fire from his massive jaws. The man screamed as the flames engulfed him.

At this point, the rest of the troops realized the futility of the battle. Already, the officers were ordering their men to retreat. Shanger laughed, a deep rumbling noise. He had forgotten how much fun this was. He let loose another torrent of flame, intent on making sure that the humans felt the full measure of his wrath. The flames consumed a small group of them, leaving only smoking metal in its wake. He paused for a moment, watching the remaining humans flee. Then, with a flick of his tail, the bonfire collapsed, leaving nothing but hot embers in its place. Unfurling a massive pair of batlike wings, Shanger leapt off the ground, disappearing into the darkness.

The news would not reach the human capital until two days later: the Great Dragon War had claimed an additional 129 human lives.

The Dragon King gazed into the night sky, the moonlight reflecting off of his blue hide. A large golden crown adorned the top of his head, gracefully wrapping around his horns. Archus was well aware that the life of a king was not an easy one, but it was times like these when he wondered if there was more he should be doing. As he watched, his keen eyes suddenly caught sight of a large green shape in the sky. Recognizing the incoming form of one of his generals, he took flight, gliding down over the stone structures of a sprawling city. A few other dragons gazed up at him as he flew above, but at this hour, not many were awake. Arriving at a great stone outcropping just outside the city walls, the Dragon King discovered that Shanger had already landed.

“Greetings, Shanger!” he called, alighting beside him. “What have you discovered?”

Shanger remained silent for a moment as if contemplating what to say. Then, licking his lips, he said, “Nothing, my king. The area you sent me to patrol is free of invaders.”

Archus studied his face for a second. At length, he inquired, “I trust that you also investigated the large fire that appeared shortly after you left?”

Shanger seemed uneasy. “A fire?” he asked. “I did not notice so much as a plume of smoke. You must have been seeing things.”

If Archus had had eyebrows to raise, he would have. It was widely known that the Dragon King had some of the best eyesight of his kind, a trait that had proven its usefulness many times in detecting their enemy’s covert movements.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I am almost certain that I could see the orange glow of a large blaze.”

“There was nothing!” the general hastily replied.

“Shanger!” Archus said in his most commanding tone. The green dragon locked eyes with him. “Were your actions responsible for the fire I saw?” The two dragons stared at each other for a good minute or so.

Finally, Shanger broke off. “They never stood a chance!” he growled.

Archus suddenly became very concerned. “What did you do?”

“What we should have been doing this whole time!” Shanger was shouting now.

“The only reason this war has gone on for so long is that you refuse to accept the truth! If I can single-handedly destroy their camps, then why should we not send out our full force to destroy their entire civilization? We are stronger, faster, and tougher than they will ever be. The world could be ours to command! And yet you still refuse to accept it!”

At this, the king let out a low growl. “No. What I refuse to accept is that extinction is the only answer. Is there no hope for peace? If we can help them to see reason, then perhaps we may reach some agreement to end this war without further casualties.” He paused momentarily, then continued, “You disobeyed a direct order tonight. I have no choice but to suspend you from military duty.” To his surprise, Shanger did not seem dismayed.

“Very well,” he said. “But, when the end comes, know that I warned you.” With that, he took off, making for the southern end of the City.

Troubled, Archus trudged back towards the Citadel. He knew that there were some who shared Shanger’s view, but this latest encounter worried him. He turned Shanger’s warning over in his head many times. What had the green dragon meant? Was he referring to an onslaught of human attacks? Was he referring to dissent from other dragons? Or

had his statement come about from a mistaken certainty in his beliefs? There was no way to be sure. At length, Archus determined the best course of action would be to consult his advisors, so he sent a young dragon to call them. Magrum and Fondor had served alongside him for many years, and he trusted their judgment.

The Citadel was the largest building in the entire City. Like all draconic structures, it was composed of smooth, igneous rock that had been cemented in place by the combined fire of several builders. It was only this intense heat that could cause the stones to fuse together. This mass of rock formed an immense spire that reached several hundred feet into the sky. The entrance was large, even by draconic standards, and the entrance hall was large enough to comfortably fit at least 200 dragons. Archus, however, did not take this way, instead flying up to the topmost level where an outdoor platform allowed him to safely land and enter his audience chamber. This was the room where he would meet with other members of the ruling body to discuss important issues, and to him, this issue was of the utmost importance.

Magrum and Fondor were already inside when Archus arrived. They dipped their heads respectfully as he entered. The dragon king paused before beginning.

“This war that we fight has gone on for two decades. Despite our immense strength, hundreds of our brethren have fallen. We have fought for so long that to our enemies, our image is almost irreparable. I am tired of this war, and as such, come sunrise, I intend to do something about it.” Archus noticed Magrum’s eyes narrow suspiciously as he spoke but said nothing of it. “Tomorrow, I will fly to the human capital city to attempt to negotiate some form of peace between our peoples.” There was a moment of silence as his advisors processed what he had just said.

Magrum scoffed. “Why?” he growled. “Such efforts were made at the start of this war, and I fail to see how such efforts would succeed now.”

“Because the war has taken a toll on them too,” Archus responded. “The humans are likely just as tired of fighting as we are, and I think that they will be receptive to the idea of peace.”

Magrum chuckled. “You always did see the best in people, Archus. However, I question the wisdom of submitting ourselves to a species that has proven that their only strength is their numbers. We have the means to bring them to their knees. Why should we not?”

At this, the king’s worry deepened. His advisor’s argument was eerily similar to that posed by Shanger just a few minutes before. Choosing his words carefully, he said, “Because... we may win the war, but at what cost? The humans may be physically weak, but they would inevitably bring down many of us as well—”

“Many of us?” Magrum interrupted. “I seriously doubt that. In fact, I don’t even think that’s what you’re worried about.” Magrum was pacing now. “No, you’re not worried about the lives of our people. You’re worried about the lives of the humans!” He swiped his tail, undoing the latch on the door and allowing a crowd of several dragons to rush in. “Archus!” he cried. “As an advisor to the king, I am hereby removing you from your position for neglecting the needs of your people.”

No one moved. Finally, Fondor stepped in. “What are you doing, Magrum? You’ve stood with Archus from the beginning! Why turn on him now?”

“Because times have changed,” another voice said. A green dragon stepped forward from the group. “He may have stood with us once,” Shanger continued, “but that time has long passed. If we are to claim our rightful place, we must eliminate any *obstacles* to our progress.”

Fondor growled. “Is that a threat?” he asked.

“Yes. Yes, it is.” Magrum replied, not bothering to mask his contempt. “So, where do you stand?”

Fondor hesitated. Then, he faced Magrum. “I stand with the king,” he said.

Magrum flew into a rage. “Then you must fall as well!” he shouted and pounced on him.

“Archus, go!” Fondor shouted as he fought his fellow advisor. “I’ll hold him off!”

Archus turned, dashing out onto the landing and taking flight. He knew there was no chance that Fondor could win, but he also knew that he owed it to his friend to use the time he had bought. He could hear Magrum yelling to those who had assembled behind him. Risking a glance behind, Archus saw a massive group had already assembled in the sky to chase him.

“You have been deceived!” he called back. “Magrum is using you to further his own goals!” Unfortunately, his words seemed to have no effect on the advancing horde. *I have no choice.* He thought. *I must stand and fight, or I must surrender the kingdom.* After a brief moment of contemplation, he whirled around to face his foes. The roar he let out shook the City, ensuring that every dragon would witness the events that were about to unfold.

As the first dragons approached, he unleashed a massive blast of fire, scattering the group. Capitalizing on their confusion, he dove into the fray, teeth bared. His claws tore through the opposition, each challenger plummeting down to the ground. He heard

Magrum calling out to him from above. "You can't possibly defeat all of us, Archus!"

Archus looked up, finally picking out his former advisor hidden by the backdrop of gathering clouds. "Maybe not!" he growled. "But I can most assuredly defeat you!" With a few mighty wingbeats, he charged upwards. Seeing this impending attack, Magrum let out a roar of his own and dove, determined to destroy his opponent once and for all. The two combatants raced towards each other at immense speeds. They collided, each one trying to tear the other apart with their claws and teeth. A blast of fire narrowly missed Archus' face. They separated, and as Archus spread his wings, he felt a sharp pain. During the tumble, a huge gash had been torn in his left wing, rendering it useless. He quickly closed his wings to avoid falling into an uncontrollable spin and braced himself as he crash landed on the stony rooftop of a tower. He tumbled to a painful stop, digging his claws into the rock to drag himself to a halt. Magrum landed lightly in front of him, with Shanger and the others lining up behind him.

"This is your last chance, Archus." Magrum said. "This is not the way it was meant to be. Surrender your crown, and we can finally end the war and claim our rightful place in this world."

Archus forced himself to stand. "The war?" he said. "This was never about the war. I could have ended the war." He locked eyes with Magrum. "My mistake was thinking I could end the conflict. Where is your loyalty? Even after all this time, you do not trust me, despite all that I have done for our kind. You are willing to kill me out of some mistaken belief in your own superiority. The fighting would have ended, but the conflict would have persisted."

Magrum paused. "So you will not yield?" he asked.

“No.” the king said. “I will not.”

Magrum growled and leapt forward, slashing with his claws. “Then I have no choice,” he said, and with a mighty swipe, the former king fell from the top of the tower.

High School Honorable Mentions

My chest hurts. Thoughts pulse through my head as my feet slap the tarmac on my way down the hill. This might be my last night alive. A stitch stabs into my side, and my legs ache. My heartbeat is pounding in my ears and echoing in my hollow chest. Today the doctor said my kidneys were spilling proteins into my body. My breath sounds raspy as I inhale - I'm rounding the corner to my house. *This must be what dying feels like.* The lights are on; my parents are asleep. I force willpower into my legs going down the driveway. This is my nightly punishment, running on empty, after a day of near sedentary survival.

-

Monitors beep. *Breathing too slow again.* The tube is tugging at my left nostril, and the rising panic wakes up with me as I open my eyes. The stupid, wet gown is plastered to my back as I sit up. The clock reads 3:55am. It's day 9, and I'm still terrified. The routine is the same every day - blood drawn at 4 am, vitals at 6, breakfast at 8, then endless tirades from doctors, nurses, psych interns, sitters, and techs. Ever since they found me doing squats in the shower, I've been banned from walking around the 7th floor.

The door opens loudly with the familiar creak of the blood-draw cart.

"Morning," the phlebotomist says, wheeling it over.

I sink back into the bed.

"Hi," it comes out flat and dissolves into the air like smoke.

"I hear you're leaving in a few days," she says as she sets up the tubes and needle. The blood pressure cuff inflates around my arm, and the heartbeat I'm so used to hearing pulses in my ears.

"It depends if there are beds available at the house," I answer numbly. I've been waiting to hear if I have a bed at a residential treatment facility for days.

She quickly inserts the needle into my arm, makes the joke about my juicy veins that I've only heard 200 times, and wishes me luck on my journey. My head hurts, my bones ache, and my body feels like a bag of liquid calories.

-

12 am. The night staff are downstairs in the kitchen, counting the knives in the sharps box. My roommate, Haley, is sleeping. I watch her shoulder rise and fall from the bed on the other side of the room. It's been three hours since the evening snack. I can't stop thinking about the liquid in my stomach. I wait ten minutes to make sure she is asleep. Sit-ups, leg lifts, squats, in sets of 100, sliding back in bed when I hear the floorboards creak. When the night nurse cracks open the door to check on us, I am motionless, mouth slightly open, body limp under the covers.

I haven't eaten real food since I got here two weeks ago. Instead, I stare at my plate until time runs out, and drink the mandatory liquid replacement. They're threatening to send me back to the hospital, so I throw back cup after cup of calories, clenching my stomach later until it offers up whatever is undigested. I hide in giant hoodies and baggy sweatpants. *I cannot let this go.* I am holding on so tightly that it is killing me again.

-

"Chocolate or vanilla?"

I squeeze my eyes shut and will her voice out of my head.

"Ida."

I snap out of my chair. Everything feels sped up as if I'm watching myself in fast forward.

I pace around the table, aware that I look crazy. I want to go home.

"I need you to take a seat for me."

She sets 16 ounces of chocolate Boost in front of me, my replacement from breakfast.

"You can work on this while I pour your second one."

Melody glares at me from across the room, fiery intensity in her eyes.

"For the love of God, drink it, Ida."

She drains her cup like a shot glass, a rim of chocolate around her upper lip, and slams it back down on the table. A month ago, she would have hidden under the table, shaking and wringing her hands. Her legs still shake, and she drums the table with long, thin fingers, waiting for me to drink.

Maybe that is the difference between us. Melody is still slender like a paintbrush, with dark purple hair sweeping the table edge. I look down at my body, muscle that has relaxed into soft curves, ribs that had stuck out now enveloped by health.

"No."

The therapist's mouth droops into the sad smile you see in a provider who has experienced this frequently.

"You realize this will count as your third refusal?"

I nod.

I know what this means. I've been in this program for six days, but I'll be leaving soon.

-

"Do you ever wish you could go back?"

We're walking into LabCorp, the weekly residential tradition, to get our blood drawn when she asks the question.

"What do you mean?" I squint my eyes in the bright sun and look over at her.

Shylee grabs the railing on the stairs to steady herself, and the counselor with us gives her a pointed look. Shylee hasn't eaten in two days; facility protocol will have her back in the hospital today or tomorrow if she doesn't start soon.

"Do you ever wish you could go back in time and say yes to your mom's mac-n-cheese, say you'll eat whatever they give you, go back to being a normal kid?"

There is sadness in her voice, remorse almost.

"Everyday."

It's not a truthful answer. When I was Shylee's age, starving was my only friend. It ruined my life, but it kept me alive.

We're in the elevator now. She grabs the railing again to steady herself.

"I miss the time when I went to soccer games instead of doctor's appointments."

Her eyes go wide and bright.

"You played soccer too?"

"Left midfielder! You?"

She laughs, "I was a right midfielder."

Her laugh fades to somber silence.

"You know," her voice wavers a little, "every time I go to the hospital, my parents and I go down to the cafeteria and get a milkshake. Always the Oreo one. It sounds stupid because, you know, they're scary. But at that point, it's like - why not? if I end up going back, I'll do it again."

For some reason, it makes sense to me. I start laughing at the ridiculousness of it.

"If I ever have to go back, I'll drink one for you," I say as we step off the elevator, holding her arm as we walk; she's so weak.

She laughs, but it's a hollow sound echoing off the white walls of the doctor's suite.

-

Dave's Pizza Parlor is crowded. The air buzzes with anxiety as we walk through the line to the counter. The calories aren't listed next to the pizzas. *Of course*. The girl behind me starts crying - she's been here for three days and I feel bad that she has to face pizza on her first week here.

I'm leaving on Monday. My roommate Madison is discharging on Monday too, after four months in hell. She hands over her plate to the man serving the pizza and winks at me.

"Give me your biggest slice."

I wonder how Shylee's doing. She went back to the hospital a few weeks ago. I'm going home! This time, I've promised to eat my food and attend my meetings and get my life back. I'm sure that I will never have to fulfill my end of the milkshake deal. In three days I'll be free! I'm only planning to lose a few pounds so I can be normal and healthy - maybe a month or two of salads and some light exercise, nothing excessive. The thought of freedom is thrilling enough

to disqualify the greasy pizza in front of me. I will be on my own, without supervision and accountability.

-

"Ida, you got a letter from the hospital," my mom says from the kitchen.

I'm on my fourth cup of coffee today, sweet and sickly as only artificial sugar-free coffee can taste. I feel nauseous, careening through the lounge, leaving Food Network (I've been watching all day) to get the white envelope from the empty table.

It's from Shylee, room 724, 7th floor.

Dear Ida,

I'm at the hospital, trying to get better. Things are going well, but I'll be here for a while because my heart is not great.

I still wear the bracelet you made for me, and I had my milkshake like I said I would. I hope you are playing soccer and having fun - you deserve it. Don't come back here!

Shylee

-

I'm drenched in sweat when I wake up to the beeping monitors. The healthy weight loss lasted one day before I was back in the vice, being squeezed smaller and smaller.

Someone is calling a code in the room down the hall. I walk unsteadily, the floor shifting under my feet, wires on my chest hanging loose. I try to make out the number on the door at the end of the hall with blurry vision.

724.

No.

I clench my fists and close my eyes and wish that it was me, pray that her body fights back against her brain once more.

No.

The pain lights up the back of my brain, like white lights on a Christmas tree. I saw her last name on the door when I was wheeled past on my arrival three days ago.

She's thirteen years old.

No.

I am there in that doctor's office again, watching her faint after they unsuccessfully try to draw blood for ten minutes. I am sitting around that table again, watching her head hang low in defeat. I am meeting her parents as they drop her off at residential, telling us that we're going to love her. I wonder if Shylee is dying with the bracelet I made for her tied around her tiny, fragile wrist.

No.

More white coats dash down the hall, and I hear yelling. There's heat in my head; the sounds are muffled from the end of the hall on the seventh floor.

No.

Everything's blurry.

-

It's been seven months. I'm thriving, according to all outside sources.

I stand in the kitchen and shake. The pantry door creaks. My heart is pounding, fists clenched, skin sweating under three layers of clothes. I am cold in my fragile bones, but there's

a hot frenzy that I can't stop. I have shrunk an inch from malnutrition since the hospital; the hunger I numbed for years eats at my stomach.

I open a bag of almonds with trembling fingers, crunching down the rising panic in my throat. Calories flash across my mind. Five almonds; the shaking continues. Half a protein bar - 100, right? Chocolate milk, that's 105? 60 for the almond milk, 45 for the syrup.

I'm starving, but I'm so full. How much did I eat? I slam the rest of the protein bar into the trash. My family is asleep in the land of normalcy, with regular problems like not wanting to get out of bed because it's 18 degrees.

The cold does not matter when the burning is in my throat from reflux and in my eyes from suppressed tears and in my stomach from a metabolic fire that I can't reverse no matter how many ounces of water I drink, like food is a toxin I can flush from my system. I take too many laxatives, lace up my shoes, retying twice because I can't stop shaking. Why did I eat? It's so cold, and I am crying halfway around the block. My chest hurts, my lungs shudder from the freezing air, my heartbeat pounds in my ears. Every shadow scares me.

-

"What happened, Ida?"

I stare out the window. The view from the seventh floor is pretty – pretty ugly to me. My red eyes are as dry as the bread I ate with spite this morning. I turn back to the psychiatrists and interns around my bed.

"I got stressed."

"And you didn't eat for nine days?" The head psychiatrist bites her lip, waiting for a response.

It's a rhetorical question.

"I'm fine! My labs aren't bad, I'm not dizzy, and my heartrate is coming back up."

My hand goes subconsciously to my chest, where the stickers and wires hang.

There's silence as they watch me.

"Why did you do it? Did something trigger it?" This time, the question comes from the resident, Quint. Doesn't he know that she's dead? *I knew her for four days and three months and now she's gone.* Doesn't he know that her last words to me were telling me to live, and I can't even do that?

"Nothing happened. School got stressful, I was working a lot, a boy rejected me. I knew if I stopped eating, I would stop feeling. I could become numb again."

The lady in the white coat sighs.

"You have to want something more than this, Ida. You know the health risks and consequences. The only people who recover are those who want more - kids, a career, a relationship. We see people coming back to this hospital for their fifth, tenth admissions. We've seen sixty-year-olds. Do you want to be sixty with anorexia?"

"No."

I look away again, see Shylee's face fading in the clouds, wish I was anywhere but here, twelve rooms away from her last breath.

"You can fight it, Ida."

She couldn't.

There's the pain in the back of my brain again, the white-hot light that burns into me.

"Will you take me to the cafeteria?"

-
Dear Shylee,

I thought of you today. I was at Dairy Queen with my team after a soccer game, eating an Oreo blizzard. The dull ache never goes away in my chest, even when I forget that you're gone. I wanted to cry or break something, but I finished the blizzard instead. My friends laughed at me for eating so aggressively, and I tried to laugh too. For a while, I was angry at you for not getting better or trying harder, but I did the same thing. It wasn't your fault. You were thirteen and murdered by this disease. I'm seventeen now, strong enough to fight, so I'm fighting harder now. The thoughts still come back, and the voice in my head uses the pain to tell me to give up instead of fighting against what killed you. Instead, I eat milkshakes and live like you wanted to. I miss you so much. I hope I'm making you proud.

Bearlock Holmes and the Crown Jewels

By Jonathan Zachriz

It was a typical day in London: the birds were chirping, the trees were rustling, and the rain was pouring. Bearlock Holmes and I, Pinky Watson, his faithful right-hand man, were on our way to the Tower of London for a private VIP showing of The Crown Jewels, as a reward for defeating a notorious black-market ring in a previous case. As we were briskly walking along, I remarked to Bearlock what an honor it would be to view these precious artifacts. Bearlock, hungry as always remarked, "Indeed, this is a great honor.

Pity we don't have time to stop for food at that pleasant-looking bakery across the street.

I do hope there will be refreshments."

"Oh, Bearlock, you are always hungry," I replied.

When we arrived at the Tower, there was a custodian waiting for us outside. "You must be the world-renowned Bearlock Holmes," he stated tersely.

"Indeed I am, sir. Allow me to introduce my partner in crime, Pinky Watson." I nodded a greeting. "And pray tell, what is your illustrious name?" Bearlock queried, looking quite distinguished in his suit and coat.

"Ah, forgive my abrasiveness. I am Sir Thomas Jenkins, the Vice President of Operations, and a custodian here at the Tower."

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Bearlock answered.

“Well, shall we get on with it, chaps?” Jenkins asked.

“Certainly,” I replied.

As we were walking through the doors, Bearlock commented on how the clock directly above looked as if it were about to fall down on top of us. It was an imposing edifice. Once inside, we noticed there was another group of people led by a different custodian. Those in the existing party rushed over to introduce themselves to Bearlock and I. They were Lord Winklebush, Duke and Duchess Stanley Payne, Sir Arthur Burton, an obscure military hero, and a Mister Nathan Allen, a beloved poet of the people. All had heard of Bearlock’s great accomplishments.

“So, you are the world-famous detective we have heard so little about,” sneered the pompous duchess dryly.

“Now, now Emilia, don’t be rude to these gentlemen,” reproved the Duke.

“They don’t seem all that gentlemanly to me,” sniffed the Duchess. “Look, that one has an orange stain on his blazer.”

“On the contrary, Duchess, these men are very gentlemanly. I have been an avid follower of Mister Holmes’ work for quite some time now,” injected Lord Winklebush. The Lord was an odd sort in a long, white overcoat. He acted mysteriously, as if he knew something that we didn’t, but wasn’t letting on.

“Oh, dreadfully sorry, my lady,” said Bearlock. “It is just a small marmalade stain. A friend of mine from Darkest Peru referred me to a most excellent recipe for marmalade sandwiches.” Bearlock flashed a modest grin at the Duchess.

“Hmmp!” said the Duchess.

“That’s a very nice white dress you have on, Duchess,” commented Sir Arthur.

“White dress!?! It is not a mere white dress. It is a silk brocade Dior original, designed for me,” fumed the Duchess. The Duke rolled his eyes.

“Ahh, madam, what is fabric when one can spin words together to make a literary legend as I have,” added Mister Allen.

“HMMPH!” the Duchess said again, this time louder.

After introductions were completed Jenkins addressed the crowd, “Hello everyone. I am Sir Thomas. My assistant Mr. Alfred Webb,” indicating a tall slender young man to his right. “We will be leading you all on this VIP showing of The Crown Jewels. There is an assortment of wine and cheese over to your left, if any of you are interested.”

“Smashing! Could use a good drink, eh, what?” said the Duke.

“Oooh, how kind,” said Bearlock, quickly moving towards the table.

“Eh-hemm,” said Jenkins, “We have a special treat for you today. Our tour will finish with a special viewing inside the vault where you will see two parts of the rarest stone in the world, the Cullinan Diamond, and for today only, The Cullinan 1, otherwise known as the Great Star of Africa, will be taken out of its case to be shown to our distinguished guests.”

After Jenkins concluded his introduction, the guests mingled over to the table to have a few refreshments. Bearlock and Duke Payne, already stationed by the table and thoroughly enjoying themselves, got into a debate of what wine was better. Bearlock favored white wine, while the Duke touted the merits of red. Meanwhile, I noticed that Lord Winklebush kept looking around in a strange way.

The first half of the showing went extremely well. Everyone was impressed by the stunning display. Through the entire tour, Jenkins and Webb were spewing out stories and facts about as many artifacts as we would let them. It was enough information to make one’s head spin. However, the wine helped everyone get through it.

Then, finally, it was time to visit the vault for the grand finale. Down two flights of stairs, through the metal detector, past the guards, and into the vault the group traipsed, with the wine glasses refilled to the delight of Bearlock and the Duke. Once everyone had viewed all of the pieces inside the vault, Jenkins unlocked the hard-sided, black case situated firmly in a niche in the back wall and opened it very gently. Bearlock was looking over his shoulder. I was behind him, and Lord Winklebush was behind me. The Duke and Duchess were off to one side. With gloved hands Jenkins picked up the Diamond and carefully set it down on a velvet pillow on a pedestal. All were amazed.

“This is the Great Star of Africa,” described Jenkins. “The Greeks believed that diamonds were splinters of stars fallen to earth.”

“Wasn’t it also believed that the tips of cupid’s arrows were made of diamonds?” added Bearlock importantly.

“That is correct,” affirmed Webb.

“What a lovely diamond,” I said.

“Indeed,” agreed Lord Winklebush in a thoughtful tone.

“I say, a pretty hefty rock,” said Sir Arthur.

“Hmmm, yes, I suppose you could call it that,” replied Jenkins. “This gem is 1,977 carats. The original Cullinan Diamond weighed 3,106 carats before it was divided. So, as you say it sir, a hefty rock indeed.”

At that moment a man burst into the vault, followed by a confused guard.

“What is this interruption?” asked Webb.

“This man claims to be Lord Winklebush,” gasped the guard.

“That’s because I AM Lord Winklebush! This man has been impersonating me!” said the newcomer pointing accusingly at Lord Winklebush.

Suddenly the lights blacked out! The ruckus was tremendous. It was total mayhem. Someone ran into the Duchess who shrieked, “Ahhhh my dress!”

“Don’t worry Duchess, I’ve got you,” said Lord Winklebush reassuringly, the person who started the tour as Lord Winklebush that is.

She didn’t seem so reassured, “Ahhhhh!” she shrieked again.

Clink! Crash! “The Diamond!” cried Jenkins.

“Hold on everybody! I will look for a light switch,” came Bearlock’s voice through the dark void.

The lights turned on. “Finally!” said Mister Allen who was entangled on the floor with Sir Arthur, the noted military genius, who had Mister Allen unceremoniously in a headlock.

The first thing Bearlock saw was Duchess Payne swooning in the arms of Lord Winklebush #1, who looked quite confused yet confident. The Duchess had heavy red wine stains along the side of her dress and down her matching handbag. Lord Winklebush #1 had a red stain on his cuff, however, his white gloves remained spotless.

The Duke looked dazed with a stupid expression on his face. “I say, anyone for cricket, and maybe some more refreshments? To the queen.”

Lord Winklebush #2 looked indignant and complained loudly, "I demand satisfaction!"

Jenkins and Webb stared in shock at the floor. Following their gaze, Bearlock saw the precious diamond laying shattered on the floor in a million pieces along with wine, and broken wine glasses. "Oh, dear," Bearlock noted, "I must have tripped whilst looking for that pesky light switch."

"Oh, what shall we tell the Queen!" Jenkins moaned. Webb stood with his mouth gaping open.

"My dress is ruined!" cried the Duchess despairingly, taking no notice of anything else. "YOU!" she growled directly at Bearlock. "YOU are responsible for this and shall pay for a new dress," she cried, letting go of Lord Winklebush #1 rather violently.

"Beg your pardon, but my wine was white, mi'lady," replied Bearlock.

"I'm afraid he's right darling. It was I who knocked you over and spilled my wine on you." The Duke put in with a smile, and a flash of reasonability, "None for cricket for then?"

"Oh, Stanley, how could you?" she sobbed clearly distraught and inconsolable.

"But what are we to do...the Diamond, Sir Thomas?" asked Webb

"We will have to report this great tragedy at once, I'm afraid," Jenkins replied.

“Uh, pardon me,” I said, “Something is rather odd. I think we’re all forgetting that diamonds do not shatter.”

“That’s right!” exclaimed everyone, except the Duke and Duchess.

“But glass does!” said Sir Arthur.

“The diamond! It’s been stolen!” Jenkins yelled as the truth dawned on him. “Guards! Stop everybody from leaving, call Scotland Yard, search everybody, just do something!!”

A guard left to call Scotland Yard, while the remaining guards began to search the party. They started with Sir Arthur and Mister Allen who had finally untangled themselves.

“They’re clean, sir,” one of the guards said to Jenkins.

Bearlock and I were searched next and also reported clean, as was Lord Winklebush #2. The Duke, completely oblivious to being searched, was pronounced clean. Hesitant to search the hysterical Duchess, guards searched Lord Winklebush #1 next, who submitted with no comment. The guards approached the Duchess cautiously,
“We have to search you now, ma’am.”

“Search me for what! How dare YOU presume to touch my person!”

When they emptied her handbag, the diamond clattered to the floor without shattering. The guards rushed to apprehend the Duchess.

“How did that get in there! I demand...”

We never found out what she demanded, as she swooned and fainted on the bewildered Duke. At this point the Helpful Inspector from Scotland Yard, with whom Bearlock and I were acquainted, arrived. “Ahhhh, good show Bearlock and Pinky! I see you have the criminal apprehended. Makes my job easy, eh what. Oh, hello Lord Winklebush. I didn’t see you there,” he said to Winklebush #2. “My apologies for knocking you with the door there.”

“Excuse me, Inspector,” interrupted Bearlock, “but this lady is not, in-fact, the culprit.”

But before Bearlock could finish. Sir Arthur pointed at Winklebush #2 and exclaimed, “You mean he IS the real Lord Winklebush?!”

“As I was saying...,” continued Bearlock.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you this whole bloody time!” burst out Lord Winklebush #2. “That man is a liar, a cheat, and a fraud, not to mention a thief and a besmircher of honor!”

“Are you sure there’s no one for cricket?” piped up the Duke.

Allen, the poet, tried to put in that “besmircher” was not a word, but no one paid any attention to him. Collecting himself with a great effort, Bearlock addressed the group,

“As I was saying, the Duchess did *not* steal the Diamond.”

“Oh, good show,” approved the Duke.

Bearlock continued, “You all who were in the vault during the blackout will remember that Winklebush #1 was standing behind Pinky here. When the lights went out he moved swiftly next to the Duchess, swapping out the real diamond for a fake he likely had concealed in his large coat. While the Duke ran into the Duchess spilling his wine, and knocking over the podium, the imposter Winklebush quickly stowed the diamond in the handbag, then acted that he had gallantly caught the Duchess mid-swoon.”

“But how are you certain?” asked the Inspector.

“I am certain because there was a red wine stain on the cuff of his jacket, which could not have been there unless he was standing near to the Duke when the Duke spilled his wine. After quickly calculating the path of the trajectory, I know Winklebush #1 had his hand in the handbag when the wine spilled because his white gloves were not stained at all though his cuff was. He was figuratively and literally caught red-handed. So, there is your proof Inspector, and it’s all thanks to the Duke here.”

“Oh, good show, anytime Inspector Bearlock,” muttered the Duke.

“STOP! He’s getting away,” Jenkins yelled, pointing to a fleeing figure. “Oh, where are the guards when you need them?”

The Inspector ran out of the vault to apprehend Winklebush #1, the imposter and thief. He returned empty-handed.

"Where could he be going?" asked Webb.

"Everybody split! Jenkins, call headquarters to close the borders. Everyone else cover the nearest transportation lines," instructed Bearlock.

At that everyone poured out of the Tower, except the guards and the unconscious Duchess who the Duke had dropped in the excitement, and hopped into the nearest cab on the hunt for the imposter.

The Helpful Inspector hung out the window of his cab shouting directions.

Bearlock, and I hopped into a cab as I remarked to Bearlock, "The nearest and most efficient transportation for someone wanting to make fast exit would be Tower Hill Station where you can catch a connecting train to the express to Paris."

"Good thinking, Pinky. You heard what the good man said, driver."

Once at the station we hurried to the platform just in time to see the imposter jumping onto the train as it was pulling away from the station. We ran after him. As we fell behind, he yelled, "Nice try Holmes! You foiled my plans this time, but I will have my day yet!" Then the train zipped out of sight.

Two days later we sat in the Inspector's office at Scotland Yard. "Shame we couldn't catch him," I said.

“He vanished. Just vanished,” Bearlock said mournfully. “I thought for sure our men would find him along the route. He should have been on that train when it pulled into the next stop. I have never failed to solve a case and see the guilty apprehended.” Bearlock shook his head bewilderedly.

“Bearlock,” I said gently, “you did solve the case. The criminal just got away this time.”

“Never fear, chaps. I have complete confidence you will capture that bloody scoundrel yet. On a related note, your names were mentioned to the Queen yesterday. You both will be receiving a medal of honor for fearlessly protecting the world’s most expensive diamond.”

“By jove, what an honor,” I said.

“Indeed,” said Bearlock, “however, I shall not fully enjoy that medal until that imposter is behind bars. In the meantime, you can find us at the real Winklebush’s estate, Winklebush Manor. We are taking an extended holiday.”

Leaving Scotland Yard, I turned to my troubled companion. “Bearlock,” I said, “take heart. You’ll track down that imposter one day and put him behind bars.”

“I will, Pinky. I will. Or my name isn’t Bearlock Holmes!”

Confessions of an Epic Wizard Dropout

By Amanda Anthony

PROPERTY OF XYLO NOIR. IF LOST—LUCKY YOU, FINDERS KEEPERS.

Day 1 of writing in this diary—(Diary? No, I’m gonna call it a journal. Journal sounds cooler)—that I found next to an old sandwich, a mood ring, and mardi gras beads.

I’ve never had a journal, so I’m not sure how I should start this. I guess it doesn’t really matter since nobody will read this. Unless I become the wizard king (which is a long shot, if I’m being honest). I’ll just talk about my day, then. Now, living on the streets (which is the cooler way of saying I’m homeless) isn’t naturally exciting, but I have a talent for turning potentially boring things, such as my day-to-day life, into an adventure extravaganza. (See? I just added the word extravaganza to my sentence and now it’s way more fun.)

Anyway, I was just going about my business: having fun, living the dream, dumpster diving for cool talismans, when I found a pair of aviator sunglasses. They were in super good condition, too. I’m wearing them right now, and it really elevates my outfit. Not to mention the mood ring and bead necklace I found next to the journal (I’m waiting for my magic to replenish, but when it does I’m gonna cast a talisman spell on both of them. They’d make epic additions to my collection). I checked myself out in a shop window and I looked like a badass. The guy inside saw me, though.

I bet he thought I looked badass, too.

Day 2 of writing in a journal that I'm keeping under a home improvement magazine

(which is ironic because I have neither (1) a home nor (2) a need for improvement).

I wanted to relocate from the alleyway I've been hanging out in, but I realized that now that I have a journal in my possession, I need a bag to keep it in. Only problem is that I don't have a bag. And I don't have money to buy a bag. So I set out on a quest to find a bag. Early into my quest, I found one of those grocery bags that say *thank you* written all over them (I've always liked those bags; they seem friendly and I need that kind of energy in my life) so I took it.

Once my quest was over, I took my singular belonging (aside from my baseball bat which I use as a wand. But I don't really think of it as a belonging, it's more like... a piece of me? Anyway, I love my bat very much, and I think more people should use baseball bats instead of wands because they are much cooler and much more useful) and then I searched for a new place to hunker down and call home. At least until I get bored of it.

Very quickly I realized that I didn't need to go very far; I only needed to look up. There was a fire escape ladder above where I was staying so I climbed it all the way to the roof. And let me tell you if I had the intelligence to think of that before sleeping across from a dumpster being occupied by a raccoon for two weeks, well, I would've taken the wizard king's throne already. Because that roof has got to be the best roof ever. I'm currently writing this next to some mysterious box that's giving off really nice heat and when I look up I can see the most beautiful skyline. I didn't realize how pretty this city was before (ha, that rhymes).

It's made me think of how many people are out there, and I feel

I don't know

separated I

guess?

Day 3 of writing in a journal that I just fought off a raccoon for.

It was way worse than I just made it sound. It was straight-up betrayal. So here's the story:

I was climbing down the fire escape (because contrary to popular belief, I am indeed *not* immortal, and *do* require food and water and a place to piss that isn't next to where I sleep) and when I landed in the alley, what do you know? There was that raccoon that was living in the dumpster. I thought to myself *You know, Xylo, you two were practically roommates for a couple of weeks and you never got to know this here raccoon. Perhaps you should get to know this trash bandit.* And I, of course, listened because I have often found myself to be quite wise.

But today was a fluke.

This trash bandit lived up to his name. He banditted the [redacted] out of my trash. He tried to steal my journal! I managed to fight him off and pry my journal away, but not without my aviators falling off and him running away with them. I swear I could hear him laughing at me as he scurried away. He could've at least put them on and given me a show, but *nooooo*. He had to be a trash bandit with no sense of showmanship.

Now I'm sad.

Day 4 of writing in a journal that I think I should give a name to... Battering Ram. I like it.

It's violent. And I think violence is cool.

I've decided to list all the reasons that I am amazing and my life is awesome.

1. I don't go to school. This one's a no-brainer (pun very much intended). School sucked.
People I don't care about trying to teach me things I don't care about while surrounded by people I don't care about to then be told by people I don't care about that I suck at school... I don't think I need to go on.
2. I've been going on an ongoing scavenger hunt looking for things I can use as talismans.
I'm already super blinged out.
3. I don't have to come out to anyone. No friends + no family = nobody to come out to.
Maybe I could come out to Trash bandit. Maybe he wants to know.
4. I found two pennies on the street yesterday. That was fun. I'm waiting for my luck to kick in.
5. That guy in the shop window from a couple of days ago waved at me.
6. I watched a squirrel chase another squirrel that had a bagel in his mouth (I named them Stormy and Sunny).
7. I get to watch people stare at me when I walk past. I'm a sight to behold, I'll tell you that. A badass with a baseball bat dripping in magic is bound to attract some stares. I

can tell that they all wish they could be as cool as me. Sometimes I'll see someone that's pretty and I'll think about talking to them. Starting something. Just to feel wanted.

But I don't need that. I'm doing great without it.

Day 5 of writing in a journal that belongs to someone whose luck just kicked in (that's me!).

My penny luck just kicked in. and oh boy, did it work.

I was wandering the streets, just a normal Saturday night, when I found a wallet outside this nightclub. I opened it up and there was *a lot* of cash in there...

So I didn't feel too bad about taking some of it.

But I did feel bad about taking all of it, so I turned the rest over to the bouncer.

I'm gonna go eat something hot. And sugary. Or maybe something frozen. And sugary. I'll decide while I'm walking. I'll make sure to say hi to Trash bandit when I pass by. But I'm still mad at him for stealing my glasses.

Day 5 of writing in a journal in a cafe that's way too fancy for me. Still day

5. I wasn't planning on writing. But

There's a girl.

She's really pretty.

And I keep looking at her. But I need to be doing something, otherwise, I'm gonna keep looking at her, and I can't look like a creep so instead I'll look like a mysterious intellectual who's writing in a journal in a cafe, but still in a badass kind of way.

Looking at her feels like

I don't know

I'm not smart enough to describe it.

I don't want to stop looking at her. But I'm afraid that if I keep looking at her then I'll want to talk to her. Which is a bad idea because I'm a lone wolf. And lone wolves don't talk to people. They act mysterious in a corner and

She looked at me.

Day 6 of writing in a journal that was written in by someone before me.

Yeah. I don't know why I didn't think to actually *read* what was written in the pages before I started writing. I honestly just picked up the journal, swiped past the used pages until I got to an empty one, and started writing. I don't know what that says about me and I'm not gonna figure it out.

Ok, so I read it. Well, scanned through, really. BUT, the point is that it seems to have been written by some Magemaster (quite honestly, I don't know exactly what that means; I know that they do stuff with like, potions and wands and talismans and... I don't know).

It's written on the front cover that it belongs to Grahm Legynd on 834 Crowley Street. And that's right across the street from me. And that's the guy from the shop window! *Mr. Legynd...*

Guess I should go say hi.

Day 7 of writing in a journal that used to belong to Grahm Legynd who is actually pretty cool when you get to know him.

I met Mr. Legynd. He said that it was ok that I was using his journal. He said he didn't need it anymore.

Apparently Magemasters craft all the wands and potions and talismans in their stores. He showed me how he makes a potion. It was really cool.

He complimented me on my talismans. He said I had talent.

I like Mr. Legynd.

Day 8 of writing in a journal that almost blew away with the wind today (it was a really close call. I don't know what I would've done if I lost it).

I decided to go back to Mr. Legynd's shop today. Only 'cause the weather's getting colder and the days are getting shorter. The streets tend to get more dangerous. So I went inside and it took me a while to find him (which if you ask me, is bad for business; I think it's a better business model to actually have people working upfront). But I eventually found him

packing in the back. He told me he was going on a quest for... something. I don't remember. It probably isn't important.

I just

Of course he's going away. Just when I thought that

Anyway. It's just typical.

Adults are always like that, y'know?

There one day then gone the next.

(Still) day 8 of writing in Mr. Legynd's scraps.

He just offered me a job. As his apprentice.

I

didn't say yes

Day 8 of writing in my journal, eating a popsicle, and sitting next to Trash bandit.

I'm doing good.

This wasn't what I had planned my life to look like.

But this is good.

My life is an adventure.

I don't need a job. I don't need that in my life. I don't need *Mr. Legynd* in my life.

I'm doing fine.

I think I'm just gonna sleep here for tonight.

Me and Trash bandit. Like back in the good old days.

And I'm really tired. Too tired to climb the ladder. someone is

h

got to me.

caught me asleep.

couldn't fight back.

no wand.

too tired.

everything hurts.

can't find trash bandit

Day ? and I'm writing.

Trash bandit is barely breathing.

I don't know what to do.

I can barely walk, let alone do magic.

I don't know how to save him.

He's all

I really have.

My one friend.

If

If Mr. Legynd was here he could help. But he's gone. And I can't do anything. I can't do this on my own.

Why did I think I could do this on my own?

Day ?? of writing in a journal inside Mr. Legynd's shop (which I broke into. Sorry not sorry).

I only feel a little bad about breaking and entering. But hopefully, Mr. Legynd understands. Trash bandit is dying.

I still can't do magic, but Mr. Legynd has potions.

Shit shit shit

I'm in a bit of a pickle.

They're labeled in some language I can't read.

Christ, I can't do this.

If only Mr. Le Hold

on.

I'm calling him.

I swear if he doesn't pick u He's

on his way.

Day ??? of writing in a journal with Trash bandit on my lap (he's alive. Huzzah!).

I'm in Mr. Legynd's shop. Today is my first day on the job. He was thoroughly distressed that I managed to get beaten half to death while he was out of town.

But he said he was glad that I called.

Ok, I've got to put the journal away, Mr. Legynd is gonna start his lesson now.

Day 1

I went to the cafe again.

Her name is Alba.

Everything that Reminded Her

By Huyenmi Dang

He was undeniably attractive. To her, at least. Locks of gold fell across his narrowed sapphire eyes as his slender fingers gripped the pen. His soft, soothing voice hung a question in the air. She didn't register the words. His voice was just so pretty. An irrelevant voice answered him, but she barely paid any attention. Perfect, white teeth pushed against his bottom lip, an adorable habit he always had when he was nervous, and he shot a quick, sideways glance at her. Her heart jumped. This man was perfect.

This man was beautiful. This man was hers.

Was.

"Ma'am, I'll need you to sign this as well," the irrelevant voice spoke again.

He turned away, placing the pen back on the form. He pushed the paper in her general direction.

"Sign it," he murmured.

"Okay."

She grabbed the pen. The same pen he had just used. Without looking at the document, she scribbled a quick signature on the bottom line. No need to read it. She already knew what it was anyway.

For a moment, they sat in silence. She was okay with the quiet. It just gave her more time to admire him for a bit longer. One last time.

Finally, he cleared his throat. He started to stand. "Well, if we're done here, then I really must be going."

"Have a good day, sir," the irrelevant voice said.

"And you."

Without turning to the other person in the room, without even acknowledging his ex-wife, he walked through the doorway, turned the corner, and disappeared from sight.

"Ma'am--"

The woman stood up.

"Have a good day."

And she, too, left the room.

The car was cold. Gripping the steering wheel, she glued her eyes to the road and tried to ignore the goosebumps on her skin. Car rides always reminded her of him. On their first date, she got carsick and almost threw up. He had rolled down the windows, letting the summer breeze coax the roars in her stomach to dull thuds until her nausea eventually subsided.

But that was almost five years ago. Things were different now. Suddenly, she didn't want to be reminded of him. Everything, every single thing, that reminded her needed to go.

Drawing a deep breath through her lungs, she steadied her shaking hands to make the last turn. She was finally home.

After she stepped through the door, the first thing she did was tear the honeymoon pictures on the table. She barely glanced at the photos. She didn't want to see his picture-perfect smile, or how his hair glinted in the sunset, or how the tie they chose so carefully that morning brought out his sparkling eyes. She didn't want to see this all again. Some things should just be forgotten. It was easier this way. Shreds of colorful paper piled on top of each other like party confetti, the small scraps of what used to be perfect memories gathering to amount to a stack of worthlessness.

Everything that reminded her needed to go.

Next was the piano. He loved to play, especially when he was upset. She loved his serene pieces when he was happy, but the crashing of chords when he was angry was just as beautiful in their own right. Now, the grand piano sat in the middle of the living room, the bench cold and lonely without its passionate virtuoso. If she closed her eyes, she could almost see his fingers pressing down the ivory keys with graceful precision, flying across the keyboard to create the melody that would turn his emotions into sound.

At first, she didn't know what to do. She considered setting fire to the room, but a house fire would only attract unwanted attention. She considered ruining the instrument with her paints, but that wasn't nearly enough to make sure she wouldn't remember his melodies again. Then she considered breaking it.

Without even thinking twice, she unplugged a nearby lamp, leaving the setting sun as the only light source in the room. Her hands were clammy, she realized as she lifted the post. Trembling, she staggered over to the instrument. She held it up, heaving it high above her head.

But she hesitated. Her breath caught in her throat as tears pricked her eyes. Wasn't there any other way? Did they have to split like this?

Then her arms gave out. Before horror could fully settle in her stomach, a violent crash screamed from the keys as the lamp smashed into the instrument, the lamp warping as it buried itself into the once-smooth surface. The noise reverberated through the house, loud enough to seem to shake the very ground beneath her. Her body quivered, sudden fear and regret squirming in her chest. But still...

Everything that reminded her needed to go.

She picked up the lamp, grunting with the effort. Abruptly, the noise stopped. Then she let the lamp drop again. Just as before, a broken chord wailed throughout the house, but this time, she felt something stir inside her. Something dark was trying to force its way into her heart. And she didn't particularly mind.

Everything that reminded her needed to go.

Again and again, she heaved the lamp high above her, then let it fall onto the wrecked piano. Discordance clogged the air, suffocatingly thick as it filled her lungs. Meaningless noise, piercing and raw, tumbled around her.

Finally, she picked up the lamp again, the appliance bent and damaged beyond repair, and this time setting it aside. Her chest heaved as wheezing breaths whistled past her chapped lips. Wiping her hands on her sleeves, she straightened herself and looked around the room with an eerie calmness. What else did she need to dispose of?
What else would remind her? What else needed to go?

“Momma?”

And she whirled around. In an instant, her face reflexively transformed into a pleasant mask. A patient, welcoming smile plastered itself across her lips.

Her daughter was adorable. And everyone could see that much, at least. Waves of gold fell across her wide azure eyes as her chubby fingers gripped the teddy bear. Her soft, curious voice hung a single word, a question, in the air. Perfect, white teeth pushed against her bottom lip, an adorable habit she picked up from her father.

“Momma, what are you doing?” the girl asked. “It’s so loud. Where’s Papa?”

But the woman said nothing. She simply walked over to the girl’s side and gently put her hands across her shoulders. She squeezed the girl to her chest tightly, her smile still unmoving on her face. She squeezed tighter. And tighter. She eyed the broken lamp.

Everything that reminded her needed to go.

Noah

By Thanisha Chowdhury

They smelled his tobacco-stained breath before they heard him, boots booming against the floor.

Sir slapped a piece of paper onto the kitchen table, and dust fled in mobs to the ground.

“I’m gonna go fight in Vietnam.”

Ma kept her face turned to the dishes in the sink. Noah kept his eyes on the corner of the carpet that curled upwards. It was always better to look where there was nothing looking back at you.

“I don’t know, it’s dangerous, ain’t it?” said Ma. “And Noah’s gonna need a daddy growin’ up. You should stay.”

“You jokin’? Look at him, practically a man!” Sir slapped a hand onto his back and ignored the flinch below his fingers. “How old are you now, sixteen, seventeen?”

“Thirteen,” Noah said quietly. But Sir had already moved on.

“This’ll earn me some respect, just you wait, fightin’ for our freedom. We can’t have the Reds takin’ over the world now, can we?” He pulled his chest up towards his ribcage, as if there was something there to salvage. “I leave F riday.”

Noah conjured images of monochrome explosions, bloodied faces and thin-legged children stumbling out of villages set ablaze. He looked at Ma, who was still looking at the sink. She’d been washing the same plate for minutes.

“I’ll get your bags ready,” she said, and the tap stopped.

When they walked him to the bus stop three days later, morning dripped down the horizon, muddied behind clouds. Puddles leapt up at Noah's ankles, laced worry into his step.

He stared at his scuffed shoes, behind Ma's, behind Sir's. The slanted roofs and stiff elbows burned glares into his shoulders. He knew just as well as they did he had no place here. He caught his reflection in the window of a store filled with clothes he'd never be able to afford, all patched elbows, calloused feet, stooped stance.

Sir and Ma were far ahead; they'd be worried about him by that point. He turned back to the sidewalk.

Before him stood a storm in the form of a stag, blinding in its stance, formidable in its gaze, with shuddering lightning for antlers that reached to the sky and further.

It neared.

Noah.

He wrenched from the path and tore through the birthing crowd. Their mutters fell silent to his ears. The brick beneath his feet turned to lush grass and still, he ran. But his legs knew no divinity.

It found him before he reached forest. Every piece of him caught fire. He tried to move, to pull back any of his limbs and howl, flee into the wood until the shrubs became sand, but he was anchored to the spot, each muscle motionless. The stag raised its head.

You. They have chosen you. The words were rolls of thunder through the fields.

His thoughts melted to white-hot pain, invisible flames that licked at his lungs and skull. He did not struggle, only bite the flesh of his cheek and wait for death to take him.

You will receive your first revelation. It will not be easy. The sky darkened further. But think of it as a blessing. A gift.

“What are you?” He was unsure whether he had thought the words or said them aloud. Either way, the response came after a moments’ silence.

I am like you. A messenger. An angel.

Thunder rumbled, this time not from the stag, but from its home. It had gone. The shower thickened to downpour, each drop a dagger to his skin, but he could do nothing but let unholy sounds tear from his throat. The clouds bled the wrong colors onto the world.

Light flashed behind his eyelids, brighter than anything he’d seen before. He heard only the deafening cries of the heavens overhead mingled with his own ragged breath as the leafy horizon faded to emptiness.

A sea of wide-leafed trees. Men and boys, dirt-caked faces.

Sir with his feet that drag against fallen branches.

Shrieking sky. Earth exploding up in a reach for god.

Sir with his hands at his stomach.

Fingers fumbling at gauze. Uniform, ground, leaves stained dark.

Sir with his eyes open to nothing.

Noah.

He gasped awake. The stag, it had returned for him, this time without mercy. But the frantic voice at his ears was human.

“He’s awake!” Ma put her palms to his face and somehow, they came away colder.

“Look at the state of you, are you okay? Are you hurt?” Sir stood behind her with his arms crossed.

Noah’s thoughts stumbled about and bumped into each other like drunks. He nodded, expressionless, before he pulled away and burst hands-first towards Sir, ignoring the groan of his bones against the movement.

“You can’t go.”

“Let go of me, boy, this ain’t your business.”

Pressure gathered in Noah’s chest. “No, you’ll die, I know you will!”

“What the Hell are you talkin’ about?” Sir tugged at the white-knuckled fists balled in his shirt and looked to Ma. “Will you get him off me?”

“Please, listen to me, it’s not safe. You can’t go, you can’t.”

The burst of an arm forward, and Noah stumbled backwards, stunned. “I’m goin’. God knows this country needs it.”

Sir stormed back towards the town, the buildings that flickered in and out of Noah’s sight. His throat grew tight around sobs. He buried his hands in the ground, tried to grab at something, anything, that would give him a way to bring him back, stop all of it, but he found nothing but mud.

“He’s gonna die, he’s gonna die, he’s gonna die.”

The more he said the words, the more he believed them, and the closer Ma’s eyebrows drew together.

“It’s for our sake,” she said.

“Do you believe me?”

She looked away and her mouth pressed in on itself, chewing at the words she wouldn't say.

The letter came before the answer did, three months later.

It was a blur of punched-out condolences neatly scripted between the margins, and to the top of it all floated the name.

Sir was gone, easy and painless, said the letter. Uniform stained scarlet, said the sky.

Ma stared at the white between the lines, tears blazing silent paths down the hand pressed to her mouth. Noah, behind her, read the words as many times as the branches had leaves and still, they echoed off his skull and back into the wooden table. The day on the hill, the stag, its light, it had been right. His blood fled to his throat.

Outside the window, lightning flickered. It hadn't stormed since the day Sir'd left. This was no coincidence.

Come.

He had to go. This time he would prevent it. He'd keep time from folding itself into tragedy and drive a sword through fate's heart.

He was the only one who could.

“Ma, I've gotta go out for a bit.”

She remained stony, unmoving. He ached to leave her as a statue, but she had said it herself: it was for their sake. And for their sake, he would bear the heavens' wrath.

When he climbed to the hill, they hummed in approval.

“I’m here!” If only his voice wouldn’t quiver. If only he could be the hero. “And I’m ready!”

Empty house. Quiet night.

Dark woven into the folds of her nightgown. Restless silence.

Bare feet on cold floors. Crumpled corners. Fingers trembling around rope.

The room holds its breath.

Scrape of wood on wood. Toes in the air, still, an arrow pointing to the ground.

Candle extinguished, along with her breath.

He was running before he was on his feet. Dirt sucked at his steps, and no matter how loud the wind whistled past his ears, the house on the horizon would not grow larger fast enough. He prayed to every god he could think of, and when he ran out, to the oceans and the sky.

He found her in the bedroom, floating like a spirit. She wore rope as a necklace and ice on her skin.

Noah crumpled to the floor and howled. Outside, the trees were silent.

One day, two deaths. He prayed that a third would follow soon.

The house was made of shadow and empty breaths. They traced his steps and rustled the growing pile of papers on the counter, fluttered the doors open and shut, like the beating of a dying heart.

Of course, he was one of them. He let dust cast itself in heavy blankets across what remained of life, and himself lived off sips of memories.

The stag appeared next closer than ever before, staring in from the corner of the kitchen through the millions of eyes that it had sprouted. Noah sat gaunt-faced at the table, letter in one hand, rope in the other, eyes blurring together somewhere between. Torrents beat against the roof.

The glow beckoned, and this time he needed no words. Whatever the heavens had left to show him, he would bear, be it for even the faintest form of meaning. He could prove that he was more than an echo.

A silhouette, thin and shaking against the night.

Face turned upward. Sky turned downward. Water rippling grass like boulders into the sea.

World lit white. Screams from storm and boy. Feet lifted from the ground, toes grazing earth.

When the fields faded back to mortal, an outline laid broken among the weeds, limp-limbed and staring at God.

The next time he heard thunder, he locked every door and window he could find. The winds howled in protest.

The corner of the room lit. His eyes stung with the suddenness, but his legs did not shake this time. There was only a tiredness that settled between his shoulders, heavy, aching, deep.

You are not going?

"No."

But you must. The gods have chosen you, remember?

"They picked wrong. I'm not the right one." He buried a fist in his singed hair. "I ain't holy like that."

You are. You have the blood of gods in you.

"I don't. I'm a kid, that's it. I don't need a god's blood. I need my own."

The rest of them will die if you don't go.

He stared, as best he could through watering eyes at the stag.

The rain, the flood. You know they are not prepared. The world flickered. Neither are you. You can choose to die the hero or among the townsfolk.

For a few moments the only sounds were that of the clouds growing angrier outside, water sloshing against the wooden walls, threatening to drown.

The light softened. *It is not the most terrible thing. Remember that you are part of something much greater than yourself.*

That was all he was. A vessel. A messenger. Nothing but an insignificant piece in a mechanism that would march on without him, just as it always had.

He looked down at sharded night that lined his arms. On the other side of the crying walls, the sky was still screaming. He thought he could hear something like a wail.

"I'll go." He stood.

You have done well.

The light extinguished. The only illumination that remained was the occasional flash through the curtains.

He looked to the door, still with a wardrobe pushed against it. There was only one direction left to go.

He was born of the storm, destined to die of it as well.

Rain drove tiny knives into his skin as he dragged himself through the floods. Water replaced the grass that had once kissed his knees, lapping higher and higher with each step. He had not brought a coat; it would only be more for others to clean up in the morning.

Wind blew at him from all directions. He planted his feet into the hilltop and turned his face to the sky. It gazed back, clouds black and spun together like chain-mail armor. He closed his eyes and breathed out.

When the light took him finally, it was behind his eyelids more than anywhere else. He rose like the clouds and sank into the earth, each vein under his skin crackling with violent currents. There was no pain, not this time, only release in its most blinding form. The world shrieked around him.

Or maybe it sang.

A thousand steps through a thousand eyes. Kaleidoscopes of brown and grey. Showers on the stone and wood.

Among the crowd, a boy. Back turned. Eyes to the ground. Adrift in a sea of stares.

You, reborn. A messenger. Pushed forward by the clouds and the winds. Closed circle, open sky.

He sees you.

Noah.