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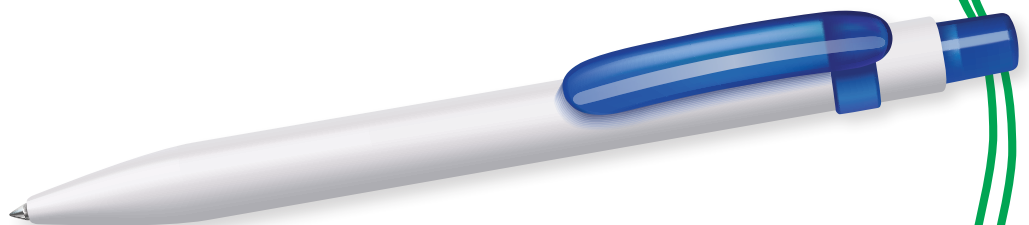
★ 2020 ★

Short Story Writing Contest for Teens

MIDDLE AND
HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS

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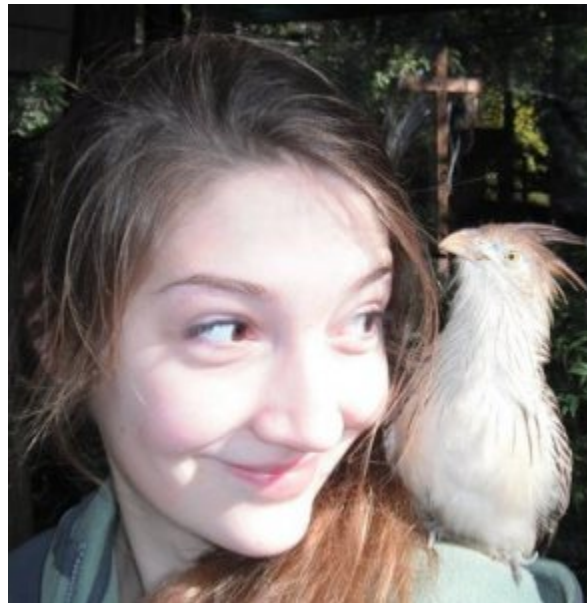
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These stories are included in their original format and text, with editing made
only to font and spacing.

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

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MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNERS

First Place: Cicadas

By Thanisha Chowdhury

The first time I listen for the cicadas is when we go roaming together through the glen behind the ranch, nestled cozily between farmland and thicket. He pauses every now and then, leaning down to pluck a dandelion out of the grass and blow, the corners of his mouth turned upwards at the way the particles pirouette through the air like elegant dancers. The way he looks at the world around him can only be described as a deity looking upon his creations in approval, as if he spun the grass beneath our feet from his fingertips, as if he was the one who painted the streaks of color on the horizon every evening, yet still with that scintilla of childlike wonder.

As we make our way through the sea of knee-high grass, he nudges me in the side. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"The cicadas."

Their tymbal had faded to background noise after being nearly constant for the majority of the summer, but becomes audible again in the silence. "I do."

"What do you think they're saying?" Maybe he's thinking aloud, or joking, or maybe he's asking me. Whatever the case, I listen. No matter how hard I strain my ears, I hear nothing different than what I always have, insects rubbing legs and wings together in search of a mate.

“I don’t know.” I pause for a moment before I add, “What do *you* think they’re saying?”

He shrugs, and doesn’t say anything more about it after that.

We spend the rest of the afternoon talking about things that don’t really matter.

The second time is when we go exploring through the woods. He leads the way, earthy brown curls bouncing with every step he takes through the leafy underbrush.

“What do you do during the school year?” His question comes out of the blue, but I’ve learned not to be taken aback by it anymore.

“Wait for summer to start again.”

He laughs, and it’s a sweet sound, like the aroma of the honeysuckle that fills my lungs with each breath. “No, really.”

I’m quiet for a moment, thinking. “I’m on the track team.”

“Really? Are you fast?”

“What kind of a question is that? Of course I’m fast. I run on a team.”

“Prove it. Let’s race.”

“Alright. To the fallen log down there.”

I don't remember starting, but I remember every detail after that. The way fallen branches crunch beneath my feet, the way he pumps his sinewy arms back and forth and screws up his face in concentration, the way I pull forward at the very last second and make it across the finish line first.

I'd expected to win, but when he reaches me, panting, and thrusts my hand into the sky as if I'd just won a wrestling match, I feel more triumphant than ever before. Ecstasy explodes from our joined hands, and the cicadas' harmonious song resounds through the forest, deafening. He's grinning, and yelling, and I can barely even make out his words. Jubilation leaks from his pores in rays of broken sunlight, and I don't think I'll ever be able to look away.

The third time is after we go swimming in the river. We sit in the back of my dad's pick-up, completely soaking through the blankets I had put down to keep the truckbed dry, but it doesn't matter because we're talking and laughing and we're the only people in the whole world.

"I'm going to miss this after I go home," I say between gasps of air.

The conversation comes to a screeching halt, and I feel him go stiff next to me. It's a truth we had both been ignoring, and it hovered over us constantly like a thick, suffocating fog. My last days here for the summer are drawing nearer and nearer, whether either of us acknowledge it or not.

He says nothing, just leans back his head to rest against the red metal.

Soft rays of light stream through the leaves, irradiating the mountains and valleys that stretch across the landscape of his face. A zephyr sends the greenery rustling, and the way he closes his eyes makes it seem as though he's listening in on what secrets the trees whisper to each other in hushed tones. In that moment, he's a tired god, faced with his own mortality and forced to make a decision.

Finally, he speaks up. "I don't want you to leave."

His voice is small, vulnerable, and I almost reach out and take his hand.

Almost.

"Me neither." I can't bring myself to look at him, so I stare down at my lap.

I feel his warm hand on the nape of my neck before I see it.

When I look up, his face is mere inches from mine, so close our noses nearly brush. Hot breath fans my cheeks, and his brow is furrowed slightly. I'm still staring at a smear of dirt across his left cheekbone when he presses his cool lips to mine.

Suddenly I'm no longer in the truck but floating, floating, above the trees and the clouds, miles high. I ride my rapture through the heavens, each touch of his bringing me closer and closer to the stars.

He holds me as if I'm made of glass, as if he's afraid that one wrong move could leave me shattered in his hands. He cups my face and brushes a thumb across my cheekbone, and it's so gentle, so *tender*, that goosebumps creep up my arms. It's everything I'd always thought it would be, and it's nothing I expected, but it's perfect in every way.

I'm soaring.

But I should have known that flying too close to the sun would end in flames.

He pulls away first, out of breath. My face is cold without his. "I'm sorry."

I want to grab him again, to pull him to me and kiss him so hard his head spins, but he's already scrambling out of the truck and onto the ground that seems miles below us now.

My wax wings begin to melt, and I'm falling, falling. "What? Where are you going?"

All he does is shake his head, and I think I can catch a glimpse of wetness glistening on his cheeks. "I'm sorry."

And then he's gone, leaving me alone with nothing but the chirp of cicadas.

The fourth time, I'm alone. I haven't seen him in days.

When I find myself wandering into the forest once again, everything is lifeless. The trees no longer sway and dance in the wind, the bright reds and yellows of the wildflowers have become dull and muted, and even the songbirds sing bleakly, as if in mourning.

As I reach the spot where I had parked the truck the other day, anger bubbles up in my stomach, rising like bile up in my throat and exploding out of my mouth in a strangled scream. I fling myself at the nearest tree, kicking and punching and yelling. It's for what he did to me, how he touched me like that and then *left*, how he had

given me a taste of what it was like to be a god and soar through the sky, but left me to drown after plummeting to my death. I pound at the rough bark until my hands and eyes are red.

I crumple to the ground, defeated, and let my head drop into my hands.
Broken sobs echo through the vast expanse of silence.

I don't hear the cicadas that day.

The last time, he finds me first. I'm sitting on the riverbank, hands hooked around my legs and chin resting on my knees when he comes and sits next to me.

"Hey." A single syllable shakes the earth, making the ground rumble and the trees drop their leaves.

I keep my eyes on the water. "Hey."

"So," Out of the corner of my eye, I see him tracing shapes in the soil with his finger. "About the other day."

Tidal waves crash inside my stomach, but I say nothing.

"I really shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry." There are those words again, the same ones he said to me that day, the same ones that have been echoing through my head constantly for days. "I don't know what I was thinking."

Finally, I turn to face him. Where there was formerly glowing golden-brown skin, dark circles entrap the spaces around his eyes. His hair is messy and unkempt. Pity joins the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside of me.

“Why did you do it?” My words are supposed to be accusatory, but they come out sounding weak and desperate. “Why did you leave?”

He’s quiet for what feels like an eternity before he speaks.

“This summer has felt like a dream. I don’t think I’ve ever had as much fun as I have with you. But you’re going back home really soon, and it’s going to be hard for me. So freaking hard. Seeing you that day, smiling and laughing, just so *happy*, it took my breath away.” He takes a deep, quivering breath.

“It was enough to make me realize that I love you.”

His words are a punch to the chest, knocking all the air from my lungs. It’s all that I can do to keep myself from gasping for air.

“After you reminded me of how short your time left here is, I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want you to leave before I could tell you about how I felt. I acted without thinking, and then I panicked and ran. I’m so, so sorry. It was stupid and rash, and impulsive. I can’t even begin to imagine how mad you must be at me right now.

“You probably want absolutely nothing to do with me right now, but I was hoping that we could maybe keep hanging out, just as friends, for your last few days in town? It would mean the world to me.” His voice breaks on the last word.

I look at him. His eyes are shining, and a few tears have already escaped to trickle in rivulets down his cheeks. When I feel a drop of wetness hit my own palm, I realize I’m crying too.

Now I can hear the cicadas again, singing, preaching, and it's louder than ever. Their resonant chorus fills every pore of my being, and that's when I finally hear the lyrics to their song.

Touch him, kiss him, make him yours.

It rings through the trees, echoing back at me as I reach up a tentative hand and brush away one of his salty tears with my thumb.

"You know," I let out a shaky laugh. "I think I'd rather be more than just friends."

And then he looks at me the same way he did in the truck, and after the race, only this time it's not fleeting, but something immortal. We soar together through the clouds, far above all our troubles.

He moves to press a chaste kiss to my lips, grinning. Strong arms wrap around my waist, and I lean forward to rest my head against his chest. We stay like that for a long time, in each other's arms, talking, touching, giggling, and I swear I can hear that cicadas laughing along with us.

Second Place: The Dark Demise of Moira Hook

By Nicole Gulosh

Captain James Hook once went by another name. James Hook was once known as Moira Hook, a girl who harbored foolish hopes and impossible dreams. Dreams of sailing the seas of Neverland, commanding her own ship. Dreams that a girl could never accomplish. Dreams blocked by the laws that benefited the male population, forcing the women that lived on the island into silence. Dreams that forced Moira to disguise herself as James, dreams that forced her to leave the only family that she'd ever known, even if they were already gone.

"Moira!" the warm voice of Jamie Hook rang out in the small room, causing Moira to slam her book shut and quickly push it under a pillow. The book contained information forbidden for a woman to read, information on sailing and knot tying.

"Yes, Mother?" Moira stepped out of her bedroom to find her mother bent over a loom full of vibrant colors. "What are you weaving?"

A bittersweet smile spread over the face of Jamie as she looked up from her weaving. "My dear, you haven't heard? I thought that one of your friends would have told you by now."

"Tell me what, Mother? You know that my old friends don't talk to me anymore since we moved to a bigger house." Moira sighed heavily, plopping down into the seat next

to her mother. "They think that I'm a spoiled rich brat now, just like the daughters of your new friends."

"Mora! Don't talk like that!" Jamie shook her head, fiddling with the yarn lying on the table. Her slender fingers moved the dyed thread through her loom, spinning the small fibers into a larger piece of cloth. "You know how hard your father and brother worked to save enough money to move us out of that horrid place!" She shuddered, presumably thinking about the poor living conditions that her children had grown up in.

"Yes, Mother." Moira rolled her eyes. Now that they were rich, her mother liked to force etiquette lessons and fancy dinners on her. Jamie was desperate to fit in with the wives and families of the merchants that her husband worked with. Moira would much rather stay in her room and read the day away. "What are you making?"

"Oh!" Jamie's voice raised in volume quickly as she regained her smile and relaxed her pinched face. "Your father is going to a meeting held by the king! All the rich merchants were called." Jamie sighed dreamily, fluttering her eyelashes. Despite raising two children, she had never lost that hopeful spark that beamed out of her. "I'm making him a special tunic."

"That's great," Moira said, sarcasm dripping from the clipped syllables of her words. "I'm going to go back to my room now."

"No, stay! Now is the perfect time for you to learn how to make clothing. Go fetch your loom and we will get started. Your future husband will thank me." Jamie winked at her daughter and laughed to herself, bending over her loom once more.

Moiras father was a stern man, all frown lines and pinched smiles. He was not the type of person to make a joke at his own expense and hated people who fooled around with a passion. He worked hard to provide for his family, but it was all that he ever seemed to do. Work.

The man opened the intricate wooden door that led to the sitting room of his house and entered, shaking off the water droplets that clung to his expensive sheepskin coat. "The country is going to war." His grave voice rang out in the room, merging with the clatter of knitting needles being dropped to the table by Jamie.

A gasp escaped Moira's lips before she gently placed her embroidery down. The mangled thread showed no hope of her talent for that particular skill improving. Her hands just couldn't seem to work together well enough to create small, delicate stitches that formed a pretty picture on the fabric. Thick rope making knots, on the other hand, came easily to her.

Moiras mother stood up to collect her fathers coat, folding it neatly over her arm.

"Nathaniel, what do you mean that the country is going to war? I don't understand."

Her delicate brow was furrowed in confusion and her posture was ramrod straight.

Nathaniel, who was now sitting in the armchair closest to the raging fire that warmed the room, sighed. "The meeting that the king called us to was an official declaration of war against the pirates and fairies. They sank one of Prince Allen's ships, one that he happened to be on. He didn't make it."

Tears sprang to Jamie's eyes. "That's terrible! What is the king going to do? We don't have a military assembled."

Nathaniel smiled grimly. "That's where Bennet and I come in. The king drafted all merchants to surrender their ships to the war effort. We have to go fight."

The tears that were being held in Jamie's eyes started to fall and she began to sniffle. "I don't want to lose you."

Nathaniel took his wife in his arms and rubbed her back in slow circles. "You won't. I'll come back to you." He murmured, all of his attention devoted to Jamie.

Moira excused herself to her bedroom. No tears dropped from her eyes. A blank mask was set on her face. Moira read, slept, read some more, and refused to acknowledge the war until her father and brother went away.

The first day that they were gone, Moira allowed herself to cry for them. She let herself miss her father and her brother for one day before she turned off the faucet on her emotions. She distracted her mind with her books and did her best to please her mother.

Somewhere along the lines of her life, Moira fell in love. She fell in love with a boy who could give her everything but her freedom. Moira married herself to the son of one of her mother's rich friends, pushing her out of her previous life. She now had to learn how to embroider, learn how to be polite and waltz.

Their wedding was beautiful but it was tinged with the slight scent of sadness.

Moira's father wasn't there to walk her down the aisle, her brother wasn't there to make a speech. Her mother cried pretty tears. Moira's smile filled with love.

She had a few blissful, happy months with her new husband. Moira buried her feelings of captivity and longing for something that she could not have with love and joy. She learned how to put up a façade of properness and decorum for the parties that her husband practically had to drag her to, only to drop it the moment she stepped back into their house. Her husband didn't mind that his wife liked to read and wasn't good at the things that her mother was good at. He loved Moira for the way that she was.

And then it all fell apart. Moira's husband was drafted into the war, leaving her alone in their too-big house. Her husband was sent to her father's ship, where they met for the first time. Moira received letters from all three of the men in her life at sea, and she wrote back at first. The letters became few and far between as conditions grew more dangerous for the sailors.

Soon Moira wasn't fully alone in the huge old manor. A child was growing inside her womb, a product of love. Her baby gave Moira new hopes. Hope that her family would come back to her safe and sound, a hope that her daughter wouldn't grow up without a father. Her old dreams were gone, dashed by society, but new ones grew from their decomposing parts.

When her daughter was born, Moira named her Wendy. She sent a letter to her husband, praying that it would get to him. The letter never made it to her husband.

1 year, 4 months, 6 days, and 2 hours after Moira's husband left, he died. 1 year, 6 months, 1 day, and 8 hours after he left, Moira and her mother learned of his death. The letter hit her like a punch straight to her gut. It pulled a shroud of darkness over her eyes. In one day, she had lost her father, her brother, and her husband. Their ship had gone down in the middle of the sea, leaving no survivors.

Moira watched her mother, who had been so bright, let her color leech away. She didn't want to get out of bed in the mornings, preferring to stay inside all day and stare at the ceiling. Her happiness drained out of her like a balloon losing air. Jamie died 3 months, 7 days, and 2 hours after her husband did. Moira hoped that her parents were together in a better place, whatever afterlife they went to if one even existed.

Moira tried to stay strong for her daughter, but the pressure was getting to be too much. She was going to break if she didn't do something. She wanted a better life for Wendy, a better one than what she or Neverland could give her.

Moira made a deal with an evil fairy, one that resembled a crocodile in manner and appearance. In exchange for a clock and Moira's hand, the fairy would bring Wendy to a family in a strange land. London. There Wendy would be able to do anything that she desired. She wouldn't be bogged down by the false expectations of what a woman should be.

Moira sent her daughter away, and she thought that it freed both of them. Her daughter would be able to live a good life, and Moira was free of her painful, broken-glass past.

Moira left her fancy house and only brought four things with her. One, her husband's old sailing clothes. Two, her books. Three, assorted gilded goblets. Four, as much money as she could carry.

Moira pawned the goblets off to a group of retired shipbuilders in exchange for them building her the finest ship they had ever made. When they asked for the name of the captain of The Jolly Roger, Moira's answer was immediate. "Captain James Hook."

Moira bought a hook for where her hand had been and hired a crew of shady sailors and pirates. She ran a tight ship, becoming the thing that had prompted the war. Captain James Hook terrorized both sides of the war, human and fairy alike. She was successful for the most part, except for a few and far between interactions with a flying boy named Peter Pan.

Unbeknownst to Moira, the crocodile fairy hadn't just taken her hand. The fairy had taken a piece of her heart all those years ago. So when Moira gazed upon her daughter flying high above her with Peter Pan and her adopted brothers for the first time since she was a baby, Moira felt nothing. No emotion touched the heart that used to be bursting with love.

Moira was gone, killed by circumstance and society, and Captain Hook stood in her place.

Third Place: Monkey Bars

By Turhan Choudhury

Grant was looking for Mark to challenge him to “who-can-hang-upside-down-from-the-monkey-bars-longer” when he saw his friend talking to a man at the edge of the playground. He walked over, scuffing the toes of his sneakers through the woodchips.

“Hey Grant,” Mark said as he came up to them, and told the man, “this is my friend Grant.”

“Nice to meet you,” the man said, and smiled. Grant thought he had a great smile, the type where his eyes crinkled up at the corners.

“I was talking to your friend who offered me some help. I took my puppy off his leash to let him run around a bit, but now I can’t find the guy anywhere.”

“I wish I could help too, but I’m allergic to dog hair so my mom wouldn’t want me to,” Grant said. “I hope you find him.”

“That’s alright,” the man replied. “You just keep an eye out.”

The two walked off into the field surrounding the playground. Grant was momentarily disappointed, but decided to train on the monkey bars until Mark returned.

While the blood was rushing to his head, he noticed an upside-down leashless dog in the grass. He swung off and leaned against the green metal

support of the bars, waiting for the world to right itself. Upon recovering, he spotted the man alone in the parking lot at the far edge of the field.

Grant hopped off the black plastic curb and sprinted across the grass. Mark had challenged him earlier today to a race at recess on Tuesday. He counted under his breath as he pumped his arms and legs and skidded to a halt in the gravel at nine-Mississippi all out of breath.

“Hello again,” smiled the man. “You’re pretty fast.”

“Thanks,” Grant panted. “I have a race next week at recess. Also, there’s a loose dog back there.”

“Oh, next to that girl? I see it. But Skipper’s white, not black, with a brown patch around his right eye. Thanks for telling me, though.”

“You’re welcome,” said Grant. “Do you know where my friend went?”

“Not sure. He was helping for a while, but I eventually told him to give up. I didn’t want to take too much of his time. He probably ran back to the playground. I’ll walk you there. It’s a bit unsafe to be on your own here because cars are coming in and out.”

Grant considered that real nice of him, especially since he was already at his van.

When they got to the playground, the man smiled.

“You be safe now,” he said, and reached out to ruffle Grant’s hair. There was a red-and-blue rubber band on his wrist that said “I <3 Reading.”

“Hey!” Grant exclaimed. “Mark has the exact same bracelet. He won it last quarter for reading the most books in our class.”

The man’s smile slipped a little. His eyes uncrinkled.

“You be safe now,” he repeated, and turned away. Grant wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he quietly watched him cross the field toward the parking lot. He opened the driver’s-side door, slid in, and slammed it shut in a single fluid motion. The van reversed and started up the winding road leading out of the park.

Standing there in front of the monkey bars, Grant was struck by the realization that the man left before finding his puppy. Who gave up that fast?

He scratched his head and let the question flit out of his mind. He had his own searching to do: Matt owed him an upside-down challenge. But that was weird. It really was the exact same bracelet.

Fourth Place: The Flying Tree

By Paula Martinson

The little boy clutched an acorn in his hand, not wanting to let go. He stared down at the hole he had dug. Could the little seed really grow into an oak tree? Hesitantly, he dropped the acorn into the hole, packed dirt on top of it, poured some water on it, and walked into his house.

Every day the little boy went out to water the seed, caring for it. Sometimes he even talked to it. In time, the seed grew into a seedling, which eventually grew into a sturdy, strong tree. The two grew up together. As the boy became an old man, the tree kept on growing, bigger and stronger. One evening the old man limped outside, clutching to his cane. He watered around the tree and sat next to it as his thoughts wandered far and wide. The man closed his eyes and leaned against the tree, his hands shaking. He took a deep breath and with his eyes glassy with tears, he hugged the tree. His hug surprised the tree. It didn't understand. The old man pressed up against the tree harder and whispered, "Goodbye old friend." A few moments later the man tied something around one of the branches of the tree, a scarf.

The man hobbled back inside, his head hanging low. As night approached the tree calmed. It swayed back and forth, letting the breeze control how it moved. Little white dots twinkled across the peaceful black sky. As the tree dreamed of a bright summer's day a scream rang through the house. The scream came from the old man's wife, whom the tree did not see very often. Sometimes the old man's wife

watered around the tree if the old man was too sick to come outside. Sometimes she would just sit on the back porch to read a book. The scream startled and panicked the tree. What happened? A few minutes later trucks with bright lights appeared and the trees thinking blurred. The tree didn't know what happened that night. What the tree did know, its best friend did not return. Sorrowful weeks followed. Only the old man's wife now came out to water around the tree. She did not speak. She did not even look at the tree. Every minute the tree thought about its best friend. Where did he go?

Many more weeks passed and the tree's leaves dried up, turned brown, and most fell to the ground much too early for autumn. The scarf remained as the only thing the tree kept from the old man besides his memory. One day the wind blew very hard. The tree's few withered leaves blew off leaving it bare and cold. The wind loosened the scarf little by little and as much as the tree tried to hold onto it, the wind won the battle.

The scarf flew away, rising into the sky. The only thing the tree had left of its best friend drifted far away. The tree wanted to get the scarf back. The tree needed to find its friend. It swung its branches back and forth, desperate to get out of the place it lived since changing from a tiny acorn to a mighty tree. The tree put all its force into swinging its branches, but it realized that did not work. It tried to think of any other way to follow the scarf. There just didn't seem to be a way. A tree is a tree. It stays where it is planted. The red scarf flew farther and farther away. Slipping to the horizon. All the while, the tree watched, helpless. Sadness overpowered the tree

and it stopped trying to go after the scarf. The tree just let go. After all the struggling and grieving over his friend and the scarf, the tree relaxed.

The wind began to pick up and blow harder. Lost in its thoughts, the tree didn't even notice it at first. As the wind rushed by stronger and stronger the tree only became more tired. The wind shook the tree, twisted it, and blew dust and debris at it. The tree did not care. It felt hopeless. The wind clawed at the soil surrounding the tree. It dug so deep, it loosened the tree's roots! The wind tugged at the tree, and finally, uprooted it.

Instead of falling to its side the wind pulled the tree into the air. The tree caught a glimpse of its old home, the place it grew and lived for so long, now a dot on the land below it. As the tree went up into the clouds, it saw a scarf. A red scarf, making its way down toward earth. There it is! The tree thought. Though the wind did not cooperate to bring the scarf back. As the tree rose higher and higher, snow and ice pelted its branches. The tree watched the world below fade away. And in a split second, the wind stopped. The tree fell down to the earth among the snowflakes. Oh it was a sight to see for the onlookers who gathered below. The tree watched as the little red scarf on the grass became bigger and bigger with snowflakes gathering around it. The tree smashed into the ground. Pieces of wood chips flew everywhere.

People rushed out of their houses to see what all the commotion was about and they pulled over their cars to see the damage. The obliterated oak laid over the red scarf, buried under the wood. An acorn from the tree survived the journey. Upon impact it bounced off a sidewalk, and rolled to a grassy patch near a tombstone. The acorn had no choice but to grow where it landed, next to the tombstone. So the

little acorn grew into a sapling. Next to the sapling grew something else though. A red rose plant. The two plants grew together. The tree grew strong and sturdy, while the rose wrapped around the tree, hugging it, happy to be reunited with its friend!

Fifth Place: The Respirator

By Katelyn Motter

A raspy exhale echoes through the room, as familiar as the bleak white walls and ceilings that surround me like a pale coffin. The machine inhales and my throat burns as my lungs are inflated with air like a balloon. Just before they burst, the raspy exhale repeats just like it has every other time. That's how this cycle goes; inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Breathing was once so easy. Speaking was once so easy. Now, I'd kill to utter just one word.

"You were so quiet. That's what drew me to you; I like quiet people. Loud people won't let you get a word in edgewise. Quiet people, on the other hand, they're nothing like that.

"You look just like you did then. That same mole on the edge of your lip, those tenebrous grey eyes. Now that I think about it, though, your eyes can't be the same. Anyone would know by those eyes to stay away. Did you know that? Maybe that's why you were so quiet."

I peel my eyes open, crusty lashes fighting to stay together. I'm not the only one that hasn't changed; you look just like you did when we were friends in high school. You have those same friendly green eyes that dip at the corners in an inviting way. Seeing my eyes open, your gaze darts towards the opposing wall. We both know why you won't look at me.

“What I still can’t understand,” you continue, “is how I played right into your game? I’m no idiot, yet you played me from high school through my mid-thirties. You were supposed to be the stupid one, the one that followed everyone else.”

I wish I could tell you why; how I did it because it was easy. I did it because I wanted to. I did it because I loved that look on your face when you’d realized what I’d done. When you’d realized who you’d been friends with all these years. The way your hands shook when you saw me being escorted into that cop car years ago, that was why I did what I did, and the way I hurt you was exactly the way I’d wanted to.

“I always told you to quit. Everywhere we went, you had a cigarette poking out of the corner of your mouth.” Your scoff is evident in your voice. “As if that made you any more interesting in my eyes. Now look where you are.”

The resonant respirator keeps on at the same, steady rhythm. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. More conscious of it, your eyes glaze over for several minutes as you watch me breathe. Or rather, you watch the machine breathe.

“Why did you kill her?” Your voice squeezes off at the end, the only sign of your distress. You’d turned away by now, your eyes out of my line of sight.

I’d laugh but even that’s too much for me now. You know why I killed her. I killed her because she was everything wrong with the world, and everyone knew it. They all called me crazy for hating her all these years, but no one acknowledged how awful she was. With that stupid, stupid smile that seemed to be carved into her face. She deserved what she got, and it’s not as if someone missed her.

“What appalls me most is the fact that you didn’t bury her. You had the audacity to leave her in that bloody bathtub to soak her guts for weeks, months, even.”

Why did you just scrunch your nose like that? You act like it was the most terrible thing ever done! I’m no Ted Bundy; I gave her a quick death which I’d consider mercy enough.

“-and I loved you, Lex.”

I pause in surprise.

“I think back on how I was then and scoff at my stupidity. Falling for your act, even now that neither of us have the good looks we used to.

“I loved you, but after I found out what you’d done I had this sense of guilt, of responsibility. It washed over me like a tsunami and left me in a hole for years and years. I should’ve known, should’ve seen the signs and tried to stop you. Not that you would’ve listened to me.

“A few weeks ago, I got a call telling me that you were dying. You know what I thought? I thought ‘Dear God, they must be mistaken!’ I couldn’t imagine you dying, you were this larger than life figure in my life that was like some immortal beast. But you know what?” You let out a dark chuckle following those last words. A long pause follows before you continue “Here you are looking like a dog about to be euthanized.

“The worst part is that I can’t get over you, even in this state.”

What do you mean, that you have feelings for me? That you love me? That’s not right. That can’t happen, you’re supposed to resent me, that’s how this goes. You’re

supposed to fight against me, feeling betrayed by your closest friend, someone you walked by every day for years.

“I was so stupid. Heck, I still am. They wouldn’t give me the number of people you’d mercilessly killed, but they made it clear that she wasn’t the first one. I just don’t understand you,” you shudder. “You probably never felt the same way, right? It wasn’t until a few years ago that I realized how empty you were, regardless of the façade you put up around me. Did you even like me?”

No.

“I know I should hate you, but I don’t, and it infuriates me.” You watch the clock tick on the adjacent wall near the door for several minutes. “I should’ve seen something, done something,” you whisper, still looking away. After a second, I realize that you have your eyes closed, fighting back tears. Your throat is clenched and your breathing shallow.

The sense of guilt that oozes out of you fills me with confusion. It changes things. Wait, no it doesn’t. Does it, though...? Why would anything change? What would change? I’m thinking about this as if we’re kids in high school again, before I started killing. When we first met.

“Everyone always says that the serial killers are the quiet ones that seems o harmless, and I guess now I see where they’re coming from. I just...” You pause to rub at your eyes, as if trying to rub the sadness away into your skin along with your tears. “I just feel like someone I thought I knew is someone I never actually knew at

all.” A sob wracks your body and you cover your face with your hands, letting tears stream down your forearms in little rivers.

You’re crying for someone you never even knew. She was someone you passed in the halls without a second thought, yet now here you are, bawling your eyes out.

You’d come to kneel down at the side of my bed by now. “I’m so sorry,” you whisper, holding my hand up to your face and closing your eyes.

I move my other hand to cup your face, my hands shaking and weak from misuse. My thumb on the first hand gently wipes away the tears that are still coming. You always used to cover your face when you cried, not wanting people to see. The thought just came to me, though I’d never taken notice of it before now. Our eyes met and I feel something I’ve never felt before. Something...

“Were you going to kill me, too?”

I pause, thinking back to my younger self. Hadn’t I loved your suffering? Hadn’t I enjoyed tricking you all these years? I assumed that I had, but now I’m not sure if I did. I didn’t get the same euphoric feeling when you realized what I’d done versus when you’d smile at me when we saw each other in the halls, or when we passed each other on the street later in life. Which was better? Which feeling was more real?

I try to shake my head no. You look at me with tears in your eyes. I try to shake my head again.

You lean over to place a soft kiss on my forehead, your lips soft and loquacious. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you. I love you.”

With that, you get off the bed and give me one last fleeting smile before heading out the door for what we both know is the last time. The last time...

Maybe I didn’t love you then, but maybe I did. Maybe I do now. Every little thing I did, every move I calculated, for what? I didn’t hate you, I couldn’t have.

The respirator seems to breathe louder, filling the deafening silence.

I miss you.

MIDDLE SCHOOL HONORABLE MENTIONS

The Wolf and the Moon

By Amrit Kaur

“This is a life-changer, for all your needs! The saints would only dream to have this in their hands! And it's only 2.99!”

The old vendor yelled out sales pitches from his cart, but the busy, seaside town streets gave no response. The pedestrians buzzing past shops and vendors avoided him, deeming him nonsense. The vendor grumbled. Although in the past he has been known to sell obscure objects, now he was really offering a wondrous item. After many months of adventuring, he finally found his greatest product; a magical drop of moonlight, stolen from the moon himself. But it seemed as though his amazing findings weren't wanted in his little town. The vendor sighed as he watched families rushed past in disgust. He had enough of his trade being discarded. That night, he threw the prized bottle of silver liquid out his cottage window in resentment.

But little did he know that it would roll down a hill, over the cobbled street, into the tall grass, between towering redwood trees, and straight into a cave in the dark forest. But it wouldn't stay there for long. As it struck midnight, a curious snout sniffed the bottle. The hungry young wolf nibbled at its clear glass. After trying to open the bottle for the millionth time, it finally broke open with a clink. Ignoring the shards digging into her paws, the pup licked the moonlight up. She grinned and started to doze off contently. But little did she realize the faint silver glow emitting around her.

As the pup trotted to her pack the next morning, murmurs and gasps rose around her. "What?" the little wolf squeaked. The other wolves motioned to her fur, and instead of its usual rusty brown, she gawked to see it shown light grey. Even in the bright day, her fur glowed like silver light. Soon every wolf was racing to meet her, and the amazed crowd engulfed the little wolf. The pup became one of the most popular members of the pack. Even the leader was impressed by her powers. Her magical fur became a phenomenon, even earning the pup the nickname Silver.

But unlike the other respected members of the pack. Silver boasted to all the animals in the forest. She told everyone, from the bears to the squirrels, about her fur.

"From a nobody-pup to a forest-wide sensation? My fur sure is the best and brightest, don't you think?" she exclaimed. Everyone soon learned to avoid her pretentious path. But she was so into herself, she didn't even notice.

The news of Silver's magical fur spread like wildfire. In only a matter of months, every creature, even beyond her forest, had heard about her mysteries. Even the moon himself found out about her glowing powers! But the moon wasn't impressed. He knew there was only one person that was as bright as she boasted, and that was he! He was also the only one who even had these silver powers, and for a scrawny pup to somehow obtain them too raised his suspicion.

So one night, enraged by her arrogance, the moon went down the beach near Silver's pack.

“Come out, Silver! I challenge you to a glow duel! Your boastfulness has gotten out of line, and I have no choice to put you back in your place!” the moon yelled down.

The echoes of his call reached the pack and the sleepy wolves perked up in their seaside den. Silver, having heard her name, woke up with a start. She scampered outside, looking for the owner of the voice. But all she saw was an empty beach and crashing waves, a scene that looked a little too... bright. With a gasp, she whipped her head up to see the angered expression of the moon.

She faltered for a second, but snapped back in a heartbeat, “Oh are you so sure of that? Bring it on!”

The young wolf ran down to the center of the beach. Silver’s pack peaked out of the forest as the rivals stared each other down, ready to shine. Suspense filled the air; only the crashes of far off waves and the salty breeze broke the stillness. Just as the pack was going crazy in anticipation, Silver made her move. Holding her breath and concentrating hard on her soft fur, she willed it to shift its shine. In only a matter of minutes, her fur glowed on the sand as if someone had shown a giant silver light on the beach. The moon, not believing his eyes, stumbled to catch up to her degree of light. He shook himself and tried all his might.

Silver, her eyes still closed, smirked at his efforts. Unbeknownst to the moon, Silver had practiced brightening up her glow to show off her glimmer. *I didn’t practice days and nights for nothing*, Silver thought energetically. The pack gasped at the sight; could it be, one of their kin is winning against the moon himself?

But the moon, with its shaking strategy, wasn't done yet. The ancient dust on him started swirling, collecting and reflecting more light onto the beach. It seemed as though dust storms were swirling around him, working up more and more rays. Silver's smile dropped as she heard the moon's whirls of wind all the way from the beach. Her snout quivered in uncertainty. *No*, she thought, tensing up, *No hold on to the glow...!*

But it was too much. The moon was working up a rally, getting closer to the now crashing ocean, and reflecting more and more light. The pack had to shield their eyes from the combined silver-white light flooding the beach. Silver slowly opened an eye and was shocked to see the quiet glow of the moon rise to a shrieking light.

The tension in her fur broke, and she found herself dimming. "How?" she stammered, "This can't be possible! Where did all the light come from?"

The moon softened his gaze in triumph and gazed downward at the shocked pup. "You see, you can't boast up for something that came from a drop of something else."

Silver's mouth went dry and she let herself flop in defeat. It happened. In front of her whole pack, she was defeated. She glanced at her kin and felt crushed to see disappointed stares, some even humored. But the moon looked down with no pity. By now, the bright dust storms on his surface have died down and he was once again his eerie calm self. Even the ocean calmed down to soft, steady waves.

"Ok, you win. I'm sorry for bragging so much," Silver muttered, lifting herself to look up at the moon.

“I accept your apology. You really are full of possibilities, Silver. When you concentrate, there’s much you can do. Stay humble,” the moon remarked.

“Ah, thank you. No one’s ever explained my abilities or even have them. I guess it got to my head,” Silver replied sheepishly, not sure what to say. She turned around to her pack, but the moon called her back.

“Yes, you’re unlike the rest of your crowd. All you need is a good mentor for your power. A mentor who knows all about out your glow, one who is really the cause of it.”

“Wait are you suggesting-!” she exclaimed, thrilled. Silver whipped her head around to the moon but was met with surprise. Little did she know that the moon had summoned a giant wave behind her. And with a splash, she was gone!

The crowd gasped, wolves howling.

But the moon smiled at the commotion. Around him, the cool, gusty wind flashed with a tint. The wolves looked up in amazement. The plain purple sky was suddenly colored in wavy light. “Silver has a lot of magical potential. With a change of attitude, she could make a big change one day,” the moon announced to the crowd.

“Hey! What is happening?” a voice echoed through the sky, a voice sounding like a sea breeze. The pack of wolves cried out in relief. The bratty, high-pitched voice belonged to the one and only Silver. The sky, now with wavy green-pink streaks, shifted to appear like a wolf, too. The crowd cheered in awe to see Silver in

her new form. And Silver, now feeling her glowing power all around her, was in sky-high wonder as well.

So now, if you're lucky enough to see the sky up north at night, you might recognize the bright green glow of Silver in the sky, now going by the colorful name of Aurora Borealis. And if you are really lucky, you might even see the sly smile of the moon beside her.

Breathe

By Zoe Korff

The crisp crunch of the snow beneath my feet was the sole disturbance to my tranquil surroundings apart from a rustle in a tree when an occasional animal made the questionable decision to leave the comfort of their winter dwellings. A single twig fell from the pile of firewood that I had gathered, but I ignored it. I began to hum as I progressed down the seldom used path back to the cabin I called home. My soft tone broke the eerie quiet and made the winter-washed woods seem peaceful, despite recent events. Almost a month had passed since that fateful night, and each day seemed to add another brick to my ever growing list of burdens. I inhaled.

I rounded the corner to the front door of my poor excuse for a house. The rusty hinges on the door shrieked their usual cry as I opened the door and stepped into the cold room. A musty smell of rotting wood and cobwebs greeted me as I dropped the wood by the old furnace and proceeded to add fuel to the fading pile of embers leftover from my fire last night. I had to use my last match yesterday, so I journeyed to the nearby town late last night. My trip had consumed the last money I brought with me on the night I ran from my old life, but I had stocked up on the essentials, so I wasn't too worried. My loot consisted of seven cans of beans, a pack of matches, a small loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and a bag of crackers stored beside the other items from my first trip to town including a first aid kit, an extra pair

of clothes and assorted non perishable food items. I ignored my stomach's plea for food and busied myself with getting water from the old well in the back.

As I grabbed the bucket from its resting place on the back step and set out towards the well, I closed my eyes and inhaled the fresh December air. Moss carpeted the dirt along the short path to the well which was covered with sharp rocks and unknown objects shallowly concealed below the path's surface. My now shoulder length hair fell loosely onto my shoulders. The one good thing from this was that after over a month, my hair had grown to a length that made me feel, well, beautiful. Whenever I passed the broken mirror in the attic of the cottage, a small smile blossomed on my face from the person in the mirror that I had become. I reached the well and after taking a sip to comfort my vacant stomach, pumped steadily until the bucket was full. The steady rhythm of the cool pump in my bare hands was comforting to my racing thoughts. As I finished my labor, I began down the path to my home.

The soles of my boots were beginning to wear down to a thin and easily penetrable layer of rubber, and I was starting to worry about my lack of money. A stiff breeze wafted through my winter jacket and settled on my skin, which slowly began to absorb the frigid air. I began to walk faster until I reached the doorway and shut the door with more aggression than usual, causing the water in the bucket to almost spill over my jeans. I took a deep breath and felt my stomach rising and falling. I opened my eyes, not realizing that I had even closed them, and set the water down.

I briskly walked over to the brick furnace and warmed my hands. The warmth soaked into my numb fingers and a tingling sensation crept up my hands as they thawed. I sat down on one of the eternally dusty chairs, and I had just closed my eyes when I heard a knock on the door. My heart beat faster and faster with every step I took towards the door. My fists clenched as I made my way towards the door and peered through the eyehole. "Mother," I whispered through clenched teeth.

Mary Jane Warner. My mother, standing on the front porch of a cabin in the middle of nowhere. Now that's an image that I never thought to see. I refused to let her win by giving into my anger, so I calmed myself and opened the door.

I greeted her with a stone cold expression to mirror the icy grimace that was plastered across her narrow face. "Hello Oliver," she said knowing the pain that would bring me. It took all of my willpower to not flinch. Instead I replied, "Hello Mary."

"I see you got some new dress up clothes," she smirked.

"Thank you," I retorted sarcastically, "I forgot how much I've missed you."

She sighed dramatically, "You'll see soon enough that this foolish game of pretend in your new home is childish and ignorant." Her face softened "Your father is worried sick you know..." Her face turned back to stone faster than it had melted. "You can't live like this forever. When you come running back begging for forgiveness, we will accept you, but there will be consequences, young man."

My blood boiled and I gave in to the growing pit of anger that had been accumulating. "I'm. A. GIRL!" I screamed and slammed the door.

My legs carried my numb body over to the nearest wall before they gave in and I slid down the wall. A dull roar echoed in the back room of my ears, but there was nothing that could be made out of it, just a steady soft static. This noise began to bounce around my head getting louder and then softer until I couldn't take it anymore. I dug my fingers into the floor. I clenched my jaw until it couldn't force my teeth together and harder. I let my head fall back onto the wall behind me, and each time it hit the wall, I gained more momentum for the next time. Pound. Pound. Pound. The hollow knocking soothed my ringing ears. I opened my mouth to scream but all that came out was a small sob. A single teardrop fell gently down my face and landed on my knee, quickly absorbed into my jeans and leaving a dot of darker fabric. My mouth gradually closed and my fingers and toes regained feeling, which I hadn't even noticed I lost. The pounding of my heart had reduced to a rhythmic beat and I felt strangely at peace. My eyes began to close, and I let my legs relax. As I slipped into sleep, my mind, for once, was still.

An abrupt rapping on the door woke me, feeling alive for the first time in weeks, but my brain didn't have time to adjust to my newly cleared mind before I was thrown into fight or flight mode. Could she—no, she couldn't be back yet, could she? I cautiously approached the door, and to my great relief, I saw Janie Bayer standing on the stoop. Janie was the first person I came out to, and she has always been my rock. I opened the door, and was confused to see her look of worry and stress on her face when she caught sight of me.

"Hey," I sheepishly said.

“Hey, you,” she whispered through a strained smile. I stepped down from the house and embraced her.

“I was worried about you,” she stuttered through a laugh.

“Hold on, how did you-“ I started.

“I followed your mom.”

“Oh,” I mumbled, “so, do you wanna come in?”

“Sure.”

I let her into the house and led her around the one room. “That’s the kitchen, the bedroom, and the sitting room.”

“Wow,” she chuckled, “luxurious.”

“Yeah,” I scoffed. We sat down in the two chairs that were the only furniture in the house apart from the table with only three legs and the musty mattress that had feathers spilling out of it from its seams, and for the first time in weeks, I could feel my muscles relaxing.

The sun’s rays gradually began to disappear over the horizon and we continued talking until the last glimmers of light were fading from the sky

“Shoot, I’ve got to get home,” Janie sighed, “my parents are expecting me home by five thirty, and I have a way to drive.”

“Oh,” I replied. “That’s fine.” I smiled softly and stood up.

“I miss you,” Janie sniffled.

“Me too,” I told her through a pained smile. I bit my lip as she departed from the doorway.

The sharp, dry air pierced through my clothes and fractured my thoughts into fragments. I fell back into a chair and took a bittersweet breath of the icy air. My surroundings faded out of my immediate vision and a foggy haze framed my thoughts, but almost as quickly as it had come upon me, it disappeared with a sharp knock on the door. Assuming it was Janie, I eagerly made my way to the door and peered out of the cracked wood. To my great dismay, I found my mother. I cursed under my breath and weighed my options. When I looked back through the hole, her body had shifted and a man with a uniform was now visible.

My heart stopped. My breath caught in my throat. I clenched my eyes shut, opened the back door and ran.

Adrenaline was pumping through every inch of my body. My bare feet scraped stone and began to bleed, leaving splotches on the untouched snow. The icy wind blew into my eyes with such force that they began to dry and I had to resort to a rapid blinking of sorts to combat the wind. I reached the top of the hill, about a mile or two from the house, uncharted territory. I looked down from the overlook and across the snow covered tree tops. The snow glistened in the winter sun and reflected slivers or rays into the grey sky.

The adrenaline pulsing through my veins and controlling my rage dissolved and the cold began to seep into me, but I had gone numb long ago. At least that’s what I kept telling myself. But had I really? Or was I just the same girl that I was all

those years ago; sitting alone in my room trying on my sister's old dresses, dreaming of an alternate universe where I was born as the girl I was meant to be, longing for a life that I could never have, and crying alone because they all laughed when I told them the truth.

But even though I had run away from the society that had confined me to a shell, I still had no name. Oliver was my past, but my future was unlabeled. Nothing felt right. Out of an infinite number of names, I couldn't find one that felt, well, me. But maybe, just maybe, for now, that was okay, because it was enough to know I am a girl, and I didn't need anything to prove that.

The sun was setting in the sky, sending fragments of rays across the winter horizon. I felt unsure, yet strangely calm. Warmth filled my body, spreading to the tips of my fingers. An unsettling combination of being completely unsure and simultaneously calm filled my body, spreading warmth to the tips of my fingertips.

I exhaled.

Isa

By Virginia McGee

The light had just begun to creep through the tightly drawn windows but Princess Isa Tashain Kolierdok of the Northern Garcinion Islands was already awake, reading a book by the light of a single candle. As the first rays of sun reached the edge of her bed, she smiled as she read 'The End' and hugged the book to her chest. It was another happy ending for Princess Celeste, Isa's favorite heroine. Then a wave of disappointment washed over her and she frowned, why did Celeste get to fight a band of orcs when all Isa ever got to do was sit through class after class after class until she practically fell asleep? Isa was a princess like Celeste but didn't ever get to walk over rickety bridges or be kidnapped by dragons. In fact, she wasn't even supposed to read about those kinds of adventures. Isa heard a stair creak as her maid crept up the endless flight of steps to Isa's room in the tower. Her mother called the tower 'the perfect place for a princess.' To Isa, it was more like the perfect place for a prisoner. With haste, Isa quickly wrapped up her book in an old tattered cardigan, along with her candle and matches, and rushed to stuff the whole thing into the back of her drawer. Just in time, she slipped into her bed with a sense of dread for the day to come.

The door groaned as Isa's maid slipped in, tripping over a heap of embroidery Isa had been forced to work on the night before. A small 'oof' came from the poor maid whose name was unknown but to the Queen. Isa's previous maid was named

Guenivere and she was mute. Isa longed desperately for a friend and so she was always kind to Guenivere, and did nice thoughtful things for her. They started playing games, and Isa shared stories with her, and told her secrets that she never dared to tell anyone else. One day she was complaining about how she was expected not to talk unless someone started a conversation with her, and once they did she was to direct it back towards them. Much to Isa's surprise, Guenivere started to talk! She told Isa that she needed to keep her ability to speak a secret, and how hard it was to keep her mouth shut when she was full of things to say. It was that day that Isa made her first best friend, and from then on they did chores together whenever they could, and talked to each other at night when they were supposed to be asleep.

Then one night, the Queen found out that Guenivere had lied to her, and her royal daughter was friends with a lowly maid. The Queen believed that a princess was to be friends only with other princesses, or possibly a grand duchess, and never was to converse with maids or servants except to bark an order in a commanding, but not aggressive manner. That terrible night, Isa had stood hidden in the shadows and watched her mother, in a fit of rage, toss Guenivere's belongings into the castle moat, and order Guenivere to leave the castle immediately, without telling a single soul. To make sure that Isa never forgave Guenivere, the Queen wrote a fake note from Guenivere saying that she had gone to the country to pursue other callings. It enraged Isa that her mother would lie, but now Isa understood that the Queen valued the rules above everything and everyone, even her own daughter. The Queen replaced Guenivere with a shy girl who was quite terrified of the Queen, and wouldn't ever speak unless the Queen commanded it. From then on, Princess Isa

lived in solitude at the top of her tower, with only her longing for adventure keeping her sane.

Isa woke and stretched, yawning a fake yawn that was small and polite in a princess way and slipped out of the bed. She began to rearrange the pillows when she was interrupted by a 'tsk tsk' coming from the shadow in the doorway.

"What are you thinking now dear *Princess*? You are not to do a maid's job, you are a royal and you should act like one!" The Queen said, stepping into the light.

"But mother..." Isa whined, completely forgetting about proper princess etiquette.

"You know better, and call me Your Majesty." The Queen said with a hint of annoyance in her voice. Isa knew better than to keep talking, and in her head she sighed. The Queen was in a good mood today, but she still criticized everything Isa did.

"Princess!" The Queen barked at her daughter. "The royal masquerade ball is today and you will be looking your best! Now get in the bath and I'll find you a suitable outfit for overseeing the preparations."

Isa grabbed a towel and hurried off into the bathing chamber, and jumped with fright when she heard her mother's furious scream. She could tell this day was going to be worse than she thought.

"Princess Isa Tashain Kolierdok, get back here right this instant! Why do you have a book, a story no less, wrapped in your old Kilnton Day cardigan? You know

that books are bad for you, they push rubbish into your innocent mind where your formal greetings and manners should be. And you know what I have to say about rubbish-“

“Your Majesty, please!” Isa begged her mother to stop by the Queen just held the book higher, out of Isa’s reach.

“I say rubbish should be burnt, along with witches and magic and peasants who rally around the castle demanding more food. Burn them all and this book with them!” And with that, The Queen tossed Isa’s favorite book into the fireplace and continued hunting for the perfect gown.

Isa stared, horror struck, into the fire as the story that gave her hope turned to ashes. She imagined Celeste going on another adventure, and the world suddenly bursting into flames. Celeste would fight back, but the fire would win, devouring the Princess and her whole world in one great orange-red blaze. Tears started to cloud her vision as Isa looked into the fire. This was all her fault. If she had hidden the book better, then The Queen wouldn’t have found it, and she could have reread the wonderful stories. Isa wasn’t even supposed to have the book. If she hadn’t been reading it then it never would have been found, and Celeste could have kept having adventures. Isa was consumed by the desire to cry, and hug someone until she was out of tears, but she had no one. Isa held back a sob and ran back to the bathing rooms, determined not to let her mother see her cry.

Tears trickled down Isa’s face as her maid scrubbed her clean, but Isa had learned to cry silent, so no one ever noticed. She also learned how to yawn silently,

stifle a hiccup before anyone heard, and sneak off to the stables after royal banquets so she could dispose of the red finned swordfish that was her stomach's nemesis without anyone watching. As Isa soaked in the bath, the maid scrubbed at her hair with a delicious smelling lavender shampoo. Isa felt the tingling sensation of the soap on her scalp that usually made her smile, but ever since Guenivere left Isa found she had little to smile about. Isa wiggled her toes in the soapy studs and remembered all the fun games she and Guenivere used to play in the water while the queen wasn't looking. She wished Guenivere was here to make this boring day interesting.

The rest of the morning was a rush of ribbons and lace and flowers and too-tight corsets. Isa was constantly surrounded by maids and servants buzzing around her like bees, as she was rushed from room to room. She was supposed to accompany the queen and learn from her aristocratic example, but mostly she just comforted the unfortunate servants who had just received the Queen's harsh criticism. When her mother started to preach to the servants about the importance of parallel banner hanging, Isa managed to slip away to the kitchens, where she tasted the soup, which was quite marvelous indeed. Isa complimented the chef, but all he did was bow. No one would speak to her for fear that Guinevere's fate would befall them as well. Isa stared into her soup and remembered the unforgettable time that she and Guenivere snuck to the kitchens late at night to cook their very own magic recipe. They had read an old book they had swiped from the library, and wanted to test their newfound knowledge by making a magic potion. They had great fun

placing herbs and other items in a pot, but something went very wrong, so Guenivere came up with the brilliant idea to bury the ruined pot in the garden.

Isa was snapped back to the present by her mother's shrill call, "Princess Isa, come at once!"

Isa hurried away through the many sparkling decorations and into the ballroom.

"Princess." the Queen barked at Isa. Isa ran over to her mother, who was standing next to a small table.

"Yes, Your Majesty" Isa spoke with her best royal manners.

"Here is your mask, wear it proudly, knowing you are of royal Kolierdock blood."

"Yes Mother, I mean, Your Majesty." Isa spoke politely, preparing herself for her mother's inevitable how-a-proper-princess-behaves-at-a-ball speech.

"This is a very special occasion, and you had best be on your finest behavior." the Queen said in the same tone she used when addressing her royal horse. "there will be many foreign princes and I expect you to make a good impression on them. You should of course dance with them as you see fit, and keep an eye on that Prince Dagobert." the Queen gave a sophisticated smile and Isa cringed. She hated having tea with pompous princes, but dancing with them would be her own personal form of torture.

“Y-yes.” Isa managed to say even though her stomach was doing nervous flips and her head felt like it might explode. Isa felt like she was going to vomit. Isa took the beautiful mask from her mother’s nimble hands, and went to her room to put it on. Isa tied the satin ribbons around her head and looked up into her mirror. It covered half of her face, leaving her mouth and cheeks exposed, but it was the most beautiful mask Isa had ever seen. It was a peacock mask with a gorgeous teal background and feminine shimmery stripes. Isa loved it, but she wished she had someone to admire it with, she wished Guenivere was still here. If Guenivere was still here she would entertain Isa with a story after story featuring the fierce exotic creatures that Guenivere and Isa were both fascinated by. She glanced at her sad reflection in the mirror. How she longed for grand adventures, friendship, and freedom. Isa pulled herself together and finally left the room and went down to the ballroom, just in time for the festivities to begin.

Perched on her throne that contained enough jewels to feed an entire kingdom, Isa sat through speech after boring drawn out speech trying to find something to entertain herself with, she opted to count the number of times she saw someone yawn. The number had exceeded 200 when finally the ambassador from Barlishmar, a neighboring kingdom, sat down and the Queen announced “May the festivities begin!”

Isa rose from her throne and politely curtsied to the Ambassador and quickly excused herself before he could start a lecture. She noticed a smiling prince who looked far too full of himself and tried to weave her way into the crowd. This turned out to be a bad move, because he noticed her when she dashed off, and then he

began to walk in her direction. Desperate to appear busy, Isa started a conversation with the shy young prince Flynn who happened to be right next to her. She continued the conversation and steered Flynn over to the decorated dessert table, hoping this would finally discourage the pompous prince. Alas, it did not. Isa looked over her shoulder to see that he was still in pursuit. She realized that he must be Prince Dagobert and that nothing good could come of this situation.

Isa panicked as she realized that she had blocked herself into a corner. Prince Dagobert was advancing and Prince Flynn was stuttering about chocolate tea cakes. Isa wished for the thousandth time that night that Guenivere was with her to cause an elaborate distraction that would allow Isa to slip away, like she did that time Isa failed to remember to study her Latin declensions and Guenivere managed to free the peacock and let it wreck havoc inside the castle. Now Isa was on her own, and she needed an escape, but there was no way out. Flustered, Isa whirled around and knocked over the bowl of punch, spilling it all over her dress and the floor. Isa panicked and bent down, trying desperately to scoop up the spilled punch with her hands, when she spotted the queen. To the others, she looked the slightest bit irritated, but Isa knew her mother's emotions far better. Under her royal mask, the Queen's eyes were blazing with a level of fury that Isa had never seen. Isa felt a tap on her shoulder and she turned around.

"Isa, come with me!" a girl in a tiger mask frantically whispered.

Isa took one glance at her infuriated mother, and took the tiger's hand.

“Hurry! We don’t have much time.” The tiger darted through the thick crowd and Isa followed, her eyes blurry with terrified tears. They ran into the garden, where the tiger produced some keys from the folds of her skirt and unlocked the garden gate. They ran out into the lush meadows. Isa was out of breath and begged to stop, but the tiger pulled her over to a tree where two of the Queen’s horses were waiting.

“Thank you, but who are you?” Isa breathlessly asked.

“Don’t you already know?” The tiger laughed as she removed her mask. Isa smiled and began to cry again, and the two girls gave each other a much needed hug.

“Guenivere, you saved me.”

Diamond in the Rough

By Kate Parker

Thaddeus Evans lay awake in his bed. Beside him, the fire crackled comfortingly in the red brick fireplace, yet its heat did not warm him. Bitterly, he thought of all he had lost; his loving wife, Rose, the estate, his entire fortune. And now Belle was lost to him as well.

She was *gone*! His only child had died barely four days ago. He had not even had a chance to say a last good-bye. How could he ever be happy again?

I have to get some air, he thought dubiously, and rose out of bed. He was tall and lean, with white hair, and spectacles perched on the end of his nose. After walking across his small London apartment Thaddeus opened the door to his shop, Faerie Jeweler's. He passed the desk, covered in necklaces, bracelets, and broaches, and opened the door leading to the city street outside.

What he then saw astounded him so greatly that the old man nearly toppled to the ground in pure astonishment.

There, on the steps before him, was a small basket. Inside the basket, folded carefully amongst a soft white lining, lay a newborn baby. She was swaddled in a blanket of the deepest blue, embroidered with tiny silver stars and little soaring blue-jays. The baby gazed up at him curiously with great, big, eyes. Gray eyes, that reminded him of Belle. Her skin was soft and pale in the moonlight, and wisps of jet-black hair curled around her sweet face. Pinned to the blanket was a note that read, "Please take her Thaddeus. You need her as much as she needs you." The

note was not signed, and the handwriting was unrecognizable, but Thaddeus knew that the words were true.

Cautiously, he lowered himself onto his knees and tenderly lifted the baby out of the basket. Filled with joy and hope once more, he turned and brought her into the house. As he sat down by the fire a smile spread across his weathered face. She was his now. His precious little girl, his jewel. And he would never, ever, let anything happen to his little Diamond.

Years flew by, and Diamond grew to be a loving, selfless child. The dingy corner where Faerie Jeweler Shop stood always seemed to glow radiantly with happiness and light. She brought joy wherever she went, a ready smile always on her lips.

However, life was not as perfect as it seemed. Diamond was thin and sickly, and she had a raspy cough which never seemed to go away. Thaddeus took the utmost care to preserve her health, but business was poor, money was scarce, and visits from the doctor were costly.

The night of the little girl's seventh birthday arrived. "Here Diamond, for you. Happy Birthday!" said the old man, presenting her with a necklace of sparkling beads. Diamond beamed with rapturous joy, and tears glittered in her wide silver eyes as she received the present. "Thank you with all my heart Papa! I shall wear it always!" she exclaimed. "You're welcome, child," returned Thaddeus. As he lifted her dark hair to clasp the necklace about her neck, the girl doubled over, coughing terribly. "I am alright," she assured him, catching the anxious look in his eye, but immediately she lapsed in to another dreaded fit of coughing. At last, Diamond's

breathing slowed, but her strength had left her. Scooping her up, Thaddeus carried her to her cot in the corner of the apartment. With a weak smile, she fell asleep at once.

When morning came, the girl was unable to rise from her bed. By night, a fever accompanied the cough. Thaddeus, beside himself with fear, ran out in a merciless tempest to fetch the Doctor. It was an hour's time before he returned with Dr. Sutton. Diamond's fair complexion was flushed red, and droplets of perspiration were beaded on her dark brow. Her breath rattled in her chest. She lay still upon the damp sheets, her eyes glazed and unseeing, her sodden black hair spread across the pillow.

Dr. Sutton spooned medicine into her mouth, but slowly shook his head. "I am afraid that this will do little to help, Mr. Evans. Diamond is an exceedingly delicate little girl, and London's heavily polluted air is too dirty for her to breathe. These years of living in London have put her life in dire peril. She needs clean, country air. If not, the results could be fatal."

"I had a daughter who lived in Shere," Thaddeus suggested. The doctor nodded. "That could be just the place, but Thaddeus, you'll need to hurry! Diamond does not have much time. I wish you the best of luck." With that, Dr. Sutton turned and walked out the door.

With the first blush of dawn, Thaddeus had packed his battered old carpet bag with his few belongings and was standing at the train station. Diamond lay limply in his arms, her head resting helplessly against his shoulder in feverish dependence.

At the conductor's call he boarded the train, hoping with all his heart that the little girl would last until the end of the journey.

The bleak streets and drab colors of London flashed past them, slowly changing into verdant misty moorland. Finally, the Conductor's loud voice boomed throughout their car, "Next stop, Shere!" It was not long then until the cobblestone streets of Shere wound before them, lined with quaint and colorful cottages and surrounded by idyllic countryside. The brilliant sun burst forth, bathing the valley in a shimmering golden sheen, welcoming the way-worn travelers to their new home. It was as if Shere had been waiting for them, and rejoiced when at last they arrived.

Their cottage was made of whitewashed stone, with pale pink climbing roses trailing up the walls, all in bloom, and the window panes and door were painted the butteriest shade of yellow. The roof had been thatched recently with fresh straw, so that it gleamed like gold in the spring sunlight. For the first time in two days, Diamond raised her head. "We're home Papa," she announced, "we're home."

It was not long before Diamond had won the hearts of the villagers. Her kind ways and optimistic outlook, despite her fragile health, endeared her to everyone. She made many friends, but none of the village folk loved her more than James Everett, Shere's doctor, whose visits always brightened the little girl's day.

Dr. Everett was thirty-two years old, had thick black hair, a fashionable mustache, and a deep, booming laugh which was heard so often when he came to see Diamond. The two instantly formed an attachment, from the moment he walked in the door for the first time. The doctor and the girl were bound by a friendship so

strong that they loathed to part, she with her tranquil, unselfish ways, and he with his ready laughter and his joyous smiles.

The blissful days of spring passed into summer, yet the happiness Shere had brought them remained steadfast. Dr. Everett proclaimed that Diamond's health was completely restored, and with ecstasy she leaped out of bed and ran into his arms.

It was a lazy late summer evening when Dr. Everett and Thaddeus sat down on the steps of the cottage to talk. Diamond was in the garden playing among the sweet smelling flowers. "Were you always a jeweler?" asked the doctor inquisitively. Thaddeus answered, "My father was a jeweler, and I was his apprentice. We lived in a tiny apartment in London, which was uncomfortably cramped for the eight of us. When I was fifteen years old my father died. I was left to care for the family and run the shop."

"One day when I was 25, I received a letter saying that my grandfather had died. He had left everything he owned to me, including his grand estate and his enormous fortune. Overnight, I went from being one of the most poverty stricken men in London to very possibly the richest. That winter I married Rose Winston. For five precious years we lived together happily, and then my beautiful wife died giving birth to our daughter. From then on our daughter was the light of my life. The summer she turned 19 she begged to be able to escape the city and paint the countryside, for she was an artist of spectacular skill. I agreed and she spent the summer here, in Shere. That very same summer, I lost my entire fortune through speculation. I was so ashamed. I could not bear to tell her that in the autumn she would not be returning to the estate, but to the old apartment I had never sold. So I

told her that she could stay through the autumn as well, then winter, and then spring.” Thaddeus lowered his head and took a deep, shuddering breath before he continued.

“As spring came to a close, I reluctantly sat down and began to write a letter telling her that I had lost all our wealth, when I was interrupted by a knock on my door. It was a messenger from Shere, who told me that my girl had died. I was heartbroken, and thought I could never love again. Just four days later, Diamond proved how wrong I was,” Thaddeus ended with a smile and looked up at Dr. Everett.

To his surprise the doctor’s face had turned white with shock. “Pray tell, what was your daughter’s name?” he asked shakily. “Belle,” answered Thaddeus, puzzled.

The doctor leaned forward, “On June 1, 1898, a beautiful young woman arrived at Shere, and it was said that she had come to paint the landscape. She had hair the color of gold and silver eyes which sparkled in the sunlight, and a kind heart. I loved her the moment I saw her, and though I was but a poor man of trade, she loved me back. We were married by July, though we told none. She was expected to marry someone of wealth like herself, so she did not tell her father. The year passed by, and Belle died, the same way as your wife Rose. My grief and pain were so excruciating that before I could compose my thoughts and state my claim on the child, she was gone, sent on the train to some orphanage. I have tried to locate her, but no orphanage seems to have her,” concluded Dr. Everett.

"If only I had told Belle of my loss! I could have met you, and known you as my son all these years!" reflected Thaddeus mournfully. "We cannot change the past. Yet I know you now, and am glad of our friendship. It would please Belle to know that we are together, as father and son, let it always be so."

Traveling down the lane walked a short, round figure, coming closer every second. As the man came close to the cottage, Dr. Everett called to him, "Good evening Mayor Remington! Do you have a moment?" "Indeed!" called Mr. Remington, and with some effort he climbed the steps and seated himself.

"Mr. Remington, do you remember a certain Miss Belle Evans who visited here some years ago?" asked Dr. Everett. "Yes, a very tragic event, her death," he answered shaking his balding head. "The child, what happened to her?" inquired the doctor. Mayor Remington paused, then replied, "Well, we sent the baby to an orphanage in London. Soon after, I received a letter saying that they had been unable to take the child, for there was no room, but not to worry, for they had given her to a friend. He was a man who had been a generous benefactor to the orphanage, but then had lost his money and daughter in the same year. She is still with him I suppose."

"Thank you Mr. Remington! Thank you!" Dr. Everett embraced the mayor and together he and Thaddeus rushed to the garden. However, the garden was deserted. There was no sound but the rustling of the wind through the leaves and the creaking of the back gate which swung open, leading to the moor beyond. "Diamond!" bellowed Thaddeus, thundering through the gate. "Diamond where are you?! Diamond!!!"

The two men desperately searched the grassy knolls and dales for any sign of the little girl, but Diamond had vanished. The moor was as empty as the garden had been. The sun slowly descended below the horizon. Hours passed. Stars appeared as pin-points of light in the vast dark sky, illuminating the barren hills, seeming to highlight the fact that the little girl was nowhere to be found.

Close to dawn, miles from the village, Thaddeus saw something twinkling on the ground. Lying in the grass was the necklace he had given her for her birthday. The deep blue and crystal clear beads glistened like water in the starlight, and the pendant was cleverly crafted to resemble a blue-jay in flight.

Falling onto his knees, Thaddeus wept openly. "My little girl, oh my little girl, where have you gone?!" he cried in anguish. Dr. Everett put his hand on the old man's shoulders, though tears flooded down his own cheeks as well, his face contorted in misery. "Diamond come back! Come back!" yelled Thaddeus, his cry echoing emptily in the night air.

Out of the darkness, a tiny figure rushed to his side and flung her arms around his neck. "Don't cry Papa!" she sobbed into his shoulder, "I'm here. I'm here and I'm *never* leaving!!"

Thaddeus held her face in his hands, looking into her eyes, at her tear-stained cheeks, and smiling mouth. "What happened?" he asked her. "I was picking flowers to bring to you, and I noticed that there were more out in the meadow. So I opened the gate and went out. I went a little farther, and a little farther, and when I tried to go back, I could not find my way. So I wandered and wandered, trying to get back to you, but I was so lost Papa! Then I left my necklace on the ground, hoping

someone would find it, and it would lead them to me. And then you came. You came! Please don't be angry with me!" she pleaded. "I am not angry with you, my dear, sweet child. I want you to meet your father," he said, turning to the doctor.

Noticing him for the first time, Diamond looked lovingly at James. "My *real* father?" she asked in disbelief. Wordlessly the doctor nodded, staring adoringly at his little girl. "Oh, Father!" She ran into his arms, and father and daughter embraced. The three of them joined hands and stood together on the moor, united. "We're a family," Diamond smiled, "and we'll *always* be a family."

The Poisoner's Daughter

By Dani Vitello

'A man was found bloated and dead due to unknown circumstances early this morning in the Silva Forest.'

The girl smirked as she placed the paper underneath the rickety chair, pleased with the morning's events. She padded quietly across the wooden floor, careful not to disturb her mother who was kneading bread, to a spot on the wall that was strangely bare compared to the other walls of the small, blue cottage surrounded on all sides by a large stone wall, so tall that not even the Duke's best grapplers could climb through.

She pressed a small coin sized indent in the flowered wallpaper, which opened a hidden staircase going up into the bowels of the house. As she walked up the worn wooden stairs, bundles of dried herbs swung from hidden rafters. At the end of the stairway there was a room full of jars and bottles, some glowing strangely and some filled to the top with fine, white powder.

The girl glided over to a jar with a glowing gold flower. She used a pair of tweezers she had in her leather tool belt to take a piece of the stigma. With the tweezers in hand she walked carefully to a table with a mortar and pestle and proceeded to grind up the stigma into a glowing powder and slip it into a shimmering vile that radiated heat. She then stirred it with a metal rod until it became a bright and oozing liquid that turned gold and clementine.

At last she made the extract of mortifer! After years of hard work she had done it! She had made a rare poison generations before she had attempted to create. The stories have said that one drop of the poison would bring down an elephant, never mind a human!

The girl was excited to be assigned a job so she could use the mortifer on a person to show her father that she wasn't a little kid anymore. The girl knew if her father saw that she made such a difficult poison, his face would break out in a beaming smile and gather her in his arms and say, "That's my girl, I'm so proud of you!"

He would let her travel to France, Egypt, Argentina, and so many other exotic places on missions to assassinate cruel, merciless tyrants.

But first, the girl had to show she was more than ready.

*

"Omisha!" The girl's father called up the stairs. "Come, I have a new job for you!"

The girl, Omisha, started at her father's voice. She carefully put down the vile in an intricate stand and rushed down the aged stairs, through the opening in the wall, and stopped when she arrived in front of her father, her heavy woolen skirt swishing in the disturbed air.

Omisha gave him a quick hug, for he had been on a long trip to get ingredients for complex poisons and poultices.

“You called, Father?” Omisha said, her eyes shining in anticipation.

Her father smiled warmly at his daughter and handed her a sack. “Yes I did, Omisha. In that bag you will find new clothes, for your disguise.”

Omisha looked into the bag and pulled out a white tunic with the duke’s royal seal on it and plain calfskin leggings. Her eyes widened as they landed on the seal. “The duke’s palace! That’s where I’m going?”

“Yes, you have to go there and poison Duke Dolion Anguis.”

“But why? Hasn’t the Duke always been good to us?”

“That is what he wants us to think, whenever his troops slaughter villages and the survivors demand answers, he always says, ‘It was the King’s orders, not mine’ when he knows that he is lying through his teeth.”

Omisha’s eyes became wide with shock. The Duke she grew up with was righteous and good, not cruel and murderous.

“Father, I will go pack up the stuff I will need, now.” Omisha said retreating back into the hidden doorway and disappearing upstairs.

The girl wondered what to bring. Should she bring the nightshade essence or the arsenic tealeaves? Her eyes wandered as they roamed the mahogany shelves in search of poisons to put in her leather travel bag, until they got to the glowing vial of mortifer.

She smiled and grabbed some clear sugar casing, because sugar dissolves quickly in liquids, if she should ever need to put the poison in the Duke’s drink.

Omisha carefully used a pipette to put a precious few drops in the sugar casing. She held it up into the light and saw that it looked a lot like a lemon drop.

'A perfect disguise for the poison,' she thought smiling. 'If someone, like a guard wanted to look through my bag, they would only see lemon drops and not poisons to kill their employer.'

She made several more fake lemon drops and added a couple daggers, some seeds of ricin, and a small jar of snake venom into her bag.

*

Omisha mounted a black stallion with her leather bag in the saddle bags along with the stolen servant garb, and documents that christened her as "Calypso Amon."

"There will be an informant at the servant chambers. When they hear your name, 'Calypso,' they will say you are their cousin, go along with it." Her father said letting Omisha know what she should expect.

"Alright, alright," the girl smiled. "I'll be careful, as long as you promise to be too."

"Deal," her father said with a small smile. "Just come home as soon as possible, your mother and I will miss you."

"I'll miss you both too." Omisha said steering her horse to the gateway, waving as she left.

*

Two people stood on the wall with only a small battlement wall between them and a long fall to the ground. The people watched as the girl rode on a midnight black stallion down an old cobblestone road, growing smaller in the distance.

“Do you think that it is all right? Sending her out this way?” Asked the woman, wringing her hands nervously.

“I’m not completely sure,” answered the man. “In some ways she can do stuff neither one of us can do, but in others she can’t.”

The man and woman gazed sadly out to the endless hills and valleys, watching the last rays of sun disappear behind the evergreen hills.

*

Omisha looked up at the looming walls of the duke’s palace. Guards were stationed every few meters along the battlement. She walked through a doorway that was wide enough to fit several wagons through it, and handed the soldier posted there her fake work documents. He nodded her through and sent her the way to the servants quarters.

“Calypso Amon?” a large woman said to Omisha while she read through the documents.

“That’s me, miss.” The girl replied going along with the plot.

“It says here that you have a cousin that works here, now who may that be?”

“That’ll be me miss.” chimed in a voice with a heavy irish accent that belonged to a girl with bright blue eyes and firey red hair.

“Ah, Ciara,” said the woman to the read headed girl. “Are you sure that this is your cousin?”

“Of course she is.” The girl, Ciara replied. “My stepmother is her father’s younger sister.”

“Alright then.” said the woman. “Ciara, take Calypso to the quarters.”

Omisha and Ciara nodded respectfully and headed out to the servants quarters.

“Omisha right?” Ciara asked in a hushed tone, to be rewarded with a nod from Omisha. “Let’s get straight to it, I’m the informant your father told you about.”

“Yeah he told me about you. But I do have a small question, what am I going to do here while I wait for the time to strike?”

“Wait a few months and lie low, then do it.” Ciara shrugged “If you had something that could be slipped into a food or drink then that may work.”

Omisha thought back to the mortifer that was hidden in her bag. “I think so.”

The girls walked until they reached the place Ciara was talking about. It was a small room with a couple hooks on the wall, a small dresser for extra clothes, and a small mirror that was the size of a dinner plate.

A little while later a different girl came up to Omisha, bringing her to the area where she would be working, all while explaining the ‘status’ of the servants.

“There are chambermaids, like me and then there are food servants, handmaidens, and regular maids. You work up to be the food servants and the

handmaidens, but you start as a regular maid, then a chambermaid, next a food servant, and then the handmaidens.”

“So how long does it take for someone to become a handmaiden?” Omisha inquired.

“It takes a couple months to become a chambermaid then another few to become a food servant.”

‘Becoming a food servant may be my best bet if I want to be in and out as quickly as possible.’ thought Omisha.

*

Omisha worked for months after that interaction, keeping her head down and slowly working up the “maid ladder” until she became the servant that brings the duke his afternoon tea.

One day when she was taking the tea to the duke, she looked around the marbleized hallway, and saw that there wasn’t anything except for the shadows dancing in the candlelight. She took a couple of the fake lemon drops filled with the mortifer, and dropped them in the tea, dissolving them instantly. She knocked on the Duke’s door and left the tray outside the door like she was commanded to.

As Omisha walked back to the quarters, she saw a girl with silvery blond hair and eyes like the deepest part of the ocean whispering to a tall guard with sandy hair. She saw them glance at her more than once, and decided to go out of their sight of vision.

*

The next morning, all the servants and maids were called into the dining area for some news.

“The Duke died last night. From what? The physicians are not sure just yet.”

The crowd broke out in whispers and speculations. Omisha was silently cheering in her mind because she had succeeded on her mission.

“You are all dismissed.” said the man who broke the news to them.

All the servants and maids filed out of the hall, talking quietly and saying how terrible the loss was. Omisha was wondering to herself about when she could go home. She wondered whether her father would be pleased and cry when she arrived home or not.

She walked to the courtyard where bits of foxglove and wolfsbane were hidden within the clusters of bluebells and hydrangeas. Guards were walking around talking and sparring with each other in small groups. Suddenly a guard in a different colored jacket, not mud brown but mahogany, ran up to one of the larger groups and started gesturing in Omisha’s direction.

All at once they started to move like a group of sharks surrounding their pray around Omisha. Like a frightened rabbit she fled to the gate, only to see it was being drawn up, closing the gates for all.

She moved to get away from the advancing guards but found herself backed up against the wall. Omisha felt a thin piece of fabric move along her back, and by

instinct, grabbed it and started climbing frantically up to the battlements. The guards at the bottom of the battlements seemed baffled for a moment before calling up to the men stationed on the battlement, overlooking the city.

Omisha arrived at the top of the wall with her hands and arms scratched up from the climb. A horde of guards, all dressed in brown started charging toward her on the rampart. The girl turned and ran, ran as fast as she could but eventually hitting a wall, with no way up. The only way to get off was to jump, but that would lead to certain death.

“No tricks up your sleeve little witch?” laughed a man with sandy hair.

Omisha discretely reached into a hidden pocket she had sewn into her skirt and carefully pulled out one of the fake lemon drops.

One of the men laughed cruelly at a joke a black haired man had made and lunged at her with a small pocket-sized dagger, scraping her nose.

Omisha reached up and touched the blood with her fingers, using that as a distraction to slip the poison into her mouth.

“Any words little witch? Before we take you away?” sneered the sandy haired man.

“If my flame is going to be smothered, then it will be by my hands.” said Omisha as she bit down on the poisoned lemon drop and everything went dark.

HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS

First Place: Nightshade in the Garden

By Claudia Hunn

She's still tending to her garden. I can see her from across the way. She glances over for just a moment, and before her eyes dart away she sees the smile painted on my face from watching her hips sway as she bustles around the patch of flowers and fruit. I start towards her as I see her brush her hands on her now-dirty apron, but she stops me in my tracks as she turns around. We stand in between both estates, looking, staring, until she nods at me and I nod back. She turns and begins to gather her gardening supplies in a basket, and I take that as an invitation to approach her.

Once again, she barely takes note of me until I'm right next to her, but I pay no mind as she is even more beautiful up close. I search her face for any trace of connection, examining every detail written in her expression as thoroughly as possible. She's been looking at me intently, and it isn't until some time passes by that I realize she has asked me a question. I ask her to repeat herself and she replies, "It's awfully hot, isn't it?" I nod in agreement, the sun is beating down on the both of us and I can see her wiping beads of sweat off her forehead. Another brief silence passes before I suggest we head indoors to escape the heat, we could even have a cup of tea and chat for a bit. She contemplates the proposal, nodding her head absentmindedly, then she smiles at me and motions for me to follow her into the sitting room at the front of the house.

The sitting room is nothing less than extravagant. Velvet drapes line the walls and a gilded settee takes up most of the space on the floor. I sit down and watch as she moves around the parlor, boiling water and setting cups and saucers on the stove. Out of the corner of my eye I see a gramophone sitting on a table of its own and I make my way towards it.

There's already a record on the needle and I can see marks on it from being played time after time. As I start to crank the handle, the sound crackles and pops until a soft waltz can be made out through all of the noise. As the record spins around and around, the soft sounds of strings and piano slowly swallow up the entire room in the melody. Glancing into the parlor I see her, but she doesn't seem to notice or react to the music.

She resumes making tea and I make my way over to her, still humming the tune as the music fades in the background. I grab her hand and she barely pays any mind, but then I take her by the waist and now she has to look at me. She flinches at first, but then melts into my arms and now we're dancing, waltzing to the record in my head. We move around the parlor as one, her skirt billowing in the air, my arm barely missing the teacups on the stove, but after a bit, she pulls away and tells me the tea is almost finished.

I go back to the settee and continue watching her prepare our drinks, and I can tell that she's almost done when she carries a basket of fresh berries in from her garden, still shining from the dew left on them in the morning. She gingerly picks them off the vine and then places the black, blue, and red berries alike into the cups of tea. I usually don't take fruit in my tea, but I don't interject.

She enters the sitting room with the tray of tea and I happily take a cup from her as she sits on the settee beside me. I take a moment to watch the berries float in my cup aimlessly, unsure how to properly drink out of it. It doesn't take long until across from me, I see her press each berry against the side of the cup with her spoon and stir the juice into the tea, the colors of blood red and deep blue mixing into her drink. I do the same, then drink out of my cup, but the searing tea hits my tongue and I recoil, almost spilling the drink in my lap. She notices, then flashes a smile and says, "Careful, it's awfully hot." I smile back and then wait for my tea to cool down before I sip again.

It tastes like something I can't place and the berries combined with the fresh herbal taste of the tea is perfect. I want to tell her, but I keep quiet and do nothing except look at her as she continues drinking, studying her face and hair and everything about her to make sure I can retain the image in my mind. I finish my cup fairly quickly and set it down on the tray. She hears the sound of porcelain hitting metal, looks up from her tea, and then promptly begins cleaning up our drinks even though she isn't finished. It strikes me as odd, but I don't have time to think about it because as soon as she crosses into the parlor, my head starts feeling like a hammer has hit it right down the middle.

I stumble when I get up and she must hear me, because she rushes into the sitting room. She tries to help me stand and I tell her that I should be on my way, but she tells me to stay so I take my place back on the settee as not to upset her and she continues cleaning in the parlor.

I realize that I'm shaking when I try to grab my hat off of the table, and then everything suddenly becomes so overpowering. The sun is streaming into the room, almost blinding, and I don't know if I'm imagining things, but I see her in the parlor, standing still as a statue, and staring at me with hollow, almost dead eyes. The room begins to spin, around and around until she blends into drapes and the wall and everything seems like a mass of light, waiting to swallow everything in its path. My head is throbbing now and there's a ringing in my ears becoming louder and louder as the floor sways under my feet and then, the ringing stops, and everything goes dark.

I take my time pouring the rest of my tea out in the sink. He's slumped over on the settee, which didn't take much time, but now I need to take care of him before it becomes a problem.

I tighten my apron and put his hat and blazer in the armour in the corner of the sitting room, then I find some room to have a seat next to him. His face is getting paler by the second and when I touch his hand it feels ice cold, so I figure I should start moving faster. I grab my basket of gardening tools from the parlor and set them outside before attempting to lift him.

I wrap his arm around my shoulder and sweep his feet on the floor as if he were standing upright himself, but when I try to stand upright I buckle under his weight and almost fall onto the floor. It takes a bit for me to regain my balance, and I

still sway while I walk outside with his body draped on mine, but I make it past the garden towards the tall willow tree that marks the edge of the grounds.

I roll him onto the space under the tree, then begin marking the earth with my trowel. I drive the point into the dirt, sending pieces of grass and soil splattering on my clothes, but I pay no mind. It's becoming more uncomfortable by the minute and I don't want to spend any more time outdoors than I have to. I glance over at him every now and then to make sure he matches the height of what I've been digging, but as quickly as it began, I've finished clearing the first layer of topsoil and the shallow grave is just the right size.

I wipe my hands on my apron and place the trowel back in the basket with the rest of my gardening tools, then I head back to the front of the state and tell myself that I'll dig deeper tomorrow.

I've had a long enough day already and after all, it's awfully hot.

"I have a deadly nightshade

so twisted does it grow

with berries black as midnight

and a skull as white as snow.

The Vicar's cocky young son

came to drink my tea

he touched me without asking

now he's buried 'neath a tree."

- *Traditional "Girls Skipping Rhyme" from Chokely in Wynterset*

Second Place: Platform 6

By Ilana Goldman

The smelly basement that is Platform 6 of New York's subway encases me in a cocoon of stench and filth. Distant sounds of honking taxis drift down the stairs and collide with the frantic screams of a raving lunatic. Ceiling lights flicker noisily as passengers shuffle about and chatter quietly amongst themselves. The empty tracks in front of me beckon.

"Fourteen!" the homeless woman bellows to anyone who will listen.
"Fourteen!"

The familiar sounds fade away as I focus on the task at hand and take a deep breath. In and out. In and out. Same as always.

A sudden clang jars me from my thoughts. Strangers continue on their way, oblivious as a young man recollects various coins into a metal cup which he'd been hoarding. Sadness washes over me and I approach him, kneeling beside him as I scoop rusted change into the tin. He looks up at me, shocked to have been acknowledged at all. I smile in return and offer my hand.

"Thank you, sir," he rambles profusely, flustered as I help him to his feet. "Not too many in this here city willing to help a street rat like myself."

"It was no trouble at all," I reply genuinely. "Folks need to realize that smartphones aren't attached to their hands. Downright shameful seeing them pass on by without giving you a second glance."

He sighs wistfully. "Nothin' I ain't used to at this point."

I cock my head. "How long have you been out here, son?"

He looks off into the distance, somehow seeing beyond the piss-stained pavement and gum-littered walls. "Lost track at about seven months. I used to live in Ohio; I worked as an artist. Thankless job, really, so I hitchhiked my way up to the 'Big Apple'." He smiles, remembering. "Wasn't too bad at first. Lived in a crappy old apartment with two or three roommates at a time. Conditions were shit but we was a family." His grin wavers. "Things started going downhill when Louis died from the virus...then Ryan and then Phil. Couldn't handle the rent on my own, so I hit the streets."

I look down, unable to manage anything apart from a short series of condolences. We stand in the quiet subway, silent apart from the hum of the overhead lights and unintelligible shouts of the crazed maniac. Finally, he speaks.

"I hate to ask," he starts sheepishly. "But would you mind sparing some change? Don't quite got enough for dinner tonight."

I smile apologetically. "Sorry lad, no bills on me."

His face fell. "I understand, sir. Thank you for your help."

I softened. "Perhaps there is something else I can do to help."

His ears perk up. "What's that, sir?" I guide him towards the tracks. As we approach, a faint peeping can be heard. Down below, shuffling balls of fur move

about, tirelessly tumbling over one another in a constant flurry. Upon closer examination, the creatures can be identified. "Are those... rats?"

"Fourteen!" the homeless hag answers.

I ignore the lady's nonsense and nod, my eyes not leaving the tracks. "Can you see what they're doing?"

He squints at the rodents. "They're feasting?" I once again nod in confirmation. "But what could they possibly be eating on the tracks of a subway?"

I finally break my gaze and turn to him. "It does not matter. The fact is they've found salvation, something in which a man such as yourself is not able to attain. Someone who has abandoned everyone they cared about, poured their heart into their work, risked everything to do what they are passionate about... yet is still not granted the simple necessity of a warm meal." I look again to the filthy animals. "Why is a 'street rat', as you call yourself, not granted the most basic essential that even rats of the street are permitted? Why is higher society allowed to go about their days while people who work twice as hard to live half as well suffer?" I pause, my voice dropping to a whisper. "Why did *she* have to suffer?"

At once I remember I have company. His face is pale. "Why are you telling me this-"

Suddenly, the ground rumbles dangerously. Furiously. "FOURTEEN," the hag wails, more frantic than before. "FOURTEEN!!!"

Those who aren't yet accustomed to the strange goings on of Platform 6 shield their eyes as the newly black tunnel is hit with a sudden burst of light from the approaching 6PM Express Train.

The man squints pointlessly. "What in the-"

Without missing a beat, my switchblade is in his throat as I connect the gap between his chest and my foot. He stumbles backwards before finally losing his footing and tumbling onto the tracks below. He falls in slow motion, shocked eyes full of confusion and betrayal as they are drained of life. The train vanishes as quickly as it appeared, the locals too concentrated on their mobile devices to notice the body buried beneath its wheels. The rats squeak in appreciation as they feast on the fresh meat.

In and out. Same as always.

"Fifteen!" the lunatic squawks wildly.

I tell myself I'm right. *She's* wrong. No one should suffer like she did. Like she *does*. I take one last glance at my mother, now a mere stranger among the passengers of Platform 6.

"Fifteen!" she cries.

Fifteen indeed.

Third Place: Eluceo

By Catherine Kelly

Football games have been one of Leah's favorite parts of band since she started it, and she's a senior now, so she's been doing band for a *long* time.

They're just so *alive*. There's so much in the air – smoke from the stand selling hot dogs, confetti from the student section, energy from the team and the cheerleaders and the band.

And it's Leah's last, first, football game. She fingers the cord on the blue jacket of her marching band uniform, the cord that signifies she is a senior. It's an unfamiliar addition to a very familiar jacket. She's not sure if it makes her happy or sad.

"Leah!"

Leah spins around. James, her best friend, comes barreling up to her, a cord and a braid on his own uniform, denoting him as a senior and a section leader (their drum captain this year). "You ready?" He asks breathlessly.

Leah laughs. "No," she says honestly.

James laughs too. "I was born ready for this."

"Oh, I know," Leah replies. James, her crazy redheaded best friend, has been preparing to be drum captain since he joined drumline. He started on bass drum with Leah, and while Leah has stayed on as bass two and bass captain, James graduated to tenors his junior year, where he is now.

"Remember when we were dorky freshmen?" She asks. "Standing right here, but you were actually my height and we were both playing much easier parts?"

James nods. "I have definitely gotten taller." He grins down at Leah.

She shakes her head exasperatedly. "Where's Zane?"

"He's inside, forcibly removing a pair of cymbals from a freshmen," James tells her with some amusement.

Leah laughs again. Zane is the other drumline senior, but he's the pit captain, playing marimba in front ensemble. But for football games, he and the rest of the front ensemble take extra marching cymbals to enter the stadium.

Suddenly, their band director is calling for their attention.

"Drumline! Get into formation!"

Leah hurries to get her drum (bass two out of five, so fairly small) onto her harness, and then organizes the basses into their formation behind the snares and the tenors. The cymbals (a small army, reinforced by the entire pit) fill in behind them.

And this is what Leah loves. The blue and black uniforms of the whole band, standing in the parking lot outside the band room and receiving a pep talk from the drum majors. The golden glow of the sun just starting to set, the parking lot filling with people all heading towards the stadium.

Their drum majors, Jenna and Liam, stand at the head of the band and make eye contact with James. They clap together, and yell, "Mark, time mark!"

The cadence starts, the drumline rhythm that the band marches into the stadium to. Leah grins. The basses start the cadence, and even her two babies (a freshman on bass one and a sophomore on bass three) nail their part of it.

They march to the stadium, between the baseball and softball fields, the fences covered in streamers and banners celebrating the first game. Then through the gates, down the side of the field past the home bleachers and the student section ('the Riot', everyone dressed in white for the theme of the night) and through the goalposts to enter onto the field.

Pregame includes the national anthem and the fight song, which they play as directed by the announcer, underneath the still bright sky and the barely-lit stadium lights. Playing the national anthem is fundamentally boring, and Leah cannot imagine she will miss it. But she enjoys playing their school's fight song, if just because everyone is screaming, and watching Jenna's eyes squint in terror as the football players storm the field right behind her is entertaining.

And then pregame is over, and the band hurries off the field. They fill into the section of stands next to the Riot as the kickoff starts. Low brass sits at the top of the stands, and the drumline holds the bottom, the tenors and snares putting their drums on stands. The basses put down their drums on the bench behind the snares and tenors, laid one side down so as to allow them to be played while sitting.

Leah ends up behind James' tenors, and she bumps fists with him. "You wanna trade during third quarter?" He asks with a grin.

"Oh yeah," Leah replies. She's never had any desire to move up from bass drum, but it's always fun to switch drums at football games.

A couple minutes in, there's a timeout. Sterling, their band director, yells for one of their standtunes. This too, Leah loves. The whole band blasts the notes of Seven Nation Army, and Leah gets to beat the heck out of her drum, teaching

grooves she's been playing for four years to the newbies. Leah grins at Connor, the junior on bass four, as she flips one of her mallets, playing the groove one-handed. He attempts the same, and both of them nearly drop their sticks.

Leah laughs. She thinks that this is what it is like to be happy.

Sooner than Leah expects, they are halfway through the second quarter, the football team is winning, and Sterling is ushering them out of the stands and back out behind. The drumline warms up quickly, and then they circle up to do sectional chants.

It is while they are circling up that Leah notices two cheerleaders rushing by. One of them looks young, probably a freshman, who is holding her hand away from her body as if she is scared of it.

Leah squints, realizing the girl's finger is bleeding, fairly profusely. Before she can think better of it, she asks, "Need a band-aid?"

The two cheerleaders stop, turn around. "Yes, please," the younger cheerleader says. Then Leah realizes that unfortunately, she recognizes the other cheerleader.

It is a girl named Roslyn, a fellow senior in her calc class, and possibly the most beautiful person Leah has ever met. She has cornsilk blonde hair, perfect beach waves that reach down to her waist, along with blue, blue eyes and perfect skin. She's lithe and strong, her blue and white cheer uniform accentuating strong thighs and long legs. And there's *glitter* on her face and on the bow in her hair, sparkling on her cheekbones in the twilight.

"Band-aid?" The younger cheerleader prompts impatiently.

Leah suddenly realizes she has been staring for an uncomfortably long period of time. “Oh, yeah,” she says, scrambling to reach into her uniform pocket and pull out one of the band-aids she keeps there for emergencies.

“Very handy, that pocket must be,” says Roslyn, and Leah wants to cry because her voice is just as perfect as her face.

“Yeah,” Leah replies. She laughs awkwardly. “Can’t imagine there’s much room for pockets in your skirts,” she says, before mentally kicking herself for sounding weird.

But Roslyn laughs and takes the band-aid, thanking Leah and wishing the drumline luck.

Rats, Leah thinks, watching Roslyn’s back as she leads the other cheerleader back onto the field.

Then James grabs her arm and pulls her into the middle of the big drumline circle with Zane, and thoughts of pretty cheerleaders go to the back of her mind. She stands in the middle with Zane and James, surrounded by the juniors and sophomores she’s helped grow and the freshmen she’s just started to know, and they scream to the sky.

And then they are lining up to march onto the field, checking if each other’s plumes are straight and adjusting their jackets. They march on, running to their dots (and Leah thanks god she’s not carrying a bigger drum as she tries to sprint) and somehow the cheerleaders are getting the Riot to roar for them. And the sky is the deep purple of gloaming hour, and the lights are bright, and this is really what Leah

lives for. The band has five minutes of halftime on the field. Five minutes to play their hearts out.

And that is what they do.

(Although at one point, as the drumline marches along the front hash, Leah accidentally notices the cheerleaders sitting on the side of the track beyond the pit, and she sees Roslyn. And Roslyn smiles at her, although Leah doesn't know how Roslyn identified her, and Leah almost gets out of step. But nobody has to know that.)

They finish performing, and from the home side of the stands comes a combination of cheering and polite applause, and then the band moves off the field and back behind the side of the stadium.

"Good work, everyone," Sterling tells them, a rare moment of praise from their normally gruff band director. "Lots to work on, but the energy was good, and you only tore once. We'll review this in depth at practice on Tuesday, but for now, be back to play for the quarter change."

The band cheers, and walks back into the stands to drop off their instruments, jostling each other and talking about the show. Leah puts down her drum and hangs her harness on the side of one of the railings, and then pulls her shako (her hat) off her head.

"God, this is so gross," she comments out loud. The inside of the hat is covered in sweat from her thickly braided hair. She places the hat on top of her drum and asks Connor to unzip her jacket. That's also sweaty, and she drapes it over the side of her bass carefully before hopping down. She won't miss the sweat.

She walks to concessions with James and the upperclassmen drumline members, and one of the snares, Will, pokes her. "Wait, who was the hot chick you were talking to before halftime?"

"Yeah, Leah." James decides to enter the conversation. "Did you actually make a *friend*?"

Leah scoffs. "I can socialize! I was giving her a band-aid."

The boys laugh. "You can't socialize for love or money," Connor says. "Don't kid yourself."

Leah rolls her eyes as the boys continue to tease her. They're not wrong, but the feeling of being known is both strange and heartwarming.

She gets popcorn and wanders back to their section of the stands. There, while Connor starts playing snare, she messes around on tenors. The drum, made of five drums of varying size and tone, is much too large for someone of her height, but she enjoys it anyway. Zane plays the other set of tenors, and Leah tosses a stick at him for interrupting her. One of the freshmen on cymbals watches them in something akin to awe, and it takes a minute before Leah realizes that she has another audience, too.

It's Roslyn again. The cheerleaders have spread out, chanting something to the Riot that involves lots of pom-pom waving and grinning. But Roslyn motions to Leah, who walks to the railing hesitantly. She has no clue what Roslyn could want.

She leans over the railing, bending down to where Roslyn is standing on her tiptoes on the track a couple feet below. "What?" Leah asks, uncomfortably aware of

her freckled skin and her hat hair, brown and messy, flyaways sticking to her face from sweat.

“Here!” Roslyn giggles, a bright, happy sound against the roars of the crowd, and leans up to smear glitter on Leah’s cheeks.

In a moment that seems almost too cliché to be true, all the noise fades away, everything seeming to slow down as Leah looks down at Roslyn. “Thank you,” Leah says.

Roslyn beams, a big smile that squinches her eyes, and Leah wants to bottle up the feeling that smile evokes. She’d bottle it up and open it on cold days, all the perfectness of this pitch-black night and this beautiful girl.

“Leah, stop flirting!” James calls. “Quarter change!”

Leah’s face probably gets red, and Roslyn’s smiles gets even bigger. “Thank you,” Leah says again, like an idiot.

“No problem,” Roslyn replies, amused, and then she bounces back to the rest of the cheerleaders.

Leah turns around with a feeling of abject doom to find James and Zane smirking wider than she thought possible, and they rally the drumline to mock her as she returns. Leah glances over her shoulder to make sure Sterling is watching the game, and then quickly flips them all off.

The Riot explodes as the football team manages a touchdown, and Sterling yells, “Fight song!”

Leah jumps into the row of stands where the basses are sitting and grabs bass five mallets. Connor laughs next to her as Sterling conducts one-handed,

counting off, “One, two, one two,” and Leah plays the first hit as hard as she can.

The cheerleaders are flying in front of the Riot, and Leah sees Roslyn at the bottom of one of the groups, throwing a girl in the air and catching her.

It is at this point, right towards the end of the fight song, when Leah hits bass five probably a *lot* harder than she should have. Her mallet smashes clear through the head of the drum.

Leah freezes. Connor, next to her, freezes. Leah turns and looks at him, and then they both look towards Sterling, who is staring at them in complete and utter disappointment.

Leah loses it.

“James!” Connor calls, also starting to crack up. “Leah broke bass five’s head!”

“You broke my drum,” says Ty, the tall sophomore on bass five. He sounds absolutely heartbroken.

“It’s not a difficult fix,” James reassures him, snorting.

It’s all Leah can do to keep from tearing up, she’s laughing so much. And when she looks up, somehow meeting eyes with Roslyn down on the track, who is smiling that beautiful smile, Leah knows what the feeling is.

It’s bittersweet, but it’s mostly sweet. This last, first football game may signify the beginning of the end of high school marching band, but there will be brightness in her future, too. Exchanging smiles with James and Zane, with Connor and Will, she knows that she wouldn’t give up any of the last four years, of long rehearsal

days and Friday night lights. Leah knows she'd go back and do it all again in a heartbeat.

Fourth Place: Tally Marks

By Jennifer Cramer

Ria had heard stories about all sorts of strange things other tattoo artists had dealt with, and some of them were even true. Late nights of scanning through Internet horror stories and bad Yelp reviews had almost scared her out of the business when she was first starting out, but she had never personally encountered anything too scarring. In fact, one of Ria's most mysterious customers ended up becoming one of her favorite people.

She first came in on one particularly slow afternoon, as Ria was waiting at the front desk for the end of her shift—or the end of the world, in the likely event that it happened first. She was tall, with warm brown eyes and dark hair that cascaded halfway down her back. She had an easy sort of confidence, as if she had known this place for years, longer even than Ria had.

“Are you here for a consultation?” Ria asked, shaking herself out of daydreams and worries.

“I just need something simple,” the woman replied, tying back her hair, “if it’s all okay with you. I’m Antontella, by the way.”

“I’m Ria. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

They walked back into the studio, Antontella almost leading Ria. Ria could see part of a spray of yellow flowers beginning at the nape of Antonella’s neck,

leading down her spine, framed by the straps of her pale blue sundress, and on her left shoulder, a cluster of black tally marks.

“You can sit down here,” Ria said, gesturing to a nearby chair, and so Antonella did.

“Just another one of these tally marks here,” Antonella explained, “I think this ... what, 32 now?”

Antonella turned around to face the back of the chair, and Ria prepared her equipment. She considered asking what the marks meant, but there were some questions better left unanswered or unasked at all. About a minute later, she was done. Ria went over how to care for a new tattoo, though she suspected it was just a formality at this point. Antonella paid her for her work, tipping a little more than 50%, and left with a jaunty wave and a smile that left Ria feeling slightly starstruck.

“I’ll be back soon,” she said.

~*~*~*~*

She was, within two weeks.

“Antonella, was it?” Ria asked when she saw her, as if she could have forgotten.

“That’s Toni to you,” Antonella replied with feigned indignation.

“Same thing as last time?”

“Another mark.”

In the studio, Toni unbuttoned her shirt and let it hang off her left shoulder, and Ria cleaned off her needle and drew Tally Mark #33, silently musing on why she could be drawing it.

~*~*~*~*

Sometimes, she would ask for two or three tally marks at once, and sometimes, Ria would go over a month without seeing her, but Toni's visits soon became fairly regular. Ria always explained how to properly care for new tattoos, Toni always left her feeling somewhat like she'd been smacked, and Ria never asked what the marks meant.

~*~*~*~*

As she covered up the name on a man's arm with the silhouette of a tree, she briefly entertained the idea that Toni was a serial killer and that the tally marks represented her victims. When an old woman getting her nose pierced to celebrate her 100th birthday complimented the blues and purples in her hair, Ria was busy considering the idea that each mark could represent a new partner. While shooing away a gaggle of dazed-looking teenagers one night, her mind wandered to the soft slope of Toni's shoulders.

~*~*~*~*

One Saturday afternoon in July, Ria remembered how every summer, she and her boyfriend Lawrence and her friend Cassidy would drive an hour down to the boardwalk and spend an evening riding the Ferris wheel, eating ice cream, and debating whether to go swimming. She remembered how last November, Cassidy

had moved to Chicago, and Lawrence left with her. It would be more convenient, if not just as much fun, to go alone, and something fanciful within her supposed Toni might be there.

She drove an hour to the boardwalk, dressed up a bit more than she usually would have been. After buying what might have been a few too many tickets for one person, she made her way through the crowd, headed to nowhere in particular. Eventually, as she stood in line for the Ferris wheel, she spotted a figure in a blue sundress out of the corner of her eye, but it was unlikely enough that Toni would be on the boardwalk that night at all, let alone at the same place, at the same time, as Ria.

She felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Ria?”

She turned around, and, unlikely enough, there was Toni.

“Do you mind if I ride with you?” Ria asked, barely forcing herself to get the words out, “In hindsight, it seems a bit strange, going alone.”

“Please do.”

~*~*~*~*

Toni told Ria that today was her first time at the boardwalk, having been in town for just under a year now, and Ria told her that despite the fact that she’d gone every year since she was 15, she’d never made it to the beach. As soon as they got off the Ferris wheel, Toni practically dragged Ria into the water.

Later, as the sun set, they sat on a beach towel in silence, sharing a funnel cake.

“It’s cold out here,” said Toni offhand, “and it’s July; this shouldn’t be allowed.”

“Do you want my jacket?” asked Ria, “It might be a bit small, but—“

“Just get over here,” Toni interrupted, pulling Ria to her side.

Ria felt something within her short-circuit.

“Mmm, you’re like a tiny little space heater,” Toni hummed into the side of Ria’s neck.

~*~*~*~*

Ria wasn’t sure where the thought had come from, but the words were out before she could stop them.

“I’m sorry, Toni, if this is too personal,” she said, “but why the tally marks? I’d actually meant to ask this since—“

“You can do me another one tomorrow,” Toni replied with a slow smile that Ria couldn’t see but didn’t have to, “I add another mark every time someone asks about them.”

Fifth Place: The Return of Bearlock

By Jonathan Zachritz

It was a dark and stormy... actually it was a bright and sunny day in Washington D.C. where Bearlock and I, Pinky Watson, were on vacation. We had come to see the famous cherry blossom trees. Anyway, Bearlock and I were admiring the cherry blossoms on Ohio Drive at the Tidal Basin near the Jefferson Memorial, when we bumped into one of my old friends, Roger, who had moved to the States. After greetings were exchanged all around, Roger offered us an invitation to the show at the Kennedy Center that night. The legendary music group, The Moosenuts, were in town on a reunion tour. We heartily accepted.

“How funny that we ran into Roger, Bearlock, I haven’t seen him for months.”

“That’s nice Pinky, but have you seen that hot dog vendor? I’m famished.”

“Seriously Bearlock, all you can think about is food. Were you even listening when Roger said we can go with him to the KENNEDY CENTER? Do you have any idea how rare this is?”

“What’s the Kennedy Center?” Bearlock asked. “Besides who is Roger? I’ve never seen him until just a minute ago.”

I sighed. “Don’t you remember Bearlock, Roger is the Vice Curator at the art museum on the east side of town. Come on, let’s walk to the Jefferson Memorial and I’ll explain about the Kennedy Center. I want to get photos of these beautiful blossoms closer to the monument.”

Later at our hotel I said to Bearlock, who for some unknown reason, had brought his pet parakeet along which he was feeding at the moment, "Bearlock, what restaurant do you want to eat at before we head to the Kennedy Center?"

"Options?" asked Bearlock.

"The two best places would be Steak N' Shake or Bob's Seafood Emporium."
"Steak N' Shake," Bearlock replied quickly.

"You're right," I said reminiscing on our last case, "I'm kind of soured on seafood for now."

When Bearlock and I arrived at the Kennedy Center lobby, Roger was waiting for us. He said his boss, Phil Nickleson, would be joining us. Once in the private box on the first balcony level, I asked Roger about work. He said, "I really enjoy working at the museum. In fact, we have a new painting in, called *The Four Towers of London*, painted by the legendary Arthropodus Beaverton."

"I've heard of Beaverton's work," I said. "He is known for paintings such as *The Three Poodles of Paris*, *The Three Bears of Barcelona*, and *The Three Frogs of Finland*." Just then a brawny, tough looking man entered the box. Roger stood up, Bearlock and I followed suit.

"Pinky, Bearlock, this is my boss Phil Nickleson, the museum's Head Curator."
I extended my hand and complemented Phil on his blazer; it was unlike any I had seen before.

“Thank you, my good man,” Phil replied, “it’s a highly rare jacket. In fact, there is only one other in the country. It is a work of art, you might say.” Phil laughed. “I apologize for getting here so close to showtime, but there are extra details requiring my attention at the museum at present due to a special exhibition.”

“Yes, Roger mentioned the Beaverton painting,” I acknowledged. “That’s terribly exciting. Beaverton is such an important artist. The museum must be very proud to be hosting his work.”

“Oh, the lights are dimming,” Roger observed. “Let’s take our seats. Enjoy the show!”

“Yes,” agreed Phil. “I better visit the restroom before the show starts. Excuse me, please.”

After many rousing songs by The Moosenuts, Phil quietly returned to the box and slid into his seat. Suddenly the show was over. The audience erupted in thunderous applause. Shouts of “Bravo!” and “Good show!” were heard throughout the concert hall.

“Well, that was a capital show!” exclaimed Bearlock. “Simply Capital”

“Indeed!” I agreed.

“Indeed!” Roger agreed.

As we were exiting the Kennedy Center to the street, Roger stopped. Addressing Bearlock and myself, he said, “Say! Would you two like to stop by the museum for a sneak peek at that Beaverton painting? I would like to check to make

sure things are in order. The museum is only a few minutes from here. The exhibit opens tomorrow with a special, VIP reception. Say, why don't you plan to attend the reception tomorrow as well? Wouldn't that be grand to have one of Britain's, in fact one of the world's leading detectives, Bearlock Holmes, in attendance at the reception! Phil, it would bring only more good press to the museum and -- "

Phil interrupted, "Er, uh, Roger, I am not sure that is such a good idea. I mean, I wouldn't want to impose on these good men. After all, they are on vacation and have their own plans."

"Don't give it another thought," Bearlock assured the curators. "We are honored by your invitations. We would be delighted to attend the reception tomorrow. I must say, I have heard so much about this Beaverton fellow from Watson here that I would enjoy seeing his work before it is swarmed by people at the reception. However, uh, before we trot over to the museum, couldn't we find a bite to eat?"

I rolled my eyes. "Bearlock," I whispered, "you are always thinking about food!"

Roger continued, "Oh, I am excited and nervous about this event. Many of the world's foremost art collectors and critics will be attending the reception. In fact, I have heard accounts through the grapevine that one of Beaverton's most ardent collectors, Ronald Rutherford, will be in town. However, I have also heard that his means of collecting are less than honorable. In fact, two years ago in Venice -- "

"Roger," Phil said sternly, "let us not be spreading rumors. Mr. Rutherford is a highly respectable business man."

On the way to the museum, Bearlock spied a food vendor still open. He slipped over to the vendor and bought himself two corn dogs. Falling into step with the others, he stuffed one into his coat pocket with a packet of mustard.

When the quartet entered the museum, the smell of fresh linseed oil met them. As they drew near the special exhibit area, the odor grew stronger. Apparently, the night janitor had been replenishing the wood floors in the exhibit. A mop and bucket sat in the room.

“Gentlemen,” intoned Phil in a deep and serious voice, “here is the most significant work of Beaverton’s to date. It is a painting done in oil, the most versatile and forgiving of mediums. For many years mixing the right amount of pigment with the right amount of thinner and drying agent was very difficult. An artist’s studio looked more akin to a chemist’s laboratory. Once the right consistency was mixed, the paint had to be stored in animal bladders.”

“Most interesting,” murmured Bearlock, who seemed much more interested in the corn dog and mustard he had pulled from his coat pocket while Phil was giving his dissertation on oil painting.

In his most official voice, the Head Curator continued, “Oil painting is so versatile that each artist can create their own style that sets their work apart. Take this Beaverton painting. A little-known fact is the crowning jewel to his works,” dropping his voice in a confidential manner, “His finishing touch on any of his paintings is a drop of vanilla which is specially extracted from an orchid plant. Beaverton is original in this way and feels it is his special signature, blending the senses of smell and sight.”

At this very moment, Bearlock leaned forward to smell the painting when he tripped over the edge of the janitor's mop, the corn dog flying from his hand, landing with a thud against the Beaverton painting. A shocked silence engulfed the room. All eyes were on the bright splotch of mustard left on the painting as the corn dog bounced to the floor.

Breaking the silence, Bearlock stammered, "Oh well, I say, clumsy of me, what? We can fix that in a jiffy!" He leaned down before either curator could stop him, picked up the janitor's bucket thinking it was water, and threw its contents at the painting."

Roger gasped, his hand extended too late to stop Bearlock. Phil moaned.

The contents of the bucket indeed removed the mustard spot. However, that was not all it removed. A slimy wet goo dripped down the canvas. The bucket had contained linseed oil, a known paint thinner. The janitor had been refreshing the wood floors with it.

Phil, who had turned ghostly white, was in full panic. Roger sprang into action, rushing to the painting. Evaluating the damage as quickly as possible, he gasped suddenly, "No! It can't be. It...it just can't be."

Phil, enraged, turned toward Bearlock, "How could you be so stupid!"

"Look!" Roger commanded pointing to the damaged portion of the painting. We all turned our eyes to where Roger was pointing. The paint was indeed gone. But what was visible were tiny little numbers in blue print.

"What? I...it can't be!" yelled Phil. He quickly turned and left the room.

Roger said, "This painting is not a Beaverton. It is a forgery. Someone replaced the original masterpiece with a paint by number! How on earth....?"

Bearlock and I, our detective instincts quickened, realized we could help. We found ourselves squarely in the middle of art theft and forgery.

Roger cried, "The exhibit opens tomorrow. The VIP reception begins at 4pm tomorrow. What are we going to do? The museum will be a laughingstock. I'll lose my job..."

I put my hand on Roger's shoulder. "It is not much time, but perhaps we can help. Bearlock is a detective of astounding talent and keen insight. His reputation is well deserved. May we examine the museum? Perhaps we can find a clue."

Roger looked at me for a moment. "Yes, perhaps you can help. What do I have to lose?"

Bearlock and I began to examine the exhibit room. "Say, is there a table where I can better examine the painting?" he asked Roger.

"Yes. In the Curator's office."

Roger, carrying the painting with gloves, led us to the Curator's office. The office was really two separate rooms. The outer office contained drafting tables and various art implements. The second room, concealed by a door, was the Curator's private office.

Phil emerged from the private office surprised to see us. "We should call the police," he said.

Roger replied, "Phil, let's wait until morning. Bearlock and Watson here have offered to help us. You know they have a sterling reputation as detectives."

"Ah... yes," Phil muttered. "Very well. I am going home. You have until noon tomorrow then I am calling the police." With this Phil left.

Roger laid the painting on a table. Bearlock, magnifying glass in hand, examined the painting. While he did, he casually asked Roger, "Who had access to the painting once it arrived in the museum?"

"Let's see. Phil received the shipment. I helped uncrate it. Obviously we curators had access. The night janitor and the security guard. That's it."

Bearlock did not respond other than arching one eyebrow. "Watson, talk to the security guard on duty tonight. Evaluate security systems."

Bearlock continued to study the painting. Then he quickly and quietly pulled a small plastic bag from his coat pocket (the one without the previously mentioned corn dog). He picked something from the canvas and put it into the bag.

I returned with the information Bearlock had requested, "Only the Head Curator, Vice Curator, night janitor, security guard, and you and I have been into the museum after hours today. The security camera shows nothing unusual." Bearlock nodded silently.

Bearlock stood looking around the room. He walked to the private office and opened the door. Scanning the room, Bearlock's eyes lighted on a crumpled nondescript piece of paper in the trashcan. He picked it up and placed the crumpled

paper in a second small plastic bag. Turning, Bearlock said, "Well, I think we have done what we can do tonight. Meet you back here at 10am, Roger."

Early the next morning I found Bearlock staring out the window in the living room of our suite at the historic Willard hotel. "Bearlock," I said. He didn't move. He didn't speak. I knew from past experience he was in deep thought. Finally, Bearlock said, "Watson, I have a brief errand. I will meet you at the museum at 10am." He picked up his hat and exited the room.

Not knowing what else to do, I sat down to breakfast.

At 10 am, Bearlock and I entered the Curator's office where we found an exhausted Roger and agitated Phil. With a superior air Phil said, "It is time to call the police. Roger told me you found nothing."

"I wouldn't say that," replied Bearlock. I looked at him quizzically. He continued, "It won't be necessary to call the police. I took the liberty to call them. I, in fact, can tell you who the culprit of the crime is."

"Really?" exclaimed Roger.

"It seems quite an impossible mystery," Phil retorted.

"I know who. Three things gave the criminal away. It was someone with unquestioned authority and access at the museum." Roger and Phil exchanged suspicious glances. "First, fibers I found on the painting last night match a rare clothing garment. The police lab verified this information this morning. Second, a receipt I discovered in a museum trashcan – in this office— proved interesting. It was a receipt

of purchase from a local apothecary for a vile of orchid vanilla. Third, I have a positive identification of the person who purchased the vanilla.” Bearlock paused. “How much did you get for the painting, Phil?”

“What? What are you talking about?” said Phil.

“You stole the painting last night and replaced it with the forged Beaverton.”

“I did no such thing!” Phil said tensely.

“Your absence during the Moosenut concert last night was long enough for you to visit the museum, switch paintings, and give the original Beaverton to a waiting accomplice. Your presence after hours would raise no suspicion.”

“You’re crazy,” Roger retorted. “I went to the men’s room last night at the concert. The lines were long. I had to wait.”

Bearlock smiled, “Lines to the men’s room are never long. Now, you stole the painting, replaced it with the fake, and turned the original over to whom? And for how much? We can access bank records you know.”

“I don’t have to listen to this rubbish,” Phil said and walked out of the office. Moments later Phil re-entered the office, accompanied by a squad of four police officers.

“I knew you’d be back.” Drawing a small plastic bag from his pocket, Bearlock said “We have fibers from the painting which, being a recent forgery, would not have yet cured and could thereby retain traces of small debris. The fibers match that of another work of art: your sport coat from last night. We also have a store clerk who

will testify that you recently purchased a vile of special orchid vanilla. You knew the forgery must carry Beaverton's signature crowning glory.

"As I said, I know the who: you. I know why. It is usually money in these things. The only thing I am admittedly unsure of is where the painting is now."

"I think I can answer that," I interjected. "After breakfast I decided to take my photos of the cherry blossoms to the one-hour photo to make prints. Much to my surprise I have a picture with two men talking in the. Here, look." Pulling out the photo I pointed. "Phil met with none other than Ronald Rutherford, the questionable art dealer!"

"Ah ha!" exclaimed Bearlock. "Well done, Watson! Beautiful cherry blossom photos, by the way old chap."

"Well, another mystery solved," said Bearlock. "See you at the reception at 4pm, Roger."

"Uh, yes, but, please leave the corn dogs at home!"

HIGH SCHOOL HONORABLE MENTIONS

Car Rides

By Lareina Allred

I air out my grievances in the passenger seat of a Toyota Fiesta. Somehow, the recycled AC and glowing radio buttons allow me to speak. The floor is littered with empty soda bottles and when I kick them with the point of my busted-up Chucks they make a hollow knocking noise.

I can't remember what I'm even talking about. Some mild injustice, to be sure, made more dramatic by all the other times I feel I've been slighted. The world is out to get me. There's no other explanation for why I wasn't accepted into the acapella group, or why I failed my math test, or why my mom just won't shut up. The world is out to get me and I make it known, barely registering my father's hands on the steering wheel as he drives home from Costco. He opens his mouth as if to speak but always closes it before he allows a word to slip past his mustache. A middle-aged fish gulping air in slow-motion and I'm grateful for the ending silence. I don't need him to respond. The offenses escape from me as torrents of toxic water, but he only nods. He's good at being something to talk at.

When I glance over at him, momentarily finished with my diatribe, all I see at first is the reflection of the stoplights against his glasses. Everything is dark and tinged swampy, but I can make out the faint silhouette of the nose we both share jutting out from under the lenses. He sighs, lips quirking as if to ask *are you done*

yet? and I groan, pushing my palms into my cheeks with a puff of jagged air. No, I'm not done. Not even close.

For ten more minutes as he steers over damp asphalt, I give my father no release from my words. I barely pause for breath, trying to get everything out before he pulls into the space in front of our brick town-house. Because once he parks, the spell is broken. Opening up in front of people is reserved for mental breakdowns and car rides back from the grocery store.

He knows this, and drives slow. Or maybe it's just because the roads are slick from rain. Either way, it gives me more time to perform my self-pitying monologue. I receive no applause when finished. As he pulls the keys out of the ignition and opens the driver-side door, my father turns to me.

"You complain a lot," he announces.

No request for moral betterment, no complaint himself. Just a statement of fact, slightly amused. I smile at him, wide and cheeky, the monster in my chest momentarily abated.

"You listen a lot," I answered, grabbing the soda cans off the floor.

Mutated

By Isabella Dalebout

I wrenched open my eyes, the white lights above blinding me. My head hurt, and my fingers and toes felt numb. *Where am I?* Weakly, I lifted my head and looked around. I was lying on an uncomfortable cot, which appeared to be the only piece of furniture in the room. The floor was scuffed and dirty, and strange clawmarks scored the walls. The only way in or out was a heavy iron door.

I dropped my head, squinting as the lights shone into my eyes again. *I don't recognize this place*, I thought, my bleary confusion giving way to nervousness. I probed my memory. I remembered my name, Dakota. I remembered where I was from and who my family was. I remembered pretty much everything.

Except how I got here.

The lights became too much for my eyes and I turned my head to the side, too sore to turn over completely. What was that on the wall? I squinted. It looked to be a colorful brochure for Sunny Seas Resort.

That's right, I was going to go there, I realized, feeling my tail flick with excitement.

Hold on, I didn't have a tail.

Ignoring my pain, I sat up faster than a bullet. Sure enough, there was a thick, slimy tail on the cot next to me. I screamed, scrambling to my feet. My head spun,

and I clapped a hand to my forehead, squeezing my eyes shut until the lightheadedness faded.

“Why do I have a tail?” I whimpered. “Why do I feel so weird? Where am I?”

My eyes found the brochure again. *I remember*, I thought. *I was going to that resort, and I had to get on a boat to get there. I remember getting on the boat... but that's it.*

I sat back on my cot, narrowly missing my new tail. *I must be dreaming*, I decided, staring down at the floor. Yes, it made perfect sense. I just needed to wake up. I was still on the ship.

As I tried to remember methods for waking up from a dream, the door squealed on its hinges and slammed into the wall, making me jump. A burly guard, clad in what appeared to be modernized knight armor, loomed in the doorway. My eyes flitted nervously over the weapons clasped to his belt and the remote in his beefy hand.

“Come with me,” he grunted. I was suddenly struck with the image of a large gorilla, but I pushed it away.

“Uhm- Can I ask- Where am I?” My voice was rough and raspy. I was probably parched.

“No questions,” the guard snarled, wielding his remote threateningly. “Only follow.”

I quickly shut my mouth with a snap. Without another word, the large man pivoted and lumbered off down the hallway, leaving me to scramble after him.

Steeling my courage, I asked, "Am I-"

I broke off as pain flashed in my neck. My eyes flicked up to the guard, who had his finger poised over a button on the remote.

"No questions *ever*."

I quickly shut up, hanging my head.

The man opened a pair of double doors at the end of the hall and shoved me unceremoniously into a broad cafeteria of sorts. The doors crashed shut, making the swarm of other prisoners' heads snap up to stare at me. This gave me a terrible feeling.

Smiling and trying to look harmless, I awkwardly shuffled over to what appeared to be the lunch line. My stomach gave an excited growl at the prospect of food.

After going through the lunch line, I sat at the most empty table I could find. The food was just lumpy, chunky mush, but it smelled okay, so I started to eat. Apparently I didn't realize how ravenous I was, and my food was gone within a few minutes.

"Hey. You're new."

I jumped, looking up. Another prisoner had slid onto the bench across from me. She eyed me closely, as though sizing me up. Suddenly, I was very much

aware that I had a giant, slimy lizard tail. Of course, this girl had a pair of horns, curled inward towards each other, so she probably couldn't judge me too much.

"Uh, hi," I replied, my tail swiping across the tile floor. It probably left a trail of ooze like a fat, sopping wet snail.

The prisoner smiled, revealing two large fangs in place of her canine teeth. "The name's Lydia. You?"

"Uhm, Dakota."

"Hm." Lydia narrowed her eyes, tilting her head like a dog. "So that means you've never fought in the arena before, right?"

"Uh..." I felt my stomach drop. "No...?"

"Great." Lydia's eyes lit up. "And you don't want to?" Spikes raised on her back. Was everyone here a reptile person?

"No, I don't think so," I muttered. "And can I just ask... why am I here?"

Lydia let out a laugh. "Silly, you're going to help the company invade the outside world and defeat the government. And we don't want that. So, would you mind helping me with something?"

I blinked, leaning back slightly. "With what?"

Lydia grinned again. "Getting us out of here," she hissed softly.

I told her I'd think about it. The guard returned and carted me away, back to my cold, empty cell.

The following days were the same. I'd stay in my cell, the guard would take me to the cafeteria, and I'd be taken back when I finished eating. Lydia didn't talk to me again for what I thought was about a week. Finally, she walked over to my table.

"Sorry I couldn't come talk to you," she sighed. "If we seem too close, they'll separate us or make us fight. So, I found out that there's a hidden air vent in every cell. I think it's under the cot. Try to find it and get out. Once we're outside the building, we should be good to go."

Before I could get a word in, Lydia was gone, leaving me baffled.

Once the guard returned me to my cell again, I sat on my cot, as usual. I felt nearly frozen. I waited, *one, two, three*, all the way to sixty, and slipped off my bed and onto the grimy floor. Worming my way under the cot, I felt around. Aha! Cold metal. A vent. *But how do I get it open?* I sighed. Of course, Lydia hadn't mentioned anything like that. *If only I had claws...*

As soon as the thought had floated through my mind, my hands began to morph. They elongated, sharpened, and turned the same slimy green that my tail was. Triumphant, I slipped my claws into the bolts, unscrewing them one at a time. Carefully, so it wouldn't clatter, I set the vent opening aside and slid into the duct.

I crawled through the vents for a long while. It was truly a labyrinth, and I had no idea where I was supposed to go anyway. Eventually, the ducts tilted upward. Hopeful that the end of my path was near, I crawled faster. I burst out into a room, the vent giving way easily. Before I could backtrack, I felt a dizzying rush of agony in my neck and I crumpled to the ground like a ragdoll. Bringing my eyes upward, I saw

a thin man in camouflage, clicking his tongue at me as though I were a misbehaving puppy. “You’re going to have to go back to your cell, troublemaker,” he crooned. He probably said more, but I couldn’t tell because I had passed out cold.

I woke up back in my cell. Chains ensnared my wrists, preventing me from moving my hands very far apart. Luckily, the pain had receded to a slight headache. I sighed. Lydia was right about the vents, but she was very wrong about where they led.

It took several weeks of food being dumped through my door for me to be permitted to return to the cafeteria. I still had the wrist chains, sadly, and when I sat down and Lydia came over to me, I noticed with contempt that she had none. *I’m sure she just doesn’t have a vent in her cell*, I reasoned. *She wouldn’t leave me to escape on my own.*

“Ok, that didn’t work,” Lydia bubbled, “but maybe if you can get your guard’s remote, you can get out.”

“What about you?” I questioned, but Lydia had already left, off to sit with whoever she normally did. Well, this plan seemed better than her last, so I resolved to try it.

The next day, the guard (whom I had secretly dubbed “Gorilla Man”) appeared as usual to take me to the cafeteria. I’d never attacked anyone, but it was worth a shot for my freedom. As soon as he tried to walk out of the room, I lunged for the remote. Taken by surprise, Gorilla Man didn’t zap me immediately, but his grip was much steelier than I’d expected. I couldn’t wrestle the remote out of his

hands in time, and within a few seconds, I was on the floor, my neck throbbing. Once I'd been chained to the wall and I was ready to go to sleep, I heard the door creak open again. Bemused, I lifted my head. It wasn't time for food yet, was it?

But instead of Gorilla Man, I saw the man in camouflage from the office. His face broke into a twisted, demented grin. "So, you're the troublemaker," he spat coldly. It wasn't a question. I said nothing. "Well, we can fix that." He strolled casually over to me, heels clicking on the tile. "You're due to fight in the arena." He snapped his fingers, and the sound sent ripples of terror through me. "Right now."

Several guards rushed into the room. They snapped a cold metal collar around my neck, a chain trailing off it like a leash. They covered my mouth with a bandana, and they bound my hands tightly together. Gripping my "leash," the man in camouflage dragged me down the hall, suddenly seeming longer than it should have, past the cafeteria's familiar double doors. I was shoved left, and before they could force my head forward again, I caught sight of a huge, glass wall. Inside was none other than Lydia, her hair freshly combed and wearing a brand new outfit, sitting at a table with a bunch of guards, laughing and seeming calm. *She betrayed me.* Before I could think on it much more, I was shoved into a cage, where my chains and bandana were removed. The cage was pressed against a wall, which upon closer inspection turned out to be a sliding door. Before I could wonder where it lead, the thing let out a grinding noise, sliding away and revealing the arena.

It was a large, Coliseum-esque space, with several jagged stones jutting out of the dusty earth that made up the floor. I considered staying in my cage, but hands

reached in and forced me into the arena. I turned to reenter, but the sliding door was shut tight. I was trapped.

A roar sounded from the other end of the arena. My heart dropped to somewhere around my toes as a bulky, molten-looking figure leapt atop one of the rocks and let out another inhuman bellow.

But below that bubbling, rocky lava skin, I saw someone familiar. I saw one of my friends. Adam.

Adam had gone missing over five years ago. I remembered it clearly. He had been one of my best friends, someone the entire group could depend on. He'd gone on a vacation and he'd never come back.

Adam let out another frustrated snarl and hopped down from the rock. I swallowed fearfully and darted behind a large stone. What was I doing? Adam was my friend. He wouldn't hurt me. I felt a surge of relief. We'd both be fine.

Confidently, I strode to the center of the arena. "Adam?" I called. "It's me, Dakota. C'mon, we can leave. We don't need to fight."

Nothing. I pivoted slowly. There was no sign of Adam. No roars, no nothing. Weird.

Adam erupted suddenly from behind a stone. I let out a yell. My friend lunged at me, claws outstretched and flinging lava. I ducked, rolling to the side. "Adam, what are you doing?" I cried. "It's Dakota! Your friend!"

If Adam understood or even heard me, he didn't show it. Instead, he just whipped around to face me. His golden eyes appeared to be fixed on me, but I saw a fuzziness to them. He wasn't himself. "Adam, you have to remember!" I pleaded, leaping away as my friend attacked again. My words still didn't seem to register. Adam threw himself at me again, and again I danced away, avoiding the spray of molten rock that flew from his mouth.

Steeling my courage, I flung myself in front of Adam, grabbing him by the shoulders. It burned, but I ignored it. I fixed my eyes straight at his, and spoke clearly. "Adam. I know you're in there. It's me, Dakota. We were friends. *Are* friends. I don't want to hurt you. We can find a way to get through this and get back home. Please. Please remember."

Adam slowed, his eyes slowly sliding into focus. "Dakota..." He seemed to struggle to remember. Suddenly, recognition lighted his gaze. "Dakot-"

He was interrupted by a blaring of alarms. Terrified, I stumbled backwards. A voice came over the intercom. "It is time for the invasion to begin."

The Loudest Silence

By Aiden Hall

I see you. I know you don't think I do; in fact, you seem like the person to think the world doesn't see you and therefore is against you. And such a thought would be preposterous if I didn't think it too. Day after day you catch my attention. Sometimes I dare not let myself glimpse your way with but the corner of my eye, and other times I am so bold as to look at you head-on. What do such precautions matter? It isn't as if you'll look back, at least, not the way I look at you. Your eyes will never have the same longing in them, and I know not whether to think it a blessing or a curse that you should never understand my pain.

I am but a lowly spectator, on the outside looking in and imagining. Oh, I imagine. My mind so often wanders to a world where you'd look back and declare yourself mine and I yours and....No. There is no pride in having a vagabond for a mind. Yet still, I can't stop myself from wanting, no, dreaming of a day when our two minds might meet wandering. What a lonely world it is if a mind can wander for years without stumbling upon another.

As an observer, I notice the minutiae. For example, you sit exactly three seats in front of me and one seat to the right. My proximity gives me the perfect angle to look without drawing suspicions. I imagine staring at the sun would be similar to glancing at you. You're brilliant, stunning, but somehow painful to look at. I fear if I stare too long I'll go blind. The mundane would pale in comparison to your beauty so

much so that I *will* wish I'd gone blind. At least then I would be able to cut myself off. For those that say love is a drug, the effects only worsen when it's unrequited.

Today, after taking your seat, I see you've parted your hair to the left instead of the right, and I wonder if *you* even realize that you differed from your reliable routine. Then, bile rises in my throat threatening to spill into my mouth and out onto my desk as I watch the scene I see every morning unfold. *She* walks up to your desk, grips your head in her probably clammy hands, and pushes her lips onto yours. *I don't know what you see in her.* She sashays away with undeserved confidence as the teacher enters the room. I feel like standing up and calling her a slut in front of the class, but I know she isn't. She's just the one who succeeded in finding love that loves her back. *That's okay. Love can change.*

The teacher stands in front of the outdated chalkboard with a piece of paper. His hairline has already dipped so far back it would be smarter to shave his head and get it over with, but I, better than anyone, understand the difficulties of cutting one's losses. He waits for the class to quiet, but no one pays him any mind until he makes a loud coughing sound. *He should get that checked out.* The murmurs fade like a flame deprived of oxygen until there is nothing left but the occasional whisper.

"Thank you," he says in an exasperated tone. Stubble dots his chin, but it's not like yours. His looks like he was too hungover to bother keeping up appearances. Yours looks perfectly unkempt, only adding to your perfection. "I would like to announce the tent-mates for those coming on the field trip." Your jaw clenches and you stare intently at your desk. *Odd.* The teacher begins to read names off the list. He drones on and on before calling my name. And he says it...with yours.

The next day I find myself standing in the crisp dawn air. You finally decided to show up, first greeting your girlfriend and then meandering over to me. “Hey,” you say in your gravelly voice that I wish to drown in.

I feel heat seeping into my cheeks. “Hey back,” I reply. My words leave my mouth in a cloud of steam.

“Are you ready for this-“ He’s cut off by the teacher, but I know what he was going to say. *Am I ready for the field trip?* I already asked myself this numerous times. Dreams were never meant to come true, so I wasn’t ready, but in a way, I’d spent so much time watching you I feel like I have been preparing my whole life for this.

“The bus driver didn’t show today.” Everyone around me groans in unison. “Settle down, there’s no reason to get that worked up over this. I used to be a bus driver. I’ll be driving today.” A cheer goes up from someone in the crowd and we all pile into the bus. I’m just thankful to be free of the autumn air nipping at my fingertips.

I expect you to sit next to me, but instead, you choose to sit with *her*. After the teacher calls roll, I allow myself the peace of sleep; at least then I needn’t watch her press herself up against you. My dreams torment me. They begin as many a lover’s dreams do, with the curve of your lip, and the slant of your nose. Your piercing eyes, vicious and cruel, look deep within mine searching for a soul but find nothing. I am

not worthy of you after all. And as I move towards you, she pushes me out of the way and-.

My dreams are impeded as my head flies violently forward and slams into the seat in front of me. Gravity stops for a moment and I'm in the air and the world around me stops. Screams erupt from those around me. *Who designs a bus with seats on the roof?* My head throbs. Then, gravity, remembering its place, sends us jolting to the ground, and sleep comes over me once more.

I awake with a coppery taste in my mouth and blood trailing from my nose and down my shirt. The *blood*. Blood paints the bus' walls and at first, it seems like many other students fell unconscious during the crash too. But some of them are looking back at me with eyes frozen over and the smell of death hangs heavy in the air.

My breaths grow quicker and shallower as I look around for anyone still possessing the breath of life. I meticulously move around the bus checking for a pulse, and that's when I get to you. You would be beautiful even in death. You lie there so still and unmoving I'm sure you must be dead. Your chest rises and falls. The movement is so subtle it barely registers, but it happens again. I would pull you out of the bus, but what if you have a neck injury? I reach in my pocket for my phone and try to call 911. Nothing. I try again. Silence.

“Fuck.” My whole body aches. I reach in your pocket and find your phone and swipe up for the emergency calls. Still nothing. You twitch. A sob escapes your lips, and you open your eyes.

“My arm,” You say, pointing to your right arm. I note its awkward angle. I pray the bones heal; everyone at school knows your acceptance to college is riding on your ability to play football. I look around, searching for something that could be used as a sling, but come away empty-handed. I use my boy scout expertise and remove my shirt to make a makeshift sling.

“This is going to hurt a lot.” You grit his teeth and I adjust your arm into the sling. “Can you walk?” You nod. I sit you up and push the emergency window open. “Okay, good. I’m going to get out of the bus first, and then I’m going to need you to slide out after me.” I clime out. The school bus is totaled. It is completely flipped and smoke is pouring out of the engine. We are also surrounded by miles and miles of ominous redwoods looking down on us.

You toss a bag out the window first, then jump out. You cry out in pain as your feet hit the ferns beneath you. “What’s in the bag?”

“Camping supplies.” I pick the duffel bag up.

“Are you seriously thinking about camping after that?” I say in disbelief.

“We might need it. Hey, do you smell that?” The air reeked of smoke. The fire in the engine was spreading. “Holy shit!” You rush to the bus and I have to hold you back from getting back *into* the burning death trap.

“You can’t go back in there.”

“Let go of me. Sarah’s still in there. They’re all still in there.” *Of course, you think of her.*

“She’s gone,” I yell. Still, he struggles against my vice-like grip on his shoulders. “They’re *all* gone.” Flames lick at the bus’ sides. “We have to go.” Finally, he acquiesces.

We climb the hill the bus had rolled off of and watched it burn. We were there for hours. Long enough for the sun to sink past the horizon and the air to fill with noxious fumes of burning flesh. Tears roll down your cheeks, but mine remain dry. *Getting out of this hell comes first; mourning comes second.*

At around midnight, all that remains is the metal exterior and wisps of smoke. I grab your left hand and pull you to your feet. We don’t need to exchange words. We both know that this is a wound too fresh to reopen. You guide me to the trail the bus was driving down and we set out walking. The only noise that surrounds us is the occasional crunch of a dead autumn leaf as we step on it. Thus begins the loudest silence. There are so many words between us, but neither of us dares to speak them.

The sun, in all its radiant glory, breaks through the horizon at around six. The strap belonging to the duffel bag has begun to dig into my bare shoulder.

“One second. I need to rest,” you say. You sit against a large stone along the side of the trail. “My legs are about to give out.”

“Are you sure we’re headed the right way?” I ask, cursing myself for falling asleep during the bus ride.

“Positive.” Your hair is beginning to become disheveled and I can only imagine how I must look to you. On both sides of the trail are two rows of trees so tall they appear to scrape the sky.

My eyes widen as my pupils dilate. *We’re saved.* “Do you see that?”

“See what?” you ask.

“The smoke. Look above the trees.” He cranes his neck up and stares at the billows of smoke rising over the treetops. A smile played at the corners of his lips.

“Well? Come on!” And just like that, we’re running through the forest and bushes. Branches whip at my face but I don’t care. *Faster!* My mind screams at my legs. I finally make it to a clearing in the woods. In it, there’s a cottage and on the porch, an old man sat in a rocker.

“Help! Call 911 there’s been an accident!” I call out. The man stands up and collects a cane propped up against the wall. He has deep wrinkles and skin like leather.

He gestures for me to come closer. I do.

“Are you okay?” he asks in a frail voice. I can tell he thinks it strange a young man like myself is out shirtless during autumn.

“Call 911. My friend and I got into a bus accident.” And that’s when I remember. You. I must have left you back in the woods all by yourself. *Stupid*. His face registers what I told him and I can see the shock etched into his features. “Call 911.” I’m crying now, pleading with this man to find help. He walks back to the porch and grabs a bulky device. His fingers briskly dial three digits.

“Hello. I ran into a young man who says he got into a bus accident. I’m going to need you to send someone out.” He stood there and answered a few questions before hanging up. “Would you like to come inside.” I nod my head even though all I want to do is search for you.

“My friend is still out there,” I croak.

“I’ll look around for him,” he says, even though I’m sure he’s physically incapable of such a task.

I sit on a ragged green couch. When he comes back I want nothing more than to see you, but you aren’t there. What I do see is a familiar red under his fingernails. He shakes his head at me. I cry myself to sleep that night. The only thing that keeps me going is that you’ll be found in the morning.

I wake in the middle of the night with the sudden urge to relieve myself. I stumble around as I make my way around the cabin in search of the bathroom. *Why is it so hard to walk straight?* I travel down a rather long hallway and find a bathroom

right next to a freezer. *What a curious place for a freezer.* Curiosity overtakes me and I open the freezer only to find your eyes staring back at me. I immediately release my stomach's contents into the toilet bowl. Once I'm done, I wipe at the corners of my mouth and walk back to the freezer. There lies your head. You *are* beautiful in death, but horrible, too.

My eyes flutter open in a hospital bed. I grab for the help button that is dangling by my bedside and press it like a madman. *Help. Help. Help.*

A nurse and a doctor rush into my room.

"Where am I? Where is he?"

"Christian is it?" I nod. *How do they know my name?* "We have some things to tell you about the accident," the nurse says. She has dark skin and bleached hair.

"From what we can tell, you've got a pretty bad concussion," the older doctor chimes in.

"Where is he?" I repeat.

The doctor sighed. He is wearing a white lab coat over his scrubs. "That's what we were getting to," he continues. "By 'he' I'm going to assume you're referring to Samuel Rodriguez." I don't like the way he says your name. "He died in the bus accident. We're trying to figure out why you dragged him eight miles while you sought help."

I felt myself shaking violently. The background seemed to blur together.

“Doctor, I think we’re losing him!”

You were gone, and soon I would be too.

I was wrong before; *this* truly was the beginning of the loudest silence.

Happy.com

By Hanaan Kazia

Welcome to **Happy.com**! This is the solution to all your troubles, your woes. Come one, come all! Our website, filled with articles written by educated professionals, is proven to help alleviate any worries you may be facing. For first timers, click [here](#) to see **Top Three Tips for Feeling Happier**.

(You'll click, of course. Curiosity has brought here and will take you further! Don't you feel so charmed already? See the cheery yellow and blue layout of the website? The words printed in round Comic Sans? Isn't that lovely? Isn't that enlightening?)

We see that you have arrived to our **Top Three Tips for Feeling Happier** page! We welcome you and commend you on starting your journey to be happier. Without further ado, here are our **Top Three Tips for Feeling Happier**!

1. If you ever feel alone, don't think that! You're not alone! In fact, your body is filled to the brim with trillions of bacteria! It is teeming with life. There are bugs spiraling in your gut and who-knows-what in barrelling into your teeth. Do you feel them? The spiraling germs in your stomach? The pathogens on your lip? You are a petri dish. You are never alone.

(Isn't that lovely? Isn't that enlightening? Knowing that you're never alone? Knowing that nothing you touch is never free from something that is just waiting to jump onto you and into your body? Creeping through your blood and up your nose?

Down your throat? In your gums? Oh, how we do love a good reminder! Everyone needs to remember how useful they are every now and then.)

2. IF you ever feel like no one is listening to you, don't think that! People will listen! In fact, someone is always listening! You, here staring at your computer or smartphone or device—you are being heard. Every conversation you have on your phone. Every word you exchange, in public or in private. Someone is listening. Someone is recording. Oh, to think that you are not heard! No, nothing is personal. Even your thoughts. Someone will always listen.

(Isn't that lovely? Isn't that enlightening? Knowing that you will always be heard? Even the smallest person, you are being listened to. Every action you do is being followed. Every breath you take is heard. By the government, perhaps, or maybe even more ordinary people, just here on the web!)

3. If you ever feel strange, don't feel that! You are incredibly normal! Horrifyingly ordinary! Even in this great, wide universe, there has been someone like you. You have never come up with an original idea, an original thought. In this endless world, there is almost certainly someone like you, shaped by society. After all, aren't we all taught the same things as children? No, you are standard, common.

(Isn't that lovely? Isn't that enlightening? Knowing that you will always be customary, drastically usual? You, a living home for bacteria. You, forever being heard. You will never be something special.)

Thank you for visiting Happy.com! We hope you appreciated our **Top Three Tips for Feeling Happier** and we thank you for your donation. We thank you for

clicking on our site. We thank you for giving us more information. We thank you for being the home to so many pathogens. We thank you for being so ordinary and gullible and clicking on our little link.

You will see the results soon, of course. Have a happy life!

(And trust us! We'll make sure that you will.)

Dead End County

By Jasmine Ly

Eden was hungry. God, she was so hungry, and so much else. But not enough for this. To be patronized by some old man.

She spit at the spoonful of soup.

The man before her sighed, pushing his broken wire-frame glasses to the bridge of his nose. “C’mon, kid, you gotta eat somethin’.” He scooped another gray spoonful and offered it again. She aimed for his face this time.

He grunted, and took a bit of the thick blanket she was wrapped in and wiped his face. She gave him a toothy grin, wincing a bit as her head throbbed louder.

Oh-ow, okay, focus, where’s ya backpack Ed? Eden patted her back, then scanned her surroundings. *Someone musta picked it up when I fell.*

The campground was a downright frat-house pigsty, with assorted goodies scattered around and a torn up blue flag on her left. *Actually*, she thought, seeing the graffitied greek symbols and a thick blanket of dust over suspicious areas of furniture, *this prolly was a frat-house*. Her eyes landed on a tiny woman in the corner zipping a pink bag with a Hello Kitty sticker peeling off the pocket.

“Hey!” Eden hollered, ignoring the man’s shushing gestures. “That’s my pack, hand it over!”

The woman turned and slid the backpack to her. “Just some supplies and personal effects, Jean,” she said, pulling off the blue surgical gloves. She laid her gaze onto Eden. “What’s with the papers?”

Eden seized the bag, grimacing as cool air touched her feverish hot skin. She searched for her receipts and scraps, sighing with relief as she gripped onto the wrinkled paper. “Nunya business lady.”

“Hey!” The woman pointed two fingers towards Eden. “I don’t care about your business, but I’d rather be called by my name. So why don’t you say your name, and I’ll tell you mine?”

Eden chewed her lip, and judged her opponent. “Ed.” She leveled her gaze to the woman.

“A pleasure to meet you Ed, my name’s Siobhan,” she said sweetly, extending a hand. Eden shook it.

Her stomach rumbled again. She frowned. *Why didn’t I just throw myself to the Eaters instead of starving to death?*

Jean smirked and gestured to the soup. “Now that you’re feelin’ polite, do you want some soup, kid?” Siobhan smacked the back of his head. “Sorry, *Ed?*”

He held out the spoon once again. Eden groaned as another roll of hunger washed over her, and snatched the spoon from his hand. “Only ‘cause I don’t turn down free food. And I won’t be staying for more than a week, capice?”

“Gotcha, ki-Ed.”

“Loud and clear Ed,” Siobhan said with a salute.

Soon, the muck green clouds rolled over to reveal the waxing gibbous moon and lit up the landscape

Eden catalogued the day quickly, glancing over to Jean every so often as he peered out the bay window.

*It's May? No, it's August, the acid rains ended last week. Okay—*Eden scrawled out with the pencil, *“met a cool lady, Eva, thought you'd like her, like one of your anime crushes,” and for the old guy, “there was an old guy named Jay or Gene who looks like your old calc teacher, Mord, and he's more annoying.”* She switched from the torn paper to the receipts.

“Less Eaters this month so far, but acid rains were heavier so expect higher population during fall. Lots of Eater larvae guts out there.” Uh, is there anymore--? Right, the gangs. “The Burners disbanded but—“ What was it, the Eater Attainers? The Eater Arcane--?

“It's the Eater Acolytes,” Jean corrected, spooking her terribly. She slammed her blanketed arms over her writing, glaring up at the older man. “And my name's spelled J-E-A-N like the pants.”

Eden swept all the papers back into her backpack, keeping a watchful eye on Jean as he circled around her and sat in front of her. “What do you want, old man?”

He settled comfortably in front of her. “Whatcha writin', Ed?”

“Nunya business.” Eden sneered at the man, hiding her backpack under all her layers. She jerked her head over to the window. “What’re you looking for?”

A deep voice hollered something from outside. Jean peered out the window once again, his jaw set into some resemblance of both relief and annoyance. “Jus’ another one of ours,” he replied gruffly, before called to the side. “Hey, Siobhan, Lox’s back.”

In the other room, Eden could hear the front door open, and a huge man hefting a butcher’s knife covered in Eater guts and two filled up grocery bags. He smiled at Jean, and Siobhan as she entered the room.

“Hey you two!” He plopped the slimier bag into Siobhan’s arms. “Got the guts, Siobhan. Good luck on the *research!*” He winked.

“...Thanks Lox. June’s out in the garage again so hand the food off to her,” Siobhan handled the bag with ease, going off to a side room to drop it off. Eden smelled the telltale rot of dead Eater and gagged to herself.

“Alright, bos-Siobhan,” Lox answered, hastily correcting himself. Briskly walking past her, he finally noticed her, and beamed. “Oh hey! What’s your name, lil’ dude?”

Eden sneered to herself. *He’s like a freakin’ camp counselor.* “Ed.”

Stretching out a grimy hand, Lox thought better, and simply saluted her with his knife. “Welcome to the Rat’s Shack, Ed,” he said, gesturing around them like she

hadn't been there for a good few hours. Jean grimaced at the informal name. "What brings you here?"

Eden gave him a sardonic grin, deadpanning, "Your buddies kidnapped me."

Jean sighed, "Ed, you're like 12—"

"I'm 17."

"Tomay-toe tomah-toe—and you literally collapsed on our doorstep." He took the remaining grocery bag and continued. "We jus' need to make sure you don't keel over again in a field of Eaters, we're doing' you a favor, kay'? And clean off, Lox." He walked off, like to the garage and whoever June was.

Lox watched him leave, quiet for a moment. Then he stretched up and followed after Jean, waving his knife goodbye behind him. "Make yourself at home!"

Eden snorted. This place, home? She glanced back over the moldy furniture, the graffitied walls, the things *not* home. The only smell in the air was rot and the faintest hint of floral, and the house only stirred with the faintest thrum of water hitting tile. It was all *wrong*, with no obnoxious pop music or smell of lemongrass.

She wallowed a lump forming at the back of her throat. *Don't worry, Ma, Mord, Eva*, she thought. *Once I can leave, I'll keep lookin' for y'all.* Crawling on all fours, she curled into a tight ball around her backpack in the cleanest corner she could find, and shut her eyes hard.

A little later, three pairs of footsteps entered the room in a staggered order. Eden listened as the heaviest footsteps fell onto the couch, and the other two—Jean

and Siobhan, probably—whispered to each other. She only caught snatches of ‘prick’, ‘quiet’, and ‘June.’ Soon they walked apart too, the slight click of boots to the bay window, and soft thuds near the basement stairway.

“G’night,” Jean’s voice mumbled. No response. Eden fell into an uneasy sleep to the sound of breathing and her fever chills.

The next few days went by about as follows:

1. Wake up and breakfast alone
2. Tolerate Lox’s presence until he leaves for food
3. Watch Siobhan dissect dead Eaters
4. Glare at Jean as he makes her eat lunch
5. Be mean to Jean as he does his checkup and gives her medicine
6. Continue to bully him
7. Listen to Lox’s annoyingly short daily report
8. Skip dinner and write in private
9. Sleep

Boring as it was, it did mean she had more time and resources for writing her letters and reports. Lox was always too short with his reports, but it was easier to follow than the ramblings of many half-mad travelers—and cheaper too.

Weirdly enough, the folks were growing on Eden. Lox’s reports were entertaining, Siobhan started explaining everything she was doing when she was dissecting, even bickering with Jean felt less necessary and more fun. Even quiet,

shy June let her hide in her car trunk in the garage to sleep when the open air suffocated her and she needed to hide somewhere small.

It was worrying. She couldn't get attached. She needed to find her family.

The fourth night had the full moon glowing in the sky, illuminating the barren terrain much more in the night than in the smog covered day they had. Eden observed from the bathroom's porthole as the Eaters began their migration, as they do every full moon. She sketched out their paths, already mapping out courses for avoiding the wave of healed Eaters that would come tomorrow.

Bang! She slipped on the toilet lid, landing on her butt. Shoving her papers into her bag, she sprinted out of the bathroom, searching for the source of the shot. From the bay window sat Jean, eyes squinted as he pointed a rifle out a cut out hole.

"What the hell was that, Jean?" Eden hissed, slinging her backpack to one shoulder.

"Huntin' for Eaters, Ed," Jean replied, eyes still locked out the window. "The more we get durin' migration, the less there're after."

Bang! Bang!

"Good shot, Jean." From her sideroom, Siobhan exited, strapped with a long sword. She gestured to Eden. "We're going out to collect and kill, you wanna come with?"

Eden stared at her for a minute, glancing over to Jean. He waved her off, translating her silent gaze.

“Siobhan and the folks will be watchin’ you the whole time, Ed. We aren’t lettin’ you run off, jus’ givin’ you some... fresh air.” He chuckled at those last words.

Eden remembered her single switchblade concealed in her sewn-in backpack pocket. “Got any weapons to spare?”

They met up with Lox and June out on the back porch, the former looking a lot more excited than the latter. Lox fumbled with something in his pocket as June surveyed the area, hand held by her open holster the whole time.

Lox looked up from his pocket, smiling as he saw the two of them. “Hey you two!” He finally fished out his prize from his pocket, a pack of cigarettes. “Ah-ha! There you are!”

Siobhan groaned as he lit the end and inhaled, letting out an exaggerated noise of pleasure. “Do you really need to do that everytime? And in front of Ed, too?”

Lox blew a puff of gray smoke. “It’s tradition, Siobhan.” He spotted the bat in Eden’s hands. “Oh, nice bat!”

Eden glanced down at it awkwardly. “Uh, thanks.”

June looked up from her trance. “That everyone?” Her brown eyes bounced distractedly from person to person.

Siobhan nodded. “Yeah, Jean wanted to go snipin’ and w—“

“Good, let’s get going.” June made her way off towards the closest herd of Eaters, her gait rigid and almost military.

Siobhan bristled at the interruption but followed, pulling Eden beside her, muttering something about manners. Lox brought up the back, blowing smoke.

Eden scrunched her face as the smoke drifted into her face, and waved it away, glaring at Lox. He gave a carefree wave. “Do y’all always do this?” she asked.

“Just every full moon, just to lower the population around us. It’s al—“

“It’s also to fuel Ms. Dane’s little guts collection,” Lox butted in. “she wants to save the *world* or her *family* or something.”

Siobhan gritted her teeth. “Shut up, Lox.” She loosened her grip on Eden.

June piped up, her small voice sounding a lot louder now. “Yeah Lox, stop being *nosy*, it’s not like Siobhan has a leg to stand on with privacy.”

“Well at least I have a spine, because you seem to only have one when it comes to your car!” Siobhan shouted, letting go of Eden to point to each person. “And Lox, unlike you, I am a *human being* who *cares* about her family.”

A lone Eater perked up in the distance.

“You don—“

“Spineless? How *dare* you—“

“Oh, so now you—“

The three adults began clustering together, shouting in each other's faces, filling the night with anger. Eden watched as bleeding Eaters lumbered towards them.

"Guys? Siobhan, Lox, June?" Eden tried to gain their attention with no effect. *Crap*, she thought, gripping her bat as Eater with a particularly bloated torso lurched forwards.

Hands sweaty, she landed a hit to the Eater's neck with a solid *whack*, swallowing back bile as it continued forward with its head at an unnatural angle. *Whack!* A hit to its lower back split its rotting green skin, spilling out blood and revealing the membrane protecting the inner larvae. Behind her, she could hear distorted moans behind her, and cold breath on her back. She could feel her breath growing faster and faster, panic seizing upon her.

"Help!" she choked out. She needed to run, hide, write. She cannot die. Not now.

Gunshots and the swishing of metal surrounded her, striking down dozens of Eaters swarming her. As soon as she found an opening, she bolted. She ran after the only familiar landmark: that house. Main room, back corner. She snatched her backpack and pulled out her papers, her hands shaking as she put her pencil to the paper.

Notdeadnotdeadnotdeadnotdeadnotdeadnononono—The pencil made deep indents into the thin paper—*"nearly died, Eater swarm, don't worry, won't die won't*

die I promised I won't I'm not dead"—The pounding in her chest won't stop, why won't it stop?—"I miss you I need you I have to find"—the pencil tip broke.

She choked on air, before the paper and broken pencil tight and collapsing, babbling reassurances. *Notdeadnotdeadnotdeadnotdead*.

Quiet footsteps and hushed conversation entered, and went silent.

"Ed, are you okay?" Lox asked. "Sorry 'bout outside."

--notdeadnotdeadnotdead--

"Ed?" June laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Oh." Jean whispered, farther than the others. "Lemme get something." Soft footsteps exited the room.

--tdeadnotdeadno--

Siobhan's voice is gentle, gentler than Eden's heard her. "We've really screwed up, huh."

"We were always screwed up, Siobhan," June said quietly. "Just needed something to care about to see that."

Jean's footsteps returned, and something light tapped her shoulder. Eden peeked through tears to see a black pen in his hands. She snatched it and wrote as much as she could, barely leaving spaces. The others were silent around her.

Finally she looked up and assessed the damage. They all were covered in guts, and June had a black eye, but otherwise they were okay, and Eden felt a sigh of relief wash over her. *Huh. They aren't dead either.*

She looked over to Jean, his brows knitted in poorly hidden worry. The rest looked more the same.

"Tell me about yourselves." Her throat was still hoarse from crying.
"Everything you want remembered, tell me."

They glanced over at each other, and slowly each began to tell their story.