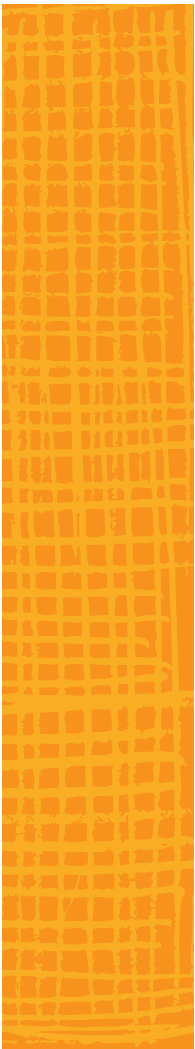


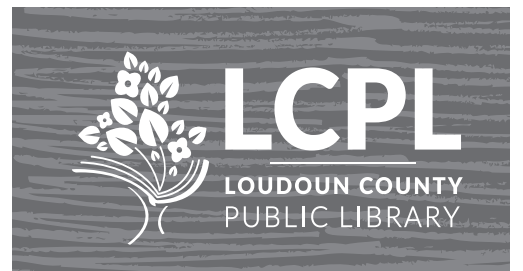
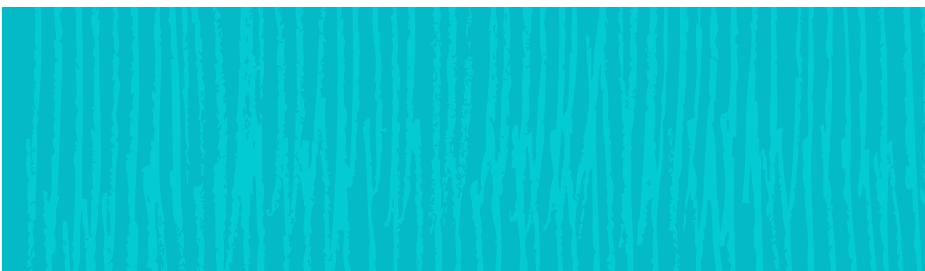


LCPL 2025-2026

# Short Story Contest



2025-2026  
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 Eagle Ridge 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



**Meg Medina**

Meg Medina is the eighth National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature. She is a *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author who writes for children and teens. She has won numerous awards for her work, including the Ezra Jack Keats Writer Award as well as the Pura Belpré Award and Honor. She is the 2019 Newbery Medal winner for her novel *Merci Suárez Changes Gears*. When she is not writing, she works on community projects that support Latinx youth. The daughter of Cuban immigrants, she grew up in Queens, New York, and now lives in Richmond, Virginia.

## 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.

## 2026 Middle School Participants

Reese Adams	“Finding Home”
Deethya Addada	“Those Five Minutes”
Violet Altamura	“Pip”
Brie Alves	“The Day The Roses Fell”
Aliyah Anbari	“The Twist”
Haidar Anbari	“A Cursed Winter”
Layla Athwal	“The Starlit Belonging”
Harrison Baracat-Donovan	“URANIUM HEART”
Liliana & Amelia Brandt	“Miles of Memories”
Anna Briggs	“Saving Jonathan”
Cameron Broussard	“My middle name”
Josh Calderon	“Dark as the night comes”
Julia Capofari	“Stargazer”
Jacob Chandler	“Adventures in the Secret Cavern”
Riya Chivate	“Anti Innovation”
Charlotte Cowles	“The Unknown”
Gresham Davis	“Rubik’stein”
Navyaa Deepak	“Flight 365”
Honor Duong	“The Volleyball Game”
Vaishnavi Dwaraka	“Do It”
Zineb Elalami	“The Lilac”
Surya Tejas Garrepalli	“The Day the Shadows Spoke”
Kaylee Getson	“Home”
Raysha Gyanwali	“The Palace Mystery”
Ghazala Haider	“Benched”
Sara Haider	“The Jersey on the bench”
Ali Jawad Hakim	“What Wasn’t Taken”
Olivia Hanchey	“Hose the Water Dragon”
David Hanlon	“The Lost Colony of Snowmen”
Ella Harding	“A Clear Sky’s Storm”
Nadia Hassan	“The Silver Tongue”
Mirabel Hersch	“The Shimmering Ruby”
Alice Holzrichter	“The Chair and the Girl”
Lawrence huang	“Iron Lung: Origin”
Gavin Itz	“The Castle”
Anya Iyer	“Team of 5 and the Unexpected Mission”
Sanat Iyer	“Ripples”
Shubhangini Jadon	“Blazing Sun”
Megan Kamakawiwoole	“Nickel in the Future”
Meher Kaur	“The Tale of Sohni Mahiwal”
Fiona Keney	“Ceramic”

Andrew Khalf	“The Phantoms”
Kyra Khullar	“Over the Ocean Blue”
Charlotte Kniskern	“A Murder on the Train”
Ananya Kodakalla	“Another Universe”
Zayan Koumudhi Rahiman	“Automaty”
Adhvita Kurupati	“A Runt and a Run-Away”
Nazeef Mabruk	“The Boy and His Bucket”
Hayden Mattoon	“Walkers Cataclysm”
Grace McCleary	“Slipping Through Death's Fingers”
Sidhu Menon	“The Village Kids”
Sarthak Mishra	“When Earth Shatters the Silence”
Sawyer Moore	“The Jolly Rogers”
Gianna Mwombeki	“Nickel In The Future”
Dawud Nasar	“The Brave Men That Fought for Freedom”
Brady Nguyen	“Slow Joe”
Isabella Nino-Mills	“Betrayal”
Abby Njambe	“Day One in the Mental Instituion”
Kaylee Nored	“Prince of Spades”
Aleyna Nunez	“The Warning”
Lillian Oliver	“Le professeur d'anglais”
Thelonius Parady	“life in a painting”
Grace Parsons	“When Life is a Fairytale”
Geet Pawar	“Ardor of Pursuit”
Satvik Polavarapu	“The Monster”
Sreenidhi Polavarapu	“A Taste of Love”
Samantha Polk	“Knnyr”
Rebekah Reeves	“The Skunk Trio”
Musa Rehman	“The Dangers of Darkness”
Victoria Rempe	“The Space Between”
Kaleb Ricce Carrillo	“La Letra”
Irie Rizk	“The Emerald on Bellicose Street”
Lavi Rizk	“The Obituary of a Waffle”
Hosanna Roberts	“The Island of Hypnos”
Judah Roberts	“A Strange Thanksgiving”
Joshua Rodriguez	“Six Year Old Me Vs. The Elf on the Shelf”
Varnika Rohatgi	“The House Fire”
Virat Rohatgi	“Poached”
Rowan Rucker	“One Day, this Came Up in a Dinner Conversation”
Shai Saffoori	“The Revenging”
Srija Sarkar	“The Birds' Collection”
Manya Saxena	“The Whispering Library”
Oliver Schaper	“A Crazy Story about Everything But Snowglobes”
Yahya Sheikh	“Walking into the past”

Tian-Ching Sheu	“I Saw Something I’m Not Sure I Was Supposed To See: Amelia Dawlis”
Anisha Shukla	“First Day of Middle School”
Prisha Singh	“The Hidden Truth”
Samayra Singh	“The Unseen Danger”
Marielle Skinner	“Last Summer Project”
Navya Srivastava	“Symbiosis”
Emily Stegmaier	“Counting Our Blessings”
Arisha Taparia	“Whispers in the Walls”
Ashvath Thogaru	“Numberverse”
Saanvi Thota	“The Burnt Archive”
Sahana Tripathi	“The Trial of Flame”
Kavin Vasanthakumar	“The Cyronium War”
Andrew Vermette	“Nanny Matilda”
Anne Vermette	“Humans Just Don't Understand”
Aviya Vidal	“A New York Summer's Midnight”
Emily Weyant	“The Glass Ghost”
Erin Yoon	“Worth a lifetime”
Isabella Young	“The Whispering Wind”
Zixi Zhu	“The Last Drawing”

## **Middle School Honorable Mentions**

# The Chair and the Girl

By Alice Holzrichter

Once there was a chair.

It sat by a small pond in a small clearing in a big forest. It was rusted from the tips of its legs to the flowers engraved along its back.

The Chair, being so different from everything else in the woods, caused quite the commotion when the forest saw it.

The crows that nested in the pines, had thought it quite a lovely thing, indeed. They had a few things in common. The squirrels who bounded from branch to branch, chattered about it non-stop. They wondered what kind of rock it was, and why it had so many holes. The deer who drank from the pond's waters, avoided it like they would a person if they ever saw one. The fawns grew up in fear of the "Dark Thing", and eventually the pond was avoided as well.

Then one morning, the forest got quite the surprise when they woke up to a strange creature in the Chair. Even the trees recoiled a bit.

The crows, who paid no attention to anything beyond the forest, had never seen such an odd looking bear. It seemed to have shriveled up forelegs and its hair only grew out of the top of its head.

The squirrels, who love to tell stories to their young, had never even dreamed of such a monster. It was taller than a new sapling, but much, much smaller than the fully grown trees.

The deer, who fear anything bigger than themselves, were in quite the shock when one of their fawns stumbled upon the creature during a little adventure it had taken. The creature was no taller than a doe, and seemed quiet enough. Its oddly shaped hoofs were swinging from the end of the Dark Thing, not quite skimming the grass.

The forest had, in fact, woken up to the sight of a little girl, no older than seven. She sat in the Chair all that day not saying a word. The pond shimmered happily for her, and the sky pushed along wispy clouds for the Little Girl to interpret. All day, the forest gathered around the rim of the clearing to watch her. She never said a word, and her tiny legs kept kicking as she stared up at the sky.

When the wind blew by to deliver the latest news amongst the trees, she took a double take at the girl in the Chair. The wind had seen people before, but never here. Humans, as the wind had noticed, always have a place to be. People to meet. Things to do. So never would they end up in the middle of nowhere, doing absolutely nothing.

Something was off.

Something was very, very off.

The trees laughed about this with one another for days. Because to the forest's second surprise, the Little Girl never left. No, she stayed in the Chair all season. And when the autumn wind rippled across the leaves, burning them with color, the girl was still there. She was still there when the trees sang their husky tunes of goodnight. She was still there when they drifted off into a dead sleep. She was still there when the crows cawed their last goodbyes and took flight. Still there when the squirrels started ceasing their constant leaping and chattering. Still there when the deer began to disappear. The Little Girl sat on the Chair all through autumn and when winter came around, she was still there. Through the snow. The rain. The cold. The sun. Everyday, she sat there kicking her legs and looking up at the sky.

When the crows came back one spring and found the bear still sitting there, they ruffled their feathers and gaped. What was this bear doing? Did it hibernate every winter when they were gone? So the crows stayed back that year to see what the odd looking bear did during the

cold winter season. It did not hibernate. In fact, it did not leave the Chair at all. All that next year, the crows flew down a few branches, trying to sort out in their minds what kind of bear this was.

One dry autumn, the squirrels gathered in the trees to watch the monster, each one of them in rapid conversation. It was the first time in weeks that they had paused their nut gathering, but this was important. For one of the squirrels had been thinking out loud to himself one day and came to the observation that he'd not seen the monster eat a thing since it appeared. So he announced this query to his comrades and they all gathered around to watch it and see if it would eat something. But it didn't. The monster just kept sitting on the Chair, kicking its legs, and looking up at the sky.

It was a particularly hot summer, and the deers had found themselves back at the pond for water. At first they were a little nervous about being so close to the creature, but when it made no moves to attack, they decided it was safe and moved in for a drink. It was only when a curious fawn asked why the creature was there. None of the does gave straight answers and the buck just grunted.

It had been five years since the Little Girl had appeared, so she wasn't so little anymore. But there she sat. On the Chair, kicking her legs, which now disturbed the grass, and staring up at the sky. She was a human in the middle of nowhere. She had not said a thing since she'd been discovered, nor had she left the chair. She had not eaten anything or drank from the pond, and yet she was still alive and well.

The wind checked on her every so often when she came with the morning news and evening gossip. The trees laughed and sang, the flowers dancing to the song of the woods.

The crows tucked away into the shadows as the sun began to set. The deer pawed at the ground for soft soil to rest on, and the squirrels' chatter drifted drowsily off as the moon took the responsibility of watching over them.

Soon it was eight years since the Girl had appeared and only the trees were left to remember the commotion she made.

The crows cawed freely, the Bear becoming a symbol of home as they returned from their long winter journey. The squirrels spent their time making up wild stories to tell their young at night. The deer frolicked in the pond without a shadow of worry and slept by the legs of the Chair at night.

Everything was peaceful. Everything felt right. The Girl had been there for eleven years, sitting in the Chair, kicking her legs, and staring up at the sky.

Then one day.

She was gone.

“Wendy!” the professor snapped, yanking her out of her daze. “Wake up!”

## Cursed Winter

By Haidar Anbari

*I really need a day off*, I thought, as I was grabbed around the waist by a colossal, meaty hand. That hand was connected to a giant. Yes, I said a giant. A hill giant to be exact, and this all was happening in the middle of the road. In Loudoun County, Virginia, there was a hill giant absolutely pulverising a tall, skinny random guy, in broad daylight, and nobody noticed. There were so many people just walking on by, not a care in the world. I don't know what was going through their minds, but I know one thing: Humans are very dense.

Oh, didn't I mention? I'm a sorcerer. Gale Zephyros. I'd say hello, but I'm currently occupied with having my rear end handed to me. I am suddenly swung into the road beneath me. At ballistic speeds. Ow. Fortunately, the giant has let go of me. Unfortunately, it is to lift both hands above his head, clench them into fists, and bring them slamming into me. Or, where I used to be.

Because by that time, I had rolled aside, come up behind him, and slammed my staff into the backs of his knees. They buckled, and he went sprawling into the asphalt, roaring his rage at me. His hand came sweeping around at me, and I was sent flying into a building. My staff went clattering to the ground, and I fell with it. That hurt. He got up, too quickly to really be fair, and came running at me, that heavy belly bouncing around. It would look comical if he wasn't trying to rip me limb from limb.

I grabbed my staff, and gathered my will.

"*Ventus!*" I thundered, and blasted him with a gust of wind that sent him stumbling backwards. However, he planted his feet and started slowly stalking towards me. I gave up on the wind, gathered my will once more, and prepared to end the fight.

“*Fulmenos!*” I released my will into a powerful arc of blue lightning, leaping at him from my spread fingertips. The effect was immediate. His spine arched in excruciating pain, his mouth opening in a silent roar, arms raised, muscles twitching and spasming. The jagged spear of crackling light let up, and he fell to the ground, smoking.

“Someone ordered some roasted giant?” I laughed weakly. I looked over at the group of children the giant had kidnapped. They were trembling with fear, and were casting huge, tearful eyes at me.

“What was that?” asked one of the older children, voice tremulous. I realised that the truth would only scare them even more than they already were.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “Does any one of you have a phone?” Several hands went up, and minutes later, the police arrived, and I walked away before one of the kids said they saw me shooting lightning out of my hands and I was taken in for questioning. As I walked down the street, I turned right onto a path through the forest. I could barely take a breath before a man with long, braided black hair and sun-tanned skin hurried up to me, eyes darting, jaw clenched. He had an anxious, desperate taint to his energy.

“Sir, I saw what you did for those children. I think you can help my people,” he bit his lower lip, waiting anxiously for my answer. I sighed. I was tired. But if help can be given, help must be given.

“Can you tell me about your problem?”

A lengthy explanation later, I had a good idea about what I was dealing with. His people went out to hunt. A good sized group goes out, but only one person comes back. Every time, one person is left to tell the story. They always lose the kill they were bringing back. Upon examination of the bodies, it looked like chunks of flesh had been torn away from them, until

they bled painfully to death. Then, it looked like it had come back to eat them, tearing at them. This creature was stealing their food source, and it seemed like it had arrived with the snow.

Winter had fallen, and this creature had arrived, snapping their fishing lines and nets, cutting their bowstrings, basically removing all paths to getting food, dooming the tribe to starve. And it was stealing their children. That made me mad. *Very mad.*

“The bad news is it’s a wendigo. A creature of hunger, extreme greed and avarice. Those traits can catch its attention, bringing it to your general area, which increases exposure with the specific greedy person, which can lead to possession and eventually, two wendigos,” I explained.

“The good news is, I know what it is, so I know how to fight it,” I said. His face flooded with relief, tightened and anxious muscles loosened and his worried face broke into a smile.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, shaking my hand vigorously. I nodded with a small, reassuring smile. He introduced himself as the tribe leader, and he said his name was Tall Oak. He told me where to find his tribe’s home, and I went home to prepare. The next day, I went out to their home, and met with Tall Oak again and had him take me to the place where the wendigo was last seen.

I looked around at the people around us. “A lot of people, isn’t it?”

He kept walking. “Not enough,” he said ominously. I didn’t shudder... visibly. We kept walking. The snow suddenly had a trail. What it was made of is not good to dwell upon. I wish it could have been ketchup. I kept my eyes up. We came to the mouth of a cave. We paused at the opening, and exchanged a meaningful glance. The point of no return was right here. If either of us wanted to leave, this was it.

“Tell your men to go back. You go with them. I’ll take care of this,” I said quietly.

“I can’t, my honor--” he started.

“I don’t care about your freaking honor,” I snarled. “Your people need you.”

“But I--” he started again.

“No. Get home and get your people together.” I stared unblinkingly into his eyes. He looked away first.

“Okay. But if you fail, our children have no chance. Our people will have to change our way of life. We will have to give up everything that we hold dear,” He said morosely.

“I will not let that happen,” I promised. I braced myself, then stepped into the gaping maw of the cave, a dark chill setting in, the temperature plunging until every exhale hung in the air, like frozen spirits. It was like I had entered a new realm; a couple of seconds ago I had been in the familiar woods of Virginia. Seconds later, I was in a land of terrible rot and permafrost. The silence was palpable, broken only by my footsteps crunching over fallen icicles.

“You’re a long way from the tundra, aren’t you?” I whispered to myself, my fingers closing tighter around my staff.

The darkness ahead of me wasn’t simply the absence of light; it felt... hungry. Wendigos weren’t just monsters; they were starvation and greed in physical form. As I crept closer, the terrible stench hit me; a disgusting, cloying mixture of wet fur and something sickly, yet sweet, like meat left to rot in the sun. Then, I heard it. A cracking sound like dry wood snapping, followed up by a wet, slurping hiss. I started up a dim, blue light to see.

I rounded a broken, jagged pillar of rock and caught sight of it. The beast was a nightmare of anatomy; stretched far too thin, skin pulled so tight over the monster’s skeleton that the bone threatened to tear the surface. Its head was a stag’s skull, fused to what could barely count as a humanoid neck, with eyes that glowed an arctic blue, like a gaping hole in the snow. It

perfectly represented its soul. The wendigo hunched over a pile of stolen furs, gnawing on the bones of a creature (I really hoped it wasn't what I thought it was) with teeth of shattered glass. The wendigo froze in place as I crunched on more ice. *Oops*, I thought, wincing. It couldn't resign itself to turning its head like a normal... creature, no, it had to be all creepy about it. It rotated its *entire torso* with a worrying crunch of its spine.

"Gale Zephyros," a terrible, hoarse voice rasped in my mind. It couldn't just use vocal chords, oh no, it had to use creepy mind powers. "So much... *power*... to consume."

"Blah, blah, I'm just in time for dinner, all that," I said in what I hoped sounded offhand, because my heart was attempting to escape my chest and run out of the cave. I didn't wait for it to lunge. I leveled my staff at the thing's head. "*Ardeat!*"

A torrent of flame erupted from the tip of my staff, illuminating the monster's eyes with a violent, burning orange shine. Fire is the element of heat and light, a wendigo's weakness. It realised what was happening at the last second. I expected it to duck, or move to the side. I was apparently small-minded. Because this thing leapt straight up, spinning around to face the cave roof, clinging to the icicles. I blinked in confusion; that was my mistake. At the opening, the wendigo struck.

I spun, compressing and hardening the air in front of me into a shield just in time. A hand, clawed and emaciated, flew at me just as I got the shield in place. My shield, however, is not a normal one. Most magic users try to make a flat, hard circle of kinetic force in order to stop the attack cold. That not only drains your energy quickly, but in this scenario, it would have sent me flying into the wall of the cave. My shield is not a wall. It's a parry. It causes attacks to miss, by pushing it out of the path it would be on to hit me.

The claw kept going at the same pace, and as it swung on its arc away from me, I sent in a small bolt of lightning to punish the attack.

“*Fulmenos!*” I thundered, sending a flashing spear of crackling pain at him. The wendigo roared in pain. “You’re fast,” I growled, “but you’re greedy. You want the tribe, the children, and you got it all. And now you want me. You’re getting overconfident.”

The creature dropped down from the ceiling, landing in a crouch with a sort of animalistic, feral grace. “Hunger... is not greed. Hunger... is... power.”

“No,” I replied, extremely wittily. Trust me, people. I’m very smart. I dropped the light I’d been holding, plunging us into a midnight darkness. I looked around warily. I wasn’t sure where it was, exactly. *This better work.* I started moving backwards, slowly. I stumbled over a projecting spike of ice. The wendigo was a predator. Predators look for weakness. It saw its chance. It came flying at me through the gloom, an arrow of hunger. As it came soaring through the air, its jaws opened and widened farther than they should have been able to.

I smirked, relishing its foolishness. You see, I had been gathering my will for something much larger. I had tripped on purpose in order to draw it in. Totally. But as it came up, I used the one thing a creature of winter cannot handle.

“*Solis!*” I yelled. I didn’t create fire. I created *a freaking miniature sun.* Blinding light erupted from my outstretched palm, the ice around me melting, the chill that I had felt evaporating. The wendigo didn’t just burn; the ancient cursed frozen heart that kept it alive, shattered. It thrashed around, hitting me once with a flailing arm, but I kept the light up. The noonday sun I had created tearing apart the supernatural frost that kept it alive. It stopped moving, and the light revealed that it had become a charred pile of blackened bone and melting ice. I let the sun go, returning the only light to the dim, blue glow of my staff’s light. The

creature's eyes flickered one final time, replacing the hunger I had seen before with a hollow emptiness that made me feel great pity for the creature as it dissolved into a small pile of snow.

That had once been a human being. Greed can transform the greatest of people into the most terrible of monsters. I shook my head. I leaned heavily against the wall of the cave, the adrenaline of the fight fading away to leave me exhausted.

"I really... *really*... need a day off," I rasped, voice harsh from all of the shouting. I emerged from the cave a little while later. Tall Oak was waiting for me, a little ways away, despite what I told him. "The winter is over," I pronounced, holding up a slightly charred antler I'd taken from the snow. The children that had been huddled in a dark corner of the cave came walking up out of the cave behind me, shielding their eyes against the sun. His eyes widened with a hopeful, grateful light. The joy in them was thanks enough. He bowed his head, a sign of great respect and gratitude. I nodded back. As I walked past him, towards the edge of the tree line, heading towards the normal world, I felt all of the pressures of the mundane world settle onto my mind.

I was covered in bruises, and my bank account was at a lavish twenty dollars. But as I made my way back home, the driver of a minivan completely oblivious to the sorcerer holding a demon's trophy, I couldn't help but give a small smirk.

Humans are very, very dense. They're bad at noticing the obvious. But sometimes, being the only one who knows what the heck is going on, that's almost as good as a day off. Almost.

## Flight 365

By Navyaa Deepak

*What if your first long-distance flight as captain were to be trapped in a never-ending loop?*

My hand subconsciously reached under the safety flap of the vending machine, anxiously waiting for the granola bar I was yet to receive.

“Oh, just forget it.”

I removed my hand from the delivery flap when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Dude, press the button.”

“What? Oh jeez, Mike! You scared me,” I exclaimed as I turned to meet his gaze.

“Nature Valley, huh? Neat.” Mike grabbed the bar and passed it over to me.

“Don’t be too nervous,” he said, putting an arm around me, “It’s just another flight.”

“Not just *another* flight. My first long-distance one. I mean, what if something goes wrong?” I replied.

At that moment, the loud PA system shook the boarding area.

“Captain Pinn and Copilot Jones, please report to your boarding gate and prepare for departure.”

I took a deep breath and tried not to return back to my state of unease.

Mike and I were almost there, as I saw the huge plane await me. Something ticked me off about the plane. I glanced at the miniature flight plan, which I had just taken out of my pocket:

**Flight 365:**

**San Francisco, USA -> Manila, Philippines**

**Time of Departure - 12:00AM PT**

**Time of Arrival - 6:00AM UTC**

I stopped reading. Flight 365? What type of name was that?

“Hey Mike? Doesn’t Flight 365 seem a little odd to you?”

“No, not really why?”

“Really, cause I’ve never heard of the name Flight 365 in the aviation industry ever.”

“This is your stress talking. Come on, we’ve got a flight to get to.”

We finally reached the tunnel gateway that led directly to the plane. I took one final breath of courage before captaining my first long-distance flight.

“Welcome, Flight 365! This is your captain, Jake Pinn, speaking. We’ve got a forecast of steady winds and fair temperatures over the course of our flight. I hope to make this flight relaxing and enjoyable for everyone. Cabin crew, please prepare for departure.”

“See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Mike said, with a gleeful tone in his voice.

I sighed when I heard his remark. “Whatever you say, Mike.”

I turned my attention to the control panel, preparing myself once again for takeoff. Before I knew it, the plane was speeding through the runway.

“Just keep going,” I whispered, clearly stressed.

The moment I felt the wheels lift off the asphalt, it was like I lost all the composure I had been determined to gain hours before takeoff.

“Get it together, Jake,” I muttered to myself, annoyed with my nerves. I calmed myself down, which surprisingly lasted for the next several hours.

Things went as normal. I could hear the sounds of chatter from behind me, as I easily steered the plane on route again and again. Mike’s steady breath was barely audible as he had crashed into a deep slumber right next to me. I suppressed a laugh when I heard a snore come out of him. I then quickly redirected my attention back to the control panel.

After a while, Mike woke up from his sleep.

“Everything okay?” he asked sleepily, sitting up right in his seat.

“Seems like it,” I replied, still focused on steering the plane.

“I’m gonna go get a small snack from the Galley, you need anything?” Mike asked, as he got up to leave.

“Nothing right now.”

“Okay, let me know if you do. I’ll probably be able to take over in a bit.”

I glanced up at the clock in the cabin.

*7:52 AM*

“Yeah, will do,” I replied after a few seconds.

Mike came back after about twenty minutes with two small trays. I could hear the door shut loudly as he came back into the cabin.

“Mike, what took you so long?”

“Nothing really,” he slid a bowl of vanilla pudding across my side table, “Just choosing between chocolate and vanilla.”

I chuckled to myself, probably loud enough for him to hear.

“You can’t be laughing, you’ve literally never told me which flavor you prefer.”

I took a tiny spoon of the pudding, surprised by its tastiness.

“Well, it’s a good thing you chose vanilla. I’m not the biggest fan of chocolate anyway.”

Mike tapped my shoulder after a minute or two.

“I can take over now. You should get some sleep.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry, it’s not a problem for me to keep going.”

“No, really,” Mike nudged me out of the pilot seat. “I’ll take over right now. I’ll let you land the plane if it makes you feel better.”

I sighed, reluctantly leaving the seat. I sat next to Mike, analysing his flying for a while. Before I knew it, I slowly started drifting off into a slumber. I smiled to myself slightly.

“Maybe this long-distance flight wasn’t going to be as scary as I had anticipated,” I thought to myself.

Mike was probably right. The stress probably was getting the best of me. My mind relaxed as I finally shut my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

I felt a familiar tap on my left shoulder, as I shuddered awake. I checked the time immediately.

*4:49 AM*

“Hey, wanna land the plane?” Mike asked.

“Dude, I didn’t expect you to actually wake me up.”

“You know, I always keep my word,” Mike remarked, as we swapped seats once again.

I immediately felt much more at ease once I got my control on the plane. I felt much more confident than before. It was like I had diminished all the stress I gained before the flight, and I was energized instead. I even caught myself grinning a little. Maybe long flights weren't too terrible after all. That's how I felt at the moment, as we neared the final stretch. Although, that's when

everything

went

south.

It was right when we started the landing course. Light at first. Slight shudders, like the wind speed became increasing fast all of a sudden. Nothing that bothered me too much. Nothing I couldn't handle. Just as I got more and more confident, a big gust of wind overtook the plane, almost tilting it. I could hear the sound of shattering glass from the cabin behind me, as I swiftly attempted to control the plane's direction. I froze, unaware of what to do.

"Everybody, please calm down. It's nothing to worry about. Just experiencing some minor turbulence. At this time please make sure your seatbelts are tightly fastened on," Mike took over the PA, seeing me as frozen as an ice sculpture.

"Mike, what was that?" I spoke with shaky breaths.

"Minor turbulence, that's all." The more I tried, the harder it got to try and believe what Mike was saying. Minor turbulence can't shatter glass. It felt as if something took control of us. As if we passed some forbidden boundary and were facing the consequences as seen in all of the most classic movies.

“Hey Jake, snap out of it.”

Mike’s voice snapped me out of my daze. I shook myself out of it. No, I was definitely spiraling. It was simply a plane route designated for us to follow. Mike was right, it was all just minor turbulence.

Through all of those stressful thoughts, I hadn’t even realised how the turbulence had completely stopped. My mind was instantly eased. Landing had become much easier and safe. Before I knew it, we were on the ground. Everything was normal once again. Although, I felt as if something about the steadiness of the plane was uncanny. It felt too smooth. Almost eerie.

“Hello passengers. This is your copilot, Mike Jones. I hope you all enjoyed your flight. We deeply appreciate your cooperation, especially with the slight turbulence we had near the end of the journey. Anyway, have a nice rest of your day!”

Mike switched off the radio connected to the PA.

“You know, I told you everything would be fine.” he said, picking up his things to leave.

“Yeah,” I admitted, “I probably was worrying too much.”

We both exited the plane together and reached the main airport lobby.

“Okay, see you soon?” Mike asked, giving me a quick handshake.

“Yeah, definitely.”

I smiled as he left to catch his taxi outside. Everything felt right. My very first long-distance flight had been a success. My eyes wandered around the airport, looking for a place to grab a quick meal before I left. That’s when I saw a sign.

**San Francisco National Airport Lounge ->**

My.

Heart.

Stopped.

This couldn't be right. I stood there, frozen once again at the sight.

*The destination was Manila.*

*The flight was fourteen hours.*

*Everything went fine.*

Then why am I standing inside the San Francisco National Airport. My vision started to blur. I quickly rushed myself to a bench and stumbled down. What was happening? My heart was pounding, as I checked the time across the building.

*11:31PM PST*

I felt a drop of sweat fall down my face. This couldn't be happening. I looked down at myself. I wore the same clothes, and I was carrying the same bag I walked out of the plane with.

Suddenly, a thought crossed my mind.

I jumped up from my seat and headed towards the boarding areas upstairs. I scanned every single sign.

**Boarding Area #18 ->**

**Boarding Area #31 ->**

**Boarding Area #63 ->**

I rushed into Boarding Area #63, and spotted a vending machine.

"I could probably get a small snack right here," I thought to myself. Food would ease my mind, right?

I grabbed my wallet, and selected a Nature Valley granola bar for myself. I paid quickly and waited for my snack. It seemed stuck, giving me familiar déjà vu.

“Is this seriously happening again?” I was about to turn away, when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Dude, press the button.”

My whole world felt like it was crashing down all in a second. I whirled around to see Mike, who had just left the airport, standing behind me.

Before I could react, he grabbed my bar out of the vending machine.

“Nature Valley, huh? Neat.”

I took a step back.

“Mike, are you serious right now? You said that yesterday.”

“Don’t be too nervous. It’s just another flight.” he said, putting the same arm around me. Just like he had done yesterday.

“Captain Pinn and Copilot Jones, please report to your boarding gate and prepare for departure,” the PA speakers announced.

I had no idea what was real anymore. Without thinking, I followed this new Mike, who had randomly appeared, into the departure gate. I put my hands in my pockets looking for my phone, but found a paper instead.

The miniature flight plan, planned for Flight 365.

At that moment, an idea struck me. I decided to test something.

“Hey Mike, doesn’t Flight 365 seem a little odd to you?”

“Actually, yeah.”

I turned to face him, my face hot in confusion.

“What?”

He just kept on going.

“I mean, how coincidental is it that 365, the number of the flight, is also the conversion to a year. Totally random factor but kinda weird.”

My head was spinning at this point, as I kept listening to Mike’s words.

“No industry in the entirety of aviation development names their Flight 365 right?” he continued.

“But that’s not what you said yesterday,” I stopped speechless. I thought this day was going to be the exact same as yesterday with me at the vending machine. Mike helping me out, and us being called to the boarding area. Everything was *exactly* the same. Why was Mike’s answer different about this question I had just brought up?

“Yesterday? Jake, this is your stress talking. Come on, we’ve got a flight to get to.”

“Now we are back to normal. Odd,” I told myself, as I continued following Mike into the tunnel.

As we entered the control area of the plane, I stopped myself. I looked around the plane. Like what I was expecting, it was exactly the same. Same layout, same control panel, same clock. Everything felt *exactly* the same. And if I was correct, I was gonna captain the *same* flight I was on just an hour ago. Was I really going to do this?

I must have looked really confused, cause Mike gave me an expectant look.

“Oh right.

“Welcome, Flight 365! This is your captain, Jake Pinn, speaking. We’ve got a forecast of steady winds and fair temperatures over the course of our flight. I hope to make this flight relaxing and enjoyable for everyone. Cabin crew, please prepare for departure.”

“See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Mike said.

I stay silent. I was yet to find out what was going on.

Everything happened pretty much identical to yesterday, which felt off. I ate the same vanilla pudding as before, and I slept at the same time as the last flight. I also was woken up by the same tap on my shoulder.

“Hey, wanna land the plane?”

I opened my eyes groggily.

“You always keep your word, don’t you?”

Mike’s mouth turned upright way too fast.

“That’s right.”

I quickly swapped seats, feeling a little spooked. I’ve never seen Mike smile like that before. The plane didn’t feel shaky at all though. I wondered if there would be the same turbulence as before. That’s when I spoke too soon.

Everything played out like it did before.

The small gusts turned into a large thud. I heard the same glass break from the cabin behind me.

“This is where it all started.”

Mike’s voice sounded from behind me.

“365 Jake. Don’t you get it?”

“Mike, what are you talking about?” I shuddered uncontrollably as I turned around to meet his gaze. Shivers were sent through my body and down my spine. My brain whirled in confusion.

*Flight 365*

My heart stopped when I heard Mike laugh. Real but eerie.

“Have fun spending 31,536,000 seconds, 525,600 minutes, 8,760 hours, 12 months, and 1 year, reliving this loop.

“Mike, what’s wrong with you?” I felt desperate at this point.

“Nothing, I’ve been like this all along.”

The past 24 hours of my life flashed before my eyes. The reassurance he gave me. The *minor* turbulence. Everything seemed to be connected.

“What do you mean by 1 year?”

He gave me the same uncanny smile.

“You know exactly what I mean.”

## **Symbiosis**

By Navya Srivastava

The Gilded Crown Music Conservatory sounded just like the type of people who attended— pompous brats who thought they could do anything with an instrument.

Like me, but I fancied myself good at what I did. Which is why my step bounced on one important evening.

Audition results day.

I was already first-chair in the House of Midnight Symphonic Orchestra, had been for too long, and with my playing abilities, I knew the only way left was up.

"I said, *you didn't make it*," the conductor hissed through his teeth, already fed up with my asking. Granted, it was the third time he'd confirmed this. "The Symbiotes require more than musical perfection— they need musical *connection*. Artistry defined by the artist. Find that in yourself before we cross paths again. Goodbye, Miss Edmonde."

I *knew* this.

I read the audition requirements tens of times over— musical perfection and connection were two different things. Perfection was *practiced*, drilled into calloused hands and set into straight postures. Connection was *subconscious*, resonated into players during performance, a bond formed by mutual respect and understanding between instrument and player. The Symbiotes were one with their instruments, their music, their performances. Hence the name.

I bit my lip hard so I wouldn't protest against my failure. It was official: I was not a Symbiote, no matter how hard I tried to copy their ability.

I trudged down the cobblestone path that cut through the field behind the Conservatory, kicking loose rocks absentmindedly. It was stupid. With the musical connection eye-opener, I could kiss my ten years of experience down the drain. All for some *symbiosis* garbage.

*What can I even do to become a Symbiote?* I thought despairingly. My flute case rattled against my side as I stepped, and I formed a new idea.

*Symbiosis is a balance, I started, between musician and instrument. I've done all I can, maybe I need a new flute.*

I reached the end of the path, which merged into the paved sidewalk lining a strip mall near the Conservatory. Nicknamed the Music Mall by the students there, it was a savior to many unorganized students, selling pretty much anything music related.

Like brand-new, perfect condition instruments.

Right now, I felt like I could do with one.

Disrupting the backdrop of evening traffic was a music shop, navy and gold stripes gliding across the awning, its name printed just above— *The Mertons' Musical Shop*. I'd never noticed it before, but I hardly stepped foot in this mall.

Looked promising enough.

As I entered, a bell jingled from above the doorframe. The store was delighted and free of customers. Chalking it up to it being a Friday evening, I walked to the counter.

I rang the reception bell, and a woman came to my aid. Her age was indistinguishable, and she wore her hair in a simple but old-fashioned knot.

"Hello, dear," her voice was even as she addressed me. "What are you looking for, today?"

"I'm looking for an instrument." The hard edge to my own voice surprised me, bringing back memories of my audition results. In an effort to smother that failure in the back of my mind, I smiled politely.

"A flute?" she asked, and I felt weirdly intruded at her assumption before realizing I had a flute on me.

"Yes, please." I responded, trying to smooth out my surprise into a customer-service-worthy smile. Lillian seemed pleased by my response, and led me through the store.

Many of the musical trinkets I saw as I walked past were not the typical ones stores sold. My standards were not particularly high for this visit.

"We only have three flutes at the moment," Lillian mentioned. Despite being so close to bail on my plan, I continued following. "I hope you find one you like." After leading me into the room, she left, leaving me to try the new instruments.

The case on the first one was favorably plush, and embedded in the center was a brand new flute. Putting it together, I noticed that it glinted almost black under the fluorescent bulbs. *Whatever. I can't be picky, especially not about its looks.*

As I snapped the last part together, I brought it to my lips.

And played.

Emotion swelled through me, pride touched by something softer, as my first few notes blossomed, lilting in volume and pitch to form a piece that sounded drowned with sorrow, layered with rich emotion that bloomed through the instrument, before the music paused, becoming jagged and irregular just as the piece ended. The flute hovered at my lips until quiet applause lit up the room. Lillian had entered, looking apologetic at her intrusion but undeniably impressed by my music.

"Sorry for listening," she apologized. "But you sounded beautiful. Really."

*Wow.* I thought incredulously, agreeing in every way. *The music practically played itself.* I was surprised, in a good way, about the piece I had just played. It was *beautiful*. Tragically so, filled with inexplicable depth and longing that I couldn't exactly capture or comprehend. I only hoped I could recall the piece onto paper later.

Rashly, I dared to think that *this* was musical symbiosis.

And so, without further thought, I bought the flute.

One might consider my house a mansion. At first glance of the stained-glass windows, trimmed lawn, and sprawling front gate, I could almost agree.

But the top floors of the mansion were claimed by dust and spiders. My family let them be after some time of feigning for control with useless pesticides that made us sick instead of them. They almost took pity on us, never intruding on the downstairs floor where we lived. To make room for the dusty cots we slept on, the rooms were insanely sparse, with only a couple essentials, and of course, the family piano decorating the living room.

I approached my parents, perched on an old couch sipping tea.

"I bought a new instrument!" I announced, holding up the case and hoping for a positive reaction.

Slowly, my father turned his head to look at me, then the instrument. "That's wonderful, Effie. I hope it helps you pass your next audition."

I hadn't even mentioned my audition. "Who told you that I—" My shocked response was dulled by my mother's explanation.

"Cassidy came by to gloat," the last word was emphasized on my mother's tongue. "That her son made it into the Symbiotes. And she offered her dearest condolences to you for not making it."

Cassidy Montclair's son was a prodigy. The Montclairs were one of the most influential families at the Conservatory, and of course, their son had to follow in their footsteps. The Edmonde name was up there too, but barely hanging onto its reputation.

That's why I so desperately hoped my audition would go well. Not that it did. Music wasn't just my passion, I pursued it for my family. To make us great again.

"Father," I started slowly. "I played this really wonderful piece today. At the music store. I'm hoping you could help me recall it, by playing accompaniment for me." I nodded to the family piano collecting dust in the corner. His lips formed a severe frown.

"First," he began. "You fail an audition through your neglectfulness regarding the requirements." I felt attacked by that. "Then," he said. "You mock me."

I didn't know what he meant. "I'm not... mocking you," I clarified. "Just..."

"I cannot play and you know that well!" he snapped, raising his hands. His fingers were crooked at the joint and painfully dry.

Of course I knew that. His rheumatoid arthritis had gotten so bad he had to stop playing. "I— it slipped my mind. I'm sorry." I bowed my head as I walked to the room adjacent, which was the office chamber and my music room.

As I opened the case to my new flute and began putting it together, I felt uneasy knowing that I had just forgotten about my father's condition.

*It doesn't matter right now,* I thought, determinedly snapping the head of the instrument to the body. *I have to focus on becoming the best musician I can be.*

Rehearsals at the Conservatory were painfully long, in my opinion. Between independent playing time, group rehearsal, and music theory lessons, I had barely a moment to myself. I both relished the challenge and despised it.

Today, I was only too happy to show off my new instrument, and my new musical abilities. When rehearsal ended, I resentfully packed up my new flute. In my peripherals, I saw my orchestral director approach. Before I could greet her, she started to speak.

"I am sorry about your audition. I want you to know that, between all the applicants who auditioned, you had the highest score for someone who didn't make it."

I didn't know how to take that, so I nodded along.

"Which is why I'm recommending you for a solo performance." Her thin lips stretched into an expectant smile. "I hope next week isn't pushing it."

Well, okay then.

I would craft this solo, *perfect* it, and with the help of my new flute, advance to the Symbiotes.

"That sounds fine," I replied, trying to suppress my excitement.

The night before the performance, I had barely started writing.

My ink-stained hands wadded another sheet of manuscript paper into a ball.

Drafting a solo was hard, especially when an overdue promotion was at stake.

I was a decent composer on good days, but today, my skills were approaching abysmal levels. Everything I played on my flute sounded perfect, but my main trouble was capturing that on paper.

I was beginning to doubt my ability to compose. I felt out of touch with the music, so focused on something else that I couldn't define. Every time I tried to recollect the notes I had played, the vision of my performance felt blurry and distorted.

I could feel buzzing in my ears as my fatigued body tried to come up with something worthwhile. I had been thinking for so long, trying to squeeze out pages of music I didn't recognize.

I felt so numb and so utterly done.

Tears threatened to spill as I remembered everything I had achieved. *Now*, I was stuck. I wasn't going anywhere; I stopped achieving a while ago when I chased perfection, connection and symbiosis slipping through my fingers like something I was so close to catching.

And I still hadn't gotten it right.

As I sat there in silence, I felt a tug at my heart. My eyes locked onto my silver instrument, still so distinguishable even through my tears. Gleaming, perfect, still there.

My flute was *right there*.

And I could tell it was waiting.

For me.

*She played quite beautifully. Hypnotically, if I must put my finger to it.*

*She was on autopilot, fingers moving rhythmically but not purposefully. Music flooded the room, pitches perfect and systematic. Emotions coursed through her, some propelling like rockets and other subtly pinching her heart— anger, grief, regret— emotions she barely registered as they transformed into sharp trills, eerie chords, and uneven rhythm.*

*Pen nibs broke under the sharp pressure she wrote with. She was so eager to have this done. Her breath was sharp and jagged as she passionately scribbled notes, flourished key signatures, and marked crescendos, every lick of the pen taking part of her with it, defining her as music.*

*Again, music in the air, even at the peak hours of the night, she was awake. Her music swelled in complexity, piercing her heart and drawing out memories. Feelings she couldn't begin to unpack detached themselves from parts of her life and left by way of the flute in her hands. Even as her fingers began to prick and bleed, she couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop.*

*As nighttime moonlight became slivers of morning glow, she collapsed from exhaustion she wouldn't be able to place the next day. Her solo covered five yellowed pages, marked in handwriting that wasn't exactly hers. Her music was heartfelt, charming and incredibly—*

*Personal.*

*Have you ever felt a feeling so perfectly real but impossible to describe? Effie had a lot of those. That's why we unpacked them into something simpler, lighter, easier to follow.*

*Music.*

*Effie won't be worrying about those feelings again anytime soon.*

I awoke to a flood of sunlight and papers.

My manuscript notebook was torn. I collected the stray papers, knowing there was a lot of work to do if I still wanted to perform.

I didn't even know if I wanted to.

As I stood, my back hurt, my legs weak and numb from the contorted position I was sleeping in.

Had I really been so exhausted I fell asleep on the floor?

The papers in my hand were covered in dark penmarks, and I noticed they were music notes. As I flipped through the papers, I noticed they made a full piece.

My next decision was to play it. If mystery music appeared on my floor a few hours before my solo performance, I wasn't exactly in a position to reject it.

My flute was on the ground, too, scuffed with fingerprints that resembled my musical efforts in the past week. Already, too many to clean marred the head and keys of my instrument.

Setting the music on the stand, I tested it out. It sounded brilliant, and rolled through my instrument effortlessly. Something felt special about it, a quality it possessed so unlike other music I had played.

*I guess I have my solo.*

I fastened pearls around my neck and eyed the mirror, then the clock.

*Five minutes.*

I wasn't nervous. I wasn't excited. Usually, adrenaline surged through my right before big moments, but this time, I felt different.

Practiced.

Prepared.

Ready.

*Three minutes.*

I extracted my brand-new flute from my case, which I had polished to an admirable silver glow. It shone proudly in my hands.

*Her heels clicked powerfully as she walked onstage. Her posture was pin-straight, hair set in loose blonde curls that wouldn't dare to move out of place. She was perfect now; she had traded everything for that.*

*She hardly glanced at her sheet music; her music came from somewhere else now. Somewhere deeper.*

*As she played, the room hovered liminally. Her music sang, wept, and soothed in one melody, until the audience felt touched by the emotional weight of the song. It was everybody but her who felt it.*

*The audience was anxious to applaud, for she had done so well. Her poised bow held years of experience, practice, and—*

*Sacrifice.*

When I was done, a face in the crowd caught my eye.

Lillian Merton was slipping out of the audience just as I left the stage, and met me at the rehearsal room backstage.

"You play really, really well," she complimented. I nodded slightly, still confused about her presence at the concert.

"I wanted to see how my flute was doing, in your hands," she said.

"Good," I said, not revealing that I had forged musical symbiosis with it.

"It seems well connected with you," she mused. Something sinister played at her expression, but was gone before I had a chance to distinguish it. "Very much so. Musical symbiosis is such a delicate balance— you must give something big to receive such beautiful music."

"Yes, I do," I lied. I didn't give anything to my flute, did I? Nothing special, at least. *It doesn't matter. I feel so connected to it even without giving something.*

*She was mistaken. She thought it was the flute, but it was her. Effie was a shallow character, too focused on her own pride that there was nothing meaningful within her to share.*

*So the instrument took instead. It gouged out her memory, turning it into soulful notes. It took her emotions, transforming them into steady beats. Every moment she had known was sucked of value, and turned into music.*

*Unknowingly, she had put her heart and soul into her music, and her instrument was more than willing to take it.*

*Symbiosis was a balance, after all.*

# Uranium Heart

By Harrison Baracat-Donovan

URANIUM HEART

2066

06:32

Nikita Morozov

*Flying over the remains of Chernihiv*

I had always thought of them as just stories, old wives' tales--something a mother would bribe a child with to get them to sleep. But as I flew over the bastardized remains of what I had been told was a city called Chernihiv, they seemed true. My mother had always told me about the Old World with a tear in her eye, but I never felt the same-- why would I have? You can't miss something whose joys you've never experienced.

From the hushed voices I overheard in alleys and through walls, the war with the New Soviets was violent, and Baron Kuznetsov had taken the land that the New Soviets and The Old Government (T.O.Γ) no longer had the troops to fight for. Seeing as I had been born into the T.O.Γ's upper class, I had been granted the luxury of truth; the records they didn't show the masses. What they did, why the war really started. The world's better days were past. We all lost the civil war that had been raging within our species since the days where man had something to fear other than itself. The payment for this knowledge was hope, but was there ever hope, really?

I shook myself and cleared my head. The mission at hand for my team, typically a civil task force, is what I should focus on. It was a strange situation: the T.O.Γ had sent a group of researchers to Chernobyl because of some odd radiation data. Comms were all clear; they gave the go-ahead to send the pilot that night, but communications had stopped after takeoff; the team

hadn't returned, even after being gone for hours. It was believed that they had crashed shortly after takeoff. Our mission was to recover their research logs and the helicopter's black box.

The team was comprised of Dasha, the leader; Andrey, our field technician, and me, Nikita. I was the recon operator. We had worked together for many years and had a good service record. My train of thought was interrupted by the pilot.

"We're touching down in a few minutes; check the seals on your radiation suits and load your weapons." I put a magazine into my carbine assault rifle and chambered the first round. I didn't know why we even brought them. There was certainly no people out here, and wildlife wouldn't be an issue.

"Nikita, don't bother bringing much recon gear; we're not going to need more than binoculars," Dasha said in her strong voice.

"Got it." I was wary of packing light for an operation like this, but the mission was only going to be for a few days at most. As we started descending I took a minute to appreciate the scenery. It was desolate, perverse in its nature, and a relic of an age that the last memories of had long disappeared. Even the countryside was unfamiliar. It was comprised of a deep white forest with a mountain range closer to the middle all surrounding the heart of it all, the city at the center. We started a sharp descent and landed on a small hill poking out from a bone-white forest. We grabbed our gear and exited the helicopter.

"Contact me with the sat-phone when you are ready to be picked up. If I don't hear from you within 96 hours, I'll pick you up at this location," the pilot said. It was a T.O.Γ pilot's standard speech. The helicopter took off, and we were left here. Dasha checked the GPS unit; we had landed far from the city.

“I didn’t see any wreckage on the helicopter, and the team radioed that their GPS was out of battery before pickup. Do you think we should head to the city first?” said Dasha.

“No, it’s probably somewhere in the countryside,” replied Andrey in his deep voice. “I agree with Andrey; let’s check the countryside, at the very least we’ll narrow down the search,” I added.

We agreed to check the countryside in a spiral pattern, slowly moving closer to the city. We trekked down the hill and made our way through the dense forest surrounding it. As we made our way through the forest I noticed the ground was a deep red that felt nostalgic, but I couldn’t place why. Not the kind of red from children’s books--it was closer to rust. As we walked through the forest I felt comfortable in a way I hadn’t remembered for years. I would liken it to the feeling of sitting in a field as a beautiful sunset crossed the horizon. Then there were the plants they were gorgeous, divine even. Each tree was sprawling a bright white hue. The branches were all viciously sharp and thick. My curiosity overtook me and I went closer and touched one, it felt unnaturally smooth even through my radiation suits gloves. It was pristine, unbroken at any point. I grabbed the lowest hanging branch and snapped it was extremely brittle and the branch had a soft core inside. Not sap; it seemed as if the core had nothing akin to any tree I knew of. Holding it in my hand was so odd almost as if —

“NIKITA!” I jumped back, startled; it was Dasha, sounding every bit the commander she was. “Why the hell are you back here?! We’ve been walking for 15 minutes you made us drag our asses all the way back here!”

“How long?” I asked.

“15 goddamn minutes, also you still haven’t told me why you’re still here.

“I was looking at this tree; it’s so odd.” I said.

“You held us back for 15 minutes so you can gawk at a tree, what is even wrong — you know what never mind, just for the love of God, keep up.” She didn’t have to tell me twice. Though as I walked I kept wondering how I had managed to spend 15 minutes staring at that tree. I pushed it out of my mind and kept walking.

*18:06*

*Chernobyl, T.O.F Territory*

*Nikita Morozov*

It had been a long day of searching; not even the slightest clue about the helicopter’s location had revealed itself. But now, as we sat around a fire in a small clearing basking in a low moonlight, we had a chance to rest our weary legs. None wanted to talk, not because we were tired, but because something was...off. As night fell it felt more as if we were encroaching somewhere we weren’t designed to be.

“Do your heads hurt, or is it just me?” Andrey said softly. I hadn’t thought about it, but my head did in fact hurt. Almost like when a storm was approaching you could feel it deep in your skull. “So, do they?” he said.

“Yes,” I replied. Dasha nodded, brown bangs falling in front of her eyes. After that we fell back into silence. Any more noise felt sinful. We were all tired, so trying to ignore the overarching dread we all cocooned ourselves into our sleeping bags which sat around the fire. Though it was hard to fall asleep wearing my radiation suit, I managed.

My eyes flew open. That feeling of encroachment had been replaced by the feeling of something that was truly above me in my presence.

“Rise, creation of our father,” I heard deep in my soul. Not in my ears, but in my consciousness. I obeyed, though there was nothing around me

“Thy flesh and faith will fuel the reformation of this land.” The voice was emanating from all around me. It was genderless and of little discernable emotion. Then I realized I was not in a recognizable landscape, it was a desert that seemed familiar yet I knew I hadn’t been. “Its hunt has yet to begin.”

“W—w — what?” I replied

“Our paths will intersect soon.” Then it was bright as if I had been flabanged. I took a moment to orient myself. Slowly I realized that I was back at camp. I ran to wake up Andrey and Dasha. They were both drowsy, but woke themselves up quickly once they saw how distressed I was. As I described what I hoped was a dream (was it a dream?) I saw looks of confusion cross their faces. Though I don’t think they believed me, they both knew something was off. “Nikita, that’s certainly odd but I wouldn’t get too bent out of shape over it,” Andrey said.

“It’s certainly odd but I agree with Andrey. We should get moving though, ‘cause I’d prefer to get out of here sooner rather than later,” Dasha said. So we packed up camp and moved toward the mountain range.

*Nikita Morozov*

*12:13*

*Chernobyl, T.O.I Territory*

The sun beat down on us as if it was trying to make our lives’ finale that much shorter; that is to say, with a vengeance. The rocky steps we had made our way to sucked the life out of my body in fact this whole dam place did, it felt like the hell wanted to take my place. We kept moving, but it had been hours; Dasha was trying to drag us up to the top of the steps so that we could surveil the area.

“Dasha, please let us take a break. It’s been hours,” said Andrey.

“You’ll live,” Dasha replied.

“Well, we’re taking a break weather you like it or not, isn’t that right, Nikita?” he said through gritted teeth.

“A break would be nice,” I said. I gave Andrey an overexaggerated wink. He rolled his eyes in return.

“Fine,” Dasha said. We all sat down on some rocks. She boiled some water so we could make M.R.E’s for lunch. We all scarfed down our food, especially Dasha, who was definitely more tired than she cared to let on. The mood was light compared to the previous day’s; we even started joking around a bit. An hour later, we were walking to the peak. I was annoyed how sweaty this radiation suit got. Minutes had bled into hours, and my concept of time had disappeared. All that was left was our progress up the mountain. The peak was just up ahead. Though “peak” was generous; it was about 20 square feet and completely flat--perfect for scouting, so I grabbed my binoculars from the bag I had been hauling around. Methodically I searched the countryside then I zoomed in 20x and stared into the city. I saw something on top of a building: a pair of helicopter blades.

“Yes!” I shouted. I had assumed that if the blades were on top of a building then the helicopter must’ve crashed somewhere on the city street.

“Dasha, Andrey! I think I see where the helicopter crashed. Dasha took the binoculars and looked into the city where I saw the blades.

“I see, let’s move there tomorrow morning,” Dasha said.

“Thank God we can finally leave,” said Andrey.

“Don’t get ahead of yourselves. Look.” Dasha pointed at a mass of dark clouds quickly approaching. Then I heard thunder.

“We have to find shelter quick,” Andrey said. We descended around the other side of the mountain. Just as the storm was about to catch up with us, we found a cave the timing was perfect... Suspiciously so. But our options were limited, so we took out our carbines and turned on the barrel mounted lights. We walked slowly into the cave, I could see the shared concern on Andrey and Dasha’s faces. As we wandered deeper and deeper still into the cave with the light of the world we were leaving at our backs, then I heard it. It was a quiet, almost indiscernible, whispering.

“Hear that?” Andrey said. Dasha made a shushing motion and waved us forward. As we descended, the whispering grew louder, yet the words were indiscernible. I refuse to describe it as a language; the word felt unfit for its beauty. The voice spoke of everything I desired, yet was just out of my reach. I could see the entrance to a chamber up ahead. It was abrupt, unnatural, as if something had bored a clean hole into the rock wall. As we got closer to the chamber, I saw that it was filled with pools of dark, still water. Wait, that wasn’t water. It was too thick.

“It’s filled with pools of goddam blood,” Andrey whispered with increasing panic in his voice. He was right. I had so many questions, all I was to afraid to ask. Then as we stepped into the chamber, I shined my light around the room. The walls were covered in a thick membrane covered in eyed. The voices were emanating from nowhere and everywhere, as if something had whispered a secret in the past and it was doomed to echo and be and reinterpreted. This reimagining of a human body was judging us--not our choices, but our very existence. It felt like we were a divine mistake, or maybe just an unintended consequence. Then same collage of voices from last night I made out one secret that seemed to be intended for us.

“The Sower will cleanse the reminders of your sins, but the burden will be for you to carry.”

*Nikita Morozov*

22:47

*Chernobyl, T.O.I Territory*

I opened my eyes. The moon’s light seemed so harsh after the cave. That thought jolted me awake. Frantically, I looked around the area. I was laying on a grassy knoll and I could see the city in the distance, probably two miles out. I was just about to call out to Andrey and Dasha, when the realization I was alone settled in on me. I thought back to what happened in the cave. I saw the eyes when I closed mine. I just wanted to lay down and die on this hill to explore what came next as opposed to having to face the reality of the decisions I would have to make. But I had to. I had a responsibility to them; they were the only family I had. I had to find them. I knew they would make their way to the city, so that’s where I was going to start.

I wandered the streets of the city aimlessly looking for the downed helicopter trudging through the streets in my radiation suit. The city was eerie and unwelcoming. Nothing human remained; it was a monument to our greatest sins: greed, destruction of what we had been granted, and growing too strong for our own good. We weren’t meant to learn that much; nothing should be able to do what we had done. I had been thinking since we got here about why we were here; what was the reason for our being? Had we been doomed to fail?. I didn’t know; none of us will. We lust for answers that aren’t as linear as we hope, which leads us to denial.

Denial is the enemy of progress; it always will be. I think we had all been in denial that we truly were at the end, and that after us there will be no monument to our existence besides the sin and destruction in our wake. I would continue on, but I would never be the same. I had been

enlightened far too much for my own sanity; now what was there to do? It would do me no use to dwell further, so I pushed it out of my mind, and searched for a building from the top of which I could use to scout the area for the helicopter. Eventually I found an apartment complex I could scout from.

The entrance was locked, so I grabbed a chunk of rubble and smashed in a window and hopped through. The building's air was thick; it had been untouched for years. As I climbed the stairwell, I saw all kinds of items that were completely foreign to me. Pre-war trinkets created for a different time, I guessed. I reached the top residential level and started looking around for a maintenance room. I ended up finding one at the end of a hallway. I opened the door and started climbing the ladder. Eventually I reached the roof and looked around. After a minute I was able to make out the helicopter lying on the road. Then I saw movement around its base.

“Andrey, Dasha, I'm up here!”

“I know.” The voice that replied was deep, grainy, and non-human. It started to approach in the shadow. I shone my barrel-mounted light on it. It was a mosaic of salvaged bodies. Its “face” was that of a man's stretched over an eyeless horse skull; its body was random pieces of bone sewn masterfully together with muscle and sinew, and its four legs, sharpened spears of bone.

In an impossible motion, it ran with its front legs bounding forward then hind legs joining them. It stabbed its legs deep into the concrete building with every step. As it reached me, I didn't run or hide. It was here to help, I knew that. It impaled me with its left “leg” and dragged me through the streets into an abandoned building it had made its own. It had a massive beating heart in the center. The creature went over to it and some sort of appendage came from the heart and attached to the creature for a few seconds; this seemed to re-invigorate the thing.

Then, in the rafters, I saw them: Andrey and Dasha's skinned corpses hanging from the rafters. Their mouths still moved in a speaking motion. The creature ripped me apart, each limb cast aside as it sewed my skin and muscle into itself with the skill of an artisan, yet I did not die. As it put my body towards some divine purpose, I had one last conscious thought: my soul was laid to rest in this land, and here it would stay, forevermore.

## **Middle School Winners**

## **Fifth Place: The Whispering Library**

By Manya Saxena

Maya Patel loved rainy afternoons at the Loudoun County Library. The tall windows rattled with the steady patter of rain, and the whole building seemed to hum with secrets. She wandered between shelves, running her fingers along spines, imagining each book as a doorway into another world.

That day, she was waiting for her mom to finish work. She had already finished her homework and was restless. She drifted toward the oldest wing of the library, where the shelves leaned slightly, and the carpet smelled faintly of dust and pine cleaner.

As she turned a corner, she froze. Between two towering shelves of encyclopedias stood a door she had never seen before. It was narrow, carved from dark wood, and etched with shimmering symbols that seemed to rearrange themselves when she blinked.

Her heart thudded. She had walked this hallway dozens of times. How could a door suddenly appear?

The brass handle gleamed, as if freshly polished. Maya hesitated, biting her lip. She was only twelve, but curiosity was stronger than caution. She reached out, twisted the handle, and stepped inside.

The door swung open silently, revealing a long hallway lit by lanterns that floated in midair. The air smelled of parchment, ink, and something like pine needles. At the far end stood a pedestal. On it rested a single book, glowing faintly.

Maya approached, her sneakers squeaking on the stone floor. The book's cover was deep blue, embossed with silver letters: *The Whispering Library*.

She touched it. The lanterns flared brighter, and the book whispered her name: *Maya...*

She gasped, dropping it, but the book floated back into her hands. Pages fluttered open, revealing a map of the library, except this map showed hidden rooms, staircases, and tunnels beneath the building. At the bottom of the page, glowing words appeared: *The Guardian awaits. Find the truth before the shadows do.*

Maya followed the map through twisting corridors until she reached a spiral staircase that descended into darkness. She gripped the railing, her breath quickening, and stepped down. At the bottom was a cavern filled with shelves carved into stone walls. Books glowed faintly, like stars trapped in rock.

A figure emerged, tall, cloaked in silver robes, with eyes that glowed like lanterns. “I am the Guardian of the Whispering Library,” the figure said, voice echoing like wind through trees. “You have been chosen.”

“Chosen for what?” Maya asked, her voice trembling.

“To protect the stories that hold the world together. Every tale is a thread in the fabric of reality. If the shadows steal them, the world unravels.”

Maya’s heart raced. She was just a kid. But the Guardian pressed a crystal quill into her hand. “With this, you can rewrite broken stories. But beware, the shadows will try to stop you.”

The ground shook. From the cavern’s edge, a shadow slithered forward, shaped like smoke but with glowing red eyes. It hissed, “Stories belong to us. We will silence them all.”

Maya gripped the quill. The Guardian whispered, “Write, Maya. Write the truth.” She scribbled on the nearest blank page of the book: *The shadow cannot steal stories, because stories belong to everyone.*

The words glowed, and the shadow shrieked, dissolving into mist. Maya stared at the quill. She had just defeated a creature with nothing but words.

The Guardian explained that shadows had already stolen fragments of stories, fairy tales missing endings, myths with heroes erased, histories with truths twisted. Maya's task was clear: journey through the hidden rooms of the library, restore the stolen stories, and keep the shadows from breaking free into the real world.

Her first mission led her into a chamber where books floated in midair. One opened to reveal *Cinderella*, but the final page was blank. A shadow hovered nearby, clutching the missing ending. Maya wrote quickly: *Cinderella's kindness and courage win the day, and she finds her true home.* The page filled with glowing words, and the shadow dissolved. The book settled back onto the shelf, whole again.

Next, Maya entered a fiery chamber where a giant bird of flame struggled to rise. Its wings flickered weakly. The Guardian explained: "The shadow stole the ending of the Phoenix myth. Without rebirth, the Phoenix dies forever." Maya wrote: *The Phoenix rises from ashes, reborn stronger than before.* The bird let out a triumphant cry, flames blazing brighter, and soared into the cavern sky.

Days passed in the hidden library. Maya restored dozens of stories, each time battling shadows with her quill. She grew braver, her writing quicker, her words sharper. Yet each victory left her exhausted, and she wondered how long she could keep going.

One night, the Guardian warned: "The Shadow King has awakened. He seeks to erase the greatest story of all, the story of hope."

Maya entered the deepest chamber, where a massive shadow loomed, taller than the shelves, its voice echoing: "Hope is fragile. I will silence it."

Her hands shook, but she wrote: *Hope is the story that never ends. It lives in every heart, every word, every dream.*

The book blazed with light. The Shadow King roared, then shattered into sparks that faded into nothing.

The Guardian smiled. “You have saved the Whispering Library. The stories are safe, for now.”

The door behind Maya reappeared. She stepped through and found herself back in the library’s old wing. The rain had stopped. Her mom was waiting outside.

Maya clutched the crystal quill, now glowing faintly. She knew the library’s secrets would remain with her forever. And whenever she opened a book, she listened closely, because stories whispered, and she was their protector.

## Fourth Place: When Life is a Fairytale

By Grace Parsons

"I just don't understand." Kate said to herself, sighing, as she was sitting on her bed one night. Kate's bookshop, *Reid & Co*, had been losing a lot of money over the past few months. She couldn't tell how much longer it could stay open. This predicament wasn't because of a lack of interest, though. Her bookshop was the only place to buy any kind of book in the small town, ranging from thoroughly used or brand new. But now, instead of looking through the windows to see what new releases were for sale, potential customers who passed by would divert their eyes, take a few steps to the other side of the road, and start hoping that when they get home nothing will be different. And it was all because of some strange stories told by her customers.

A few months ago, just before this whole ordeal happened, Kate was standing at the register and looking around proudly. It was a rainy Saturday, so it seemed that everyone in town thought that they would buy a new book to pass the time. The bell on the door chimed, and standing in the doorway was a very flustered looking Mrs. Smith. She started to come in, but then quickly turned around, tapped her wet umbrella on the sidewalk multiple times as courtesy to the bookshop floor, and continued toward the register. Kate stood up straighter and repeated her usual line,

"Is there anything I can help you with today?" Mrs. Smith waved her hand over her head as if she was brushing away that thought and replied,

"Actually, I want to tell you about something very unusual that happened last night." Kate was a little confused but kept listening. She could stand some conversation with her neighbor.

"I'm all ears." The lady took a breath and began.

“Last night I was reading a book to my grandson Jake (who is staying with me for the weekend,) called Jack and the Beanstalk. You may recognize it as one of the books you sell in the children’s section at your store. That’s because Jake bought it from you two days ago.” Kate nodded, quietly thinking that every bookshop in the world sells that book. Almost anyone would recognize it. But if what Mrs. Smith was saying was a compliment, Kate didn’t want to ruin it by interrupting.

“I had just put Jake to bed after reading him that book and was sitting on my rocking chair on the porch. You know what chair I’m talking about, right?” Kate nodded again. From the way the front of Mrs. Smith’s house looked, though, you could barely tell there was a rocking chair at all for the number of large plants she grew in her front yard.

“Well, I was sitting there, just breathing in the cool autumn air, when suddenly one of my cats (I don’t know which, I can never keep track of them,) bolted out the door and ran right up my beanstalk. And from where my chair was positioned, I couldn’t see the top, though I know that it is only just taller than the shortest part of my roof.” Mrs. Smith raised her hand high above her head to indicate the height of the beanstalk. Kate was growing kind of impatient with her plant-loving, cat-lady neighbor who was telling a very long story.

“I jumped out of my chair to grab the cat, because my cats are strictly indoor cats. But when I looked, the cat was gone and I know it did not jump onto the roof or anything else outside.” Kate took a second to process what was just said. Her first thought was, *Why would her door be open if she didn’t want the cats to be outside?* But instead replied,

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mrs. Smith. And that is a strange coincidence that you and Jack seem to have the same problems.” She said with a laugh, trying to brighten the mood. “Like unfortunate happenings around tall beanstalks. I’m sure your cat will return from the clouds

soon, and it will be like he never left.” Kate was growing nervous and shakily rearranged the free bookmarks on her desk.

“You don’t seem to understand.” Mrs. Smith told her, looking more flustered and angrier by the minute. “There is something wrong with that book. Something... enchanted about it. And I don’t know why, but your book decided to curse my beanstalk and now my cat is somewhere in the clouds with those giants!” Kate was very concerned for Mrs. Smith’s sanity at this point and slowly took a step backward.

“I promise, I have no idea why that happened, and I promise I did not... ‘enchant’, or ‘curse’ that book. As far as I know, all the books I sell are normal and amazing, as usual.” She said with a nervous chuckle. Mrs. Smith stormed out of the bookstore, yelling unintelligible threats about what would happen if she was ‘cursed’ by Kate again. Kate just thought the whole thing was just a strange coincidence, and the cat would be found eventually. But that never happened, and the stories kept pouring in from confused customers.

Some of the tales were way more serious than a cat escaping, like what happened to an eleven-year-old girl who had just read *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The day after she read the story, her stepmother, (who was not evil and loved her dearly,) unknowingly cooked her a meal that gave the poor girl food poisoning. The stepmom had told her friends about the coincidence, who then told their friends, and word eventually got around to Mrs. Smith, who promptly told the stepmom about how Kate Reid sells cursed books to her customers. At this point, Kate had labeled Mrs. Smith as certifiably insane and thought she would never have to deal with her stories again. But sure enough, Mrs. Smith came marching into the quiet bookshop on a normal Wednesday evening, yelling at everyone about how *if you buy any more books you will be cursed!*, with an embarrassed looking stepmom trailing behind. When this happened,

Kate did start to feel curious, as well as angry, about this whole situation. There were now two strange and seemingly impossible coincidences regarding books bought from her shop. And there would soon be more.

It was a week later, and Kate was sitting at her desk; her mind overwhelmed with stories from confused customers. Stories about girls who slept in for more than 6 hours after reading *Sleeping Beauty*, stories about girls who had mysteriously lost their shoes at midnight after reading *Cinderella*, about children, who, after reading *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, broke both their chairs and beds collapsed and broke into pieces as soon as they sat on them, and so many more. And Kate was the most confused of all. At this point, she had to admit that something was a little... *magical* about her books. But she didn't know what it was, and she didn't know how to find out.

And that brings us to a few months (and a hundred more book-related coincidences) later, when Kate was working late in her shop, pondering what to do about her failing business. She suddenly heard a loud clatter that sounded like it was coming from the back of the shop in one of the storage closets. Kate stood up and slowly crept toward the noise to investigate. She reached out in the dark and flipped a light switch. She heard the scraping of a box against the floor, and all was quiet. Now Kate was sure she wasn't the only one in the shop. A box full of books couldn't have moved on its own. But when she looked around, everything looked like it was just where she had placed it before. Though nothing was out of the ordinary, she didn't leave. This was a mystery Kate wanted to solve. So she decided to pick up the box that was in the direction of the loud noise. It was heavier than she expected, so she pushed it a little to the side. What Kate was not expecting to see was the small corner of a square-shaped hole in the floor of the storage closet. And there was light shining through. Kate pushed even harder on the box until it slid all

the way across the floor. She could see the entire person-shaped hole in the ground. And -even more to her surprise- there was a ladder leading inside. And now she could hear loud scuffling around under the floor. Kate couldn't remember ever going into the basement of her shop, mostly because she didn't even know there was a basement. When she started to creep down the ladder, the light at the bottom turned off. Kate could still see the ladder because of the light from above, but didn't want to turn back.

“Hey!” She called down the ladder. “I know you're down there, and I want to know who you are.” Kate prayed her voice wasn't as shaky as she thought it was. “Please turn on the light!” The light instantly turned on and Kate gave a short yell, because where she saw the ground below before, standing there was a young man in casual work clothes. He said in a completely normal and definitely-not-shaky voice,

“Hello. I am part of a secret book society, and you, Kate Reid, were not supposed to know about it. But I must pay for being unnecessarily loud, so you may come down here if you wish.” Kate was extremely confused, and against her better judgement climbed all the way down. Then she quickly asked,

“What in the world are you doing in my basement?”

“Ah, but is this *your* basement?” The man tapped Kate on the nose and quickly turned around and started walking. Kate stood there for a second, flabbergasted. Then she regained her senses and ran to catch up with him.

“Where are we?” She asked.

“I will show you. Just follow me.” Kate followed the man down a long hallway to a door plainly labeled normal books in all lowercase letters. But the sign did not at all capture how

extraordinary the room was inside. When the man led Kate inside, all she could see was books, specifically fairy tales, on shelves from ground to the ceiling at least fifteen feet high.

“Can you please explain what is going on?” Kate asked the man, awestruck, as he walked immediately to a desk, rifling through the drawers and obviously looking for something. When he pulled out a silver key, (Which seemed to be precisely what he was looking for based on the satisfied grin) he answered her question.

“I am part of a society that replaces normal bookstore books with enchanted books. There you go. If you want a more thorough explanation, then you must keep following me. I was not prepared for this... untimely visit.” Kate shut her mouth and the man proceeded to walk out the door and into the hallway. He walked out quite fast and it took a second for Kate to follow. Then he shut the door behind her and continued walking down the long hallway.

“Can you at least tell me your name? Because you know mine. Which is a little creepy. So you kind of have to tell me.”

“My name is John.”

“John?”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out! What’s wrong with a name like John?”

“Oh, nothing. I mean... you’d think someone who hides in people’s basements for 3 months would have a more interesting name.”

John scoffed, trying to hide how surprised he was that Kate guessed the exact number of months he was down there.

“Well, with a name like Kate, you sure are one to talk.” He started walking faster down the hallway.

“Hey!” Kate said, slightly panting. His legs must be much longer since Kate had to run to keep up. “My name is actually Katherine. So, not that much of a plain name.”

“And mine is Johnathan. There you go. Two definitely not plain names. Can we move on?”

“I’m ready when you are.” Kate said, stifling a chuckle. Then she realized that they had been stopped for a whole minute in front of another door. He stuck the key into the lock and turned it.

“Ladies first.” He said with a smile. When Kate walked in, she was awestruck. This room looked like the other one, with books from floor to ceiling. But this room swirled with something... *indescribable*. She could just tell that something was different about these books. Kate stood there, putting the pieces together. The other room must have had the unenchanted books. (She realized with a start that they were all stolen, probably by John, but she decided to forgive him later.) So these must be some of the enchanted books.

“You may have guessed,” John seemed to read Kate’s thoughts, “That we replace your books with these ones. These make things happen in real life that usually only happen in fairy tales. But the experiences are...” He struggled to think of the right word. “...Modified, in a way. For example, we wouldn’t want Mrs. Smith’s grandson to climb up the beanstalk. Only the cat.” Kate stood there in the room with her jaw dropped, a million things whirling through her head at once, shock, anger, amazement, and so much more.

“You- you knew about that?! And now, you’re letting my business fail because of these stupid enchanted books!?”

“No, this secret society actually-”

“What society? All I see is one person- you! And you are ruining my shop!”

John's face fell. He was the only one. The only person with real magic.

"No, Kate, I promise I'll make it up to you. Can you please let me explain something?"

Kate slowly nodded against her better judgement. "I was born with book magic. I don't know how, and I don't know why. Every time I read a book that I liked, something that happened in the book would happen to me. I sort of... *wished myself into the story*. But that's a tale for another day. Anyway. Growing up, I adored learning lessons from books in real life. So, I decided to "wish" on each of these books to enchant them and create this whole secret area in the basement with magic, so that people can learn the valuable lessons like characters do in fairy tales. Kate, this is *magic*. It's real. And... please don't be mad. I have an idea."

\* \* \*

Three weeks later, Kate closed down the bookstore- and then reopened it with a new sign. Instead of *Reid & Co*, the sign read *The Enchanted Bookstore*. Now more customers than ever before visited her bookshop because of John's idea. He didn't mean for the bookstore to lose money- he wanted it to thrive in his magic. But since he had already spoiled Kate's reputation, John made it up to her by making the enchanted books more attractive for customers than normal books. Now people came from far and wide to read fairy tales and live out the characters' experiences. Because of course, what's better than living in a fairy tale? There were instructions printed on every book-*After reading every word of this book, wait 10 minutes to 48 hours for the magic to start. You will then begin having a fairy-tale experience!* But Kate and John changed a few things-

"First of all, no more poisoning customers." Kate had told John sternly. "We will only sell good experiences." John agreed and made sure the magic worked right this time. And now there were stands for all kinds of enchanted books in Kate's bookstore-instead of being poisoned

after reading *Snow White*, you would make seven new friends the next day. Oh- and John was designated as co-owner of the bookshop. Books were his passion, and he had grown attached to *Reid & Co* over the past few months. All was well at the newly reopened bookshop.

As Kate was sitting at her desk one afternoon making more labels and signs for her shop, the bell chimed and Mrs. Smith entered. Kate and John both held their breath, remembering the past couple times Mrs. Smith had walked through that door. The whole bookshop seemed to quiet down after the door shut with another chime of the bells, everyone inside knowing the commotion Mrs. Smith had caused before.

“G-good afternoon.” John stuttered in a cheery-but-nervous tone. “Is there anything I can help you with today?” Instead of waving her hand and brushing away what John said, she quietly replied,

“Yes, please. Can you show me where *Jack and the Beanstalk* is? I want to look at it for a second.” John gulped and asked her to follow him. Mrs. Smith was eerily calm today. As soon as she saw the book she was looking for, she picked it up and searched for a seat. The only one available was in front of John. She sat down and started to read. John accidentally stared at her the whole time from his seat at the register. After about five minutes, (She had chosen the Little Readers edition) Mrs. Smith closed the book and then blinked. Something seemed to be off. She reached into her pocket, which had been empty before, and pulled out a little golden egg. Mrs. Smith then smiled apologetically at both Kate and John. She made her way across the room, carefully put the book back, and left. Kate didn’t even notice that Mrs. Smith had broken an unwritten bookstore rule by reading the whole book without paying. Because something about what happened that afternoon made Kate completely sure that *The Enchanted Bookstore* would be a neighborhood favorite for years to come.

## **Third Place: Jersey on the Bench**

By Sara Haider

The jersey still hangs in my locker with one single crease in the center. Blue and red, number 11 stitched on and the words Wilson in bold white letters. It smells like sweat and detergent mixed together. Now my jersey just hangs there while I wear jeans and a hoodie, watching practice from the bench.

Tyson scores the winning layup just as the buzzer screams and the crowd goes wild, but I'm already standing before it finishes. Everyone else rushes onto the court sneakers squeaking voices loud celebrating our victory. I stay where I am.

What's the point when number 11 isn't mine? The neon yellow band with big black words that spell out CAPTAIN isn't wrapped around my arm. Instead, someone else is wearing my jersey and what hurts more is that no one noticed. They never do.

They start chanting his name. Not mine. It feels strange hearing the words Tyson echo through the gym like it was always meant for him. I clap because everyone else is clapping and it would feel wrong doing anything else, but I don't mean it.

Coach doesn't look at me, not even for a second. When the team meets at the center of the court he doesn't invite me to join. He's focused on the players who can play. I get it the game doesn't stop because I did.

I sit back down on the bench and lean my elbows on my knees. The gym smells like rubber and sweat, the same as it always has. It doesn't feel the same though. The lights are bright. Almost too bright, and the loud cheering makes my head hurt. I remember how I used to stand out there during warm-ups bouncing the ball, feeling confident. Being captain meant people looked up to me. Trusted me, to score the winning point or make a layup. Now no one needs me for anything.

Tyson readjusts the yellow band on his arm. My chest tightens when I see it. That band used to be wrapped around my arm, it showed leadership and responsibility. It meant I mattered. Now it's just another reminder that I've been replaced.

In the locker room, everyone's loud. Some blast music from their phone, and people are laughing and replaying moments from the game. I walk to my locker and open it slowly. My jersey is still there, hanging exactly how I left it. Blue and red, number 11. My name stitched on the back reminding me of something that made me feel like I belonged.

Basketball wasn't something that I just did. It was what people knew me for. Teachers asked how the season was going. My friends came to watch me play. When I introduced myself, being on the team was always a part of it. Without basketball, I don't know who I am.

“Good win” someone says as they pass by

“Yeah” I say forcing a smile

I sit down on the bench and retie my shoes, even though they are already tight. I don't want to be the first one to leave. I have to pretend like I care even though staying makes my chest feel heavy.

When I finally walk out of the locker room the gym is almost empty. The lights are dim, and the court looks bigger without the crowd here. I stood just for a minute, just staring at the empty bleachers and orange rimmed net.

I think about all the hours I spent here. Early morning practices. Late nights. Missed hangouts with friends. Basketball was always the one thing that I knew I had; Knew I was good at. I was sure about it.

The injury happened so fast that sometimes it doesn't even feel real. One second, I was dribbling through players and the next I was in the hospital staring at the bright white ceiling

lights. I told myself that everything was going to be fine. I wasn't injured. That's what I always told myself. The doctor didn't.

Six months. That's what he said. Six months of rest and physical therapy. Six months of watching from the bench.

At first, everyone checked on me. Texts and calls. "We miss you" "You'll be back soon" or "We need our captain back." But after a little while they stopped. The game doesn't stop because I can't play. The season kept moving forward.

So did the team.

At practice, I try to stay involved. I pass balls, set up the drills, and help the younger kids. Sometimes coach asks me to explain plays. I like those moments it lets me know that I still know what I'm doing.

I watch Tyson run the same plays I used to run. I see him make mistakes that I know how to fix. I don't say anything though. I don't want to sound bitter. I don't want to be that person.

Jealousy sneaks up on me anyway. I hate that feeling. He didn't do anything wrong just taking up the opportunity not many people have. I would've done that same. But it's hard not to feel bad when your spot has been replaced.

One afternoon after practice, coach asked me to stay back.

"Sit for a minute" he says pointing to a bench.

I sit, nervously, not sure what he was going to say.

"You're doing a good job staying involved" he tells me "I know it's not easy"

I nodded, not wanting to speak because I felt like I might start getting teary eyed. For no reason.

“We still need you” he adds. “Your importance doesn’t just disappear because you injured” I want to believe him. I really do.

That night I lie in bed staring at the ceiling. I think about myself before basketball. Before I became captain or anything. I was a kid who just enjoyed playing outside and didn’t care about stats or titles.

I guess I lost that version of myself when I became captain. Somewhere along the way I lost site of what really mattered.

At the next game, I sit on the bench again. I clap. I cheer. I help when I can, This time when someone misses a shot, I’m the first one to encourage them to try again.

It doesn’t fix everything. Things didn’t go back to normal, more specifically I didn’t go back to being myself. But it helped.

In the locker room afterward, a player from the junior varsity basketball sits next to me. “How do you stay calm during games” he asks.

The question surprises me.

“I don’t always” I admit. “But I focus on what I can control.

He nods like it matters. Like what I said really made sense.

For the first time in a while, I feel useful.

Weeks pass, Then months. Rehab is slow and frustrating. Some days hurt more than others. Some days hurt more than others and I feel like things might be starting to get good. Other days I feel stuck and weak.

But I keep showing up. I keep sitting on the bench. I keep being there.

One afternoon, I open my locker and look at my jersey again. It’s still hanging there unchanged. This time it doesn’t hurt as much.

I realize something then. Basketball helped shape me. It made me realize that titles aren't everything. It helped me realize that I am more than just a number. More than a captain. More than point guard.

I don't know when I will wear number 11 again, If I will ever be captain like before. But I do know that this. I still care. And I'm still here.

## Second Place: The Burnt Archive

By Saanvi Thota

They say I died in a fire.

That's what the file says. Printed in blocky black text on government-standard e-paper.

Double-stamped with a half-rusted red insignia:

**“STATUS: DECEASED.”**

Reason: **Fire**

Name: Cassophia Mareen Sinclair

Identification Number: #8143

Age: 14

Parents: Dead.

Siblings: None.

Relevance: Minimal

Outcome: Forgotten.

It's been three years since I “died”. Honestly, It's kinda funny, in a messed up sort of way. I used to think death would be more dramatic. Maybe some kind of ceremony. Or at least a heartbeat stopping. But in the Dominion, death isn't something that happens to you, it's something they *assign* to you.

And I got mine early.

Before the fire, I wasn't anyone special. Just a random nobody. I wore the bright colored bow my mother gave me every day, she said it made me look hopeful, like the world hadn't taken everything from us yet.

Turns out the world *had* plans.

I remember the sirens. The *wrong* kind. Not a warning, a cleansing. Everyone knew what they meant. fire scour. A strategic burn. A population reset.

We were the lowest of the lowest, in other words we were hardly a threat and were the easiest to get rid of. But I escaped. Or maybe I was forgotten. That's the thing about a system that runs on algorithms and quotas, sometimes it glitches. I didn't know I was "dead" until I saw my own file on a stolen datapad. My picture. My bow. "DECEASED." Like it was true just because they said it. Like truth could be typed and filed.

I laughed. I think I laughed for hours. I don't know when I stopped.

And then I started rewriting myself.

I found the **Archive** three weeks later. Or maybe they found me.

It started with a note. Paper, the old kind, slipped under the drainage gate I slept behind.

Just six words:

**"We know you're not really dead."**

Then came the girl.

Name: Vex. Age: 12. Hair: like rusted copper wire. Attitude: worse than mine. She showed up in the middle of a blackout, dragged me through sewer tunnels to a room lit by scavenged terminals and screens showing hundreds of names. Kids like me. Status: DEAD.

Once they've written you down, once they've assigned your death, there's always a record, always a trace, always a way back. You can try to bury a name, but that name still carries weight, even in the void.

They called us the **Burnt Archive**, ghosts in the machine. Not alive, not officially. Perfectly invisible.

“You're lucky,” Vex told me. “Most don't get a file. Just flames.”

The others were like me. Runaways. Survivors. Not all of them were kids, some were teens with scars and eyes too old. One boy, Keer, hadn't spoken in two years. But he could code like a machine. He rebuilt my ID chip. Gave me a new biometric pattern. A different heartbeat, digitally.

“You're a glitch now,” he said. “Glitches don't burn.”

We started hacking the DeathNet. Every person they marked “deceased,” we tracked. Every death certificate they falsified, we cracked. And when we could, we reached them first. Gave them a choice: vanish quietly, or fight from the shadows.

The Dominion doesn't know how to kill what they've already buried.

The thing about being dead is that no one notices when you start slipping through cracks. They forget to lock the doors to their data centers. Forget to monitor the ghost children running wild in the shadows of their empire. They think that by erasing us, by writing us off with a few keystrokes, we disappear.

But they're catching on.

The last mission went wrong. Vex and I were tagging a Dominion data silo in the south, near what used to be called “Texas” back before the Dominion, before the war, before everything. Back when the so-called United States of America existed.

We had the route mapped out. Keer looped the perimeter cams so it looked like dust on the lens. The blackout window was scheduled. Thirty seven seconds of blindness. Vex and Keer timed it down to the breath.

We slipped through a maintenance hatch that smelled like old rain and rust. The ladder rungs were still warm from the day's heat. My palms stuck to them on the way down.

Inside, the silo hummed. Not loud. Just steady. Like a throat clearing over and over again.  
Rows of servers blinked in patient green. The Dominion loves green. It looks like permission. It looks like safety.

Vex plugged in first. She always did.

Her fingers moved fast across the stolen pad. Archive footage flooded the queue. Kids with smoke in their hair. Kids reading their own death certificates out loud. Kids laughing at the word deceased like it was a bad joke.

For twelve seconds the feed switched.

Across the entire sector the screens flickered. Classrooms. Transit hubs. Ration lines. A girl with ash on her face stared back at the nation that buried her.

My voice followed.

If you are watching this, you were told we are gone.

You were told wrong.

They lied to you.

They always have and they always will.

Vex grinned at me from the floor, copper hair falling in her eyes. See. Clever.

It was supposed to be simple. Just another ghost job. Nothing Heroic. Nothing Loud. We were only replacing their propaganda feed with Archive footage. Burning kids speaking the truth, from beyond the grave. We thought we were clever.

We weren't.

The lights changed.

Green to white.

White to red.

No sirens. No alarms. Just the hum stopping.

That was worse.

Keer's voice cracked through my earpiece. "Cass... whatever that was, it wasn't a system error."

The doors sealed.

Vex yanked the drive but it was too late. The screens around us blinked to life, not with our footage but with our own faces staring back at us.

A message scrolled across every monitor.

TRACE CONFIRMED.

Suddenly, footsteps, several of them, thundering across the halls, with precision in each step. Every single step bringing them closer and closer to us.

My stomach dropped so fast it felt like it was falling through the floor.

We ran.

Boots hit concrete behind us. Not rushed. Measured. Like they knew exactly where we would go. Like they knew there was no escape from here.

Vex shoved the USB drive into my jacket pocket. If one of us makes it, she said.

I tried convincing her we would both make it.

But in the Dominion nothing is guaranteed.

We both knew the stakes.

As the corridor ahead split left and right. The map in my head stuttered. The blackout window was gone. The building had woken up.

Flood gates released somewhere below. Water roared through the lower levels, not enough to drown a city. Just enough to corner us.

They were not trying to burn us.

They were trying to flush us.

Vex took the left corridor and threw me a look that said trust me.

I did.

That was the last time I ever saw her.

By the time I reached the drainage exit the tunnels were filling. Cold water bit at my knees. Then my waist. The water kept rising. I waited and waited for her head to break the surface of the water behind me.

It did not.

A small part of me hoped her head would break through the currents and laugh at me for being worried and scared, but alas it never did.

Above ground the sky looked normal. Blue. Empty. Like nothing had shifted. People bustling around like the world hadn't changed, but of course to them it was just another day in the Dominion, they knew nothing. I had wondered if anyone had even seen our footage. What if all that had been for nothing. What if Vex was gone for no reason? I needed to know her death was worth something. That it had changed something. That it hadn't gone to waste.

My comm stayed silent.

Two hours later the DeathNet updated.

**Name: Vex Amari**

**Age: 12**

**Status: Dead**

**Cause: Accident — Flooding**

**Next of kin: None**

Accident. Flooding.

Efficient. Clean. Believable.

They always choose believable.

It felt like a slap in the face or even confirmation that she was truly gone.

They filed her like she was a typo. Like she never mattered.

But I remember.

And I have her voice recordings, her cracked jokes.

Vex isn't gone. She's just waiting.

I listened to her last voice recording that night. Static at the edges.

“If we ever get caught, Cass, promise me you will haunt them properly.”

I'm trying.

I *swear* I am.

The Dominion thinks this was a warning.

It was.

Just not for us.

They found the Archive.

Which means we found something first.

And if they are scared enough to close the doors, to reroute water, to rewrite a twelve year old girl into an accident, then we are closer than we thought.

Fear makes empires sloppy. Sloppy empires overcorrect. Overcorrection leaves fingerprints. And fingerprints mean they're bleeding somewhere. But every leak has a cost, and even ghosts have limits. We had to stop before the fire consumed more than just them.

We stopped broadcasting big. We couldn't risk another loss. At least not now. After Vex our numbers were starting to shrink. She was the best recruiter we had, now we have less and less survivors arriving by the day. We had to stop.

No more hijacking entire sectors.

No more bold speeches.

No more ash faced children on screens.

Now *we* whispered.

We slipped single frames into their feeds and their propaganda. One second. One flicker.

A face.

A name.

A mistake in a census report.

A "deceased" child showing up on screens across the country.

Tiny fractures.

The Dominion thrives on certainty.

We started feeding it uncertainty.

At first, no one noticed.

Then the rumors started.

A Capitol teacher swore she saw her nephew on a public TV in the train station. The nephew who supposedly "burned" three years ago. More and more rumors started popping up throughout the Dominion.

Keer didn't smile, but his typing got louder.

We weren't bringing people back.

We were simply making it impossible for them to stay erased.

Of course, erasure only works if the erased stay quiet.

Too bad us in the Brunt Archive have never been good at staying quiet.

The thing about burning a file is, the ashes still say something. Every lie leaves a trace.

So I've made it my job to be a trace. A scar. A memory burnt into the minds of the Dominion and its supporters. In honor of her. I hijack their systems. Whisper into their comms. I lace their school videos with Archive messages. I rewrite the ending of every dead name I can find.

Because I'm not gone. I'm not silent.

I'm the ghost they made.

And ghosts don't burn.

**Name: Cassophia Mareen Sinclair**

**Age: 17**

**Status: Unknown**

**Cause of death:**

**Current location: Unknown**

**Threat level: Escalating**

## First Place: La Letra

By Kaleb Ricce Carrillo

February 15, 2026

If someone were to ask me what has impacted me the most in my life, I wouldn't answer them with the day I learned to ride a bike or the day I won an essay contest, but instead, I would answer them with a date: Tuesday, December 9, 2025, which is the day my father was detained by ICE.

Looking back at that particular day, I find it hard to believe that a regular day like December 9 could turn into such a tragedy. That Tuesday, I said goodbye to my father like I would have on any other school day: a simple *adios*, an *hasta luego*, maybe even just a wave or hug. My father was a handyman, a sort of jack of all trades in the area of maintenance and repair. He worked every day except on Saturday, the Sabbath, and on Sunday, church day. One very important rule that my father would always keep is that God always comes first, followed by my family, and then work. My father would take us to church every Sunday to hear the word of God. He would participate and help out at church, and encourage us to do the same. At home and during the Sabbath, he would read us the Bible. His number one job was to make sure he was there for us and present in both our physical and spiritual lives. His handyman work would sometimes clash with his job at home, though. I have heard him get up at four in the morning to leave for work in the cold morning. I have heard him come in at midnight from work. The clatter of his keys, the thump of his heavy boots, and the heavy sighing made his arrival known. It was not uncommon for me to see my father absent during the morning, and I never doubted that he would come back home. I took my father's presence for granted.

I can't recall all the details of that Tuesday, but I remember it was like any other school day. The weather was chilly and the sky was a dull gray. Orange, yellow, and brown leaves

shivered on the ground every time a gust blew through, and they crunched under the weight of my bike's tires. I always biked to school whenever the weather wasn't acting up. The school day went fine for me: I had math, I played my viola, I ate lunch, and I joked around with my friends.

I had always figured that you would know when danger was coming, sort of like a Spider-sense but for minor problems. I could never imagine that it would creep up to me like a snake that can and will bite.

Although I have said that I cannot remember specific parts of that Tuesday, I am very familiar with the ride home. I was reflecting on the school day and thinking about going home to my loving family. I am sure my father thought like that every day he drove home in his van, and I am positive he still thinks like that at the detention center.

When I got home, I began to sense something was off

The snake was creeping up to me. I had heard the rustlings and I had seen something move in the bushes, but I wasn't sure what it was yet.

I hurriedly rested my bike against the garage door, all while fumbling with my pockets to find my house keys. When I entered the house, I said a clear yet timid, "Alo?" and made my way up the stairs. When I got to the living room, I noticed a few things that turned on red WARNING signs in my head. My mother, who was usually cooking in the kitchen or listening to a sermon, was absent from both of these activities. My brother, Jose, was not sitting on the old, wooden table where he did his homework or read his daily twenty-minutes. Confused by their absences, I quietly walked up the stairs that lead to my bedroom. I paused when I reached the door. My mother's voice drifted from inside the room. I entered the room cautiously and quietly, and saw my mother and Jose sitting on the floor. My mother was talking to someone on the phone, and

my brother was listening. I set down my backpack and sat down on my bed, waiting for her to finish. When she finished her conversation, she set down her phone and breathed out hard.

“*Hijo,*” she told me in a shaky voice, “*Lo peor ha pasado.*” The worst has happened.

A million possibilities came to my mind, but deep inside I knew what had happened. My mother explained to me that my father had been detained by ICE while working at his nephew’s new house. She told me that he had desperately called her and given her instructions on who to call and what to do. My mother had called most of my father’s family.

Mi papa?

MY dad?

The snake had caught me by surprise. And it bit me with such speed that it left me wondering whether it was real or not.

It has been almost 3 months since my father was detained, and I think about him every day. I hear his name in conversations, in the news, and in social media. When I go to sleep, I think about the number of days until his hearing in court. His court hearing is on February 18. February 18 is less than 3 days away.

My family has been very fortunate. Our church has helped us the most and in many ways. The congregation has prayed for us, church members have hugged us and held our hands, and I constantly hear, “*Tu familia esta en nuestras oraciones,*” meaning, “Your family is in our prayers.” I have prayed, too.

“*Hijo, quiero que escribas una letra al juez. Podría ayudar a tu padre mucho.*” My mother told me she wanted me to write a letter to the judge because it could help my father a lot. I had never written a letter to a judge or anyone as important as a judge. I was uncertain at first, because I was afraid that I would mess up my father’s chance of coming back. I came to realize,

though, that this was my chance to show the world who my father truly is as a human. So, I wrote the following letter.

*To the Honorable Judge,*

*My name is Diego Enrique Martinez and the petitioner is my father, Luis Enrique Martinez.*

*My father is a significant part of my life. He is an example for me and I have always looked up to him. He has not only been a grand part of my regular life, but also my spiritual life. My father always made time to read the Bible to me and my family. My father cared for me, looked after me, and always made sure that I was okay. My father is a hardworking handyman, who takes pride in his work and offers satisfactory products to his clients. In the past, I have accompanied my father to work and witnessed the level of skill and patience that is required of one working as a handyman, as well as the exhaustion that comes after it. I have seen how one flaw can ruin the entire project, renovation, or construction. I have tried to model myself after my father by working on skills like patience and my dedication to tasks. My father uses these skills every day in his work to create a strong, trusting bond with him and the client.*

*My family has suffered a great deal since my father was detained. I have seen my mother in tears and tired after a long day. I have seen my brother worried and scared for my father. I have seen my sister busy, balancing schoolwork and the current situation. These worries continue to be present up to this day, and will continue until my father comes back to us. Hearing his voice over the phone during his daily calls brings us momentary hope and peace.*

*My father's deportation would cause me a great deal of pain and disappointment in many areas of my life. I was born in the United States and I have lived here for my entire 14 years of life. I have made friendships and bonds here with neighbors, teachers, classmates, friends, and family. My education would also take a devastating toll. I have not had any educational experiences in other countries besides the United States. I strongly believe that my future depends on the American educational system. From a young age, my father has taught me the importance of a strong education by taking his own educational life as an example. I care a lot about my future, and I have always thought about my plans for high school, college, and beyond. Not only is my education in danger, but I would also not be able to take advantage of the endless opportunities America has for me. I am currently in the process of applying for a community service project at an arts center in Washington DC. This project would open many doors for me and I would be able to grow and develop many essential skills in both the arts and the real world. The deportation of my father would disrupt the path that I am trying to build for myself.*

*My family has always had a great interest in music. We would sing songs at church, in the car, and at home. My sister was greatly inspired and continues to sing up to this day at her university's choir program. I play the viola in my school's orchestra, and my brother Jose wishes to play the trumpet in the school's band. Jose got his passion for the trumpet from my father, who learned to play during his time in the military. My family has always found time to sing gospel songs and practice music. This love for music has helped us stay connected as a family, wherever we might be. As for my father, although far away, he has continued to call us and sing with us whenever our spirits are down.*

*Last but not least, my father is the most important person in my life. I have always known him to be reliable. My father's deportation would cause sadness in not only my entire family, but also in me. I have missed my father all throughout this time, and I continue to hope for his release. We can both agree that although his work sometimes interferes with the amount of time he gets to spend with me, he has always tried to be present in my life, from orchestra concerts to homework assignments. He has never stopped loving, caring, and guiding me. There would never be anyone who could fill his role as a father for me. There is only one man who cares for me as much as a father would to his son, and that is my father, Luis.*

*Sincerely,*

*Diego Enrique Martinez*

As I reread this letter for the umpteenth time, I think back to all the times I've had my dad by my side. From learning to ride a bike, to playing soccer, to working out, I've had my father by my side all these years. It has been a devastating experience to not have him with me to help me and guide me. Although it has been 3 months, it has felt like a lifetime. As I finish these words, I make a quick prayer to God, and with a heart full of hope, I wish for my father's return.

Tuesday, December 9, 2026 was the day the most important person in my life was taken away from me. From then on, it has been a journey of discovering how important it is to value the time you have with someone. To finish off this entry, I promise myself that wherever we might be when we finally meet, in Peru or in America, I will embrace my father and thank God for the tears of happiness in my eyes.

## 2026 High School Participants

Janelle Aborisade	“Dorine”
Dane Adams	“The Tragedy of Innocence and Guilt”
Safa Adiba	“Crooked”
Soraya Anbari	“Kingdoms of Morana: The Cosmic Sisters”
Noah Annis	“The Deadly Dinner Party”
Scarlet Artz	“Half a Heart”
Justin Baker	“Read This When I Die”
Ghazifa Bashir	“The Library of Last Breaths”
Joslyn Bennett	“In the stars”
Valentina Beraun	“The Deceiver and The Messenger  Nocthros”
Ariana Blake	“The Door”
Saadya Bojja	“Held Together By Hope”
Annie Butler	“The Emerald Halls”
Clare Ceigersmidt	“A Dance to Remember”
Desta Chachu	“I Am the Ocean”
Alyssa Chandler	“Unwanted Summer”
Jeven Chaudhry	“Dragonwood”
Anne "Hero" Crookston	“How to Thread Witch”
Josie Davis	“Perspective”
Jason Del Cid Campos	“The Spring”
Maka Devaiah	“The Last Phone on Earth”
Allison DuVal	“The Day the Sun Didn't Rise”
Vaibhav Dwaraka	“A Trip One Can't Forget”
Hannah Edwards	“Empty Space”
Elizabeth Frierson	“And the Wall Comes Crumbling Down”
Akshara Gaddam	“Life of Darkness”
Eviana Gervais	“How Not To Identify A Pirate”
Bethany Grinnell	“It Was a Simple Trip”
Leia Hatem	“Blank Slate”
McKayla Hill	“Lost Below”
Myriah Hill	“Just Average”
Sara Holmes	“A Cold Curse”
Rachel Hughes	“The Other Half”
Sabrina Ibragimova	“Praise of the Faulty”
Monodia Jean-Baptiste	“The Man I Once Knew”
Sameeha Khadari	“The Lesson”
Talia Knutsen	“Dispatched”
Tanvi Konduri	“Broken Clocks”
Anna Kuruvilla	“The Poison Cup”
Silas Laiacona	“Though the Glass Pierced His Head”
Nyla Landy	“If a Shadow Could Cry”

Samuel Lopez	“The Great Truck Heist”
Brooke Marsden	“The Triumph”
Asifah Mirza	“Peak Contentment”
Aris Moreau	“Stories Keep Them Alive”
Marian Murray	“Flickering”
Ajrin Nawaz	“Remembering on Purpose”
Oluwadarasimi Olatunji	“Not Just Bravery”
Alice Palmer	“A True Mask”
Monika Partangel	“A Theater of Grief”
Hannah Pogany	“Please Refrain From Commentary”
Sreelasya Polavarapu	“Rain Doesn't Apologize”
Declan Powers	“Flat Landers”
Benjamin Revak	“From Within”
Ana Rivera Sao	“The Burling Birdwatchers”
Liam Roberts	“The Oak Tree”
Peyton Robinson	“Angélique & Robert”
Carolina Rojas	“Growing out of Rags”
Diya Saxena	“The Clockmaker’s Apprentice”
Laila Shams	“5 Days Till I Die”
Ahana Shastri	“Rewind”
Eisa Sheikh	“No going Back”
Bryn Smith	“The Price of Progress”
Abdu Sock	“The Prince of Royaume”
Naya Strunk	“The Accident”
Ramona Suter	“Near-death by Chocolate”
Evelyn Thai	“Lavender and Wolfsbane”
Shannon Van Horn	“The Clock Of Many Hands”
Katherine Varachi	“The Space You Leave Behind”
Navatej Veldhandi	“The Mystery of the Lost Gilded City of Paititi”
Philip Vidal	“Untitled”
Charlotte Wimmer	“The Christian Next Door”
Ellie Xu	“Look In the Mirror and Tell Me What You See”

## **High School Honorable Mentions**

# The Clock of Many Hands

By Shannon Van Horn

Sunisa Huang could not recall the moment she entered the station. One instant there had been thick darkness, enveloping, and strangely soft, and then next she was standing on a subway platform that vaguely mirrored the one she took to work every weekday.

Almost like it, but not quite. For it was too quiet, much too bright, and too clean in a way nothing touched by the living ever was.

The fluorescent lights hummed steadily, neither rising nor fading, as if time itself had forgotten how to pass. The tiled floor gleamed as though not a single footstep had ever traced its pearly surface. Even the stale metallic scent of the tracks had been washed away and replaced with something faintly sweet, like steeping tea or warm rain.

But the most striking element was the large clocklike structure rising between the two platforms, resembling something out of an engineer's fever dream. Brass poles spiraled upward like the bones of a mystical animal. Hundreds of silver hands radiated from its circular face, each pointing to a name or symbol etched into the metal. Some names were familiar: "New Zealand, Alaska, Taipei". Others looked like constellations folded into script. Odd symbols that induced a strange comfort in her mind but revealed nothing of meaning.

Sunisa took a few hesitant steps towards it. Her voice echoed too loudly when she whispered,

"Is this a dream?" Her question hung in the air, unanswered and heavy. She wasn't tired enough to dream. She wasn't asleep at all, was she? She remembered leaving her apartment this morning. She remembered tying her shoes, She remembered...

No. She remembered something *else*.

There was a sudden pressure in her chest.

*A stumble.*

The feeling of the sidewalk rising far too quickly.

But as soon as she tried to grasp the memory, it slipped through her mind like water.

“It’s nothing,” she told herself, brushing her nervous hands against her coat. “Just a strange dream. A strangely vivid dream.”

She began walking along the platform. Her footsteps made no sound.

The advertisements were blank.

The benches were empty.

The whole setting felt hollowed out.

She walked a long while, she was certain of that. Yet, after several minutes she found herself standing again before the Clock of Many Hands.

“As if the world loops upon itself,” she murmured. “I go forward, yet arrive back. What kind of joke is this?”

She circled the clock.

It circled her.

For a moment she had the uncanny feeling it was studying her as much as she studied it. It knew something she did not, something deep unto her soul.

A bell tolled inside it’s mechanical heart, one deep, resonant chime. The sound trembled along the rails and flowed throughout her head.

She flinched.

Then shivered.

Then remembered nothing.

Time passed, or didn’t.

Another chime.

And another.

Each tone felt heavier, as if it was calling for her heart.

Sunisa pressed her hands to her ears. “Stop. Please stop.”

The clock did not listen.

When she looked around again, she was no longer alone.

A station attendant was sweeping the platform in slow, deliberate strokes. His uniform was unblemished like his surroundings, his expression was calm. But when he glanced up at her, she noticed something was profoundly wrong.

His pupils ticked in tiny circular motions, endlessly rotating, like the motion of a second hand.

Sunisa’s breath caught in her lungs.

“Where did you come from?”

The attendant paused mid-sweep and tilted his head.

“I’ve been here the entire time.”

“That’s impossible. I walked all along this platform. It was empty.”

“Perhaps you walked in a place that had not yet noticed you. Or perhaps you were not ready to notice it.”

She stared.

He resumed sweeping.

Another chime rang out from the clock, sharp as a broken glass. Sunisa winced.

“What is that sound?” she asked.

“A bell,” the attendant said. “They tend to ring during such moments.”

“What moments?”

He looked at her with a shine of empathy.

“You’ll understand soon.”

His tone was compassionate, and somehow that frightened her even more.

She walked away, if only to escape the gaze of his turning pupils. She moved down the platform again, past the blank posters, past the unmoving tracks, past the spotless tiles of the station.

And again, she arrived back at the clock.

“This place,” she muttered, “is only a trick of my own mind.”

*The clock shimmered.*

She blinked.

Inside one of its polished brass panels she saw something, a flicker of light and movement. She stepped closer.

It was a *memory*.

She saw her grandmother’s kitchen in Taipei. The red lanterns hung from the balcony. The steam of herbal soup perfumed the air. A younger Sunisa sat at the table learning her first mandarin characters, tracing them on her little tray of sand. Her grandmother’s laughter rolled along through the memory like gentle rain.

Sunisa reached out a hand.

The image dissolved.

Another piece of her past lit up.

Her first snowfall in America. Standing alone on a bus stop bench while flakes melted on her coat, astonished, delighted, yet lonely. The moment glowed tenderly.

Another chime.

Sharper now.

A new image,

Her apartment in Chicago, still smelling faintly of paint. The first night she slept there alone, staring at the ceiling through the hum of the radiator. The mix of homesickness and lingering hope.

Another chime.

Lower. Heavier.

Sunisa stumbled back. “Why am I seeing these?”

The attendant’s voice floated from behind her.

“Because the train will arrive soon. And passengers must remember who they are before they board.”

“Passengers?” She turned. “What passengers? There’s no one here!”

“You are here.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

He gave her a sad, quiet look.

“It makes more sense than you wish it did.”

The next chime caused her to topple over.

She pressed her hands against the cold tiles, catching herself. A pain bloomed behind her eyes, a pressure, she could not place.

A flash of memory struck her,

The sidewalk.

Her collapse.

Voices shouting.

Hands lifting her.

A siren.

Her breath hitched. “That, no– was that today? Or yesterday? Or... years ago?”

The attendant placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“It was only a moment ago.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You fell. You could not breathe. Your heart..” He paused, choosing his words carefully.

“Your heart became still for a time.”

She shook her head violently.

“This is a dream! It must be a dream.”

“What convinces you more, that this is a dream or that the alternative is too difficult to accept?”

Her throat tightened.

She rose to her feet and backed away.

But the clock loomed over her, relentless, shimmering with a hundred tiny memories she hadn’t yet embraced.

*Chime.*

*Chime.*

*Chime.*

The station lights flickered. The rails hummed. A growing rumble echoed from the tunnel.

A train had to be coming.

The attendant set aside his broom.

“It’s time now.”

“What if I don’t want to go?” Sunisa whispered.

“You may stay here,” he said softly. “But this place will not stay the same. Eventually it will fold in on itself until only the clock remains. And even that will fade. The train is... much kinder.”

The clashing squeak of metal against metal rose from the tunnel as the train slid into view. It was nothing like the real subway she knew. This train was wooden, lantern-lit, carved with swirling patterns that shifted as she watched.

It stopped before her with a sigh, as though exhaling over centuries of time.

Sunisa’s fear melted into something else, something like calm.

Or surrender.

Or the recognition of a truth she had hidden all along.

“Tell me,” she questioned, swallowing the tremor in her voice. “Am I dead?”

The attendant didn’t answer in words.

He simply bowed his head.

The clock chimed one final, resonant time.

A sound full of endings.

Sunisa inhaled deeply.

The air felt so warm.

She stepped onto the train.

Inside, the seats were a soft green velvet. Warm golden light flickered from its brass lanterns. The door hissed shut behind her, and the train rolled forward with a gentle sway.

Outside the windows, the station dissolved.

In its place emerged a long tunnel of soft blue light. Then the tunnel broke open into landscape. But not any landscape she had ever known.

Field after field of floating color, like a meadow painted by wind. Grass that rippled in lush, luminous waves. Skies shifting between bright lavender and rose pink. Everything *gleamed*.

And in the glass, reflections flickered, her memories passing by like scenery.

Her first best friend in elementary school.

The cat she fed on her apartment steps each morning.

A summer picnic by the lake where she laughed so loudly she startled nearby birds. The warmth on her cheeks when someone she admired complimented her work.

The endless, aching simple moments that made her life hers.

Tears blurred her vision.

“They’re beautiful,” she whispered.

A soft light began to pulse outside. It grew brighter, warmer. As if the train were approaching the heart of a star.

Then, for an instant, another image overlapped the meadow.

*A hospital room.*

Her body lying still beneath paper white sheets.

Sunlight streaming through a narrow window, turning the air golden.

Someone, a nurse, leaned over her, then slowly, reverently, drew the curtains a little wider to let the light fall across her face.

Sunisa felt no fear.

Only a gentle ache, a quiet wonder.

The hospital room faded.

The meadow brightened.

She rested her head against the window.

The train glided onward, wheels humming in a rhythm that matched her breathing, steady now, peaceful, and complete.

The light outside grew softer, stretching toward an infinite horizon.

Sunisa Huang closed her eyes.

And the world, these new passing meadows beyond time, held her as gently as a pair of loving hands.

# The Day the Sun Didn't Rise

By Allison DuVal

Let me start by saying the title might make you picture something different. *You hear the day the sun didn't rise* and think “*it must be eternal darkness*”, but that's not true. There was light. That glow on the horizon you see below a thick blanket of clouds before the sun rises, or right after it sets. There was light. I want that to be clear. There was light, but it was brought by *Them*.

The day the sun didn't rise started like any other cloudy, December day. There was a thick blanket of gray that broke at the horizon, letting a sliver of light come through. That yellow-ish orange light you can't really describe. Nobody thought anything of it. ~~Hell~~, I didn't think anything of it. It was early in the morning. The time you wake up for school or work and it's light out, but you can't see the sun. I didn't see the sun. I wasn't looking for it. You never really look for the sun, especially when it's cloudy. You just assume it's there. Like gravity, matter, or math, it's something you accept. Nobody noticed the sun was gone. Not at first.

The first to notice something strange were those often looking at the sky. Not scientists or the weatherman, but the dreamers. They noticed the band of color at blanket-break that shows when the rising sun reflects distant clouds hadn't changed since morning. It nagged at me as it grew later. The colors never faded and the sun never showed. The dreamers were also the first to see *Them*.

I was one of the dreamers. I've always believed in more out there, just not like other people do. I don't think ~~God~~ would be something we'd understand.

When I first noticed it, I was looking out the window while passing between classes. It was still early, so I brushed it off. It felt weird, but it was the middle of winter. I saw it again in the afternoon. It felt wrong, but I kept walking, kept moving through life. As the day went on, I

found myself looking out the window more frequently. Asking the sky itself for answers. I brought it up to a few others, some kids, some teachers. Some noticed, most didn't. Something kept me watching the sky, even when others said I was crazy. Even when the final bell rang. Even when a sea of students chattering about mundane things blocked the window. That's when I saw *# Them*.

I wish I could tell you what I saw. What *They* are. But I don't know. I tried taking a picture of *Them*. It only showed a bright light where *They* should be. I thought *They* could've been a cloud. Something made by the sky, I guess *They* kind of are. It looked like the light was coming from *Them*. All anyone really knows about *Them* is that *They* are beyond what we believe. What's possible. *Their* actions are decided by what we can't fully understand. That *They* rose instead of the sun.

I'd returned home late that evening. Light was still out. I found *Them* on the horizon still bathed in a heavenly glow. I could feel *Them* watching me as I went inside. You'd think someone watching you would feel unsettling, at least uncomfortable, but it didn't. It felt protective. Like a parent watching over an infant, defending them from harm as they sleep softly, unaware of even the concept of cruelty.

My parents, of course, wanted to know why I'd been gone so long. I tried to explain. They didn't believe me. I tried to show them. My father didn't see anything. My mother made out a vague shape in the sky. Not the one I was seeing. She'd described what she saw as a mass of rings, like Saturn but with a center that made no sense. I asked her to sketch it. It looked nothing like the one I saw. I spoke to my partner later that evening. She'd seen *Them* too. That's how we learned there were more than one.

I decided to sketch what I'd seen too, but nothing looked right. I searched on the internet for answers. If anyone else had seen *Them*. I found more than I originally thought. People reported the never-setting sun all around the world. Some could see *Them*, others couldn't. I eventually tried to name *Them*, but any name I decided on quickly faded from memory. *They* have names, I know *They* do, but *Their* names were never meant to be things we could understand. I just know *They* don't like to be referred to as *it*.

The next morning was chaos in the kindest terms. In the worst, it was absolute *hell*. *They* don't like that word either. Any kind of writing, physical, electronic, even code, as soon as you blink, it's suddenly crossed out. I think *They* change it, but I'm not sure. It doesn't really matter now. Nothing really matters anymore.

Some called it the *Rapture*, which kind of makes sense, but that's not really how it played out. There were horns, but not trumpets. No, trumpets are high and shrill. The horns that sounded sounded like nothing. It wasn't a call announcing arrival. It was a deep, reverberating hum that shook those who heard it. It left an unsettling feeling behind long after the sound faded. Nobody thought about it much. If they did, they didn't connect it until long after it would've mattered. I don't think it would've made any difference if they had. As if we could ever deny *Their* will.

Nobody was sure if it even was *Their* will. No one could think clearly after what happened, and nobody could blame them. To blame others to avoid one's own consequences is a sin. ~~To sin is to beckon death.~~

The sun didn't rise that day either. That's when the world noticed the heavy clouds hanging around the world, the light on the horizon only a taunt. No matter how far anyone went, they never reached the light. Those who attempted to go above the clouds never returned. The sky belonged to *Them*. People tried to post photographs, or draw what they were seeing, some

even tried to record *Their* presence with satellites. Nothing worked. The photos never showed. Satellites never returned any data. The drawings were all anyone had. Scientists tried studying *Them*. They found no answers. We did discover that, while *They* couldn't be named, *They* could be described.

Exact appearances among *Them* vary, but there were broad consistencies. Supposedly, *They* were the *One who wore the armor of a Knight*. The armor looked different for each person, sometimes *They* held a weapon, sometimes not. For me, *They* held a sword pointed down towards the earth. My mom saw the *One of the cosmos who watches*. An observant star with millions of rings. Some saw a pupil, others didn't, but *They* were always watching regardless.

While the world was on edge, it never stopped. Nearly everyone was seeing one of *Them* by now.

The morning started normal, I paused for a moment to greet *Them*. *They* gave no response. The light was brighter today, one would think the clouds had lifted. They hadn't. Nobody thought *They* were harmful. *They* never attacked, never moved, only watched. The world went on. Most paid *Them* no mind. *Most* left that morning.

As I drove to school, *They* stayed in the sky. I'll admit, I wasn't paying as much attention as I should've. A fancy car cut me off, I had to slam on my brakes. They were speeding, weaving between cars, nearly striking a mother and child crossing the road. They revved their engine at anyone who honked or yelled. They threw a piece of trash out their window. ~~Pride is a sin. To sin is to beckon death.~~

That was the first time I saw someone be taken.

*The Hangmen* came for the ones who did worse than waste their gift. *The Hangmen* weren't *Them*, but we assume *They* sent them. *The Hangmen* can be named. They still couldn't be recorded, but everyone could see them. The first one I saw looked like a bear-cat with a long thin tail, huge wings, and white feathers with gold tips. *The Hangmen* had no head, just a void with gold rings around it. There were eyes on the rings, but you were never to meet their gaze.

*The Hangmen* descended. They dove into the car, throwing it off the road. We all slammed on the brakes. *The Hangmen* ripped the front passenger side door off of the car and grabbed the man inside, pulling him out and pinning him under one foot. We watched him struggle, scream, as *The Hangmen* lowered its head down to his. The rings started rotating, glowing. The light grew brighter until it burned and forced all to look away. There was a flash and the man was gone.

Some say he was pulled into the void, or he was vaporized in the light, or he simply ceased to be. It doesn't matter. *The Hangmen* stared at the wreck piling up. The rings spun and it was as though time itself reversed. Cars un-crashed, for a lack of a better word, returning to where they were before *The Hangmen* landed. All except for the car the man was driving, which now sat upright on the shoulder. He didn't return. The cars in the road were left stopped and stayed that way long after *The Hangmen* took off, returning to the clouds. It broke the blanket of gray when it did, leaving a golden ray of light shining through, lighting the spot where the man disappeared. The clouds never returned.

Nobody moved for a long time. Everyone had questions. No one dared to ask them. I didn't go to school that day.

A national alert soon went out across the globe. Apparently, every country across the planet was experiencing the exact same thing. All of *The Hangmen* looked different, some were

animalistic, others were humanoid. They all wore colors of white, black, and gold. They all had the same eyed rings. They all had no head. One had descended on my neighborhood, but it went for another house.

By the end of the day, humanity had lost nearly half its population. Everyone had different theories; mass hysteria, aliens, a secret government weapon, AI, etc.. The only constant was those taken by *The Hangmen* had an immoral background. My neighbor, for example, killed his partner. Others were mostly politicians, the exceedingly wealthy, and those who showed no care for the world around them.

Some churches across the globe began to worship *Them*. They used *The Hangmen* as reasoning to convert others to their faith, saying it was an act of their ~~God~~ to punish non-believers. Those who preached this were taken. ~~*Blasphemy is a sin. To sin is to beckon death.*~~

You'd assume the following days would be chaos. The world collapses. It's anarchy. It wasn't. It was eerily quiet. Cities, which you'd expect to be the loudest, only spoke soft whispers. Gray clouds hung over the skyline, now punctured by thousands of light rays. *The Hangmen* still descended, but not as frequently. They took the ones who looted, vandalised, murdered, burned. Without those who'd commit such crimes, the world stayed calm. That was the first wave.

Following those days, the calm broke. Nobody did anything. Doing nothing wasn't acceptable. ~~*Sloth is a sin. To sin is to beckon death.*~~

Those who took the absence of society as an opportunity to better the world without obstruction were praised. Those who stayed home out of fear or to grieve were forgiven. Those who still went out either to work or care for their family were blessed. But those who showed

apathy towards the world, who partied and drank, who celebrated the end of times while investing no effort in themselves or others, *The Hangmen* came for them.

My mom still went to work, ending up stuck there in the chaos. My dad looked after us. I kept the house clean and tried to reach out to friends. Some had been taken, but most were left. I was beyond relieved that my partner was okay. She'd seen *The Hangmen* too.

I began researching. It took days, but eventually we'd formed a basic understanding of what was happening. We learned *They* were servants. No one knew for whom. *The Hangmen* were hounds, led to the scent by *Them*, but receiving instructions from someone else.

*The Hangmen* would take those who ~~sinned~~. Some believed they serve ~~God~~, but no one ever referred to *Them* that way. *They* were not ~~God~~. Who *They* served may be, but nobody dared to look.

We learned some things people thought were ~~sins~~ aren't. Homosexuality is not a ~~sin~~. Killing in self defense or defense of another is not a ~~sin~~. Theft is not a ~~sin~~ if there's a pure reason. Differing ideals is not a ~~sin~~. One doesn't have to follow *Them* to avoid ~~sin~~.

We learned of things that are ~~sin~~. Any abuse of children is a ~~sin~~. Lying knowingly without cause is a ~~sin~~. Sacrificing others to further yourself is a ~~sin~~. Cruelty to any living creature is a ~~sin~~. Believing another to be lesser is a ~~sin~~.

The most important thing we learned: ~~Sins~~ can be forgiven.

*They* can forgive. *They* will show mercy to those who've been victim of circumstance. Those who take ownership of their mistakes are spared. If *They* sense a righteous soul, regardless of background, *They* will call off *The Hangmen*.

We also discovered what *They* mean.

Seeing Them would warn you if *The Hangmen* were coming. The *One who wore the armor of a Knight* was considered a protector. *They* oversaw the righteous and protected them from *The Hangmen*. The *One of the cosmos who watches* is the overseer. Seeing *Them* means you're being watched. *The Hangmen* weren't coming, not yet. It's said *They* can see your soul itself. Changing your actions when you see *Them* won't affect the outcome if it's only to save yourself.

The *One who holds the scale of Judgement* is the final omen. Seeing *Them* meant you were being judged. The *One of the cosmos* saw you may be unfit, and now the *One who holds the scale* will decide. Most who see *Them* will see *The Hangmen*. Some have avoided that fate. If *They* deem you worthy, *They* will disappear from the sky and you'll see the *One who wore the armor of a Knight*. If *They* disappear from the sky and don't reappear, you have lost your protector, lost your faith. *The Hangmen* are coming.

It wasn't long before *The Hangmen* came for those remaining. Living a life of true righteousness was difficult. After the first week, many started succumbing to greed, lust, apathy, and envy. Some would hoard supplies. Some grew jealous of those whose friends and family remained. Some became infatuated with the prospect of a lawless land. Some lost interest in the world entirely. Some were forgiven, most were not. My father took the last supplies from a store. We were fine for the moment, others there weren't. He was forgiven as *They* knew it unreasonable to expect one to know every detail about the lives of others. *The Hangmen* still appeared, but only after the ~~sin~~ had taken my father. *They* may have forgiven him, another within the store didn't. *The Hangmen* showed her pity, but no mercy.

Most never learned whether their loved ones were missing or taken. There was no explanation, no closure, just a ray of light where they once stood.

It's been nearly a month now. We think. It's difficult to tell time. The clouds are no longer as thick, parting in speckled patches from rays of light. Some believe once *The Hangmen* create enough gaps, the clouds will lift and the sun will return. It's a nice thought, I hope it's true. I doubt I'll live to see it. As the days crept on, we've seen some willfully giving themselves up to *The Hangmen*. Either *sinning* on purpose or calling them directly. It doesn't matter which, *The Hangmen* still appear. While they're still taken, it appears much calmer, more solemn when individuals relinquish themselves. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't toyed with the idea once or twice. My partner pulled me out of it. We made a promise to never leave one another.

I'm not certain how to tell her.

I've seen the *One of the cosmos* a few times before. *They* usually appear when I go gather supplies, or when I've had unsavory thoughts. I don't like *Them* looking into my mind, but *They* never fault me for what I think. Any *sin* I've committed is forgiven. I'll admit the grief and apathy have worn me down. I've done things. Things I hate to admit. Things I won't forgive, but *They* will.

Lying knowingly is a *sin*, but that excludes promises you make if you intended to keep them. I will always regret that I couldn't keep mine. Let me correct myself. What I've done has been forgiven, what I did may not be. *Will not be*. The eye has turned to scale now. I don't have much time. I'm writing this so that if any of us remain after *Their* purge, the ones left will know what happened.

To my love, if you see this, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I've done. I'm sorry that I couldn't keep my promise. I'm sorry that you'll have to go on without me. By all means, please go on without me. Grieve, but don't dwell. I'll always love you. I'm sorry if I've never said it

enough. I'm sorry I'll never see the world you'll build. I love you, my dear, and I'm sorry. *They*  
are gone now. I'm sorry. *The Hangmen* are coming.

## Remembering On Purpose

By Ajrin Nawaz

The box looked like it had been closed in a hurry.

Three layers of yellowing tape crossed the lid in uneven lines, as if someone had meant to come back and seal it properly but never did. Dust gathered along the edges, the heavy, grey velvet of a decade, the kind of dust that suggested forgetting had been intentional.

Maya found it while cleaning the attic on a Saturday afternoon she hadn't wanted. Sunlight slipped through the small circular window, cutting the air into pale, slanted beams where particles danced in the stagnant heat. The attic smelled of cedar, old paperbacks, and summers that no longer existed. Downstairs, her mother had handed her a stack of black trash bags with a simple directive: "Anything you don't recognize, throw away."

The box sat in the far corner, half-hidden behind a hard-shell suitcase missing one wheel. Maya dragged it into the light, the cardboard scraping against the floorboards like a throat clearing itself. On the side, written in a thick, fading marker, were three words:

DO NOT FORGET

Maya frowned. That seemed dramatic for seasonal storage.

She peeled back the tape. It gave way with a dry, brittle protest. Inside were ordinary things, the debris of a life lived before Maya was a thought. A movie ticket stub for a film released in 1998. A cracked snow globe of the D.C. skyline, the water inside long evaporated into a cloudy film. A handful of photographs held together by a rubber band that snapped into grey dust the moment she touched it.

She flipped through them slowly. Most showed a boy about her age, messy hair, a crooked smile, always caught mid-laugh as if whoever held the camera kept surprising him. In

one photo, her mother appeared beside him, younger than Maya had ever seen her, leaning into his shoulder with a familiarity that made Maya's chest tighten.

At the bottom of the box lay a small, spiral-bound notebook. Its navy cover was soft and frayed at the corners. The first page read: The Summer List. Below it, handwritten goals filled the page in a confident, loopy script.

1. Watch the Perseid meteor shower from the Water Tower.
2. Learn to skateboard without breaking an arm.
3. Drive until the radio station changes to something we don't recognize.
4. Don't be scared all the time.

Maya sat back on her heels. The handwriting wasn't her mother's sharp, slanted print.

Downstairs, the rhythmic clink of dishes in the sink stopped.

"Mom?" Maya called out. Her voice sounded thin in the cavernous attic.

"Yeah?"

"Who's Daniel?"

The silence that followed was heavy, long enough to feel deliberate. Then, the sound of footsteps. Her mother appeared at the top of the attic stairs, drying her hands on a floral dish towel. She looked at the box, and her expression shifted, not into sadness, but into a sort of distant, quiet recognition. She climbed the last few steps slowly, each movement careful, like someone approaching something fragile.

"I thought I'd donated that box years ago," her mother said quietly.

"That's not an answer," Maya replied, holding up the notebook.

Her mother sat beside her on the dusty floor, her knees cracking. “He was my best friend,” she said. “We grew up on the same street. We spent every July biking until the streetlights flickered on, planning lives that were much bigger than this town.”

“What happened to him?”

Her mother traced the edge of the notebook, her thumb lingering on the frayed wire. “He was the person who taught me that writing things down made them real. He had a heart that beat too fast for his own good, always rushing to the next thing.” She paused, looking at the photo of the boy with the crooked smile. “He didn't get to finish the list, Maya. He got sick the year we turned eighteen. By the time the leaves turned, he was gone.”

Maya looked at the list again. *Don't be scared all the time.*

“I stopped looking at the box because I didn't want to see the things he missed,” her mother whispered. “I thought forgetting was the only way to move forward.”

Maya realized then that she was looking at a version of her mother she had never known: a girl who was unsure, who had lost her North Star, and who had chosen to bury her grief in a cardboard box under a broken suitcase.

That night, Maya carried the notebook to her room. She flipped to the very back, past the finished goals and the ones left tragically blank. On the final page, she found a note in hurried, shaky handwriting:

*If we forget things, do they still count?*

Below it, in her mother's unmistakable print, was a reply written years later in a different shade of ink:

*Yes. Because they changed who we were while they were happening.*

Maya closed the notebook. The box wasn't a grave. It was a map.

The next evening, Maya climbed out her bedroom window onto the porch roof, a quiet rebellion she usually avoided. The shingles were still warm from the Virginia sun. The sky stretched wide and purple, the first few stars blinking into existence over the tree line.

She opened the navy notebook to the first blank page she could find. For a long time, she just watched the horizon. Then, she clicked her pen.

1. Learn how to fix the kitchen sink so Mom doesn't have to.
2. Ask the uncomfortable questions first.
3. Stop waiting for the 'right time' to be brave.

She hesitated, then added one more, pressing the pen firmly into the paper.

4. Remember things on purpose.

A week later, Maya helped her mother carry donation boxes to the car. The attic box sat among them, sealed once more with fresh, clear tape.

“Are you sure?” Maya asked, hand resting on the trunk.

Her mother nodded, a new lightness in her shoulders. “We don’t have to keep the cardboard to keep the person, Maya. I’m okay now.”

Before the trunk clicked shut, Maya felt the weight of the navy notebook tucked safely into the waistband of her jeans, hidden by her sweater. Her mother noticed the slight bulk, the way Maya’s hand stayed protective over her hip. She didn't ask for it back. Instead, she offered a small, knowing smile, the kind shared between two people who finally understood that memories weren't burdens to be stored.

They were choices you kept making, every single day.

Maya climbed into the passenger seat, the notebook a solid, comforting presence against her side. The future didn't feel like a series of empty days anymore. It felt like a story she was finally ready to write

# The Space You Leave Behind

By Katherine Varachi

“Staying or going?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, you’re not quite gone yet. You’re in limbo. You’ve given up it seems. However, your body is physically fine. It’s your soul that’s worn, so you get the choice. Stay, or go.”

You look around, only mildly surprised. You knew that the days had been feeling longer and that your feet had felt heavier every day. You certainly hadn’t thought that it would be this soon, but it makes little difference in the end. He’s right, your soul is worn down, and going on seems insurmountable. The figure in front of you tilts its head, waiting for a response.

“Go, I suppose.”

“Go? Odd of you.”

“Why?”

“They don’t often pick go. Human souls are creatures of habit, even the most adventurous ones. They like the familiar and safe. Whatever they’re going back to always feels better than something unknown.”

You look at the figure in vague confusion. It’s an odd one, one you can’t quite describe, its face shadowed, slender hands tucked into its pockets. It seems you forget its face each time you look away. Not quite how you expected Death to look.

“I want to go. There’s nothing for me back there.”

“Nothing?” The figure cocks its head quizzically, interest coloring its strange features.

“Are you sure? I mean, everyone has *something*. Something to live for, be it a person, or a pet, or even their favorite sandwich.”

“A sandwich?”

“You’d be surprised how many people talk about food. They seem so shocked by it, the fact that they won’t eat anymore. It seems to be something like a tether for them, something less strange than any of the other things that won’t happen again.”

You have to shake yourself a little, realizing that you’re standing, in the afterlife, having a conversation about sandwiches, with Death.

“Hear me out,” the figure says gently. “Give me one chance. Just one chance to show you what you have back in your life. Then you can go.”

You raise an eyebrow, suspicious.

“Aren’t you Death? Don’t you want to drag my soul down to the underworld or something?”

“I don’t *want* to do anything. I don’t *want* people to be hurting, or have regrets. It’s about what’s right. Most of the time, people’s deaths have to happen, and it’s awful, and hard, and *exhausting*, taking those people beyond. You, now? It doesn’t have to happen. So what’s right is to give you the choice. An informed choice, where you can see what you’d be missing out on.”

You start to speak, but the figure raises its hand, cutting you off.

‘Uh uh uh, before you say you’re too old, or too tired, give me *one* chance. Please? To prove to you that life is always worth living, even if it seems like it isn’t.’

You sigh. Well, if you’re going to die anyway, might as well see it all one last time.

“Fine. One thing.”

The figure seems satisfied, before stepping towards you, reaching towards you before pausing.

“May I?”

You nod, and you feel the brush of fingertips, cool and gentle at your temples, before a flash of light and a rush of wind and-

The scent of toasting bread and spices fills your nose, and you feel your shoulders relax as you look around at the familiar deli. You came here, every morning before work, to pick up a turkey sandwich, and the young man at the counter would always put extra hot peppers on the side, even when you pretended you didn't like them.

*She was the one who always liked spicy food, the one who introduced you to chili oil, and Sichuan peppers on your grocery store ramen, as you laughed together in your tiny college dorm.*

You never even asked the poor kid his name. You see him now, looking around the deli, before calling out over his shoulder.

“Hey, Elliott, you seen hot pepper guy?” A skinny, pimply teenager peeks his head out from the back room.

“Nah, not yet, sorry Cal. Hope he's okay. He's a nice dude.”

*Cal. His name is Cal.*

Cal looks around again with concerned eyes.

“Yeah, me too.”

You feel the figure's presence before you see him.

“I told you. The sandwich thing is real. People love their sandwiches. And the people who make them? They notice things. They know people. Cal looks forward to seeing you every morning. He'll miss you if you decide to go.”

You remember, suddenly, every time Cal cracked a friendly joke, even when you grumped at him, how he always tried to make you smile, and yet you never did. For a moment, you truly wish that you had smiled back, just once.

The figure looks around, before nodding. “I think we can continue on.” Before you can object, you feel the light touch on your face, and you’re gone again.

The white cubical walls make you want to scream. You always hated this job. It promised money, and security, and the best retirement package you could want, but at the unspoken cost of every dream you ever had.

*Most of your fights, once infrequent, then nearly every night were about the job. She always said it sucked the life right out of your eyes, as she cupped your face in gentle hands, angry tears decorating her lovely face as she whispered to you how you used to laugh so much.*

You notice, as you walk slowly through the halls of the building, that the break room coffee pot is empty. You were always the one who filled it.

“Hey, do you guys know what’s going on? The pot’s empty and it’s already 10:30. He’s normally filled it at least twice by now.”

It’s Delilah, your cubical neighbor. She was friendly and funny, and she always offered you a pencil if you left your bag in your car. You never minded talking to her like you did your other coworkers. You could tell she had once been a dreamer too. You never asked her what she’d wanted to be. The sudden wish that you had overtakes you.

“I dunno. Guy probably took a sick day or something,” the man who works across from you says, shrugging. “I’ve got the coffee.”

You feel a bit of a pang as he brews the pot. That’s your job.

“He didn’t put enough coffee grounds in.”

The figure is next to you, the comment quiet, but enough to let you know you’re no longer alone.

“No,” you agree, “he didn’t.”

“Time to go?”

“Time to go.” The office vanishes around you, leaving only the lingering taste of weak coffee in the back of your throat.

You recognize the dull tan walls as you open your eyes, standing in your bedroom. The room is mostly bare, no photos or posters to cover the tired paint job. You always intended to paint the house someday, but time seemed to slip away from you, and you just never got around to it.

*She always wanted to paint it yellow. Yellow walls and rosy pink cabinets, and sky blue ceilings, bringing the light and life of the world into your home. You always promised to help, even buying the paint with her at the hardware store.*

*It sat in the basement unopened, gathering dust.*

*It’s still there, the sun and sky, and flowers, so desperately alive locked away below ground.*

“This is what you meant about nothing, I presume?”

There’s no cruelty in the figure’s voice, only matter of fact surety.

“Yes. Why would I want to go back to this? I’m alone. I wake up. I get a sandwich. I make a good pot of coffee for people who couldn’t care less if I do. I go to work. I go home. I go

to bed. Alone. With no one who cares, and no one to talk to and no one to notice when I disappear.”

“You’ve just seen that your words are false. You’ve just seen that your absence is noted.”

The figure’s voice remains sure, as you grow only angrier.

“Don’t you understand? I have no one! I had it all! I had it all and I threw it away for a job and a promotion and a retirement plan, and none of it, none of it *ever* mattered because I *still* ended up alone. So yes. I want to go. I want to go.”

The figure stands, quiet for a moment.

“One more thing. One more scene. Then you can go.”

You nod, furiously swiping at tears you haven’t let fall in years. You feel the brush of fingertips and-

You would know the smell of the perfume anywhere. Honeysuckle sweet, just like her. The warmth of the sunlight streaming through the bay window warms your skin, and for the first time you realize how cold you are. The living room you stand in is small and cluttered, but cozy, and the figure is nowhere to be seen. *She*, however, is. She’s settled comfortably in a soft looking armchair, flipping idly through a worn leather book. You don’t remember her like this, silver streaking her dark hair, crows feet decorating her eyes like the footprints of laughter gone by. *She always had the best laugh. Contagious and bubbly, like it came from the tips of her toes and up through her chest.* You step carefully through the room, walking around her to look at the photo album on her lap, the photo her now-bony fingers brush against as she smiles that beautiful smile. You know the photo, of course. You’d always know that stupid powder blue tux, that somehow she loved. You look like an idiot, next to how gorgeous she is, because of course

powder blue looks stunning on her, perfect against her dark hair. You can't believe she kept the photo all these years. You would have thought she'd have torn it up after the final fight.

After you called her a hopeless dreamer, who didn't understand real work.

After she called you a cynic who didn't care about anything but money.

After you cried and she yelled and she drove away and didn't look back.

But no, she has it, tucked into the leather photo album her *nonna* gave her when she was fifteen, the one she always told you that you would record your life together in.

His flower.

His love.

*Oh how he missed her.*

"Do you still want to go?"

The figure hovered, apprehensive.

"I-I don't know."

"She misses you."

"I miss her too."

"You still have time."

"No. No, I'm too old, too tired. Too broken. It's too late."

The hand on his shoulder was exceedingly gentle.

"It's never too late."

You feel the burn behind your eyes, two times in one day.

"So? Staying? Or going?"

You close your eyes, and think about what you're leaving behind. The space you'll leave for Cal, for Delilah, for *her*. You feel the sun on your skin, smell the honeysuckle in the air. You

think about office coffee grounds, and burning hot peppers, and dusty paint cans. You think about the kid who always waves up at your window as she walks to school, and the family of sparrows that live in the tree in your yard, and the way the man at the post office always tips his cap at you, and about the thousands of stars you can see from your porch, and about all of it, *all of it*. And you choose.

The paint smell stings your nose as you crack open the dusty can. The yellow color is still just as bright as ever, as you slowly carry it up the stairs, and dip the brush into it, before making a gloppy streak across the tan kitchen wall, the peach glow of the setting sun mingling with the dripping stripe-. It's been two weeks since you woke up with a start, slumped in your chair, heart racing with the memory of your experience. Your first thought, to be honest, was to call 911. You wondered if you'd had a heart attack, and somehow not realized. Your chest felt fine however, save for the knot of anxiety choking you, as you wondered if it was all a joke, and you were about to die after all. However, it seemed that the figure had been right about your body being intact, and the knot slowly began to untie as the days passed. Your soul truly had been the thing taking the blows, so worn from years of being alone that it had simply given up, and had almost taken your life with it. Now, with that life back in it, you feel more alert, happier, and younger than you have in years.

You're up for the rest of that night, the moonlight spilling from the star freckled sky, and pooling with the sun on your walls as you bring the colors of the outside in, working up the courage for what you know the next morning will bring. It's 6 am, by the time you finish all that needs to be finished, and you sit yawning on your steps, your finished two weeks notice beside

you, as the sun rises, its rays warming your paint freckled skin, before you stand with a huff, and walk to your car.

You idle outside the house for twenty minutes before you can build up the courage to walk up the steps and knock, and even then, you pause, with your fist an inch away from the door. It's a bright, vibrant orange, the color of sweet tangerines, and the spicy orange peppers she always loved. There's rosebushes in the yard, and lilacs along the sides, and stained glass in the topmost window. You steel yourself before you knock, but you manage to make a decent tap on the orange wood. After 30 seconds, you've convinced yourself she's not home, before the door opens.

“Franklin?”

“Daisy.”

“You're here?”

“I'm here.”

“I thought...I thought you...you'd...”

“I know. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

It's not perfect. It's not fixed. But it's a start. And as Franklin lets Daisy lead him inside, he decides that a start is good enough to keep him here for a while longer.

## Unwanted Summer

By Alyssa Chandler

The smell hit Chloe's nose before she had properly prepared herself. The situation she found herself riding into was outlandish. True, she had known that she would be spending three weeks of her precious summer at the cruddy farm since school ended. Unfortunately, she had been in self-denial. Now here she was, sitting in the back of a rust-covered pick-up truck. Her twin brother, Kyle, was beside her. Aunt Gwen was sitting in the passenger seat. She kept gabbing about how excited she was that they were coming back to the farm. Their mom's older brother, Uncle Seth, was driving. He was responsible for getting Chloe into this predicament.

Chloe drowned out the chatter coming from the front seat. She occupied herself by dreaming up ways to get out of spending her summer at the farm. She was away from her friends, parents, and any chance of having fun. She and Kyle had just finished their freshman year of high school. It had gone well; they both kept good grades, made friends, and were prepared for the next years of high school. But now they were being forced to stay at the old family farm. And it was all because Uncle Seth had suggested that Chloe's parents take a long, expensive trip- without their kids. Just so that they could celebrate their 25th anniversary.

Life was so unfair.

As they rolled up to the old house, she thought she must be experiencing what a prisoner experienced the first time he walked to his cell. The outside of the house was white, with a small yard surrounded by a black fence. It separated the house from the huge red barn. Their uncle's cows grazed on the hillside behind the house. The chicken coop, with chickens and roosters running all around it, covered next to the barn. Chloe sighed as the smell of chickens, cows, and everything else dirty stuck in her nose again. Hopefully the next three weeks would go by quickly.

Chloe hopped out of the truck. She slowly picked her way across the yard and followed Uncle Seth into the house. He set her bag onto a faded green couch in the room adjacent to a small kitchen. Kyle was close by her side as she looked around the house. The interior was painted a calm green. There were windows in all the walls and there was a spare bedroom down the hall from the master bedroom. No second floor, no television, and no place to be alone.

“All right, you bunch,” Uncle Seth’s scraggly voice boomed from the kitchen. “You got two options. First, y’all can get grub then help Aunt Gwen with the chores. Or, you can do chores now and munch later. Picken’s yours!”

Chloe was just turning to make a snarky comment to Kyle about how “funny” Uncle Seth thought he was, when her twin beat her to talking.

“I could eat,” Kyle blurted out. Chloe shot him a glare, but he just shrugged his shoulder and innocently mouthed “What?”. As he turned his back to her and headed for the kitchen, Chloe caught the slight smile that was playing at his lips. How could he possibly be enjoying himself here? Slowly, she trudged toward the kitchen to see what meal her brother had just volunteered them to eat. She found her aunt tossing a salad together and her uncle pulling chicken breasts out of the fridge. Throwing the chicken into the microwave, Uncle Seth motioned at a cupboard above the stove. “Plates up yander. Forks beside the stove. Lunch’ll be ready in a rooster’s crow.”

The salad turned out to be better than Chloe had expected. The dressing was a homemade balsamic glaze that paired well with the spinach, peppers, and chicken. Before long, the meal was completed and the dishes washed. Chloe found herself throwing on an old pair of boots her aunt offered her and heading outside.

Kyle walked right up with Aunt Gwen. He was babbling about who knows what. Aunt Gwen was nodding, adding a comment here and there and answering occasional questions. Rolling her eyes, Cloe tried not to care that they were leaving her out of their conversation.

Throwing her head over her shoulder, Aunt Gwen motioned to the barn and said, “There’s where we’ll start. Gotta feed the pigs, freshen up cow’s hay. Then we’ll head over yonder,” she paused to point at the little red shed next to the barn, “and feed the chickens. Few other small things here and there, but you get the gist of it. Tomorrow morning, y’all milk the cows.” Grinning, she turned back to the barn, and with Chloe and Kyle following her, entered through the huge sliding doors.

Almost immediately Chloe knew that the barn was not going to be one of her favorite places. The air felt hot and sticky, there was not a lot of lighting, and straw dust covered everything. One corner was filled with random junk, but otherwise the barn was clutter free. The pig and cow stalls were along both sides of the walls, and their noises filled the air.

“They get hankerin’ when it is feeding time,” Aunt Gwen laughed as she watched the pigs stumble over each other to be the closest to their door. Seeing a bunch of fat pigs tripping and squealing, Chloe could not help but smile.

“Hey! What’s this?” A shout came from the other end of the barn. Turning, Chloe spotted Kyle in the corner of the barn with the junk in it. He was holding an old piece of leather.

Chuckling, Aunt Gwen shook her head as she walked over to Kyle. “Whatcha doing over yonder? We’re feeding pigs! They’re ready to eat!”

“Yeah, I know. I just saw this stuff and wanted to check it out,” Kyle said sheepishly. “I’ll put it back.”

“Don’t fool yourself. Just teasing ya. That’s an old horse bridle. Hasn’t been used in years, old thang. I’ve been eaten at your uncle ‘bout that conner for years. But,” she said with a sigh, “he jest puts it off. I don’t know what’ll get him moven, but I’m done with the clutter.”

“I didn’t know you had horses!” Kyle said excitedly. Cloe could not understand why he had suddenly gotten interested in the barn. It intrigued her. Maybe she could find something to get interested in too. She started to fall into her own thoughts as Aunt Gwen said something about them having horses in the past, but they had to get rid of them recently. She kept being reminded of how her parents had told her that she and Kyle would love it here at the farm. Well, they had been right about one of them, Chloe just hoped they could be right about her.

After stumbling half-heartedly through the chores, Chloe was relieved when they finally finished. They enjoyed the hamburgers that Uncle Seth had made for dinner with a side of sweet potatoes and fresh green beans. Uncle Seth had made the hamburgers with meat they had gotten from their own cows, and the buns were Aunt Gwen’s homemade sourdough buns. Both the green beans and the sweat potatoes were fresh from Aunt Gwen’s garden. Everything tasted so good on the farm. Even if she hated the rest of the farm, Chloe could at least look forward to mealtime.

That night, while Chloe was laying on the makeshift bed on the couch, she suddenly was struck by how much she missed her parents. All that day, she had been consumed with anger for having to be there. But now, alone with just her thoughts for company, she realized that she was not mad that she was there. But she was sad that her parents were not. They had never left Chloe and Kyle by themselves for more than a day, and now they were going to be gone for three weeks. Chloe realized that even though she did not know either her aunt or uncle very well, she was coming to like them. She liked Uncle Seth’s humor. Throughout dinner he had prodded her

side, asking her questions about school, her social life, and anything else he could think of. And Aunt Gwen, she was always ready to answer any of the questions Kyle threw her way. She always took the time to explain what they were doing before they did any of the chores, and she never got mad at them for messing up. Chloe was sure Kyle would have pushed her over the edge when he poured water into the chicken's feed bowl and ruined an entire day's worth of food. But Aunt Gwen had just thrown the feed to the pigs and told him to do it again until he got it right. As Chloe drifted off to sleep, she decided that she would start being a bit nicer. Even if the smell still disgusted her, she was starting to like being here.

The next morning, the glaring sun woke Chloe up. Bacon sizzled on the stove while Aunt Gwen mixed up eggs. Chloe yawned and joined her aunt in the kitchen.

"Good morning," Chloe said through another huge yawn. By now the eggs were almost cooked and the bacon was cooling on a plate.

"Mornin'!" Aunt Gwen said cheerfully. Pointing at the food laid out on the table she said, "Eat up, y'all've got a big day ahead of you!"

Something in the way she said it made Chloe look back up at her aunt with a questioning glance. "What are we doing today?" she asked suspiciously.

"Well," Aunt Gwen rubbed her hands together, "Uncle Seth said he'd clean the barn!" She was practically jumping with excitement. "He said he'd have you and Kyle help. He is out there now, assessing the damage. Or so he says."

Inwardly, Chloe groaned. The last thing she wanted to do was spend a day in the smelly barn. But reminding herself of her decision last night, she smiled and said "Cool. I'll bet we find some interesting stuff in there."

Laughing, Aunt Gwen nodded and said, "You're darn right!"

“Well, hey there little lady! Good to see ya!” Uncle Seth shouted when Chloe entered the barn.

Chloe smiled and waved to him as she made her way over to the junk corner. “I heard I was signed up to help you today. What’s the plan?”

Chuckling, Uncle Seth shook his head. “That’s what she told you? That I signed you up for this? That little fox! She came in like a jack rabbit last night. Talken ‘bout you kids helpin’ clear this lot out. She’ll make me sleep out with this junk if we don’t get it clear. So I’m tryin’ to clean as fast as I can so that I can have better company tonight than them pigs.”

They worked steadily for a few hours. They managed to clean out a good section of the corner. Most of the clutter just got thrown away, but some of it was useful. Uncle Seth found a broom that Aunt Gwen had apparently been looking for for months. And later Chloe found a rake that made Uncle Seth dance for joy and then slap his head in frustration. Around noon, the barn door opened and Aunt Gwen walked in holding a big platter of sandwiches and glasses of lemonade. Kyle stumbled into the barn after her, barely looking awake.

“Well, looky who I found! Sleeping like a baby, he was. I woke him up before y’all finished the barn without him,” Aunt Gwen said teasingly.

Kyle mumbled something incoherent that nobody heard. Everybody laughed at it anyways.

After they enjoyed their lunch in the barn, Aunt Gwen wandered off to take care of the animals, and Kyle joined Uncle Seth and Chloe in the junk corner. They were over halfway done with it and would hopefully be done before dinner.

Two hours later, Chloe’s energy started to fade. Her back hurt from bending over and straightening up so often and her arms were sore from carrying a pile of bricks out of the corner.

She held up a doorknob she had just found and threw a questioning look at Uncle Seth. “Okay, most things we’ve found have made sense, but this is a bit odd. Why in the world would a doorknob be in the barn?”

Uncle Seth looked up from where he was trying to wrestle an old window frame from under a milking stand. He gave up the fight to come to Chloe. He broke out into a huge laugh as he saw the doorknob. After he got control of his himself, he called Aunt Gwen over from where she was poking around in her garden.

“Gwen! You’ve gotta tell the kids ‘bout the first time you met the family!”

Aunt Gwen looked a little confused until she saw the doorknob that Uncle Seth was holding. Her face relaxed into a grin and she shook her head. “You sure you want me to tell ‘bout that?”

“You tell it funnier.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll tell ‘em.” She turned towards Chloe and Kyle who were watching this exchange with a bit of excited confusion. “First time I met your family, I was twenty-four. I met Seth at a burger joint he’d been working at. We’d seen each other oft’ ‘cause I kept coming back. He finally got the nerve to ask me out. Soon enough, I knew I liked him and I reckoned it was time to meet his family.

“One Christmas, he brought me home. It was Christmas Eve, the day I first came over. The whole family was in town. Bunch of Seth’s cousins, aunts and uncles were ‘round. Plus a few more relatives that ain’t here no more. Anyway, we were all in our Sunday best, I had this long green dress. We were gonna be headen over to church soon.”

Uncle Seth interrupted to say, “That dress looked mighty fine.”

Aunt Gwen blushed, “Are you telling the story, or am I? We were all heading out, and I was try’n to make a good impression on Grandmother Rachel. I was try’n to help her out with the little ones who were scamperin’ ‘bout, not doing a thang to get ready. She didn’t seem to like me too much yet, so I was fixin’ to change her mind.”

“No, she did not,” Uncle Seth chuckled.

Slapping his arm, Aunt Gwen kept going. “There’d been a table in the living room. It came from an old door of Grandmother Rachel’s ancestors. She’d brung it with her when she came from Ohio to come live with your grandfather. It’d been passed through generations, and t’was her most prized possession. We were running late for church, and Grandmother Rachel was getting all them cousins out. She had two little babies in her arms and was shooin’ a few more youngins out of the door. I was following close behind, trying to help. Honestly, I’d probably gotten in the way of things. Suddenly, a ripping sound came from in front of me. When I found what had made that racket, I just stood there frozen. Your grandmother’s skirt got caught on the handle of the door table and had ripped all the way up. Her face was plum red! She just stood there too. She couldn’t even grab her skirt because she was holding the little ones. Before anyone knew it, I started laughing! We were turning the same shade of red, but for different reasons, I reckon. Soon enough, somebody came to their senses and grabbed the babies from her. The way she ran to her room, you’d thought her skirt caught fire too! Looking back, my reaction was so bad, I’m surprised she ever let me marry your uncle. I do feel bad ‘bout it all, but it was hard to contain myself! She was so embarrassed, she didn’t even wanna go to church that night. It was one of those things that I should ‘pologize for, but it felt better to never talk ‘bout none of it. I hope she likes me better now than she did back then. I guess I am still just surprised she didn’t make me leave right then and there. When we got home after church, we found the

doorknob removed from the table. I haven't seen it again until just now. Near forgot 'bout it. I always reckoned it had been burned or buried or something of that liking. Maybe it's time to give it to her and see what she says. Poke the bear a little bit." She was still laughing to herself as she walked back to the garden.

Looking back at the doorknob that a laughing Uncle Seth still held in his hands, Chloe realized that it would not be as hard to stay here for another few weeks if she kept drawing out stories like this one. Her previous fear and hatred of the farm started to melt away as she got back to work. She knew that she would enjoy many more days filled with squealing pigs, running hens, and delicious meals. Chloe would look forward to having her parents return. But in the meantime, she could get Uncle Seth back for all the poking he did at dinner the night before. And she might throw in a few extra pokes, just for good measure.

## **High School Winners**

## Fifth Place: The Clockmaker's Apprentice

By Diya Saxena

In Ashbourne the tower looms, Its crooked gears, its ticking toms. The townsfolk laugh,  
the townsfolk sigh, “The clock is cursed, its hands belie.”

But Elias, youth of seventeen, with sharpened gaze, both bright and keen, believed in gears,  
believed in springs, believed in truth that ticking brings.

His father once, a maker proud, was swallowed by the tower’s shroud. The whispers  
claimed he lost his way, where shadows coil and pendulums sway.

One autumn dusk, a letter came, No seal, no crest, no writer’s name. It read: *Apprentice,  
midnight calls. Bring tools, bring courage, breach the walls.*

Elias trembled, heart aflame, yet knew the tower’s voice by name. He packed his satchel,  
leather worn, and walked alone through streets forlorn.

The door swung wide, the gears awoke, the lanterns hissed, the shadows spoke. A Keeper  
stood with eyes of brass, His cloak was dark, his voice like glass.

“Your father served but sought command, He tried to bind time’s living hand. He failed,  
and now the tower weeps, its broken heart no keeper keeps.”

Through winding stairs and endless halls, they passed the gears, they passed the walls.  
Pendulums swung in spectral air; staircases spiraled into despair.

The Keeper said: “Time breathes, it dreams. It bends, it breaks, it splits at seams. You hear  
the pulse machines impart; Perhaps you’ll hear time’s beating heart.”

He gave Elias a clock to mend, its hands spun wild, no start, no end. Elias whispered, calm  
and slow, “Patience, precision—let it flow.”

The gears aligned, the ticking true, The Keeper's gaze burned bright anew. "You listen well, you understand. Yet greater trials still demand."

A shadow rose, his father's shape, A twisted ghost, no true escape. It whispered low: "My son, beware. The tower binds, it does not care."

Elias faltered, pain and doubt, But Keeper's voice rang sharp, devout: "Not him, but memory turned to ash. Do not be fooled by shadow's flash."

Elias raised the quill of light and wrote with trembling hand that night: *My father's voice is memory's song, but I must walk where gears belong.*

The shadow screamed, dissolved away, the tower sighed, the gears held sway.

At last, they reached the highest room, where pendulum swung in golden gloom. Its surface cracked, its rhythm slow, its heartbeat faltered, dimmed its glow.

"This is the heart," the Keeper said. "If it should stop, all time is dead."

Elias knelt, his tools in hand, adjusted gears, obeyed command. He whispered words his father taught: "Respect the craft, respect the thought."

The pendulum steadied, light returned, the tower's gears in silence burned. Outside, the clock struck true at last, its curse undone, its chaos past.

The Keeper's eyes grew soft, resigned: "You did not bind, you did not grind. You listened, boy, you let it be, and time itself now flows with thee."

Elias asked, his voice a plea: "Then where is he, my father, free?"

The Keeper bowed: "He lives in gears, in echoes lost, in vanished years. But you are free, the work is done. The tower breathes, and you have won."

At dawn the town awoke to chime, the clock struck six, the hands kept time. The people cheered, the curse was gone, but Elias knew the truth alone.

He walked away, his satchel near, his father's tools, his memory dear. And sometimes still,  
at midnight's call, he hears the tower whisper all.

## Fourth Place: Dispatched

By Talia Knutsen

Saile skidded around the corner, sparks flying as his armored heels ground against the floor. He barely got back up to running speed before he heard a rattling screech as the archaraptor slammed into the wall behind him. It was stunned for a second, but Saile didn't spare a glance back. He was focusing on too many things right now to care. The pounding of the raptor's massive talons resumed behind him, but Saile had enough of a head start to make it to the next turn before the biodrone caught up.

A voice crackled through Saile's helmet for the fourth time in the last five minutes. "*Still alright?*"

"Yup," Saile said shortly. He didn't have the breath to give a more descriptive answer.

Patterned doors and branching corridors flew past Saile as he shot down the hallway of the archarian war cruiser. He ignored all of them, gunning straight for the checkpoint on his visor. As he turned, he caught a glimpse of the raptor out of the corner of his eye, its mechanical jaws a lot closer than he would've preferred.

"*Great. You're five hundred meters and closing,*" his partner replied. Something in his voice told Saile that he knew that he was not, in fact, alright. Saile winced. Fate. Five hundred meters. That was farther than he would have liked. No time to think about it, though.

He felt a snap of air as the biodrone lunged forward, nearly clamping down on his arm. Well, that was too close, he thought as he ducked into a roll, dropping out of range. Its second bite missed his head, but was still too close for comfort. These things are

way smarter than their creators give them credit for- He shot back up, charging the particle shield on his arm just long enough to make it spark with green energy. He whirled around, socking the raptor in the jaw and cutting it off mid-roar. He was back to a sprint before the biodrone recovered. Saile was pretty sure he saw a crater in the wall where its head struck metal. As if that ever stopped an archaraptor, but hey, at least it wasn't three feet behind him anymore. Fate, I'm off my game—

Saile's attention snapped back to the chase as he spotted an interface beside a doorway up ahead. He had to go down that hallway to get to the checkpoint that he and Kaihe had set up. Their preliminary scan must have missed this panel. Saile's gauntlet reformed into a small cannon and he shot the panel with a blast of green light. He felt the familiar surge of energy as the neurons in his brain overlapped with the circuits in the door. He flew through the threshold, and the door slammed shut behind him.

Saile stumbled to a stop, panting heavily. He rested with his hands on his knees for just enough time to not fall over when he stood back up, then turned back toward the door. There were already several large dents in it from the raptor's attempts to break through. That door would not hold for long. The raptor behind the small glass window looked absolutely furious, foam spilling from between its cracked jaws as it rammed its head into the door. One of its mechanical ears was already reduced to scrap metal by the force it had put into the hunt, but its skull apparently remained intact enough for continued use as a battering ram.

Archaraptors stopped at nothing to kill anything that moved. They were genetically engineered cyborgs, large enough to be dangerous yet small enough to fit in restricted spaces—practically designed for close combat—hence why Saile and Kaihe

had to take them out as fast as possible. On a cruiser like this, even abandoned after battle, getting caught by a pack was more than often deadly. Raptors usually hunted in packs of three. The soldiers had already taken out two, and it wasn't exactly a good idea to leave one roaming the ship while scraping an entire mainframe's worth of data for the Silver Fleet.

"How much farther?" Saile asked his partner, tearing his gaze from the biodrone. He turned on his heel and started to run down the hallway.

*"You've got two hundred meters."*

"The panel's on the right side of the door?"

*"Nope, try again."*

"Left."

*"Right."*

"Right?"

*"No, 'right' as in 'yes,' you idiot. It's on the left side. Your left."* Kaithe replied.

Saile let out a short exhale.

"Yeah, thanks." He muttered, an annoyed smile twisting the corner of his mouth.

*"You're really tired, aren't you?"*

Saile was about to reply, but was cut off by the sudden crash and deafening screech that sounded from the corridor behind him. Once more, things were going wrong much sooner than he would have liked. Saile started to sprint again.

They both shut up. The sound of the raptor's screams and pounding claws against the metal made up for the silence over comms.

*"One fifty meters."*

The archaraptor was gaining ground much faster than before. It was definitely pissed off. His heartbeat accelerated as he pushed himself to go faster. The biodrone's screams got louder behind him. *Way* too loud. He was still out of Kaithe's range, and he hated to admit it, but he was exhausted. *Don't slip now.*

*"One hundred..."*

The clanging of the raptor's claws rang in his ears. The last turn in the hallway was coming up ahead. If he could just get around that, he'd be right in Kaithe's line of sight. Sparks flew once more as he skidded around the corner, and the biodrone's metal skull flashed in Saile's peripheral.

Too close.

*"Fifty meters, you're al—"*

The raptor lunged.

There was no time to dodge. He managed to catch its jaws and hold them open, even as the drone slammed him against the wall. He locked his shoulders and gauntlets, his armor and shields now taking the brunt of the raptor's bite force. That didn't stop it from rearing its head and repeatedly smashing his back into the metal behind him. Its claws scraped against his chestplate, leaving long gashes in the particle shield that took too far too long to repair. Its exposed eye shone a shade of bright violet, the iris glinting in a pool of pitch black hatred. *Too slow, b\*tch*, it seemed to say. It let out a triumphant scream that pierced Saile's eardrums like sharpened spikes.

That scream was cut short as a red and gold light slammed into its side.

The raptor was flung off of Saile. He fell to the ground, landing hard on his knees.

His pounding heartbeat nearly drowned out the sound of his strained breathing. Saile

ran a hand over his chestplate, feeling his gauntlet catch on shallow grooves that his shield didn't have the energy to fully absorb. *That's not good.* When he lifted his hand, he could see the holographic net weakly flickering. It might have enough power to deflect a few more hits, but banking on that was a risk he'd rather not take.

Saile cursed quietly, dragging himself off the ground and using the wall for support. His head was still ringing from the hits to his spine. He looked up from the blurred environment around him and focused in the direction the raptor had been launched.

The drone screeched as Kaithe's spear pierced its abdomen. It lunged at him, but he dodged with a blast of his thrusters. His thin scarlet wings were tucked tightly at his back to avoid the raptor's claws, but there were already several large slashes in them. Kaithe twirled the spear around and raked it against the raptor's armored neck as it shot past.

*There goes the 'kill it quickly' plan.* Saile pushed himself off the wall, launching into a full sprint. His armor hummed with energy as a long holographic blade unsheathed from his gauntlet, and the cannons on his shoulders unfolded with another electric buzz. Right as the biodrone caught Kaithe's tail with its own and threw him into a wall, Saile opened fire. He dove under the raptor's legs and sliced upwards, carving a long groove in its scaly underside. It screamed in pain, spinning around and snapping downwards at him, but its jaws caught Kaithe's spear instead. Kaithe yanked its head back, giving Saile an opening to roll out of the way, his cannons getting several clean shots to the raptor's neck. The blasts didn't do much but slow the biodrone down. Most of them ricocheted off of the drone's scale plating.

“I told you *the door wouldn't work!*” Kaithe yelled over the raptor's roars.

“That's great Kai, let's focus on not dying before we bicker like an old married couple,” Saile replied. He backed up, fusing his gauntlets into a high-powered rifle and taking aim. The biodrone dodged in and out of his crosshairs, so Saile kept his finger off the trigger. He'd get an absolute earful if he accidentally shot Kaithe.

He got an opening when the raptor pushed itself forward, ripping the spear out of Kaithe's grip. The blade skidded across the floor, far out of reach. The eyelike slits on Kaithe's visor widened as he realized, well, sh\*t, before the raptor slammed itself into the wall, crushing one of his wings under its weight. Kaithe let out a strangled cry, and Saile winced as he heard several loud cracks. He focused the rifle again as the biodrone got ready to clamp its jaws around Kaithe's skull.

He took the shot.

A blast of green light exploded on the raptor's neck and it shrieked in pain, stumbling backwards. It shook its head several times and the plating on its neck, now dented from the blast, dislodged and fell to the ground. Saile fired again, now hitting the drone square in the center of its armored skull. This time, after only a split second of recovery, it ran directly at Saile with a furious screech.

“*Sh\*t.*” Saile hissed. He detached his gauntlets and reformed one of them into a long whip, then lashed it toward Kaithe's spear. Saile yanked the spear into his hands just as the raptor leapt at him and whipped around, jamming the spear between its jaws. It slammed him to the ground, snarling, its teeth inches from Saile's visor. *Stay right there.* He aimed his shoulder cannons at the raptor's eyes and fired.

The biodrone let out a pained scream and stumbled away, right into Kaithe, his

wing clutched at his side. He vaulted onto the raptor's back with a strained growl, locking the claw on his good wing around its neck. It tried to back up and shake him off, but Saile's whip wrapped around its skull, immobilizing it. Several loud clangs sounded as the anchors on his boots engaged, locking him in place even as the biodrone tried to get away. The blinded raptor thrashed wildly, its shrieks growing higher in volume. Kaithe's spear materialized in his hands with a scarlet glow, and he raised it point-down over his head, right over the base of the raptor's neck.

He took a second to steady his aim, and when the raptor strained against the whip again, he stabbed it downward, piercing all the way through the drone's neck and staining the spear red.

A final, warbling cry escaped the drone's throat. The line went slack as its thrashing finally stopped. It stayed upright for a few seconds, swaying slightly, then slowly folded to the floor, a soft thud echoing down the hallway.

Kaithe pulled his spear out of the raptor's neck with a whisper of metal on flesh. He eyed the spear for a second, and with a dull orange glow, it vanished, the blood splattering onto the ground. Saile retracted his whip. It slithered off of the raptor's throat, drawing a line in the growing pool of blood on the floor.

He and Kaithe stood there, watching the raptor for several quiet moments. They were both breathing heavily. Kaithe nursed his injured wing, keeping it slightly unfolded. Saile looked up at him, his eyes locking onto the wing's fingers, which were bent at an odd angle.

"...Do you want me to take a look at that?" he asked, breaking the silence. Kaithe met his gaze, holding it for a few moments before dropping his head defeatedly and

letting out a quiet chuckle.

“You’re not gonna let me say no,” he sighed. His helmet retracted as he stepped over the drone’s corpse. His golden eyes sparkled in the dim light of the hallway.

Saile let himself relax, his shoulders dropping as the tension slipped away. The fight was over. They could get their data and go home.

This time, the blur that shot out of the side hallway was silver.

The fourth archraptor rammed into Kaithe at full speed. His head cracked against the wall, and he crumpled to the floor.

“KAI!” Saile yelled, his eyes widening, hearing fear in his voice for the first time in a long time. His blade shot out of his gauntlet again, but the last raptor was on him before he could react. It dodged the sword, and its teeth tore straight through the remaining shields on his torso.

A searing pain exploded up Saile’s side. His scream echoed through the ship. The raptor was dragging him, shaking him back and forth so that its teeth dug farther into his flesh. The smell of his own blood filled his lungs as the drone pulled him back down the hallway. Everything was blurry from the pain. Saile tried to stab his blade into the raptor’s skull, but it deflected off of the metal.

The vague shape of the hallway around him was familiar. The edges of his vision were going black, but they snapped back into focus when he remembered the trap he and Kaithe had set up when they first boarded the ship. There was no time to think. His gauntlet warped into the blaster and he fired down the hallway, hitting the panel on the left side of the door.

As the raptor dragged Saile under it, it slammed shut, severing its head with a

clean crunch.

Saile lay on the cold metal floor, his head ringing. Pain washed over him in waves. He let out a stifled groan, tilting his head towards the raptor's, lifeless, but still locked around his torso. He had to get it off.

He reached down, feeling the smooth metal of the raptor's skull and running his hand along it until he found the edge of the jaw. He gritted his teeth and pulled upwards. With a sickening krrrrrch, the teeth retracted from his flesh and armor. Saile leaned to dislodge the jaw from his back, then shoved the raptor's head away. He could feel his blood draining from the wounds on his torso. *Kai.*

Saile struggled to roll over, planting his hands in the growing pool of blood on the floor. There was a rusty orange stain on the wall where Kaithe's head had struck it. *Fate... please, no...* His heartbeat pounded in his skull. Things weren't going blurry yet. He knew he was on borrowed time that the adrenaline had graciously given him.

He pushed himself up, trying to get his legs under him, but only one responded.

Saile looked back at the door. There were two stains at the bottom. One was partially obscured by the raptor's head. His gaze drifted downward.

His right leg was gone.

There was a clean, angled cut just above his knee. Some of the plating of his armor was detached, exposing his scaled skin underneath.

Saile stared at the stump for a long time.

A thought cut through the haze in his mind like a knife. *I need to move.*

His severed leg would start hurting like hell soon, and then he could do nothing. *I need to get Kaithe out of here. We need to leave.*

Saile turned his full attention back to the hallway. The whip shot from his gauntlet again, latching onto the ceiling several meters down the corridor. He pulled himself up. He could see over the corpse of the first raptor now. Kaithe was still collapsed in a heap, his injured wing further crushed under him and the other splayed outwards. Rust-colored blood seeped through his jet black hair.

Saile let go of the line and dragged himself over to his partner. His visor flashed green with a vital scan. Kaithe was unconscious, but alive. Saile let his head fall against Kaithe's, relief washing over him. *Thank fate.*

"Kiera." Saile said quietly. His own voice was distant. No wonder.

Their squadron logo flashed on his visor, serving as an anchor, keeping him awake. They were so close.

*"I hear you, Saile. Do you have the mainframe?"* Kiera's voice crackled from the speakers in his helmet.

"No." Saile replied. "...Kaithe's hurt. I- Kiera, we- we need to get out of here."

"Sh\*t, Saile- what's going on? Are you alright?"

Saile slowly lifted his head, looking back at his leg. There was a long trail of blood along the hallway behind him, leading to the door. His visor chose this convenient time to flash an alert on his screen. *"WARNING—excessive blood loss. Seek medical attention immediately."*

He let his head fall back to Kaithe's chest—still rising and falling, slowly but steadily. He let his eyes flutter closed as he gave a weak laugh.

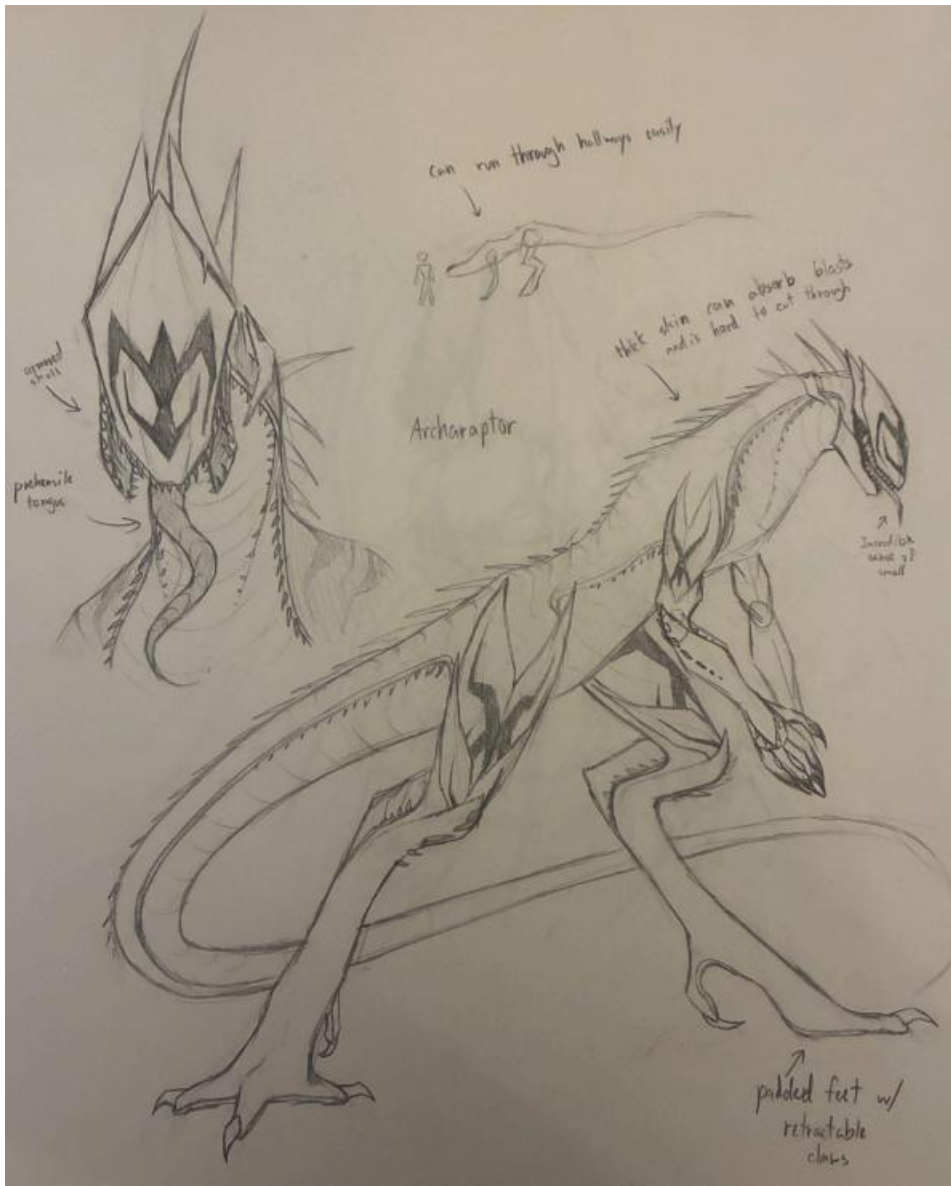
"No," he heard himself reply distantly. Kiera's voice faded into the background. She sounded panicked. He couldn't find the strength to answer her.

Minutes faded by. He felt the vibration of rapid footsteps. Someone grabbed his shoulder and turned him over, bright light pouring through his visor. Despite the blaring warning that still overlaid his vision, a wave of calm washed over him.

*We're alive.*

*Four fate-damned archaraptors.*

*Kaithe, if we survive, please remind me that we are never doing this again.*



## **Third Place: Look in the Mirror and Tell Me What You See**

By Ellie Xu

LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND TELL ME WHAT YOU  
SEE. DOES SHE SATISFY YOU?  
IS SHE THE BEST VERSION YOU COULD POSSIBLY BE?  
ATTEND GLOW & GROW'S FAMOUS 2-WEEK INTENSIVE  
CAMP. GLOW UP YOUR ATTITUDE AND GROW UP YOUR  
CONFIDENCE. REGISTER NOW: ONLY \$2000 FOR A  
LIMITED TIME!

I don't mean to judge, but I'm judging.

It's sad, seeing these twelve girls gathered together in the middle of nowhere because they feel like they're not enough but *this* could fix that. We're at a sleepaway camp surrounded by spindly green pines so long they disappear into the sky. All you can hear are hooting owls and chirping crickets. How could anyone sign up for this?

That doesn't include me. I'm writing an undercover exposé on Glow & Grow and its "self-growth" programs. It's disgusting, the way they exploit people's insecurities. Gabi, our appointed Glow & Grow coach with a bright salesgirl voice and pearly smile plastered onto her face, seems nice enough, and I hate that she's supporting something like this.

Mandy, Erin, Esmerelda, and I head over to the bathroom to get ready for our first night. As I turn on the faucet to brush my teeth, the yellow fluorescent lights flicker for a moment. Then they're back, humming like nothing happened.

“Huh,” Erin remarks from beside me. “I wonder, Clarisse, how do they even get power way out—”

She stops midsentence. I turn to her. She’s frozen, green eyes bulging out, pinned on her reflection.

I follow her gaze. In the mirror, staring back at Erin, is... Erin. Only, I realize as I look closer, it’s not. I’m not sure how I can tell – they look the same. But the Erin next to me stands with more of a slouch, like she’s trying to hide from the world. Erin in the mirror has her head lifted.

Erin shrieks. I try my best to stay calm and make sense of it all. Over in the showers, I hear Mandy and Esmerelda scrambling. This must be a trick by Glow & Grow. They’re messing with us, using some sort of crazy technology to show us “better” versions of ourselves.

My sink is still running, so I switch it off. The rest of the girls burst inside and the lights flicker yet again, an ominous sign.

“What’s going on?”

Erin opens her mouth, but no sound comes out. The mirror has reverted back to normal.

*What the hell?*

“My reflection, it was...” Erin trails off, uncertain.

I start to tell them my hypothesis when another thought strikes me. I walk to the leftmost sink, the one I was using, and turn the cold water knob.

They all watch me, confused. I look straight at my reflection, as the lights flicker once again. I know I’m right.

Sure enough, someone who’s not quite me smiles back playfully. I feel a surge of understanding toward her: she’s a go-getter like me, but she’s relaxed rather than intense. She’s

assertive rather than domineering. She knows what she wants and knows she'll get it.

A silence falls over us. We're too entranced to speak.

"We need to tell Gabi," Daniela says just as the door slams open.

"You girls should be in bed, it's late!" Gabi pauses at our shocked faces. "What?" "The mirror," Justine musters. "Look in the mirror. Look at your *reflection!*"

"I don't see anything."

"It's some sort of trick by you guys, right?" I say, perhaps a bit too accusingly.

She narrows her eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. Girls, I know you're excited, but you'll need rest if you want to get the most out of this. Understood?"

We nod numbly, no one bothering to protest. Either she's a really good actor, or she actually doesn't notice.

"Don't you get it?" Erin says as we shuffle back to the bunks. "The mirror shows us the perfect version of ourselves, the ones we're trying to be. Gabi doesn't see anything because she's *already* her perfect self."

"Yeah *right*," Esmerelda fires back. "Gabi's clearly lying." She nods in my direction. "I bet Clarisse is right."

"Or maybe we're all hallucinating," Lacie sighs.

I don't sleep well. Every time I close my eyes I see *her* and her winning smile and I hate how much I love her.

A ringing bell startles me awake. I guess I must have fallen asleep eventually.

"Morning, all!" Gabi chirps when we meet her at the bonfire pit. She dons a fuschia raincoat but the same happy demeanor as yesterday. "Did you have a good night?"

We mumble in response, but she takes it as a yes. "Awesome! Now, I want to do a little

team-bonding warm-up.” We take a seat as she explains. “We all have regrets.

There’s no time machine that can take you back, but you can’t ignore those past mistakes – they’re what make you *you*. So we’ll all share our biggest regret, and what we’ve learned since.”

No one volunteers to go first. For some reason, her eyes land on me. “Clarisse, why don’t you start?”

I have many regrets, too many to count. But I tend to avoid dwelling on them because I know if I start, I won’t be able to stop.

“I’m a journalist,” I say slowly. “Once, I was about to crack this story…” There was a corrupt politician, a tale as old as time. I had figured him out: sources exposing him, all the right documents. Then my editor-in-chief red-lit the piece, saying releasing this would be a threat to my safety. I knew the truth. Mayor Wellick had spent quite some money bribing publications. I wasn’t aware of which ones until then.

“...I couldn’t bring myself to do what was right.”

I willingly let an injustice slide. It said something about me as a journalist, as a person. I had spent over half my life believing this was something I was good at – something no one could ever take away. I didn’t know what to do if it turned out I just wasn’t cut out for this.

I didn’t mean to share all that with twelve practical strangers, but I guess it felt nice. Gabi looks very pleased.

Our “character-building activity of the day” is taking turns with an old-school camera, photographing the beauty we see in each other. The woods are cold and muddy from an early morning storm, but it’s actually pretty fun. The second Gabi bids us good night, we rush to the bathroom.

I almost sigh in relief when I see her staring back at me. I’ve kind of missed her, in a sick

way. I don't consider myself a jealous person, but I've never wanted to be in someone else's skin so badly. Well, she *is* me.

Lacie has formed a new theory. "Everyone knows mirrors are haunted. Have you noticed that your reflection is always watching you, even when you look away?"

"Now you're being ridiculous," Esmerelda snaps. "Clarisse and I already said, it's a set-up. And Gabi's been told to act like she doesn't notice it."

"So you don't think we're real?"

It's Esmerelda's voice. Esmerelda's lips are shut. Basic logic tells me... look at the mirror.

My eyes recognize it before my brain does. The person in the mirror is talking to us.

I scream.

"Oh, calm down already!" I snap. No, I didn't say that. It sounds like I said that. It's definitely something I would say. A fresh wave of nausea hits me as I meet my mirror's eyes. Now her proud smile seems taunting, almost sinister.

"Please. Who are you all?" Mandy is staring wide-eyed at her reflection.

"We are you." Mirror Mandy gives herself a reassuring smile. She's as kind as our Mandy, but more of a leader. "But not quite. We're from an alternate universe. Same person fundamentally, but we made different decisions in our lifetime."

I make a mental note to research Glow & Grow's connections to technology companies once I'm back in the city.

Mirror Clarisse nods at me. "You still don't believe this, do you?" I don't respond. "I know things only the two of us know. Wellick, for example?"

My blood runs still. *No. It can't be.* They must've hijacked my brain. I can come up with a million explanations, but in a way, it feels good to believe.

“Wait.” Esmerelda frowns. “If you're in another universe, why are you all in this same bathroom too?”

“Our world is more advanced than yours,” Mirror Justine replies. “Long ago, scientists realized mirrors allowed parallel universe counterparts to communicate. Our government has been watching your world, and learned you would all gather here. So, they recruited us to help.”

“Why the faucet?” I ask, gesturing to the water continuing to trickle. “Why does that trigger the connection?”

Mirror Clarisse laughs. “How the hell would we know?”

I can't help but crack a smile too. I've never felt more at peace with myself. “Everyone, come gather now! I have an important announcement to make.”

I open my eyes and realize it's morning. The rest of the night was a blur. We spent hours chatting with our alternate selves, returning to our cabin before the sun rose so Gabi wouldn't notice anything. I still don't trust her, even if Glow & Grow supposedly isn't involved.

I stumble outside and look for Mandy so I can talk to her, but she's nowhere to be found.

“Where's Mandy?” I ask.

Gabi's face tightens. “That's what I wanted to talk to you all about.” I tense.

“Mandy had a family emergency and had to withdraw from the program. Let's all respect her decision and wish her the best.”

Esmeralda and I lock eyes. We're thinking the same thing.

Today's activity is finding something from nature that we think matches the soul of the other campers and gifting it to them. Esmerelda hands me a pretty rose-colored stone.

"Last night spooked her too much, didn't it?"

"I don't know," I mutter back. From what I remember, Mandy seemed pretty happy. Fascinated, like the rest of us. I have no idea what's happened to her, but I know for a fact Gabi's lying.

Like a silent agreement, nobody touches the left sink tonight. Mandy's absence hangs in the air, but we don't talk about it. I notice something under my pillow as I head to bed: a page frantically torn from a book, with words scribbled hastily in Sharpie. It's Mandy's handwriting.

*Clarisse, you're the only person here who I trust to not say anything. Whatever you do, DON'T go back to the mirror. I went and I barely escaped. Listen to me and leave this place NOW. –Mandy.*

I can barely process the words. When did she write this? Why did she write this? Objectively, it seems Mandy's gone insane, but I have more faith in her than that.

*What could be so bad over there?*

I feel the cool midnight air on my skin as I make my way toward the bathroom. Above, a million little stars twinkle. I wonder what would happen if they all fell down.

*Here's my chance.* I stare at the faucet handle. Just one turn and I can find out the truth. There's more to this than I could have ever imagined.

I reach into my pocket and take out Mandy's note, reading it over to myself one more time. She was warning me not to do exactly what I'm about to do. But I have to go, doesn't Mandy understand that? I have to investigate. I have to prove that I'm just as good as *her*.

I hold out my hand, letting the cold water wash over me.

“What did you guys do to Mandy?” I demand the second I see my reflection switch.

Her smile flickers. “What?”

“She crossed over, right? She went to your universe.” “What are you talking about, Clarisse?”

“It’s a lie. Everything you told us is a lie.”

“You’re not making any sense—”

“Are you really even our parallel selves? Or are you monsters? Demons?” Now I’m shouting.

“Listen to yourself. You’re insane! This conversation is over.” She reaches toward the sink. I lunge forward, trying to stop her, and hit the glass instead. The lights flicker once, twice, then go out completely.

A beat passes. They’re back on, the water is off, and she’s gone from the mirror.. I let out a shaky breath and shuffle out the door, freezing when I see what’s outside. Instead of the measly firepit and wood cabin, there are cars and tents.

A middle-aged man with a white beard jogs toward me. “Again, so sorry for waking you at this hour, miss. But our monitors were going off, saying your Other was entering the bathroom.”

“M-my Other?”

He doesn’t seem to hear me. “I hope you’re not angry about this. We just want to maximize all our chances of interaction with the Other World.”

I push past him and break into a run, heading straight for a car. Somehow, I have the right keys and the engine starts. I don’t think twice. I floor the accelerator and steer off into the dark

woods.

I instinctively know which way to go, even though I've never driven here before.

I'm out of the forest and in my apartment before I know it.

It looks and feels the same – the noisy upstairs neighbors, the lavender humidifier, the pictures on the walls. Except one: a faded photograph of me (or her, I don't really know the difference anymore) posing proudly on a podium with a tall man in a bright blue tux. The guy who was running against Mayor Wellick. He certainly would have won if someone exposed his opponent's fraud.

I don't understand. What happened to Mandy when she entered the mirror?

Because right now, the last thing I want to do is leave.

I collapse onto the soft memory foam of my bed. When I open my eyes, bright sunlight streams in through the blinds.

My alarm clock tells me it's seven in the morning, Monday. *Work.*

I spring up. Strangely, I seem to know where to find everything, like this really is my home. In less than ten minutes, I'm riding the elevator down with an elderly woman I've never seen before.

"I'm so glad you're back, Clarisse sweetie!" She pulls me into a tight hug, her jasmine perfume enveloping me. "You don't know how much I missed you!"

"I've missed you more, Iris. How's your grandson doing?"

I don't realize what happened until I'm in my car. I spoke with a woman I don't know about things I don't know. And yet, I've never had a more natural conversation.

It's the same at work: when I sit at my desk, I know exactly what I'm writing about and what I need to do. As if all of Mirror Clarisse's memories are flooding my brain.

Something within me is shifting. I don't know where it's coming from, but I know I like it. Interviews are easier. Collaborating with my editors is fun. I laugh louder than ever when I'm with my friends. I can't remember the last time I felt something negative.

Every day is a good day, though I no longer dream when I sleep except for a few snapshots of a far, distant life. Something's changing not just the way I act, but the way I think too. Because I'm not thinking at all. That's it: I can't hear my thoughts.

When I make a mistake, I don't second-guess my abilities because I don't reflect on anything. When I take too long on something, I immediately get back to work instead of wallowing because I simply can't care.

Every day is a good day, and it's not enough. I'm tired.

On Saturday, I go to yoga. The instructor, smiling bright like a lotus flower, hands clasped before her in prayer pose, is Gabi.

"Good morning, Clarisse. How are you?" I freeze.

It's not my Gabi, I remind myself. She doesn't know who I really am. She can't. I've been here almost a week now and no one has suspected anything.

Something deep inside me is fighting its way to the surface, triggered by her appearance. I push it down and follow Gabi's movements.

*You don't belong here You don't belong here You don't belong here.* The bright white studio lights flicker.

*You can't hide me forever You can't hide me forever You can't hide me forever.*

My classmates begin to vanish, one by one.

*Perfect job, perfect social life, perfect happiness. But are you really happy? Are you*

*feeling anything at all?*

It's just me and Gabi now.

"I'm happy here," I say to myself. "It's all I've ever wanted." My heart is nearly jumping out of my chest. *"It's all I've ever wanted."*

Gabi's gone too.

In the mirror, my reflection flashes before me. I have everything I want here. Everything except myself. And I really miss myself.

The part of me that's been buried ever since I switched into this world finally snaps free. She's far more awful than she is perfect, and sometimes I really hate being her. But now I know I would rather color outside the lines than have no color at all.

*I don't want to be you anymore.*

In a blink, my background changes. I stand before a familiar sink, under familiar yellow lights. I feel truly awake for the first time in days. Something about this place is so still and so calm. It's beautiful.

Gabi waits for me outside.

"You were there," I breathe. "In the other place. Did you recognize me? It wasn't actually real, right? Just some simulation? Is that Glow & Grow's whole strategy?"

She hums to herself. "For an investigative journalist, Clarisse, you should have listened more closely during our team-bonding warm-ups."

I shake my head. "I don't get it." It's almost comical, how I just can't understand. And honestly? That's okay.

Her eyes twinkle. For the first time, her plastic smile seems genuine. "Write us a good review, won't you?"

## Second Place: Coconut Trees Remember

By Keshav Ganugapati

Arjun had come to know when he was eleven that his grandpa was completely the worst embarrassment of all people.

It wasn't just one thing. It was everything.

Even when he arrived in their Konkani village in Kerala, Dadaji had to put on that white dhoti and his kurta, even at the time of scorching hot weather. He would speak Malayalam with a thick Konkani sound and use words that no one in the city could even pronounce. He would also always fall on his forehead every morning to the ground, praying to trees as though they were gods.

Above all it was the coconut grove.

Their land here, in their village off the Goan coast, was a patch, Dadaji only having two acres of coconut palms, interspersed with kokum trees, and a little house with a red-tiled roof, which leaked during the monsoon season. This entire location reeked of damp soil and rotting jackfruit.

Once, on a summer morning, Dadaji called Arjun when he was at the house, "*Beta*, come, come, come. I will demonstrate something important." Arjun groaned. He had been attempting to gain internet connectivity so that he could send a message back home to his friends in Mumbai.

"I'm busy, Dadaji."

"Busy with what? That machine?" Dadaji shook his head. "Come, the trees are waiting."

"Trees don't wait. They're just trees."

The face of grandpa softened and he smiled. "Then I wait. I will wait for you to get it."

The sneakers were dirty in the red mud as Arjun rolled his eyes and followed him reluctantly. They were in the grove of coconuts, Dadaji pausing at every one of the trees, touching the trunk, glancing up at the fronds as they swung in the breeze of the Arabian Sea.

“You see this tree?” Dadaji stopped at one of the palms, especially tall. I planted it on the day your father was born. And this- this was the tree I planted when you were born.”

“So what?” Arjun made kicking movements at a fallen coconut. “They’re just trees.”

“Just trees?” Dadaji laughed, which was not a jolly laugh. These trees, *beta*, offer us with everything. Eating, oil, selling coconut. The fronds for roofs. The trunk for timber. The roots even keep the soil steadfast in case the land will be washed off during the monsoon. Just trees? These are family.”

“That’s weird, Dadaji. Trees aren’t family. A family is made up of people, and maybe pets, but that’s it.”

Dadaji remained silent for a long moment. Then he said, “Come. Sit.”

They were seated on the laterite stone wall which bordered the premises. Viewed there they might see the entire grove, and beyond, the roofs of the village, red tiled, and the azure reflection on the water.

“You see the reason I will never leave this place?” Dadaji asked.

Arjun shrugged, “Because you’re old-fashioned?”

“Maybe. Or maybe because I remember. Your great-grandfather, my father, used to be a worker on another land. No land of his own. Each tree he climbed, each fruit he gathered was that of another person. He saved for thirty years, *beta*, and lastly, he purchased this spot. Two acres. Not much, but ours. He himself planted these trees, as he said to him, “My children will never serve anyone, they will never be another person’s shadow.”

Arjun was unsure how to respond to this and he kept silent.

“I also believe this is a backward place, Dadaji, when I am the same age as you are, I wish to visit Mumbai, Pune and Hyderabad, to be modernized.”

Dadaji responds, “I have spent fifteen years working in Mumbai. But you know what I learn? Contemporary people possess a lot but they lack roots. Wind blows, they fall. Rain comes, they wash away.”

“No it is not true,” Arjun protested. “The people in Mumbai are successful. They possess cars and large homes and-”

“Are they happy?”

Arjun paused his speech and considered his parents. They worked daily, twelve-hour-long shifts, constantly in stress, never sleepy. He did not want to accord Dadaji the satisfaction. But he wished to be happier, where there is nothing to do.

His grandfather smiled melancholically. “Okay, *beta*, you’re young. You’ll get it when you’re ready.”

But Arjun had no desire to be prepared. During that summer, he hardly talked to Dadaji. Arjun rejected his grandpa when he attempted to instruct him on how to climb coconut trees, how to extract toddy, how to tell when the kokum were mature enough to pick and so on. “I am going to become an engineer”, he said as a final message to his grandfather. “I do not have to be acquainted with village stuff.”

Dadaji just nodded. “Maybe you’re right.”

The years passed. Time flew. Arjun went to high school in Mumbai followed by engineering in Pune. He returned to the village less often, once a year, such as on religious

festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi. He would spend two days, mostly on his phone, and then make a return to the city.

That phrase was all Dadaji said. He simply continued to work on his coconut grove, at an increasingly slower pace as a result of his hunchedbackness and coarse hands.

At the time of being called by his mom, Arjun was twenty-five and already working in Bangalore at a tech job. “It’s Dadaji. He fell from a coconut tree. The physician mentions that his hip is broken.”

“At the age of eighty was he still climbing trees?”, Arjun demanded. “Does he not have people to do so?”

“You know your granddad. He does not trust anybody to do any gardening in his trees”, Mom said.

Arjun flew back home and visited his village health primary care center. Dadaji was lying in a bed wide enough to fit a grown dog and gazed at the ceiling.

“Dadaji.” The old man turned his head. His face lit up. “Arjun *beta*. You came.”  
“Of course I came. Was it to climb trees that you are determined about at your age?”  
“The trees need tending. Who’s going to do it?”

“Hire someone!”

Dadaji shook his head slowly. “You don’t get it. But maybe...”, he reached and caught Arjun roughly by the hand. “Maybe you can learn. The grove has to be taken care of on a daily basis. Will you do it? Just until I’m better?”

Arjun wanted to say no. He was working, had a life, an air-conditioned apartment in Bangalore with high-speed internet. However, at the face of his Dadaji, that play of hope and fear in those old eyes, he said to himself, okay, I will get it.

Dadaji smiled and shut his eyes. “Good. Now I can rest.”

Arjun resorted to taking leave and shifted to the old house with leaks. The first day he came to the grove, he stood amidst the coconut palms feeling lost the whole day. His ignorance was such that he never knew when the trees required water, and when they were ill, and when the coconuts were fit to harvest.

Some of the villagers assisted him, kept on asking him questions he could not answer. “*Sir*, shall we pick the kokum? Shall we cut down this dead tree? Shall we take your land into our hands?”

Arjun had no clue. He even called his grandfather who attempted to clarify to him over the phone, yet he still didn’t comprehend.

Arjun at last found his way to the old house and searched it. Notebooks were also discovered in a room belonging to Dadaji. Dozens of them. They were written in Marathi, with partial Konkani words, and were decades old.

Arjun gave himself up and began to read.

12 March 1985: I planted a new coconut for the birth of Arjun. The soil is good, red and rich. I hope this tree will rise as great as my grandson. May he be deep rooted and sky-bound.

18 June, 1996: Arjun said that the village is backward. I recalled that I told my father the same thing. It is a strange thing that the generation has to learn the same lesson. A seedling cannot be accused of being as ignorant as the operations of the roots.

3 August, 2005: Arjun was not coming on this summer. His mother reveals that he is studying hard. This is good. I never pruned these trees that he should be in the snare. I took care of them, so that he can constantly have a home to get back to, in case he finds a need to.

22 April 2012: The ancient coconut tree, which I planted in the place of my father, bore sixty coconuts this season. A good omen. Arjun is a student enrolled in engineering college at this point in time. He does not call much. However, I occasionally find him on WhatsApp, in pictures with friends. He looks happy. He looks free. That is what I wished I should have when I planted his tree.

Page twenty-three, year twenty-six. Dadaji had written it all down, how the trees had been growing, how Arjun had been growing, the boy who now was too proud to love him back. There were observations of Arjun: hopes, worries, unconditional love with notes on rainfall and harvest yields.

The final record was that of the week preceding his fall:

I have a painful hip, but the bushes demand attention. It is the monsoon approaching, and I have to find a way of securing the young palms. Arjun is in Bangalore, doing very important business. I am proud of him. However, there are occasions when I hope that he might realize that there is one more significant thing in this world: working with trees, and taking care of the land. Not serious like computers or engineering. Important things like taking a deep breath, and remembering who you are. But perhaps he will never need to know this. Perhaps I have done such a good job that he is able to live his entire life in air-conditioned rooms, and never miss it. I hope so. I hope not.

Arjun was sitting in the room of Dadaji, full of notebooks and sobbed. He wept at all the summers spent in vain, all the knowledge he had turned a blind eye to, all the love that he had not been awake to perceive.

That evening he visited Dadaji. He was at home, slowly growing stronger, and most of his days, he was on a cot over on the veranda, staring at the coconut fronds.

“Dadaji, I read your notebooks.”

His grandpa’s eyes widened. “That is nothing but my scribbles”, he said in a slightly embarrassed voice.

“They’re not just scribbles. They’re...”, Arjun gulped down his sore throat. “I’m sorry. I regret my occurrence of calling the village backward. I’m sorry I didn’t help you. I’m sorry I didn’t get it.”

Dadaji touched and crushed his warm, coarse palm against the cheek of Arjun. “*Beta*, no need to forgive. I have behaved the exact same way to my father. That’s how it is.”

“I want to learn”, said Arjun. “Everything. Trees, land, all of it. Will you teach me?”

Tears formed in the eyes of his Dadaji. “Yes, *beta*. I’ll teach you everything.”

He did. During the six months that Dadaji was recovering his hip, he instructed Arjun in all that he knew. How to differentiate the color of the sky to signify whether or not there was incoming rain, how to judge whether a coconut tree was healthy or not by the way it sang in the wind, how to tap toddy in such a manner so as not to kill the tree, how to make kokum sol, how to dry fish, how to learn what the old almanac has to say when it comes to the time of planting.

More importantly, Dadaji emphasized that patience is key when it comes to coconut trees. The coconut palm bears fruit in seven years, and you continue working on it, hoping that you will live to see the gifts of your work.

Arjun left his employment in Bangalore. His friends believed that he was a lunatic. “You’re abandoning a six-figure salary to be an agrarian worker?”, they whispered.

Arjun couldn’t explain. He had not mentioned to them that he had fourteen years to run away with what was dear, and that he did not want to waste even a second.

He took over the grove. He got to learn to love the red mud, the monsoon drums on the roof of the tiles, and the flavor of fresh coconut water out of the shell. He began with a small organic farm, where he cultivated the traditional Konkani vegetables that he once hated. He sold coconuts and kokum to restaurants in need of resources to grow.

He started educating village children on agriculture. A lot of them were similar to him—they attempted to run away to the city disgraced by the life of their parents in the countryside. He demonstrated how to climb coconut trees, how to find medicinal plants and read the land.

“Farming vs. engineering. What’s better than engineering?”, one boy asked.

“It is neither better nor worse, Pandu”, said Arjun. “It’s different. It would take years to learn how to code, construct virtually, it was like laying houses on sand. This-”, he struck a coconut tree trunk, “feels like laying them on rock.”

One day, seven years after his grandpa fell, Arjun was hustling in the grove when Dadaji summoned him.

“*Beta*, come see.”

“You see?” The voice of Dadaji was weak and proud. He was close to ninety, feeble, lying the greater part of the time, but the shine in his eyes remained. Pointing at Arjun’s tree, he said, “I told you, this tree would grow straight up, taller than the other trees, just like you.”

“You had faith”, Arjun replied.

“In the tree or in you?”

“Both.”

Dadaji laughed. “Yeah. Both.”

Dadaji died three months later, peacefully, in his sleep, having lived the day before after having planted the coconut palms around his house. Arjun was unable to focus on his own life at the funeral where he was engrossed with thoughts of roots, growing things over decades, patience, faith and the ability to develop beauty in a world that demanded immediate outcomes.

Dadaji’s life never truly ended, his legacy was continued. Arjun picked up his grandfather’s sixty-year-old journal and wrote. He wrote about Dadaji’s influence upon him, his work and life. He prayed to the trees like they were gods, no longer something he makes fun of, but understanding of the true value of the spiritual connection with ancestors who were determined for a land of their own.

He recounted the grove, how the village children learned how to climb, how the old trees held the soil tight even in harsh monsoon seasons. He wrote it, how his grandfather told it to him, about love at a young age that he had been old enough not to see, about forgiveness that was not relevant until as late as possible.

Occasionally, when the Arabian Sea wind whistled in the palms, Arjun knew he heard the voice of his grandfather. Not sad, not disappointed, but proud.

“See?”, the wind seemed to say. “I told you. You just needed time to grow.”

Arjun now knows what roots are. It is not what entraps you, but what is there to hold you in check during the heaviest of storms. The grove keeps on connecting to something older and wiser than he is. Each coconut that he picks is talking with the dead. All of these trees he maintains are an evidence that love does not come to its end when a heart stops beating.

He sees how he was wasting years of his life, all those summers that he could have learned with Dadaji. But he is also aware of the fact that regretting is a garden in itself. When you think about past mistakes, they get stronger and spread, just like the way plants grow in a garden.

So Arjun plants. He tends. He patiently waited for the trees while he was also learning to wait. That was too late, but not too late to count.

He acknowledges every year, in monsoon, when the coconut palms are straining in the wind, they never fail to break. The trees remember. They keep in mind each hand, which planted them, each voice which addressed them, each generation which took care of them.

Now, when small town children grumble at the backwardness of farming, that life is there which seems to be enacted in the city, Arjun smiles. He doesn't argue. He takes them to the grove, climbs with them, makes them hear the wind in the fronds, and feel the bare beauty of the Earth beneath their feet.

Some of them understand. Some don't. But Arjun puts it anywhere, he takes care anywhere, he educates anywhere, since that's what his grandfather taught him. "The hardest dirt put in bears the freshest of fruits. When you have been waiting for long, when you have believed, when you recolor the place you grew up in, one time or another, you among the trees will have reached the sky."

He would just like Dadaji always said he would.

# First Place: Blank Slate

By Leia Hatem

January 3rd, 1954

I shuffle into the room, my heart beating fast. This isn't quite what I'd expected. I was told this was the best treatment for my depression, but this place really sets me on edge. Between the cracks in the walls, the dusty floors, the barred up windows-

"Ma'am." I snap my head over to the lady looking at me, with gray-streaked hair pulled back so tightly into a bun I wonder how she can function. "Put these on once you get to your rooms."

She shoves stiff fabric into my arms until I'm prodded forward by one of the uniformed men who had escorted me here. He leads me through a metal door into a hallway. At the end of the hallway, a young girl sits there in a plain dress that appears to be the same material as what I hold in my own hands. She has to be no older than 20. Dark, matted hair falls down across her shoulders, tousled as if she hasn't seen a brush in years. Her cheekbones are sunken in, her eyes vacant and hollow. They are directed at me, but it is as if she is seeing *through* me.

Before I can stare any longer, the man turns me and shoves me into a room to my right, locking the door behind me.

"Hey!" I shout, banging on the door which doesn't have a lock from the inside. "What is this?" I bang on it some more, to no avail. This is supposed to be a health center, not a prison.

But no; I was promised this would be the best help I would find. I just have to trust the process. Sighing, I walk over and sit on the cot in the corner of my room, held up by a thin, metal bedframe. I unfold the fabric in my hands and hold it out before me.

Shapeless, it appears to be a square of fabric with two short sleeves. How is this supposed to bring light back into my life?

I pull the gown over my head anyway and shove the clothes I was wearing under my bed. I sit there and stare at the wall for an infinitesimal amount of time, an odd fear making my stomach churn.

I hear the click of a lock and the turn of the handle, and the same lady I saw from earlier walks in, this time a smile plastered onto her face.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am. This must’ve been a shock for you.”

I nod slowly. She glances at my new outfit, and satisfaction fills her eyes. “Good. You’ve changed. Now, I wanted to let you know the reason you had to go straight to your rooms. A lot of the patients here are...mentally challenged.” I almost laugh. By the way she says it, she makes it seem like *I’m* not “mentally challenged”, too.

“We want to introduce you slowly to the other new patients, so we can avoid any conflicts. Over the next few days, you’ll be granted a little more freedom. For now, you will have to be escorted, and your meals will be brought to your room.”

Her smile widens.

“We can’t wait for your transformation. By the end of this process, you won’t even recognize yourself.”

January 8, 1954

Spiders.

They’re all over me.

I can feel them, crawling across my arms, my legs, my face, across the stiff fabric of my gown. I feel their legs and their fangs and I know I shouldn’t open my mouth but a scream rips out of me anyway.

Almost instantly, my door is slammed open and the lights turn on. I frantically lift my head up to see three uniformed men storming in, hands on the guns at their sides.

“Spiders,” I gasp. “They’re all over me-”

They look at me with blank expressions. I look down and...nothing.

There’s nothing on me.

No. That can’t be right. I *know* what I felt.

Behind the guards, I see an old lady stand in my doorway. She stares at me, and I look long enough that the men turn around and see her.

“Go back to your room, ma’am,” the largest of the three says. No one ever gets called by their name here. No one ever calls me by my name. Esther. I miss hearing someone else say it.

The large man turns back to me. “Is there a problem?”

I realize I’m shaking now. But I can’t say there’s a problem. They’ll just think I’m insane. Or just attribute it to my disorder. “N-no. I guess not.”

He nods, and the three turn off the light and leave the room, locking the door behind them once again.

I pull the sheets over me, my body still shaking. I didn’t see the spiders. But they had to have been there. It felt too real.

January 12, 1954

I’ve earned more freedom now. I don’t have to be escorted anywhere, and my room isn’t locked at night. But the same lady who stared at me the night I felt the spiders keeps appearing, keeps staring at me. It makes me want my escorts back.

The treatments are unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before. They make me do a lot

of tests, the kind that I took in elementary school so they could see if I was gifted. Intelligence tests, that make you think. I'm not sure what that has to do with depression, but I'll have to trust them.

After the night I felt the spiders, I had two more episodes. The first time, I told them there were fire ants on me. But the second the lights were on, the sensation went away. The lady with the constant tight-bun pulled me aside and told me that sometimes, the anti-depressants make you see things and feel things that aren't really there. A temporary side effect that will go away with time.

I knew she was lying, I just wasn't sure what *exactly* she was lying about.

The third episode, I felt scorpions. This time, I kept my mouth shut and stayed logical. Why would there realistically be scorpions crawling all over me? It must be the anti-depressants. That's what the lady said, and I should trust her.

January 13, 1954

I'm sitting in the common room, on the dirty, stained couch, when the bald man with only one eyebrow gets up and screams.

“WE'RE BEING DRUGGED! THIS ISN'T REAL! THEY'RE DRUGGING US!  
THEY'RE DRUGGING US!”

The uniformed men come in and drag him away.

January 14, 1954

The bald man with one eyebrow doesn't show up today.

January 15, 1954

I've had more episodes every night. I think about what the bald man said. That we're being drugged. And about what the lady said, that the anti-depressants are making me hallucinate. I know I take anti-depressants. I swallow the pills every night.

But I wonder if there are other kinds of drugs in my system.

January 17, 1954

A cold hand grips my wrist, hard. I gasp and turn around. It's the old woman that stares at me. Every time she sees me, she stares.

She leans in close to me, so close I can see her brown teeth and sunken eyes, pupils dilated.

"You must escape," she whispers. "Before it's too late. Before they make you forget yourself."

She suddenly releases me and walks away. I stare for a second after her before I come to my senses. I rush after her and grab *her* wrist.

"What? What does that mean? What are you talking about?"

Her eyes are wide when her head snaps back to me. She pries my fingers off her wrist. "Do I know you?" Her face is blank, without recognition of me. Maybe she has dementia...but I don't think so. I think it's something else.

I think she's forgetting herself, just like she warned me.

January 18, 1954

I can't sleep. Not because I'm having hallucinations. Because I know sleep will bring

them.

I slip out of the cot, the cold of the floor seeping in even through my socks. Quietly, I turn the knob and open the door. To one end of the hallway, the young girl I saw on the first day is in the same spot, in the same position, staring vacantly ahead. A shiver runs through me.

I turn the other way, searching for a clock on the wall, even though they never have one. It is one of the things that irks me most about this place. I never know what time it is. The only thing that tells me of the time is when the workers call for lights out, but for all I know, we could be sleeping during the day and getting “treatment” throughout the night.

They don’t usually have a lot of uniformed men roaming the hallways. Probably because the way out of this prison isn’t accessible to us, so they don’t have to worry.

Either way, I tiptoe down the hallway, feeling the eyes of the young girl on the back of my head.

I turn down a hallway and open a random door, deciding to explore. Since I haven’t been sleeping the whole night, my eyes are well adjusted to the darkness.

I hear voices, and find that I’m following the sound. They’re coming from behind a closed door on my right, at the end of this particular hallway.

I press my ear against the door, heart pounding, because I get the sense that I shouldn’t be here.

I can’t hear much, only a few seemingly important words, muffled.

“Too long.”

“New girl.”

“Cold war.”

“Project.”

“CIA.”

“Experiment.”

“Blank slate.”

“Human weapon.”

I gasp, and a moment later, the door opens, slamming into me. Rough hands grip my arms, and I’m being dragged into a room, held down into a chair.

The lady with the tight bun is sitting across from me, but this time a stray strand sticks out behind her right ear.

“What were you doing here?” she demands.

“I..I was just taking a walk. I couldn’t sleep. I didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

“What did you hear?”

*Experiment. Blank Slate. Human Weapon.*

“N-nothing.”

Her gaze flicks to the space above my head, and I feel the presence of someone behind me.

A sharp jab of pain explodes in the left side of my neck.

I inhale sharply. “What was that?” I expect to pass out, or die, or *something*.

Instead, I feel my muscles relax ever so slightly. “I’ll

ask one more time. What did you hear?”

Against my will, the words flow freely out of me. Truth serum.

What will they do to me now?

January 20, 1954

More hallucinations. More than before, stronger than before, longer than before.

January 21, 1954

My head is starting to get fuzzy. I keep on writing things down, as the doctors told me to. They said to document my recovery progress, everything I feel throughout the day. But I can't even remember what I had for breakfast. Or how old I am. Or what year it is.

I scribble something else down, and when no one is looking, I tear it from the notebook and tuck the paper in my sock.

Later, when I'm in my room, I take off my sock and shove it under the mattress. I don't know if there are cameras in here, but I'm not taking chances. I can't let anyone see the paper. Because I know I'm being watched. And I know something is wrong with this place.

I just don't know what.

January 23, 1954

They're drugging the food.

I'm convinced of it.

It is all I can think of as I swirl the potatoes around my plate. Because I've tried to push my meals away, and they won't let me. And every night, the hallucinations get worse, and sometimes I have two or three before the guards wake everyone up. It has to be drugs. It's in the food or it's in the water or it's in both. I don't know.

I can't remember much, but I do remember being injected with truth serum after hearing

words I wasn't supposed to hear. I don't exactly remember what I heard. Just that it was bad.  
And the hallucinations and confusion increased after that night.

I cannot bring myself to believe that's a coincidence. They must have been drugging me before, and increased the dosage once I heard those words, words I wish I could remember.

But I can't let anyone know I'm aware they're drugging me. Because I don't want to disappear like the bald man with one eyebrow. He knew too much.

And now he's gone.

January 27, 1954

Against all odds, I think this place really is treating my depression. Instead of being filled with emptiness, I'm constantly filled with fear. Why did I ever spend every day sitting in bed? I took for granted the sunshine, laughter, my family...

My breath catches in my throat as I think of family. Because when I think of family, my mind is blank. I reach for an image of a family, and come up short.

Who is my family?

Who am I?

February 3, 1954

I'm up for another round of testing today.

I sit in a hard chair, facing the lady with the tight bun. "Can you tell me the date?" she asks.

"Uh. No."

"Hmm. Describe how you're feeling today."

Anxious.

“Fine.”

“What’s your name?”

What an odd question. Shouldn’t they know this? Come to think of it, though, they’ve never called me by my name.

“My name? It’s...” What  
was my name?

Didn’t it start with an A? No, an E? Yes, it started with an E.

“E...” I look at the woman. She stares at me expectantly.

“Eh...my name is Eh...”

My heartbeat races in my chest. She’s still staring at me.

“I don’t know,” I fold.

She pushes her glasses up her nose, writes something down in her notebook. I swear I can see a trace of a smile on her face.

February 12, 1954

I’m in the common room when I smell it. Metallic, pungent...

Blood.

With a gasp, I look up. Rivulets of red are streaming from the cracks in the wall, in the ceiling. I hear screams. Raw and terrified and my throat burns and *I’m* the one screaming.

The old lady enters the room. Stares at me. Shakes her head at me.

In my peripheral vision, I see a uniformed man enter the room. Approach me.

Something sharp stabs my arm.

At once, the walls are blank again. My heart slows down. It was just my imagination. Just another hallucination.

My vision clouds and I slump to the floor.

February 13, 1954

I wake up, slumped against the bedframe. My eyes are filled with grit, and my back and legs ache. I slowly push away from the bedframe, and look around the room.

Visions of red walls fill my mind.

And the man. And the pain.

They sedated me.

I grip the bedframe, and my hand brushes against something soft. Something wedged under the mattress. A sock.

I pull it out and hear a crinkle inside. There's paper. Why would a sock be under my mattress? And why is there paper in it?

I pull the piece of paper out. Rub my eyes. And read.

*Esther.*

*This is you. I'm writing to you because something is very wrong with the place you are in. It will be confirmed if you're reading this and you don't recognize your own name. If you see more hallucinations.*

*These people, the people in uniforms, they're drugging you.*

*Keep this paper. But DON'T let anyone see it. Don't leave it out. Or else something very, very bad will happen.*

*You have to escape. Your name is Esther. You're supposed to be treated for depression but you're here for a different reason, one that you didn't agree to.*

*Please find a way out.*

*Get out of this place.*

*Try to get help from the old lady.*

*And please, please, please don't leave this paper out.*

*-Esther*

My hands shake as I hold the paper. Drugging? Yes, that's right. That's why I hallucinated, isn't it?

“LIGHTS OUT!”

I hear the yell, signaling that it's time to sleep. How long was I out for? How is it already night?

The paper. I can't let them see it. I look back down at the paper and...

The words are swimming. Rearranging themselves. The letters spin and dance around the page.

What...?

Then I see it. A spider crawls *out* from the paper. More and more and they're covering me again and I'm screaming again.

I hear footsteps. I feel another stab of pain in my arm.

The paper flutters from my hand, onto the floor, and the world is dark yet again.

February 14, 1954

I wake up on the floor of my room.

Why am I on the floor?

I stand up, joints cracking. I look around. Stare at the ground. Why am

I staring at the ground?

Something should be on the ground. Something is missing.

Something I *need*.

But I don't remember what it is. What am I missing? I feel a weight inside of me, as if something very, very bad has happened. But I can't remember what.

I hear more voices, more footsteps out in the hallway.

It must be time for breakfast.

I shuffle towards the door, place my hand on the knob. Turn my head back one last time.

Stare at the clean floor.

Oh well.

It couldn't have been that important.

*Author's Note*

*This short story was based on real experiments done illegally by the CIA, called MK ULTRA, during the Cold War. The program was exposed and shut down in the 1970s.*

