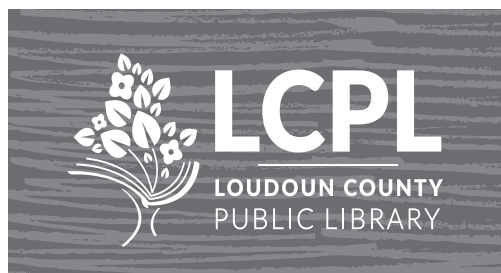




LCPL **Short Story Contest**



2025
**Contest
Winners**
Teens



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Dedication/Thank You

This anthology of short stories is dedicated with heartfelt gratitude to the family and friends of James Horton, whose generosity and vision through the James Horton for the Arts Trust Fund make this annual contest possible.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to the Loudoun Library Foundation which helps fund this and so many other library programs.

Finally, a special thank you to Trailside Middle School for graciously hosting our award ceremony this year.

And to all our writers: thank you for sharing your stories with us. We enjoyed reading every one.

About Our Guest Author



Monica Saigal

Monica Saigal is an award-winning author, literary coach, and educator whose storytelling bridges cultures and genres. Born in New Delhi, raised in the Middle East, and currently residing near Washington, D.C., she has authored over a dozen books, including acclaimed cookbooks like *Modern Spice* and *A Life of Spice*, as well as fiction titles such as *A Kiss in Kashmir* and *Karma and the Art of Butter Chicken* which inspired a featured menu in NPR's Sound Bites Café.

Her work has been featured in esteemed publications including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Bon Appétit*, and *Food & Wine*, and she has been recognized by the *Chicago Tribune* as one of the seven food writers to watch. Monica is also a sought-after speaker, having presented at institutions such as the Smithsonian and Georgetown University.

About Our Guest Judge



Nathan Leslie

Nathan Leslie won the 2019 Washington Writers' Publishing House prize for fiction for his collection of short stories, *Hurry Up and Relax*. He is also the series editor for *Best Small Fictions*. *Invisible Hand* (2022) and *A Fly in the Ointment* (2023) are his latest books. Nathan's previous books of fiction include *Three Men*, *Root and Shoot*, *Sibs*, and *The Tall Tale of Tommy Twice*. He is also the author of a collection of poems, *Night Sweat*. Nathan is the founder and organizer of the Reston Reading Series in Reston, Virginia, and the publisher and editor of the online journal *Maryland Literary Review*. Previously he was series editor for *Best of the Web* and fiction editor for *Pedestal Magazine*. His fiction has been published in hundreds of literary magazines such as *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, *Boulevard*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Cimarron Review*. Nathan's nonfiction has been published in *The Washington Post*, *Kansas City Star*, and *Orlando Sentinel*. Nathan currently lives in Northern Virginia.

2025 Middle School Participants

Chiara Alcor	"Dust"
Milo Anderson	"The Cat-astrophe"
Aishani Basu	"Independence of Iceland with a Spicy Twist"
Anvitha Bejjanki	"A Summary of Unusual Normalities by Ishmeal Beah"
Antoinette Bentil	"She Knows"
David Bour	"Constance's Story"
Anna Briggs	"Ava's Adventure"
Alexandra Caputo	"A Berry Chaotic Vacation"
Lillian Cassano	"A Price To Pay"
Desta Chachu	"The Divide"
Desta Chachu	"Grandma's Rose Garden"
Shreya Chang	"Bonded by Heart"
Ethan Chen	"Turn Eight"
Ananya Chennuri	"The Magic Door"
Srinithya Cherukuru	"The Move"
Maria Chicas	"Snowstorms and Secrets"
Saanvika Churukumalli	"Into the Thirteenth Realm"
Jonah Cromartie	"Caverns"
Kate Crookston	"Catching Confidence"
Candace Dagmawe	"Daisy's Favorite Doll"
Aneruddha Das	"The Red Bike"
Luciana de Lima-Campos	"The Class of First Crushes"
Petra Demas	"Under Pressure"
Petra Demas	"The Monsters at Twilight"
Laramie DeRocco	"All Alone with Uncle George"
Alyssa Dinelli	"A Wolf Tail"
Avani Dounde	"A Future Forged in the Past"
Vance Dsouza	"The Cop"

Mason Duan	"The Haunted"
Sydney Dudman	"Under Italy"
Mark Eskandar	"The Brave Bunny"
Eeshan Farhad	"The Last Sanctuary"
Alayna Gardner	"The Lucky Coin"
Sadie Gatz	"New Beginnings"
Siri Gudi	"The Unraveling"
Aarav Gupta	"Achoo!"
Saanvi Gupta	"La Forêt Magique"
Mia Gupta	"Jenna's Mistake"
Shivi Gururaj	"A Friend of Crime"
Ghazala Haider	"Behind Closed Doors"
Sara Haider	"Out of a Shadow"
Vivian Hall	"A Journey Through Time"
Kristyn Heinrich	"The Black Figure"
Mirabel Hersch	"King Lune of the Moon"
Alice Holzrichter	"Our Fearless Explorer"
Mary Hwang	"A Spark of Hope Prologue"
Daneyal Jafary	"Night Drive"
Pranamy Jindal	"The Jailbreakers"
Om Joshi	"Life"
Irene Jung	"The Big Project: Emily Discovered a Bug!"
Ruthvija Sai Kakularam	"Dark Side"
Megan Kamakawiwoole	"Twin Drama"
Vihaan Kamavarapu	"For Our Own Good"
Sahana karthik	"Sailing to Self Discovery"
Aarna Katarki	"Sweet Sabotage "
Aarav Kaul	"Adventure to the School Graveyard"
Meher Kaur	"The 13th Birthday Blessing (and Curse)"
Sameeha Khadari	"Really Grandmother?"

Ruyaa Khan	"Missed Message"
Vishakh Reddy	
Kichhanagari	"The Tunnel of Terror"
Nathan Kim	"The Hunter"
Alexandra Kleder	"The Song of Souls"
Ananya Kodakalla	"The Dybbuk"
Eesha Korlepara	"Second Best"
Sreehith Kovvuri	"Lukas Outsmarts a Zombie"
	"Captive, Lettia Camen: Book One of the Camen Chronicles"
Lily Larkin	
Luci Leventry	"The Choice to Read"
Noah Magin	"The Midas Mystery"
Arya Malhotra	"The Urban Kraken"
ANYA MANNE	"The Crown"
Sameera Mantripragada	"The Portal's Curse"
Grace McCleary	"A New World"
Mikayla Mertz	"Beyond the Mountains"
Ava Moslehi	"Streaks"
Brooklyn Mulholland	"My Weird Life"
Gianna Mwombeki	"Twin Drama"
Arya Narula	"2 Pills on Thanksgiving"
Maylie Ngo	"We End With Hello"
Eric Nordyke	"The Tale of Two Kings"
Adrien Nowak	"Process of Elimination"
Mohammad Odeh	"Echos of Silence"
Anna Oechslein	"The Aeaea Odyssey"
Nicole Pappageorge	"How I Came to Earth"
Anirudh Potti	"Quest for Knowledge"
Ashley Powers	"The Unspoken Virus"
Ananya Praveen Kumar	"Cafeteria Mystery"

Antara Radhakrishnan	"The Red String"
Tessa Reedy	"A Whale Tale"
Kaleb Ricce	"Fingers Crossed"
Aria Rienzi	"King Wonderful and the Kingdom of Kindness"
Ariana Rinaldi	"Red Destiny"
Ana Rivera Sao	"Mr. Flower's Inn"
Annamarie Roselle	"The Willow Tree"
Sean Ethan Sab	"The Vacation"
Shai Saffoori	"Adelayd Twist"
Sphurana Sainathuni	"Ceres"
Avanthika Sakthivel	"Fearless Mary"
Kavin Sathiesh	"The Cursed Candy"
Samyuktha Senthilkumar	"A Guide To Glitch Death"
Prisha Sharma	"What's Cooking?"
Ahana Shastri	"The Edge of the Universe"
Sabrina Shumway	"Six Shadows"
Sabrina Soto	"The Killer Chef"
Navya Srivastava	"Bee-yond the Meadow"
Arisha Taparia	"Whispers of the Hallow"
Chelsea Thornton	"The Cleansing"
Manna Tijo	"Beneath Her Innocent Smile"
Sahana, Nishi Tripathi, Naik	"Stuck in AI"
Tegan Tullock	"Project Lorraine"
Arush Vallepalli	"The Beauty of Life and Death"
	"The Man Who Fought Through Hardship and Overcame
Navatej Veldhandi	His Biggest Fear"
Madyson Victor	"Finding Family"
Srinika Vutukuri	"The Black Room"
Mason Wang	"Tree of Music"
Emily Weyant	"My Place"

Alexis Yeh

“Neighborhood Watch”

Echo Zheng

“Two Years”

Sanat

“Riddles”

Middle School Honorable Mentions

The Haunted

By Mason Duan

JUNE 18, 1845

Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled. A boy ran down the wet street, bumping into people as he ran. The boy was very small for his age, about 4'7", with curly brown hair that reached down to his shoulders. People stared as he ran by, wondering why this boy was in such a hurry. The boy turned down an alley. Lightning flashed and the boy's screams echoed through the small town of New York. That was the last thing heard from the boy.

It is said that his spirit haunted that alley, sending chills down people's backs as they walked by. When New York City was expanded, workers were too scared to tear down that alley. He has haunted that alley for 300 years...

JUNE 18, 2145

The phone rang inside a ten-story mansion sitting on Long Island Sound. The owner of this house, Jeff Peterson, answered the phone.

"Hello, Top Dog Industries speakin'," Jeff's deep voice thundered through the phone.

Pause

Let's talk a little bit about Jeff. Jeff is a 6'4" African-American rapper who is one of the best in his time. He was a multi-billionaire with long black hair that was in braids, a thin, pointy nose, and was extremely buff. And to all you abdominal lovers, yes he had an eight-pack.

Unpause

A woman's voice came on the phone.

"Hi, I am Olivia Tomson," she said. Jeff thought the voice reminded him of fresh honey. That name also sounded really familiar to him.

"Hey! Aren't ya the author of that book, *The Blood of the Nile*?" Jeff blurted all of a sudden.

"Yeah."

"Are you asking for fundraisers from rich people to help poor schools in need?"

"I wish, but that's not why I called."

"Why did ya call?" Jeff leaned back in his chair.

"You know the alley off of Times Square that everyone says is haunted?"

Jeff rolled his eyes. "Yeah, but it is not really haunted."

"Well, I thought so too. So the other day I went to New York to check it out, and when I drove back--"

CRASH!!!

Jeff jumped. "Lady, you need ta chill. But I understand if you are calling in the middle of a party."

"Uh, that sound was not me, that is my problem."

Jeff blinked. "Huh?"

"Ever since I got back from the alley, weird things started happening in my house. The lights flicker randomly, and furniture moves around. The other day, 25 of my plates fell out of my cabinet, and I had closed it!"

"So are you suggestin' that your house is haunted by a ghost?" Jeff almost laughed, but he held it in.

"Yeah."

"Well, good luck! I'm not a ghost detective, so I won't be comin'!"

His hand was an inch away from the hang up button when Olivia yelled, "Wait!" Jeff paused. "What?"

"In case you do come, here is my address: 1805 Pillor Rd, Trenton, NJ, 22054."

Jeff rolled his eyes and hung up.

He got up. "Yeah, there's no way I'm goin'."

But Jeff still got off the couch and grabbed a yellow backpack full of supplies, and got in his Lamborghini. As he started the car he paused.

"Wait, why am I doin' this again?" He thought aloud. He shrugged and typed the address to the house into his phone.

"8 hours?" he sputtered. "So much TRAFFIC!!!!"

He started driving, no matter what he told his brain. When he pulled into the house, he was surprised to see that it was a fairly normal-sized house, about 15 feet long with 2 floors. He walked to the door and knocked. A lady opened the door. She wore a green sweater with a picture of Snoopy sewn into it, ripped jeans, and black socks. Her blond hair was tied into a ponytail. She raised an eyebrow.

"I thought you said you weren't coming."

"I never said that." Jeff smiled, showing his perfect white teeth. "Jeff's Ghost-Hunting Company at your service."

"I thought you weren't a detective."

"I also never said that."

Olivia rolled her eyes and let him in. "Please take off your shoes."

Jeff took off his shoes and came in.

"So Olivia, wasn't it? Where was the last time you saw any signs of a ghost?"

Olivia led him to the kitchen. Plates were scattered on the floor, and food was everywhere.

"AHA!" Jeff pointed a finger at Olivia, "So ya did have a party!"

"What?! Where did you get the idea that I had a party?"

"So ya didn't have a party?"

"Yes, I totally had a party." Olivia said sarcastically.

"Well, it could have been a rat...."

"Well, isn't that what you are here for?"

"Jeez, ya sure know how ta argue..." He took his yellow backpack off and rummaged through. He pulled out a stethoscope. "Na, not this..." He threw it out of the bag, nearly hitting Olivia.

"Why do you have a stethoscope in your bag?" she asked, dodging the stethoscope.

"Oh, my mom is a doctor." He said, still rummaging through the bag, "Aha! Here it is!" He pulled out a heat detector. "Ok, so this is a heat detector,"

"Yeah, no kidding." Olivia rolled her eyes.

"Ok, I'm gonna use it ta track the ghost."

"But ghosts don't give off heat."

"Lady, who is the expert, you or me?"

Jeff walked out of the kitchen and walked around the living room. The machine started beeping rapidly, and it was coming from behind the couch. The lights suddenly

dimmed, and an eerie whisper filled the room. A gust of wind sent shivers down Olivia and Jeff's backs.

I am the ghost of the abandoned alley,

Forged by death and hate.

I have made all the good grieve, All

across the state.

No one shall survive my angry wrath without going insane.

***Anyone who stands against me Will
live a life of vain.***

"So is the ghost of the abandoned alley your official name, or did you just make it up?" Olivia said as Jeff said, "Good rhyming man!" Jeff gave a thumbs up to the general direction of the voice. A ghostly shape materialized in front of them.

"What is wrong with you, human? Why aren't you scared?" The ghost pointed a misty finger at them.

"Actually, I am terrified." Jeff said truthfully.

"Me too." Olivia whispered.

Olivia, who had been staring at the ghost from behind Jeff suddenly collapsed.

The ghost also disappeared.

"Well that was easy, wasn't that?" Jeff grinned down at Olivia. Olivia looked up, and Jeff knew something was wrong. She looked very pale, and her cheekbones were sticking up a little more, but the scariest part was her eyes. They were glowing red.

"Hello, Jeff." Olivia grinned. The voice sounded like iron scraping against concrete, and it sent a chill down Jeff's spine.

"Who are you?"

The ghost wailed. ***"MY NAME IS SAM!!!"***

"So... Sam. Why were ya rhyming?"

"It is my curse... everyday, I have to say one rhyme in order to stay in the human world. But that does not matter."

"What do you want from Olivia?"

"This helpless bag of meat? I want nothing from her. What I really came for is you!"

"So why didn't you possess me instead of her?"

"Oh Jeff, you know why. But you have been keeping it a secret haven't you?"

"What?"

"I know you possess something that no other mortal has, but I just don't know what it is."

"How did you even get here?"

"This is my house. And honestly, it is quite comfy. It has been my plan all along getting you here. I saw an ad on Times Square of you, and I knew there was something different about you. "

"I find that very offensive."

The ghost—well, Olivia—rolled his eyes. *"After following her back home, I started whispering in her ear. She was quite easy to convince, so I told her to call you. As I planned, you did come. And now, I have you right where I want you!!!"*

The ghost jumped at Jeff. Time seemed to slow down. Jeff hands clenched into fists.

The ghost was right, he did have a secret—and it was a big secret. About 5 years ago, when he went out one night, he had been struck by lightning. After that he possessed some of the greatest powers ever known.

After his best friend and rap partner, Tedd, had died, he grieved and tried to hide his power. Jeff closed his eyes remembering that day. He had to do it.

He felt a tingling in his gut and right as the ghost- wait, Olivia- was about to jump into him, his hands crackled with electricity, and lightning bolts shot from his hands into Olivia's chest. The blast sent both of them flying in opposite directions, and they both landed on their backs. Jeff heard a fading wail from the ghost of Sam.

Jeff groaned and sat up. His blast had also destroyed the room. Furniture was flipped over, and the wallpaper was torn. When Jeff stood up and went out of the room, he realized his blast had destroyed the whole house. He went back to the room where Olivia was lying on the floor. Jeff sat beside her.

Olivia sat up. The first thing she noticed was Jeff sitting next to her. The second thing she noticed... her house was destroyed.

"What the -- Jeff, what is going on?"

Jeff was shaking, and he looked sick.

"Jeff, you look like you have just seen a ghost."

Jeff stared at her, his eyes were bloodshot and red.

"I have." he whispered. He shook his head. He got up. "C'mon, you can live with me."

Butterflies danced in her chest. "No, I really couldn't." She whispered. "But I need an explanation on why my house is wrecked."

Jeff shook his head. "I will give you an explanation later. Are you going to come?"

Olivia nodded.

As they walked to his car, Olivia stared at her house. "Why are you doing this?" she asked

"Because..." His voice was barely above a whisper. "Your house is haunted."

5 months later...

Olivia was worried for Jeff. Every night at midnight, he would get out of bed and get in his car. He would drive, and wouldn't come back until 5 in the morning, and he rarely slept.

One night, Olivia decided to follow him. She lied down in the back seat of the car, and prayed he wouldn't look in the back when he got in. After what seemed like hours, Jeff got in the car. He drove past the barrier of New York and New Jersey. How strange, she thought.

Jeff pulled up in front of her house and walked inside. Olivia got out of the car and slowly crept in the house behind him. It was very quiet, and eerie, and the only light was the one coming from ahead. Olivia crept to the light and found Jeff sitting on the floor, eyes closed, chanting. A shape appeared in front of him.

"Did you consider what I said?"

"Yes." Jeff opened his eyes. ***"And?"***

"I don't want anything to do with you."

"Then you will end up like me, and I will torture you for eternity."

The ghost closed his eyes and started chanting.

***"Your darkest hours are yet to come, You
will not prevail without the one, And no
matter how much you try, Seven of the
thirteen will surely die.***

The doctor will see his final days,

A man with one eye, will start the phase.

***The monster, who has not been seen for ages Will tear
out all of your pages.***

An enemy who sucks out life,

Will kill joy, like a man stabbed by a knife.

*A single curse, utters the truth, Destroying
the man who created you, And one who you
will call your friend, Will kill who you hold
dear, in the end. Death, destruction, filled
with hate, Destroying men who guard the
gate.*

*And if you do not stop Death, Then
everyone will take a final breath."*

The ghost laughed and disappeared, leaving Jeff shaking. Olivia hurried back to the car, knowing one thing was for certain: Jeff and her life were about to take a slight turn.

THE END

The Hunter

By Nathan Kim

Prologue

In space, an unidentified flying object sped toward Earth at maximum velocity. It flew faster and faster until it finally entered the atmosphere. To those who noticed, it seemed like the beginning of a meteor shower—but something was off.

As the object crashed onto a mysterious island in the middle of nowhere, the onlookers realized this was no meteor. They rushed to get dressed, grabbed their guns, and set off toward the crash site. After trekking to the other side of the island, they came across a small crater with a half-buried sphere at its center.

One of them cautiously approached the sphere, stepping forward with slow, deliberate movements. He reached out and touched it. Suddenly, the top of the sphere popped open. A moment later, a head emerged from the hole—then a body, then legs.

It let out a deafening roar, like a lion warding off a challenger. And then—kaboom!

Chapter 1: The Rizzful General

It was a warm summer morning when seven friends were abruptly woken up by their drill sergeant and ordered to do push-ups. Their names were Charlie Sus, Bill Fanum, Gordie Ohio, Theo Toilet, Ray Sigma, Ace Grimace, and Skibidi Merrill.

After finishing their workout, the sergeant told them to report to the office.

Begrudgingly, they obeyed and took their seats in front of General Rizzler—the most rizzful general of all time. He was munching on drippy cheese and meowing for some reason.

"Why are we here, General?" Sus asked.

"A weird UFO landed on Cocos Island, which is part of Costa Rica, which is in Central America, which is in North America, which is on Earth," Rizzler explained. "Anyway, the rangers who went to check it out were mysteriously killed by some kind of creature that came out of the UFO. I need you guys to find it and capture it. Kill if necessary."

"When do we start?" Charlie asked.

"Tomorrow."

Chapter 2: Tomorrow

When the next day arrived, the team got ready for their mission.

Charlie equipped a minigun. Bill chose a flamethrower. Gordie brought a rocket launcher. Theo carried a sniper rifle. Ray wielded a shotgun that shot sigmas (whatever that means). Ace grabbed a machine gun. And Skibidi, in all his wisdom, brought an extremely powerful can of insect spray.

In addition to their personal weapons, everyone had an AK-47, a pistol, explosives, and a knife—except for Skibidi, who had a machete instead.

The team flew to Costa Rica and then took a boat toward the island. Unfortunately, three-fourths of the way there, the water became too shallow, forcing them to swim. Thirty minutes later, they reached the shore and removed their snorkeling gear.

Exploring the island, they stumbled upon a shack. Charlie attempted to open the door, but it was locked. Ray Sigma fired his sigma shotgun at the handle, breaking it. As they entered the shack, they were horrified by what they found.

A dead body.

Chapter 3: First Blood

Theo cautiously approached the body, inspecting it. There was a gaping hole in the corpse—as if a laser had burned straight through. Blood stained the floor beneath it.

The team worked together to clean up the mess and dispose of the body.

Afterward, they examined the shack. It was just big enough to hold seven beds, with a ceiling only seven feet high. Inside, they found three hammocks, four chairs, a microwave, a refrigerator stocked with food, some rifles, and various other supplies.

As the sun set, they ate apples from the fridge and settled in for the night, sleeping in hammocks and chairs.

The next morning, Charlie, Bill, Gordie, and Theo set out to track the creature, while Ray, Ace, and Skibidi stayed behind to set traps and guard their base.

Charlie's team split up to cover more ground. Bill, armed with his flamethrower, was prepared to burn the creature to ashes.

Suddenly, a flash of light shot toward him. He dodged just in time. An explosion echoed behind him.

Then, out of nowhere, a beast lunged at Bill, scratching him. He retaliated with a punch and squeezed the trigger on his flamethrower.

A scorching-hot blaze erupted from the barrel.

"Take this, you stupid animal!" Bill roared.

The creature howled in agony. As the fire subsided, Bill finally saw it in full form:

It stood on two legs like a human but had reptilian skin. Its webbed hands and feet resembled those of a frog. It wore a helmet covering its face, but from beneath, porcupine-like quills trailed down its head. In one hand, it held a spear. On its shoulder sat a plasma cannon. On its wrists were razor-sharp claws, akin to Wolverine's.

Despite being severely burned, the creature let out another enraged scream and charged at Bill with its spear.

Bill attempted to fire again—but he was too late.

Bill Fanum was dead.

Chapter 4: Blood of a Hunter

Hearing Bill's screams, the others rushed to the scene—only to find the creature feasting on their fallen friend.

It had removed its helmet, but just as the team arrived, it swiftly put it back on and leaped away.

Surprised, everyone opened fire. Ratatatatatatatatat! (Random shooting noises.)

After unloading countless rounds, Charlie signaled to stop. "What was that thing?" Skibidi asked.

"Only Bill would know," Charlie replied grimly.

To honor their fallen comrade, they held a silent prayer. Lacking a shovel, they placed Bill's body in a ditch and covered it with leaves and branches.

From the corner of his eye, Ray noticed a strange green liquid dripping from a large tropical leaf. He stepped closer, sniffed it, and realized—

It was the creature's blood.

Chapter 5: The Meeting

Exhausted, the team sluggishly walked back to the shack.

The next morning, Charlie called a meeting. They gathered around a small table, waiting for him to speak.

"Yesterday, one of our friends was killed by some kind of hunter," Charlie began. "It's using guerilla warfare to take us out one by one. If we don't change our strategy, it'll keep picking us off until there's no one left."

"So what are you suggesting? That we all stick together so it can kill us all at once?" Ace asked.

"No, we'll split into pairs. That way, we'll watch each other's backs while staying mobile."

The team agreed.

The hunt was on.

Chapter 6: Eating a Pear

Later that night, the group split into three pairs: Charlie and Gordie, Theo and Ray, Ace and Skibidi.

Theo and Ray moved cautiously, crawling through the dirt.

Theo, however, was starving. He hadn't eaten lunch, and his stomach rumbled.

Spotting a pear bush, he plucked a pear and took a bite. It was, without a doubt, the best pear he had ever eaten. Before he knew it, he had devoured the entire bush.

As he let out a loud burp, a blue blur shot out of nowhere. Ray and Theo barely dodged in time.

The Hunter had arrived.

It leaped from tree to tree before landing in front of them. Theo fired his AK-47. Ray blasted his shotgun.

Like Neo from The Matrix, the Hunter dodged most of the bullets, twisting and flipping through the air.

But then— It stumbled.

Clutching its leg, the Hunter snarled. "Well, that was easy," Theo said smugly.

The Hunter glared up at them. It growled. It was furious.

With a sudden burst of energy, it stood up and fired its plasma cannon. BOOM.

Chapter 7: Theo's Secret

Theo lay on the ground, unconscious. A few moments later, he woke up.

"Ray! Where are you?" he called.

A low groan answered him.

Theo ran toward the sound, only to freeze in horror. The Hunter was devouring Ray.

A gruesome, terrifying sight.

Theo's fists clenched. His anger boiled. The Hunter turned toward him.

It made a sound—something between a laugh and a snarl. Theo's rage exploded.

A glowing aura surrounded him. His body levitated like an Evangelion from Neon Genesis Evangelion.

He grabbed his sniper rifle.

He aimed directly at the Hunter's head.

Channeling every ounce of his energy, he pulled the trigger. BOOM!

Theo collapsed. Dead.

The Hunter staggered, injured—but still alive. And now, its mask was shattered.

Chapter 8: Weird Noises

No one dared to look for Theo and Ray.

Everyone was asleep, dreaming about video games and random nonsense. Charlie was the first to wake up.

He gasped. Loudly.

Gordie stirred. "What's going on?" Charlie didn't answer. Ace woke up. Ace yawned. Skibidi woke up.

Now, everyone was awake.

"Did anyone hear that explosion?" Charlie asked. Everyone shook their heads.

They all shrugged and went back to sleep, completely unaware that two of their friends were gone.

Chapter 9: The Trap

"Has anyone seen Ray and Theo?" Gordie asked the next morning. Everyone shook their heads.

"They probably got eaten by the Hunter," Ace said nonchalantly. "Shouldn't we at least look for them?" Gordie asked.

"If they're eaten, there's nothing left to find, genius," Ace retorted. "Oh... that makes sense," Gordie admitted.

Charlie ignored them. "We need a trap."

The team set up a net trap with a dummy in the center, hoping to lure the Hunter in. Then, they waited.

Hours passed. No Hunter.

Afternoon came and went. Still no Hunter. Evening fell.

Finally—

A rustle in the bushes.

The Hunter emerged, creeping toward the dummy. The team held their breath.

It moved closer... closer... closer. Then—

SNAP!

The net sprang shut, trapping the Hunter inside. Gordie grinned. He aimed his rocket launcher. "Say goodbye, you ugly lizard."

BOOM.

Smoke filled the air. As it cleared...

The Hunter was still standing.

It had slashed through the net just in time.

But it looked different now.

Burns. Bullet wounds. A bandaged leg. Its mask was gone, revealing its true face:

- Slitted cat-like eyes.
- No nose.
- A gaping mouth lined with four jaw-like fangs.

The Hunter snarled.

It gripped its spear and hurled it at Ace's machine gun. The spear pierced through the barrel.

Ace tried to fire—nothing happened. Now, he was unarmed.

The Hunter lunged at him. Ace barely dodged.

Skibidi grabbed his insect spray and blasted it at Hunter's face. The creature staggered back, coughing.

Ace yanked the spear out of his ruined gun and charged forward. He aimed, point-blank. He pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

Jammed.

The Hunter growled.

Then, it ran.

Chapter 10: The Wrath of Grimace

Ace was furious.

His face was scarred for life.

That night, while everyone else slept, he grabbed his gear and went out to hunt the Hunter alone.

After walking for hours, a blue flash streaked toward him.

He dodged just in time. The tree behind him exploded into flames. The Hunter landed in front of him, ready for a final duel.

It fired again. Ace dodged.

They clashed—gunfire, plasma blasts, and burning trees all around them. Then—

The Hunter stopped moving. It was out of ammo.

So was Ace.

The Hunter ripped off its plasma cannon and smashed it underfoot. Ace grinned.

He had one last trick.

He lifted his gun, aimed at the Hunter's hair, and fired. BAM!

The Hunter screamed.

Its hair—or whatever nerve-filled quills it had—was obliterated. The pain was unbearable.

The Hunter collapsed, unconscious. Ace smirked.

Then, he looked down. He was bleeding. A lot. He collapsed.

Ace Grimace was dead.

Chapter 11: The Blades

The next morning, Charlie and Gordie woke up to find Ace missing. “I guess he got killed by the Hunter,” Charlie muttered.

“We should go find him,” said Gordie.

“If he’s dead, there’s nothing left to find, doofus,” Ace had once told him. Gordie sighed.

“Oh... yeah.”

The two grabbed their weapons and headed out.

After walking for a while, they found something unexpected— The Hunter.
Lying on the ground.

Bald.

But before they could react— It shot up and snarled.

Charlie and Gordie panicked and ran. Except for Skibidi.

Skibidi stood his ground.

He grabbed his insect spray and blasted the Hunter in the face. The creature staggered back, coughing violently.

Red burns spread across its skin. It was furious. It lunged at Skibidi—

But Skibidi still had his AK-47. Ratatatatatat!

Bullets tore through the Hunter’s ribs. Some of its bones shattered. The Hunter roared in pain but kept coming.

Out of ammo, Skibidi threw the AK-47 at the Hunter’s head. BONK.

The Hunter growled. Skibidi drew his machete.

The Hunter extended its claws. A blade battle began.

The Hunter slashed.

Skibidi countered.

Metal clashed and crashed.

They were evenly matched—until one of the Hunter’s wrist blades snapped. But at the same time, Skibidi’s machete shattered.

Now, Skibidi was unarmed. The Hunter was not.

It lunged one last time—

And stabbed him through the chest. Skibidi Merrill was dead.

Chapter 12: The BOOM

Charlie and Gordie hid in the shack.

“Wait a second!” Charlie said. “We’re such babies. We left Skibidi alone!” “Let’s go back out!” Gordie shouted.

They ran back— Too late.

Skibidi was already dead. Gordie’s hands clenched into fists.

He heard something rustling in the bushes. “That must be the Hunter!”

He aimed his rocket launcher and fired. BOOM!

Trees exploded.

Flames spread.

Unfortunately, Gordie had just blown up... a squirrel.

“Oh,” he mumbled.

But now, an entire forest was burning down.

As he admired his masterpiece, he didn’t notice the Hunter sneaking up behind him.

Charlie did.

“GORDIE, WATCH OUT!”

Charlie tackled the Hunter before it could strike.

Punching it repeatedly, he yelled, “This is for Bill! This is for Ray and Theo! This is for Ace! And this is for Skibidi!”

The Hunter shook Charlie off, but Gordie was ready.

He aimed his rocket launcher. BOOOOOM!!!

The Hunter was blown back.

Unfortunately, the launcher malfunctioned— And self-destructed.

Gordie Ohio was blasted to smithereens. Charlie, thinking he won, did a victory dance.

Then he stopped.

He realized Gordie was gone. And the Hunter was still alive.

Chapter 13: The Last Battle

Charlie stared at the Hunter. The creature barely stood.

Its armor was gone.

Its blades were destroyed.

Its skin was torn and bleeding green.

Charlie grabbed his minigun. RATATATATATAT!

The Hunter took the full force of the bullets— And still stood.

Charlie switched to his AK-47. BANG BANG BANG!

Still standing.

He switched to his pistol. BANG!

Still standing.

Charlie had only one weapon left— A knife.

Panting, he charged at the Hunter. The Hunter suddenly countered.

BAM!

It punched Charlie so hard, he staggered back. Charlie growled. He charged again.

And then—

He kicked the Hunter in the balls.

Or at least, where the balls should be. But the Hunter didn't react.

Because it had no balls.

Instead, it punched Charlie again. Charlie got even angrier.
With all his might, he threw his knife. It spun through the air and— THUNK.
The blade pierced the Hunter's skull. The Hunter collapsed.
It didn't move.

For a few seconds, Charlie thought it was over. Then, he saw something strange.
The Hunter lifted its arm.

On its wrist, there was a bracelet.

Charlie squinted.

There were weird symbols blinking. Beep.
Beep.

Beep.

Charlie's eyes widened. IT WAS A BOMB.
The Hunter, using its last breath, had activated a self-destruct sequence. Charlie bolted.
He sprinted to the water.

He saw the boat—half a mile away. He jumped in.
He swam like Michael Phelps on steroids. Beep. Beep. Beep.
The beeps sped up. Charlie reached the boat. He climbed aboard.

And then— BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!
The explosion was so massive, the shockwave rocked the boat. The entire island was
obliterated.
Nothing remained.

Charlie watched in silence.

Then, he grabbed the oars and started rowing. Rowing.
Rowing.

Until a helicopter finally came to pick him up.

Epilogue

Charlie never spoke about what happened. No one would believe him.
The government covered it all up.

Years later, people still whispered about the lost island. But Charlie knew the truth.

The Hunter was real.

And maybe...

Just maybe...

There were more out there.

THE END.

The Song of Souls

By Alexandra Kleder

In every person, there is a heart. And in every heart is a piece of Songlight; the very essence of creativity, the fabric that separates us from animals and machines. But Songlight isn't just a blessing, for if not cared for, or protected, or taken away, it leaves us soulless, zombies wandering with no purpose. Everyone knew to keep their Songlight safe, at least in the olden days...

Nowadays, people credit creativity to “nothing but a pattern of neurons” and a “random coincidence in genetics” and half the population doesn't even *care* as long as it doesn't interfere with their day-to-day life. Only we, the Guided Ones, still tend to Songlight. One day, maybe, you all will be able to journey into the world and use our methods to restore Songlight, as Guides or Shamans.”

Amber sat in the nursery, telling stories to three excited children. They were so *excited* for the journey ahead of them. Bouncy little Sheila already had both hands raised, with her doll raising her hands as well. She was always full of questions, comments, and would always welcome other kids with a loving attitude and a questionnaire. Timmy was a little shy; he was best at sharing his knowledge with those who needed it, but could also be brave whenever it was required. And then there was Jackson; the troublemaker of the bunch. He was rowdy and energetic and wasn't afraid to bend the rules a *little*, but still respected authority and knew what was expected of him.

To think that these children hold the fate of the world...

Three hundred years ago, their names had been prophesied, but Amber, as their caretaker, doubted whether or not they could bear the weight of choosing who was fit

for their destiny; choosing who would be allowed to keep their Songlight, and who would be forced to wander the Earth forever, a husk of their former selves.

Amber let the children play hide and seek and wandered out of the tree hut. She stood on the balcony, overlooking the village; a mesh of treehouses, platforms, wood and vines supporting the whole structure. *The jungle around us keeps us safe*, she remembered telling the children. *It gives us food, water, and shelter*. She sighed. Recent reports from the guides said that Songlight was diminishing rapidly for the Metal Ones. It seemed they were giving their Songlight to their machines, unknowingly sacrificing their own. To truly save them, The Guided Ones would have to destroy every single machine, and last time they tried, the war party was ambushed and massacred. Since then, everyone had been more cautious about their mission, even though they were technically abandoning the post given to them by the gods. And in addition, some of their own were defecting to the Metal World, and their ranks fell by the minute.

Amber heard a scream in the distance. She saw chaos coming from the east guard post. She knew that only she could see it; the dense trees made it so that no other platform could. She couldn't run for the warning bell, it was on the other side of the vast village, and it would take too much precious time to get there. She called out to a nearby scout, but she could tell that it was too late as invaders broke into the clearing, seemingly unfazed by the guards' efforts. She counted at least fourteen men from the Metal World at first glance, and saw some familiar faces, defectors, helping them. *This was a coordinated attack, for sure. And defectors from our side are helping them navigate to different places; they're ignoring all of our traps. Did they cause this invasion?*

Amber ran back to Timmy, the seeker, and called out to the other children. "Kids, come on out!"

"Timmy!" Sheila shouted from somewhere to the left. "It's not fair to get Amber to help you!"

"Yeah, Timmy!" Jackson added.

"Your game can wait, kids! This is an emergency!"

Sheila and Jack emerged from opposite ends of the rooms and joined Timmy, all three faces pale. Amber ushered them to a rug, shoving it aside to reveal a hole in the floor with a ladder going into the hollowed tree trunk. The kids hopped in, first Sheila, Timmy then Jackson, and Amber jumped down while pulling the rug back over the secret escape. She prayed to the gods that none of the traitors from the other side knew about this passage, as it was kept secret and was unknown to most Guided Ones. It was hard, though, because she heard so many voices try to fight the army, her leaders, her friends, her family, all fighting, and she knew it was just to buy her that extra scrap of time to get the prophesied children in front of her out of the settlement and into the wilds.

“How much longer?” Sheila asked. Timmy stopped suddenly.

“Are we ever going to see anyone from there ever again?”

There was a moment of silence from all of them. To Amber, there seemed no gods-given words to comfort them. To her surprise, Jackson was the one to comfort them.

“There’s no use in thinking about that right now,” he said. “We have Amber, we have ourselves, and we have to focus on getting out so that we can still have those things.”

This speech seemed to soothe everyone, even Amber, and they finally saw light at the end of the tunnel. The jungle outside was *right there*, and once they were out they could run to someplace safe. They finally had a plan.

Outside, Amber told everyone to run in a certain direction. They found a clearing, where Timmy set up an arrow, pointing towards the village, made out of stones. Amber applauded his ingenuity, but then focused on a more important issue; she, at the wise age of twelve, and three nine-year-olds were alone in the woods, alone with only themselves and the dangers of the jungle for company.

“How are we going to survive out here?” Sheila asked. Timmy came and hugged Amber, and Jackson came to comfort Sheila.

“I asked us to stop here,” said Amber, “because there’s a small cave here. We can light a fire for food and warmth, and gather moss to make beds. We can hunt, gather water from... somewhere,”

“I heard a river somewhere over there!” Sheila piped up, pointing to the left of the cave.

“There have to be animals there,” Timmy added.

“And I saw a clearing with a lot of fallen branches and moss that way!” Jackson added, pointing the opposite direction from Sheila.

“Good work, kids!” Amber clapped her hands. “Now, let’s get to work. Timmy and Jackson, gather dry sticks. Sheila, collect dry moss. I’ll get food, but don’t hesitate to call if you need me. May the gods light your path, everyone!” And, for once, things went smoothly.

There were no raids, no animals, not even a single scrape on one of the children.

Later that day, Amber led them all to the river, which she found delightfully clear and wide, with plenty of salmon in it as well. She planned to make a bowl out of a rock and store water in it, and Sheila spent her spare time working on it and gathering sticks, moss and berries, as she preferred that to learning how to fish, hunt and track. Amber helped when needed, always ensuring that no child was alone. They lived together for several years, learning, surviving, and adapting, until they were all fourteen, (except for Amber, who was seventeen), and experts at their trades. Jackson became a wonderful leader, who most likely was in love with Sheila, the makeshift tribe’s expert healer, and Timothy was a wise advisor, managing the supply of food and kindling, his calendar, and organized tasks. Amber became their teacher and their medium, telling them tales of Songlight and how to tend for it. In their years, they had also encountered a few survivors, who helped in gathering and storing for the winter. But every night, Jackson

and Sheila would wander back to the old village, and every night, they would come back, with Sheila crying into Jackson's arms. It seemed like a grisly nightly cycle; any were welcome to join them in raising their hope, only to be crushed in sadness.

Amber saw this and would remind Timothy, Jackson, and Sheila of their divine goal, preparing them day after day to choose whom to save. She would talk to Timothy privately and warn him to let go of his grudges when the appointed time came, and speak with pure fact. To Sheila, she would say to be the embodiment of forgiveness, convincing them to let everyone to have a less horrid fate. But to Jackson, she said to

be Sheila's counterbalance; to be the voice of rage against the Metal World, as that rage would balance the Judgement. None of them forgot their instructions, and soon the gods bestowed the three with gifts for surviving and caring for their Songlight; to Timothy they gave a scroll on which only the truth could be written, to Sheila a vase which poured the purest water that would heal those who drank it, and to Jackson Amber gave a basket that would always be filled with leaves, and he would give these leaves to the dead to decide their fate.

To Sheila, she also gave a warning;

"In three days' time, the End will come. You will give this message to one of your friends; one of them would grant you eternal happiness in the end, and the other would make you feel eternally empty."

Sheila didn't know who to choose. She knew that eternity awaited all those with Songlight, judged by the trio, and then the judgement was given by Jackson to the souls. But she had to choose either Jackson or Timothy to pass the message, and she didn't know that Jackson loved her. She decided to choose Timothy; the truthful scroll could instruct them in what to do, because of their practice of writing down different options and seeing what ink would come onto the paper.

"Timothy?" Sheila asked him in private. "Amber gave me a message; the End is in three days."

"I...I have to go tell Jackson! Did you tell him already?" Timothy asked. "No, I was thinking we could use the scroll to prepare the tribe."

"Why?! Jackson is the leader of this village! He could tell me! Just because I was given the scroll doesn't mean that it is the one that should make every decision. There's a reason we have a leader, Sheila. You should have told him first."

Timothy ran off to tell Jackson, and Sheila realized that she was wrong in her actions. Her heart had told her to choose Jackson, but she hadn't realized that it was *right*. Across the clearing of the camp, she saw Timothy tell Jackson. For a scary second, Jackson's mourning eyes connected with hers, and then he turned away, leaving Sheila as only a shadow of herself.

She came to confront Amber, but as soon as she stepped in the cave, Amber hissed and stepped back.

"What has happened to you, a Chosen One, to become a Husk?"

"What do you mean? It's still..." Sheila realized her punishment, and solemnly told her tale. Amber took pity on her.

"You must use your flask."

"What?! That can't help me! I tried dozens of times!"

"I can't believe I'm doing this... You aren't the one who needs healing, Jackson is! Your Songlight is interwoven! *He* is the one that must be healed!"

At once Sheila knew what she would do.

The next day, Sheila approached Jackson with her healing vase as he examined a new catch of fish.

"You require healing," Sheila said with the certainty of a healer.

"I'm perfectly fine!" Jackson said sorrowfully.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying! I'm perfectly fine!" He said, rising to try to push her out of the room. To his shock, she forced him back onto the floor, and with one hand bracing him against the wall, silenced him as he tried to argue.

"You require healing, and I am your healer." She took her vase, a gift from the gods, and smashed it at his feet, all of its contents forming into a bubble around Jackson. But he did not drown. He breathed and drank and breathed and understood, and he embraced Sheila.

"All this time, I thought that you hated me," he whispered into her ear.

"All this time, you were gravely mistaken." They embraced for the rest of the night, happy at last.

The next day, Timothy, Sheila, and Jackson were swept into the sky by fierce winds, into a gleaming temple with no one inside. In front of them was a single podium, for one person at a time. Timothy was the first to step on, and was whisked into the sky *into* the moon, where he knew he would be happy. As he ascended, everyone understood; they would watch the world from the heavens, at night going to the underworld to judge the dead. But during the day, they would care for those alive. Sheila was hesitant to step on. Through great lengths she had found her beloved, and she would not risk separation. In a bold move Jackson grabbed her hand and they both went onto the podium together, immortalizing themselves, with Jackson as the New Sun, and Sheila as the new sky.

And so it remained, for all of time, that they let Songlight thrive throughout every generation, and were together forever at last.

A Tale of Two Kings

By Eric Nordyke

My father could not live with us in the village— he was confectioner to the King. Once a month, he was allowed to come see us. Every visit was a celebration. He brought sweet cakes and fruit pies, but the best part was later, when we would sit together by the fire. My father would smile at me and ask, “Edward, would you like to hear a story?”

When I was 14, my father was promoted to head cook to the king. Since the position came with a house, mother and I were able to move out of the village. Our new home was in Castletown, a large cluster of cottages inside the castle walls. In a few weeks, a job opened up for me in the kitchen—cellar boy.

As cellar boy my job was to fetch things from the cellar whenever *anyone* needed *anything*. I also had to keep track of how many supplies were available, as well as keep the cellar clean and tidy. This meant NO RATS ALLOWED. It was hard work, but not very exciting.

I always wondered why I never saw a single rat down there. In the village, there were plenty of rats; in the castle, rats abounded. Why weren't there any rats where all the food in the whole castle was stored? One day, I found out why.

The head cook (Father) sent me to the cellar to get turnips, potatoes, and onions for the stew. At the bottom of the stairs, flour was all over the floor. Investigating the cause, I saw a fist size hole in the bottom of the flour sack. I leaned in to look and a chubby, black rat squeezed out, screeched at me, and scurried into the corner. A pile of stones was neatly stacked there. Moving them, I saw a hole.

Now, it was my job to find and kill rats, but it was also my job to bring supplies to the cook. So, I blocked the hole and ran the vegetables up to my father first.

When I returned, I brought my wooden rat stick with me to take care of the rat. My stick fit easily into the rat's entrance, and I wiggled it around to see how deep it

went. When I pulled it out, the edges of the hole began to crumble. Pulling it apart with my hands was easy and I enlarged it until I could fit inside.

There were four torches mounted on the cellar walls. Taking one with me, I crawled inside. Halfway in, I saw the rat's eyes glinting red in the torchlight. It screamed at me and ran out of view into the dark. There was a sudden SNAP! and silence—no more shrieking, no more scurrying. Quickly, I turned my light toward the corner. There was nothing there but a rectangular box.

Upon closer inspection, it was actually a large wooden chest. Wide iron braces wrapped around it on either side of the lock. To the right of the latch, I saw a black string hanging out. It wasn't a string though, it was the rat's tail. I assumed the rodent jumped into the chest and the lid slammed shut. With a sudden slurp, the tail disappeared. Alarmed, I jumped back and the chest jumped forward. The lid opened, revealing two rows of sharp, white teeth, and a sizable pink tongue. It only took me a moment to realize that it was a mimic, a dangerous creature from one of my father's stories.

Terrified, I threw my rat stick. It bounced off the lid and landed somewhere in the room. The chest spun around and hopped after it. Returning with the stick clenched in its teeth, the chest dropped it at my feet.

From that day forward, he has been my most faithful companion.

His name is Fido.

Over the next 4 years, I hid Fido in the secret room. The only person I trusted enough to tell was my father. He thought Fido was magnificent! As the head cook, father had access to scraps of raw meat. Fido made it clear he preferred the mutton.

After each day's work was finished, I would spend hours sparring with Fido. My sword was my rat stick, and his weapon was his tongue. By the time I was eighteen, there was no attack I couldn't evade.

A sparring contest was announced for the King's upcoming Birthday Festival. To enter, you had to be eighteen or older and live within the castle walls. The winner would be awarded with knighthood, a sword, and a suit of armor.

Fido wanted to come to the festival, but we could not risk him being seen. Father had a brilliant idea. As a mimic, Fido could transform into any non-living object he desired, as tiny as a thimble, or as large as a king-size four-poster bed.

Father leaned down and whispered to Fido. In the blink of an eye, he turned into a small money pouch that could be clipped on to Father's belt.

When we got to the festival, Father and money pouch Fido took their seats in the stands. In the contestant area, I was the last one to check in. I received a wooden training sword with a suit of one-size-fits-all leather armor. Emblazoned on the breast plate was a red number twelve.

The arena was a large rectangle of bare earth. On each long side, bleachers were erected for the spectators. Opposite of the contestant area, high up, was the King's box. Three of the King's best Knights sat directly below him at the Judges' table.

We drew lots to determine fighting order. The twelve opponents were pitted against each other two at a time in elimination rounds.

My first challenger was contestant #2, a skinny nineteen year old who could barely wield a sword. I knocked him down with one blow to his side and he yielded instantly—it was pitiful.

The next match was against #11, a squat, stout, bearded man that could have been mistaken for a dwarf. His arm was a catapult that threw his sword so powerfully every swing rushed by in a gust of wind. He chased me around the arena for half an hour in an unwinnable game of tag. Red-faced and sweating, he quit without ever landing a blow.

My last elimination round was against #1. He barely beat #10 in the previous round. We struggled against each other for fifteen minutes until I was able to knock the

sword out of his hand. Enraged, he immediately bunched up his fists and ran at me. Before he could get a punch in, one of the Judges yelled, "Disqualified!".

All the elimination fights were over. There were three winners left: #8, #4, and #12. For the final contest, all three of us had to battle against each other at once.

Before we began, we were given a ten minute recess to get water and, if necessary, medical attention.

Looking up in the stands, I saw Father in the front row beaming down at me. He gave me a thumbs up and I noticed he had put the money pouch on the ledge in front of him to give Fido a better view.

Number 8 was a medium height, scrappy young man, but not as skinny as #2.

Number 4 was the only contestant I knew well. His name was Darius, son of Sir Darion, the Knight. Darius was twenty years old, tall with broad shoulders, and sandy blonde hair. His eyes were cold, callus, and calculating, and he **hated** me.

When I was growing up, Darius visited the village every few months with his father. Sir Darion believed our blacksmith's work was superior to the one in the castle. Every time Darius came to the village he would seek me out to bully me. I'm not sure why, but I have a few guesses. Darius lacked two things that I had, a mother and a *kind* father. Sir Darion was a *cruel* father.

The match started like all the others, except there were three of us fighting. When we began, I heard #8 ask Darius to join forces against me. Darius gave a quick nod and they both turned to face me. The moment #8 advanced, Darius hit him hard in the back of the head. #8 immediately crumpled to the ground, unable to continue.

The two of us stood alone in the arena. We locked eyes and clashed swords. Darius and I fought for nearly an hour, attacking and retreating; parrying and riposting all over the field.

In frustration, Darius began to bait me. He demeaned my wealth, my class, and my skill. None of his insults landed. Then he remembered my weakness, my Achilles heel,

and directed his venom toward my father. I swung my sword wildly in anger, giving Darius his opening.

His sword inflicted a powerful blow squarely upon my back. Stumbling forward, I fell on my hands. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Darius charging forward to deliver the finishing stab. Rolling quickly to the right, Darius's sword missed me and stuck into the ground, throwing him forward. He landed on his face. In one fluid motion, I rolled to my feet and laid my sword on the back of his neck. The head Judge yelled, "STOP!" and I was declared the victor.

The next day, the King knighted me and I became Sir Edward. Most of the Knights welcomed me with open arms, but definitely not Sir Darion.

Over the next three years, the king took notice of me and gave me a position on the royal guard.

The King and I became very close. Like Father, the King thought Fido was magnificent. His Queen and their two children had become ill and died many years ago. The King's grief was so severe that he was never able to remarry. He saw promise in me even though I was a village boy and hired tutors to give me the finest education.

The Magistrates taught me history, mathematics, and how to read and write in three languages: English, Latin, and Greek. Master John was my favorite tutor. He taught me military tactics, geography, and extensive knowledge about our allies and enemies. By watching the King, I learned diplomacy, protocol, and leadership skills.

By the time I had completed my education, I had become indispensable to the King as both a companion and advisor. He thought of me as his grandson and issued a decree declaring me heir to the throne.

On a cold winter night, after a short illness, the King passed away. He was very old, but it still felt sudden and the whole Kingdom mourned his death.

That April, I was crowned King Edward during an elaborate coronation ceremony.

A year later, I married Princess Isabel the eldest daughter of our most trusted ally, Queen Felicia. My father stood next to me as my best man. Fido, as a purple velvet pillow, was our ring bearer.

Now, I am 28 years old. Queen Isabel and I just welcomed twins into our family. We named them Princess Alice and Prince William, after my mother and father.

Tonight, as I sit holding them by the fire, I think of my father. Looking down at the babies, I smile and ask, "Children, would you like to hear a story?"

Whispers of the Hallow

By Arisha Taparia

Prologue: Summer of 1939

Deep in the heart of Oakridge's woods, where the air was thick and cold even in the peak of summer, three children ran. Their tiny feet pounded against the moist earth, panting, legs failing, but the woods had no mercy. The trees stretched their limbs and the shadows flickered like hungry mouths waiting to consume. The children were not fast enough.

Danny Rivera was the first to fall. "Run!" he shrieked, but his voice was lost in the rustling leaves. A root twisted around his ankle, pulling him down. He clawed at the dirt, kicking and screaming as something unseen dragged him backward into the unknown. "Help me! Please!" His friends turned just in time to see his fingers disappear beneath the soil, his last cry piercing the night before silence swallowed him whole.

Marissa Marshall choked on a sob, her breath hitched. "We have to get out!" she gasped, pulling Casie Carter next to her. The wind howled, whispering their names in voices they didn't recognize. Marissa stumbled, her knee slamming against a jagged rock. Pain flared, but she had no time to recover. A shadow loomed over her, its fingers curling like claws. "No, please!" she begged, trying to crawl away. The shadow lunged, and Marissa's scream was cut short.

Casie Carter was the last one left. Her heart thumped in her body, her lungs burning as she forced herself forward. She could see the gap in the trees ahead, the warm glow of the streetlights beyond. Safety. Home. But just as she reached the final

stretch, a whisper crawled through the air—her name, spoken in her mother’s voice. She hesitated. Just for a second.

The second was all it took. A pair of hands shot from the darkness, wrapping around her throat. Her scream came out as a strangled gasp as she was yanked backward into the shadows. The woods devoured her final breath, and then there was nothing.

The town of Oakridge forgot them. Their names faded from memory, their homes left untouched as if they had never existed. But the woods remembered. The woods always remembered. And they were still hungry.

50 years later

The sun cast its golden glow over the town of Oakridge on August 31, 1989. The leaves of the trees outside of Ella Carter's window danced in the gentle breeze while she sat on her bright yellow bed, her fair skin illuminated in the sunlight. Her brown hair cascaded in soft waves down her shoulders. The usually very patient Ella kept twisting the strap of her fragile purple watch, checking the time every few milliseconds. *They should be here any minute*, Ella attempted to be patient.

Downstairs, the aroma of sizzling bacon and fresh pancakes filled the air and drifted throughout the kitchen. Her mother hummed along to the radio. Everything felt peaceful, until the doorbell rang. Ella bolted down the stairs, socks sliding on the wooden floor. She yanked the door open, revealing two familiar faces.

Max Rivera stood with his usual confident smirk, lifting his chest high. His dirty-blond hair tangled, and his hazel eyes sparkled with mischief. Beside him was Theo Marshall, his neatly combed black hair and blue eyes contrasting against his deep brown skin. He adjusted his glasses, taking in Ella’s expression. “Finally!” Ella pulled them into a hug.

Max grinned, "You act like we made you wait hours."

Theo smirked. "Blame Max. He got distracted by a dog."

Max raised his hands in defense. "It was a cute dog."

Ella laughed. "Come on, let's go upstairs." With that, they ran up to Ella's room.

As they sprawled across Ella's bedroom floor, flipping through comics, the rose-scented summer air drifted through the open window. Max suddenly sat up. "This is boring. We should do something we've never done before." We should explore the woods," he suggested, excitement flickering in his eyes. Ella frowned. The woods always seemed too quiet, like they were holding their breath. Ella was more of an introvert, cautious and reserved, never the one to take unnecessary risks.

Theo adjusted his glasses. "I've always been curious about them."

Ella's fingers tightened around the fabric of her jeans. *It's too risky*, Ella thought.

The excitement in Theo's face faded slightly when he saw the unease in Ella's eyes. His lips pressed together, and he paused for a moment, sensing her hesitation.

Ella crossed her arms. "You know the saying, 'dodge a bullet'? There's a reason we've never gone into them before."

"You've heard the saying 'nothing ventured, nothing gained,' right? This is just a walk through the woods. We're not going to die." Max commented.

Ella rolled her eyes. "Fine, I'll just go alone then," Max said with a smirk. "You two can stay here, eating pancakes and being boring." Max was visibly starting to get upset, which made Ella feel like a bad friend. Not wanting to disrupt their friendship, she reluctantly agreed.

“Fine, but only under the circumstance that if we die I'm haunting you both,” stated Ella.

Max and Theo sprinted out the door and down the stairs, but Ella walked slowly, unsure of her decision. “Mom, we are going to play in the park,” Ella announced. She felt bad about lying to her mother, but she knew that if her mother ever found out, Ella would be grounded for life.

The woods swallowed them as they stepped inside. The towering trees stretched their gnarled arms toward the sky, their leaves whispering secrets. Then—rustling. Ella’s breath hitched. “Did you hear that?”

Max waved her off. “Probably a squirrel.”

Theo frowned. “I don’t know... something feels off.”

“You guys are overreacting.” Max said, but then he stopped abruptly. His eyes locked on something beyond the bushes. “Do you see that?” he whispered. Behind the thick, prickly bush, something lay in the dirt. Something big.

Swallowing her fear, Ella stepped closer. “Ahhhhh”, her scream shattered the silence like glass hitting concrete. “Oh my god! It’s a dead body!” A frail, lifeless figure lay sprawled on the ground, its ribs forming a cage of despair, its skin a lifeless sheet of moonlight.

Theo stumbled backward. “That’s not funny,” he whispered.

Ella turned, eyes wide. “It’s not a joke!” She yelled. Max, usually quick to act, remained frozen. His hands twitched, reacting like a reflex to the shock. Max’s silence made everyone else in the room even more anxious. The weight of the forest was a storm cloud, heavy and ready to burst. Then, a voice.

"You shouldn't have seen this." Ella's heart almost exploded out of her chest. A tall figure walked out from behind a tree, his face partially hidden by shadows. "Keep quiet," he hissed, "or the forest will come for you, too."

Ella's mind raced, *Why did he say that? Who was he?*

The trees loomed closer, as if they were listening. Max clenched his fists. Ella's heart thundered in her chest, as loud as a drum in battle. Then instinct took over.

"Run," she whispered. And they did—at the speed of lightning.

They didn't stop running until they reached Ella's backyard, lungs burning.

Panting, they turned to see symbols were appearing on Ella's fence. Glowing, twisting, as if they had a life of their own. Theo glanced at the symbols glowing on the fence, "This isn't some prank-- this is real."

Ella's hands shook. "We have to tell someone."

Max hesitated. "What if that guy—"

Theo interjected, "What if we're next? What if we are the next souls it claims?"

Ella's jaw tightened. "That's why we have to stop this." Ella is brave when it matters, even when she is scared.

Max frowned. "How?"

Theo exhaled. "If the forest takes, maybe it can be forced to give back."

After a lot of discussion, they decided it would be best to report it to the authorities. And so the friends embarked on their journey to the police station. Ella's face was set in determination, but her eyes darted nervously at the police station ahead. Max's eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms, his stance confident, but there was a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth, a sign of uncertainty that he quickly tried to hide.

The police officer listened to their story, his expression growing graver as they spoke. "There's been talk about the woods for years," he said, his voice low. "People disappearing, strange happenings. But we've never been able to find anything... real."

Max's frustration by the lack of answers was evident, and it made everyone else in the room uneasy. "This is insane! It's like the body never even existed!" he shouted, throwing his hands up in the air.

The officer sighed. "There are dark secrets in those woods. But no one has ever been able to uncover them fully. You kids should stay away from it."

Max, Ella, and Theo exchanged uneasy glances before getting up to leave the station. They had somber expressions on their faces as they walked out, feeling as if they accomplished nothing. "We need to figure out what's going on." Ella exclaimed, restless. "We should research about it, at least try to solve whatever's happening in the woods."

"Are you crazy? That dead body is proof we should never mess with those woods again," Theo cried.

"We don't have to go back into the woods, maybe we could go to the library and see what they have. If we don't find anything then, no harm done. But if we do..." Ella said, half doubting her own idea.

Max and Theo stood uneasily, debating Ella's suggestion. "I guess we could try to research," Max said, with a slight eagerness in his tone. Ella turned to Theo and clasped her hands behind her back, pleading with her eyes instead.

“Fine, but I doubt there will be anything there anyway,” Theo uttered, giving in to Ella’s imploring.

The trio made their way down to the library, eager but uncertain with their decision. Max was noticeably nervous as he fidgeted with his jacket, and Ella was going over all the things that could happen should they find anything. They walked in silence until they got to the library. It towered over them and they all exchanged anxious glances before they stepped inside.

They scoped out the directory and Ella pointed a finger at the map. “Okay, split up. Theo and Max, you go to the Supernatural section and I’ll go to the Mythical Beasts section. We meet right back here in 15 minutes,” Ella ordered. They both gave a quick nod and went off to the section, leaving Ella alone with her racing thoughts haunting her. She hurried off to the Mythical Beasts and walked through each aisle. She abruptly stopped when she came across an article called “*The Cure to Spirits*”. Her heart hammered as she lifted it from the shelf and flipped through it. *Perfect*, she thought.

She ran out of the aisle back to the directory where Theo and Max were already waiting with nothing in hand. Ella waved the article over her head excitedly. “I found something!” She cried, too loud for the quiet setting of the library. A librarian scowled and shushed her. As Ella waved the article over their heads excitedly, Theo and Max looked at her with raised eyebrows. “You found something already?” Max asked, skeptical.

Ignoring him, Ella opened the article, scanning the brittle pages. Her excitement faded as she realized it was vague. It mentioned spirits and disappearances, but not how to stop them. “There has to be more,” she said, looking at the map of the library again. “A place like this must have more records.”

Max sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Ella, we don’t have all day—” A loud creak interrupted him. Theo had absentmindedly leaned against an old wooden

drawer built into the base of a dusty bookshelf. The drawer, seemingly untouched for decades, had slid open a few inches. The three of them froze.

Theo straightened, glancing down. "That wasn't supposed to happen." Max, now suddenly intrigued, crouched down and pulled the drawer open the rest of the way. Inside was a thin leather-bound book, its edges cracked with age. Ella reached in and lifted it carefully. The cover was blank, but when she slid her fingers across its surface, she could feel that someone had etched something into the leather. A symbol, one that felt oddly familiar.

Theo paled. "That was on the fence."

Ella's hands shook a little as she flipped open the book. The initial pages were written in script that was difficult to read. She cleared her throat and read aloud. She cleared her throat and began to read aloud. *"I saw it again. The shadow in the trees. Watching. Waiting. The others think I imagined it, but I know the truth. The woods are alive. And they don't let go."*

Ella glanced up. "This isn't just a story."

Max motioned for her to keep going. *"We tried the ritual. It didn't work. The fire burned out too soon, the salt didn't hold. The spirit still lingers. I think it's angry now."*

A chill ran through Ella's spine. Theo's breathing had grown uneven. Max, for once, was speechless. Ella turned another page, but the rest were blank—except for the final scrawled message at the very bottom. *"If you find this..."*

Run," Ella finished. The three of them sat in silence. Ella shut the book. "Someone tried before us," she whispered.

“And they failed,” Theo added.

Max exhaled sharply. “So we just... pretend we didn’t see this?”

“No.” Ella’s voice was steady. “We do what they couldn’t. We’ll finish it.” Max and Theo exchanged glances. Then, without another word, they all left the library—journal in hand.

Later that night, Max, Ella, and Theo laid in a circle on Ella’s pink, fluffy rug. The journal laid in the middle. “Are you sure we’re not walking into a nightmare?” Ella asked.

“Yeah.. This is the only way,” Max uttered.

Determined to end the terror, they returned to the forest, journal in hand. They followed the instructions to eliminate the remnants of the soul. They scattered salt in a circle, hammered iron spikes into the ground, and Ella struck a match, setting the flame to the earth. The wind was as loud as a crashing wave as she dropped the flame onto the ground. A cry echoed through the woods, fading into silence. The trees no longer loomed. The air lightened. It was over.

The next morning, they stood at the forest’s edge. It looked... normal. Birds chirped, sunlight filtered through the leaves. Max let out a breath. “We did it.”

Theo adjusted his glasses. “At least, I think we did.”

Ella studied the trees one last time. “We’re never coming back.”

Max let out a nervous laugh. “I’d rather face an intergalactic war than go back into those woods.”

Ella's eyes lingered on the forest for the last time. As they walked away, Ella thought about everything they had been through. The forest remained still. The woods' dark secrets remained veiled, but the encounter had left them shaken. For the first time in years, it was truly at peace.

Middle School Winners

Second Runner Up:

Two Years

By Echo Zheng

One Stray Dog Against the Streets

Prologue

Will clicks on the TV, ready to watch a movie. As I lick the face of my new owner, I sit down obediently and happily chew on my food. It's food that you haven't had in nearly two years that has a slightly sweet taste to it.

Two years.

I whine silently.

It hurts, thinking about the harsh streets. About my encounter with a car. About the people who deserted me like I was an empty bottle of soap.

Then I see my friend. Someone who wants me. Someone who doesn't care about my missing front leg.

For him, I'd do it all over again.

Runt

A runt.

That's what I first heard from the Man.

I looked up when I first opened my eyes, expecting the furry, loving face of my mother. Instead I saw the Man. He had a mixed look of disappointment and disgust on his face. I whirled around, tired but determined to find Mother.

Mother had a solemn face.

Listen to the Man, she said. Stop squirming. Act presentable. Or he'll...

I was so tired I was already falling asleep. But Mother's voice made it clear. The Man was dangerous.

Despite my mind's urge to just collapse near Mother, I went still and tried to make myself look as strong as possible.

But I'm pretty sure I just looked like a dead mouse with how small I was. The Man snorted in displeasure.

And I passed out, half out of exhaustion, half out of fear. Last thing I saw?

The Man's angry hands coming towards me.

A runt.

Whispers

I yawned, exposing my body to the cool, dewy morning air. I chased after my brother, who the Man called Ripper. His name suited him, with his enormous jaws, drool dangling from his lips. He always plays gently with us though. He was firstborn. He had authority.

But one day while having fun with him, the Man came over with his friend. Van Man. One day I heard them whisper.

What a runt.

So small.

Well, you know how it is around here.

But dad...

Come on, bud. This is what you have to do to breed dogs. No one wants a runt. I don't want-

SLAP!

You do what I tell you to do, alright? I can punch you harder next time you try to disagree with me.

...fine. I'll get rid of the pup.

Good. Do it by morning, Pete.

The Man strutted away, looking pleased and satisfied. Van Man just looked disgruntled. The side of his face where the Man had struck him was swelling up and turning red. I stared at Van Man as he stood staring at me. Somehow, I felt a bit on edge. Not the usual jitters when the Man would glare down at me, but a different uneasiness. One that didn't go away even after the Man had walked away. It wasn't Van Man. In fact, I don't think it was anyone at all. Something in the air, its presence itself, was making not just me, but Van Man too, afraid.

Roar

It was late at night when Van Man jostled me awake. It was nearing midnight, and I could hear the loud snores of the Man. Van Man was uttering some human words to me, as if I could understand them.

Snappy. Wake up, Snap. You've got to go. You don't deserve to die. Dad's just too cruel, too harsh. I'm going to give you away. Come on, Snappy-boy. I'll miss you.

I crawled up to him and I could see watery spheres pouring out from his eyes. I didn't want to leave him. But before I knew it, he had hoisted me up onto his shoulder, and was running into the shadows.

At first, I didn't know where we were going. But after my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I could see we were out on the side of the road. Two people, a man and a woman, were standing there looking bitter in the cold winter night.

Took you long enough. What held you up? Darla and I were freezing out here.

Sorry, sorry, just uh, ran into some maintenance on the way here. I apologize on my father's behalf.

Maintenance? Well, I can't judge. I've never bred and sold dogs before. Speaking of your father, where is he? I thought he was going to deliver the dog to us.

My dad, um, hurt his leg. Yeah, he hurt his leg. Can't walk for very long, and can't pick up heavy things. So, he asked me to send your order for him.

Alright. Let me see the dang thing. Your dad holds a good reputation, so I'm expecting a good dog.

I felt Van Man's heart speeding up as he plopped me down on the hard concrete.

WHAT IS THIS?! Your father sells bulldogs and all that junk, I was expecting to get a strong, menacing German shepherd. I don't want this weakling!

Please, sir. Calm down. She's only a puppy, so she's small. Let her grow up, and she'll get big. She is still a German shepherd dog.

Whatever words Van Man had said at that stranger seemed to calm him down, but his eyes still blazed with fury.

Honestly Pete, why didn't you say that before? You know what? I'm not paying you as much. \$500 for a freaking pup? This is terrible customer service. I'll pay \$250.

Dave. \$250? Are you kidding me? For her, you have to pay at least \$325. My father's rules, not mine.

That was definitely the wrong thing to say, because at that moment a growling, crackling, burning, furious, blistering flame exploded in Strange Man.

Send this to your father then.

With a vicious CRACK! Van Man crumpled to the ground. Gigantic rough hands scooped me up and tossed me into the car.

Dear! You knocked him out!

I know, Darla. But when he wakes up he'll be sure to want revenge. He'll tell everyone. So to make him not wake up...

Disgusting, horrific crunching sounds erupted from the bottom of the car. Darla and Dave stayed silent at first, and then they started laughing. Horrible, cackling chuckles. Dark laughs.

Insane, crazy howling. I whimpered, all sounds popping up at me, the laughing, the grotesque cracking, the rev of an engine and my own cry, begging for my mother's protective body and fur for me to burrow into.

Somehow, deep down, I knew I didn't need to look back for verification. I already knew Van Man was dead.

Fawn

Dave had me do strange things. Like killing animals. He and Darla lived in a cabin in the woods, trees surrounding the house on all angles. Those woods had a range of critters. Squirrels, rabbits, foxes, deer, Dave made me slaughter mercilessly. I didn't feel bad slaying the smaller animals, but something about deer made me feel different. I felt wrong killing them. They were so frail and graceful, and seeing them dead on the forest floor, their own blood pooling around them, knowing that they would never again jump and prance with such agility made me think how much they were like me. Helpless.

One cool morning, Dave whistled. I learned that when he whistled, I had to come. Or else. I jogged over, panting, my tail still. He didn't deserve a happy tail wag. He killed Van Man.

We walked deeper into the forest, and I caught a few critters. Two rabbits, and even a squirrel. Slaying them felt satisfying.

Suddenly, Dave got all jittery and hyper with excitement.

Snapper! Look! It's a doe and a fawn. Go on, bite them. Kill 'em!

Kill. That's what Dave wanted me to do. I never liked killing deer. I barked. All I got was a stern shushing.

You'll startle them, Snap.

I reluctantly stalked toward the deer. The mother stayed oblivious to my presence, but the fawn turned his head.

His eyes met mine.

Something inside those orbs made me realize I couldn't kill them. Dave said a dog's "nature" was to kill, but I was different. At that moment, the weakness surrounding the deer infiltrated me. I felt helpless like the night of Van Man's murder.

The doe turned around and saw me. Scared, she bounded away gracefully with her fawn, breaking the spell.

I turned around to face Dave. I lost the deer, and he knew it.

Discarded

Even though I knew letting the deer run away was right, Dave punished me hard. He skipped my meals, leaving me starving. Darla did nothing but chat with her friends, telling me to “not let the guests see you, they’ll think you’re an overgrown rat.”

I wanted to run, but I didn’t have the strength.

Another hunting morning with Dave, and I was so hungry that I was dizzy. Soon, I was flat on the ground, not moving.

I woke up to the sound of a car’s engine revving away. I sat up, but then wished I hadn’t. The biggest headache struck me, and I plopped down on the pavement, shivering. It had already been one year.

Food. I wanted food. Spots were dancing in my vision. I paused. I couldn’t think straight.

They left me. Like a piece of trash. I cry, because that’s all I can do.

Taught

After Dave and Darla threw me away, I was on the streets. I met hundreds of strays and abandoned dogs, just like me. Dirty, old, and young had also had a time in their life like I had, being discarded.

A gruff Doberman found me cowering in his dumpster home. Fortunately, he had a soft spot, and he decided to help me. His name was Gravel, and he had a long, thick scar running from his back all the way to his eyes.

He taught me how to snag meat from the butcher's food stand, and how to walk without anyone hearing me. He'd tell me stories about each of his injuries, but one he didn't touch on was the one about his scar.

It was a peaceful few months, another year almost ending. By now, I had remembered everything Gravel had taught me. I steered away from the butcher, and was light on my feet.

Gravel was an old dog, and I mean old. It amazed me that he was still quick on his paws, as if he was still in youthful years. I had grown out of my puppy phase. I was now a grown dog.

We curled up one night, the bitter cold biting my nose once again. Gravel sighed.

I should tell you why I'm so reproachful about the butcher, huh?

I had never thought why he was so tense about the butcher. Around other stalls, he was more laid-back, more relaxed. But when around the butchery, he was stiff, he was quick, he never broke his stare on the butcher. It was as if he felt like if he laid his eyes on something else, the butcher would immediately know where he was.

Listen up. I'm nearing the end of my life. I'm old. I need you to listen to me. Do not go near the butcher without high alert.

He stared at his back, where half of his scar ran.

I got this scar from him. From his cleaver.

I stayed silent. How could anyone be so cruel? The people who grilled meat always happily petted me and gave me enough meat to sustain Gravel and me for a full day.

I wasn't even taking anything. I was just there, eyeing all the juicy, tender pork chops. The butcher saw me. I took off running, because one look at the fury in his eyes made it clear that I wasn't welcome. Normally, hecklers let me run, but the butcher threw his cleaver. It hit me so fast and fierce it cut through my skin and barely avoided my eye. Since then, it's never healed. Maybe all the rocks and dirt infected it.

I felt a new fear chill me.

I want you to know to never take your eyes off the butcher. The moment you do, you'll never see him coming. I don't have much time left, Snap. Just know that about the butcher.

The next morning, he didn't wake up, and his scar looked worse than ever.

Car

After shoving Gravel in a proper resting place, I heeded what he had said to me. And it was helpful. The butcher was wild and unpredictable. Every move he made had me dashing to hiding spots.

As you know, I don't have a good track record with cars. They murdered Van Man. The last thing I saw before being abandoned was a car. But maybe I had too long of a period that cars weren't traumatizing me.

It started like this. I woke up, and went to get breakfast from the meat grillers. I was thirsty after that salty beef, so I dashed towards a fountain. I wasn't looking where I was going.

THUMP!

Red enveloped me. I was surrounded by the crimson color. A red Jeep had hit me. A red traffic light was up in the sky. A red hand saying *Halt!* flashed. I could see people wearing red jackets crowding around me. And most nerve-wracking, the red of my own blood was staining my fur. A blaring pain in my shoulder was almost blinding.

I lapsed in and out of consciousness, and finally, my eyes closed.

Bittersweet

Gravel often talked about another dog he loved called Sand, a female golden retriever. She was always on his mind, but apparently she had been burned alive by a mall fire. I always thought about that. Love.

I slowly blinked. Where was I?

Oh, right. I was hit by a red Jeep. How am I alive?

A young man was in front of me, talking with an older man.

He's okay, right?

Yep. All vitals are stable, and no organs were damaged. He just lost a lot of blood.

That's great.

By the way, are you going to adopt him?

Sorry, I've got a lot at home. I don't think I'm going to be able to.

Listen. I wasn't instructed to say this, but the no-kill shelters are full.

...Nevermind. I'll take him.

Great!

I blinked a few more times. Adopt? Gravel had mentioned that before. The young man tapped on the glass.

I'm going to adopt you. You'll have to get used to Nat and Marlo.

I didn't know what he was saying, but it sounded beautiful.

I wiggled around my leg, but only to feel a strange light sensation. My whole right arm was gone.

I barked, alarmed. Had that car taken off my limb? The man looked somber. He whispered into my ear:

I'll love you regardless.

Later that day, the young man (whose name was Will) picked me up. I awkwardly walked to his car, fear no longer surging through me like it usually did. This was a good car.

I happily jumped in, wagging my tail so hard I thought it would fall off. Who cares if you lost an arm when you could be with someone who will love you no matter what?

He laughed as I propelled myself forward to lick his face.

All the memories with Dave and Darla were gone. The Man was now just someone who had existed in my life and had made a strong, bad impact.

And I know that somewhere beyond the clouds, Van Man and Gravel are watching me, happy and in a better place.

Epilogue

Will is snoring on the couch, his cats Judy and Marlo curled up near him. The list of movie credits plays on the TV screen.

I think of what I just relived. Gravel, Van Man, The Man, the car, everything was worth it to get here.

I look up at Will's relaxed face, and I feel satisfied. Not the wrong satisfaction when I killed those small critters, but a new kind of satisfaction. A sweet, sugary satisfaction.

I bury myself into him, the two cats trotting over and laying on me. It sure took a long time winning them over.

Everything is perfect.

I happily sleep with Will on the couch, the movie credits still going. I catch a few words, like "Carmen," and "Gravel Monster."

Reminders of my past.

But it's all over now, and I can be a happy German Shepherd.

I doze off, dreaming of a world where none of that happened. Where the bad memories weren't there. But then I wouldn't have met Will.

I think. Would it have been better if none of the bad happened? Would I have been happier even though I wouldn't have Will in my life?

No. Because it's those bad memories that make the good things feel even more jovial. I feel Will stir beneath me. I start sleeping again, because it's nearly midnight.

It took two years for me to get here, and it was all worth it. For Will, I would go through each horrible event.

So I think about the beginning again.

A runt.

That's what I first heard from the Man.

I looked up when I first opened my eyes, expecting the furry, loving face of my mother. Instead I saw the Man. He had a mixed look of disappointment and disgust on his face. I whirled around, tired but determined to find Mother.

Mother had a solemn face.

Listen to the Man, she said. Stop squirming. Act presentable. Or he'll...

I was so tired I was already falling asleep. But Mother's voice made it clear. The Man was dangerous.

Despite my mind's urge to just collapse near Mother, I went still and tried to make myself look as strong as possible...

Normally, I would quiver in fear. But now?

Well, I'm already asleep.

First Runner Up: Our Fearless Explorer

By Alice Holzrichter

“She swung from rope to rope as the tigers chased her! Then with a *SPLASH* she swam against the river current. And oh no! Are those *crocodiles?!?*”

“Crocodiles?! This is hard enough with the tigers!” England complained, brushing a strand of loose hair out of her face.

Addie shrugged. “It adds suspense.”

England glared at her friend. “You try running away from tigers and crocodiles in the middle of the jungle!”

Addie just smiled. “You’re doing fine. I like being the narrator.”

With a long sigh, England continued.

“She scrambles out of the river– and just in time! Now we find our fearless explorer stranded on a lost and forgotten island!” Addie faked surprise.

England looked down at the sandbox she was standing in. “Forgotten island?!” She exclaimed. “What is a forgotten island doing in the middle of the jungle?!”

Addie shooed away the question. “Just keep playing along.” She put a hand to her mouth and stage whispered, “The audience likes a good scene change.”

England let out a long and exasperated breath.

“Our pirate escapee gazes out at the endless ocean. Somewhere out there, is Jane. Her best friend who is hopelessly looking for her. And oh woe! The tragedy!” Addie dramatically fainted.

“I thought I was an explorer! Not a pirate escapee.” England said, utterly confused.

"Well. " Addie got up. "The audience likes a good character arc."

"This isn't a character arc, I'm a whole new person!"

"*Exactly!* Isn't that what the character is meant to be at the end of the story?"

England's eyes lit up. "Wait. This is the end?" she asked excitedly.

"Oh, no. We're somewhere near the far beginning, but I don't know for sure. It really depends if you survive the shark."

"SHARK?!"

"Then out of nowhere, a giant great white shark leaps out of the water and traps our escapee in its massive jaws."

England fell to the sand. "Help!" She cried. "Help! Help!"

"But being on a forgotten island, there was no one to hear her." Addie pretended to wipe away a tear. "There seemed to be no hope for our beloved escapee. This was surely the end. The very, very end."

England got up and dusted off her skirt. "Thank you, thank you!" She bowed and stepped out of the sandbox.

But instead of letting England walk away, Addie found this the perfect time to continue a whole new story.

"Our knight rushes over to her horse! There was no time to despair! The kingdom was in danger!" Addie waited for her friend to do something, but England stood as still as stone. "This is the part when you climb onto the swing and pretend it's a horse," Addie prompted.

With a long, sad sigh, England sat on the swing and pushed off from the ground.

"The knight raced through the forest, the moonlight glinting off her shining armor. The only thing that could be heard for miles was the *clip-clopCRUNCH clip-clopCRUNCH* of the horse's hooves on dead leaves. But eventually, the cries and

screams of the distressed kingdom filled the knight's ears."

"What's that?" England jumped off the swing.

"Help! Help! The fire! It's spreading!" Addie called, switching to a different voice.

"Call the fire department!" England turned to leave.

"What? There weren't *fire departments* in the medieval era!"

"Well then what am I supposed to do? I'm a knight! I don't fight fires, I fight-!"

Wait.

Hold on. Addie, that is so unoriginal."

Addie shrugged again. "The audience likes a good classic story."

"I've already survived tigers, crocs, and a freaking shark! I am *not* fighting a dragon."

"Well too bad, too sad, because look! There it is!" Addie pointed to the sky, and to the girls' amazement, a large, bald eagle circled high above them.

"*That's* the dragon?! How am I supposed to get up there?!"

"*Pretend*. Honestly, England, you may be good at math and all that, but you don't have a lot of imagination."

"I leave all that daydreaming to you, Addie. My brain is hardwired for solving problems, and the possibility of anything. Not imagining up dragons and jungle explorers!"

For a split second, Addie's face lit up, then she smiled. She smiled like a teacher who knows their class is lying, though they find it quite sweet. "Oh, England. Poor, poor, England," she sighed.

"What?"

"What you said just now, is exactly what a storyteller is!"

"And you mean . . .?"

"The whole point of being a storyteller isn't to create a set of characters and introduce them to problems, the whole point of being a storyteller is to create a set of characters and teach them how to *overcome* problems. When you write or tell stories, the possibility for, well, *anything* is endless! You say you love to solve problems and the possibility of anything? *So do storytellers.*" Addie laughed and playfully punched England in the arm. "You know what, England? I think you would make a great author."

"You think so?"

"I think so. Well, some day, at least. Far, far in the distant future!"

England laughed with her. "Of course."

"Now where were we?"

"I was about to fight a dragon?"

"Oh yeah! Our knight in shining armor draws her sword, daring the dragon to take another step. "

England tapped the tip of her pen to her chin, thinking.

There once was a fearless jungle explorer . . .

"Come on, England. Think. Think!" she told herself, tapping the pen harder against her forehead.

There once was a fearless jungle explorer who . . . was captured by merciless pirates!

As quick as she could, England jotted down the idea.

There once was a fearless jungle explorer who was captured by merciless

pirates. Then one day . . .

One last useless thought drifted through her head before she slammed it onto the desk. "I. Hate. Writers. Block." She said in between hits.

"The whole point of being a storyteller is to create a set of characters and teach them how to overcome problems."

Addie's words rang out in England's mind.

"When you write or tell stories, the possibility for, well, anything is endless!"

England picked her head up and looked out the window.

A jolly spring sun broke through the clouds, lighting up the nearby playground. A young boy swung from monkey bar to monkey bar, like a jungle explorer swinging from vine to vine. A helpless baby fell in the sand pit, like a lost and forgotten sailor who gave up trying to survive. A girl about nine years old, kicked her legs back and forth on the swing. Her face was harsh and determined, like a knight about to fight a deadly dragon.

England smiled, a memory growing as clear as a polished window in her mind.

Twenty-one years ago, England and Addie were sitting around the playground. It had been one of those rare days when the sun refused to work with the weather. It was meant to be a chilly, mid-winter afternoon, but it turned out to be quite pleasant. Addie had insisted that they play Jungle Explorer, and although England knew where the make-believe game would lead them, she agreed to play. One thing led to another, and instead of finding herself still running through the dense jungle, England was fighting off a fire-breathing dragon!

There once was a fearless jungle explorer who was captured by merciless pirates. Then one day, Captain Skullcrusher ordered that one fateful order.

"This island seems good," he murmured to himself. "Drop the anchor!"

Pirates scurried around the deck, like mice being chased.

Then suddenly, a wave of intense heat hit the captain. He stubbled, caught off guard. "What in the name of . . ." Another wave, then another. The heat grew so strong, the ship caught on fire!

"Abandon ship!" he called to his crew.

One by one, the pirates jumped off board, leaving our rattled explorer all alone on a flaming ship.

The sudden burst of ideas, made England blink.

Quicker than ever before, she wrote down the tiny excerpt.

Her once-blank-paper was now filled with scribbled words and phrases.

"You know what, England? I think you would make a great author." Addie's young words seemed to hang in her head, glowing, and throbbing. Her voice repeated again, and again, and again.

"A great author."

A few years later, England found herself standing in the bookstore. She stood in front of a bookshelf that was jammed packed with new releases. A book with a fading brown cover, like old parchment, sat in the middle. Its title was embossed in fancy dark lettering, and a sticker that read, *NEW AUTHOR*, stuck to its corner.

"Who's the author?" A voice asked.

A girl about twelve, stood next to England, staring up at the book.

Self-pride filled her chest. "A great author. An author that loves to solve problems and the possibility of anything."

"Looks interesting." The girl reached up and grabbed the book. She read the cover and flipped to the blurb. "A jungle explorer?"

"What? You don't like a good adventure?"

The girl smiled. "Actually, this was exactly what I was looking for."

"I'm glad."

The girl skipped away, the book tucked under her arm.

England never felt happier.

Addie was right.

She made a great author.

Third Place:

Fingers Crossed

By Kaleb Ricce

A distant sound was ringing in the back of my mind. I listened to it for a few minutes before realizing it was my alarm. Grabbing the clock, I forced my eyes open and read the time: 8:07! Startled and tired, I groaned and tossed my sheets aside. I hurried over to my closet and threw on some clean clothes. Once on a TV show, I heard a man in a television show talk about how first impressions are important, and today wouldn't have been any better of a day to listen to his opinions. It was a new school year in a new district, so I was praying since last week for some new clothes. My wish was made on Sunday, when my mother finally gave in to my begging and agreed to take me to a decent store with a decent wardrobe. I splashed cold water all over my face in an attempt to wake myself up faster, careful to not spill any water on my new hoodie. Water droplets scattered and danced across the mirror. I looked down at my watch and hurried downstairs.

My mother was serving a plate of steaming eggs and bread. "Come sit down for breakfast," she said, motioning me to sit down. A pan dropped three pieces of sizzling bacon, and the smell wafted up, making my mouth water. She said a quick prayer before letting me eat. School mornings usually gave me a big appetite, so I scarfed up all my breakfast and started drinking my milk.

"Big day today, isn't it?" she asked, and I nodded,

"Yeah, I guess it is." I didn't want to be late, so I brushed off my milk, grabbed my backpack, and stuffed my new school supplies in.

Have a good day!" My mother yelled at me as I hopped on my bike and pedaled away. North Ridge Middle School wasn't very far, so I slowed down. I surveyed my

neighborhood. It was a gray, autumn day, and the houses didn't make it any better: most of them were dull, with brown shingled roofs and moth-chewed porches. Each house had a front yard, but the grass wasn't any greener over here. A gust of wind traveled over my head, so I pulled up my hood. I eventually reached the road that separated my neighborhood and my school. I pedaled over to the pole with the walking button and pressed it, making it buzz. Cars passed by while I waited, as well as a school bus full of kids. I could see the shapes of students even through the dark glass, and raised my eyebrow when a kid slammed a piece of paper with "HELP!" written on it. When the school bus finished passing, the crossing light buzzed and switched to a green light. I crossed the road and cycled through the path that led to my school.

North Ridge Middle School is one out of twenty schools in the district of Treestock County. It's a regular, rundown middle school with rumors of an extremely terrible lunch menu. As I slowed down my bike, I could see a large football field, a basketball court with no nets hanging down the hoops, and a track surrounding a plain soccer field. I perked up when I saw it, but the moment died down. My father had taught me everything he knew about soccer, and he trained me like those special academy coaches train their players. I was a natural at it, so he signed me up for the county soccer club. At first, I was in my prime, taking in the pleasure of belonging to an official club. When my father got sick, though, my mother told me I should spend more time with him. I didn't understand why I had to, but I stayed with my father and skipped my practices. I finally understood my mother's request on the night we took him to the

hospital. I was sitting alone in the waiting room, wondering why I had to be here, when my mother walked up to me from the room where they were keeping my father. I was nine years old when my father died. After the incident, I told my mother she could stop paying the county club, and I quit soccer that same year. I looked away from the field and walked to the front doors of the building.

...

North Ridge was every bit as chaotic and loud as any school. There were kids hanging out by their lockers, bratty-looking kids throwing paper airplanes at teachers, and water on the floor underneath the fountains. I had checked my schedule on my computer and printed it at the library two weeks before school had even started. My first class was English, followed by Algebra, Science, History, Physical Education, Computers, and at the end of the day, something called Study Hall. I decided the day wouldn't wait for me, so I scurried over to the seventh grade locker bay.

I've dealt with lockers before, so I know what a pain they can be, especially if they're old and rusty. I struggled with mine for a while, and I was about to give up when I decided to give it a kick. My locker popped open, and I stuffed my coat and binders inside. I slammed my locker shut and headed to my next class.

It took me a while to get to Room 805, but I managed to find it the second before the bell rang.

The teacher looked up from the papers he was reviewing,
"Oh, hello there, uh..." he looked down at his papers, "Diego,
right?" I nodded,
"Yes, that's me,"

"I'm Mr. Smith. Welcome!" he motioned for me to sit down. I walked over to an empty seat and set my backpack down. Mr. Smith cleared his throat to get everyone's attention,

"Good morning, everyone! I hope you have all enjoyed your summer vacation because you will work your hardest in this classroom this year," He scanned the room and pointed at me, "Diego, could you introduce yourself to us?!"

I often asked myself why teachers made *me* introduce myself when I hardly knew the other kids, because for the rest of the year I would have to learn their names and recognize their faces. I didn't argue, though, and I stood up and introduced myself.

"Hey...uh, I'm Diego," Twenty-three heads turned around to face me. "I'm new to this area and, uh...I guess I'm glad to be here," I mentally grimaced at myself for sounding so plain and started to sit down.

“Well, we’re very happy to have you here with us today, Diego,” Mr. Smith nodded at me and I quietly sat back down. I kept thinking about my father through the whole class.

...

My classes are forty minutes long, so the bell rang before Mr. Smith could even start the lesson. He didn’t seem to care, though, because he said we had the whole year to work hard. When the bell rang, everyone picked up their bags and went off to their classes. As I was walking through the halls, I came upon a giant bulletin board with posters and calendars shouting out important dates and information, like the Winter Dance or the school sport teams. I looked at one of the posters carefully. It contained information on the brand-new soccer team the school was setting up. It said,

“If you wish to join, you have to pass a series of tests challenging your control of the ball, speed, mobility, shooting, and dribbling. A scrimmage will also be included. All students who enjoy playing this sport can meet on the school soccer field after school! Good luck and may the best succeed!”

I hadn’t played soccer in years, but I knew that I desperately wanted to play again. I decided to face the fact that I had forced myself to stop playing because of my father’s death, and not because I wanted to. The bell would ring in a minute, so I glanced around to check if anyone was looking and quickly whipped out my phone to take a screenshot. Once it took the photo, I started to head to my next class. Suddenly, the bell rang, and I realized I was officially tardy to my next class on the first day of school. I sighed, thinking,

“It’s gonna be a long day.”

...

In my last class, Study Hall (which I found out was just a block to study and complete assignments in the library), I counted down the minutes until the last bell rang and I could finally leave for the tryouts. When it rang, I jumped up from my seat, flung

my backpack over my shoulder, and practically flew up the stairs to the seventh grade locker bay. Kids were streaming out of their classes, filling the hallways like a herd of buffalo. I struggled to find my locker, but eventually I reached it. Once again, my rusty old locker refused to open, and I had to resort to kicking it again for it to open. The second it creaked open, I grabbed my jacket and slammed it shut. I turned around and saw the wide herd of students leaving and taking up space in the stairway. I sat down near my locker and decided to wait for everyone to clear out.

After fifteen minutes, I could finally head down the stairs without having to squeeze past other kids. My sneakers squeaked as I hustled down the steps. The hallways and walkways were deserted, leaving a few gum wrappers and homework assignments. The main office, though, was still occupied by a few teachers, the dean, and a student who had missed his bus. None of them noticed me as I slipped out the doors into the chilly afternoon. From where I was standing, I could see the activity in the soccer field. Kids were shooting goals, balancing balls, and practicing moves. I recognized one of them: a tall, athletic boy named Henry, was playing against five other kids. He plowed through them like a bulldozer, and I imagined steam shooting out of his ears and his eyes glowing red as he ran right through them. I gulped and started sweating, even though there was a strong breeze outside.

North Ridge's soccer field was the only field that was regularly maintained. You could see that the grass was kept cropped well below a person's shoes. When I got to the field, a big burly man with a clipboard walked to me.

"Hey, there kid! Are you here for the soccer tryouts?" I nodded. He introduced himself as Albert John, the coach for the North Ridge's soccer team for ten years running.

"You can call me Coach John," he grinned, revealing his gleaming white teeth.

Coach John told me I arrived right on time because they were about to start the scrimmage. He explained to me that the purpose of the scrimmage was to test each

player's abilities and strengths, as well as expose their weaknesses. Once he finished, he barked out with a foghorn voice,

"Okay, everyone! Shape up! Stand in a line in front of me so that I can split the teams!"

The players and I scrambled in front of him, shaping a near perfect line. Coach John started counting us, one by one. In the end, there were twenty-six kids in total. Coach John grabbed thirteen yellow jerseys from a box nearby and tossed it to thirteen random kids. I ended up in the no-jersey team, which contained a few kids who looked pretty confident and a handful of kids who didn't. Henry, the kid I'd seen plow through five kids, was in the yellow-jersey team. He had his arms crossed over each other, and a menacing scold was plastered on his face. Suddenly, Coach John's foghorn voice boomed through the air,

"Okay, everybody! Your teams have been chosen, so know you can go to your sides. Yellow, go to the left side of the field! No-jersey's can go to the opposite side!"

Coach John jogged to the middle of the field while we went over to our sides. He placed a clean, new-looking ball in the middle and asked for two players who could represent their teams. I noticed the yellow-jersey team arguing over who would go, until Henry started walking toward the middle. Nobody argued over the fact that he self-appointed himself the position of captain. I wasn't paying much attention to my team, who were also fighting over the position of captain, when one kid suddenly pointed at me and said,

"What about this one?"

Twelve heads turned around to face me. I tried to look calm even though my mind was screaming,

"Don't accept! Don't accept it!" I was worried that I would make a mistake and cause the team to lose. I wouldn't be able to face the disappointing expressions or the glowering that makes people feel so small and insignificant. I couldn't answer their

question, though, because they were already signaling for me to go to the middle. I decided it was too late to argue, so I jogged over to the ball. Coach John produced a coin from his pocket and asked Henry to choose a side. Henry chose tails, which left me with heads. Coach John flipped the coin up into the air and the coin seemed to suddenly flip in slow motion. Once it started its descent, Coach John caught it and looked down at his palm,

“Heads! Diego, you start off with the ball!” He tucked the coin away as my teammates started shaping a formation. I took in mind my teammate’s positions.

Coach John blew his whistle, sending a shrill shriek across the field and parking lot. I kicked the ball to a kid behind me, and the game began.

It had been eight minutes since the game had started, and neither team had scored at least one goal. Coach John looked somewhat irritated by the fact that not one of us on either team could make a goal. He wore the same, stony expression until Henry shot the ball straight into my team’s goal. Coach John smiled and scribbled something down on his clipboard. I felt cold and breathed out hard. The game lasted ten minutes, so I only had two minutes left to show Coach John I had potential. Once I got the ball passed to me, I executed a few lightning quick moves around some yellow-jersey players and headed for the goal until... BAM! Henry had crashed into me and was rapidly approaching my team’s goal. Fortunately, he was stopped by a few

defenders. I rubbed my shoulder, which had taken much of the impact, stood up, and took a few steps. I was generally fine except for my shoulder, which was starting to sting. The defenders caught me walking, so they shot the ball towards me. I recovered it and started towards the goal, only this time the distance seemed longer. Blinking hard, I thought the only thing that wouldn’t distract me was: my father’s voice guiding me into the goal when I was five years old.

“*You have to have patience and skill to make this, Diego,*” he had said, looking down at me from his towering size.

"Patience and skill," I thought as I weaved through a few more players. *"Don't forget to keep your eye on the space in front of you!"* he had warned. I surveyed the scene in front of me: two defenders and the goalie.

"...and finally, thread the needle and shoot," he finalized, beaming as I shot the ball into the net.

My leg moved automatically at light speed, sending the ball rocketing into the net.

It took me a few seconds to process what had happened. The goalie, a husky kid named Ray, attempted to make a save but ended up flat on his back. My teammates came rushing towards me, high-fiving and clapping each other, giving me pats on the back. The timer Coach John had set rang through the cheering, and I saw him give me a nod. Once the cheering died down, Coach John lined us up and cleared his throat,

"You all did very well today, and I'm proud of your efforts," he said, looking at each one of us.

"I have decided to tell you who I have chosen to be the captain and who the players are," he paused for dramatic effect and then continued,

"This year's captain will be none other than our new student... Diego!

Congratulations and thank you for your outstanding performance!" He applauded, and so did the kids all around me. I felt my back straighten and my head high as they clapped. Coach John continued talking, but I zoned out. My new title in this school was going to be "captain of the soccer team", not, "new kid" or simply, "kid". I looked around at my fellow teammates. I figured somebody would always have my back, so I promised myself that I would always have theirs. Coach John finalized his speech, thanking everyone for their time and commitment, and then he sent us home. I approached him as everyone was leaving, saying,

"Thanks a lot, Coach John. This opportunity really means a lot to me!" Coach John looked down and smiled,

“No, Diego. Thank *you* for filling this position. We’re glad to have you in the team!” I returned his smile and left to pick up my bike. I stopped halfway, deciding to walk instead. The sun was out, and it wasn’t cold anymore. Heading down the sidewalk, I thought of the great year I was about to have.

I couldn’t believe my luck.

The End

Second Place:

The Edge of the Universe

By Ahana Shastri

The first thing that the rat feels is freezing metal and fur. It blinks open its eyes, and finds itself at the bottom of a pile of ragged creatures. Alarmed, it claws its way out of the pile of furry bodies, tumbling back onto the metal. It shakily raises its paws to its face, observing the claws on its fingers and the brown fur on its arms. The brown rat has no idea when it got here, how it got here, nor where *here* even is. It looks back at the writhing mass of creatures, and realizes that they too are rats. Panicking, it stumbles on all four paws, looking around frantically for some kind of exit.

“Heya.”

The brown rat jumps as a smooth voice speaks from behind it. It turns around to see a rat with smooth, shiny black fur. It sits on its haunches, waiting for a response. When it doesn’t get one, it sighs.

“So you’re one of the quiet ones.” The brown rat scowls, opening its mouth to make a comeback, but is interrupted. “Well, I’m assuming that you’re searching for an exit, yes?”

“Yes. What is this place? Forget that, how can I get out of this place?” The brown rat demands.

The black rat inspects its claws. “Easy. Red or blue.”

“W-what?”

The black rat looks back up at the former. “You just walk down this hallway, and then, you will have to make a decision between choosing the red path, or the blue path. It could lead to the exit, but... it could also lead to something else.”

The brown rat considers the other’s explanation and squeaks, “If that is true, then why are you still here? Shouldn’t you be going down the hallway?”

“Eh, it doesn’t really match my style.” The black rat glances down the path.
“Rather help newbies like you than have to make an important choice like that. It isn’t fun making the wrong choice.”

That, the brown rat begrudgingly decides, *I can agree with.*

“I’ll take my chances.” The brown rat scampers down to the start of the hallway.
“Thanks.”

The black rat chuckles. “Anytime.

The rat scampers down the long hallway, its metal walls seemingly stretching on forever. It can hear the metal clank beneath its feet as it scurries along the foyer. There are a few other rats scurrying along with it as it continues forward.

Glancing back at the direction it came from, the rat’s footsteps slow to a stop as it sighs in exasperation. However, it doesn’t have much time to rest, as a new, high-pitched voice emerges.

“Hey there!”

The brown rat bristles, its fur prickling and its heels lifting slightly as it turns to the source of the noise, a cage in a corner of the corridor.

“Wouldja give me a hand? I’m sure you can see that I’m in a bit of a predicament here.”

The brown rat squints its beady eyes, and manages to see a white, rat-shaped blob inside the cage, waving a pink paw at the brown rat sheepishly.

“Nobody really cared to stop and help me out. Guess they saw that I fell for the oldest trick in the book, eh?” The white rat chuckles, its shrill voice causing its laugh to

sound more like a wheeze. “So, are you gonna help me out? ...Or you can just stand there in silence.”

The brown rat, still startled, takes a moment to respond. It scurries forward, then sits on its heels, pink paws motioning to the cage.

“How can I get you out?”

The white rat scratches its nose in seemingly deep thought.

“I dunno, just... get me out, I guess.”

The brown rat’s whiskers twitch in annoyance as it spares the white rat an unamused glance. It circles the cage, its eyes scan the structure, a metal cage with bars too slim for the white rat to slip through. The white rat fidgets nervously inside the cage as the brown rat inspects it, glancing around the cage.

“Hey, what’s that wire?” The white rat extends a claw to a black wire extending from the cage.

The brown rat glances at the wire, and follows it to the far, shadowed corner of the corridor. Attached to the end of it is a metal button, shiny, polished, and bright red.

The brown rat raises its paw above the button, pausing when it hears nervous skittering from the far corner of the room.

“H-Hey, buddy. I don’t think you should press that. Who knows what it could do to me?” The white rat’s fur slowly begins to stand up straight. It fingers the pink pads on its paw nervously.

The brown rat stares at the white rat for a second or two, feeling the annoyance creep up on it from the back of its mind. “There’s no choice now, is there?”

The white rat circles its cage, regretting its decision to enter the obvious trap in the first place. It chitters something to itself nervously, glancing at the brown rat, who looks at the white rat with some emotion it can’t decipher, making it uncomfortable.

“You should decide.” The brown rat says, eyes still trained on the white rat. The white rat hesitantly nods, wrapping its claws around the metal bars of the cage.

“Alright. Just press the button. Nothing else to do now.” The white rat stutters out.

Without a second thought, the brown rat presses the metal button. After all, what could the cage do?

“What’s happening?” The white rat squeaks, hearing a whirring noise emerge from the trap.

The brown rat turns its head in time to see the cage fold down on itself, crushing the rat inside it. Blood splatters on the wall, dripping down the cold metal, and puddles on the floor.

The brown rat doesn’t know what it just witnessed. Before, there was a foolish rat in a cage. Now, it’s all blood, bits, and bone. It stares, unmoving, at the gruesome scene.

It curls its lip. Disgusting.

Yet, it can’t help but feel guilty for pressing the button. But... there wasn’t a chance for the white rat to survive, was there? The brown rat shakes its head, clearing its thoughts.

It leans forward, paws meeting the blood on the floor. It can feel its heart pumping, and in that moment, the rat feels so very *alive*. It stays there for an everlasting second, feeling the blood rushing through its body, feeling the cold sensation from the metal its paws rest on, and feeling each of its hairs standing on edge.

Then, it moves on.

The brown rat continues down the hall, its steps reverberating across the room as it slowly shuffles along the corridor. Its eyes are unfocused as it processes its

situation. The rat hasn't even made a decision. Red or blue, what could it even lead to? Either choice could lead to death, a reward, or nothing at all.

It continues down the chambers, scuttling faster, until it hears a sound that gives it pause.

Squelch.

The brown rat pauses, still on all four limbs, carefully, it sits back, peering upwards. The unsettling squelching continues, making the rat more and more disturbed by the second. It carefully inches back, and finds the source of the sound – an eye. Actually, it isn't just one eye, it's many. They're attached to some kind of amalgamated pulsating mass, which is stuck to the low-lying ceiling of the corridor, glistening in the dim light.

These eyes are different from rat eyes, the brown rat thinks. They have a ring of color on some kind of sphere, and inside that ring of color, a space of pure darkness.

The brown rat shudders, observing the small red nerves on the edges of the sphere, and freezes when they squelch again, rolling to look at the rat.

The rat can't move. All it can do is stare into that endless dark space in the eyes.

That darkness bores into the brown rat's being, judging it for every action it took, and will take. The hairs on the rat's back bristle against each other as they stand up straight, warning the rat to move, to do something. The rat simply stares back instead, at the eyeballs, at the beating flesh underneath it, at everything.

Cautiously, it places a paw in the direction of the room's exit, and quickly scampers away, trying to get rid of the disgusting sensation the eyes left it with. The rat can still feel those eyes trained on its back through the metal walls, and it shivers as it continues to crawl along the floor.

The rat looks down towards the metal, blinking slowly, and when it opens its eyes, it sees something glowing off of the floor.

Light. It sees light.

It looks up, shielding its eyes with its paws as it tries to adjust to the bright red and blue light being emitted from two signs attached above two paths. It sets its paws down and inches towards the signs. Red and blue, just like the others had told it.

“Hey, kid.” A gruff voice echoes through the chamber.

Startled once more, the brown rat turns towards the voice. Standing in front of the lights is a rat with gray fur, staring up at the glowing signs like some kind of secret is held within them. It turns to the brown rat, eyes roaming over its matted, slightly bloody fur before meeting the other rat’s eyes.

“Where ya going?”

The brown rat hunches over slightly. “I suppose you mean red or blue.”

“What else would I be talking about?” The gray rat motions towards the paths with its head. “It’s not like they give us much choice here.”

“Who?” The brown rat questions, tilting its head.

“You tell me.” The gray rat chuckles dryly.

The brown rat stiffens as it hears that laugh, its ear twitching slightly as the gray rat’s hollow laughter dies down. The gray rat relaxes, flexing its worn down paws.

“I don’t really believe that we have a choice in this matter, y’know.” The gray rat glances at the brown rat, reading its expression. “Back when this whole thing started, I used to ask myself, “Does it really matter which path you choose?” Now, I have my answer. Things are going to end up the same no matter which path you choose, because that’s what is meant to happen. So why worry? Why break your head over things that don’t matter anyway?” The brown rat turns its head towards the gray rat, noticing how its eyes glint in the red and blue — no, purple, light. “Because all living creatures will never stop trying. We may not be able to sit at the edge of the universe, or find answers in the stars, but that won’t stop our willingness to try.”

The brown rat stared at the grey rat's silhouette, one side of the gray fur reflecting red, and the other reflecting blue. "The only option is... purple." The brown rat murmured.

The gray rat barked out a laugh. "Tell ya what kid," The brown rat glanced at the other in mild surprise. "Why don't you make the choice? I'll go in first for ya."

The brown rat stared into the gray rat's beady black eyes with an emotion it itself couldn't understand. It exhaled, glancing towards the two paths.

"Y'know what?" The brown rat said, allowing himself to smile, if only a little. "Red suits you."

The gray rat chuckled, his laugh more full and free than it was moments before. "Thanks... kid."

The brown rat watched as the gray rat shuffled toward the red path. The grey rat looked up at the red glow from above and walked down the vent-shaped hallway until it was out of sight. The brown rat let out an exhale it didn't know it was holding.

It stares at the ground, watching the red and blue light glint off of the metal floor, swirling into some strange color.

Purple.

The choices along the way... that's what mattered. Or did they not?

Somewhere, in the back of its mind, it can see the white rat in its cage, the lever next to it. If the brown rat hadn't pulled the lever, would the other rat have survived?

Now, it's all blood, bits, and bone, splattered on the walls.

No. If it had left the white rat in its cage, then the animal would have starved to death, rotting and decomposing.

It curls its lip.

Disgusting.

The gray rat was right. Their choice didn't make a difference, did it? There would always be the same result.

Do we really have a choice between red and blue?

It looks into the red path the gray rat chose, then turns its head towards the blue.

The only choice is purple.

The rat is a rat.

It always has been, and it always will be.

Eyes, staring down at it, judging its every action. It knows what it did, and what it could have done.

However, it's in a rat's nature to never stop trying.

Sitting at the edge of the universe, looking for answers you didn't know you needed.

All the rat can think of is purple as it crawls forward and makes its choice.

First Place:

Bee-yond the Meadow

By Navya Srivastava

The quiet bumblebee delicately perched herself upon the magnolia's bright petals. Her aching legs trembling, she extended her proboscis toward the pollen-rich center, retracting it when it realized the flower was sucked dry, like the rest of the flora in the field.

Propelling herself back into the air, she fought against the morning breeze, carrying herself up into the azure sky. Its immeasurable boundaries, dotted with white, illuminated the flower field below.

The little bee looked down upon the bursts of color below: ruby red roses, elegant violets, lacy pink lilies by the pond, sunny marigolds, bushy hydrangeas. Swooping down, she could see fuzzy bees from her colony, all similarly fruitless. Her colony was starved, as the flowers were already sucked dry of their sweet nectar. She sighed. We'll need to expand soon...

She looked around as if a magical new flower field would immediately appear beside her; to her disappointment, it didn't.

Flying alongside the breeze, she let it lead her to the far confines of the field, where the flowers were free of bees hanging onto their petals. Looking up, she found herself only a few wingbeats from a dark pine forest. It was swathed in eerie shadow, the trees reaching high above. They were decorated with pointy, dark green needles, so unlike the flowers in the field– neither delicate, fragrant, nor beautiful. She felt almost drawn to it, as if the creepy shadows were calling for her, and found herself buzzing closer in curiosity.

Suddenly startled by the shadows, the little bee zipped away, too afraid for an adventure.

Far enough from the terrible, alluring trees, the bumblebee got time to think clearly, realizing that she was too bored of the mundane job of pollen collection—especially when there was nothing to collect.

We need to expand, right? She thought determinedly. She gathered up her scraps of courage, now transformed into purpose—beautiful, directed light within her, now drowning out the darkness of her fear. Looking down at her fellow bees, all with empty pollen sacs, she felt a longing ache in her heart to set it right. Then, she shot through the sky, a fuzzy black-and-yellow bullet, piercing right into the heart of the forest.

Upon entering, a musky, rich odor filled up the air. The tall cypresses blotted out the sunlight, and the trapped air was sticky and humid. The bee felt small, so very small, among the giant trees and skittering fauna. Her buzzing no longer filled up the open sky, and she felt trapped—choked by invisible hands twining around her tiny self.

Despite it all, she persisted, flitting through the pines, and taking a quick loop-de-loop around a stuck-out branch, to lift her spirits. As scared as she felt, she felt equal wonder; she had never seen such a place, soon coming to realize that it was beautiful in its own way.

A breeze zigzagged through the trees, ruffling her fluffy hairs. She let out a squeak of delight as the teasing wind blew past her. Recovering her balance, she realized how heavy her wings felt, and recounted her long fly.

She fluttered down to the peaty ground, which was patchy with grass, dirt, and mud. Feeling slightly repulsed at the unusual sight, she pressed her wings against her sides, ready to trek on.

Tentatively stepping onto the marshy ground, she was surprised when it held her weight. She felt clumsy as she skimmed the murk, straddling across it in fear that she would be consumed by the earth.

Relief flooded through her when she reached the grass again.

Her relief was short-lived, though, as the forest grass was neither soft nor green; it was hard, prickly bristles in a dark beige hue. She had to try not to stub her nose on any of the stalks.

Ow! She thought, bumping into a tall stem. She ruefully rubbed her nose, reminding herself to never do that again.

Taking to the air again, the bee ascended high into the sky, near the tips of the pines. Hoping she could find something, anything, that would serve as a landmark, she stopped, hovered, and scanned the muddy clearing, which was completely unified in a drab palette of browns and muddy greens.

The wind raked across the trees, sending a scattering of pine needles cascading upon her, which she nimbly darted past, the wind buffeting her delicate pile as she fought against it.

Stopping to catch her breath, and thankful she was in the clear, she spotted something– a blue-gray dot in the far distance. To her horror, she realized it was diving, startlingly fast, straight toward her.

FLY! Shrieked her subconscious, prompting her to move. Yet caught in the intensity of the moment, she stared wonderingly up into the sky instead.

The thrush swooped down past her, and the bee thought she was safe; maybe it wasn't coming for her, after all.

But as the bird ascended, directly toward her with its beak poised to eat, she knew she was wrong. Buzzing into action, she flew her fastest, pumping her wings hard and willing them to carry her faster, driven by fear and the will to stay alive.

The thrush was just a few wingbeats behind her, pounding its own, bluefeathered wings at a dizzyingly fast speed.

She swerved around a clump of bushes in her path, and entered a diving position, hoping her momentum would be enough to out-fly the thrush. Terror pounded inside her as she desperately positioned for a dive, swooping down above the swampy ground.

The bird, unfazed, followed her closely, its beady black eyes staring at its meal-to-be.

I'm not losing him! The bumblebee thought, panicked. The fear pounding inside her was like waves whiplashing the shore. Adrenaline pulsing through her, she flew faster than she ever had before, wondering how she would ever escape the evil thrush.

I should have never left the meadow! She cried inwardly.

Just as she began to accept her fate as bird food, she spotted a fallen log on the ground.

Nearing the log, she could see its mossy exterior, with crumbling wood, infested with ants. Her eyes glinted.

Diving towards the fallen timber, the bumblebee powered her wings hard, feeling fear churning in her stomach, and the ache of her tired limbs. Even so, her adrenaline overpowered it all, and she buzzed far ahead of the predatory thrush.

Swiftly zipping through a tiny, bee-sized gap in the log, she halted abruptly, panting and catching her breath. Her wings were trembling, and she snapped them against her sides to rest them.

Behind her, a harsh shriek rang through the air, gripping the bumblebee tight in icy, raw fright. Flinching away from the opening in the log, she crouched down, quivering.

The thrush, too large to fit in the tiny hole the bee had entered through, shoved its dull orange beak through the opening, snapping it around. Pressing against the back of the log, the bee shook in pure terror as its beak neared her. The creature was snatching up squirming maggots in its jaws; the slow worms couldn't move away in time.

Then, the thrush, satisfied with its meal, flew away, giving one glaring stare back at the bumblebee, its eyes glinting in a way that said, I'll get you next time.

Still trembling, and unable to remove the image of the stark-feathered bird's terrible gaze from her mind, she closed her eyes tight shut, wishing she were back at the flower field. The acrid, pungent tang of the forest made her sick to her stomach now, not to mention the smelly worms inside the log.

I should have never come here! The tiny bee reflected despairingly. She knew she would have to make the journey back home, but how could she bear it, with the presence of the thrush still vivid in her mind? I should have stayed at the meadow.

Curling up into a tiny little bee ball, wishing to forget, she thought of the flower field, how though it wasn't fruitful any longer, it was home.

Yet, a tiny voice in the back of her mind echoed the same thought, just a little different.

And though it is home, it isn't fruitful any longer.

You know what to do, she encouraged herself. *You have to help your colony!*

Standing on unsteady feet, she felt her strength regain, her wings flooded with the sheer strength of her determination.

I will find us a new home! The bumblebee smiled softly, hardening her gaze at the outside world, beyond the log.

Tentatively stepping forth, she began to regain her confidence in her adventure.

Not wanting to exit through the same hole she had entered through, she found another similarly sized hole in the log, but on the other side.

Unfurling her small wings for balance, she jumped through the hole, fluttering carefully to the ground, where she was surprised to find soil. Rich, earthy, deep brown soil coated her legs as she walked.

Her fear still simmered in her belly, yet her curiosity piqued with every new shrub, stalk, and finally *flower*.

Joy bursting in her chest, she flew to meet it, relishing the contact as its cool, red petals brushed her side. Landing atop its center, she was happily surprised to find tiny yellow particles creeping up her legs.

Her proboscis stretched instinctively at the healthy flower, and only moments later, she was sipping up sweet, sugary nectar from the red flower.

Drinking until she was satisfied, she was filled with newfound wonder of the world. Were there always flowers on the other side of a forest?

Guess I'll have to find out! She thought cheekily, proud of her newfound courage.

Gliding over the red flower, her wings buzzing in rhythm with the wind, she let it take her to more sweet-scented, bright flowers. It was a lush meadow of flowers; some she had never seen before. Excitement fluttered within the bumblebee, who danced in the playful breeze to the rhythm of nature. Glancing down toward the colored dots of petals and swirling stems, each a beacon of new hope not just for her– for her colony.

The bumblebee, with an eager dip downwards, greeted each beautiful flower, wonder fizzing in her stomach, drawing her closer. Her antennae twitched with joy, cherishing the beauty around her

2025 High School Participants

Zainab Abdullah	"Devote Yourself,"
Myra Abdulrehman	"Finding Evil Mage"
Hafsa ahmed	"Pink Camera, Black Drones, Red Blood"
Ayah Ali	"Salty"
Mona Amini	"Below Zero"
Harsha Antham	"The Last Rations"
Jessica Awuah	"Two Hundred and Counting"
Sheela Bahrami	"The End Is A New Beginning"
Cayden Baker	"Fighting Decision"
Meg Bales	"The Modern Remans"
Samhita Bellary	"This Story Is a Metaphor"
Elisabeth Biggs	"A Purloined Princess"
Clara Bloom	"Entitlement, Inc."
Grace Bodman	"My Precious"
Grace Callahan	"Crushing Silence"
Everett Casali	"A Sakson Redemption"
Nishi Chute	"The Ink Stained Regrets"
Jason Del Cid	"A Lost Son"
Akshaj Donthi	"The Bench Where We Spoke"
Anna Dou	"Something Is Not Always Better Than Nothing"
Anshu Emani	"The Lighthouse Keepers"
Anshu Emani	"The Reflection"
Jack Evans	"The Project"
Giada Foggi	"A Whisper in the Flames"
Yahan Fu	"The Fourth Floor"
Akshara Gaddam	"Faultless"
Leia Hatem	"Spell It Out"

Onyx Hawes	"A Deer in Headlights"
Vivian Hays	"Pluto"
Isabella Ingegneri	"Sacrifice to the Horizon"
Kush Jadon	"Offering to the Horizon"
Aditya Kaul	"The Recollection of an Odd Case"
Tanvi Konduri	"Fake Smile"
Aiden Lee	"The Pizza Paradox"
Maggie Libby	"The Call of Discovery"
Samara Masson	"Stranger with Memories"
Gwenyth Mayo	"The Stradivarius Society"
Mallory Mosuela	"Second Place Revelations"
Catalina Nemes	"As She Fades"
Kayla Nguyen	"What If?"
Angel Ongwae	"When Summer Comes"
Sahasra Palle	"Mama's Home"
Lucy Panning	"The Rain Will Fall"
Arjun M Pathak	"Innovations of Aviola"
Bella Pettit	"The Day of Inanimation"
Ryan Pineda	"Raymond's Tragedy"
Hannah Pogany	"For the Greater Good"
Sreelasya Polavarapu	"Tracks of Change"
Ryan Posid	"The Chess King"
Khadijah Qirat	"Blossoms of Death"
Emily Quintanilla Ventura	"We Were Born To Burn"
Benjamin Revak	"I Am an Escapee"
Carolina Rojas	"In the Wrong Mind"
Brady Schwartzberg	"Deceit of the Soul"
Sohail Shaik	"Summer at the Lake House"

Warner T. Sobol	"The Jaw Trap"
Abdu Sock	"Chasing the Answers"
Sabrina Stewart	"Storm Dancer"
Hannah Stine	"The Sojourner"
Abigail Strohmeyer	"To Live and Die For"
Emily Tarazi	"It Was a Dare"
Alie Tate	"To Wish Upon Dandelion Puffs"
Hannah Thomson	"Carried Away"

High School Honorable Mentions

The Modern Remans

By Meg Bales

"And here we have... a pile of rubble. Oslo?"

"On it." Oslo scribbled down yet another to-do on our alarmingly fast-growing list. Ytterbius, his ostrich, had decided that the margins were delicious four feet ago, and he was less than halfway to the end.

"And over here, a stunning... pile of rubble." I sighed. The Modern Remans, despite all our amazing improvements over those psycho Romans, were absolutely rubbish at building. Those cheater Romans got all the cool monuments.

"I'm beginning to sense a pattern," Oslo observed. His walkie-talkie buzzed. "Bother. Yes?"

"There's a kraken in the laundromat! The ceiling is imploding!" Ah. Business as usual.

"I've gotta deal with that," Oslo said regretfully. "Sorry, Arbiter."

"It's fine. Send me Onyx." Oslo nodded, turned around, and rode off. I went back to sorting out this month's construction emergencies.

Oslo was half Ostrigoth, half Busygoth, and he did so much general running around I'd swear he has 'Shockingly Busy' playing in his head nonstop. To be fair, Ytterbius did most of the actual running, as Oslo had the spinal problems common to most Ostrigoths, but Oslo steered and did the actual problem solving, so it all worked out.

"So. It has come to this."

"Nice to see you too, Onyx." Onyx was a Goth Goth, so he wore lots of armor and eyeliner. Today he had a new streak of silver dyed into his black hair. I handed him the list.

"What dark ritual happened to the brain of whoever insisted you do this?" Onyx asked ominously. "More importantly, what black magic must I wield to make them regret their life choices?"

"Delegation?"

Onyx shuddered. "Speak no more, Arbiter of Disputes."

"You're from Disputes, too, Onyx."

"Yes. I recall. I have not contracted amnesia."

"Just checking."

"I repeat: speak no more, or the wrath of thunderstorms will have nothing on my fury."

"Good to know. These stairs are uneven."

The Modern Remans used to have an underground hideout, but after it collapsed for the fifteenth time, they gave up and moved aboveground. That was when my mother was a kid. Now we have more structural failures, but fewer fatalities.

I rounded a corner and collided with my mother, Irina Silvia, the direct descendant of Remus Silvia, the founder of Reme.

Oh, you've never heard of Reme? No, not Rome. Those psycho engineers' founder, Romulus, attempted to kill his own brother, Remus, for jumping over his half-built wall. To be fair, Remus was being super annoying about it, but Romulus had *anger issues*. So. We're way cooler.

Remus woke up six hours later, with an epic scar and a massive headache, and promptly decided not to go back to his backstabbing psycho murderer brother with anger issues. Instead, he set off on his own personal journey, met the love of his life, joined the Gothic Resistance, freed the Busygoths, Ostrigoths, and Goth Goths from oppression by the other Goths, lost an eye to an enemy architect's pocketknife and swore vengeance on all architects forever, made friends with nearly everyone else, married the love of his life, had kids, and finally, after many years, sent a letter to his brother inviting him to come visit, like, hey, I'm not dead!

Romulus, having heard about the mysterious main character wandering around doing main-character-ish things, was a bit annoyed about his failed fratricide, but agreed to come. He just so happened to bring along an army or six. He completely failed to kill Remus, but managed to murder Remus's wife. Remus, escaping with his young son in tow, swore eternal vengeance on his brother and everything to do about Rome. He founded the Modern Remans, a secret nation of underground (until relatively recently) agents dedicated to Rome's destruction.

We half-succeeded in 1870, when Rome was conquered by Italy, but they kept the name, and mysteriously objected to us insisting they burn the city to the ground. So. Now we don't like Italy, which is a shame, because I like pasta and pizza, but until they rename and/or allow us to destroy Rome, these will just have to be Unpatriotic Foods.

Anyway. Mother took one look at my to-do list, unrolled due to the collision and now rolling merrily down the stairs, and sighed. "I see you're busy again this year, Arbiter."

"It looks worse than it is," I assured her, attempting to roll the list back up. "I'm almost done."

At the foot of the stairs, Onyx had decided to be helpful for once, and was rolling it up from that end. "No, you're not," he informed me. "The building's falling down around our ears and you know it."

Mother and I exchanged a glance.

"Okay, yes, possibly that," I admitted. "But we're working on it. The base just happens to give anyone with any mechanical knowledge a heart attack, that's all."

"It might be simpler just to move our base of operations to a more structurally sound building," Mother mused.

"No, that wouldn't work; Remus angered the deity of buildings, remember? All buildings one of his descendants or allies lives in starts to break down."

"But surely if we get a building with good enough underlying supports, the curse will take a while to set in..." Mother argued, trailing off. "Oh, you're right. You're sensible, like your father. It's just so *frustrating*. This building was *fine* when we moved in, and now it's..."

A faint explosion was audible in the distance, followed by ostrich war cries and ominous splashing noises. "Imploding," I finished. "Yeah. It's a pain, but it would definitely be harder to uproot every thirty years."

"If only the Blessing of Hole didn't have such a long recharge time..." Mother mused.

"Yeah, that'd be nice."

Mother shook her head. "Well, I suppose I'll leave you to—"

I never found out what she left me to do, because that was the moment everything went black.

"I don't get your obsession with this punk, Jules. He's just some idiot diplomat. Wouldn't last ten seconds in an arena."

"Marc. Don't be *psycho*. Idiot diplomacy is beside the point entirely, though I happen to value it, but you know what we need him for."

"Yes, but we're not going to say that within earshot of the prisoner, because we're not stupid recurring BBEGs and he might be awake."

"You read my mind. Ah, he's waking up."

I blinked awake, noticing several things in short order. First and foremost, I was in a small room with three chairs. I was tied to one chair, while the other two were being sat in by unbound strangers about my age, fifteen. One was a blond boy who looked like he opened coconuts with his bare hands and then fed the splinters to small woodland animals. The other was an attractive girl with long, reddish-brown hair, who appeared to have eaten something unpleasant and suspected I'd cooked it.

"Good morning, I see you're hostile forces, likely Romans, I heard everything from 'I don't get your obsession with this punk' onwards, I appreciate your appreciation of diplomacy, and how may I help you?" I said, then blinked. What...?

"I see the suggestibility toxins are going strong," the girl, probably Jules, observed caustically.

"You're pretty," I informed her. She blinked, nonplussed. I blushed. "I apologize, but it would appear I'm not in control of my speech at present," I began, attempting to un-dig the hole I'd just gotten myself into. "I must ask that you ignore anything stupid I say, such as references to appearance, although I realize you may not wish to cooperate with me as, as I repeat, you're likely Romans. Help me."

"Shut up," the blond boy ordered bluntly. "You're talking nonsense, *Reman*, and we're not stupid enough to monologue our nefarious plans and carefully explain the intricate workings of our lovely pilfered deathray like some B-rated recurring villain. Get a life."

"I have a life, unless you kill me," I said helpfully. The girl sighed impatiently.

"Don't interfere, Marcus. We can't all be lecturers on the evils of poorly written villains. You. Reman." She fixed me with a steely glare. "You're Arbiter Silvia?"

"Last I checked. You're pretty," I added, to my infinite shame.

"Duly noted," the girl conceded, thankfully taking my idiotic comment in stride. "I'm Juliet Caesar of the Romans. You're currently our hostage."

"Do your extended relations and allies know you've incited the entire Reman forces to come and retrieve their current future leader?" I asked, invoking some cringe-worthy grammar, but thankfully not saying anything particularly moronic.

"Yes. It was their idea. Marcus, go fetch the tea," Juliet ordered.

"You think that's a good idea? These Remans are slippery," the blond boy, Marcus, argued.

Juliet rolled her eyes. "Marcus. My dear unneeded bodyguard. You've seen me take down mammoths unarmed. You've seen me topple buildings with a blow. You've seen me wipe out herds of *emu*. Do you seriously believe for *one second* that I can't handle a boy my own age who's unused to physical exertion and is currently tied to a chair?"

"Hey, I do a lot of general running around with Oslo," I interjected, stung, but she ignored me.

Marcus sullenly rose and exited the room.

"He gives you all the feels?" I guessed, wishing to melt into the carpet. Juliet raised an eyebrow.

"What are you going on about? ...I suppose it doesn't matter. I'm—"

I never found out what she was, because by then I'd utilized my escaping-from-things training, grabbed her wrist, and activated my Blessing of Hole to dump both of us through an extradimensional hole to the Reman fortress.

We landed on Oslo and Ytterbius, halfway up a staircase, just as they were aiming the net cannon at the kraken. The cannon went off, hitting a skewed column and knocking it over, and sending the burned-out chandelier spinning. The chandelier's chain quickly gave out under the strain and snapped, smashing into the floor and exploding in a

blastwave of shrapnel. I ducked. Juliet let out an ear-piercing scream, though she looked uninjured. Girls.

Meanwhile, the chunk of ceiling that the column had been supporting decided to take a vacation to the eighth floor, destroying all ceilings and floors in its way and leaving an interestingly shaped hole on its way down. Beside me, Oslo had fallen off of Ytterbius, and was attempting to stand up when the kraken lost its grip on the ceiling, going straight down and through the hole in the floor.

Onyx came dashing up the stairs, snapping several of them on his way up. "I have acquired the tape of ducts!" he gasped, holding it out. "Use it wisely! Arbiter?"

I grabbed Oslo, hauling him upright and onto Ytterbius, snatched the duct tape from Onyx, and shoved it into Oslo's hands. "Duct tape! You're the one who took three days of structural engineering!"

"What are you *idiots* doing?" Juliet shrieked, reminding us all of her presence. "Duct tape? By the large statues of imaginary beings, what is *wrong* with you? Give me that!" She seized the tape from Oslo and bolted for the chandelier. "You! Silvia! Goth Goth! Here! Assist me! Now, or we're all going to be crushed by the ceiling!"

Onyx and I helplessly followed her, unsure what was going on. Juliet glanced over the exploded remains of the chandelier and took the largest surviving bar, a pitted, curved thing, with most of the little candleholders sheared off. She handed it to us, grabbed a disembodied candleholder, and dashed back up the steps, spewing orders for us to follow. We followed.

At the top, she began furiously scratching guidelines into the wall with the useless candleholder, and directed us to lever the bar into the creaking ceiling near where the column had been. We made it about halfway through that when the other wall exploded and the ocean came for a visit.

"One of the elemental generators must have exploded!" Oslo announced. Juliet rounded on him, smoke practically coming out of her ears as the room slowly began to fill with water.

"One of the *what?*" she demanded.

"Water elementals! Infinite water! Runs a couple of power generators!" he yelled, as Ytterbius nervously backed up, splashing through a new puddle. "Who are you?"

"I am Juliet Caesar, *peasant*," she snapped, eyes flashing. "And I—"

We never found out what she was, because that was when Onyx hit her over the head with the empty net cannon.

We looked at him. He shrugged. "What? She was starting to tick me off. No Roman calls Oslo a 'peasant'. She scorned my wrath."

"Which thunderstorms have nothing on, yes, thank you, appreciate you sticking up for Oslo, but it may have escaped your attention that *she was the only one who knows how to stop buildings from falling down!*"

"This building chose its side long ago. Its failure is not my fault, nor could some Roman prevent its demise." The water was knee-deep by now, and steadily rising.

"Except she *could* have!" I snapped, hauling the unconscious Roman girl out of the water and depositing her on a mostly intact table. "That's literally their entire glitching *point*! They build stuff, they kill people! They fail to swim!"

"Can't we Hole over and get another one to patch it up for us?" Oslo suggested, eying the water nervously.

"What reason would a different Roman have to prevent our fortress's collapse?" Onyx retorted.

I snapped my fingers, inspiration striking. "I've got it. Oslo, warp the three of us in. You'll be able to retrace the route my Hole took. Onyx, you still have your Hole, right?"

"Why *me*?" Onyx demanded.

"You're closest."

"*Fine*," Onyx hissed, "but this is an extremely terrible plan."

"Noted. Hole?"

Oslo eyed me, but snapped his fingers, summoning his extradimensional tunnel of the day. The three (four, counting Ytterbius) of us appeared in the Roman room I'd been in, just as Marcus shouldered the door open, carrying a platter of tea things.

I paused, expecting him to drop the platter, but to my surprise, he turned and carefully deposited in on one of the empty chairs before drawing his sword.

"Cool your jets, blondie," Oslo warned the Roman. Ytterbius hissed. "We're not here to pick a fight, or even to finish the fight *you* picked. Our fortress is imploding, and the girl who came through with Arbiter is still in there. Come with us, or she's gonna get smushed."

Despite the anticlimacy of that statement, Marcus went slightly pale, sighed in the exasperated manner of someone who went away for *two minutes* and now has to rescue their friend and save the world *again*, and sheathed his sword. "Alright, *Reman*. If you've harmed her in any way, the flames of heck will have nothing on the heat of my fury, so on and so forth, and you'll regret matters and die painfully. Beam me down."

Onyx's eyes widened. "He speaks my language." He grinned eerily, the first time I'd ever seen him smile.

"Yeah, yeah, talk about it over tea sometime," I told him. "Hole?"

Onyx shot me an annoyed glare, but summoned a Hole back to the imploding base. The water was now chest-high. Fortunately, the table with Juliet on it was wooden, and had begun to float. Marcus waded straight to her, eying the water warily, and began appraising the exposed pipes gushing water.

"What is *wrong* with you people?" he demanded, to no one in particular. "You!" He turned to face me. "Why has no one even tried to seal the leaks?"

"It's coming from the water elementals," I snapped. "There's no point!"

"Then shut them off!" he snapped right back. "Is basic engineering so far beyond you idiots that you failed to add water shutoffs?"

"Probably?"

"Look, where *are* the elementals?" he said finally, exasperated, throwing his hands in the air with a *splash*.

"Underwater, now." I pointed down. "They're in the basement!"

"Then use that teleporting thing!"

"Can't! It's a once-per-day thing! We've all used ours!" I shot back.

"Then get me *someone else who can!*" Right on cue, Mother appeared from one end of the flooded hallway. Marcus spotted her immediately. "Her! Can she open wormholes?"

"She knows Blessing of Hole, yes, but what-?" I started, but the Roman boy was already heading straight for Mother, carrying Juliet over his shoulder.

"You! Reman! We need a hole from the elementals to the outside!" he roared. Mother blinked, took in the situation, and bolted.

"No! Mother! He's with us!"

"Technically, he's walking off with the hostage," Onyx pointed out. I emitted a strangled noise and plunged after Marcus. Remans, unlike Romans, were all accomplished swimmers, so I quickly caught up to him.

Mother had fortunately not heard Onyx's comment, and hesitantly snapped her fingers. The flow of water halted abruptly. I heard the distinct sound of a reverse waterfall launching large quantities of itself into the upper atmosphere, followed by the similarly distinct sound of a small sea blasting itself into existence in the local countryside.

The water filling the hallway reversed its progress and began to slowly drain. I caught up to Marcus, but he turned and gave me a singularly unimpressed look. "Nice try, Reman. I've sorted out your immediate problem. Now we're leaving."

"How do you expect to escape?" I asked, actually curious. He raised an eyebrow.

"Like I'd tell you?" He snapped his fingers, and I realized a half-second too late that he was standing right where the Holes had been.

That was a week ago. We haven't seen them since. We've tried going back to the Roman base, but we were too busy dealing with the aftermath of the new inland sea, the kraken, and the near-collapse of the base to do anything for several hours after the fact. By the time we tried, it became obvious that it was only a small base, and had been completely abandoned.

I expect they'll be back. But next time, we'll be ready for them.

A Purloined Princess

By Elisabeth Biggs

When I stepped out of my room on the morning of my eighteenth birthday, I did *not* expect to be immediately bombarded by the shocking news that Princess Alithiea Zendraises, my intended bride-to-be, had disappeared overnight.

In my opinion, such matters should have been dealt with by my royal father. Aside from the fact that we were supposed to be getting married, Princess Alithiea was of little concern to me. I had never met her, nor did I know anything of her save for what my parents had told me—and that was very little indeed.

Ah, such was the fate of an heir to the throne. No sooner had a day passed after my entrance into the world than my parents had engaged me to the neighboring kingdom's newly born daughter. At least, so said my nurse.

Then eighteen years passed, and I hardly gave my fiancé a single thought unless my royal parents spoke of her. Who can blame me, though? Being a crown prince required all of my immediate attention. There were lessons to learn, weapons to master, horses to tame, and a kingdom to explore. Boyhood was too precious to waste worrying about my future.

But now I was eighteen—officially old enough to be called a proper man—and adult life welcomed me with a smack in the face.

"She's gone, Prince Malachai," said the messenger as I stepped out of my room. "Disappeared. No sign of her anywhere."

"That's rather unfortunate," I replied, still trying to blink away sleepiness.

The messenger sighed. "What will you do about it, Your Highness?"

"Me? Isn't that my father's business?"

"Your Highness, she's supposed to be marrying *you*."

"I'm well aware of that!" Running my hands through my hair, I tried to think of what could possibly have happened. "Well, when was the last time anybody saw her?"

"Last night, Your Highness, in the carriage on her way here."

Of course. Princess Alithiea and I were to meet for the first time *today*. She would have been well beyond my kingdom's borders when she disappeared. I gave a sigh. "Do you suppose she's been captured?"

The messenger shrugged in a most unhelpful manner. "Your Highness, who can say? Perhaps some band of brigands is holding her up for ransom."

"That *would* be unfortunate," I murmured. "Well, prepare my horse. I guess I've got to go after her."

After the messenger hurried away, I went back into my room to exchange my royal attire for traveling clothes.

What a horrible bother this all is, I thought. *You would think a first meeting would be simple—but no, the princess just had to disappear. Bother, indeed. What a way to begin my birthday.*

But there was nobody to listen to my grumbles or do anything about the situation. Several minutes later I found myself riding out of the courtyard on a mission to recover my lost bride-to-be.

It was a perfect morning, one which I would have enjoyed under any other circumstances. Springtime in the Kingdom of Rion always promised clear skies and gentle breezes. The hills bloomed with colorful flowers, and birdsong rang from the treetops.

Cheered by the pleasant weather, my horse ran swiftly along the cobbled road. Within a matter of hours we reached the princess' carriage, which had continued on its way to the castle despite her disappearance.

"Ay there!" I called out, reigning in my steed.

"Who approaches?" came the reply.

"Crown Prince Malachai of Rion," I said. "A messenger came to me with tidings of Princess Alithiea. Does anyone know what happened?"

By this time the carriage and its entourage had come to a halt. The man who had spoken—a soldier at the front—stepped forward and bowed. I surveyed him a long moment before gesturing for him to speak.

"We're not entirely sure, Your Highness," said the soldier. "At dawn we found two of the men knocked out, and then the ladies-in-waiting informed us that the Princess was gone."

"So you suspect a kidnapping?" I pressed.

"That is the most likely conclusion, Your Highness."

I sighed. While bandits and thieves often threatened the roads of my kingdom, they hardly ever attacked heavily protected retinues.

Whoever took Princess Alithia must really want money, I thought. Or perhaps some leverage against our kingdoms. That certainly was a big bother. If I don't rescue the princess it will put my father into quite the pickle with our neighboring ruler.

"Well then, I suppose there isn't any time to waste." I wheeled my horse about. "Hurry on to the castle; I'm going to look for Princess Alithia." The soldier wished me luck, and I took off down the road.

A good couple of hours dragged by. Taking advantage of the cloudless sky, the midday sun shone hotter than ever. Soon, both my horse and I were exhausted and thirsty. At a place where the road met the river, we halted. I was beginning to wish that I had thought to eat breakfast before leaving the castle in such a hurry.

"Enjoy the grass," I told my steed rather bitterly.

The horse was too busy doing exactly that to take much notice of me.

After taking a quick drink at the river and splashing the cool water on my face, I started to feel much better. Hunger, however, still knocked loudly at the door of my stomach. *I can't go back to the castle until I've found some trace of the princess. But if I don't get something to eat I might die of starvation.*

This was a probable exaggeration, but my royal appetite remained too pressing for me to care about accuracy. I mounted my horse and resumed my journey. Hopefully, I could attain both victuals and any news of Princess Alithia in the nearest town.

It so happened that I hadn't ridden very far when I came across a farmer driving a wagonful of goods. Slowing to a halt in the middle of the road, I addressed him, "Good day, fellow. Where are you headed?"

The farmer glowered at me from beneath a pair of bushy eyebrows. "What's it to you, traveler?"

Unaccustomed to such responses, I felt rather taken aback. "Twas merely a courtesy question. I'm looking for a kidnapped princess. Have you heard of any active brigands recently?"

A blank expression met my words. "I don't hold no stock with royalty," spat the farmer. "You won't find your princess in *my* wagon."

"I wouldn't expect to," I returned, wrinkling my nose.

"But if it's any worry to you, I did pass a young woman walking back to town this morning. A proper stranger, she seemed." The farmer's eyebrows wriggled like two hairy caterpillars. "Do ya know what this princess of yours looks like?"

With some surprise, I realized that I did not. Princess Alithia and I had never met before, nor had I bothered to see any portraits of her. The farmer guffawed at my expression.

"Ha! He don't even know! Off your rocker, you are. Why'd you waste your time going after her if you don't know how she looks?"

Unfortunately, that was a good question. One which I did not have a proper answer to. To avoid further embarrassment, I ignored his remarks and urged my horse onward. The farmer's burlish laughter rang in my ears for quite a while after.

What a bother, I thought. Some birthday I'm having. Well, hopefully things will improve when I reach town.

They didn't.

None of the townspeople were very willing to help me, nor did they seem to care that I had lost a princess. When I announced my name and title, they only stared incredulously. At last, I gave up asking and set off for the nearest market to buy some food.

To my great misfortune, I discovered that I had failed to bring any money along with me. The merchants turned me away, all refusing to sell on credit. I betook myself to aimlessly wandering through the streets. My stomach complained loudly, as did my sore muscles.

Botheration! I thought irritably. *Honestly, do fiancés have to be this much trouble?*

In retrospect, I probably could have been more gracious in my thoughts towards the poor girl—after all, I had no idea what ordeal she had been through. But at the moment I was very put out.

Aching legs, an empty stomach, half of my birthday gone by...all for what? A princess I've never seen before in my life. Phooey.

At that opportune moment, my train of disgruntled mental complaints was interrupted by a shrill scream.

Eager for some action, I urged my horse towards the sound. We flew down the street, bounding past a group of wagons with hardly a “pardon me!” The scream came again, this time closer.

My steed hurtled round a corner, only to come head-on with two burly men. I discovered that the source of the aforementioned screams was the struggling figure whom they held between them.

Startled at their sudden appearance, my horse reared. One of its hooves caught the man on the left square in the jaw. He flew backwards, completing an impressive amount of five mid-air flips before landing several yards away with a loud thump.

“Oy!” bellowed the remaining man. “Your beast just totaled my brother!”

I made to draw my sword before realizing that I had neglected to bring that along as well. *Bother!* “Cease this harassment!”

Before the man could react, his female captive turned and delivered a vicious kick to the sensitive areas. I winced. The man gave a shout and moved as if to strike her.

“On, boy!” I cried, digging my heels into my horse’s sides.

Unfortunately, the man had the sense to stagger away before we could plow him down. Nevertheless, he was still doubled over from the girl’s kick. She, meanwhile, continued to thrash in his grasp.

I wheeled my steed about for another run at him. The man was preparing to dodge my next rush, so instead of aiming at him, I steered my horse towards the girl. As we galloped by, I reached down and pulled her up out of his grasp, firmly setting her in the saddle before me.

We made it about four blocks, then the girl started fighting me. I did my absolute best to keep her upright, but she squirmed more than a worm on the hook. Before I knew what was happening, her elbow struck my ribs with the force of a battering ram. I found myself tumbling out of the saddle and rolling over on the cobbled street.

"Halt!" I called.

My horse, trained to follow only my commands, came to a quick stop. The girl furiously ordered him on, but he paid her little heed. I got to my feet and stormed up to them.

"What in all the blazes was that for?" I demanded. "You're not even going to thank me for saving you?"

She whipped around to face me, eyes flashing. "I could have handled it myself!"

I raised an eyebrow and took a moment to scrutinize her. She certainly didn't look strong enough to wrangle two strong men. In fact, she was rather frail. Her face was stained with dust, and her fair hair fell down over her shoulders in a soiled tangle. A heavy traveling cloak draped about her, but aside from that she looked just like one of the townspeople.

"Oh?"

The girl flipped the edge of her cloak to one side. "Don't you dare give me that look, boy. Just who do you think you are, rescuing me out of the blue like that?"

"Well, you certainly have an odd sense of chivalry," I muttered.

"I demand that you answer my question!"

"You're not in the position to demand anything, miss."

The girl fumed. "You have no idea who-" she began before suddenly cutting off and looking away.

Curiosity aroused, I asked what her name was.

She gave me a look. "I refuse to say."

"Will you tell me if I give you mine?"

"What obligation have I got to you?"

I grinned. "Well, I did save you from those men."

Her face turned red. "I told you, I could have handled them myself!"

"Mmhm." I nodded amiably. "Since you're so determined to be rude, I suppose I shall have to initiate the introductions. I am Crown Prince Malachai of Rion."

At my pronouncement, the girl went from a bright red to a pale white. "You—you're *who*?"

Coolly, I repeated my name. "Now, if you please, get off my horse and say thank you."

"Thank you?" she repeated, her voice going shrill. "You ruined my life!"

That was certainly not the expected reaction. "Oh? Do tell."

Eyes blazing, the girl leaned towards me. "I'm Princess Alithia of Zendraises. You're supposed to marry me."

Out of all the ridiculous things that had happened, this was the final blow. I gaped at her, both appalled and relieved. "You're a perfect bother, you know that?" I snapped. "I'm sure the whole castle is in a proper uproar now, because of you. I've wasted half my birthday looking for you. Why in *blazes* did you let those men kidnap you? And why are you dressed like that?"

The princesses sniffed disdainfully. "Those churls did *not* kidnap me. I *ran* away."

My jaw, if possible, dropped lower. "You...what-?"

"I...I ran away." Princess Alithia sniffed. "I never wanted to be engaged to somebody I'd never met. All my childhood passed in a blur of primping and pampering and getting ready for my wedding day. That was all anyone at the castle would talk about—how I would be such a *lovely* queen someday, how our kingdoms would *finally* be united, how *wonderful* it all was. I hated it!" She glared angrily at me. "You of anyone should understand. Don't you want to marry somebody you actually love?"

That idea had never occurred to me. I had been far too busy *living* to worry over my future. "Er, I suppose so," I admitted with some reluctance.

Princess Alithia tossed her head. "I am determined to do what *I* want with my life. It's not like I'm the only princess of Zendraises. I've got five other sisters which you can choose from, each prettier than the next."

"You think I care about what they look like?"

"Well, it always helps," she muttered.

We remained silent for a very long time. Finally, I rubbed the back of my neck and said that I wasn't sure what to do now.

Sighing, Princess Alithiea suggested I let her go.

"Impossible. We've been engaged for eighteen years; you can't back out of it now."

"Watch me," she snapped.

I prudently grabbed the reins before she could get any more wild ideas. "Now look here, imagine the utter scandal this would cause if you disappeared within Rion borders. There could be a war!"

"As if I care."

Sternly, I said, "You are the princess of Zendraises, whether you like it or not—furthermore, you *are* my fiancé. You have both legal and moral obligations to consider."

"To blazes with obligations," Princess Alithiea said. "I refuse to marry a man I don't love."

"Whoever said anything about marrying me?" I replied.

She gave me a long look. "Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing?"

"Well yes, eventually. But just because you're coming to the Kingdom of Rion for the first time doesn't mean anything official needs to happen. I can speak to my parents about it; I'm sure they'll agree."

"What exactly are you proposing, Prince Malachai?"

I smiled. "An interim. You come with me to the castle, and I convince my parents not to ring any wedding bells just yet. It will give us some time to properly become acquainted."

Princess Alithiea considered this for a very long time. She glared at me, then turned to stare thoughtfully down the street. Her gaze drifted back in my direction.

"I still don't like you, but I'm willing to give it a chance," she said.

I audibly sighed in great relief. "Thank you, Your Highness. Now will you please let me get on my horse?"

"I'll think about it."

Rolling my eyes, I jerked the reins slightly. The steed gave a sharp turn, and Princess Alithiea careened sideways with an indignant squeal.

"I *know* I'm going to regret this," she muttered as I climbed into the saddle behind her.

A grin began to spread over my face. "We'll see about that, Your Highness."

"Don't you dare put your arms around me!"

"How else am I supposed to steer?"

"Oh, give me the reins!"

I kicked my heels into the horse's sides, and he sprang forward. Princess Alithiea yelped in surprise and wildly grabbed my sleeve. With a laugh I urged the steed onward. Then Princess Alithiea and I galloped up the road to Rion Castle, bickering every step of the way.

Tracks of Change

By Sreelasya Polavarapu

The station was eerily quiet, the occasional rustle of papers caught in the wind being the only sound in the stillness. Ellie stood on the platform, glancing at her watch for the hundredth time. Her breath curled in the cold night air as she stared at the blinking clock above the ticket booth: 11:45 PM. The last train to the city. Her last chance to leave behind everything that had weighed her down. But she wasn't sure she could step aboard.

For twenty minutes, Ellie had been frozen, her feet rooted to the concrete. Fear gripped her chest like a vice, an all-too-familiar feeling that told her to turn back. It whispered that she didn't have what it took to start over. The station was dark and abandoned, as if even the world had given up on her tonight. Ellie's mind was a storm of doubt, every nerve in her body screaming for her to turn and run in the opposite direction.

She thought of her mother, who had always told her to take risks. "You can't live a full life if you're too scared to step into it," her mother would say. But Ellie had always been hesitant, always played it safe. She stayed in the background, where life felt predictable and failure seemed impossible. Now, as the clock ticked toward midnight, she felt as though all those moments of hesitation had led her here—to this platform, this choice, this moment where she either moved forward or let her fear define her once again.

Her mind drifted back to Adam. Two months ago, he had sat her down and told her, "I need space." His words had shattered the fragile world she thought she'd built with him. Three years together, and she had believed it was love. In hindsight, she realized she had spent more time molding herself to fit his plans than living her own dreams. She'd been suffocating without even realizing it, burying her desires under layers of compromise and silence. When he walked out the door, he took more than his belongings—he took the last piece of certainty Ellie thought she had.

Ellie swallowed hard, her throat tightening with emotion. She had spent weeks in a fog, packing her life into boxes, resigning from her job, telling her family she needed

time. The truth was, she didn't know what she needed. The city had always been a dream—a hazy idea of freedom, independence, and a chance to rebuild. But now that the moment was here, the fear of the unknown loomed larger than the excitement.

The distant hum of the approaching train cut through the night. Ellie checked her watch again. Less than ten minutes. The thought of stepping on that train terrified her. But staying? That terrified her even more.

"Ellie?"

The soft voice startled her. She turned to see Jenna standing by the ticket booth, her breath visible in the cold air. Jenna, with her warm smile and short brown hair, had been Ellie's rock during the hardest days of her breakup.

"Jenna? What are you doing here?" Ellie asked, her voice shaking.

"I saw your car outside and figured you might need some company," Jenna said, stepping closer. "You've been planning this for weeks. I couldn't let you stand here alone, second-guessing yourself."

Ellie felt a lump rise in her throat. She hadn't told Jenna how scared she was, but Jenna had known anyway. That was the kind of friend she was. "I don't know if I can do this," Ellie admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Jenna placed a hand on Ellie's arm, her touch grounding and steady. "Ellie, it's okay to be scared. This is a big step. But being scared doesn't mean you're not ready. It just means it matters."

Tears welled up in Ellie's eyes. "What if I fail? What if I can't handle it? What if—"

"What if you don't?" Jenna interrupted gently. "What if this ends up being the best thing you've ever done? What if you find yourself in the city, Ellie? The real you—the one who's been waiting to break free?"

Ellie's heart ached at the truth in Jenna's words. She had spent so much of her life hiding, trying to be what others needed her to be. But deep down, she wanted more. She wanted to live fully, to chase dreams she hadn't even allowed herself to imagine.

The train's horn sounded, louder now, closer. The headlights cut through the darkness as the engine slowed to a halt at the platform. Ellie stared at the open doors, her heart pounding in her chest.

"You don't have to have it all figured out," Jenna said softly. "You just have to take the first step. The rest will come."

Ellie turned to Jenna, her voice trembling. "Thank you. For being here."

Jenna smiled, her eyes shining with warmth. "Always. Now go. That train's not going to wait forever."

Ellie nodded, a mix of fear and determination coursing through her. She stepped toward the train, her hands trembling as she grabbed the railing and climbed aboard. The doors hissed shut behind her, and as the train began to move, Ellie found a seat by the window. She looked out at the platform, where Jenna stood waving, her presence a reminder that she wasn't truly alone.

As the train sped away, Ellie leaned back in her seat. The fear was still there, sitting quietly in the corner of her mind. But for the first time in a long time, it wasn't paralyzing her. She felt something else—something lighter, something brighter. It was hope. And it was enough to carry her forward.

She didn't know what the city would hold or who she would become. But as the train raced toward the unknown, Ellie smiled to herself. She was finally moving. And that was enough.

The rhythmic clatter of the train wheels against the track became a soothing backdrop as Ellie leaned her head against the cold glass. Memories drifted in and out, snapshots of a life she was leaving behind. There was the tiny bookstore where she had spent countless Saturdays, losing herself in the stories of others when her own felt too small to be written. There was the park bench near the river where Adam had once told her he loved her—words that now felt hollow in recollection. And there was her childhood bedroom, where she had scribbled dreams of adventure on the walls in invisible ink, afraid someone might see them and laugh.

The train conductor's voice crackled over the intercom, announcing the next stop. Ellie's heart skipped a beat as she realized how real this was. She was truly on her way, and each passing mile was a step further from the life she knew. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at once. She pulled her journal from her bag, flipping to a blank page. The

pen felt heavy in her hand, as if it carried the weight of all the words she had yet to write.

“Dear future me,” she began, the words spilling out slowly at first but gaining momentum as her thoughts flowed. “I don’t know where you are as you read this. I don’t know who you’ve become or what you’ve discovered. But I hope you’re proud of me. I hope you’re living a life that feels full and honest and unapologetically yours.”

She paused, staring at the words. For so long, Ellie had been writing for others—work reports, emails, love notes that were never reciprocated. This was the first time she had written for herself, and it felt strangely liberating.

The train slowed, pulling into a small station illuminated by dim yellow lights. A handful of passengers boarded, their faces tired but determined. Ellie watched as a young couple settled into seats across from her. They whispered to each other, their hands intertwined. It reminded her of what she had once wanted with Adam, but there was no bitterness in the thought—only a quiet acceptance that their paths had diverged.

The journey stretched on, each stop a reminder of how far she was traveling. Ellie found herself lost in a book she had packed, a novel about a woman who rebuilt her life in a new city. The protagonist’s struggles felt achingly familiar. Ellie underlined passages that resonated, as if they were breadcrumbs leading her forward.

When the train reached its halfway point, Ellie ventured to the dining car. It was nearly empty, save for a man in a suit nursing a cup of coffee and an elderly woman knitting a scarf. Ellie ordered tea and sat by the window, the darkness outside broken occasionally by the glow of passing towns. She sipped slowly, letting the warmth seep into her, and for the first time that night, she felt a flicker of excitement.

She thought about the apartment she had rented online, a small studio with a leaky faucet and creaky floors. It wasn’t much, but it was hers. She imagined decorating it with plants and art, filling it with music and laughter. She thought about the job interviews she had lined up and the classes she had enrolled in—writing workshops that felt like the first step toward a long-forgotten dream.

Back in her seat, Ellie watched as the first hints of dawn painted the horizon. The sky shifted from inky black to deep purple, then to hues of pink and orange that took her

breath away. The city was still hours away, but this felt like a beginning. She opened her journal again, sketching the sunrise and scribbling words that came unbidden—words of hope, curiosity, and courage. This sunrise, she thought, was a promise of new days ahead, days where she could redefine who she was and what she wanted from life. It wasn't just the start of a new day; it was the start of her new story.

As the train hummed along the tracks, Ellie's thoughts wandered to the life she had left behind. The tightrope she'd walked to keep everyone else happy felt so far away now. The years spent shrinking herself into a version of what others expected—quiet, compliant, invisible—were finally behind her. She wondered what it would feel like to be seen for who she truly was, to exist without apologies or pretenses.

Hours passed, the train bustling as more passengers came aboard. The once-empty seats filled with strangers carrying their own stories—students heading to university, families off on adventures, and business travelers lost in their laptops. Ellie observed them with quiet curiosity, realizing that she was now part of this moving tapestry. For the first time, she didn't feel like an outsider looking in. She was a traveler, just like them, heading toward something unknown but undeniably hers.

At one stop, an older man sat down beside her. His kind eyes and worn hands suggested a life filled with hard work and wisdom. They exchanged polite smiles before settling into a comfortable silence. After a while, the man glanced at Ellie's journal and asked, "Writing something important?"

Ellie hesitated but then nodded. "I guess you could say that. I'm trying to figure out who I am."

The man chuckled softly. "That's a journey that never really ends, you know. But it's worth every step."

Ellie smiled, his words resonating deeply. They didn't speak much more, but his presence was calming, like an anchor in the midst of her swirling thoughts. When he departed at the next station, he left her with a simple farewell: "Good luck on your journey, young lady. I have a feeling you're going to do just fine."

The train continued its course, and soon, the city skyline appeared on the horizon, its towering buildings shimmering in the morning light. Ellie's breath caught in her throat

as she took it all in. The city was vast, chaotic, and beautiful—a stark contrast to the small, quiet town she had previously called home. It felt overwhelming and exhilarating all at once.

When the train finally pulled into the station, Ellie gathered her things, her heart pounding with a mix of fear and anticipation. She stepped onto the platform, her feet hitting the ground with a sense of finality. The air smelled different here—sharper, busier, alive with possibility.

Ellie followed the flow of passengers through the station, her suitcase rolling behind her. The streets outside were a blur of motion—cars honking, people rushing, the city buzzing with energy. She paused for a moment, taking it all in. This was it. The start of everything she had dreamed of and everything she had feared.

As she walked toward her new apartment, Ellie felt a surge of determination. She didn't know what lay ahead, but for the first time, she wasn't afraid of the unknown. She was ready to embrace it, to let it shape her into someone stronger, bolder, and more alive.

By the time Ellie reached her apartment, the city was fully awake, sunlight streaming through the streets. She unlocked the door and stepped inside. The space was small and bare, but it held endless potential. She set her suitcase down and walked to the window, where the city stretched out before her, vibrant and alive.

Ellie took a deep breath and smiled. This was her new beginning. And as she stood there, bathed in the light of a new day, she knew she had made the right choice. This was where her story truly began.

The Rain Will Fall

by Lucy Panning

I wait patiently for the dawn, gazing out to the edge of my world. On this slab of rock, I and my ancestors have lived forever. Always here, and always alone.

Like I have done all my long life, I sit on the edge, painting pictures on the rough gray stone. I dip my fingertips in a crumbling clay bowl, filled to the brim with crushed dark green berries and ancient rainwater.

The dark paste stains my mottled fingers, sliding thickly, smoothly across coarse rock in a graceful arc which takes a sharp turn, an elbow.

The first sun sets behind me as the second rises ahead, dark and dying in the wake of its brother. A blot of harvest gold on the horizon, the color of tree number six in row eleven. I clean my hand and scoop rich color, now streaked orange in the twilight of its season. All the more accurate for its flaws.

A circle filled in with a methodic swipe of my thumb, and the picture is complete. I stand up and collect my bowls. Around me, the curious doves scatter with a rustle. As I straighten my weary back to take in the image I have created, I notice with mild interest that I have painted the entire space from the image to its left to the one on the right. Stretching out in both directions, an unending ribbon of paintings has unfurled. The last and the first have found each other. So the circle is complete, then. Just in time for Supplication Day.

I hobble back to my home in the grassy center of the island. I stop beside it for a moment and look at my little stone sanctuary, smiling to myself at its antiquity. I go down to the pool, where rainwater has collected for time out of memory, and draw a vessel of water. This bucket in particular was given to my ancestor by a suppliant who was a woodcarver. Over the long years, the images painstakingly engraved into the old wood have been worn smooth. The iron bands on the outer rim have rusted away and the bucket is on the verge of collapse; but I use it still, to carry water to the edge of my rock. I sit on the edge once more and dip the first bowl into the bucket. The remarkably

clear water is stained blue and green, red and brown with the juice of my rhelin berries as I scoop out the remnants from my clay bowls. They are cracked. I am pleased that they will soon be replaced.

The water pours over the rough edge of the boulder. I know where it will fall; through the clouds it will pass, appearing like rain from the haze below me. It will splatter onto the ground, soaking into the earth, sand, rock, or water which I cannot see, growing up into tall grasses and wildflowers. They bloom in semblance of rhelin trees; their petals are rich in hue. Undoubtedly the stone has drifted over the years, and undoubtedly hundreds have followed the trail of rhelin. They wait for the clouds to fade.

I am careful not to spill any rainwater on my paintings; that will come in time. This one was from the third or fourth year of my residence, and depicts a figure burying a sleeping dove whilst a flower blooms within it. I wonder what the people will make of that.

They will have a good look at it soon. They will all come to me for guidance, and they will interpret one of my paintings, and then they will leave. Just as they always do. Then the rains will come at last, and I and my paintings will be gone. A blank canvas for whoever should come next.

The second sun is at its height as I meander within the orchard. Hundreds of trees stand in neat rows adjacent to my cottage. Each tree is a different size and shape. Each bough is heavy with rhelin berries of a unique shade. I wonder what color I shall be?

The smallest tree is sixty-eight years old. It is mature, yet youthful among its elders; it boasts berries the hue of a hard-boiled egg yolk, milky-grey-green on the outside but a wonderful sunny yellow at its core. I remember meeting him in my youth. He was an old man, a venerable man with broad shoulders and a craggy face that made him appear intimidating. But his eyes... his eyes had a merry twinkle in them like my grandfather used to have.

I expect I shall be blue.

I circle the island one more time before morning begins to approach. The second sun is low in the sky now; more time has passed than I knew. They will all be waking

soon down below. I have one more day of my own. I shall spend it in peace, doing what I love best. Then I shall sleep, and when I wake the clouds beneath me will part.

I pass my chicken coop. Three eggs have hatched today. Some of the visiting doves have alighted on the roof to investigate. I toss the chicks handfuls of dry feed, singing the same song I have every day since the previous Oracle first taught me. Over the crops, I sing my mother's lullaby. She will be gone now; perhaps some of my family will seek me out. Or perhaps not.

I scoop water from the pond, releasing it over my head and letting it stream down my wispy white hair, as white as the fallen snow. The cool water traces dripping paths down my wrinkled face and onto the many folds of my billowing white robe. I sit and bathe my bare feet in the clear pool, watching the sun set. I relish these moments. Each night, when the second sun rises, the world dims but doesn't fade; after it is gone, there is a pause. The world steps away from itself and takes one moment to breathe. Eight and a half minutes entirely devoid of light. There is no speech, no movement. For eight and a half minutes each day, we rest.

The new sun rises at last, washing my lonesome world in color and instilling in me a curious sense of sadness.

I dry my feet gently and slip back into my sandals. It is time to prepare the way. I gather rhelin berries in my wicker basket and a bucket of rainwater. When I am sitting at my little table once more, surrounded by age-old shelves overflowing with older books, I begin to crush berries for the final time. My hands revel in the smoothness of the paint, and my eyes in the beauty of its colors. A clean rag is soon mottled in various hues as I clear my mortar for the next color, and the next.

I scrape pigment from bowl to bowl, adjusting each amount with an apothecary's care. Before me I now have twenty-six little bowls of rich pigment, each mixed to perfection according to my vision. I stack them in my basket with care. The bucket's worn handle is smooth against my fragile skin. There is a staircase along the wall of my cottage, spiraling up to the domed ceiling. Here is where my ancestors have left their marks. Here is the archive of words, of wisdom. I climb the staircase and search the wall for my blank stone. On a whim, I pull it out from the wall and set it down on the step

where I stand precariously. I reach into the cavity and pull out a worn, stained scroll. Here is my wisdom, the scattered thoughts of an old woman, accumulated over sixty-eight years of solitude. Each year, before the supplicants came to interrogate me, I have always consulted my ancestors' scrolls. Each year, I have added wisdom to my own document. Now the time has come to pass it on, and I am more than ready.

Resetting the brittle scroll and stone in their places, I reach into the basket for a periwinkle blue. My mark will be a mountain. A pinnacle, isolated and peaceful, and strong. I never liked symbols much, but I choose this to represent myself, and my own quiet existence atop this island.

I swipe a bold, dark mixture of grey and plum over the blue background. With my little finger, I dab whites onto the peak. I labor over the image for hours, adding detail and subtle colors until it resembles a masterpiece. But it isn't; it's only a doodle, really.

Cocking my head to inspect the finished product, I decide that I am not the mountain. I am the goat on the side.

I spend the remaining hours of the day wandering the island, by turns sitting and pondering under the trees, lying on the edge and watching the cloudscape roll by above and below, and recalling my youth before the day the rain came. After some time, I remember the pendant hanging from my neck.

I kneel before a patch of soft, bare dirt, beside my ancestor's tree. Carefully, I unclasp the locket hanging from my neck and open the smooth shell for the first time in sixty-seven years. There it is, a small brown rhelin seed. I remember fondly the first time I plucked a berry; as tradition requires, I waited the appointed year for the new tree to grow before crushing my first fruit. As I knew I would, I carefully extracted the tiny round seed from the fresh paint, washed it, and placed it in my locket. Here, around my neck, it has rested for the majority of my life, its dry rattle a constant companion, and now its time has come. I roll the hard, golden-brown seed in my left hand for a moment while I dig in the soft soil. Then I drop it in, sealing it with a handful of earth and a word of blessing.

Now the sun is setting. I walk back to my cottage, admiring the streaks of color adorning the fluffy clouds on both sides of the horizon. Here I am, a child of the sky and a servant to all who seek me. It was a life well lived.

I slept without dreams last night. When I woke, it was not yet dark. I rose and dressed, and went outside. The second sun is dipping below the horizon now, and I am watching for the final darkness.

It comes, and it passes silently. Standing in the emptiness, I rest deeply, and no thought dares to intrude.

The sun breaks over the edge of the world. I breathe. I am at peace.

I step forward to the edge of the stone where the ladder is. My eyes crinkle at the corners when I smile. I am overjoyed to see people at last.

There is movement in the peachy sunrise clouds. It seems they are excited as well.

I stand at the edge of the rock, tying my hair back against the wind. As I hold the end of the simple rope ladder in my hand, the wind picks up and the clouds below me are split in two and dissipate across the earth below.

Elation strikes me as a lush landscape unfurls. From end to end, the earth is blanketed in grasses, flowers, and trees. I am always amazed at its magnitude.

The crowds gathered below me erupt when my figure becomes visible, angelic in my billowing sleeves.

I raise my arm, acknowledging their praise. Then, with what strength I have left, I toss the rope ladder over the edge. It tumbles down, down, down, unfurling at a breakneck pace until it bounces to a halt just above the ground.

Instantly, there is a rush for the rope. But, as always, they are conscious of my gaze and quickly back off into a line. I wait patiently as the first supplicant climbs.

It is a young woman. I silently take her hand and sit with her on the swing I was given years ago. She looks equal parts petrified and determined. She sets down a sack full of cakes and pastries on the ground beside me. She is hesitant, so I nod for her to speak.

"I have a problem," she says, her voice ringing quiet but clear across the stone.

I smile slightly. This is what I was made for.

I speak to her about her troubles, and her face lights up in understanding. Our voices meld together as we speak, and we become friends. I lead her to a painting I made twenty-three years ago, one that just may hold the answer she needs.

I send her happily on her way and call for the next.

For most of the day, it goes on like this. I accept a gift, we talk, they see the proof, and I see them off with a smile.

Petty quarrels. Hopeless dreams. Loneliness. Uncertainty. For everything they bring to me, I offer my counsel. Everybody leaves smiling. And as for gifts, I receive two buckets, the bowls I wished for, paint brushes that I would never have used, piles of food, mainland books, and a speckled puppy.

I choose an oracle. She is a grave young woman, wise beyond her years yet inherently kind. She has lost her family to war, but has kept her senses and her soul. She chose it of her own will when I asked it of her, and I am only pleased to grant it; she will do very well. She will say her goodbyes today and return tomorrow, and I shall have one last day to teach her.

Late in the evening, a young man's curly brown head peeks over the edge of the stone.

"Oh, it's pleasant up here," he says mildly, looking around. His youthful voice reveals a slight accent. Have I drifted north, or has this young man traveled? No matter – it is not a necessary question.

At first, I am not sure he is speaking to me; he shows no sign of the usual trepidation. I walk to him as he heaves himself over the edge, empty-handed.

"Welcome," I say placidly. He offers his arm like a gentleman, and I guide him to the swing. We sit. "What brings you here?"

"My cousin's died," he says quietly, squeezing his hands together.

I put an arm around his shoulders. "I'm sorry," I say quietly. Then I repeat: "Why have you come here?"

"I wanted to ask for your help, but they brought me the news as I waited."

"And yet you still climbed to me."

"I wanted to meet you," he said, turning his sincere face toward me at last. "I've heard so many legends, but I wasn't sure if they were true."

"And now?" I smile, genuinely wanting to know.

"You're less imposing than I'd imagined, for one thing."

I laugh. The puppy, who'd been sleeping beside the swing's post, wakes and runs to my feet, begging for pets.

The boy noticed him immediately and jumped up. He deftly untied the rope, scooped him up, and sat back down. "He's yours?" he said.

I nod. "A gift."

"What will you do with him, up here?"

"What do you mean?" I cock my head, confused.

"What if he fell off the edge?" The boy seemed genuinely concerned.

I smile, rubbing the puppy's warm head. "He won't. But he's not mine for long. I don't know what his next owner will do with him."

"Next owner?"

I stand up and gesture at the edge of the rock. "Do you know what all of the paintings are?"

"They're your oracle images, aren't they?"

I turn to him, solemn now. "Yes. I have painted those for sixty-eight years. I have finished the circle."

He is listening intently. I continue.

"There is nothing left for me to do here. The cycle must go on. Tonight, I will choose from the crowds a new oracle. The rains will come."

I hold his gaze.

"And then I will go to the edge before the darkness. And then I will die."

The boy looks slightly disgusted. He does not speak for a moment. "How?"

A simple question. "I shall give up. The rains will take me. When the darkness lifts, I will be gone."

He sighs, frustrated. "Why?"

I am taken aback. "Why what?"

“Why must you die? You’ve lived your whole life in service to us. Why not come down to earth, reunite with your family, live out your last days the way you were meant to?”

I am silent. Then, “This is the way it has always been done. Who are we to deny it? What will come of us if we do?”

The young man places the puppy on my lap, and I stroke it gently with a hand I hadn’t realized was trembling.

“The oracles will be no more. People could perish, with no one to turn to.”

A lone tear streaks down my aged face. The young man wipes it away.

“The oracles will still be here. We can change the ending if we choose to.”

I am overcome. I want so much to follow him away. “

I will go down,” I say at last, shaken. “But I understand something now. Something you need to know.”

He helps me up from the swing, and we walk to the painting. The one depicting the dove.

“Your cousin. She is not dead,” I whisper, looking up into the young man’s face.

“The messenger was mistaken. She has turned for the better.”

The Sojourner

By Hannah Stine

He rode into town with the sun blazing behind him and an unbidden messenger racing ahead. "Pa!" a boy cried, running into the faded town just in front of the horse and its rider. "Look!"

The stranger entered the town, sending up a plume of sand as he reined in his horse. A young woman, caught in the storm of dust, fanned it away furiously. "Look at my dress. It's ruined! Why, if my mother heard of this—"

The man looked at her and she froze. "My apologies, ma'am," he said. He descended from his horse, leading it on without a further glance.

The woman ran over to her friends, loudly proclaiming that she had been caught in the glory of a hero.

"He could be an outlaw," a friend hissed.

"Who cares?" The woman's scoff tapered off as she simpered, "At least he stopped by *me*!"

The stranger pushed his hat low, brushing dust out of the horse's mane. After watching it dip its head into a trough, he strode into the saloon.

"Pa," the boy said, his voice a loud whisper. "Did you see his hat, his boots, his gun?"

The boy's father glanced at the saloon doors, still swinging from the latest entry. "I saw him," he assured. "We've got ourselves a cowboy."

The pounding of a piano and the bright swirl of skirts nearly eclipsed the cowboy's arrival as he stepped into the saloon. His silhouette cut an impressive figure at the sky-framed doors for only a moment; he quickly edged towards the tables that had been pushed to the back. Despite this, he still felt eyes on him. Turning towards the center of the room, he tipped his hat. Then, as if the effort had exhausted him, he collapsed in the furthest chair.

The saloonkeeper hurried over to him. "What will you be wantin', sir?"

His eyes hooded in shadow, the cowboy replied, "Jus' some water, please."

"Nothin' stronger?"

"Water's jus' fine."

As the cowboy waited, fingers tapping on the table in time with the music, a young woman entered the saloon. Clothed in a faded dress, she stood away from the dancing. Looking towards the back, her eyes widened.

Skillfully avoiding the reckless crowd, she walked towards the cowboy.

He stood, pulling out a chair as she approached.

The young woman accepted it with a laugh. "Well, it isn't ev'ry day that I'm treated like a lady."

An unexpressed smile crinkled the cowboy's eyes and he merely tipped his hat as he went back to his chair. "Ma'am."

The young woman's smile dimmed. "Sir," she replied with a solemn nod. Her eyes, a honey brown, peered over at him. After swishing her braid behind her, her freckled face broke into a grin. "You needn't call me ma'am. You know everyone calls me Betty."

"Yes, but it ain't proper," the cowboy said.

"You an' your manners!" Betty exclaimed.

The cowboy leaned forward. "An' you an' your ways. How did you know I was here so quickly?"

Betty laughed. "Have you seen the size of this town? We all live on the same street. I was on my way to the store when I saw your horse an' heard the gossip. Why?"

A glass of water beset itself before the cowboy. Looking up, he found the saloonkeeper waiting for approval. He downed half the glass and declared, "It's the finest water I've tasted on God's green earth!"

The saloonkeeper beamed and left.

Betty's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Don't they realize that you come 'round every year?"

"They must not. Do lots of cowboys come 'round here?" the cowboy asked, smiling.

"No, but when you come everybody acts like you're the grandest thing they've laid their eyes on. I overheard Susanne sayin' that—" Betty caught his expression and crossed her arms. "You were kiddin', weren't you?"

The cowboy hid his smile behind another sip of water. "I jus' like visitin' the locals. Who am I to be nasty if they don't remember a face?"

"Some of us remember your face, ev'n if we only get to see it once a year," Betty muttered. She sighed, then asked, "Why *do* you keep comin' back?"

"I herd cattle half the year an' ride through the desert the rest. My path takes me through this town sometimes."

"But you never stay long," Betty said.

The cowboy looked down at the table, silent.

Betty placed her hands over the cowboy's suddenly, excitement in her eyes. "Tell me about your travels," she pressed. When he pulled his hands away and gave her a questioning look, she added, "You're my only friend who leaves this ghost town."

"What about Susanne?"

"That'd be somethin'," Betty said with a laugh. "She's the biggest gossip in town. She's not friends with her victims. No, you're my only friend." Betty crossed her arms. "I think that earns me a story."

The cowboy pushed his hat up. "Very well." Glancing at Betty, he warned, "My stories are not for the faint of heart." When Betty nodded earnestly, the cowboy took a deep breath and began. "The day began like any other. The sun rose, an' I got on my horse. The cows mooed sorrowfully, promisin' a hard day—"

Betty laughed, and the cowboy grinned. "I don't want to hear about the cows. I want to hear about the desert. About your travels. About *you*. I've been stuck here all of my years. An' yes, I've seen cows." A grin pulled at her lips, but it quickly faded. "I could use a bit of light in my life."

The cowboy swallowed. "How do you mean?"

"Tell me about the sky. You must see some beautiful sunsets."

The cowboy hesitated, then said, "The sun castin' its glow in the sky is only part of it. The plateaus are burnt orange, brilliant in the comin' dusk. An'— An' the shadows

spread out behind the cacti, tryin' to claim the day, but it jus' don't work. The light's too bright to be quenched."

"That sounds beautiful," Betty murmured. "Bein' alone in the palm of creation."

"Cept I'm not alone," the cowboy corrected. "I'm at peace."

"How do you mean?"

"I live my life as a cowboy," the cowboy said, "but I'm not. Not really."

Before Betty could ask what the cowboy meant, a man swaggered over. His eyes glassy, he slurred, "Betty, dance with me, would ya?"

Betty stiffened.

"Aw, come on, Betty. You're the prettiest doll in town. I'm not so bad lookin' myself... What do you have against the one-step?"

Betty lifted her chin. "It's not the dance that bothers me, Billy. Like I've told you before, my answer is no."

"Girl, you've got to get on your feet at some point. Ya ain't a scrap of a girl anymore," Billy said. The cowboy leaned forwards and Billy looked at him. "What? Ya got a problem?"

The cowboy stood, keenly aware that the piano had ceased playing.

Betty put a hand on the cowboy's arm, silently urging him to sit down. He stood regardless, knowing that the situation had already become what Betty feared: a scene.

"I told you," Betty repeated, looking at Billy. "I'm not dancin' with you."

"I wasn't askin'."

"And yet you have your answer," the cowboy said, his voice low. "If you can't accept it, then git."

Billy looked the cowboy up and down, eyes narrowed. He snatched the glass from the table; swallowed the water in a messy gulp. His fingers tightened.

Slam!

Betty flinched as the glass pounded against the table. The cowboy met Billy's gaze steadily, even as Billy leaned towards him, fuming, "I ain't listenin' to a vagrant like ya."

The cowboy reached towards his holster. "I said git."

Billy backed up. "Ya wouldn't." He glanced at Betty. "Not for a girl like her."

"Says who?" the cowboy asked, his fingers twitching. "A boy like you who went into all this trouble just for her?"

Betty stood, brushing the cowboy's hand away from his revolver. "Billy can stay," she said. "I was jus' leavin'."

The cowboy eyed Billy warily before following Betty. The spurs of his boots jangled in their own ghostly chorus until the doors shut behind him and the piano resumed its jovial tune once more.

The cowboy looked around the wispy town and concurred with Betty's description. It was a ghost town, if he'd ever seen one.

He turned to find Betty staring at him. "What?"

"I know what you're thinkin'."

The cowboy followed her to a rickety bench. "What's that?"

"A life lived in a town that can be blown over in a stiff sandstorm is hardly a life at all."

"Ma'am—"

"It's not the buildings, it's the people," Betty continued, heedless of the cowboy's concern. "They put on a dance just to fill their cups, but by the 'morrow, their buckets will have run dry." She put her arms around herself, staring at the cowboy's horse. "Why can't you take me with you?"

The cowboy sighed. "The life I lead, it's dry as a desert."

"The life you described sounds beautiful."

"Ma'am... There's snakes, bandits, an' any number of things that want to kill ya. It's no place for a lady like yourself."

"And this is?" Betty waved her arm towards the dusty street. "I want to be with you. Who else do I have besides you?"

"You have the Lord, ma'am."

Betty turned towards him sharply. "What consolation is that supposed to be when you're sittin' right here?!"

The cowboy looked away. "I work alone."

Betty leaned closer, her eyes pleading. "Then change vocations."

"I can't. This is my calling."

"Then, by God, I hate your calling," Betty said vehemently.

The cowboy looked at her in surprise. "Don't swear the Lord's name, ma'am. Keep Him close to your heart."

"How can you say such a thing?"

"I learned it the hard way," the cowboy said, regret evident even in his shaded eyes. "But you- You don't have to become hard to realize the Lord's hand is upon you."

Betty studied him intently, then asked, "Who are you?"

"Pardon?"

"If you're not a cowboy, an' you're not a vagrant, then who are you?"

The cowboy looked down at his hands. "I'm jus' a sojourner."

A scream tore through the air. Betty and the cowboy whipped around as a man ran out of the general store. Pale bags weighed down one hand and the other gripped a cold, shining revolver. Women froze in the street; a boy looked on in horror.

Betty and the cowboy stood, she gripping his arm.

"Get inside," the cowboy ordered, already striding towards the store. He pushed against the current of townsfolk who were scattering in the opposite direction, his hand gripping his own Colt's cool frame.

"You'll come with me," the thief told the boy, pointing his gun at the lad.
"Wouldn't want anyone gettin' ideas, would we?"

"Any ideas like this?" the cowboy asked, pressing the barrel of his revolver to the thief's head.

The man shuddered. "I don't have a problem with this boy, Deputy. Don't make me have a problem." His finger inched towards the trigger.

"Who said I'm the deputy?" the cowboy growled.

The man's finger hesitated by the trigger, and the boy's eyes widened. The cowboy set his mouth into a thin line and did the only thing afforded to him.

Betty rushed out of the saloon with the rest of the townsfolk, reaching the cowboy as others carried the thief's limp body away.

"I don't believe it," Betty said, trembling. As much as the cowboy wanted to wrap an arm around her, he didn't. "The others– When we were watchin', they were sayin' that maybe we'd see a real shoot-out. An' you know what? I don't think they cared who would've won."

The cowboy looked at the townsfolk and a few of them giggled. He turned back to Betty with a sigh. "It's not winnin' or losing, ma'am. It's a constant fight for life." He glanced at his Colt, which had knocked the thief on the head only moments before. "An' I wasn't goin' to let myself nor the thief take one."

"What you did was brave," Betty conceded. "But I was scared."

"Goin' to the saloon was the right–"

Betty looked up sharply. "I wasn't scared for myself. I was scared for the boy. An' for you."

The cowboy scuffed his boot in the sand. "Bett–"

A man stepped in front of the cowboy, stretching out his hand. His other arm wrapped around the boy. "Thank you kindly, sir."

The cowboy shook his hand, frowning as the townsfolk formed a line. He shook hand after hand and the saloonkeeper brought out a free round for everyone. The piano started to pound out notes twice as loud, and the party from the saloon moved out to the dusty street. The cowboy turned towards Betty, but she had vanished.

The deputy arrived soon after. "We have the thief in custody now, thanks to you," he grinned. "Tell me your name, lad, an' be sure to look me up if you ever need anything."

The cowboy shook his head. "I couldn't."

"Pardon?" The deputy cupped his hand next to his ear, then tapped a girl on the shoulder. "Go in an' tell the pianist to stop!" The girl ran towards the saloon, and the deputy smiled sheepishly. "If I didn't know these townsfolk, I'd think that they're tryin' to make me more deaf than I already am!"

The music lurched to a stop, and the dancing quickly ceased. The deputy turned towards the crowd, clapping his hands. "Folks, this man brought an outlaw to justice an' saved the life of little Timmy. I expect you to treat him with the highest esteem–"

"Don't bother," the cowboy interrupted. "I was about to leave, anyway."

"Then how do you expect us to repay you?" the deputy asked.

"I don't." The cowboy looked him in the eyes. "Just remember that a deed's been done an' who it was done for."

The townsfolk turned to one another, excited. "He did it for me," a young woman declared breathlessly.

The boy stepped up. "Don't listen to Susanne. You did it for me, didn't you?"

The cowboy tousled the boy's hair. "No, lad, though I'm glad you're safe."

The boy looked up, confused.

"I did it for life," the cowboy said, looking at the crowd. "I did it for love. I did it because in the end, love lives."

Billy stepped forward, thrusting a half-full glass in the air. "You heard him!" he shouted. "To life!" The crowd cheered. "To love!" The crowd raised their glasses up. "To..." Billy frowned, then roared, "To free drinks!" The crowd cheered the loudest yet.

The cowboy shook his head, bemused, then searched the crowd. When he found who he was looking for, he tipped his hat.

The crowd parted, leaving Betty standing alone. She held the cowboy's gaze knowingly, smiling despite the others' glares.

The cowboy walked away from the crowd. He had already mounted his horse when he felt a hand brush his arm.

Betty gazed up at him. "Why are you leavin' so soon? You just got here. An'... the others. They're so happy you came."

"They won't remember me when the year's out," the cowboy said. "'S'always this way in a bone dry town. In a bone dry world."

Betty put a hand on his saddle. "I won't forget you. How could I?"

The cowboy smiled. "I know. You're too keen for that."

Betty patted the saddle, frowning. "What do you have in here?"

"Life." The cowboy nodded towards the store. "A truth worth more than what would've been taken from the store. It's how I survive." He looked down at her. "You know what I'm talkin' about. You have a different life in you."

Betty's hand dropped away. "How do you know it won't be whisked away in this dry wind?"

"Look towards the sky, an' pray without ceasing."

"You'll come back, won't you?" When the cowboy remained silent, she grabbed his arm. "Promise me."

The cowboy looked away. "I won't make a promise I can't keep."

Betty's hand dropped to her side, her eyes alight like fire. "You'd better come back. I'll be waitin'."

The cowboy tipped his hat. "I wish you the best, Betty."

"What happened to ma'am?"

The cowboy shook his head. "You'll always be Betty to me." He started his horse at a slow trot, glancing back to see Betty staring after him, aglow even in the swirling dust.

He rode into town with the sun blazing behind him but came back years later in the cool of the night. Betty stood on her porch each night after their parting, wondering about the silhouettes that rode across the fiery horizon.

One night, Betty had turned to go inside when a voice said, "Betty, I'm here."

Betty turned around, finding the cowboy on the steps of her porch.

Betty's hair shifted around her, casting shadows on her face. The door behind her creaked in the wind. "An' who are you?"

The cowboy took off his hat. "I'm a sojourner. But I've finally found my home, if you'll have me."

Betty looked away, tears in her eyes.

"What is it?"

"It's been hard," Betty said shortly. "I was the talk of the town before Billy... Well, Billy died years ago, when he sinned so hard that even God couldn't stop the vengeance comin' his way." She sighed. "I didn't mind bein' the gossip, knowin' the truth, but I almost thought..." She searched the cowboy's face. "Why are you here?"

The cowboy knelt before her, reaching for her hand. When she slipped her fingers into his, he said, "The sunsets... they lost their grandeur. I used to think that God had given me the sky as a canvas, but things changed when... When I realized that the true beauty God had given me was you."

High School Winners

Second Runner Up: The Call of Discovery

by Maggie Libby

I awoke to a loud, hurried knocking on my cabin door. Groaning as I picked up my glasses and brushed my blunt bangs out of my face, I got out of bed and unlocked the door.

"What?" I yawned, trying to seem less irritable than I was. The excited face of my coworker grinned back at me, gripping what appeared to be a jar of shriveled toothpicks. I sighed internally, knowing this was surely another one of her experiments. "Hi Ana!" she exclaimed with a jittery speed, drumming her fingers on the glass as she spoke, "Uhm, I know you said not bother for any more diving missions, and to just get Kate or Jonah to do it, but-"

"No." I cut her off mid ramble. Out of the seven workers stationed here, Reese was the lab's resident marine life researcher who had a habit of getting overly excited over small findings. If she discovered so much as a new type of algae, she would beg the divers to get her fifty more samples. She dressed as eccentrically as she acted, too, with a nose chain across her face and her dark brown hair in a braided jellyfish haircut.

"I told you, it's not my job. I'm a mechanic, not a bacteria hunter. Besides, It's late and the water's freezing cold."

"But you're the only other person here with major diving experience," She raved, "and Kate's down with the flu so she can't, and Jonah's up-"

"Wait," I interjected, "Kate's got the flu? How does that even happen? We're completely isolated." She shrugged lightly, a twinge of annoyance in her voice now that I'd interrupted her twice. "Well, the point is that Kate can't swim and Jonah's not here, so you're my only option. Please, Ana?" She stretched the please out like people do when they're really desperate, and held her jar up as if she were clasping her hands. This gave me a chance to see the container's contents better, which appeared to be small, dried up, leech-like creatures.

“What even are those, some kind of new nudibranch you found?”

She smiled like a little kid as I realized what I’d unleashed.

“Actually, they seem to be some kind of flatworm, which is weird because they don’t look at all like the average marine variant. They behave strangely too! like they can’t leave the water or else they shrivel up like these ones.” She pushed the jar closer to my face. “I tried a few different liquids, and it turns out they can survive in most fluids, so long as the solute isn’t too thick. They also seem to have some kind of tusk or tooth on the front of their head, which is why I’ve named them Swordfish Worms, or Xiphias Platyhelminthes if you wanna be real scientific. Still not sure why they have it, but my guess is that they’re some type of scavenger, since they showed up around the time that Sperm Whale carcass did-”

I held my hand up to pause her rant “I’m sorry; whale carcass? You want me to go collect underwater maggots from a whale carcass?”

“I mean, it should be fine-”

“*Should* be?”

“Well, it’s early enough in its decomposition that there probably aren’t many predators yet.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m more concerned about having to dig around a dead whale to find worms. Besides, didn’t you already collect your samples? You are holding a jar of them.”

Reese looked at me disappointedly. “These samples are all dead, I accidentally killed them early on and need new ones. Please Ana, I know you’re not as interested in this project as the rest of us, but this may be the only time we encounter this species! I need to study them as much as possible.” We stood in silence for a moment, both stubborn about our positions.

Finally, Reese spoke up, having formulated a new plan. “I’ll make those pancakes you like?”

I perked up at this. She was the only person in this lab that could make actually edible pancakes, and I had been craving them for months.

“You.. can do that?” I hesitantly asked.

“Sure!” She said, excited by my sudden interest. “It’s my turn to cook this week, anyways. I’ll make them every morning if you agree to this, please?”

I paused for a moment, before dramatically sighing in a defeated tone. Her face lit up at the victory, jumping forward as she thanked me over and over again. I had to catch her and the worm jar before going to get my wetsuit.

As I stood in the dark changing room, I looked down at the diving mask in my hands. Aside from the obvious disgust of having to reach through what was definitely a biohazard, I was also hesitant to go out because of my poor vision. I can’t see anything without my glasses, and my employers were yet to get me a prescription mask. I thought about my employers. I never looked into them much, just the advertisement they had sent out about needing an on-site mechanic. It seemed like this whole thing was a passion project of theirs, but I couldn’t understand why they put so much money into it. I mean, is an entire underwater lab really necessary? Whatever the case, I didn’t really care. I was just here for the good pay. An impatient tap came from the outside of my stall.

“Hey, are you almost ready?” Reese called from outside.

“Yeah yeah,” I responded, “I’m coming.”

Finally, we reached the docking bay. Despite it sporting the only windows in the entire facility, the room was just as artificially lit as the rest of the place. With no light reaching this deep under the waves, the three large circular windows only showed the pitch black trench. As I began making my way down the tile floors towards the diving pool, Reese continued to talk and hand me a few instruments.

“Here’s a communicator so I can monitor you for safety.”

“I thought you said this would be safe?”

“It is safe. This is just for.. Extra safety, you know?”

“Right..”

“Oh! And here’s a container for more professional sample collection. Could you try to get some whale meat along with the worms? I wanna see how they interact with it, or if they lay eggs!”

I shuddered internally, silently reminding myself of my pancake reward. “Yeah, sure thing.” I said as I finished securing my mask and air tank. I dove into the freezing water, the cold hitting me despite my insulated wetsuit as I swam into the murky blackness.

It took a while to find the site, but Reese guided me towards it, listing random deep sea facts that did not help.

“Did you know that we know more about outerspace than we do the deep sea? How cool is that? It’s like we’re reverse astronauts; pioneers in our field. Oh! There’s the carcass. Do you see any worms?” I in fact couldn’t, as I wasn’t wearing my glasses, but couldn’t exactly tell her with my mouth containing a snorkel. I could see the whale, though. I swam over it, bracing myself as I deeply scraped the sample container across the rotten flesh. Suddenly, a gray cloud of nastiness burst from where I’d been collecting, exploding up directly into my face. I had to stop myself from gagging, quickly swimming back from the murky cloud.

“It’s ok!” Reese tried to reassure me, “I think you just hit its spermaceti. It’s the liquid sac in a Sperm Whale’s head that gives them padding for headbutting Colossal Squid. That should be a big enough sample, you can come back now!” Thoroughly grossed out, I had already been racing back to the entry, when I felt a sudden sharp pain in my side. I stopped swimming, clutching the area with a yelp that released in the form of a few bubbles. Reese noticed, her worried voice coming over the intercom.

“Are you ok?? Is that blood?! Nothing should be able to pierce those suits- get back here now!”

I swam the last few meters and surfaced back in the lab, hauling myself onto land and wincing at the stabbing pain. Reese quickly ran over, clearly distressed and hurling questions at me.

“What happened? Did something attack you? Are you hurt? I’m so sorry-” I was about to respond when a searing pain shot up my abdomen again. I gasped from the shock of it, writhing on the ground as it continued eating away. Reese felt around the area of pain, seemingly checking for the injury point.

“There’s barely a wound, I don’t understand! This seems serious, we need to get you to Clancy, **stat**.”

Unable to argue, I felt Reese hoist me up and drape my arm over her shoulder, helping me hobble through the pain all the way to the medbay.

A few hours after the incident, I knocked on Ana’s door again. After hearing a quiet “come in”, I entered the room to find Ana sitting up in bed, her expression tired. “I made pancakes.” I said, the guilt fairly obvious in my tone as I placed the tray on her lap.

She stared blankly at them. Her usually neat A-line bob was messy, and her face looked paler than usual.

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry right now.” she said wearily.

I felt myself deflate a bit, worry growing in my chest. She seemed to notice my concerns, sighing slightly before speaking.

“I’m not upset at you or anything. Just tired from the medication Clancy gave me.”

“Medication?”

“For the pain.”

“Oh. How is the pain? And the injury. Is it serious?”

“No, he said it was probably a cut that got inflamed by seawater. Barely even left a mark. He gave me some antibiotics and painkillers just in case. Barely hurts now.” I eased up at the light diagnosis, but something was still gnawing in the back of my mind.

“Did he have any idea how you got hurt?”

“Nope. Said it was probably some debris from when the whale popped. Apparently it’s pretty common for them to explode.”

I frowned. “Well, yes, whale carcasses do explode, but not like that. Usually it’s the guts that pop from methane gas build up-” Ana covered her ears and began doing that thing kids do when they don’t want to hear something.

“No! Nope. LALALALALALA! I can’t hear you. No more whale carcass talk, please. I’ve had enough of them for a lifetime.”

“Sorry,” I said, “I’ll leave you be. And I’m so sorry for this whole incident; I’ll make you pancakes for the rest of our careers.” She flopped down into her bed, shifting a bit onto her side.

“Hey Reese?” she suddenly spoke up, just as I was leaving her room. I turned to answer her.

“Yeah?”

“How deep can a human swim before being crushed by the pressure?” I was a bit surprised at the sudden question, but answered without hesitation.

“Well, 700 feet is the record, but with proper gear a person could hypothetically dive past that. Why do you ask?”

She smiled lightly to herself, like she actually found the answer interesting. “Just curious, I guess.”

I tried to smile back and left the room, making my way down to my lab. I had live samples now, so I might as well study them, right?

I sat down at my workspace, the container of foul meat water and sea worms sitting in front of me. I pushed some loose papers out of the way, booted up my computer, and started taking notes. While the majority of the worms had latched themselves onto the whale meat, a few had allowed themselves to float to the top of the container, gently brushing against the plastic cover as if waiting to continue their ascent. A couple of worms on the meat also seemed to be in the middle of some kind of mitosis. I was jotting all of this down when I suddenly realized; the worms were **latched** to the meat. A few had cleanly burrowed into the flesh, but most sat on its outside, using a snail-like mouth to break it apart instead. I didn’t get it, if the tusk wasn’t for feeding, then what did they use it for-

And then it hit me. How the worms got to the carcass so fast, why there were so many of them, why they didn’t look like their typical species, and what that stupid tusk was for.

There’s a type of land flatworm commonly called the *Green Banded Broodsac* that’s famous for its method of reproduction. Basically, it takes over a snail’s body, forcing the unsuspecting victim to make itself as visible to predators as possible. After the snail gets

eaten by a bird or some other animal, the worm reproduces in the bird's stomach. A little while later, a snail eats the waste and the cycle repeats itself. What if something similar existed underwater? And what if, instead of being eaten, it dug its way in? I felt so stupid for not seeing it before now. It was a parasite; a parasite that targets whales and messes with their nervous system, causing them to drown themselves.

Then, the worms eat the sunken carcass and reproduce before floating to higher waters, looking for their next victim. And if they could get through whale skin, then how difficult was a diving suit to penetrate?

I knocked over the tank as I rushed to the crew quarters, hoping I wasn't too late. I banged on Ana's door, yelling her name and for her to open up. I opened it myself, only to see an empty bed covered in spilled pancakes. No. **No. No!**

I heard a sound coming down the hallway. It was the slosh of water in the diving pool. I scrambled, hoping I was quick enough to stop whatever was happening. I reached the pool to see her walking into the diving pool's shallow end. She wasn't wearing any diving gear, yet didn't react to the ice cold water soaking her sweater, or the hundreds of black worms swarming around her feet, seeming to sense their oncoming dinner. The white bottom of the pool was almost completely obscured by the writhing mass.

"Ana!" I screamed after her, causing her to pause her death march and turn to face me. She looked at me, then gave a wide, genuine smile before fully diving into the abyss. Panicking, I dove in after her. Thousands of little worms brushed against me, swirling around us as they clung to the folds of our clothing. I wrapped around Ana's stomach, trying as hard as I could to swim back with her while being unable to see through the dark, worm filled water. I wasn't as strong a swimmer as she was though, and she kicked back into my stomach, knocking the air out of me. I finally had to relent and go up for air, gasping as I surfaced out of the icy water. Ana used this time to swim out, disappearing into the dark.

Everything was a blur after that. I remember crawling out of the water, shivering and wailing. The commotion had alerted the crew, who came rushing to the scene to question me. I wasn't coherent, though, still being hysterical from the event.

Ana never came back. The crew didn't believe me when I said it was the worms, they thought I was misremembering things due to being shaken up. I couldn't prove it, the samples had died when I knocked their container over, and the rest had already left the desecrated whale, now a pile of bones. They aren't gone, though.

The others called the surface for help, they say they'll be here in a couple of days, but they won't come in time. I can already feel the pains under my skin, digging, gnawing through me until they finally reach my nervous system, and when they do...

I can already feel the call. I'm going to join Ana soon, whether I like it now or not.

First Runner Up:

It was a Dare

by Emily Tarazi

It was a dare. That's all it was. But somehow, it was that simple dare that changed my life for eternity.

"Truth or dare, Cam," Patrick asked me on that dark night, his freckled face gleaming in the light of the campfire. A mischievous smile curled up the corners of his chapped lips as he glared at me expectantly.

My gaze focused on the glass Coke bottle lying in the middle of the orange leaf-strewn floor—I hadn't realized that it was now pointing directly at me.

"We don't have all night, Cam," whined Tessa from her perch in a nearby tree.

"Okay, okay!" I readjusted my seating on the fallen log next to Margo, trying to stall for time. I was never good at party games. There always seemed to be some sort of strategy that I could never understand, especially with 'truth or dare.' Because if too many people pick truth, it starts to get boring, and if you pick truth when the person before you picked it, then everyone will call you the R-rated version of 'scaredy-cat.' Picking dare is risky, though, because if the wrong person chooses your dare, you can end up in big trouble (just like me). In my case, maybe truth would be better because Patrick is known to give insane dares...But then Tessa picked truth before me, and I don't want—

"Cameron! Hurry up!" Margo's empty plastic water bottle smacked the back of my head, startling me out of my thoughts.

"Ouch!" I sucked some of the crisp autumn air in through my teeth. "Okay, fine. No need to get all angry..." My mind was still a rumbling mess, but the four sets of narrowed eyes around me forced me to quickly blurt out, "D-DARE!"

A loud bellow echoed around us. "Finally! Something good!" A large figure emerged from the shadows. It was Ralph, finally returned from his 'potty break.'

"Quiet down, Ralph. You're going to give away our hiding spot to the *monsters*," Tessa eerily jeered as she jumped down from her tree. She took a spot next to Ralph on the ground, the leaves satisfyingly crunching beneath her.

"Very well!" Patrick started rubbing his hands together as he stared intensely into my soul. "I've been waiting for this moment...and I have the perfect dare in store for you, Cam." He giggled.

"And I'm not too excited to hear it..." I mumbled.

"Cameron Fitzwilliam *the Third*, I dare you..." Patrick paused as he steadily leaned over the campfire. We all held our breath, the only noise around us coming from the chirping crickets hiding within the shadows of the forest.

"JUST SPIT IT OUT ALREADY!" Tessa shouted after a full minute of silence.

"I dare you to...*sneak into Area 71*." Patrick murmured in an ominous, deep voice. The response was a mix of chuckles and gasps. My heart dropped into my stomach.

"Area 71?!?" I screeched. "Are you crazy? I can't just sneak in there!" My mind raced even faster as I visualized the tall chain-link fence surrounding the mysterious complex we locals dubbed 'Area 71,' named after the infamous 'Area 51' due to its equally unusual history.

"Sure you can," Margo said. "It's been abandoned for years, remember? Plus, I know a bunch of people who've done it."

I scoffed. "Everyone who goes in there disappears, you know that! We should all know that better than everyone else! Don't you remember her? Don't you remember what happened?"

Margo hesitated, her face paling as she stared at everyone else, her blue eyes begging for backup.

"It—it was a long time ago..." She murmured.

"It was LAST YEAR!" I shouted.

Dead silence.

Patrick coughed to lighten the tension. "Well," he started, his voice unusually cheery as he approached me, "you'll just have to be the first one who comes back!" He

slapped me a few times on the back as if we were old pals when, in fact, he knows that we were never close. "What do you say?" He stuck out his hand in front of me.

I narrowed my eyes at his hand, hoping that I would magically gain laser vision so I could shoot a hole right into it. "If you think I'm agreeing to this after—"

"Come on, Cam. What's the harm?" Ralph asked from his reclined position on the ground.

The harm is that I could go missing like her. Do you really want that for your friend? I nearly retorted.

"Cam," Margo whispered by my side. I turned to her, her eyes boring into mine. She glanced my face up and down and then murmured softly so only I could hear, "*It's like I don't even know who you are anymore...*"

That did it.

"Fine," I sighed as I clasped Patrick's sweaty hand. He grinned as he pulled me up.

"That's my man!" He slapped me on the back so hard I felt my spine break.

I rolled my eyes. "*Let's just get this over with.*"

"Finally, some real fun tonight!" Tessa cheered as she danced her way through the trees, her flashlight's beam of light swirling through the shadows. "I'm getting tired of Margo's dares... 'Oh, I dare you to burn your homework' this and 'oh, scream as loud as you can' that," Tessa mocked Margo in a whiny, high-pitched voice.

"I do not talk like that!" Margo retorted.

"Yeah, no offense, Margo, but Patrick's dares are way better," Ralph said in between crunching bites of chips.

"I actually *like* Margo's dares," I blurted out. "At least she has some sense, unlike *some of you*." I glared pointedly at Patrick and Tessa who just ignored me and kept on walking.

"It wasn't always like this, you know..." Margo mumbled. "Especially after S—"

I ignored her. "How much further, Patrick? It's getting late."

"Past your bedtime, is it, Mr. Perfect?" He replied in a baby voice.

I rolled my eyes. "*How much furth—*"

He paused in his tracks and turned to face me. “Just down here, okay? I promise we’ll get you in bed by nine-thirty...jeez...what else do you want? A bodyguard?” He then turned back around and continued walking.

Annoyed with my so-called friends, I remained behind to ‘tie my shoe’ as everyone continued off. But for some reason, Margo remained with me.

“Hey,” she murmured. I didn’t look up and pretended to continue tying my shoe even though it was already tied. “Hey, look. I’m sorry for reminding you of Sara—”

“Enough of this.” I stood up. “Let’s just go. So you can get back the *old me*, the *old us*, like you want.” I ran off, leaving her behind.

I can’t believe I’m about to make the same mistake Sara did last year...I thought as we trudged through the forest. Why am I even doing this? Why did they even suggest this when they know this is exactly how Sara disappeared...We were six friends, and now we are five. Do they want to become just four? Are we even friends?

But just then, Patrick’s voice cut through my thoughts, disintegrating my worries and rationality to dust. “Welcome to paradise!”

We were at the edge of the trees, staring at a tall chain-linked fence stretched out in front of us. It ran left and right into the surrounding forest for what seemed like miles. The barbed wire at the top had all fallen to the ground, and the bright yellow signs that clearly once read ‘DO NOT ENTER’ had all nearly faded.

“Okay, Cam. Just go in there, come back, and tell us what you find. Bring back anything interesting as a keepsake, alright?” Patrick patted me on the back and shoved a flashlight into my hand. “Godspeed, my friend.”

I turned and stared at everyone with dead eyes. “If I don’t come back, tell everyone this was *your idea*, not mine.” Before any of them could respond, I jumped onto the fence, hooking my shoes into the gaps, and started climbing.

It was like I was running a long-forgotten program inserted into my DNA. My hands knew exactly where to go—my legs too—yet my mind had no idea; it was struggling to catch up.

When I jumped down to the other side, I landed impeccably, like a superhero striking a pose. My friends cheered me on from the other side. They, of course, missed this side of me—and honestly, I kind of did too.

At first, I saw nothing. It was too dark, and the shadows creeping out from the forest seemed to be grasping at me, trying to drag me back to their dark lair. I flicked on the flashlight and all I saw was a deserted wasteland.

“There’s nothing here!” I shouted.

“Just keep walking!” Was their distant, ghost-like reply.

“Whatever,” I murmured as I walked forward, my sneakers crunching the dry dirt beneath me, swinging my flashlight around every now and then.

What a waste of time, I thought.

That was when I saw something in the distance. All of a sudden, there was a building standing directly in my path, shadowed by the night.

“I swear that wasn’t there before...” I whispered aloud.

My curiosity now piqued, I continued faster this time, heading towards the stout building ahead. But just then, I ran face first into a door.

“Woah!” I gasped, the dirty glass door in front of me fogging with my breath.

I turned around and took a few steps back, watching the building grow to full size in front of me. It was the one I saw earlier, but now I saw that it wasn’t just any old building—it was a 1950’s-style diner.

I opened the door, a bell jingling overhead as I did so. Inside was dark, dusty, and just as old as the exterior appeared. The booths that appeared to once be teal and red were now gray. A few of the bar stools were torn out of the ground and tossed along the checkered tiles. Parts of the ceiling had fallen out and lay upon the tables. Old picture frames lay broken, shards of glass everywhere. It looked like an earthquake had struck this old diner, but now all was eerily still and quiet.

I made my way through the mess, weaving in and out from between the tables.

Just garbage, I thought as I kicked aside a dusty, chipped milkshake cup lying on the ground. It clattered away from me, rolling to a stop right in front of a dusty, stained red velvet curtain probably leading to the kitchen.

“Nothing...” I sighed as I turned to leave.

But that’s when I heard it.

Is there someone else here? I stopped in my tracks and perked up my ears to listen.

There it was again.

A distant murmur of voices...a distant clatter of dishes...a distant wisp of peppy music. I turned around and stopped breathing, and the noises continued.

They were coming from behind the red curtain.

“Hello?” I called, taking slow, steady steps toward the curtain. Faint giggles sounded from behind it. The music grew louder. A man’s deep voice was singing. My gaze focused on the milkshake glass at my feet. My brain decided that it would make a good defense weapon, so I slowly leaned over to pick it up. But as I did, something caught my eye—a shadow peeking out from underneath the curtain...almost as if someone were standing right behind it.

I startled backward, holding my milkshake glass up at the ready. My breath shook and my heart fluttered as I suddenly shot my hand out in front of me and tossed the curtain open.

But no one was there—just a mirror.

“Huh?” I gasped as my eyes laid on the strange piece of glass in front of me. It wasn’t really a mirror—the glass was too foggy, too frosted. But it was just reflective enough for me to see my silhouette in front of me and the outline of the diner behind.

“Wait a minute...” I studied the silhouette closer. My breath halted as I realized—*that’s not me*. The person in the strange mirror was clearly wearing some sort of dress.

Suddenly, it lifted its hand and knocked. Two muffled thumps echoed throughout the deserted diner.

“*What?!?*” I gasped as I jolted backward. “Who—who’s there?” I pointed the milkshake glass at the odd mirror, my hand and voice shaking.

Muffled giggles trickled out from behind the glass. I timidly watched as the silhouette raised its hand in a wave. It seemed to turn behind it, and then more people silhouettes crowded into the skinny frame.

“What’s going on...” I mumbled as I watched them from a distance.

The first silhouette knocked again, startling me back to reality. It seemed to be saying something, but I couldn't hear it over the steady murmur of the music and clattering dishes. It then pointed to my right side.

I looked in that direction, and that was when I noticed a small picture frame on the chipped wall an inch from the edge of the mirror. It appeared that the whole wall used to be filled with picture frames due to its discoloring and the shattered glass and frames lining the floor. This one was the only one left.

I walked closer to the frame, bits of broken glass crunching beneath my sneakers. The shadows obscured the black-and-white photograph, so I dug out my flashlight and clicked it on.

At first, it looked like a black-and-white photo from the 50s taken in this diner of six people sitting at the bar with milkshakes in hand.

"What?" I narrowed my eyes on their faces. They looked oddly familiar...

It must be the dust.

I blew on it and coughed as the dust scattered around me.

"No," I murmured in disbelief. "*It can't be.*" I leaned closer, peering into the eyes of the kids in the picture, soon settling on the furthest right one who was sitting directly in front of the curtain and looked just like my twin, if I had a twin—

Before I could figure it out, something grabbed my left arm.

"AH—" I barely had time to scream as my face headed straight toward the mirror, but instead of hitting something smooth and solid, it was like I was falling through a chilly, dense cloud of fog. Then, all of a sudden, I was sprawled face-first on a checkered floor. The same music from earlier blared in the background now at full volume.

"Look!" Someone shouted. There were a few gasps and the clacking of racing feet. The music switched off with a screech.

"You're here!" A familiar girl's voice exclaimed.

"Finally, what took so long?" A familiar guy's voice added.

It must be the dust, I told myself. *Because why do these voices sound exactly like...*

"Hey, there, Cammie!" A freckled face popped up in front of me. I startled backward, rubbing my eyes furiously. "Long time no see, huh?"

Am I seeing things? Did some mold get into my system and poison me? Because why am I hallucinating Patrick right in front of me? And what in the world is he wearing?

"What's wrong, Cam? Are you alright?" My frozen gaze flickered away from the strange Patrick right in front of me to a familiar girl standing right behind him.

"How—what? You're supposed to be in the forest—?" I stammered as I stared up at Margo. She was there, but she was different. *What was she wearing?* It looked like a 50s-style poodle skirt, not something I would ever expect her to wear.

"I think he's just a little startled," a voice said from behind Margo. My eyes darted around, trying to find the source of the voice. As they did, they noticed the bright neon colors beaming up at me and the shiny, smooth freshness of it all. It was exactly like the photograph I looked at that exhibited a time back when the diner was new and pristine. But then that would mean...those kids in the picture...*I knew it...* It all makes sense now...*But how?*

"No, he'll freak out even more if he sees you," a deep voice added from the left of me. It was Ralph trying to stop someone from making their way through the crowd.

"What's going on..." I tried to whisper, but my voice came out tiny and strained.

"But I've missed him!" The voice exclaimed again.

"I don't think you should—" But it was too late.

"Hey there, Cam," Sara said as she burst through the barricade of my friends. "Would you like a milkshake? It'll make you feel better." She stuck out a shiny milkshake glass filled to the brim with bright pink strawberry cream.

The sight of her face dragged my mind back in time at lightspeed—to the moment when I received the horrid news. And that was when I realized, as the vivid memory of seeing their *five* faces on the evening news materialized before me: Sara wasn't the only one who went missing last year...*all my other friends did too.*

The truth that I refused: *I had been hallucinating them this whole entire time...*

And now they finally found me.

Or rather, *I found them.*

"No—The dare—" I started, planning on refusing the milkshake, but instead forcing my mind against the crushing realization of reality bursting inside of my mind. But that

was when Sara shoved me into the wall, forcing my mouth open with an unusually cold hand.

"I insist."

I was now reunited with my friends, and it didn't seem like they were going to let me leave anytime soon. Thanks to that dare I was now trapped in this warped reality.

But that didn't worry me for long, because as the thick, sickly sweet substance slid down my throat, all my troubles seemed to fade away...

As well as my will to return to the present day.

I swear it was a dare, but it turns out it was just me.

Third Place:

The Stradivarius Society

by Gwenyth Mayo

How far would you be willing to go for something you loved?

The year is 1870, and my father is staring, wide-eyed like a child, at my youngest sister. My mother excitedly claps at her. "Well done, Delilah." Delilah puts down her viola and beams. She is only 10, and a musical prodigy.

My family's world is perfect.

I tasted the sugar in my tea as I swirled the cup around in my hand. Dumping the dregs out, I looked at what leaves remained– a flower.

Even after her disappearance, Delilah still haunted me.

I smudged the leaves with my finger.

"Are you okay?" Alder, my brother, asked. His brown hair was flopping into his eyes. He needed a haircut– he had a tendency to ignore things like that when he got obsessive. "You have the most bizarre expression on your face."

"I'm just thinking," I said.

His almond eyes hardened. "Well, think less and let's practice more. We have only four days left until the orchestra audition. It's of utmost importance we focus." I loved him, despite his bossiness.

Deep, dark notes sounded from behind me. My sister Camille, pounding the keys of the piano, a gloomy tune. She's used the piano to cope. Alder joined on his violin, the lilting, haunting tones putting me at unease.

We've always had a taste for the morbid.

My family and I were filled with talent– the musical kind. Starting from the ripe age of three, my parents sat us down at the piano with an instructor and plopped a string instrument in our hands. All of us played the piano, although Camille could easily be considered the most skillful. She also dabbled in the double bass. My brother excelled on the violin. My cello is my prized possession.

Gifted, is what they called us.

Gifted?

I scoffed. No, we weren't gifted. *We were cursed.*

As Camille reached the pinnacle of her macabre piece, and Alder's highest notes soared along with her, I joined in, picking up my bow and drawing it across the strings. My calloused fingers were practiced, my posture upright and skilled.

It was moments like this I appreciated with my siblings. All of us, together, our melodies and harmonies intertwined, the different rhythms, our different techniques—one sound. Our sound.

But the moment was shattered as I tasted in my mouth the bitter flavor of...
Competition.

Jealousy flashing in our eyes as Camille earned a superior and Alder and I, only an excellent. The bitter scent of defeat as Alder received a handshake from the country's best orchestral conductor. Triumph better than no other when *I* was selected to play a solo piece.

A knock startled all three of us, abrupt noises coming from our instruments. Alder made a frustrated sound, annoyed that our rehearsal was once again interrupted. He made a vague gesture towards the door at me, and I hurried to the front room, fistfuls of my skirt in my hands. I wasn't sure what I expected to find at the door, but it definitely wasn't a smiling, soaking wet courier.

"A letter today!" The courier stood in the pouring rain. "Three, actually."

"Bella, don't let him stand there," Camille laughed, a jauntily teasing noise that jarred me to my core. I grabbed the letters and thanked the courier. Camille winked at him and he blushed. He opened his mouth, and she shut the door in his face.

"Are the letters from father and mother?" Alder asked. "They don't often write to each of us." My father and mother, on a desperate search to replace what they've lost.

"No, I..." I gasped. I dropped the envelopes to the ground. I scrambled to pick them up, thrusting them at one of my siblings.

Camille's eyes widened. "Is that—" She choked.

"The Stradivarius sign," Alder breathed. "That means..."

"We've been invited to the Stradivarius Society." I said.

"Pack quickly," Alder ordered.

Nothing could disguise the greediness in his eyes.

"Tickets for three?" The conductor checked our tickets and left. Soon after, the train was quiet. After all, only my sister, brother, and I sat in the cramped car, and we didn't have much to say. The invitation flashed in my mind once again.

Pale envelope. Creamy black seal. Spidery ink.

Below, the words that would change my family's life.

Dear Ms. B.-

1/27/72

Stradivarius began making instruments in 1660. No violin, viola, cello or guitar has been able to replicate the sound of a Stradivarius. His secrets have been well kept... by us.

You've been invited to join the Stradivarius society. Every 50 years, the most skillful musician is selected to learn the secrets of the Stradivarius.

But the competition is incredibly intense.

Do you dare?

Sincerely,

The Stradivarius Society

My breath caught in my chest. Every musician worth their salt had heard of the Stradivarius Society. Whispered between individuals, in corridors and other confidential places, the rumors flew wild.

Alder, especially, was intrigued. He studied potential patterns of the secret society, dived deep into evidence of its existence, and assured us his obsession would be worth it.

One year ago, shortly after Delilah's disappearance, Alder pulled me aside. Camille was in the other room, drowning her sorrows in piano playing.

"With recent events, I know how you must be feeling," he told me in a low voice.

Tears came to my eyes. I missed Delilah more than anything. It was hard, as nothing turned up, but I tried to keep my spirits up. It's what she would have wanted.

"I'm just here to say, don't worry. I want to reassure you that everything will be okay."

"Thanks, Alder. I miss her so much."

"What? Oh no, not the Delilah business. I meant you dropping to the second chair in the orchestra."

Disgust flared through me. Why did he have to bring that up? How could he say that in such a cold, calloused voice?

"I wanted to say the Stradivarius Society won't care. You've proved yourself in other ways. They don't test just musical ability, you know."

I slapped him.

With a shriek, the train shuddered to a stop. "We're here," said Alder in a hoarse voice. Camille gave him a grim smile.

We stepped into the station. It was nearly deserted, a lone man smoking a cigar on a bench reading a newspaper. He looked frail– and somehow, inexplicably dangerous. A cold wind brushed against the shell of my ear. Camille shivered. She'd dressed in one of her best gowns.

The man cleared his throat, snuffed out his cigar and put down his paper. He whipped out a black case and began to play the violin.

It was the most glorious sound I had ever heard.

Alder was in tears. "How did you learn to play like that?" he begged. The man grinned.

It was sinister.

"Become a Stradivari, and you could play like this too." He beckoned us to his carriage. "The competition awaits."

The dining room was grand. The windows stretched tall, thick turkish curtains framing a desolate scene outside. Dark and rainy, we sat at the dinner table, my plate in front of me full but untouched. It was a grand meal– yet none of the six of us could stand to eat.

Evelyn, Francis, and Grady. The other three competitors. Evelyn on viola, Francis on double bass, and Grady on guitar.

"My name is Henry," The man from the station suddenly said. He was wearing a tailored suit to accommodate his long limbs. "50 years ago, I stood in this very room. I was selected at 16 to be the next Stradivari."

Electricity shot through me. I'm 16. Suddenly, becoming a Stradivari seemed a lot more attainable.

"There will be five tests. Obviously, more than musical ability will be tested. But the tests shall not be revealed."

"What? That's not fair," Francis protested. He was a short, dark haired boy with an upturned nose and a petulant look on his face. "How am I supposed to win if I don't know what I'm up against?" He shot a lazy, bragging smile at Henry. "You know what I mean." His voice dropped to a whisper. "The other five don't stand a chance."

A gunshot rang out. Francis slumped over, blood pooling from his chest onto his dinner plate. "You've failed the test of grace." Henry said. "As such, you are no longer eligible for the Stradivarius Society."

All of our mouths dropped open. Bile rose in my throat as I stared in disbelief at Francis's body. He was annoying, yes, but was death the solution?

I heard a whimper from across the table. Tears pooling in her bright blue eyes, blonde braids down her back, Evelyn jumped up from the table. "You killed him!" She screamed.

"Yes, I did." Henry calmly said. Evelyn burst into tears, sobbing and wailing as loud as she could. She— I swallowed. She reminded me of Delilah, a little bit, whenever Delilah got upset. Evelyn blubbered, "But—But—"

Bang.

Evelyn's body fell to the floor. "You have failed the test of strength," said Henry. "Any other objections to the rules of the Stradivarius society?"

The four of us left were too shocked to shake our heads.

Henry told us, "You all will go to your rooms and change into appropriate concert attire. Then, you will be given an hour to practice the piece given to you. After one hour,

a servant will lead you down to the concert hall, where you will play..." He flashed a murderous grin. "For me."

The walk to our rooms was bleak. I nodded my heads to Alder and Camille, turning away. I realized this could be my last moment to speak to my siblings.

"Good luck," Alder said. He said it chopply, as if he didn't really believe it.

Camille thanked him. I hesitated...

"You too," I said.

Fifty five minutes later, I sighed. My fingers were cramped and shaking. I had never practiced as hard as I just did. I had never wanted anything as bad as to be a Stradivari.

"I am a winner." I hissed, fastening pearls around my neck. *"I am graceful, I am strong, I am loyal, I am talented, and I am a—"*

The door opened. My servant was here. She was an older woman, but not quite as old as Henry. She looked motherly, and I felt a pang, knowing what my siblings and I had lost, to have a chance to become a Stradivari. My mother and father were never quite the same after Delilah disappeared, but they loved my siblings and I despite that. Now, they would return home to an empty house.

"I am Isadora," she said. "It is time to come downstairs."

My walk with Isadora was silent. Scales and excerpts of the piece given to me rang out in my head. My fingers twitched, itching to show Henry exactly what I could do on my cello.

When I arrived into the concert hall, Camille, Alder, and Grady already sat silently with their instruments by their sides.

"Welcome, Bella." Henry said. "Since you are the last to arrive, you will play first." My jaw dropped. How was this fair? But I knew what arguing would get me—a bullet to the chest.

I unpacked my cello from its case and walked onto the stage.

I sat down, took a deep breath.

And I played like my life depended on it.

Because it did.

As my bow glided across the strings with practiced precision, memories arose of another time where I felt betrayed. I poured that emotion into my playing.

My performance was ethereal.

When I finished, the silence was as clear as glass.

Henry broke the shocked pause, with slow claps that shook me to my core. "Well done," he said.

Something strange was happening with Camille. She looked anxious, sweating, trapped beneath a mysterious thumb. She burst out into a sob, "You don't want Bella!!" She cried. "She's horrible, I swear. All my life she's treated us like we were nothing, like we were something she could easily break if she just tried." Her eyes widened, her voice dropped. "And she did break us--"

Henry pulled out his pistol and ended Camille's sentence. "Loyalty is the highest quality of a Stradivari. You have failed the test of loyalty, by speaking against your sister." He turned to Alder, as if nothing had happened, ignoring Camille's body on the floor. "It's your turn."

I longed to run from my seat and rush to Camille's side, begging her to be okay. I almost jumped up, but I quickly recalled Evelyn's death. I would not fail a test of strength. I would be strong, even though I had no sisters left. A twisted sort of satisfaction crept through me— one less obstacle to becoming a Stradivari. I envied Alder's confidence as he walked up to the stage. Alder snapped open his violin case. At once, he began to play.

It was good, but I knew he'd done better.

Still, was either of our performances good enough against Grady's?

When Alder finished, Henry clapped again. "Grady, it is now your turn."

Grady gave a half-smile, turning green. He walked onto the stage with his guitar, and sat down. Slowly, he started to pluck at the strings.

Out of my peripheral vision, I saw Henry move.

Bang.

"That was not the piece I gave you," Henry uttered. "A musician who ignores audition requirements does not deserve to be a Stradivari."

Grady collapsed, blood pooling on his guitar. What a pity.

It looked like a nice instrument.

"Alder and Bella," Henry announced. "The final trial will begin tomorrow morning, at breakfast. In the meantime, go to your rooms." I solemnly bid goodnight to both Alder and Henry.

One of us would be dead by supper tomorrow.

I was struggling to unclasp my pearl necklace when the door opened. I snapped my neck towards the ajar door.

"It's just me, Isadora." She said, "I wanted to tell you how much I loved your performance."

"Help me with this necklace," I demanded. It was demeaning to be found in such a helpless position. She hurried to help me. "Bella, I thought your performance was wonderful. Your playing, your eyes, they sparkled!"

My eyes glanced at the crystal vial on the vanity. I turned to Isadora and thanked her. "You may go now," I said.

The elaborate dining room was cold, and I shivered in my dress.

"How did both of you sleep?" Henry asked, passing around a plate of pastries. I took two. Since I couldn't stomach dinner the night before, I was starving. I offered the plate to Alder. He looked rather pale- I wondered if he was catching a cold.

"I slept well, thank you." It had been difficult to sleep with the memory of four dead bodies in my mind, but I managed. It's not like I hadn't seen one before. "Alder, you?"

Alder's hand swerved towards his fork, and he missed it slightly. I smiled, amused. "Yep," he mumbled.

"It's peculiar," I said to no one in particular. "I haven't felt this accomplished since... well, since Delilah died. It's been rough, keeping up such a... calculated facade."

“What!?” Alder shouted angrily. “She disappeared! She could still be alive!”

She couldn’t, but he didn’t know that. Henry eyed us warily, not wanting to get between us. I almost laughed. As a Stradivari, he would have done enough research on our family to know exactly what happened.

“I hear drinking a glass of cold water helps with anxiety,” I’m telling Alder ten minutes ago on the way to breakfast, just like I told Delilah then. *“You should try it.”*

A cold, sweet sip. *Too sweet.*

Now, Alder is mumbling and spitting nonsense. His body is shaking, his uneaten plate rattling as he tremors in his seat. Glistening eyes fall upon me, pupils dilated, and something seems to dawn on him.

But his body slumps over onto the pastries I offered him.

Two victims I was responsible for.

A single tear leaked down my cheek. “Oh Alder!” I cried. “I didn’t want to have to do this again.” My eyes gleamed. “But you and Delilah both stood in my way. The musical world is a cruel one.”

I pulled out the crystal vial and smiled at it. Belladonna, my namesake. What a wonderful thing.

Henry clapped solidly, echoing in the room. It was just us alone. “Congratulations, Bella.” He said. “You have passed my final test... of ruthlessness. You are the next Stradivari.”

I tucked the bottle away and shook his hand. “When do I begin?”

How far would you be willing to go for something you loved?

Second Place:

The Lighthouse Keepers

by Anshu Emani

The wind howled, whipping the sea into a frenzy of churning waves that crashed relentlessly against the cliffs. Above it all, a solitary lighthouse stood, its beam sweeping across the darkened ocean, searching, watching.

Inside the small, cramped quarters of the lighthouse, Thomas O'Neill paced restlessly. His brow furrowed in concentration as he glanced constantly at the log book lying open on the table. The ink smudged from the moisture hanging thick in the air. The flame of the old lamp flickered in rhythm with the storm outside, casting his face into shadow.

"How long's it been now?" a voice came from behind him.

Thomas turned to see his partner, Isaac Moore, standing in the doorway of the small kitchen. Isaac's body leaned against the doorframe, his face pale and drawn from days of little sleep.

"Four days," Thomas said, rubbing his chin. "Four days since the last ship passed by. I reckon we'll have another storm like this for the next three, maybe four."

Isaac nodded, stepping into the room and sitting down on one of the wooden chairs. The lighthouse creaked and groaned under the nonstop wind, but it was sturdy. It had survived worse storms than this.

"Seems every year the storms get fiercer," Isaac muttered. "The sea's angrier."

Thomas nodded absently, his mind drifting elsewhere. He couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled over him since the storm had begun. Isaac was right — the storms had grown more violent each season, but it wasn't just the weather that had changed. There was something else, something deeper. Something he couldn't name.

"Remember that ship last month?" Isaac asked, his voice low, as though he feared the walls might overhear. "The one that didn't come back?"

Thomas looked up, meeting Isaac's eyes. "I remember."

"It's been bothering me," Isaac continued. "We saw her leave port. A cargo ship, a big one too. Never saw her return. Not a trace of her. No wreckage, no survivors."

"Maybe she changed course."

"Maybe," Isaac echoed, though the doubt in his voice was clear.

Thomas sighed and sat down across from him, placing his hands flat on the table. "We can't think about that now. We've got enough to worry about with this storm. If something happens to one of the ships out there tonight..."

Isaac shook his head. "I know. But something's not right, Tom. You've felt it too, haven't you?"

Thomas hesitated. He had felt it — an odd tension in the air, like the whole sea was holding its breath. But what could he say? They were lighthouse keepers, not fortune-tellers.

"I don't know," Thomas finally replied. "Maybe it's just the isolation, the storms. We've been out here a long time."

"Too long," Isaac muttered, staring at the floor. He suddenly stood up, as though the conversation was too heavy to continue. "I'll check the oil in the lamp."

Thomas watched him leave, the door creaking shut behind him. The room fell silent except for the endless roar of the storm. He couldn't help but think of the ship Isaac had mentioned, the one that had vanished. Ships didn't just disappear, not without leaving something behind — a piece of scrap, a distress signal, something. But they'd heard nothing.

Hours passed, and Thomas finally managed to doze off at the table, his head resting in his arms. When he woke, the first thing he noticed was the silence. The storm had quieted, the winds reduced to a whisper. For a moment, it felt as though the entire world was holding its breath.

He blinked the sleep from his eyes and sat up. The clock on the wall ticked softly, marking the slow passage of time. Isaac wasn't back yet.

"Isaac?" Thomas called out, standing up. He crossed the room and opened the door to the tower stairs. The steps spiraled upward into darkness, the distant hum of the lamp barely audible.

“Isaac?” he called again, louder this time.

No response.

Frowning, Thomas climbed the stairs two at a time, his footsteps echoing in the narrow space. As he reached the top, he pushed open the heavy door leading to the lantern room, expecting to find Isaac tending to the flame.

Instead, the room was empty.

The great light turned in its slow, steady arc, casting beams out over the ocean, but Isaac was nowhere to be seen. The oil canister was still half-full, untouched since the last inspection.

Thomas’s heart began to race. He stepped out onto the narrow walkway that circled the top of the lighthouse, peering through the iron railings into the stormy night. Below, the sea crashed violently against the rocks, and in the distance, the faint outline of a ship appeared on the horizon.

His breath caught in his throat.

The ship wasn’t moving.

It was just... sitting there. A shadow on the water, its sails slack, its silhouette barely visible in the mist.

“Isaac!” Thomas shouted, but his voice was swallowed by the wind.

He raced back inside, nearly stumbling down the stairs in his haste. Where had Isaac gone? Had he gone out onto the cliffs? Had he fallen? Panic gripped Thomas as he burst out the front door of the lighthouse, the cold wind hitting him like a wall. He scanned the cliffs, but there was no sign of Isaac anywhere.

And the ship was still there, looming on the edge of the horizon.

Thomas turned and ran back inside, grabbing the lantern from the table and lighting it with trembling hands. He threw on his heavy coat and boots before stepping back out into the storm. He had to find Isaac. Something was wrong, deeply wrong, and he wasn’t going to sit by and let it unfold.

He made his way down the narrow path leading to the cliffs, his lantern casting long, flickering shadows. The waves below were a constant, thunderous roar, and the

wind tugged at his clothes, threatening to pull him off balance. But he kept going, calling Isaac's name over and over.

Finally, just as his voice began to give out, he saw something. A figure, standing near the edge of the cliff, staring out at the sea.

"Isaac!" Thomas shouted, running toward him.

Isaac didn't turn around. He stood, his back to Thomas, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. His hair was wet, plastered to his head, and his clothes whipped violently in the wind.

Thomas reached him and grabbed his shoulder, spinning him around.

"Ike! What are you—"

Isaac's eyes were wide, glazed over, like he wasn't really seeing anything at all. His face was pale, and his lips moved soundlessly, as though he were trying to speak but couldn't find the words.

"Isaac, snap out of it!" Thomas shook him.

Slowly, Isaac blinked, his gaze focusing on Thomas.

"I saw it," he whispered, his voice barely audible above the wind.

"Saw what?"

"The ship," Isaac said, his eyes wild. "It's not... it's not right. It shouldn't be here."

Thomas glanced back at the horizon. The ship was still there, unmoving, like a ghostly specter watching them.

"We need to get back inside," Thomas said, tugging at Isaac's arm. "Come on."

But Isaac wouldn't move. His gaze was fixed on the ship, his body stiff and unresponsive.

"They're waiting," Isaac murmured, his voice distant. "They're waiting for me."

Thomas's blood ran cold. "Who's waiting?"

Isaac's lips parted in a chilling smile, and his voice dropped to a whisper.

"The ones who never came back."

Thomas had to drag Isaac back to the lighthouse, half carrying him through the wind and rain. By the time they stumbled inside, both men were soaked to the bone, their faces pale from cold and fear.

Isaac collapsed into a chair, staring blankly at the wall. Thomas slammed the door shut and locked it, as though that would keep the storm — and whatever was out there — at bay.

“What the hell happened out there?” Thomas demanded, kneeling in front of Isaac. “What did you see?”

Isaac didn’t respond at first. He just sat there, his fingers twitching slightly, his eyes vacant.

“They were calling to me,” Isaac finally whispered. “From the ship. I could hear them. They want me to go with them.”

“No,” Thomas said firmly. “It’s just the storm messing with your head. There’s no one out there. You’re safe here.”

Isaac shook his head slowly, his lips trembling. “You didn’t hear them. You didn’t see...”

Suddenly, a loud crash echoed from above. Both men looked up, their breath catching in their throats.

“The lamp!” Thomas sprang to his feet.

He raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time, with Isaac stumbling after him. When they reached the lantern room, they found the great light flickering erratically, the wind howling through a window that had been blown open.

But that wasn’t what stopped Thomas cold.

The ship.

The ghostly, unmoving ship— was no longer on the horizon.

It was directly below the lighthouse, its dark silhouette looming in the waters just off the cliffs.

And standing on its deck, barely visible through the mist, were figures. Shadowy, indistinct figures, watching them.

“They’re here,” Isaac whispered, his voice shaking. “They’ve come for me.”

Thomas backed away from the window, his heart pounding in his chest. “No, they haven’t. We’re not going anywhere. We’re staying right here.”

Isaac looked at him, his eyes filled with terror and a strange kind of acceptance.
“It’s too late. They’re already inside.”

Thomas turned, his stomach lurching, and saw the door to the lantern room slowly creaking open.

The wind howled, and the shadows moved.

First Place:

Entitlement, Inc.

by Clara Bloom

“Welcome to Entitlement, Incorporated: organizing your crime since 2398! My name is Amicus; how may I assist you today?”

Delia, Amicus’ supervisor, gave him an approving nod before strutting away to find her next victim—er, employee. Amicus immediately slouched down in his cubicle and double-tapped the side of his glasses to take the call off speakerphone.

“Hi, I’d like to meet with an advisor?” The woman had a high, tense voice, like a tedious tightrope that she might topple from at any moment.

“Of course. Have you filled out an Entitlement Request Form?” Amicus asked, trying to hold back a yawn. He’d been up late last night trying to organize loose ERFs—Entitlement Request Forms—and was now feeling the effects. Even the office coffee, with its abnormally high caffeine content, hadn’t managed to energize him.

“Yes, last week. I was just wondering if I’d hear back soon, or if I need to schedule an appointment.”

“I’m sorry, we’ve had an influx of requests recently,” Amicus apologized in his Customer Service Voice. “I can schedule an appointment for you now. What name would the Entitlement Request Form be under?”

“Samantha Roland,” she replied.

His glasses displayed augmented reality, showing him Roland’s ERF. After a quick glance, he saw she wanted Brayden Andrews—her boss—dead.

“Are you available for an appointment today?” Amicus asked, checking his own calendar and the calendars of Operatives.

“Oh! Actually, I am,” she spluttered. “I just finished dropping my kids off at school, so yes, I’m free.”

Amicus hid his surprise. Usually, the people commissioning murders were childless. Samantha Roland was an interesting exception.

"It looks like you want Brayden Andrews eliminated and his home destroyed?" Amicus checked.

"Yes, that's right. I'd like his house burned, but I want him dead first. Is that okay?" The anxiety tightened her tone again.

"Yes, that's all good," Amicus soothed. He was waking up now, his own interest drawing him out of his boredom. "You'll need to meet with both a murder expert and an arson expert. Looks like they're both open at... noon. Does that work?"

She checked her calendar and reported that yes, that was perfect. Amicus ended the call with a friendly goodbye, then rose from his desk to locate Layla and Dean, who worked, respectively, in the Murder Department and Arson Department.

On his way, though, he ran into Delia. He fought hard to keep annoyance from winning over his features as she clapped excitedly.

"I have news for you, Amicus!" she trilled, holding out a file.

Anticipation surged through Amicus. Recently, he'd applied for a job transfer to the Piracy Department. Answering the phones and setting up appointments might've been a good way to make connections, but he'd figured it was about time he start really advancing his career in Entitlement, Inc.

It had been twenty years since Earth's government had allowed Entitlement, Inc. to form. Crime rates had been off the charts with the advent of system-wide space travel, and Earth couldn't find a solution. After all, the police couldn't patrol every corner of the galaxy. With all the artificial intelligence and facial recognition, though, they were able to find and arrest criminals with ease, but then the prisons started overflowing. That's when Julieta Robin, now Entitlement's CEO, had an idea: instead of trying to end crime, why not legalize it—for a price?

Robin had proposed that, if one wanted to commit a crime, one would fill out a report and submit it to a third-party company. After receiving approval to commit said crime, the customer would then send payment to the company, and the company would send the customer a Certificate of Entitlement. The customer would commit their crime, hand in the Certificate to their local authorities, and go on their way with absolutely no

consequences. All in all, it was a very simple concept, but many people strongly objected to the proposal, claiming it was immoral.

But, as crime continued to rise and prisons continued to overcrowd, Earth's government faced a dilemma. Eventually, they relented, allowing Entitlement, Inc. to form. Crime rates plummeted, the economy boomed, and prisons became wastelands. It was so effective that citizens' moral compasses shifted their alignment ever so slightly to account for Entitlement, Inc.

And now, Amicus was going to be a real part of that mission. He was going to help people. Sure, maybe a few innocents would be bruised, but it was worth it.

Everything hinged on the file Delia held in her hands.

Amicus took it, about to open it when she said, "I know it's not the Piracy Department, but it's an assignment! Congratulations, Amicus Morales, our newest Junior Operative!"

Amicus took the file. Inside, staring right back at him, was a single piece of black paper, spitefully blank.

Amicus flipped the paper over, confused. There was nothing on the other side, either. "Ma'am?" he asked tentatively, showing her the paper.

Delia snatched the paper, confusion hijacking her features. "This can't be right," she muttered, holding it up to the light. "Must be a misprint. I've never seen this before."

Amicus looked in the empty folder. In the very bottom corner was a small, handwritten message.

Burn it.

Amicus took the paper back from Delia, his excitement rising. This was partially what he'd expected when he'd joined Entitlement, Inc.: secrets written in nondescript files, mysterious hidden messages. And now he got to use fire.

"Do you have a match?" he asked Delia urgently.

"Someone need a light?" Dean, from the Arson Department, stopped on his way from the coffee maker. He fished around in the pockets of his blazer, then triumphantly pulled out a lighter. "Voila!"

"Thank you," Amicus said, enthusiastically taking the lighter.

Delia winced. “Maybe don’t burn things in the middle of the hallway?”

Amicus took the file and the lighter up to the roof, sitting down on the hard concrete and flicking the lighter. The flame engulfed the black page, and Amicus quickly threw it aside, alarmed. The paper twisted and writhed, the darkness melting away to reveal a vibrant gold sheet, decorated with swirls of red.

Once the flames died, Amicus picked up the paper, his eyes wide with awe as he read the words that had appeared on the golden page.

A.,

I am pleased to invite you to assist in this prestigious assignment. If you so wish to accept, a rendezvous will take place at the fountain at Andrew Daisy Park at twenty-three hundred hours tonight. Dress inconspicuously.

Cordially,

P.

That night, fifteen minutes before 11:00pm, Amicus arrived at Andrew Daisy Park. He sat on a bench beside the fountain, which had been broken since September—almost two full months now. A cold breeze threatened to swipe Amicus’ hat right off his head, but he grabbed it right before it the wind could snatch it.

“Nice hat, stranger.” The voice was playfully mocking but surprisingly familiar.

Dean took a seat beside Amicus, his glasses shining in the moonlight. “We’re all very excited to train a new Junior Op.,” he confessed quietly as Amicus stuffed his hat into his lap. “And on such a historical assignment. You’re really fortunate, you know that? Piracy doesn’t have anything on this.”

“Mind if I sit?”

Amicus looked up. It was Layla from the Murder Department. Amicus swallowed the excitement that rose in his throat. He was sitting with two of the most experienced Operatives in all of Entitlement, Inc.

“You’re early,” a newcomer remarked, also eerily familiar. Leaning against a tree a few feet away, arms crossed, was Anton Prescott.

The President of Earth.

P is for Prescott, Amicus realized, thinking back to the mysterious file. *I've been commissioned by the President.*

Prescott stepped out of the shadows, his long coat flowing around his expensive suit. "I'll make this quick," he began, looking down his nose at the Operatives. There was something like disgust in his clear blue eyes, turned silver by the monochromatic light. "I need Cassandra Gallagher eliminated. Details are in the Entitlement Request Form. You'll be doing the... well. You know. But I can't have anyone knowing I—or Entitlement, Inc.—was involved."

Alarm raced through Amicus, growing stronger with each pulsation of his heart. Gallagher was Prescott's opponent in the upcoming Presidential election. Was this legal? Could a member of the government—the *President*—really acquire an Entitlement? If so, what was to stop the government from tearing itself apart to eliminate competition?

Dean and Layla both nodded, as if this was the most routine request they'd ever gotten. "We'll need an ERF," Layla told Prescott, who grew annoyed.

"No ERF, no Certificate of Entitlement," Dean chirped, beaming.

"Fine, fine." Prescott pulled out a bulging envelope and a folded sheet of paper. "Here. The money and the ERF. Just—get rid of it after. I don't want any evidence of my involvement."

"Sounds good," Layla purred, pocketing the envelope. "Have a nice night, Mister President."

Prescott looked irked, but he just huffed and stalked away, vanishing into the darkness.

Amicus immediately turned to Dean and Layla. "Is this legal?" he asked nervously.

"Not at all," Dean replied jovially, peering at the ERF. He nodded to himself, stuffing it into his pocket and shooting Layla a meaningful glance.

"But we're going to do it anyway," Layla said, "because we're approving this Entitlement."

Dean stood, stretching. "See you tomorrow, Junior Op.," he said to Amicus, grinning. "Meet in Conference Room 17 at oh-six hundred hours. Prescott wants this done ASAP."

Dean and Layla disappeared into the shadowed park, leaving Amicus alone by the broken fountain.

As Amicus walked back to his apartment, he started to wonder why he was needed on this assignment. It was an extremely high-profile case, demanding two of Entitlement, Inc.'s most prestigious Operatives. Why would they choose this assignment for him to observe?

This assignment would massively propel his career if it was carried out correctly, though. Sure, no one would see his name on the report—there wouldn't even *be* a report—but he'd have credibility with Dean and Layla. Maybe he'd become a Junior Operative in the Murder Department.

You want to become a hired killer? The voice in the back of his mind wondered. *I thought you wanted to help people.*

Amicus quickly hushed the voice as he arrived at his apartment. These thoughts weren't welcome in Entitlement, Inc.

The next morning, Amicus met Layla and Dean in Conference Room 17. They were both already dressed in their all-black tactical gear, and they handed him a duffel bag as he entered the room.

"Prescott wants Gallagher's murder to look like a crime," Layla began, pacing the front of the room. "Not an accident, not an Entitlement. A good, old-fashioned crime."

"And he wants yours truly to play a part," Dean added, pompously referring to himself.

"We can't just burn the house down," Layla mused, looking over Prescott's ERF. "Although he does want casualties..."

Dean stood, placing his palms flat on the conference table. "Okay, I have an idea. Amicus, you need to infiltrate Gallagher's estate. Make sure there's no exits. We can't have Gallagher escaping. Then, Layla will..." He consulted the ERF. "Oh, nice. Layla will stab Gallagher, leaving her to bleed out, while I conveniently knock over some gasoline tanks and light a match."

"How will we get out?" Amicus asked.

“Hmm.” Layla exchanged a glance with Dean. “We can’t get a hovercraft to bring us out—any witnesses will instantly know we’re with Entitlement, Inc. I guess you *will* have to leave an exit, Amicus. Dean, maps?”

Dean tapped the table twice, and it suddenly illuminated, displaying blueprints of Cassandra Gallagher’s estate.

Layla pointed to the house’s third story. “Gallagher will be working in her home office today, preparing her speeches for the upcoming electoral vote. I’ll enter here—” She pointed at a window. “—do what Prescott’s paying us to do, then exit the same way, sealing the window behind me.”

Dean pushed up his glasses, frowning at the blueprints. “No, leave the window open. I’ll enter from the basement and work my way up, then exit right after you.” He crossed his arms, brow furrowed in concentration. “I’ll leave the third floor untouched. That way, the scene itself should be mostly intact by the time the fire department gets there.”

Layla’s sharp eyes flicked to Amicus. “Seal the exits from outside first, then work your way in. You’ll follow Dean out the third floor window.”

“Understood,” Amicus replied, trying to hide a grin. He’d never been so excited.

You’re going to trap a family of innocents in their own home and let them burn, that pesky voice whispered.

Dean pointed at Amicus’ duffel bag. “Get changed. We’ll meet outside in fifteen minutes.”

Amicus obeyed, putting on the Operative suit. He observed himself in the full-length mirror in the bathroom, smiling. He looked just like Dean and Layla.

He strode outside, gas mask tucked under his arm. Dean and Layla had gotten an unmarked company van and were waiting inside, Dean at the steering wheel. With all the advancement in space travel technology, Earth’s own needs were brushed under the rug, leaving the planet with nearly the same methods of transportation they’d used four hundred years ago.

Amicus got in the back of the van with Layla, and it lurched off to its destination.

“We’re on channel six,” Layla informed Amicus, who adjusted the transmitter on his goggles while Layla hacked Gallagher’s home security system.

It was a quick drive, but they were forced to leave the van at a nearby recharging station so it wouldn’t be seen near Gallagher’s house. They trekked silently up the hill, and Amicus felt uncomfortably exposed, the early morning sun already warming his back.

Layla climbed to the third floor, while Dean and Amicus sneaked around the back of the house. Dean picked the lock on the basement’s outdoor entrance, then slipped in, quiet as a fox.

Amicus made his way around the exterior, sealing windows and doors from the outside. His heart was racing with anticipation, and the alarms in his head were peeling, growing louder and louder by the second.

He finally entered the building from the basement, instantly feeling the urge to choke. The wooden floorboards were soaked with gasoline, the volatile fumes saturating the air. Amicus quickly strapped on his gas mask and continued his job.

He eventually reached the third floor. When he entered Gallagher’s office, he froze.

He’d never seen a body before, not really. He’d seen pictures and videos, but they never perfectly captured the way the blood contaminated whatever it touched. Suddenly, he was very aware that what he was doing was incredibly, intensely immoral.

Entitlement, Inc. had made crime legal under certain controlled circumstances. But could illegal activity ever be legal? Could immoral acts ever be classified as moral?

Amicus felt like he might faint. Even with the gas mask, the scent of gasoline was so, so strong. He reached out and shakily gripped the knife, pulling it out of Gallagher’s chest, so he could fix her blazer. She would’ve wanted to look her best.

“This is wrong,” he blurted. Layla and Dean glanced at each other, hearing him through their earpieces.

“Amicus,” Layla said, her voice soothing in his ears. “We’ve all felt uncertain before. Right, Dean?”

“Right,” he confirmed.

“But we can’t get cold feet now. The deed’s been done!” Layla smiled kindly.
“Now all that’s left is to drop the match.”

Dean took off his gas mask, breathing in the contaminated air, then letting out a sigh. “Come on,” he coaxed Amicus, holding out a hand. “Take off your mask. Feel what you’ve done.”

Amicus fumbled as he handed his mask to Dean, coughing. Tears streamed from his eyes, and he tried to grab the mask back, but Dean had tossed it outside.

Layla slid out the window. “You would’ve made an excellent Operative, Amicus,” she told him. “What a shame.”

“What?” The alarms in Amicus’ head screamed.

“How do you simulate a crime, Amicus?” Dean drawled as he pulled out a matchbox, sitting on the windowsill.

The match was stroked quickly against the box, and the little flame burst to life, excited and I. Dean dropped it on the carpet—the carpet he’d poured gasoline on, because he’d lied in Conference Room 17, and he’d saturated the entire house, even the third floor, and now Amicus was going to—

He was going to burn.

Dean grinned at Amicus. “You frame a criminal,” he answered himself, then slammed the window shut and disappeared.

Amicus ran to the door, but he’d already sealed it. He started hacking at the wood with the knife in his hand. His brain felt too big for his skull, his head pulsing with pressure. Abandoning the door, he stumbled to the window, tripping over Gallagher’s body.

I told you so, the voice in his head sang. *Maybe if you’d stuck to whatever morals you had, you would’ve made it out alive.* Amicus dropped to the floor, his vision blurring. Everything burned: his lungs, his skin, his eyes, his head, the body on the ground beside him.

Amicus closed his eyes as the fire engulfed the world.

Meanwhile, Dean and Layla sat in Conference Room 17, watching the reporters scramble to be the first to figure out what had really happened at the Gallagher estate.

Prescott was making a statement, claiming he was oh so bereaved, that this was not the time for political wars. Investigators found two bodies, identifying the first as Cassandra Gallagher and the second as Amicus Morales, a customer service employee at an unnamed firm. They'd concluded that Morales was the killer; after all, he was holding the murder weapon.

“What a shame.” Dean turned off the television. “If only he’d had a Certificate of Entitlement.”