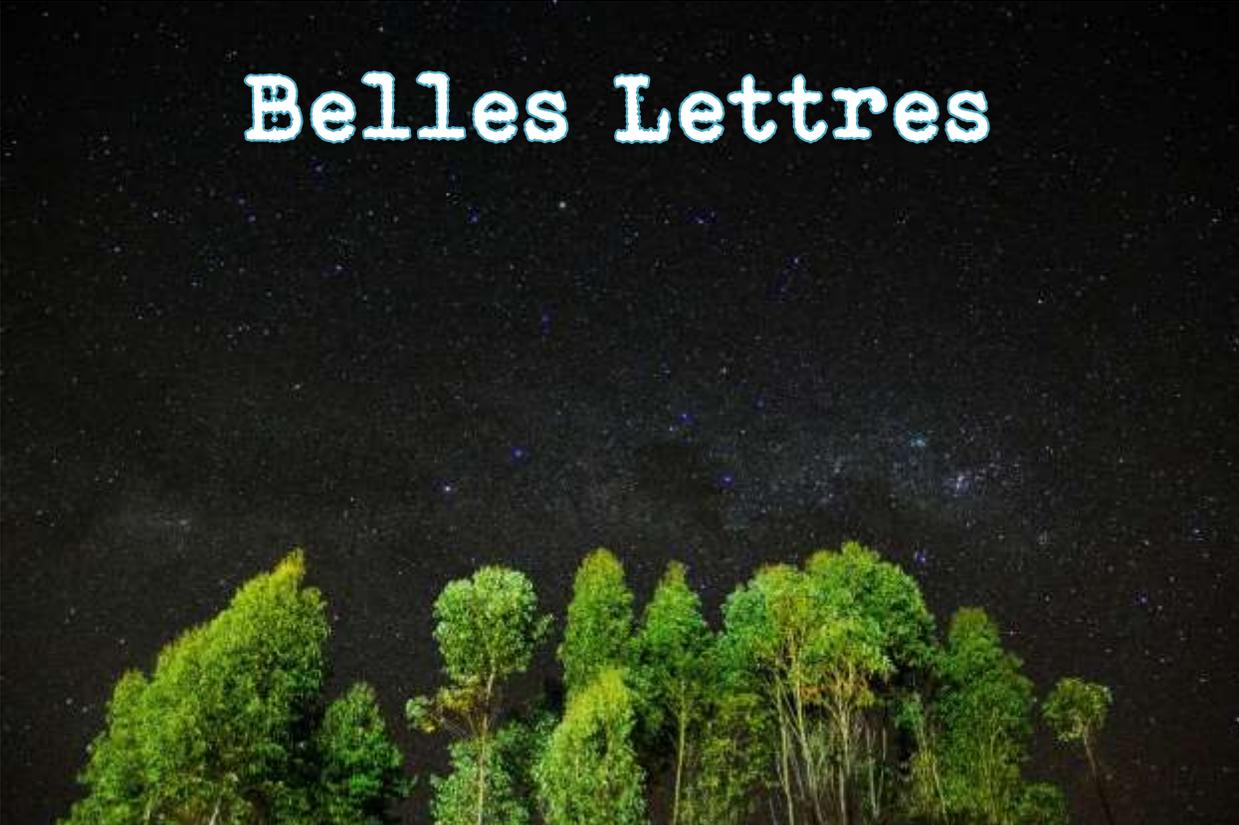


Belles Lettres



Belles Lettres (French for "Fine Writing") is a literary magazine managed by the creative writing class at Bellarmine Preparatory School in Tacoma, Washington. Please read and share.

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Table of Contents:

Poetry

Mason Daniels (p. 4)

Jamaica Station

Thomas Boyland

Bergen

Rockaway

49th Street

Bushwick (M17)

Harlem

Lexington

6th Ave.

Mulberry Street

Broadway

Ferry

The Garden

Zoe Shelton (p. 11)

A Horse Given No Name

Bright Boy

Powerful Man

Red Sun Sea

No, No

Be the Cowboy

Hannah Lynch (p. 22)

A Scattered Seed

Beaches

Grace Georgeitsis (p. 24)

Ta Dákrya Tis Afroditís (The Tears of Aphrodite)

Grandma's China

Cigarettes and Coffee

Role Model

By the Ankles

Tiropeta

The Tears of Aphrodite

Fantasy

- The Wanderer- Johnathan Pascual (p. 32)
The Land of Agliven: The Power of the Flame- Ally Downing (p. 44)
The Dark Forest- Matthew Sommerfeld (p. 55)
The Moon Only Comes Out at Night- Kasey Schuler (p. 96)
Albert and the Wizard- Charlie Zelazny (p. 105)
Memoriae Mori - Michael Curry (p. 76)
Space Debris - Jack James (p. 89)
The Boy and the Woods - Sasha Earle (p. 114)

Fiction

- All the Way to the Podium-Meisi Settle (p. 121)
Wake Me Up- Zada Boitano (p. 128)
An Unfortunate Town- Natalie Doelman (p. 134)
The Dinner Party- Reese Wyman (p. 142)
The Face of Beauty-Nelly Ramos-Laguna (p. 149)
The Possibility of Lasting Love- MaryRose Johnson (p. 159)
Memories of the Desert- Joseph Cedarland (p. 165)
A Caravan from Canada - Jake Galvan (p. 179)
Murder at Christmas - Jessica Silva (p. 185)
F to Pay Respect - Riley Baerg (p. 198)
The Love that Never Was - Olivia Haller (p. 209)
The Getaway - Sydney Ball (p. 219)
Remember - Madison Gray (p. 226)



Poetry

Mason Daniels

Jamaica Station

It all started here
We, confused and scared, move
as we turn to, what seemed to be safe,
an assuring officer.

There is a simple, yet complicated question to be answered,
that is, "Where is home?" I know that we are far from home,
But home takes up a new meaning when in a new place
This place is what we will call home for the next 10 days

The officer, who seemed just as scared as we,
Told us that we shouldn't go to this place,
This is because it is not safe, he said that,

We shouldn't go because we will most definitely be robbed.

I don't know if it was the lack of sleep,
Or a crazy and confused mom,
We went, not knowing anything about this place,
and only knowing a name, Thomas Boyland.

Thomas Boyland

Thomas S. Boyland,
Thank you for the nights when the sky could cry onto you,
Your shoulder that supports so many,
and for the times when it was hard to walk, and quitting was near,
but you were always there supporting and guiding
Nothing about you was perfect or straight
The imperfection of your appearance made you
You are the best in Brooklyn.
People yell and fight on you, but you stand strong
Not only do you support the people in the city above,
but you comfort and protect the city underneath.
Inspiring how you can do all this.
You are not the safest, or the smartest, and certainly not the
prettiest,
but you are like a good friend, always there.
You serve almost effortlessly, the joy and love that has been shared
is amazing. It is crazy to think that you are only concrete,
just the pavement beneath my feet,
and so again, I thank you Thomas Boyland for a good time.

Bergen

Now after finding Thomas Boyland St. we take a turn on Bergen,
here there is a man waiting to greet us,

and to inform us about our new home
He is charming, and nice, but his name... I have since forgotten.

He was a short, plump, and dark; man who had lived here most of his
life
I could not understand why an officer should shame a place like this,
Yes maybe it smelt, and you don't want to touch anything because of
the dirt,
but being scared of this place is hard.

We are staying at the top floor of a three story apartment building,
(Which is small for the city)
but a long way for a tired family with heavy luggage,
and still empty handed I dreaded this hike at the end of every day.

Tired from a long day outside,
This place was like a peaceful sanctuary from the chaos outside,
Here we could rest, and embrace the experiences from the day,
Here we could laugh and cry, and no one but each other would know.

Rockaway

A first subway,
You wouldn't think that there would be a lot of people on the train,
at seven on a Saturday morning,
Back at home there is barely anyone awake at this time,
But not here in the "City that Never Sleeps."

At the station there didn't seem to be a lot of people,
but then moments before the train approached,
like a wave crashing over the stairs,
The people moved like water,
Trying to stay afloat in this sea of people was difficult.
When those train doors open they flooded in
Slipping into any little space left,
Drowning in people we had fifteen stops

You will only know the pain of being on a full train,
for fifteen stops if you experience it personally,
It is like the worst, tightest, car ride you've ever been on times ten
There are people touching every inch of your body,
and they don't smell that good either.
I realized that this would be every morning.

49th Street

What a sight night can bring,
A musk of smoke and body fluids sit above.
There is almost a music from the cars,
an elegance in the never ending horn.

Walking up the stairs a light turned on,
but not from the sun, from a bulb,
This light seemed brighter than the sun,
For it was not just one bulb, but millions.

It is hard to distinguish the rain and the tears,
struck in awe we stand amazed,
It is magnificent, the magnitude and beauty,
It is never ending.

It is known as the "Crossroads of the World"
You can feel the ground beneath shake like a drum
Only a tourist could be found here,
Times Square.

Bushwick (M17)

The bus, a whole new problem to be solved. Another gateway to a new
world, but the only difference here is that we can see the journey. We
go to a place of ultimate creativity. Nothing that you can find at
home. This Bushwick Collective is so bright, colorful, and authentic.
A masterpiece, each from a different creator, no space between, there
is no limit on their canvas.

Harlem

What a place, it is amazing. People say that it is dangerous, which it can be, but these are the places that can be the most memorable. The disrespect, and hate that these people receive is enough to make a person break, but this is why they lean on each other. There is always someone to greet you, and lift you up. Never feel scared in a place like this, just give respect and honor. The harmony, and unity, is breathtaking. Attending a service like something I have never seen before. There was a spirit in the air driving the people together.

Lexington Ave

The Park, the greens of New York,
The 'hustle and bustle' seems to stop,
A nuance from the rest of the world,
A quiet peace lingers here.

The trees sway in the wind
How beautiful diversity can be,
The trees competing with the buildings,
People around who know how to breath

When night falls,
This becomes a completely different place
The trees seem taller, and the wind louder
People emerge from the bushes,
and it may not be the safest place at night
In New York City

6th Ave.

What a show,
the synchronization of their legs should be impossible,
and the way they can move is mesmerizing,
A timeless show.

It has been going on for years,
A continual show showing to all,
It is not only the show though,
It is the spirit the room brings.

This holy and sacred place,
A church for all artists,
The stage waiting to be conquered
Making a dream reality.

This place hosting many,
It makes superstars,
Arguably the greatest talent comes from The Rockets.

Mulberry St.

Ancestors from before reside here,
Their smooth, yet powerful, voice
It can only be from an Italian
The way they yell moves me

The amazing aroma that comes from this place,
It is like no other, the greatest,
Men, who beg for a customer,
so much competition for a restaurant

What journeys they made to be here,
A perfect example of freedom,
They made this place a home
Never ceasing to express their love,

It is love in its purest form,
The rich and famous meet here,
With the poor and weak,
but they not only meet they create,
They fuse ideas and make a masterpiece.

Broadway

There is something special about this room,
because it, like the performers, were saved,
This theatre, that was run to the ground was ruined,
But it's spirit never died,
Even with walls torn; anything can be made whole.

This is why they came here,
To restore art to its original beauty.
Bringing it back to its amazing grandeur,
Much like the performers inside,

They too are moving up,
As they practice, study, and execute,
Repetition is key to their success,
It shows in the performance,

All this work for one show,
I can see the work it took,
But I will never understand the pain,
What a show though.

Ferry

	Just
	A small
	Ferry moves
Through	The nasty waters,
We are	Cold, wet and hungry
Not the	Right way to approach such
Solemn of	A place, and we don't only travel
To this place	Of freedom, but also to a place of pain,

Breathtaking, looking at the base of a statue, and looking into her eyes from afar, but yet you can still see pain from across the water, looking from the top of the Statue of Liberty, I can see Ellis Island, oh the suffering that happened for our freedom.

The Garden

Finally we made it,
I have been waiting for this day to come,
We have come to a place where the best performers play,
A room that is filled by some of the most powerful voices.

Madison Square Garden,
Solo shows, bands, comedians,
It is an iconic stage to express,
To show and spread the talents of the world,

To come and give entertainment to
New Yorkers, and tourists alike,
I have been dreaming of seeing a performance,
The one that I see today is amazing,

You see, it is a different entertainment,
The great game of basketball,
Such an iconic place we watch,
There is a different rhythm in the way they move.

Zoe Shelton

A Horse Given No Name

Deep in the myth of the night
I found you, and you were mine
Completely and totally broken down by dust
I will raise you up again and you'll be whole

Have you gotten used to sleeping outside?
Where we're going you'll be coated in cold.
I have no plans, but you'll carry me
Over every plain I choose to hold.

Can you feel the pressure of a gun on my hip?
Pressing into your broken side.
If you gallop a little bit faster,
We'll make it before morning light.

Do you think I'm good at this?

Although I can't steal or rob or bleed,
But I can lie and spit and call you names,
I will blame you for everything I need

You are the absolute worst.
I should've left you back in town!
I've exhausted every measure,
It seems futile to break you in now.

Now stop here beside the water,
I need to stretch my legs
I waste bullets shooting passing fish
and I've been let down by the gods again today

I should shoot you now,
But I cannot walk to the next corral
I am not good at stealing
I didn't steal you...I wouldn't know how

Where can I find the Cowboy I hear of
And how can I be his friend
I know I must play this lonely man's game
But I need someone to talk to until then

Do you believe all the stories you've been told?
Do you have any of them yourself?
Can you make me the formidable Cowboy
That lives in spoken word on an empty saloon shelf?

Are you listening to what I'm saying?
Well you're not listening at all
I became a corpse of what I hoped I would be
When we exited that thick bitter fog

I'm sorry for dropping ashes onto your tired shoulder
The night is bleary and I cannot see
Maybe this life is not what I need
Maybe this isn't for me

We will park here for the night

Under the moon and its empty glow
I no longer find it comforting
Is it the same moon I see from home?

Tomorrow we will find a way
To sharpen any of my skills
Maybe I will save a town over
I have nothing, but you and my own will

I apologize for any hurt I've caused you
But we both know I won't change
I am the myth you're burdened with
Out here, on this lonely range.

Bright Boy

Bright sailor, You are shining out upon the sea and I hate you. I
smashed a bottle against the hull of your new bride before you left
and the glass shattered around my toes.
Please sailor, will you come back to me.
I do not think of you as any great thing
When will you understand?

Bright sailor, you should come home soon,
because you know how angry I am with you,
is this how you want to end things?
Are you ever going to listen to me?
I hear you talking about me over the sea
I suppose you like making a fool out of me
When will you return?

Bright Sailor I've heard of your tales from beyond the docks
I enjoy the idea of a tiger in your boat and how one of these days its
going to swallow you whole
And you'll return as a shell of what you used to be, with your pretend
gods dragging around your feet.
I'm positive that would make me happy.
My friends, they miss their sailors too
But no one has been missed quite like you.
My sailor, you are the biggest fool.

Bright sea, the water is shimmering
And I watch the albatross cast down from the sky
I've been waiting for your boat since the sun came up
And I'll be waiting till the night is nigh

Water, only water, its all around
They tell me horror stories on shore
I guess I do not want you to sink all alone
I'd rather your boat capsize outside our hometown port

The cut of your jib isn't faring to well with the continuous slapping
of the waves,
That should be enough to make you stay,
When you left you were my hero, when you return you'll be going gray.

Bright Boy, I'm leaving tomorrow just like you.
I'm leaving and I don't know when I'm coming home.

Bright sailor I will stay if you agree to just one thing,
When you get home you will marry me and forget the open sea.

Powerful Man

The night rolls on and you and I are alone again
Bumping over the water on your sturdy spine
The lightening casts itself over the edge of what I can see,
but the world goes on around it.

Below is the rattling of the ghosts of our friends
That were floating facedown in the waves
They do not like when I talk about them
From the cracks in the slats of wood they call my name

In my most broken you were still whole,
Giving all of yourself to me.
As I run to the bow you are fighting,
Fighting for me against the waves of the surging sea

You are my only bride
And I'll save pieces of you all my life.
Building you anew again
White-knuckling your brass rails for balance.
You will catch me forever,
You will carry me,
And I will give you nothing,
But the smacking of the sea on your side.

Red Sun Sea

Once my wife dreamed of the ocean
Of rocking on its waves.
I asked her if she wished to move,
She won't tell me to this day.

I know we live far inland,
And the earthquakes rock us rough,
But I've been telling her we'll get used to it,
I'm telling her it will make us tough.

I once took her to the ocean
After my final battle was done.
I didn't like the vast water scape,
She asked if we could take a plunge.

It was cold under the water,
So cold with the pushing tide.
But she held my hand steadfast,
As I twisted under the rippling lights.
The electric current groaned
With the weight of the noiseless sounds,
Of swirling fish and castaways
And sharp rocks that covered the ground.

I haven't returned to the ocean
I'm too scared I won't come back.
I was trained to leave it all behind
I left her behind in fact.
I lost many friends at sea
They live beneath the shore

She was kind enough to move out here
So that there's only water when it pours

I've been fostering a pearl deep inside my chest,
It's rolling around at night
And It's beginning to feel like a needle that pricks
My organs around inside
I fear I will not get it out
I'm praying it'll be golden someday.
And this growing pearl in my tight chest
I want to give it to her someday

I'm trying to build up the courage
To buy a boat and show her the world
But I think once outside the nearest port
I'll faint at the slightest concern

When I was last out at sea
They told me to be brave.
The sun should've been high,
But the clouds in the sky
fogged up as far as we could see
We were hit within minutes
By the red flag and her glowing teeth.
The airplanes above shot down like fireworks
When they fell they erupted into the sea.

So understand
Why I fear the ocean,
And the red sun flying high.
I cannot hurt anyone else
I cannot have sea foam act as guide.

My wife was packing up our car
When I arrived home for the day
I swore she was deserting me
She promises we won't overstay
She drove me to the ocean
Two states over and I knew.
She stopped at a quiet beach

Somewhere out on the coast
My fears they rose up to my chest
Now I think they're in my throat

She struggled with the bags
As I stood silently by the car
My heart was beating awfully fast
I think I might be seeing stars

The water's glittering blues and whites as far as I can see
The sky is moving faster than I ever though it should
I'm scared it will come raining down
Leaving me the dark for good

I pulled myself down to the sand
And again down to the edge
I do not hate the feeling
I'm more distracted by what's overhead

But I do not like the waves
They are violent, crashing down
And when they slap the rocks enough
They make a dreadful sound

My wife is gone to the waves
I'll never see her again
She's floating out and I'm dumbstruck here
What will I tell her friends?
But there she is still alive and well
Dancing in the sea
She begs me to join her
I tell her that's too much to ask of me

So she sighs heavy and lays back
Becoming one with beach
I whisper prayers to myself again
'Praise God and pray for me'

I made a streamline for the water
Just like the good old days

I ignore the call of my old friends
Begging me to stay
I stand ankle deep in the water
And I feel nothing but dread
She asks me to come out farther
She asks me to try again

I do not know if we'll move to the ocean
Or if the desert is right for us
I do know that everything I've lost
The ocean gave back to me at once

I still ache for all my friends
And they've all been gone for years
but I was right to tag along
And drown out my long had fears.

No, No

They do not like me back at camp, where the guns are pointed inward
at the mahjong tables and the food is caked with dust instead of rice
flower.

My friends called me a traitor and scribbled two letters two times
across their cards

Mom said they bombed home good and well, she says this with a sigh.
Dad told me I must fight for this country, fight with every will to
survive.

I did not want to go that much, but I thought it'd be better than a
chain link fence

Where everyone I've ever held close lives in a series of barracks
And we're all stacked up, just how the guards say they like us

They do not like us here at camp, they call us names
And spit at the sun
They condemn us for being uprooted from the red origin
I think they've been to more times than us.

I'm scared of going to war
And I'm more scared of going home

Does home mean Idaho barracks
Or a ransacked Seattle room.
But moreover, what will they say
When they see me again,
Will I go to war and prove myself
But after lose all my friends?

Now we're in a foreign land and I have no idea what to do
My captain says we're here
And here is nothing, can it be true?
Here is another camp
Much different than my old
Here is a camp where I can feel
The pain seeping into souls.
Here we are alone in this city,
Where not one person seems to be whole

As we break down the doors
It seems that nothing is alright
'Here, you're free!' My captain screams
And he yells it with all of his might.

I walk through a quiet camp, too quiet with its pain.
And I begin to cry so hard, my chest, it feels so strange.
I see the face of my friends, stumbling out from their small beds,
I see my mother cry out in pain.

But back at home I think we're lucky
Although there's only dry land far as we can see
Even though I can't help my friends, even if they now hate me.

We stand outside the camp, once all our work is done
Here we are, my terrified brothers
Roosevelt decided we're worthy sons.
When we get back into the states, they tell me where to go.
'Back to Minidoka' they yell, I guess I'm headed home.
And when I return to camp, the ground, it's lined with snow,
My mother is here to greet me,

My friends, again, say no.

But here I will stand tall, and duck into my barrack with pride
The war can't last all that more,
Soon enough we'll be let outside.

Be the Cowboy

There he stands
In the entrance of an old saloon
His gun held high, it pierces the air
Acting as if he hadn't created the mess that stood

I hate how his lips pull across his teeth
He starts all these fights
Shooting down his foe unfair
Then leaving in the dead of night

Even his horse is mean
She bit me with all her might
When my brother tried to set her free,
just to ruin that cowboy's life

So here he goes again,
Standing face-to-face with smaller men
No concern for the blood he sheds
Staring down those around, whose life have no expense

What are you looking for you awful cowboy?
You know we want you gone!
Can't you see you've hurt this town
How many times will you do us wrong?

He laughs quite loud and closes his eyes
And again he draws too quick
He's slinks into the dust, unscathed
But he'll be back in the crack of a whip

I tell my father about the Cowboy

He sighs and turns back to read
'We do not need to kill him,' he says
'We just need a better cowboy than he!'

I want to be that Cowboy
And protect this ransacked town
But how do I become a Cowboy,
Other than stealing and lying around?

The next morning I left my home and my brother and I went to the
ranch
We watched men throw bales of hay
This is not what we envisioned at last
So we went down to the saloon
And sneaked into through the swinging doors
We watched men sit around lazily
'This isn't what cowboys are' I scorn

We trudge back to our home, and the sun is going down
When we get to our door my brother begins to cry
'What's your problem!' I say with a tired frown
'Can't you see we'll die soon!' He sniffles and wipes his nose
'It's only a matter of time before the Cowboy arrives home,'
I pondered that idea, but I think the Cowboy's are already here.
I will be that Cowboy, I will not hate or strike in fear.

Hannah Lynch

Beaches

Barefoot in lands far from my home,
Earth touches Earth in those realms unknown.

Heaven's waves whisper against my ears
Lost anamnesis from some distant years
Nauseating and repulsive, a terminus of loam
Reminding me of direction, wherever I roam.
The weary bottoms of my feet are torn by the sand
And sea goddess hair courses through my hand;
As I walk eternally toward some distant land,
My final destination, a place unplanned.

Those innumerable grains falling gracefully to the ground,
Unnamed souls lost without a single sound;
Crawling through my fingers in an effort to escape,
The imperfections in my hands, they tirelessly take shape;
I will myself to hold onto every rough grain
The endeavor to confine them I squander in vain;
For though their presence in my wounds bring me pain,
Those multitudinous, sharp grains I cannot retain.

Those longing winds exhaled from the mouth of the sea,
Speaking languages not known by most, yet familiar to me,
Yet no seaside town, no docks, no lighthouse, no quay
Pass below, beside, or behind me on my journey:
For all that remains in me are those lands of distant reaches,
Those unquieted oceans, and their oppositely voiceless beaches,
With their vast expanses of desert sand,
Not telling the distance to sea or land,
With darkness falling upon my blue ocean bay,
and memories returning of what was taken away;
The seductive sunset falls in a slow burn span,
Slipping from heaven like small crystals through my hand,
And waves rushing across the earth, loosing memories strand by
strand
Never ceasing to remind me of all of my lost grains of sand

A Scattered Seed

I am not the dirt beneath your shoes
Nor the sun in your sky

No more strength I have to lose
As you finally pass by

Do not come here trying to plant your seed
For I promise you will not grow.
Your bad habits I will not feed
Since I've found the strength to tell you *no*.

You will not claim my ground
Nor kill my growing crop
For you are no longer around
And now the taking can stop.

You cultivated me in shallow soul
In the nighttime, never to see day.
But then my fruit began to spoil,
And my foliage began to decay.
To you, I remained unfailingly loyal,
Even as I withered away,
And even though I began to toil,
Still, you willed me to stay.

Close together as we bore fruits,
My devout trust you did acquire.
Sucking the life from my roots,
Turning my stable ground to quagmire.
With my water, you grew taller
Your foliage overshadowing me below;
Causing me to become ever smaller
As my branches ceased to grow.

Finally, I want you to know;
I have one thing to tell you, I must:
For you I do not grow,
And I won't sit on your shelf, collecting dust

Grace Georgitsis

From When I Was

Ta Dákrya Tis Afrodítis (The Tears of Aphrodite)

My great grandmother was fourteen

When the delicate string of pearls piled into her palm,
Palms washed of residue built up from a long day in the kitchen,
Washed the steam accumulated from the boiling pot atop a barely
kindled fire,
Cool like ice from the water of the island's only stream,
Both of her slender hands were needed to contain the necklace's
length,
Both eyes squinted to comprehend its beauty,
Elegantly it glistened,
Stark white against her deep olive skin,
'Ta dákrya tis afrodítis,' her mother's aging throat croaked,
Withered thumb stroking her daughter's youthful cheek.

That night she donned the necklace,
It hung cool against her sweat glistened chest,
And snaked against her rosy cheek,
As she laid her head to rest,
It absorbed the oppressive heat,
A burden she had endured her entire life,
She baked like a brick of clay in the Mediterranean sun,
Saved by pearls molded of sea foam,
Or so the story went,
A product of the only escape she'd ever known,
From the dry air scratching against her lungs,
From the warm breeze hitting her in the face,
And so it granted her a restful sleep otherwise unheard of,
In the warm Kefalonian night.

Her neck glowed in the light of the moon,
The pearls were a sponge collecting its silver drip,
They had seen her age too soon,
Watching her stare emptily across the medics tent,
Oblivious to the blood which caked her fragile hands,
There were no streams on the battlefield in which to wash them,
Pain screamed at her from surrounding cots,
She had long forgotten to scrub her uniform,
Now indifferent to the smudges of dirt and streaks of rusty brown,
It's innocent white has been saturated with tragedy,

And yet her pearls continued to glisten,
As each night with an aching precision,
Akin to that which she used in surgery,
One by one she scrubbed them,
Determined that the Tears of Aphrodite be kept pure.

Grandma's China

I was seven,
Trying with all my young strength,
Reaching with all my young might,
Traversing the dining room table,
As I set the places for dinner that night,
My grandmother smiled behind me,
Her kind eyes studied my precision,
As they watched me place the ornately engraved forks in the wrong
order,
And out of the eight wine glasses we needed,
I entirely forgot a quarter,
We weren't having any meal of extravagance,
There was no need for such formalities,
But in watching my jumping excitement at the notion of helping,
She let me ignore these dull realities,
Giving me full access to the dining set,
And once each piece was nicely laid,
I reached for that looming corner cabinet,
It's thick oak walls and fragile glass doors intimidated my tiny
frame,
My trembling hands struggled to turn the key,
Fearful of the cabinet's fame,
For locked away was grandma's china,
The china I had enjoyed so many important meals upon,
The china which had at one point housed all of her famous dishes,
It's blue and white rims treasured in my family,
Though certainly not for long.

Clumsy legs lifted me up high,
Clumsy fingers grasped the china,
And clumsy ears missed grandma's sigh,
So as I turned and tripped,
I wasn't sure why.

With a crash my heart shattered across the floor,
And looking down to it I saw instead the fragments of the china,
I had missed what grandma had seen,
And when I discovered it I wasn't too keen,
I glared down at the burdensome dog,
That malevolent lump that had tangled my feet,
Sending me askew with such precious items in my hand,
And across the floor I jumped like a frog,
Scooping shards of glass from beneath the seats,
My head stayed low,
My anxieties high,
If only I'd registered grandmother's sigh,
Shards of white and blue adorned the scratched wood floor,
And drops of red were present my scratched denim thigh,
In her heart she felt my defeat,
Trembling as I tried not to cry.

Fragile arms enclose my fragile sadness,
And I was shocked to hear,
A gentle voice mending my fragmented sorrow,
"Don't fret over flea market china, my dear."

Cigarettes and Coffee

I was eight,
Tangled in unfamiliar sheets,
And the smell of cheap french perfume,
I was roused by the piercing scent of cigarettes and coffee,
As it clung relentlessly to my father's threadbare sweater,
Long had my mother begged him to abandon that old blue sweater,
Her senses offended by its pungent scent,
Haunting her with the ghosts of many cigarettes past,
The same sweater whose sleeve I gripped tight in my small hand as we
wandered foreign streets,
She too urged him to shave his scruff,
The same scruff which scratched my cheek when he carried me to the
subway station late at night,
And she rolled her eyes when he stopped at a dingy cafe,
Where he enjoyed another cigarette,
Another cup of coffee,

And I hoped to all hope that he'd never rid himself of that old
sweater,
Never rid me of its scent,
Because to this day I can help but think of rundown cafes and long
walks at night,
At the scent of cigarettes and coffee.

Role Model

I was nine,
Watching you apply makeup on our hotel room floor,
Following close behind as you bat away leagues of adoring men,
Entranced by the elegance of your apathy,
By the blank stare that met their enchanted eyes,
And later by your unfiltered exasperation,
By the scrunch of your nose and the waving of your hands,
By the unladylike actions made by the best example I had of a lady.

My innocent eyes studied your natural beauty,
Waiting for the day it would be me,
The gentle curve of your nose,
The fall of straight hair down your back,
My adoration ignoring your occasional immaturity,
"You've always resembled your cousin,"
Incites a moment of pride,
Grateful for your guiding presence,
Always a step ahead of me,
Teaching me to handle the irritations of our family,
Demonstrating to me an air of acceptance and grace,
With your tight lips and knowing glances at the dinner table,
I mimicked your gentle chuckles and slight eye rolls,
And together we quietly listened to the boisterous men ramble on and
on,
And together we kept quiet the truth,
Holding within ourselves a reality they couldn't see,
You've acted as an outlet for the resulting frustrations,
And I'd like to think I've acted as the same for you.

By the Ankles

I was ten,

Giving hugs like candy at the door on Christmas Eve,
Throwing my tiny frame thoughtlessly into my family's warm
embraces,
Excitement knit clearly into my innocent features,
Eyes wandered the room in a daze,
Taking in the holiday scene,
But as they fell upon the large figure in the corner,
They dropped to the floor,
Hoping silently and stupidly that he had not noticed me,
But knowing deep down what was about to happen,
My uncle smiled smugly at my fear.

I inched tentatively forward,
Arms held close at my side,
A weak attempt to guard my torso,
And though I took every precaution to protect myself,
Shuffling across the small living room,
I didn't want to hug him,
But my good manners taught me better,
So with bony arms shaking,
I reached out to hug him,
Soon my offering of peace was betrayed,
And I was met with my worst fear,
Tickles.

I fell immediately to the floor,
My body was racked with fits of giggles,
My lungs gasping for breath,
And my stubborn young self was even brought to beg,
Pleading with him to stop this tickling madness.

What a fool I was,
I should've known the second he agreed to stop,
Eyebrows sitting maliciously atop his head,
Evil eyes gleaming at me,
That he had other plans,
And suddenly I was hanging upside down,
Tiny ankles gripped delicately by the baseball mitts he called hands,
The lights of the Christmas Tree swinging smoothly across my vision,
Whoosh,

My hair reached all the way to the floor,
And somehow my screams did not reach his ears,
For he stopped only when my mother ran in tugging on his giant ears,
I dropped to the floor,
Sprawled beneath the tree I turned around and stuck my tongue out at
him,
I really showed him.

Tiropeta

I was twelve,
When I was taught the recipe that took my mother so long to secure,
Grandmother's closest guarded secret,
Her Tiropeta (known to the kids as 'cheese pie'),
Crafted and perfected time and time again,
Enjoyed at each family gathering,
It was the dish I grew up on,
And it is the dish I will always grow with.

It was Christmas Eve when she taught me,
I didn't realize it's importance at the time,
I just wanted cheese pie,
And I wanted to make mine just right,
I wanted grandma to be proud,
Never have I so carefully studied anything,
As I studied grandmother's frail hands as they folded the fragile
phyllo,
Pouring indefinite amounts of unsecured ingredients into the
filling,
And however diligently I watched,
I could never pinpoint its recipe in exact.

Again and again I asked her,
Begging for the recipe,
Yearning for measurements,
Wanting to perfectly replicate her cheese pie,
And when greeted with that knowing smile I realized,
There's no way I could,
Her cheese pie would always hers,
And mine would always be mine,
It was a generational recipe,

It changed as we did,
But it's roots would always remain with us.

The Tears of Aphrodite

I was fourteen,

When the delicate string of pears piled into my palm,

Cradled in the pit of my hands,
Its beauty cradled in the adoration of my eyes,
Unable to understand its elegance,
It shined and shimmered in my hands,
'The tears of Aphrodite,' my great grandmother croaked,
Perched at the side of her creaky old bed,
With her shades drawn tight,
The only light cast by the black and white movies rolling silently in
the corner,
Her withered thumb stroking my cheek,
Smiling at a memory I did not yet hold,
And she could never get back.

My mother would not let me wear it,
Saying it is worth too much,
So it was placed within a golden box,
Safe from grabbing hands and harmful touch,
And kept in a nook beneath my bed,
Where it would remain for years to come.

Suffering late one summer night,
A casualty of the war in my head,
With the moon's slender arms reaching through the window,
I felt a pull beneath my bed,
A string tugging silently upon my breaking heart,
Dragged me to the floor with a start,
Hands stretched wide beneath the bead,
Knees red against the rough carpet,
My searching fingers found the box,
And the string on my heart cut its slack,
Greeted with the playful shimmer of its soft aging wood,
As though it was painted with moonlight,

The pearls called to me through the heart shaped hole in the box's lid,
The Tears of Aphrodite had been shed,
And how was I to know that it was me who shed them?



Fantasy

Johnathan Pascual

The Wanderer

The little priestess, Luna, joins the adventurer's guild in the big city she recently moved into, she is also given a necklace with a bronze medal to show her rank. Usually the job for a priestess on adventurers is to perform supporting miracles that will aid her allies in battle, it comes down to healing, buffing her allies strength, or casting wards of protection. She is eager to get out into the world and is approached by a fellow group of the lowest ranks, which is bronze. The groups plan is to defeat a group of goblins who have attacked a nearby village and kidnapped some villagers. Their little group consist of a fire mage named Aela, a fighter named Camila, and a swordsman named Roggvir, so Luna is a great fit towards their party as she is a priestess. Luna is pressured into joining them on their contract as the group of newbies brag about how easy it is to defeat these small goblins. Luna didn't ask many questions as the group was in a hurry, so she didn't have a single clue to what these people are capable of. The guild secretary, Lucy, is very worried as they set off quickly with very little to no preparation with Lucy knowing goblins shouldn't be taken lightly.

As they arrive at the cave, where the goblins are nested, they see a totem with a skull on it as they enter. The group doesn't think much of it, they just thought it would have hinted that goblins are inside. They venture deeper into the dark cave. They get about halfway through the cave and see the same totem but now the cave splits into two different routes. And as Camila and Roggvir went ahead to go scouting off for the left side, goblins came in from behind and were beginning to attack them, they were confused as they saw nothing as they were entering the cave but it turns out they were hiding in the shadows. The skull totem was placed purposefully as a distraction so that the goblins can jump humans or anything coming into their cave.

Fire mage Aela casts a spell killing goblins about to attack them, burning them to ashes. Luna was waiting for Aela to cast more spells to fend off the goblins as Camila and Roggvir are running back to them to help. But it turns out Aela was only able to cast a single miracle and is now helpless. Thankfully Roggvir was able to jump in and slice at the goblin before it was able to get its hands onto Aela.

As Roggvir was doing his best to kill the goblins coming for their group more keep on funneling out from the inner part of the cave. But as Roggvir was fighting off the goblins, the worst was still yet to come. Roggvir was fighting the goblins and as he was swinging, his sword hit the ceiling of the cave and went flying out of his hands. As he was disarmed the group of goblins swarmed him and killed him. Camila and Aela tried their best to fight them but there was too many goblins. Camila died and Aela was poisoned to the point where there is no saving her. But as the goblins were about to attack Luna, something came in and killed the goblin that was close to hitting Luna. Luna looked over and saw a man suited in iron armor from head to toe. And as Luna looked at him she noticed his diamond necklace, this knight is the highest rank you can be in the guild.

"W-who are you," Luna asks the mysterious man.

"They call me The Wanderer," replied the mysterious knight.

"I have to kill this girl to end her suffering," said the mysterious knight.

"No! Maybe we can save her," said Luna

"I'm sorry but there's too much poison in her veins now, she cannot be saved," said the knight.

"Alright sir. May you rest in peace Aela," said Luna.

"How many more miracles do you have left, perhaps you can aid me greatly in this fight," asked The Wanderer.

"I have two more sir," said Luna.

"Mind if I ask what miracles they are?" said The Wanderer.

"I can cast heal and holy light sir," replied Luna.

"All right, that is great. I will set up a tripwire trap right here in the split of the cave, it will come in handy if we need to retreat. Let us venture deeper for now though. There is a goblin shaman in this cave, you can easily tell with the skull at the entrance and at the fork. But rookies don't think much of it. We need to clear out this cave until it is empty," said The Wanderer.

"Understood, just let me know when you need me sir," said Luna.

"Come here, if we cover ourselves in their blood it will cover our scent so that we can have the upperhand as we start this next fight," said The Wanderer.

"I am completely against this sir, but I'll do it so I can be of help," hesitantly said Luna.

As they venture deeper into the cave, The Wanderer wiping out the goblins with ease, they find where the shaman is located.

"Here we are. Can you cast a holy light before I go in?" asked The Wanderer.

"Yes sir... Oh merciful earth mother, please give us strength and bless us, help those lost in darkness. Holy light!" chanted Luna.

The huge group of goblins were all blinded by this bright light. And as the spell was casted The Wanderer rushed in killing the goblins and even wiping out their shaman. A bigger goblin, called a hobgoblin, came out of nowhere striking at The Wanderer but he was quick to react. The Wanderer told Luna to fall back and as they got to the split in the cave Luna and The Wanderer jumped over the tripwire. The Wanderer told Luna to cast her holy light again. When she did the goblins fell into the trap and from there it was an easy clean up for The Wanderer.

As Luna and The Wanderer head back towards the guild Luna asked The Wanderer some questions.

"So what do you do usually?" said Luna.

"I kill goblins," replied The Wanderer.

"Is that it?" said Luna.

"Yeah, I also hunt down goblin nests so I can eradicate it, I take contracts from the guild to slay goblins, and I go around cleaning this world of the foul goblins so I can avenge my sister," said The Wanderer.

"Weird flex but okay," said Luna.

The truth behind The Wanderer though is that he hunts down goblins until there are none left because of his dark childhood past. As The Wanderer was young he had an older sister which he looked up to a lot but one day she was kidnapped by goblins and was never seen again

after an attack on his village. The Wanderer was left all alone since then because his younger sister moved to the city for a good education at a young age.

They finally return to the guild and immediately Lucy the guild secretary noticed that Luna had returned with The Wanderer and that the rest of the squad was missing. Lucy just assumed the worst, in which she was correct, and paid her respects. The Wanderer takes up another contract from the board to eliminate goblins. Luna wants to accompany The Wanderer in his quest. The Wanderer allows her if she is really down to go. Luna had just purchased chainmail to put beneath her clothes so that she is more protected while going on their adventures. With a months worth of the usual goblin contracts Luna had ranked up to the next guild rank of silver and has since learned a new miracle in the process. She had learned a miracle called protection. It works as a shield to block incoming damage but also allows her allies to shoot things such as arrows through it and blocks out enemies from getting close to them.

There is an odd group of adventures that consists of a one thousand year old high elf archer named Ayrenn (which is quite young for a high elf, it would probably be a young adult as a human), a dwarf mage named Sadryn, and a lizardman summoner named Milos. This odd group has been looking for The Wanderer, they have heard many songs about The Wanderer from bards in taverns that they have been to. They came barging into the guild, bickering at each other, and just started to yell at Lucy for if she knew of The Wanderers whereabouts. Lucy doesn't pick it up immediately about who they are asking about because in high elf their way of tongue is different so Ayrenn was asking if there was someone named "Orcbolg" in the guild, which roughly meant goblin killer. Sadryn tried correcting her and asked if there was someone named "Bread-cutter," but finally Milos figured it out that most people call him "The Wanderer," Lucy then points them in his direction. The odd group looks at him and questions if it is really him. The Wanderer is a noble man but doesn't have amazing shiny armor such as the other Diamond ranked members. Even the other Diamond ranked members look down on him just because he only kills little goblins, they don't see him worthy as a diamond. But the odd group approaches The Wanderer and asks if they may have a meeting with him. They proceed with the meeting and the odd group talks about the return of The King of the Demons but The Wanderer is

disinterested immediately since it doesn't involve goblins. The odd group gets frustrated with him as the return of the Demon King could mean all hell breaks loose once again, but to The Wanderer, goblins are worst and are the top priority. The Demon King was defeated once before but that old group of heroes has holes in it as a few died in battle. They come to an agreement as to where this odd group just joins The Wanderer and Luna on their quests but if the Demon King appears one day they all have to join the battle.

They take up a big goblin quest, specifically asking for The Wanderer, where many people have gone missing. This goblin nest is different than anything that The Wanderer had seen. This goblin nest is located underground in a dungeon while usual nests are above ground in abandoned buildings or just a nest built from scratch. After they had wiped the two goblins that were on watch duty they enter the dungeon. On the walls were even some hieroglyphics of some sort and had pictures of goblins on the wall as well. As they traverse deeper they come to a point where they either go left or right.

"We don't know much about this place so we must be careful on which way we pick," said The Wanderer.

"It's alright Bread-cutter, it appears that the floor to the left is more worn than the path to the right so we can assume more enemies come in and out through the left so we should check out the right side first to be safe," said Sadryn.

"Good thinking short man," teased Ayrenn.

As they took the right path they came to this one room that was a struggle to get open.

"By the divines! What have they done?! I can't even look" gasped Ayrenn.

"They tortured this high elf, she's on the brink of death," said Milos.

"K-kill..." muttered the high elf.

"Understood," said The Wanderer.

"Wait! You can't do it Orcbolg," yelled Ayrenn.

The whole group thought that The Wanderer was going to kill the high elf to put her out of her misery, as he had done before when he first encountered Luna. There was a goblin hiding right behind her about

to kill her and jump the squad but lucky enough The Wanderer was just in time.

"What did you think I was going to do?" said The Wanderer.

"My heart stopped for a moment," said Luna with a sigh of relief.

"It be like that sometimes," said Ayrenn with a great sigh as well.

After that whole misunderstanding, the tortured high elf with the remaining strength in her, she pointed towards a bag off to the side before passing out. Located inside that bag was a map of the huge dungeon. Milos summoned a bone warrior to safely carry out the high elf all the way to her homeland. After acquiring the map they proceed deeper into the dungeon. They come across this huge ogre that is one of the spawns from the Demon King. They get into a big fight with this powerful ogre. They are fighting really hard but this ogre is a strong enemy. The ogre casts a huge fireball that burns up the big room that they are in from one corner to the other and Luna casts her protection miracle in the shape of a bubble. She has a hard time keeping the spell maintained throughout the burn of the fireball. She faints as the ogres attack fades away. The rest of them continue to fight but it's hard to budge the ogre. The Wanderer has to pull out a trick up his sleeve. The Wanderer pulls out a scroll from his back satchel as he ran at the ogre full speed. He opened the scroll and water rushed out. The water under the most pressure at the sea floor had been swiftly unleashed, like a blade. This one time use scroll allows you to escape from anywhere in an instant, it is like a lifeline in battle, yet The Wanderer used it as a last resort weapon. Everyone was in shock as the huge ogre was cut in half. After that intense battle they take a quick break before they continued. Once they got some energy back they go even deeper so that this whole place can be cleared out. They come to this huge arched door and see another person that had been tortured. As they walked closer to the person, they see the hair come off their head and fall to the floor. The person had been dead already for a while. The doors shut behind them before they could react. It was sealed shut. Poison gas had began to enter the room through the holes in the wall.

"I had a feeling this would happen," said The Wanderer.

"Don't worry you all just try to hold your breath as much as you can while I try to patch these holes in the walls up," said Sadryn.

"Move those legs faster midget! It sounds like a horde of goblins are trying to break through this door," said Ayrenn.

"If the door falls we're going to need that protection Luna," said The Wanderer.

"Yes sir," said Luna.

Sadryn was barely able to patch the last hole up in time before the gas was able to do a lot of damage. But shortly after the door was about to burst open.

"It's about to open, get ready for a fight everyone," said Milos.

"I'm putting protection up now! Oh merciful earth mother, please protect us, the weak with the powers of the earth. Protection!" chanted Luna.

The huge wall of protection went up in place of the door as it opened. Ayrenn immediately starting taking shots with her bow to pick off some of the goblins. Sadryn started throwing his magical rocks killing goblins as well. But after a minute there is still a ton of goblins, way too many to count, and Luna's protection is wearing off. The Wanderer and Milos get ready for the close action. Luna's miracle shatters and she falls to her knees. All of the goblins flood into the room, even a goblin champion enters the room. A rare goblin big in stature that has lived twice as long as the small goblins. They all do their best to fight them off but it seems to be too much. Ayrenn and Sadryn get pushed into one of the corners as they are fighting. Milos, trying to help The Wanderer with the goblins on him. The goblin champion heads over to Luna. Luna is tired to the point where she can't even get up to run. The Wanderer notices and tries to rush over to save her but then gets hit by the goblin champion that sends him flying across the room and smashing into the wall. Luna screams as she sees The Wanderer cough up blood and not get up. She has always seen The Wanderer as this unstoppable goblin slayer but she now sees him on the edge of defeat. The goblin champion picks up Luna and attempts to choke her. The Wanderer slowly gets up, and limps his way over to Luna. With the remaining strength The Wanderer has he picks up the hair of the person who was tortured to death, leaps up onto the goblin champion's back and begins to choke it.

"Assassins in the past used to use hair to choke people out! They said it is one of the best methods!" said The Wanderer.

The goblin champion dies and falls over but The Wanderer falls over as well with no more strength. Ayrenn, Sadryn, and Milos were able to kill off the small goblins but had many scars. After this huge fight they return to the guild as soon as they can, so that they all may get healed. In that fight Luna had seen another side of The Wanderer that she had not seen before. Even Ayrenn and Sadryn, they are always bickering between each other but they got each others back in the end where it all matters. The next day, they are chilling in the guilds medical room talking about the whole thing that went down. After this huge contract they get paid good money and all become closer as a group.

"Whoa maybe that whole contract was worth it! We were paid really well," said Ayrenn.

"You weren't acting like that the other night. You were on the ground screaming for help. You're lucky I was there or else I probably could have double the money I got right now haha!" said Sadryn.

"We all did well out there!" said Luna.

"I really cannot believe we made it out, and to think there could be more places overrun with goblins," said Milos.

"Everyone listen. This has to be something leading up to another thing way bigger. That contract was assigned by the one and only Bella. She is the sword maiden that had helped defeat the Demon King the last time it had showed up. If she is asking for our help this is getting serious," said The Wanderer.

"I told you the King of the Demons is on the come up," said Ayrenn.

"Yes, I understand that but it doesn't involve me unless there is goblins for me to slay. If there is goblins then I am more than ready to fight," said The Wanderer.

With this, things are just beginning, the big battle is ahead of them and it's not the Demon King. Bella had a dream of high goblin activity somewhere and she knew it wasn't just a random dream, it has to be something.

It turns out that a group of four powerful adventurers had defeated the Demon King before anything too serious happened. The group of four were promoted to the rank Hero. Only five others had achieved this rank in the past. But as many adventures were cautious about the

Demon King something else had come up from the shadows. As The Wanderer did his daily patrols on his country side home just outside the city in which he had been living for half a year now with his younger sister. Usually nothing is damaged or there is no signs of goblin trails, the most he had seen was just weather damage to some fences. But as he came to the far side of the field he came across something he had never seen before. Thousands of goblin footprints. They were probably there the other night scouting the area. The Wanderer knew exactly what was happening. It has to be the Goblin Lord. They have to be planning an attack on the city soon if they are targeting the area of his home outside the city. The Wanderer has to act quick.

As dawn came The Wanderer set out immediately to the guild. The Wanderer asks for everyone's attention and asks for all of the guilds help. The adventurers did not want to help at first as they just see The Wanderer as the odd quiet one obsessed with goblins. So one of them asks.

"What's in it for us? Why should we even help you?" said an adventurer.

"I will give you everything of mine. All my possessions, my money, and even my life," said The Wanderer.

"Whoa, chill out dude, I didn't think this meant that much to you. Fine, my group and I will lend you a hand. But buy me a drink once all this is done," said the adventurer.

The guild secretary Lucy came out running with a whole bag of contracts. She came out to help The Wanderer to get more people to join this big fight.

"One gold coin for every goblin that you kill!" said Lucy.

And immediately the entire guild was on board. One single gold coin is already a lot of money. With tons of goblins slain at the hands of The Wanderer he has a lot of experience and comes up with a well organized plan to fight the attack of the goblins. The night of the attack of goblins, many adventurers were positioned ready to fight. The Wanderer was right. The first wave of goblins flooded out of the trees. Hundreds of them. But everything went as planned. The Wanderer had said that goblins are used to ambushing but are not used to getting ambushed. A wizard and Sadryn casted a sleep spell

knocking out all the goblins with shields and from there many adventurers jumped out from the tall grass they were hiding in and began to fight. The second wave had goblins on riding on the back of wolves but again The Wanderer had planned ahead for if something like this happened. They allowed the goblins to rush them but as soon as they got close enough and the wolves jumped at them to attack, the group of adventurers each raised up wooden spikes and the wolves jumped straight into them. And from there they just killed the goblins as they weren't prepared for such a thing. The Goblin Lord probably felt shocked and sent out the group of hobgoblins, orges, and goblin champions. All these big goblins are two to three times the size of a normal human. This was the final wave of goblins that The Wanderer had predicted. Honestly, this fight was just a fight of brute force. The diamond ranked veteran adventurers and the some of the platinum ranked adventurers were the ones that dealt with this. It was a little bit of a struggle but in the end they prevailed. The Wanderer's strategy was well thought out and worked almost perfectly, they even had backup plans if things went south but luckily they did not need it.

But as this huge fight is going on The Wanderer was doing work in the backline of the goblin horde. He went to the cave which they came out of and was killing goblins there. As the guild adventurers almost won the fight the Goblin Lord began to retreat as it didn't know what to do. The Goblin Lord didn't have a place to return to though as The Wanderer had cleared the cave. As the Goblin Lord reached the cave The Wanderer was exiting the cave as he wiped out all the goblins inside. And now came The Wanderer to fight the Goblin Lord. They had a good stare down before anyone made a move, but then the Goblin Lord charged at The Wanderer, full speed, striking at The Wanderer with his axe. The strike was so powerful it broke the face of The Wanderer's shield. But as the Goblin Lord got all cocky The Wanderer got a clear slice in between the Goblin Lord's eyes but then was immediately knocked down to the side as the Goblin Lord screamed in pain. The Goblin Lord then stood over The Wanderer as he laid there. But as soon as The Wanderer was able to get onto his feet the Goblin Lord hit him with a heavy attack, cutting him deep in his arm and knocking him down yet again. The Wanderer's sword was broke into two. One half was in his hand, and the other was in the chest of the Goblin Lord. The Wanderer managed to stab the Goblin Lord as he was hit. But now he is struggling to rise to his feet. Although the blade is in the

Goblin Lord, he is still in better condition than The Wanderer. The Goblin Lord began to stomp on The Wanderer laughing away at him. Now, The Wanderer laid there. Not moving a single muscle. The Goblin Lord went to finish him but as the Goblin Lord swung his axe, he froze. It was as something was holding him back. Luna emerged from the forest behind The Wanderer, glowing brightly, as the Goblin Lord was filled with disbelief.

"Oh merciful earth mother, please protect us, the weak, with the powers of the earth. Protection!" Luna shouted.

The miracle known as protection, previously used as a shield by Luna was then casted twice front and back of the Goblin Lord trapping him in a tight makeshift cage. The cage was so tight that the blade stuck in the chest of the Goblin Lord was struck deeper into him causing more damage. The Wanderer suddenly rose to his feet using the slightest bit of strength in him and his broken sword to slice the neck of the Goblin Lord. But after doing so he fell back and fainted into the arms of Luna. Luna used her last miracle available to heal the deep cut on The Wanderer's arm. The Wanderer put a lot of trust into Luna to pull off something great there. It could've been a lot of trouble if the miracles weren't casted correctly. But just as everything else that had happened that night of the fight, The Wanderer always had a plan. Dawn came as everyone was exhausted from the big fight. And that night they all celebrated with lots of drinks.

The Wanderer asked for help in the way he did, willing to give everything away and almost begging for the guilds help up front was because if it was a simple contract posted on the wall then many people would overlook it as people rarely accept goblin contracts. Which happened to The Wanderer's village when he was young, no one came, which then lead to his sister's death and many other people as well. He was not about to take that risk and let the same thing happen again but to this place.

The Wanderer is relieved that the Goblin Lord is gone. With the Goblin Lord gone, goblin activity will slow down greatly. The Wanderer has been thinking about the future for a while. He isn't too sure on what'll happen next in life for him if there isn't much goblins much anymore. He feels lost but is slowly getting a clearer idea of what's to come. But he also feels happy for getting as much

revenge as possible for his older sister and making some great friends along the way, doing what he can to rid of the goblins. He is the hero to many people but he doesn't even know about it.

He was just an ordinary young man. He was a man you could find anywhere. The gods favored him as well, but they didn't expect anything special from him. For he was just another pawn they could find anywhere else. However, The Wanderer was slightly different from the others. He was always coming up with strategies, thinking, taking action, training, using his wits, and being thorough. He never let the gods roll the dice. And then, one day, the gods finally realized... He would probably never save the world. He would probably never change anything. For he was just another pawn they could find anywhere else. But he would never let the gods roll the dice. And that's exactly why the gods don't even know the fate of The Wanderer. His battle continues today, somewhere out there.

Ally Downing

The Land of Agliven: The Power of the Flame

If looks could kill. Every minute building up to this made my stomach turn. It has been a month since I showed up in Agliven and found out that the evil warlock here, was actually my brother, who killed my parents all because he wanted more power. Just looking at his face filled my entire body with anger. Visions of my childhood flashed in my brain. I couldn't help but think that everything could have been different. If my brother had not have gone crazy, I could have grown up with loving parents in a magical land where I would have been taught how to use my powers. Instead I had little control over them and I was expecting to use them to defeat my deranged brother. It's crazy how I keep calling him my brother. I don't even know his real name. I doubt that it's really King Phoenix.

These strong thoughts kept going through my brain, so I did my best to push them back and focus as I started to approach the field. He yelled from across it.

"Hello sister. This has been a long time coming." Said King Phoenix.

"As far as I'm concerned you lost the right to call me that as soon as you killed our parents." I said.

"Ouch feisty, it's almost a shame I'm going to have to kill you." Said King Phoenix.

"Not if I kill you first." I said.

"Those are big threats for someone who didn't even know they had powers a couple weeks ago. My powers are far greater than yours will ever be. No one is greater than King Phoenix!"

Suddenly, he shot up a line of fire from his hands. It was obvious the back and forth banter was getting on his nerves.

"Enough talking! Let's begin!" Said King Phoenix.

The sky shifted from a clear day to a grey gloomy day with clouds blocking the sun so it was dark all throughout the realm. It started raining with thunder and lightning. It was almost like the land knew there was a war happening. I knew this was not going to help the situation. I looked at King Phoenix, and he looked at me. I turned around to see Lilac, Asher, and Queen Ophelia Rose. They nodded at me insinuating it was time. Both sides starting charging to the middle of the field.

I met King Phoenix in the middle of the battle. Everyone around us fighting for their lives. We walked slowly in a circle watching the other carefully. All around there was clashing of swords and shooting of arrows, people screaming. I have never heard such a piercing sound and my eyes started to tear up. I could see in my brothers eyes however, that the sounds of those dying danced around in his head like a harmony to a song that he has listened to his whole life. I was the first to fire. I used both my hands and I tried to push him using my telekinesis. But he blocked it.

"Is that all you have sister? You are nothing like our mother." Said King Phoenix.

I knew exactly what he was doing and I told myself it wasn't going to work, but hearing the words affected me more than I thought

and I got angry. With more power I tried to push him down again. He blocked it but stumbled a little.

"Someone's getting angry I see." I said.

He shot back at me with his fireball, but I dodged that. I wasn't too confident with my blocking yet. I didn't want to test it on something that could burn me alive. Our fight was heating up, not just literally, we continued to shoot back and forth to each other and I knew I was getting weaker. I could feel myself losing the grip I had on my powers. Of course he could sense I was getting weaker.

"It's not easy is it? Being this powerful is hard I deserve more credit from you people with all the havoc I've created." King Phoenix said.

"All you've done is tear away everything good and beautiful in this land." I said.

"You make it sound like a bad thing. I will not stop until this land and all its' people belong to me." He said.

We both got angry, and launched at each other again. We were so close up that instead of using our powers we were full on fighting with our hands. We exchanged blows and he obviously didn't care about chivalry. I knew I wouldn't be able to win, but I was determined to keep going.

"Look around sister, get a good last look. To your friends, your mentor, this land, all its secrets and memories of your parents, gone." King Phoenix said.

I looked around to see my friends and Queen Ophelia Rose still alive and fighting. The thought of losing them after only just finding them sent a pain through my heart like a sword was driven through it. Then I got an idea.

"If you are so strong and powerful prove it. Grab your swords and fight me. We can not use our magic, only our swords. We'll fight to the death, then we will see who's the strongest." I said.

A smile formed on his face that showed pure confidence. He bent down and picked up a sword from a body on the ground. Now I had to find one. I didn't want to take one from a body on the ground because that felt disrespectful, but if I didn't do that, everyone in Agliven

would end up just like them. I took the first one I saw. He twirled it in his hand as a sign of experience, showing he wasn't afraid to kill me. Unfortunately, my fear causes ten sword to shake in my trembling hand. I tried to calm down before he saw but he noticed.

He gave a little chuckle which made me red with fury. We ran at each other and the clashing of the metal was the only thing you would be able to hear. His skill was far greater than mine. He was dodging and twirling out of the way, but I anticipated that. I was struggling to keep up. He swung at me and I used my sword to block it, but it sent me flying to the ground. He came over and leaned over me trying to show dominance. He swung his sword trying to finish me off but I blocked it, this time he held it there trying to push past mine. I pushed back and that left us both using all our power. The strongest person would eventually win the fight. The swords started getting closer to me.

"It's probably sad for the people of Agliven. Having to put their lives in the hands of you. A weak, stupid girl who has no family." He said.

"You might want to guess again who the stupid one is." I said.

I quickly grabbed another sword lying on the ground and sent it through his stomach. Before he knew what happened, he let go of his sword and fell backwards. His face looked shocked. I got up and turned to him with a brave look on my face. The battle went silent. Everyone stopped what they were doing. Some of King Phoenix's faithful servants made a run for it seeing their master get stabbed, they realized he wouldn't be able to protect them from the grave. As I was about to walk away, he got up and pulled the sword right out of his stomach. And dropped it in the ground. His closest servant, Gorg the elf, ran over to him. I was at a loss of words for what was happening.

"How- how the heck?" I questioned.

"You brat. You don't understand anything do you. You can't kill me. I am immortal. My reign will never end as long as I'm alive, and that is forever." He said this while trying to catch his breath. That just proved he was weaker. "You really don't know anything. I will kill you for going back on your word." Said King Phoenix.

"I didn't go back on anything. I said swords not sword." I said.

"You tricked me! And for that your death will be slow and painful."

I was out of ideas. If a sword straight through the chest couldn't kill him I didn't know what could. All hope was lost. I did everything I was supposed to do and it wasn't enough. He was going to kill me. I thought about my friends who have become my family. The anger was filling up inside me. Suddenly the ground started to shake.

"What is going on master?" Gorg said.

"It's the girl, I can feel the power coming off of her." He seemed surprised yet happy. "Everybody retreat back to the fortress!" King Phoenix screamed.

Everything had broken in to chaos. The ground was shaking so much it was hard to stay up. I looked around but everything was spinning around me. It was like a barrier was formed around me. I wanted to leave, but as soon as it touched the tip of my finger it shocked me. I couldn't explain the feeling of it. I felt trapped, but also stronger than I've ever been. It was like I had a boost of power but I wasn't sure what it was from. In my own thoughts I had images of the land. It was weird because there were parts if it I had never seen before. Almost like it wasn't coming from my eyes. These visions consumed me to the point where I noticed nothing around me. It wasn't until Queen Ophelia used her powers to break the barrier, and suddenly I felt weak again. I fell to the ground and everything in my eyes went blurry.

I woke up to the most beautiful room I had ever seen. I was laying in a bed with white covers with gold detailing all over it. The bed frame was gold and had flower carved details all around it that went all the way to the top, where the white lace canopy flowing over the bed. I got out of the bed and stumbled a little but my curiosity got the better of me. The rest of the room took my breath away. All the furniture was white with the same gold detailing that was carved. Each flower different then the other. In very unique pots were these gorgeous flowers that I had seen from my paintings, the ones with the gems in the middle. I looked up to the ceiling and it was the most magnificent thing I have ever seen. I completely disregarded the huge crystal chandelier. It was hand painted with many creatures and nature all over the ceiling that went down to the walls. I recognized the fairies on there that had appeared to me earlier. As I was looking

at the magic on the wall, it started to come to life. The fairies came and danced around me leaving trails of sparkles, a white graceful deal with dots that formed a pattern on their head appeared in the corner of the room. Music started to play and it started to snow. The fairies came around me and as they danced around me, they lifted me into the air. I was spinning and twirling and for the first time since I've been here a laugh came out of my mouth. Out of all the darkness that has been happening, these creatures maintain so much light, and that reassured me that as long as they are here, his evil will never win. They returned me to the floor just as Queen Ophelia Rose walked knocked on the door.

"Come in." I said. As she walked in I gave her a bow.

"How are you feeling child?" She asked.

"Oh much better thank you." I said.

"I see you have discovered the magic in these walls. Isn't it beautiful." She said.

"It really is magical." I said.

"I really wouldn't want to ruin the mood, but we need to talk about what happened. I have never seen the realm shake like that, and it seemed to be coming from you." She said.

"I don't know what was happening. I was so scared and angry but it was a feeling I have never felt before. I need to know what it was." I said.

"I might have an idea. Follow me." Said Queen Ophelia.

I did as she said and followed her out into the hall. It was a grand room with paintings on the walls and the highest ceilings anyone could ever imagine. Before the battle when I was here, my days were filled with training and eating and sleeping that was it. I never got to explore the castle and I certainly had never seen that beautiful room. She led me to a huge brown door that she pushed open and inside there were stacks and stacks of books. There were long tables in the center of the room and sitting at one of them was Asher and Lilac. They both have been great friends to me over this great journey, even though we barely knew each other. It's only been a month and most of it I was training so we never really talked about ourselves. Maybe that would change soon.

Me and the Queen walked over and sat down. There were about a dozen of old books that looked like they have been through a lot in the middle of the table.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

"Oh can I tell her pretty please with cherry on top!" Said Lilac. Queen Ophelia nodded her head.

"Well it was said that a long time ago there was a baby girl born here in Agliven, and she possessed the power of the flame. The power of the flame is the core of the world, and if you obtain that power you can control all of the worlds elements. When that girl had a baby she passed the power on to her, and so on with all the generations of baby girls. It was rumored that Jocelyn, your mother possessed those powers, therefore.."

"I have those powers." I said

"That is correct dear one. That would explain why the ground started to shake when you were scared. It activated your powers. That would also explain why King Phoenix retreated instead of finishing us all off. He has been after the power of the flame for as long as I can remember." Said Queen Ophelia.

"That must have been why he killed your parents and tried to kill you. He was trying to get the power of the flame." Said Asher.

"But why did he have to kill me? We have the same mother the power would have been passed on to him." I said.

"That is incorrect. The legend says it can only be passed on the a baby girl, not a boy." Said Lilac.

"It all makes sense." Said Asher.

All of this was so much to take in at once.

"Why are all of these books here?" I asked.

"We are doing research on how to defeat King Phoenix because you know the whole immortal thing." Said Lilac.

"I'm sorry this too much I need some air." I rushed up from the bench and walked towards the door. Then I heard a voice telling me to wait. I turned around and it Queen Ophelia.

"Yes your majesty?" I said.

"Please Freya Dawn, call me Aunt Ophelia. You remind me so much of your mother. She was a kind and gracious women. You have her strickeng girl eyes. She would be so proud of the women you are. I understand you need a breather. I would suggest the garden. Follow the corridor to the end and take a left. It really is quite magical. Said Ophelia.

"Thank you." Although I tried to be strong a tear rolled down my face and I gave her a hug. I didn't know if that was allowed but I couldn't help it. I quickly got off and then gave her a bow and scuttled away.

"Okay children let's get to reading." Said Ophelia.

I walked in the direction that Queen Ophelia had told me too. When I walked out into the garden it was very pretty. There was a massive fountain in the middle and trees all around with flowers hanging from the branches. There was a giant hedge maze that I would not be entering, and in the corner there was a white swing bench that I went over and sat in. Apparently I had been at there for 30 minutes just thinking and I didn't even realize until Lilac came out to me.

"Hey." I said.

"Hey back. Look I know you wanted to be on a break right now but we found some really good information." Said Lilac.

"Sure, what is it?" I said. She had in her hand two books. The first one she opened, there was a page with and amulet. It was a fine piece of jewelry.

"This is the amulet of the flame. It is a magical necklace that can trap people inside of it. It was created long ago to maintain the baddest of the bad warlocks. Then here it says that it can only be accessed with someone who has the heart of fire, which is you with your flame power. I believe that if we stab King Phoenix it will make him weaker, which we then use the amulet to trap him inside. To find it we have to follow this map that contains hard obstacles that only the person with the power of the fame can get by. That way he won't be able to rise from the ashes. Get it because he's-" Lilac Said.

"Ya I got Phoenix will rise from the ashes, how long were you working on that one?" I asked

"Since you came to town." She said.

We both started to laugh and it felt like we really bonded during that time. She shared more information we have found. Anyone who has the power of the flame gets a dragon at their call whenever they need it. Seems pretty cool to me. I don't know how she did it but she found an old family tree of mine that dates way back. It even showed my name but with no picture. There was my mom and dad. Seeing them made me tear up because I have never really seen them before. Below them with me was someone named August but I had no idea, until I looked at the picture.

"Is that?" Asked Lilac.

"Yes, it must be." I Said.

After finding all that information the Queen wanted to celebrate our success in our search. We knew we need to go find the amulet but right now we decided to have a feast. Everyone in the palace was invited and it was just what I needed for things to feel at least a little normal. We would head off to find the amulet in the morning.

I woke up the next morning and Asher, Lilac, and I got ready to head out. We packed supplies in a backpack and said goodbye the Queen. Although she wanted to come, she still had a Kingdom to look out for and couldn't afford to leave it. We followed the map to a cave and followed it inside. It was pitch black and no one could see anything.

"Did anyone bring a flashlight?" I asked.

"What's a flashlight?" Lilac asked.

"Never mind." I Said.

We kept walking very carefully until the cave opened up into a huge room. With many obstacles ahead. All of a sudden, Lilac and Asher disappeared. I looked around but they were nowhere.

"Asher! Lilac!" They just vanished.

Then one by one a torch lit on the walls, lightning up the whole cave. Now I could see clearly. On the ground there was a stand with any weapon you could chose. All around there were floating blocks to the highest of the cave. I went and grabbed a sword, because I felt like I was going to need it. Then out of nowhere a huge dragon flew from a hole in the ground. I dropped my sword out of fear but after

staring for a good five seconds I picked it back up, and while I was at it, I grabbed a shield. The dragon was flying around in the air and turned at me and breathed fire. I couldn't dodge it so I used my shield to protect myself from it. I then ran to the first block near the ground and started to make my way up those. At the halfway mark there was a platform that I was standing on. If I fell, I would die, if I stayed on the ground, I would die. The options weren't very high for me but I had to do something. I had to keep dodging the fire because my powers weren't reaching him and neither would the sword. There was only one thing I could do. As soon as he came near me I jumped onto him, holding on with dear life. I managed to crawl to his back and when I got there I found he had a neck chain on. It was gold and glowing and I could feel the magic off it. I thought quickly and used my powers to break it off. It took a lot of power out of me but I had to do it. After using all my strength I was beat. The dragon then came to a stop and then descended to the ground. He put out his wing and I slide down it like a slide. When I stood up he began to speak to me.

"Hello Freya Dawn of Agliven. By showing your bravery and quick thinking, you have completed the trials of the flame. You have proven yourself worthy of the amulet, but I must ask you one more thing. Why do you wish to possess the amulet?" The dragon asked.

"It's the only way I can save the entire realm. I don't know how I'm going to do it but I won't give up, not until good triumphs over evil." I said. The dragon gave me a nod. Then a pillar in the ground started to rise up, and at the top of it was a box. I grabbed the box and opened it to find the amulet. It was stunning.

"You must keep this safe at all costs. Do not let it fall into the wrong hands or this world as we know it will be over. With this trial you have gained the amulet but you have also obtained an ally." He said.

"You're the dragon of the flame." I said

"Indeed I am Freya Dawn. I knew your mother. She was in the exact same position you are in right now. If you ever need assistance just summon me." He said.

"How do I do that I don't even know your name?" I asked.

"When the time comes you will know exactly what to do. Until then keep this amulet safe. The future of this world rests in your hands." He said.

He then flew back into the ground. Part of me wanted to follow him and find out more about my mom, but I had a responsibility to get this back to the palace. I walked out of the cave and found Lilac and Asher sitting there.

"Thank god you are alright we were so worried. Pretty necklace!" Said Lilac.

"We were right behind you when all of a sudden we were out here. When we tried to go back in it wouldn't let us. What happened in there?" Asked Asher.

"It was something I had to do on my own. The good thing is I got the necklace and we can head back to the palace." I said.

We started walking back to the palace and we had some time, so I decided to get to know them a little better.

"Hey I don't want to intrude but I feel like I barely know you guys. I always see you at the palace but where are your parents?" I asked. Their demeanor changed.

"I'm sorry you don't have to answer." I said.

"No it's fine. When we were younger both our parents fought in a war against King Phoenix. Unfortunately, that was the last day we saw them." Said Asher.

"I am so sorry." I Said.

"Why are you apologizing it wasn't your fault." Said Lilac.

My conscience in me couldn't help but feel that it was. He was my brother and turned bad because I got the power and he didn't. That must be the case with a lot of people in this realm. We made it back to the palace and when we entered something felt different. There was almost a dark energy in the room. We walked into the throne room and what we saw felt like a stab to the heart. Sitting on the throne was King Phoenix and next to him Queen Ophelia was standing there tall.

"What are you doing here? Let the queen go!" I said.

"I'm sorry sister but she isn't here by force. We are a team." He said.

"I believe you have something we need Freya Dawn." Said Ophelia.

Matthew Sommerfeld

The Dark Forest

Sylvan set his cup down hard on the beaten table of the inn. The clamor of the barkeep and drunken fools yelling at each other with unrecognizable emotions behind their laughs, shouts, and slurs, was overbearing to the his ears. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the sounds of insanity around him as he took a bite of his steak.

He had come to the drunken disaster of a bar as a last resort, and was not pleased at all. He had spent the better part of the last six months attempting to find suitable comrades for a quest of his that would pay incredibly well to all those backing him. This tavern was his last chance before all hope was lost and everything he had worked for was washed away.

As he slumped in defeat, elbows on the table, a mighty hand clapped him on the back. He jerked his head around to see who dared to interrupt his reverie, but saw no one.

"Down here." Someone said, irritably.

Sylvan looked down to see his unexpected interrupter, and gazed into the round, bearded face of a mountain dwarf. The dwarf in question was five feet in height, bearing bronze armor and a helmet with grey chain mail beneath. He bore a large, dwarven axe in one hand and a keg of mead in another. Sylvan blinked once and then gestured dumbly to the one of the empty chairs.

"Thank ye." The dwarf spoke graciously, seemingly not caring about the look he had just received. He then grasped a waitress' arm and

pointed to Sylvan's food and ordered the same. The dwarf hefted the mighty axe onto the table as he was handed a plate of food mere moments after the order and began to wolf it down.

"So," The dwarf spoke between bites. "You're the bum that's been trying to get a quest through the common fold, eh?" He then took a hearty swig from his mead and belched loudly, the noise drowned out by the clamor. "How's that comin' for ye?"

Sylvan composed himself and counted to ten steadily in his mind, fearing the wrath of his new impolite, invader.

"Not how I would put it, but yes." Sylvan said as he too took a drink from his mug, though not as massive as the dwarf's. "I take it you have a reason for being here, master dwarf, may I ask?"

"You see laddie." the dwarf began, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "I, as well as a good friend of mine, have taken an interest in your wee proposition."

Sylvan's previous thoughts towards the dwarf evaporated as he nearly spit out his drink. The dwarf smirked and continued to speak, talking with his mouth full.

"I've been searching for ye, Mr. Sylvan, and my friend and I have closely examined your proposal and," he paused and leaned on the table and spoke softer. "We want in."

Sylvan was dumbfounded, struggling to accept this. He had been waiting for near a half of a year to find members beyond himself to help him in his quest, but no one even considered it when he asked. Yet here was a dwarf, who also spoke for his "good friend", who had come to and asked him if they could join. Sylvan clutched the rim of the table tightly in an effort to balance himself on the rickety, beaten chair.

"Do you know of what I seek to do? What I truly mean to do in the forest?" He questioned, intensely. The dwarf was unfazed by his stare and simply answered.

"What's to know lad?" He asked rhetorically. "Yer going on a quest to hunt down goblin treasures that were lost to the dense thickets of the Deep Forest itself. Which you hope to profit from if you can survive that damned forest. The mere mention of tha' place sends chills down me back. It's filled with all manner of unholy creatures,

curses and spirits that are armed to the teeth with all manner of poisons, weapons, and other unsavory devices. It is certain death to anyone goin' in there." He then slapped the table and laughed. "Where do I sign?"

"There is no official document for this matter." Sylvan spoke. "But before I remotely consider you as a partner I must know one thing."

"And what is that lad." The dwarf asked.

"Who are you?" Sylvan questioned.

"Thrang." He answered calmly, offering a hand to shake. "Thrang Ironforge, a pleasure."

Sylvan was hurriedly pushed out the door by Thrang as he rambled on about what they needed to get and acquire. They began walking towards the stables where the horses that Thrang had acquired for the journey were.

"First off, we need to find Daman, my partner, the one you should be thanking as soon as you see him."

"And why would I?" Asked Sylvan.

"He convinced me to come to you to accept this little quest of yours." He explained gruffly. "We were both interested in it, but he made the push to get me on board. We both share a mutual taste in danger you see, and the Deep Forest is like a ghost pepper chili boiled by dragon fire kind of taste. We wish to fill our bowls with that danger."

"Is he too a dwarf or should I be expecting a gnome?" Sylvan asked slyly, causing his vertically challenged friend to fake laugh.

"Very funny, lad. Mockery gets you places in this world, but short jokes with a dwarf present is just low." He said grumbling to himself about the serious deprive of human comedy. "No. He is one of those snooty high elves that prance around in the forest singing lullabies to the roses."

"Thank you, Thrang." A voice spoke as a tall elf dressed in hunting clothes stepped out from behind the corner of the tavern. "Let us not get into the laughable,, false myths of my kin without one here to laugh at when his face turns red in fury."

Thrang laughed and walked up to the man and slapped on the back like he did Sylvan. Sylvan chuckled at the joke the elf made about his own race as Thrang began to introduce the forestborn.

"This is the high-browed, pointy-eared bastard who thinks he's better than everyone who took first interest in your little quest." He laughed then sighed. "But he prefers his actual name, Daman."

The elf rolled his eyes and the three started to walk towards the stable together.

"I already procured the provisions and weapons needed for our adventure, master Sylvan." He informed with practiced cordiality as he offered him a longsword from his sheath. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance at last."

"Thank you, but I have my own" Sylvan said shaking the elf's offered hand like he did the dwarf's and continued to walk towards the stables.

"Of course. Unfortunately, I was only able to rent a horse and a stiff donkey for myself and my stout friend, respectively." He apologized. "You may have to ride with one of us or go on foot."

Sylvan smiled with little care of what the elf said. He had a little surprise that no one, not even his previous candidates for the adventure knew about. And it was big.

"Not a worry, master Daman." Sylvan spoke with a smirk that confused the elf. "I brought my own."

The elf blinked in surprise, a momentary confusion overtaking his face before he composed himself with a light smile. They rounded the final corner and were nearly upon the town's stables.

"Where might we retrieve this fine horse?" Daman questioned to which Sylvan's smirk deepened.

"I never said she was a horse." He spoke as the dwarf and elf looked at each other with caution. Sylvan then turned to his new

quest mates. "Now whatever you do, don't attack her or look like you're hurting me. That is a death sentence around her."

"What is this beast then?" Thrang spoke up.

Sylvan unlocked his rented stall and threw the doors open wide. Thrang and Daman froze at the sight behold them. In the stall, lying upon a bed of hay, was a massive silver-furred wolf nearly up to Sylvan's ribs in height. It suddenly jumped up in surprise at the intruders, revealing muscular legs and a long muzzle filled with needle-sharp teeth. It snarled at them and glared menacingly.

"F-f-f-fenrire." Thrang stuttered as Daman stepped back a few paces in utter fear.

"Hi girl, did you miss me?" Sylvan spoke in a voice meant for toddlers. The large fenrire suddenly noticed her master and lunged at him, tongue flying in the wind. She landed on him with a heavy thud that would've knocked the wind out of him had it not happened to him several times in the past. The canine licked his face with fervor only used between equals, not master and dog.

"Good girl. Now get off me." He spoke as his ribs started to ache. "I need to breathe."

The she-wolf obeyed and sat on her haunches, standing straight and began to stare at her master's two companions, growling as if she didn't trust them. He noticed this and pointed at them.

"Friends." He said simply, but forcefully to ensure the point got through to her. Even wolves can only be so intelligent.

She snorted and her gaze softened. Thrang was shaking with a hand on the hilt of his shouldered axe.

"This lovely canine friend of mine is my ride, companion, and protector, but you can call her Silver."

"You have a fenrire." He said shakily, ignoring what he just said. "As a PET!!!"

"This is m-most unusual." Daman stuttered, his innate silver tongue leaving him.

"Well partners the road is long to the deep forest and we had best be off." Sylvan replied with enthusiasm. He was finally on his way to

the Deep Forest, the place that haunted his waking dreams, he couldn't wait.

On the morrow the trio left the town and began their journey to the cursed forest, the anticipation was in the air. Sylvan was grinning like a fool. His long months of strife had finally come to fruition and the trials of the road ahead loomed upon the horizon. Daman reached into his hunters jacket and pulled out a map. He glanced over it and pointed at it for Sylvan to see.

"We make for the ancient path, it will take a matter of hours to get there." Daman spoke.

Sylvan didn't mind the fact that Daman was leading the group. All he cared about was the end goal; killing goblin scum that plagued the land and retrieving the treasure they had amassed.

Thrang finished saddling his and Daman's animals, but looked warily at the fenrire and glanced at Sylvan for guidance.

"Don't worry Thrang. You need not concern yourself with saddling her." He spoke as he took the remaining saddle from the dwarf and proceeded to mount it to his furry companion. "She'd probably bite your arms off if you tried."

Thrang paled a bit and grunted, excusing himself as he climbed onto his donkey. Sylvan chuckled and mounted up on Silver's saddle and they were off.

They traveled from dawn to midday, stopping only for a light lunch and to water and feed their rides. When the sun was nearing the horizon and evening was to turn to night, they stopped and beheld the entrance to the cursed forest.

"We should stop here for tonight." Thrang stated. "The forest is terrible enough as it is in the daylight. I'd rather not find out what is nestled in the darkness of that damned wood."

"Agreed." Sylvan spoke. He dismounted Silver with practiced ease and patted her on the head. "Good girl. Get some rest."

Silver understood and padded over to a stray tree and lay down by it.

"I shall retrieve firewood." Stated Daman as he walked briskly to the edge of the forest and began to collect sticks.

After several minutes Daman brought back a bundle's worth of wood. Thrang took out a match and set it alight, before creating a rotisserie and mounting a chicken on the thin pole. Silver visibly drooled at the bird, the smells overwhelming her heightened senses.

"No girl, that's for us." Sylvan scolded. "Go hunt near the forest edge."

Silver grumbled a bit, but proceeded to hunt as the trio began to eat. They ate a hot stew and waited for the fenrere to return before going to bed in anticipation of the next day.

Sylvan awoke as a hand covered his mouth. He reached for his sword at his side but it was only Thrang. He put a finger to his lips and pointed. Sylvan squinted in the darkness of midnight, and was horrified. Going into the forest about a half-mile away was a dark cart being led by ash-grey horses and armored guards. The guards wore crude armor and appeared misshapen in the shadows.

Daman crawled over, trying to be as unnoticeable as possible. He pointed at the escort and uttered a word that sent shivers down Sylvan's spine.

"Goblins."

"What are they doing so far outside the forest?" Thrang wondered, whispering as quietly as possible.

"No idea." Sylvan spoke, his mind whirring with the thought of danger. "Let's follow them." As he was about to wake Silver, Thrang grasped his arm and shook his head.

"No," He whispered, ",We enter the forest and prepare an ambush in their path." Daman explained. "We knew these things were tromping around the region, but we weren't able to find them until now. You want to try to slay a goblin escort head on with their current numbers? I don't believe you do. We will intercept them and ambush them."

"Fine." Sylvan said. "Let's enter the Deep Forest of all places at midnight to intercept a goblin escort. That's a great idea." He grumbled sarcastically, but still agreed.

They gathered what gear they could spare without making noise, but were forced to let go of some of the pots, pans, and unfortunately the donkey and horse.

"Return to your master, go." Daman whispered, as he pushed the animals into going home.

"They were fine beasts, tis' a shame to let them go." Thrang stated, sullenly. "But they're far too noisy for an ambush. Only Silver can come, but we must go on foot."

The three adventurers and Silver ran through the plains of grass on padded paws and plunged ahead into the darkness of the Deep Forest. The sky soon become unseeable with the roof of trees overhead. The forest groaned as the three entered, but silence resumed once they came through.

They traveled for hours in the darkness, their only guide being the light of the lanterns from the escort far off on the Ancient Road. Thrang muttered to himself mostly about how much the place freaked him out while Daman kept silent, as if trying to not accept the reality of where they were. Sylvan thought to himself about the legends of this place, that it was cursed by a long-dead sorcerer to never rest until the curses were broken. The animals mutated over time into hideous aberrations, bent upon causing death to anyone they found. The people that lived in the once peaceful forest vanished and were never seen again. This forest was tainted by magic older than the three of them combined.

Suddenly a screech broke through the air. The group jerked around to see the source of the disturbance, but could only gaze on in horror. Standing before them was a figure draped in spectral robes, its skeletal, torn hands and feet visible. Atop its head was a goat skull. It stood there, just staring at them.

Sylvan was having a heart attack. He knew of this dreaded monster before them. It was a creature of the unliving plane of death, an echo of the Dark Age where millions died in the oppressive fires of yore. A wraith. While it could not touch them physically, it could

send them images of their worst fears and only through conquering them could they banish it.

"Stand your ground." Sylvan spoke, his voice quivering slightly. "Hold firm and s-show no fear."

The wraith looked through the goat skull's sockets to look upon its prey. It glanced at the his three companions and raised a hand and clenched it. Daman, Silver and Thrang slumped to the ground as a deep slumber overtook them. Sylvan looked at the aberration once more. He was alone.

The wraith stepped closer and stretched out its tattered, bony hand and grabbed Sylvan's face. He tried not to cry out, remembering that the escort was just a mile ahead at best. It growled at him and Sylvan shouted in pain as he was assaulted by memories of his past.

He saw his village burned to the ground by goblin mercenaries, his mother and father impaled on spikes as he ran from the scene with a puppy Silver in hand. He saw his mentors, who taught him everything he knew about fighting, dying of age or steel. He saw everything that ever plagued his thoughts from his failures to get a quest through to interested people to being jeered at by his peers for being weak as a boy.

The wraith glowed with power as his despair fed it. Then Sylvan suddenly thought of the burning of his village, but focused not on the death and bloodshed, but of the vengeance he had craved from that day on. He thought of his fenfire, Silver, as he carried her to safety from his burning house. Finally, he saw Thrang and Daman, taking an interest in his quest and him finally knowing what friendship was again.

Sylvan roared in fury and sent his powerful emotions through his mind into the wraith's. It screamed in unearthly agony as it tried to pry its hand away, the bony appendage starting to burn. The wraith's cloak caught fire at random sections, the flames licking the fabric and sinew of the wraith's spectral form.

He sent more and more of his friendship and love for his new friends and canine at the loveless thing before him. It was poison to the wraith, it needed hate and despair to live. He almost felt sorry for the being, not wanting to try to imagine living off evil emotions

to live. But he pushed those thoughts aside and sent every happy memory, thought, and reverie towards the monster.

The wraith burst into blue hellfire as its screams pierced the night in agony. Sylvan pushed the burning creature back as it flailed around the darkened space before bursting once more into ash with only the skull remaining. It was banished back to death.

His three companions awoke with a start. Silver got into a pouncing position, Thrang reached for his axe and Daman his short sword, but found only Sylvan staring at them tiredly.

"Where's the abomination?" Thrang asked, eager to try and destroy it.

"Gone." He replied. "Banished back to whatever hell it came from."

"You faced a wraith on your own... and lived?!" Thrang asked with Daman staring dumbly at him. He nodded and began to walk away towards the light of the escort.

"Where are you going?" Daman asked, still trying to process the information.

"We have an escort to ambush remember?" He said. "Come on the light is dwindling and we must follow."

The two companions nodded and picked up their dropped belongings before setting off towards the escort. Thrang picked up the skull and muttered about unholy things before stuffing it in his pack claiming it as a trophy. After hours of running they passed the caravan and continued on, traveling another hour or so before finding the perfect spot for the ambush.

"Now, we wait." Daman spoke in an ominous tone.

Sylvan crouched in the bushes to the side of the dirt road with his arm on his sheathed sword, waiting for his prey to come. He glanced at Silver crouched beside him who, like he, had a stoic face of canine determination on her muzzle. Someone tapped him on the shoulder causing him to flinch.

"Shh!" whispered Thrang beside him, "Here they come."

Sylvan nodded in understanding and turned back to his eye hole in the thicket. The thundering of horses and clanking of iron drew near. Sylvan gulped nervously. This was it, the first trial of the long road ahead.

The dark cart came into view, led by even more goblins than before they had first tracked it. Sylvan looked up to the ceiling of trees, attempting to spot Daman. The elf met his gaze from his branch perch and held up a hand as if to say, 'Not yet'. The noise grew louder as the goblin-lead procession marched towards them. Sylvan was getting anxious, would they be killed if they were found or worse? But he steeled his nerves and held strong.

"Now!" Thundered Daman.

Thrang charged out of the bushes, axe held high, shouting dwarven curses of all manner at his foes. The procession stopped as the goblins beside and on the cart stopped in surprise, fear overtaking them for the briefest of moments, the mistake that would cost them their wretched lives.

Sylvan breathed deeply and leapt out of the thicket of branches, drawing his sword and grasping it firmly in hand as he charged one of the stupefied abominations.

"Die for the glory of the forest!" Shouted Daman as he leapt from his perch with twin hunting daggers held in his hands. He landed on top of the cart roof and thrust the blades into the head of the goblin pulling the reins of the halted stallions. It screeched and slumped, falling forward over the edge of the seat and landing face-first on the ground below, black blood staining the ground.

Silver pounced onto one of the three goblins on the side, biting down hard on its helmed head, crushing the metal and skull to bits. Thrang ducked under the middle goblin's swing before plunging the axe through its crude armor, death taking the creature as it fell to the ground in a mesh of vile flesh and iron.

Sylvan charged at the last one of the three, he stopped in front of it and swung his sword. The blade sailed through the air but suddenly stopped mid swing. Sylvan looked up in horror; the goblin had grabbed the blade with its gauntleted hand and was growling at him. Sylvan

smiled weakly, fear overtaking him. It snorted at him and the goblin headbutted him with its war helmet.

Sylvan fell to the ground dropping his sword, his vision doubling as all thoughts of battle draining from his concussed mind. He clutched his head in agony, praying for salvation from his pathetic failure at killing the abyssal monster.

The goblin raised its weapon, blade faced downward to impale with through the chest, smiling cruelly. Sylvan closed his eyes in grudging acceptance, then lightning flashed across his mind as a very good thought struck him; "I don't want to die."

He rolled away as the sword plunged into the blood stained earth. He picked up his sword and sliced the goblin across the chest, counter attacking the near fatal blow. The goblin screamed in unearthly pain as he clutched his chest in agony. Sylvan stepped forward and placed his hand onto the goblin's armored shoulder. It looked up in confusion, and he gave it a cocky smirk.

"Enjoy the abyss." He said driving the blade through his foes chest. The goblin made a strangled noise as it gargled blood, crumpling to the ground.

Sylvan turned to see how the rest were faring in the raid, while still clutching his swelling, pained head. Thrang had killed a second one and was moving onto his third yelling curses and generally inciting terror into the goblin guards. Sylvan looked up to see Daman leaping from the roof of the cart into the mass of goblins behind the it, daggers sheathed and his short sword drawn from its sheath.

Sylvan heard a screech from behind him as a mass of silver fur shot by him and leaped onto a goblin that was seconds away from decapitation him. Silver bit down hard and shook the goblin's limp body around for good measure. She looked up at her master with pride as her tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth, a wolf smile.

"Good girl. A special steak for you tonight." He said giving her a brief head rub, "Let's finish this."

Sylvan gazed at the remaining guards adding up to about seven left and sighed. He twirled his sword in one hand and muttered something like "I've gone mad" before rejoining the fray, with his furry companion close behind.

He crashed his blade into the crude armor, sending its misshapen owner stumbling backwards as it tried to breathe in the crushed chestplate.

"Move!" Daman suddenly shouted.

Sylvan threw himself to the ground as the elf raised his arm and threw both his daggers at the goblin, lodging them deep within its already destroyed chest. It sputtered and grasped the daggers with one hand weakly and spoke in a garbled tongue, pointing at them both with its blade before falling to the ground with a clank.

"Little more warning would do!" Sylvan shouted at the elf, irritated at the closeness of the blow to which Daman flashed an unapologetic smirk.

"Less talk, more blood." Commanded Thrang as he pulled his axe out of the armored collarbone of his latest victim.

Sylvan's ear twitched and he swung around just in time to bring his sword to meet the dark blade with of one of the remaining defenders with a loud, sharp clang. The goblin then spoke in perfect common language, sobering him of the fight's bloodlust.

"The master waits for you in the Deep Forest." It spoke forebodingly. "He said that we should make sure to put adventurers like you on the right track, though I doubt you'll make it that far." Giving Sylvan a twisted smile at that.

"What master?" Sylvan questioned. "Your kind have no master."

"We serve the Dark One himself." It said, expanding its grin even more somehow. "You've stepped into his forest, boy. You're all doomed!" It then began laughing as Sylvan's face paled.

"Duck, lad." Shouted the dwarf. For the third time Sylvan threw himself to the ground as Thrang drew back his arm and threw his axe at the horrified goblin. The axe blade plunged perfectly into its chest as the armored brute fell to the ground. It then turned to Sylvan still lying on the ground.

"You will all burn and serve him." It rasped as it gargled blood. "Everyone... does... in this... forest." It then went limp as its life force was sent to the eternal abyss.

Sylvan stared at the corpse for a second, deeply troubled. Was it telling the truth? Was there a master of the goblins and the Deep Forest itself? Who or what was he? The questions revolved around his mind before the clash of Daman's sword and a scimitar brought him out of his stupor.

Three of the defenders remained and were engaged with several of his team members. Thrang was pinned on the ground by a thin, sickly-looking one, attempting to slap away its sword with his axe. Daman was trading blows with a bug-eyed, green one with one his curved daggers lodged in its club. Silver had an exceptionally ugly one with a lumpy face on the ground, biting down on its sword as she tried to get to the owner of the crude weapon.

Sylvan jumped up, firmly clenched his sword in hand and threw it like his comrades at Daman's. It wasn't perfect, but the flat of the blade smacked the helmet causing a loud metallic bong as the sword shattered on impact sound. Daman saw his chance and slashed his short sword down its front in a lethal blow. As it crumpled to the ground he turned around to help Thrang, Silver had already taken care of hers. But his friend's goblin was nowhere to be seen. Thrang noticed his team member's gaze and spoke.

"It's gone. Fled off into the forest like the coward it is." Thrang stated.

"Over here." Daman shouted, gesturing for them to come over to the cart. "The reward is about to be reaped."

Thrang slung his axe around his back and walked over with an eager smile with Sylvan following close behind. The cart was now fully visible to the foursome. It was a carriage-like vehicle, completely black in color with runes painted on every side of it.

"Let's see, what do we have here?" Thrang asked himself as he fingered the lock to the lid of the cart, kicking a dead goblin's corpse that was in the way. He touched the lock all over, pausing several times on the immense runework inscribed. He then threw his hands down and grunted in frustration.

"It's warded." Thrang stated. "And it's beyond my knowledge of spellcraft. You're up, elf."

Daman knelt by the lock and began muttering words of ancient magic. The runes began to light up as the words of power unlocked the intricately decorated mechanism.

Then Sylvan had a thought.

"Wait," He said suddenly pausing to think, Thrang gestured to go on. "The goblin that had me said something to me before he was killed. He spoke of 'The Dark One'."

"And... got it!" cried Daman, with immense joy in his voice, as all thoughts of the master of the goblins left them.

The lock clicked and turned and a previously invisible door in the cart swung open, smacking Thrang in the face. Sylvan and Daman chuckled at this before all three entered, with Thrang rubbing a slightly flatter nose than usual, leaving Snowfox to peer in through the door in interest. Sylvan gaped at the contents of the cart. It was like an arsenal of the High Kingdom and their treasury had an extended cousin. Piles of gold coins and gems lay about the floor and shelves mounted to the sides. Random bejeweled weapons lay about the interior, each one weighing in at thousands at a mere glance. Mounted on the wall opposite the door was an skull with a sword pierced through it, acting as a terrifying wall mount.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Shouted Thrang, laughing smugly as he picked up a fairly big ruby and stuffed it in his beard.

Then the room went cold. The light from the door slowly started to fade as the shadows deepened. Everyone's breath was suddenly caught and they were struggling to maintain air.

"Put it back! Put the gem back!" Sylvan shouted.

Thrang fingered the jewel a bit greedily, but put it back in the same spot on the floor. The room warmed and the light returned. Sylvan struggled to breath as air returned to his hungry lungs.

"We need to destroy this cargo." Daman stated.

"Aye." agreed Thrang. "This entire chamber is cursed."

"Who would curse their own treasure?" Sylvan said as he stepped out of the cart and turned to face them. Thrang and Daman quickly exited and began to seal the door. Suddenly Thrang turned to ask Sylvan something, but his breath caught and he shouted.

"Look out!"

Sylvan heard a grunt behind him and swiveled around to meet his foe. The previously occupied goblin had a crude dagger in hand blade down. Sylvan's eyes widened as the goblin thrust the dagger through his right shoulder, the blade sticking out the other end.

Sylvan groaned in pain, unable to voice his screams as the white-hot burning sensation overtook him. He clutched the handle of the dark iron weapon as he slumped to the ground in twisted agony. He heard Thrang and Daman shout in fury. The growling of Silver turned to snarls and barks as she launched herself at his would-be assassin. She batted its remaining weapon away with her large paw and pressed her remaining paw on its throat, choking it. Daman rushed over to his bleeding comrad, dropping his still drawn sword.

"Sylvan, Sylvan. Sylvan!" He shouted increasing in volume. "Can you hear me?"

Sylvan managed a brief nod before grunting in agony as the pain set in even more. Daman pointed at Thrang.

"Thrang, see to it that the wolf doesn't kill the it." Daman ordered, pointing at said canine who was attempting to strangle the would-be-killer. "We need him alive."

Thrang nodded with a frown of concern for his friend and one of contempt for saving a monster from a deserved fate. He sprinted over to where Silver had the fiend, who was blue in the face from lack of air. He put his hand on her tensed shoulder and spoke in his gruff voice, but soothed his tone a bit.

"There, there. I know." The dwarf consoled. "I want to do it to him too, but we need him alive. Let him live for a minute longer, please?"

The large wolf seemed to have an inner struggle. Sylvan looked over and managed a snort as he could practically see the decisions in his wolf's mind.

In her mind, Silver had two options. She could get off the demon and help save her master, or she could just flay it alive. Both were very appealing to her, but she then gave a slight tilt of the head to signify her understanding. She turned to her captive and roared loudly at the blue-faced hellspawn, before stepping off its throat. The goblin gasped clutching its slightly crushed throat as its normal

putrid colors returned slowly. Thrang then held his axe to its face and spoke.

"Tell me what you did to my friend." Thrang spoke, emphasizing on each word, getting his point across to his ugly foe.

"The blade is not poisoned." It finally spoke, in a slightly garbled, raspy voice. "I would never resort to such cowardice to take down a weak human like that."

"Yet stabbing them from behind is more honorable?!" Sneered Thrang.

"No I stabbed him in the front, whether he was ready or not isn't my concern, hurk!" The goblin cried out as Thrang's axe nearly drew blood.

Sylvan focused his attention back to the wood elf in front of him. Daman was attempting to remove the dagger with a surgeon's finesse. He spoke an apology to Sylvan who nodded, before removing the bloody dagger from his shoulder. Sylvan screamed in agony as the pain took over his mind. Daman muttered elven blessings of health and spells of mending on the arm. The edges of the wounds closing a bit, but mending less than the spell should.

"My magics are not effective on the wound!" He cried out to Thrang. The high elf lifted the dagger to his nose and sniffed it, careful to avoid the blood. He wrinkled his nose in disgust and threw it away.

"The blade was enchanted with black magic, I can do nothing about this wound." He shouted again to Thrang.

Thrang turned on the goblin once more with renewed fury etched on his bearded face.

"Tell us how to undo the curse and I will give you a swift end." He ordered.

The goblin spit on the axe and muttered a curse in its native tongue. Thrang held the axe closer to its throat now.

"Tell me, now!" He thundered, before pointing to the bloodthirsty wolf beside him. "Or you tell her!"

The goblin flinched as Silver growled and brought a hand to its throat on reflex. It darted its eyes around like a lizard for a moment, before holding its hands up in surrender.

"Alright, alright." It spoke. "Don't get your skivvies in a bunch. The blade was enchanted to cause unhealable wounds."

"By who!" Shouted Thrang.

"Th-the ruler of the Deep Forest! The Dark One!" It cried frantically. "He sent us here to guard and escort the cart. I don't know him or what he looks like, just that he controls everything in this forest, and is graced with darkness."

"What kind of darkness?" Thrang asked forcefully, masking his concern as to who they were dealing with. "I want details, creature! Details!"

"There are stories everywhere about him. Some false others true. No one knows, but the Dark One himself." The goblin answered in a hushed ramble. "But all the stories have one thing in common... necromancy." It then glanced around like a caged animal as if expecting the sorcerer to appear.

"Then our this escort has been a trap." Thrang thought aloud, then he remembered his original question. "Is there a cure to the curse?"

"Yeah, the curse is on the blade itself." The goblin said compliantly. Thrang looked to Daman who was checking the blade as he applied a strip of his tunic to Sylvan's wound to stop the bleeding. After a half a minute Daman nodded in confirmation of the goblin's statement. Thrang turned back to see the creature with a nervous grin.

"I helped you out." It said. "Now let me go."

"Not quite, goblin." Thrang spat. "Why was the treasure trapped with a curse if it was being escorted."

"It was a trap for you all." It said as it laughed slightly. "The Dark One makes it his business to know everything about everyone who enters his forest. Now let me go. Free me!"

"As you wish." Thrang said coolly, as he let the goblin get up and start to leave. He waited a moment before shouting to Silver.

"Sick em, girl!"

The goblin spun around in terror as the fenrere charged at the creature who nearly killed her master. Sylvan looked away as he heard the screams of his attempted assassin.

"Good dog." He muttered to himself.

"I'm unraveling the curse, Sylvan," Daman spoke as he touched the blade, unseen runes glowing as they began to fade from the blade. "I will be able to heal you once the runes on the blade are destroyed. I'm not letting you survive a wraith battle and then succumb to mere enchantments like these."

"I'm so glad a blunt, bloodthirsty dwarf and a magical elf with a peculiar idea of how worthy my cause of death is were the ones who were interested in my adventure." Sylvan said, attempting to laugh despite the pain.

"Very funny, lad." Thrang muttered, secretly happy that their friend was returning to his old, annoying self. The process took several minutes and they were agony for him, but Sylvan held strong as Daman muttered a spell and the dagger crumbled to ash. The wound began to dry of blood and the rent flesh sewed itself together.

"Thank you." He praised. The wound has still burning, but the mark was but a scar and he could move his arm with a slight pain. "I was probably crippled."

"Elven magic is at its strongest when a person needs help." Daman explained, pulling Sylvan to his feet as the healed man leaned on the black cart.

"What do we do now?" Asked Thrang, curious as to where they would go from here.

"The goblins spoke of a master of the forest. The 'Dark One', they called him." Sylvan spoke. "They also claim him to be a necromancer of all things. Do you know of anyone bearing such a title?"

Daman's face was white as a sheet, as if he had gazed into the abyss. He then gulped in nervousness and twiddled his thumbs a bit, avoiding his question. Sylvan's eyes narrowed.

"What do you know of this person?" He asked.

Daman took a deep breath and spoke in a hushed and worried tone.

"We need to leave this forest now!" He rasped. "We've been lucky to not come into contact with more traps and monsters of that vile sorcerer."

"So you do know of what the lad speaks?" Thrang stated. "Who is this necromancer?"

"He is an ancient horror. A commander of life and death that can summon the wraiths and aberrations of the Cursed Realm itself!" He cried, his face contorted in utter fear. "He has caused the death of thousands over the course of his millenia-long life."

"How have we not heard of such a monster?" Thrang questioned, voicing both his and Sylvan's question. "Such a figure would be hailed in infamy in the halls of hell and below."

"He has changed personas over the years." Daman explained. "He took on many different forms; elf, dwarf, man, once even a satyr if I remember correctly. The point is that only the elves themselves know of him as he is to this day and it is safe to say that they are terrified of him."

"So we find this guy and we kill him then." Thrang stated, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

"One does not kill a necromancer!" Daman shouted. "They are immortal, all-powerful, endlessly superior in magic, he's the strongest one to date too."

"Then we find a way." Sylvan said speaking up. "We've slain goblins and faced down a wraith together."

"You faced a wraith." Thrang corrected. "We took a near permanent dirt nap."

"But we know how to face them now." Sylvan insisted. "We have to overpower them with happiness, love, friendship, whatever. Good memories and emotions are like acid to them."

"That still leaves the nigh unstoppable, immortal psycho who rules the living and the dead." Daman said, looking at him as if he were talking crazy.

"I know it will take months, years even, but we're in this now." Sylvan proclaimed. "We came in here with a purpose to murder and loot from murderers and looters. Now we have a better option on the table. We slay the greatest dark force of all time."

"Why do we care about this abomination?" Daman questioned vigorously. "All stories of him end in death for all who serve or oppose him!"

"That is precisely why we must destroy him." Sylvan rebutted. "We came into this forest for goblin blood and treasure. We can't do that with a force such as him controlling the forest. We would go down in history for such an achievement."

"It could be done." Thrang said, his voice rising in hope.

"We would die in weeks, maybe a month if we're lucky." Daman said sullenly, wavering slightly.

"We will fight the good fight for the better of everyone." Sylvan reasoned. "He will continue to kill, murder, and resurrect those he slays, turning them into puppets of his own. If we end that we won't have just become legends, but a force of good marked in the books of history themselves!"

"I'm liking this more and more." Thrang said.

"All we need to do is try." Sylvan insisted. "We may go down in flames, no one even knowing our names, but we will have gone down fighting as a force for good."

"Certain death guaranteed, zero percent chance of success, I'm in." Thrang said sarcastically, but was on board nonetheless.

"Silver?" Sylvan asked, said canine barking in agreement, ready to serve. Dwarf, dog, and man alike looked at the elf standing indecisively. Daman finally shrugged in defeat.

"Why the hell not. I'm in."

"Then prepare for the chance of a lifetime lads." Thrang spoke grinning madly. "We're about to meet the abyss in epic battle. Let's get there early."

The four set off into the forest, soon to prepare for the upcoming battle that would cleanse the Deep Forest of evil and corruption, or be their own end.

Michael Curry

Memoriae Mori

The steady drip....drip....drip of droplets hitting water was the first thing Amaril noticed, the sound resonating throughout whatever room he was in. When he opened his eyes, he found himself in the middle of a sewer tunnel, staring up at the brickwork roof as his eyes adjusted to the stygian darkness. The smell of the sewer, a disgusting combination of bile and rot, was muted to him, which he took that as a blessing rather than a curse. Sitting up from the ditch, he turned his head to look about the sewer, taking in his surroundings. The tunnel stopped at the far end, opening up to what he assumed to be a river or canal, but what absorbed his attention was the slumped over form of another man, leaning against the wall next to him.

The man was an elf-like Amaril, given the shape of his ears, with raven locks down to his shoulders. He was wearing a breastplate made from some kind of scale, with a short scabbard at his side, though there was no blade present. As Amaril reached out a hand to touch the other man, to wake him up and demand answers or to inquire where they were, he noticed something strange: The man's face was bruised and misshapen, as though it had been struck repeatedly by a blunt object. The man was dead, killed by some thug or robber.

Turning away from the dead man with a sigh, Amaril caught sight of his own reflection in a puddle: Sharp features, black hair going down his face to his chin, and a breastplate, with his entire figure surrounded by an odd ethereal sheen. When he thought of it, his

reflection seemed very similar to the appearance of the dead man, uncannily so in fact. Going back to the dead man's face, Amaril studied it again: The pointed ears like his, the similar hair, the scar across his throat as though they had barely survived a near-death experience in battle just...like him. In fact, every single feature on the dead man's face was identical to his.

"It is almost like this man and I are the same person," he said, trying to make sense of the situation. "But that would be impossible! That would have to be some kind of faulty magic, or perhaps a trick! The only way for him to be exactly like myself, except dead, would be if...oh." He trailed off, words dying on his lips. The realization of what that meant hit him in the pit of his stomach. If this man was exactly like him except for the fact that the man was dead, that had to mean that Amaril was also dead. Dead and somehow not able to pass on to the afterlife, trapped as some remnant of his former self for all eternity. It was a sobering thought.

"Oh," he said, because it was the only thing he could say as the metallic taste of copper filled his mouth. He didn't know how to vocalize the existential crisis he was having. How does one rationalize or explain that they were dead, and forced to life on in the mortal plane as some kind of perversion of their former self? What did he do to deserve such a punishment? He couldn't recall anything he did that was particularly evil. In fact, he couldn't recall anything particular at all.

It was as though his mind was clouded by a fog, the kind that never truly leaves, and concealing everything from sight. He could barely remember anything beyond his own name. He could find flashes of memories, a smiling woman, a hearty laugh, even a dragon's roar, but nothing solid. He didn't know why he was in the sewers, where these sewers were, or anything! He couldn't even remember his parents. Slowly, pinpricks of tears traitorously slipped from his eyelids.

"Why me!" He screamed into the nothingness of the sewer. "What did I do to deserve this?! Why don't I remember!?" He wailed, to no response. Until he heard some voices carrying down from one of the ends of the

tunnel. As he crept closer, he was able pick up two different people having a conversation.

"So, did you hear about that dwarf that got arrested?" Said a male voice, deep and gravelly. He could see one of the figures gesture to the other, as both were sitting on a side of a bridge crossing the river.

"No," The other figure replied, this one with a female, young-sounding voice. "I was busy cleaning the barracks all day today, and just got off my shift. What happened?"

"Apparently this dwarf priest was arrested by the royal police. They say he was with that band of criminals that destroyed Linstrana, but he was the only one they caught." The male explained, "So the captain wants us to keep an eye out for an elf with a short sword and scaled leather armor. Whoever brings them in gets a thousand gold pieces as a reward. That's enough to let a man retire early, and buy a new necklace for his loving wife."

"That is a lot of gold," the woman replied. "But I mean, these people apparently destroyed an entire village in one night. I'm not sure I'd want to find one of them in a dark alley."

"You've got that right. Rumor has it, the elf is the son of this elven noble, but he couldn't learn magecraft like his father, and was shunned because of it. So one night, the son runs away without his parents realizing, and his father disowned him." The older man explained to his partner.

The two figures, city guards, continued their conversation, but Amaril has stopped listening. The man had mentioned a short sword and leather armor. That was what his body was wearing when he died! Did that make him a criminal, some evil anarchist who destroyed towns for his own amusement? He didn't think he was an evil person, but his memory had been unreliable as of late. Amaril needed answers, but he had no idea how to get them. So far his only ideas were to either find this imprisoned dwarf and ask for answers, or to wander the

continent and hope something returned to him. And to be honest, he really didn't want to try and meet this criminal who might've known him as a fellow criminal, so he decided to sneak out of the city at night, and try to find something in the world to jog his memory.

That night, Amaril exited the city under the cover of darkness. His escape, if you could call it that, was not difficult at all, due to his newfound ability to move through solid surfaces such as walls and gates. Now, he stood on a small hill, about half of a mile from the city's outskirts. From here, he could see airships help afloat by large balloons and riverboats slowly cruising along the river, all leaving the city proper, headed to whatever destination they wished. To Amaril, it was oddly poetic, if that was the correct word. Like the ships, he was headed out of the city into the unknown. Perhaps he was being too sentimental, after all he was simply a dead man stuck on earth, who chose to wander instead of haunting people. Did that make him some kind of "good" ghost? From what little memories he had since waking up, Amaril didn't know anything about ghosts besides the base concept, and certainly hadn't encountered one, unless he counted himself.

"Well then," Amaril said, his voice sounding oddly layered and echoing, "let's find out the best direction to walk then. I suppose it is a benefit that I don't seem to get tired, or fall through the ground similar to how I move through walls." He looked around, observing the well-beaten path that led to and from the city, looking for some kind of sign, perhaps a divine light or phenomenon in the stars, to tell him where to go. But there was none; even the gods had forgotten Amaril it seemed. Perhaps he deserved it, in some sense. From what he saw of his...corpse, he didn't carry a symbol of worship of any kind on his body, unless he worshipped a god who didn't have a symbol. Maybe that was why he was stuck in between life and the afterlife, because he didn't worship any god and therefore didn't have an afterlife to go to. That was a chilling thought, stuck between life and death for eternity until he went mad or was killed again by some overzealous paladin looking to "destroy all evil, regardless of form," and decided that a harmless ghost was clearly the biggest threat available.

"Time to switch topics," Amaril said to himself, shuddering at the thought of dying again. Once was enough for him. "I suppose I'll just follow the road then?" He said, questioning himself at the same time as choosing a direction to walk.

Amaril walked for hours, time seemed less noticeable to him now that he didn't get tired. Eventually, the morning sun began to rise, and that was when he found his first setback. As he was walking in the early morning shade of a tall tree, he made the mistake of stopping directly into the light of the rising sun.

Immediately, he felt the most odd and most horrifying sensation he had ever felt before. The light seemed to burn his skin like he was being lit on fire while simultaneously being drowned in ice cold water. As he screamed, he could feel his entire being slipping away the longer he stood in the light, words cursing the light spilling from his mouth in a multitude of languages. It was a terrible pain, feeling his soul being torn away from his body by this...purifying force. Retreating back into the shade of the trees, Amaril consulted his options. Unfortunately, they all came out to the same result: wait until nightfall and continue from then.

The recent development regarding his strong aversion to sunlight meant that Amaril could only travel at half the pace he wanted, at least until he found some way to hide from the sun. Perhaps he could get a large cloak or something to cover his body. Regardless, Amaril could do nothing but wait until sundown and then continue traveling, so he resigned himself to attempting to sleep, if it was even possible for him now. Leaning against the tree, he closed his eyes, thankful he couldn't see through them like he could other parts of his body, and attempted to clear his mind.

He had a dream that night, or rather, a nightmare. He could remember seeing himself running through the sewers, heavily injured, fleeing from something. For some reason, in this dream he was clutching a handful of ashes desperately as he ran. Then, as he turned a corner, he ran into something, and was knocked to the ground. Looking up, he saw a huge mass of flesh, an ogre, leering down at him, before the brute brought its fists down toward his face. There was a sickening

crunch, and everything went black. Then he woke up, gasping for air, holding his arms out to defend against a killer that wasn't there. Amaril didn't sleep much after that.

Amaril's travel slowed, due to only being able to travel at night. He didn't sleep anymore either, preferring to lay awake doing menial tasks such as counting stars for hours on end until the sun set. Eventually, after nearly one month of traveling along the road, he reached a place where the road passed by a small wooden building with two stories, and a wooden sign reading "The Screaming Prince" held above the door.

For some reason, this location seemed familiar to Amaril, and he decided to investigate. Entering the building, the first thing he noticed was the innkeeper was a half-orc, dressed in an odd combination of a pointed triangular hat made from blue cloth and emblazoned with tiny yellow stars, and clothes made from leather and stained with multiple different substances.

The second thing that Amaril noticed was the presence of some kind of...animated box standing in the corner. The box was made of metal, and had two spindly arms and two thin legs, with a small pair of metal wings on its back, and a large unblinking eye in the middle of its body. The box stared at him, before making a very unnatural waving motion with its hand. Confused, Amaril walked up to the orc, and cleared his throat, prompting the orc to turn around.

"Welcome to the Screaming Price Bar and Grill, how can I help you-" The orc began speaking, before he turned around and saw who Amaril was. "Ah, it's you. How'd that treasure hunt go? Did you bring me back my share of the gold?"

"I'm sorry? Do you know who I am?" Amaril asked. "Because I don't rememb-"

"Of course I remember who you are!" The man interrupted. "You're that elf who I sold a treasure map in exchange for a share of the treasure. But you're a ghost now, so I guess that didn't work out for you,

unfortunately. Excuse me, for a moment." The orc rambled, before turning to the box. "Boxy! Bring me the tub of water for the dishes!"

"So you do know who I was, then," Amaril asked, intrigued by this man, but confused as well. "Because I'm afraid that somehow I've lost my own memories. Perhaps you could help me?"

"Hm." The orc seemed to consider something for a moment, before shrugging. "No."

"Excuse me!? What do you mean no?!" Amaril yelled at the man. Clearly this man knew him, but why was he refusing to help him remember?

"I mean no, I can't help you." The half orc replied. "Mainly because I don't know anything besides what I just told you. You stayed at my inn for one day, then ran off with your friends the dwarf and the other half-orc. Mentioned Linstrana too, if that means anything, but I can't see why anyone would want to go there, especially after the blight hit." The innkeeper shrugged, before beginning to wipe a dish clean.

"Linstrana?" Amaril perked up. "That sounds familiar, but I don't remember why. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes actually, it's near the southern coast, across the severed hills. Most don't go there, town had a horrible blight nearly half a year ago. Do you need a map or something?" The half orc offered, before noticing what exactly he said. "Right, ghost. Nevermind."

"It's fine. I've had some time to come to terms with it." Amaril sighed. "Thank you anyway, mr..?"

"Klaatu. Just Klaatu," The cheery bartender replied. "Are you sure I can't get you some magmin flambé before you go? What about some roadside-side salad?" He offered Amaril, trying to sell his food and goods, but Amaril had already rushed out the door into the moonlit night.

Walking to Linstrana took Amaril nearly a year, due to the pure distance from the middle of the continent's west coast to the near-bottom of the landmass, and needing to seek cover from the harsh rays of the summer sun for a portion of every day. However, beyond the sun threatening to burn him out of existence, the weather didn't bother Amaril at all. Apparently rain and cold didn't bother ghosts, and neither did the violent winds of the mountains called the severed hills. But soon, Amaril approached Linstrana, and he was able to smell it before he saw it.

Only a few miles outside of the mountains, Amaril's nose, however muted, caught scent of something terrible. While before in the sewers Amaril had faced the smell of waste and rot, this stench was that of death itself, and soon he discovered why. The entire town of Linstrana was a burnt and destroyed shell of itself, sitting in the middle of rotten fields of wheat, and a swamp that might have once been a forest.

As he walked through the ruined village, Amaril began to feel....hazy. It was almost like something was tugging on the back of his mind, but he couldn't tell what it was exactly. The tug only became worse as he approached the center of the ruins, what used to be the town square, and soon it was a dull throb in the back of his non-physical skull. Suddenly the pain became too much to bear, Amaril's vision grew darker, and he felt himself pass out.

When Amaril came to, he felt....different. He was heavier for some reason, and warmer. He was also hungry, which was odd, as he didn't have a stomach anymore since he died. He opened his eyes, and came face to face with the upside-down top half a woman's face.

With a cry of shock, Amaril tumbled backwards, off of whatever bed he had been laid down on, and slammed his head into the floor. Pain rocketed through his body, and he let out a soft groan of discontent before he realized what happened. He was able to feel pain again, and it was euphoric. His death and being a ghost must have been a terrible, terrible nightmare, and one he was happy to wake from.

Sitting up again, Amaril was met again with the strange woman. She was a young human woman, perhaps in her early twenties, clad in dark leathers and with two blades sheathed at her side. Despite her somewhat fearsome clothing and weapons, her face was as non-threatening as could be, with her showing concern for him after he had bashed his head into the floorboards.

"Captain, are you alright?" The strange woman asked, her voice carrying a tone of youthful vigor in it, but also strict professionalism. "You hit your head pretty hard there."

"I'm fine," Amaril said without thinking, still shocked that he had a physical body again. "What happened?" He asked the woman.

"Well, you and Damachos went to find our new client, some dwarf named Garth, I think is how it's pronounced," She explained. "After discussing payment, you took him to the tavern to meet me and explain what exactly he hired us for."

"Yes, that sounds correct." Amaril mused, listening to this woman recount his actions.

There was a knock at the door, and before either of the, could respond, a large tiefling entered the room. The fiend blood in the man was apparent for all to see, from his ramlike horns, rusty red skin, and cloven hooved feet. Across his back was slung a large greataxe, itself nearly as tall as the man carrying it.

"Thola, is Amaril awake yet?" The man, Damachos, Amaril assumed, barked as he entered the small room. "It's nearly noon, and everything's ready for us to start going to the capital city," Now fully inside the room, the bulky Damachos was able to see Amaril, and gave him a small wave. "Good to see you're awake captain. Ready to get moving?" He said, with pure professionalism in his voice.

"Of course, the sooner the better," Amaril responded automatically. "Just give me a minute to get my armor on, then let's get going." By

the time he had finished talking, the others, Damachos and the woman he assumed to be Thola, were already gone, leaving him alone.

When he was finished dressing and made to exit the room, he suddenly felt a familiar tug in the back of his skull, and found himself feeling faint. Realizing that he was about to pass out again, and afraid of everything he had experienced being a dream of some sorts, Amaril tried to scream. But already he could feel himself being pulled out of his body, and was forced to watch the back of his own head as his body walked out the door, to meet with his companions.

Amaril awoke from his trance, gasping, and he was sure if he had a real body, he could be in a cold sweat. What had that vision been? Was that him in the past, and if so, who were those other people, the dwarf and the other two?

Before he had time to think about it, Amaril suddenly felt some kind of pulse go through his head, before he heard someone speaking.

"Amaril, it's Garth. Glad you're alive. Managed to escape the guards and jail. Go north to Mt. Skyfang in the heartlands. Meet me there. Stay safe." A mysterious male voice echoed inside his brain, before it was suddenly gone. Confused, startled, and a little scared, Amaril considered not listening to the mysterious voice in its head. But the promise of knowledge from someone who knew him before he died was too much to resist.

Additionally, if he remembered correctly, the dwarf mentioned in his dream was also called Garth. Perhaps they were the same person? Without any other leads to his past, and a strong desire to leave this rotting town before he somehow passed out despite being a ghost again, Amaril basically ran out of Linstrana, heading to the north.

After receiving that strange message from this...Garth, Amaril begun traveling north, to where his contact had told him to go. Luckily, due to winter approaching fast, the days became shorter and Amaril had longer nights to travel. Unlike the long journey to Linstrana, thanks to the changing of the seasons and different climate of the heartland

of the continent, he was able to reach the mountain specified in only six months instead of one year. Walking up the mountain hadn't even taken a day, thanks to Amaril not needing food, water, or rest, until finally Amaril reached near to the summit of the mountain, and came to a small, ramshackle hut built into the cliff's face.

The hut was made almost entirely from stone, hewn directly into the mountain itself, with the exception of a small brickwork doorway, and a simple but effective wooden door, signifying the entrance. Assuming this was the "home" that this Garth was speaking of, Amaril prepared himself to open the door and meet this man who claimed to know his past. When he reached out to knock on the door, the door suddenly opened, revealing the man inside.

The priest was a dwarf with ginger hair, a full head height shorter than Amaril, dressed in white robes and carrying a prayer book in one hand and a mace in the other. Seeing the spectral form of the elf standing before him, the dwarf looked shocked, then angry, before he opened the book, looked back at Amaril, and began shouting some kind of prayer.

"May the radiance of the holy dwarf-father Moradin, forger of dwarfkind, blacksmith of the gods, drive you from this land! Unholy foulness, crime against life, begone from this place!" The dwarf finished his yelled prayer, and suddenly a burst of light shine forth from the dwarf's amulet.

If someone asked Amaril before, he would have tell them that he was well-acquainted with pain. His nightmares of his own death, and the harm the sun threatened him with every day, was reminder enough that ghosts could feel pain. But he was wrong. Everything before now wasn't pain. This was true pain, feeling his ghostly body forced away from everything and anything around him, this light of whatever a Moradin was threatening to erase his very existence entirely with its burning power.

Struggling to speak, his words slurring from the pain, Amaril tried to reach out to this priest.

"G-arth!" He gurgled. "It..me! A-ril!" He attempted to tell the strange small man. Somehow, it worked. Apparently hearing Amaril's labored screamed of pain and calls for reason, the dwarf lowered his book, and the burning light vanished.

"For what it's worth, sorry I tried to revoke you," The dwarf said, looking sheepish. "But to be fair, you never told me you where a ghost. Anyway, it's about time you arrived!" The dwarf said with a hearty chuckle, "I was beginning to think you weren't going to show up!" He said, before gesturing for Amaril to follow him inside. Confused as to why the dwarf was acting in this way, Amaril followed. Hopefully this priest would have the answers he was looking for. When they were both inside the hut, the dwarf spoke again, "Now, I know what you're thinking: 'Garth, how did you survive?' and lemme tell you, it's a long story."

"Actually," Amaril spoke up, "I don't really know who you are, or who I am really. I have some memories, but only of certain events or places. Even then, my memories only returned to me when I went and found those places. I was hoping you could help with that." When he said that, that Garth looked dumbfounded.

"Oh," Garth said, "Well then, this should take a while. Let's start at the beginning. A long time ago, about a two years, give or take, you and your friends found me in the middle of the wasteland known as the severed hills. And then..."

The dwarf continued talking, and Amaril realized that he may have made a mistake. Hopefully, there was some truth to this Garth's words, and he did know a way to help Amaril. So he resigned himself to listen to the story, no matter how long, or boring, it was. Garth continued either way, so it wasn't as though Amaril could stop him.

"And then, we went to find this 'Oceo-limo....Oceo-limpid....Oceo.....Ocean Man', and he took the cursed ring from me, which was good because we had to cut off Amaya's finger to get it off her and then we met a fairy dragon named Lord Tinkle and he wanted us to fight an actual dragon and it was breathing fire and nearly bit you

in half..." Garth continued talking, and by the sound of it he wasn't even close to done. Amaril needed to do something.

"Yes, yes, that's all very interesting Garth, but perhaps we could try something that has worked before?" Amaril interjected as his dwarf host paused to breathe.

"What do you mean by that huh? Are my stories not helpin'?" Garth asked, looking somewhat insulted and downtrodden at the same time

"Not really. I'm sure they're very good stories, but I've found that if I visit somewhere of importance in my past, I can begin to remember more about it. We could try visiting somewhere important to my past self? Amaril suggested, wracking his mind for somewhere important to him when he was alive.

"Well, if you've got nothin' else, I've got a place. Or at least, an idea about one," Garth perked up. "There's this manor house near a lake to the north. Apparently some old elf family uses it as a summer home when they visit outside of their kingdom. Heard the name is...Amas-something or other. My memory isn't as good as it used to be. Being hit by a warlock's brain magic do that to you."

"Wait." Something clicked for Amaril in his mind. "The name of this house, is it Amastasia Malanore?" He asked, unbelieving of the revelation he discovered.

"That's it!" Garth brightened. "Why? Is it important?"

"I..." Amaril paused. "I think it belongs to my family. I remember...leaping out a window and climbing over the fence around the grounds. I think...if what I know is true, that was when I left my home for good, and started adventuring."

Garth looked at Amaril, studying his face, before standing up abruptly.

"What are we waiting for then? Let's go find your old home and maybe your family and have a family reunion.." Garth trailed off, already rushing around the room, struggling to pull a vest of metal ringlets over his head while gathering up what appeared to be a backpack and supplies.

Amaril remained sitting in the shoddy stone chair. Sighing, he stood from the chair, and walked over the the still-open door, joining his ally. Together, this dwarf was going to help him find out who he was before he died, and maybe discover why he ran away from home in the first place. Turning to help Garth get his armor over his head and his supplies packed away with what little ability to manipulate objects he had, Amaril found himself feeling excitement. It had only taken him a little under two years, but Amaril had finally found someone who knew who he was, and he was on his way home. For the first time in two years, Amaril allowed himself to crack a smile.

Jack James

Space Debris

Everything I knew, everything I could see was slowly getting farther and farther away from me. Someone once told me that being in the absence of gravity was an unimaginable feeling that could not be explained or compared to anything on Earth and they were right. There is no up or down and left or right. Every sense of direction is lost and you are just there in nothingness. Floating in space is like no feeling you have ever felt. There is only one problem with me floating in space right now. The only reason I'm out here is because my crews space station was hit by an asteroid.

As far as I know I'm the only survivor that got away from the crash. The rest of my crew died on impact. I was already out of the station when it happened because I was conducting experiments on bacteria and the effect space has on them. My team was inside analyzing our research when the asteroid hit. When everything happened the line holding me to the station was cut and I lost all communication with everyone and everything that could get me home. The only thing I could see was the wreckage of the station and Earth as it slowly got further and further away. Even if I could get back

to the station there would be nothing to salvage. My team were the lucky ones. They all died as soon as the asteroid hit but I'll have to wait until life support gives out. It's a funny feeling drifting away from everything you have ever known. Knowing death is imminent but still not sure as to when it will happen. With all communications gone it was just me, the debris from the ship, and the dark endless void that is space. End transmission.

It's been about ten minutes since my last transmission. At least I think it has. Time seems to last forever when you are so alone in space. No rescue team could get here in time to save me and even if they could I'd be too far gone for their satellites to track me. I knew the risks of space travel when I became an astronaut but even then there is no training that can prepare you for death, especially one like this. As a kid I had always dreamed of being an astronaut and going to space. I dreamt of what it was like to float among the stars. Little did I know that would be the way I died. I guess dreams do come true, but at what cost? End transmission.

By the way I forgot to mention this earlier but the reason I don't know how long I have is because the readings for my life support glitched out so the whole system is unreadable. I don't even know what the point in explaining all of this is. No one is ever going to hear it. Most people won't even know it existed. No one on Earth even knows I'm alive right now. They probably thought I died in the crash along with the others. It's not like me to complain about everything so much but I am not exactly in the greatest state of mind right now. It's as if I was just told I have cancer and I only have months to live but in my case I only have hours. I didn't get the chance to accept my imminent death or even say my goodbyes to the ones I love. My wife and daughter are at home right now. I wonder if they have heard about the crash yet. I'm not ready to die yet. I'm not ready to lose everything. I can't let my daughter grow up without a father but there is nothing I can do to stop that from happening. End transmission

Sorry about my last transmission. I've collected myself. Well as much as a man that's floating into an infinite void can be. Like I said earlier when you are floating out in space there is no other

feeling like it. It is like skydiving but the universe is there to catch you. It feels almost as if you are falling but there's no gravity weighing you down, no friction, nothing. I used to think being in the absence of gravity was the most freeing feeling ever, like there was nothing weighing me down. Of course back when I thought like that I was in control and still attached to the station. Since I have lost control it no longer feels freeing. Instead it feels like I'm not freed at all. I feel trapped. No matter how I wave my arms, kick my legs, or turn my body I will still never be able to escape this and that is a scary feeling. It's funny having no restraints but feeling more restrained than ever. End transmission.

This transmission is for my wife. Hey honey. I am so sorry. I should never have decided to take this position to go to space. I knew the dangers yet I decided to come anyway. I know I always told you that going to space was my biggest dream but I was blinded. The truth is my dream had already come true. Being married to you and having our daughter was a dream come true. I'm sorry I didn't see that before I decided to go to space. I keep replaying this one memory over and over in my head. That memory is of the day we met. It was at university and we had an astrophysics class together. By luck we sat down next to each other in the lecture hall and something just sparked. Later that week I asked you out and the rest was history. You were my one and only and I love you so, so much. I'm sorry I left. If I could go back to you I would do anything in my power to do it. Goodbye. End transmission.

It really is lonely here in space. It is true that no one can hear you scream in space. No one can hear or see you do a lot of things in space. I've drifted so far away from the station that I can only see a little spec of it still. Everything I know is fading away and this is probably the most scared I have ever felt. In my best estimate it has been about three hours since the crash. Which if I'm correct I believe I have about five hours left. End transmission.

This will be a transmission for my daughter. I know you are too young to fully understand what is happening right now but I need you to know that daddy loves you. I need you to know that you mean the world to me babygirl. When you were born I knew that my purpose

in life was to protect you and to give you the future that you deserved but I've failed to do that. I will never be able to see your beautiful face again and I cannot be there for you. I will never know what your future holds or who you will turn out to be but I know it will be great. I love you very much and so does your mother. You became my world when you came into my life but I let other dreams and ideas lead me to other things. I love you till the end of the universe and back. Please just promise you will do one thing for me. Please take care of your mother for me. Both of you need someone to love them so please always be there for your mother. I love you babygirl. End transmission.

Do you know why space is black? It is actually a paradox. It's known as Olber's Paradox. Space being black is a paradox is because if the universe is truly infinitely large and infinitely old then space would actually be bright. The idea of the universe being infinitely old and endless contradicts the idea that space is black which makes the blackness of space paradoxical. One explanation for this paradox is that the Earth is not actually infinitely old. Some believe it's only 15 billion years old which is why we cannot see stars everywhere in space. We can only see as far as the light that has traveled as far as 15 billion years. This is pretty random but I have always loved learning little facts like this and it is keeping my mind off of other things. Did you know Einstein referred to time as a fourth dimension. He believed that time is completely relative and that it only moves forward. He believed that time could speed up or slow down in relativity to something else. He even believed that gravity could bend and morph time into different speeds. Theories of space and time are truly endless. That's why it's always fascinated me so much. I wanted to discover the unknown. End transmission.

When I die I'll just keep floating in the same direction until it hits something. Do to the coldness of space I will just freeze and keep going. There is the possibility that my body is preserved because of the cold. Nothing could decompose it. I basically just be rock or some kind of space debris just floating around forever. Maybe eventually I'll float into a black hole or a star. I know I wouldn't be alive but that would be crazy. Could you imagine my body getting sucked into a black hole. The laws of physics have no bounds in a black hole. From the outside perspective it would look like my body

was being stretched and contorted by the black hole but my body would actually be unharmed. After I was sucked into the middle of the black hole, the singularity, I would fall into the unknown. No one knows where black holes lead, maybe just absolute nothingness. The possibilities are endless. End transmission.

I know this is not the best way of thinking but I've been out here in space for what feels like an eternity and I'm honestly thinking about just cutting off life support. Death is imminent and it's not like I have a lot to do out here except make these logs. I don't really have much left to say either. There's not really a point in prolonging a death that is bound to happen. Death has always been a scary thing to think about. Death is almost like a black hole in that it's completely unknown. There's also no return from either of them. I've always been a fan of the unknown but death is one of the unknowns I would like to figure out. End transmission.

First off, I'm still alive. Second I feel like these transmissions are getting a little all over the place. I'm trying to keep them simple and to the point been your as alone as I am right now you tend to just say everything you are thinking because no one will hear it anyway. No one will ever hear any of this most likely. No one will ever hear my voice again. No one will ever see or hear anything I say or do again. I miss what being on Earth felt like. Zero gravity is great but the feeling of being able to walk and run and just the feel of being secured to the ground is such a good feeling. I miss a lot of things from Earth. End transmission.

"If you don't love what you do then why do it?" and "Die knowing that you accomplished something" were things my parents would always say to growing up. For the most part I think they were right. I chose to do what I loved and it turned out to be a pretty good decision, well except for the situation I'm in right, but they were right. Being a astronaut makes me happy and I love being one. Life is pretty sweet when you can say you love your work. The only problem with my parents sayings is that I'm not sure I will die knowing I accomplished anything. my life's work was all on that space station and now it's all destroyed. Everything I had worked to do is gone. I'm

not sure I will die knowing I accomplished something. End transmission.

I wish I could have Spotify out in here. Music could make this a little more bearable. I'd sing songs to myself but I'd probably just get annoyed with how badly I sing to be honest. There's a lot of things that I wish I could have out here in space. Netflix would be pretty great to. Maybe I could finally catch up on *Breaking Bad* before I die. You know that game where you chose three movies to have on desert island? People don't realize how nice having a movie would actually be when you are stranded. If I had to choose what three movies I would want to have with me right now I would definitely have *Forrest Gump*, *The Big Lebowski*, and probably *Anchorman* because it would make me laugh quite a bit. I wish I could have something to make me laugh right now. End transmission.

I would do anything to have a conversation with someone right now. I don't even care who it is. To just see another person would be amazing. I never thought it possible but I am tired of hearing my own voice. I need someone else's voice in the mix. I cannot listen to myself talk forever. That would be agony. I miss the sounds of others voices. I know I have only been out here for a few hours but going this long without talking to anyone has been rough. It is a lonely place out here floating in space. End transmission.

There are about 500,000 pieces of debris just floating around in space from old spaceships and other things humans have put into space. I have now become one of those pieces of debris. I'm just another object floating around that people put into space. It's not the worst thing to be. I never really felt great about just being put into the ground after I die. Being put six feet under just never really felt appealing to me. This way I get to be put thousands of miles away. A viking funeral always sounded appealing too. Getting put out to sea then someone shoots a flaming arrow out your boat. That always just sounded like a cool way to be passed on into the next life. End transmission.

It really is beautiful out here. I feel like I haven't talked enough about what I'm seeing as I'm drifting away. To be among the

cosmos is a beautiful sight. I'm not far enough away from Earth to see other planets or anything super up close but in the distance I'm seeing more stars than I have ever seen in my life. Space truly is marvelous. I can still see Earth because I'm not moving that fast but I'm still getting farther and farther away. Earth looks so small from up here. It really puts life into perspective seeing how small we actually are in this ever expanding universe. End transmission.

I think I have about another hour. I'm pretty hungry. I haven't gotten to eat since I was on the station. Not hungry enough to starve but it is kinda sad that I'm going out on an empty stomach. Even serial killers get a last meal before they get put to death. My last meal was dry freeze-dried strawberries. What a meal to go out on right? It wasn't even a meal, it was just a snack earlier in the day. I'm also really thirsty. Food sounds pretty good right now. I never thought I'd have to go out on an empty stomach. End transmission.

What a life to live. I have about thirty minutes left alive and it's kinda scary but at the same time I think I have finally come to terms with death. Once life support cuts out I wonder what will happen first. Will I die do to lack of oxygen or will I freeze because the heating system in my suit cuts out? Most likely the ladder. Once the heat cuts out space will probably freeze me immediately. Hopefully it's not very painful. End transmission.

Hey, It's been a while. I just haven't had a lot to talk about in my final moments. This will most likely be my final transmission. Dying among the stars doesn't sound all that bad anymore. I can still see Earth. I'm getting colder but that's only because I'm getting farther and farther away from the sun. The suits were only made to be able to last in certain conditions around Earth. I'm not far enough away for the cold to kill me right now though. The suit can still handle it. Of course death will still happen but for now, for a few more minutes I'm fine. I lived a pretty good life. I had a loving wife and a beautiful daughter. I may not have accomplished everything but I did what I could in the time I had. I had a lot of fun. I did things I had always dreamed of doing. I touched the cosmos and soared above the Earth. I loved what I did. I loved my life. I'm just part of space now. Drifting forever. It's not so bad. I've become part of the universe

now. I may be space debris just floating around but I sure as hell am not a meaningless piece. I wish my wife and daughter well. I love everyone back on Earth. Goodbye. End transmission-.

Kasey Schuler

The Moon Only Comes out at Night

Shayla wasn't used to talking to people. She didn't like to, therefore she did everything she could to avoid it. She sat in the library at lunch, the best place. The place where you weren't allowed to talk. She avoided people in the hallway as much as possible, not that anyone wanted to talk to her. No one knew her. Well, that was because no one wanted to. She purposefully wore clothes that would repel her fellow humans: the same red sweater and jeans every day, and she messily pulled her tangled hair back with a braid, as well as her face bore no makeup. If you look nice, then people want to talk to you. You don't- and they don't. If you haven't gotten the picture already; Shayla is shy. So when, Chris Trenton came up to her at her locker, you could tell in addition to being surprised, she was also incredibly uncomfortable.

"Hey." Chris said, leaning against the lockers that were next to her open one.

She responded looking at him apprehensively. "H-hi."

"You know, I bet under whatever that is," He used his hand to gesture at her whole body. "You might have a chance at being pretty attractive" He smirked.

In addition to now being offended and embarrassed, she was also confused. She more often got this kind of thing from Jen and occasionally some of her 'friends'. However, as if on cue, she heard sniggers from behind Chris. She leaned around the side of him and saw just what she'd expected. She then looked back at Chris, rolled her eyes and went back to depositing her book in her locker. She would rather just stay quiet and ignore him rather than tell him off.

"Awww- what? It was a compliment." He was laughing now.

She quietly shut her locker and started to walk away. Still able to hear the words spoken behind her.

"Geez, no one can take a joke nowadays."

"Just leave her alone Chris. Can you just for once not be a complete jerk?"

She stopped and turned to see Lucas James coming on the scene. He was the typical white knight of the school, linebacker on the football team, incredibly attractive, and yet somehow still single. He met eyes with her as her head was still turned watching him call out his fellow teammate. She turned back very quickly and continued walking.

Celeste looked up from Esoteric Lake. She technically wasn't supposed to be here, not until she finished her training. But she was only a week away from the end of the term and all she wanted to do was help people, especially this Shayla girl because she was just truly enraged for her. So she was shy, that doesn't mean that people have the right to mess with her. She had to convince the headmistress to let her take this assignment. That wasn't going to be a piece of cake though, Celeste had a reputation for disaster. Not that she ever meant to cause it, it just seemed to follow her wherever she went. Like when she tried to give the cafeteria food a little kick and actually ended up covering the room and everyone in it, in mashed potatoes.

She flew into the headmistress' office, the room she knew all too well. Being often sent here by ticked off or enraged professors during her last four years of training, she was well accustomed to the scent of the room. It was somewhat of a mixture between shame and oppression, with just a touch of lilac. Nevertheless she flew into the room and hovered in front of the desk hat was enchanted to stop whomever should come up to it from speaking until they were spoken to. Celeste had never been very good at this, and she had a strange feeling that the desk was enchanted just so the headmistress could deal with her, for the enchantment had not been placed before she came to this school. However, Celeste hovered in front... waiting.

"Name and reason for interrupting me." Said headmistress Privet, not bothering to look up from what she was working on.

"Miss Privet, I know of a girl in need of my help and if i could just--"

The crusty old woman held up her hand for silence and looked up at the highly talkative fairy from behind her half moon glasses.

"Miss Moon, if you wish to help somebody you either wait till your graduation from this school, or you should have taken better interest in being on the honor roll."

"Oh but Miss Privet I need three more credits to graduate and this would be the best way to--"

"No." She interjected firmly "Now please leave Miss Moon"

"Okay." She turned and started to fly away. "But just think the sooner I get those three credits the sooner I graduated and you never have to see me again. But if I don't get those credits then you are going to be stuck with me for another year." She added very quickly as she turned around after changing her mind about giving up.

It was a very long and awkward pause between them, but Celeste could tell that she was considering it.

Finally she said, "You have three days. But you must stay hidden and follow protocol. If you complete the intended task then you may graduate, if you don't then I'm afraid you'll have to come back here."

"Yes!! I won't fail, I promise!" And with that she flew out of the office, not giving the headmistress a second to change her mind.

It was Friday, which in Shayla's opinion was the best day, because she could go home after and not have to socialize for two whole days. Plus everyone always had plans for that night so everyone was buzzing about them all day so no one even bothered to talk to or mess with her.

Now there's one period left in the day and Shayla is in the girls locker room, changing for PE . She hated the girls locker room, it was where everyone was the most vulnerable and everyone had the opportunity to get made fun of or make fun of someone else, which usually happened. However today Shayla was the first one in the locker room, therefore she decided she would change before anyone else got there and avoid the usual harassment.

So she is now halfway through changing, she has changed into her school supplied athletic shorts and t-shirt and is about to grab her shoes when-

"Pssssttttt!"

She turned around trying to locate the shrill, but definitely clear noise.

"Pssssttttt! Over here!"

It was like a high-pitched whisper, and she thought she was crazy for hearing voices when no one else was in the room except- there it was. A small moving piece of light by the vanity means next to the showers. She looked apprehensively around, not sure what she was looking for, and then moved forward, toward the piece of light. She gasped when she came closer upon the brightness and it turned out to be this tiny human, the size of glue stick, with equally small delicate looking wings on her back.

"Took you long enough." she squeaked looking exasperated.

"Wha- how- who... who are you?" Shayla sputtered out.

"Well, I'm the help you need... duh. My name's Celeste, well actually it's Celestial Moon, but I've always hated how long it was. Anyway, you, are Shayla Katherine Morgan and I'm here to help you."

"Help me with what?" She asked, still very confused with this entire situation, and also partially terrified that someone was going to

walk in and see thee already insane girl talk to the counter top corner.

"My goodness you don't even know? Look, here's the deal, your an amazing girl with so much potential, and yes I know that for a fact so don't disregard what I'm saying. Yet, what do you do with all of your potential and talent, you throw it away and just mope around hoping nobody notices or talks to you. And I am here to help be a more confident you, if you'll let me because you do have to sign this." She snapped her tiny finger and out appeared a human sized parchment with a dotted line and a quill and ink bottle, all somehow magically floating in the air.

"Look, Celeste was it? I'm flattered, but I really don't think--"

"What are you doing?" Interrupted an incredibly unfortunately timed voice from behind her.

She whipped around, not before grabbing thee parchment and ink from out of mid-air.

"Great- now they're really gonna think I'm a freak." She thought.

"Oh, my bad. Do I need to leave you and your imaginary friend alone? Sorry for interrupting I know that was terribly rude of me." Jen laughed and the second she did all of her cronies standing behind her did as well.

Shayla quickly grabbed her backpack, stuffed thee magical parchment in it and dashed out of the locker room. She quickly ducked into an empty classroom and then took out the parchment. She started to read it, and the more she read the more she was considering letting this random fairy help, that it's if this wasn't all a hallucination and she actually did see a fairy back there.

"Alright look, Celeste." She spoke into the empty classroom, still highly confident that the supposed fairy was listening. And then pop, out of nowhere the familiar being fluttered into mid air. "If I sign this, you can help me get Jen out of my life? Because truth be told, I'm sick of her I just can't seem to ever speak when she's around me."

"Not exactly Shayla, I can help you become who you want to be on the inside, which means you can get rid of her yourself. But I can put a temporary jinx on her if that eases your mind."

She chuckled, still thinking about Jen and her idiotic boyfriend and how they tormented her. She wanted them gone, she had stayed quite and ignored them for so long now and enough was enough. So she got out the parchment, the ink, and the quill, and was dipping the quill in the ink when she froze.

"Wait a minute, what's in this for you? What, do you win some sort of fairy lottery?"

"Why does anything have to be in it for me? Can't I just want to help you?"

Shayla looked at her incredulously. "Ok, fine! I need to help you, because if I don't help someone, A: everyone will think I'm a joke. And B: I need the credits to graduate"

"... fair enough" Shayla said. And then finally made that fateful sign on the dotted line.

The couple days went by rather painfully. Shayla was trying multiple new things, all of which made her very uncomfortable. But Celeste was there the entire way, which was both encouraging and exasperating to Shayla. It was nice to have someone telling her that she was doing great when trying to be chatty with the guy of whom was taking her coffee order. However, it wasn't so nice when she tried to step in with magic, and made the hot drink spill and burn the poor barista. Or when she tried to help show Shayla how to apply eyeliner by levitating the pencil and ended it ended up drawing all over her face. So, while Shayla was grateful for her help, it was clear that Celeste was clearly still very new at this.

By the end of the weekend however, Shayla looked like a completely different person, even if she may not have entirely got that whole talking thing down. Celeste showed her the basics of makeup (with the help of YouTube), showing her what was overkill and how she didn't want to look desperate for attention. Not to mention, she traded out her every day red sweater, with something actually flattering (and that didn't need washed) and was nice to look at. So, on Monday she walked into school feeling more like an accurate representation of herself and yet, still not really wanting much attention. But, if people ignoring her was what she wanted that was not going to happen, because to those who have only seen her in her every day braid and

baggy jeans, she looked like a supermodel in the soft pink v-neck and curled hair.

So when Shayla wakes into her first period literature class, she was stared at all the way down to her usual seat in the back of the classroom.

"What are you doing sitting in the back?" Celeste whispered from her pencil pouch she had been carrying around, not wanting to squish her new friend. "There is a seat right in the front corner."

"That's Jen's seat." She whispered back "I go over there I'm dead meat."

"I thought you wanted to stick up to her. If you want my advice, go over there and if she starts to yell at you about it, yell back."

Shayla considered it for a long moment and then took a very deep breath. She got up, grabbed her stuff and walked up her isle, towards the front seat. Just as she set her back pack down and made to sit, she heard...

"What do you think your doing? Who the hell are you?!"

Shayla looked up and saw Jen standing now in front of her and practically fuming. But once she made eye contact with Shayla, she looked her up and down.

"Well, look who it is. Guess someone finally looked in the mirror, what'd you do bump into mommy's makeup this morning and finally decide to look like the rest of us?" Now the entire class was intrigued, all of them listening in.

Shayla looked back at Jen, now terrified. "Well- I- uh..." Of course a comeback wasn't coming to her now, when she needed one.

"I- uh- um." Jen said, imitating her stuttering, "Look why don't you just do what you normally do and stay quite. I don't care, just do it ot out of my seat."

Shayla, now mortified, started to grab her backpack, and then suddenly she stopped.

"You know what Jen, there are no assigned seats in this class. So why don't this time you stay quiet, and you sit in the back." She said a little more strongly than she thought was possible.

Jen, now a little taken aback started to counter with, "What so you think that just because you look like us now you can- buuuuurrrrrppppp." Suddenly Jen had just let out the most loud, long, and disgusting burp ever known to come from an adolescents mouth. She covered her mouth with her hand and then came another belch, now muffled but that really didn't make that much of an improvement. The whole class was starting to laugh, she was now the one looking mortified. Just as another one started to come she ran out of the classroom, still being followed by laughing students, one of which, she had to admit, was Shayla. She looked down at her pencil bag and saw Celeste give her a thumbs up with one tiny hand while her wand was still twinkling in the other.

"Thank God you said something, so sick of her and Chris treating everyone else like trash. That was pretty impressive by the way." She heard from behind her.

She turned to see Lucas James sitting in the seat directly behind her, "Ha, thanks" she smiled as he said it and turned back around. "Oh my God" she mouthed to her pencil pouch where Celeste gave her an equally excited head nod.

Shayla walked her way home from her very exhausting, but very enjoyable day. Within an hour, her story of talking back to Jen and then her running out of class on a burping fit got around the entire school, making people want to talk to her in every period and sit with her at lunch. Which, once again, was nice, she just hadn't gotten a break all day. So she enjoyed the one on one conversation she was having with Celeste as she flew by her walking on the spacious rode, not far from the school that led back to home.

"Oh my gosh, that was such a good spell! Congratulations on it working!"

"Thanks! But hey, you got the ball rolling. You just totally put her in her place, and believe me she needed it."

They both were laughing when they turned the corner, but the laughter camouflaged itself along with Celeste when they caught sight of what was waiting for them once they had turned the corner. Jen and Chris were both stood in the middle of the sidewalk, looking foreboding.

"Who were you talking to?" Asked Chris, once he saw that she was alone.

"Herself, who else? She does it a lot." Jen commented

"What do you guys want, or are you just blocking the sidewalk for fun?" Shayla countered. She was certainly feeling more spunky today, even though the logical side of her brain was screaming at her to just shut up for they were alone on an empty street.

"Wow. She has gotten a big head. So what then, huh? You spend one day with the rest of the world and then decide your better than the rest of us?" Jen was practically red, and clearly pissed off.

"Jen no one has said they're better than you, you put that into your own head; as you do most things alright. I have never been out to hurt you and yet you or your minion boyfriend here have always felt the need to go of your way to make my life miserable. I'm sorry that I'm now taking it back." Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Her brain told her.

"Oh, look who's a smart-ass now." Chris felt the need to pipe in.

"That's it! You little-" however her last word was cut off as she grabbed Shayla by the shoulders and pushed her up against the electrical post. Shayla tried to squirm out of her grip but Jen was weirdly strong.

"Baby you still got that knife?" She asked Chris who was looming behind her.

Shayla squirmed more, now the fear had been kicked up about a thousand notches.

"Let go!" She yelled, as Chris was pulling out his pocket knife.

"Fight me. Oh right, you can't can you?" She smiled with a malicious intent upon her face. The blade had been handed to Jen and she flipped it out dramatically when-

"What the hell do you think your doing?!" Jen was shoved off of Shayla by none other than Lucas James.

"My God, you two are messed up! Were you seriously going to cut her just for telling you off? Get out of here before I tell someone what you two were doing that made Shayla scream!"

They took off like scared little dogs.

"Are you ok? He turned toward her, an entirely different tone in his voice. Truth be told she was still a bit shaken leaning against the post, but she nodded. Lucas didn't believe her considering her eyes were still wide. "Come on, I'll give you a ride home." He hovered by her as she unstably walked back to his black truck that he must have stopped there in the middle of the rode when he saw what was happening.

He drove her back home and by then she had regained her control of breathing and calmed down enough that she got just a couple butterflies when it came to her full realization that she was getting a ride with Lucas James.

They pulled up to her house and she unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Thanks." She said looking in front of her.

"It was no problem. I can't believe they'd do that still."

"No, really. Thanks for everything. For defending me at school last week, for talking to me in class when no one else would, and for what just happened" She looked at him now.

"You deserve it, trust me." He leaned a bit closer.

"Heh, well I don't know about that, I didn't exactly make it easier on myself back there. I could have just shut my-" and then she was cut off by the most wonderful sensation she had ever felt.

So Celeste wiggled her way out of the backpack on the floor of the car she'd been hiding in. And flew off, knowing her work was done.

Charlie Zelazny

Albert and the Wizard

Albert was an average high school student. Every day he would wake up to his alarm clock, brush his teeth, and rush out of the door. He lived in a huge family where he had about eight brothers and sisters. His parents barely noticed him and never realized when he

was out and about past his curfew. Everyday, he would drive five miles down the highway to school in his Honda Accord. He was happy and satisfied with his everyday life, little did he know, that was about to change.

It was just an average Thursday afternoon in the Bay Area. When Albert woke up, he did his average routine and rushed out of the door. When he was driving down the highway on his way to school, he got stuck in a huge traffic jam. He then got really nervous because he knew that he was going to be late for first period, and this was a major problem. If he was late again, he would get suspended because he had already been late two times that week.

As he was sitting in traffic, he noticed something in the sky. He couldn't depict it clearly, but it looked like a man who was flying through the sky. He became puzzled at this and thought that his eyes were deceiving him. He continually rubbed his face and his eyes trying to make his vision go back to normal again. He looked around at the people in the neighboring cars around him and it seemed that no one else could see what was going on. He looked back up into the sky and it appeared that the mysterious person was flying directly at him.

The creature then flew down and came into his car. Still, it looked like no one else could see what was happening. Albert could now tell that the mysterious creature was indeed a man, and that he was wearing a long robe and had a weird stick at his side. The man introduced himself as Ribbly and told Albert that he was from Jonkland. He said that he was a wizard and that he wanted to Albert to his homeland and teach him about the art of wizardry.

Albert was still in shock and barely heard a word that the man was saying. He was confused at what was happening and was confident that this was all a dream, and that he was still sleeping. He started pinching himself, to try and wake himself up. When he finally realized that this wasn't a dream and that this was actually happening he started to ask a ton of questions like, "what is happening?" and "who are you?",

Ribbly told him that he would answer all of his questions later, when he accepted his offer and agreed to go to Jonkland with him.

Albert spent much time thinking and trying to understand what was going on. He was confused and had no idea what he should do. After about five minutes of just sitting and pondering, Albert came up with an answer. He told Ribbly that he would accept the offer and travel to him to Jonkland, but only under one condition, that he would be able to travel back to his normal life and to the normal world if he didn't like it. Ribbly accepted this offer and told him to hold on. In a matter of milliseconds, the car was floating in the air and traveling fast into the sky. This threw Albert around the car and he went sliding from side to side. He closed his eyes and thought that this was going to kill him.

When the car came to a halt, Albert opened his eyes and looked out the window. What he saw was a beautiful green land, that was covered in fertile hills and animals running about. It was the most beautiful that he had seen. He also saw a mountain in the distance, covered with snow and rocks. It was calling to Albert but also looked like one of the most dangerous things that he had ever seen. There was no possible way that a person could climb that thing. When he turned around and looked out the other side of the car, he could see a bunch of people gathering around and staring at Ribbly. They were asking him a lot of questions about if he had found the new necromancer, but all of this went over Albert's head and he had no idea what they were talking about. He was too focused on the grand house in the back of the village. It was gold and covered diamond and emerald jewels. After seeing how the people of the village treated the wizard like royalty, Albert thought that this was where the wizard lived and where he would be staying and learning magic.

Ribbly called to Albert and told him to follow him. He went walking towards the great golden house, and Albert got excited, but to his surprise, the wizard walked right past it to a little shack in the distance. Albert became really confused but realized that this was where the wizard lived. Ribbly told him to get some sleep, because tomorrow was going to be a rough day, and they would start their training.

Albert woke up the next day, full of excitement. He was ready to learn a bunch of magic spells and gain power. He thought that he would be learning spells on how to change the weather, and how to move things without touching them. Ribbly though, had other ideas.

Albert came running down the stairs and was full of questions, he was ready to begin his training. Ribbly told him to calm down, because there were some tasks to do before he could start his learning. Albert thought that he would have to do something magical, like learn some basic spells or go find his magic wand. Ribbly had different plans though, he told him that he would have to look after his sheep for the day while he went to the town. Albert was confused and thought that he heard Ribbly wrong. "You want me to look after the sheep?" He said. Ribbly replied with an affirmative yes, told him what to do, and left to go to the town.

Albert was really confused and angry, he thought that he was going to learn wizardry and magic spells, but he was just the sheep farmer. This made Albert question if he made the right choice, was it really worth leaving his normal world to do this? After much thinking and a long day, he came to the conclusion that he would give it another try the next morning.

After a long day of clipping, shearing, and feeding sheep the wizard finally came back home. Once Albert saw Ribbly, he asked him why he made him do this ridiculous chore.

"Why did you make me look after your sheep while you went to the town?" Said Albert

Ribbly replied, "There is a reason that I had you do this while I was gone, but I cannot tell you."

"Why?" Albert quickly replied.

"You will find out in due time, there is a reason behind everything that I have you do." Ribbly replied, choosing each of his words carefully. "Tomorrow will be a better day, I promise."

"It better be." Replied Albert

Albert ran to his bedroom and closed the door, he then lied down on his bed and went to sleep. He thought about his life back home, and how right now he would probably be finishing his homework and then getting ready for bed.

When Albert woke up, he got dressed and went into the living room and waited for the wizard. After a few minutes of waiting, Ribbly walked in carrying a huge sack over his back. It looked like it weighed two-

hundred pounds, the way Ribbly was hunched over and barely moving with every step he took.

"What's in the bag?" Albert asked.

"I'll tell you what's in the bag." Replied Ribbly, "In this bag, I have a bunch of hiking gear that I want you to put on."

Albert had no idea why in the world, that Ribbly would want him to put on hiking gear, but he agreed and went to go change. He returned in a full hiking suit. He had on a big, fluffy, blue jacket. With a bulky pair of red pants to go with it.

"How the heck does this have to do with learning magic?" Asked Albert.

"Oh, it has everything to do with magic, I am sending you to go to the top of Mount Magic, to obtain the egg from a hairy eagles nest."

Replied Ribbly.

This made Albert very excited because he thought that he was finally going to get started on his journey of becoming a wizard. This was not what the wizard had planned though, because he knew that there was no magic involved in this. Ribbly simply wanted to see if he would quit, or continue to persevere through the challenges that the mountain would provide.

"Why do I have to obtain the egg from the eagle?" Asked Albert

"It is because the egg holds power inside of it, and will help you get started on your journey to becoming a wizard." Replied Ribbly

This news made Albert really excited and eager to start his journey up the mountain. He asked when he would be making this journey, and Ribbly told him that it would happen tonight.

All day long, Albert was preparing himself for the journey he was about to do. He knew that it was not going to be too hard, but that he would have to be alert and look out for any dangers. Ribbly told him that there wouldn't be any wild animals that could harm him, but that the ice and terrain of the mountain would be a challenge.

When Albert finally came to the foot of the mountain, he was filled with excitement, yet also fear. He thought that this would determine if the wizard would train him or not, and that if he was unsuccessful, then he would not be able to do that.

Finally, his time came, he had all of his gear and had made all of the preparations, and Albert was finally ready to conquer this mountain and become a wizard. He took his first step onto the snowy white mountain and realized something. He had no idea how to get to the top of the mountain.

"Which path am I supposed to take to get to the top?" he asked Ribbly.

"All you have to do is follow the signs that have been placed along the path." Replied Ribbly

"That's not too bad," said Albert "I know how to read and follow directions."

"Don't be too cocky, along the way there will be signs that will try and lead you to danger." Said Ribbly

"How will I know if the sign is trying to trick me?" Asked Albert

"You will have to figure that out on your own, I can not help you." Replied Ribbly

"Ok, got it." Replied Albert

Albert started to make his journey up the rocky terrain of the mountain. The whole time, all he could think about was what Ribbly had said to him. He was trying to think of ways to discover if the signs were fake, but he could not come up with a solution. After a few minutes a walking up hill, he came across a pair of signs. Albert knew that one of them would be fake and one of them would be real, but he had no idea how to discover which one was which. One of the signs said turn left for the snowy wall, and the other one said turn right for the mysterious pond. Albert stared at the signs for a long time trying to figure out which way he should go. Ribbly did not give him any directions on where to go, so he was confused on what he should do. After much thinking and deliberation, Albert decided to follow the sign that told him to turn left and to go the snowy wall. This was because Albert had remembered the wizard saying something about how the terrain was going to bad.

This ended up being the right decision because he did in fact come across a wall that was covered in snow. It was a giant wall that was probably fifty yards tall, and it was covered in thick white snow. Albert had no idea how he would get up this thing, because he had no tools that could aid him. After staring at the wall for a few minutes,

he noticed something. There was thin icicles that were poking out of the wall. Albert decided that he was going to try and climb the wall using these icicles, like climbing a rock wall.

Albert took his first step onto the first icicle, and it was sturdy. He then took another step, and another, until he was at the top of the wall. He had made it up the wall safely, and quickly. He then walked about three hundred yards, until he found another sign. This time it was only one sign, and it read "Turn right to go to the lake". Albert followed the sign and did exactly what it told him to do. After walking another three hundred yards, he was at the foot of the lake. Just across the frozen water, he noticed something. There was a birds nest sitting in a tree, and in it was an egg. This made Albert excited because all he had to do was walk across the frozen lake, and retrieve the egg.

Full of excitement, Albert ran across the lake to retrieve the egg and return home. After a few steps, the ice became cracked beneath him, and he had to slow down. He realized that he would have to travel carefully across the lake, to make sure that the ice did not break, so he would not fall into the lake. He took it a few steps at a time, pausing at moments to make sure that he was ok. After doing this for a few minutes, he was finally at the foot of the nest. He examined the egg carefully to make sure that it was the one he was told to retrieve. After much deliberation, he snatched the egg from the nest and proceeded to make his way across the lake, and back down the mountain.

Towards sundown, he finally made it back to the wizards house and handed him the egg. Ribbly examined it and then placed it on the counter.

"Am I allowed to start my wizard training now?" Asked Albert.

Ribbly didn't respond as he went and got a frying pan out of the cupboard.

"Did you hear me Ribbly? I asked if I was allowed to start my wizard training now?" Said Albert.

Ribbly still did not reply, and what he did next made Albert become full of anger. Ribbly took the egg, cracked it against the side of the frying pan, and began to make himself eggs for dinner.

"What the heck are you doing?" Asked Albert, with the rage in his voice filling up.

"I am making myself dinner." Replied Ribbly.

"So I went and traveled on a dangerous journey up the treacherous mountain, just so you could have breakfast for dinner?" Asked Albert

Albert, full of anger, then proceeded to charge at Ribbly. Albert was extremely angered and upset at all of the pointless activities that Ribbly was making him do. Ribbly could tell that Albert was going to hurt him, so he used his magic to make Albert freeze right in his tracks.

"Why are you making me do all of these ridiculous things?" Albert asked.

"I was trying to make you a tougher person, and to see if you were up for the challenge of being a wizard." Replied Ribbly.

"But what was the point of all of them, I don't even want to become a wizard anymore." Albert said back to the wizard.

"That was not my intention." Said Ribbly

"Unfreeze me right now so I can go back home." Albert said

Ribbly, who had also become angered in the moment, unfroze Albert. Albert, not giving Ribbly another look, went back to sit in the car.

Albert kept turning the keys to the ignition of the car, but the car would not start. Even if he was able to get the car to start, it would be no good to him because he had no idea how he would even be able to get out of this place they called, Jonkland. After a while trying to get the car started, Albert reclined his seat, and simply pondered about the decision that he had made to follow the wizard. He thought about what his life would be like right now back home. He hadn't been gone for a super long time, but he thought about what people were thinking about him, and if they were even wondering where he was right now.

Ribbly was also doing a lot of thinking, inside of his house. He thought about how this was not what he intended to do, and how he simply just wanted to make sure that Albert was up to the challenge. All that he wanted to do was train his successor, one who could be the wizard for the town, and help solve all of the problems that the town

would face. After much thinking, Ribbly decided to go talk to Albert, and apologize for everything that he made him go through.

Ribbly slowly approached the car, and made sure that Albert was aright.

"What's up?" Asked Ribbly

Albert gave him no reply, and was still very mad at Ribbly.

"Look, I'm sorry for what I made you do. I should have never made you go through all of those ridiculous tasks without telling you the reason behind them first." Said Ribbly

"What was the reason behind that, if you were trying to find someone to train, why wouldn't you tell them what you were doing." Replied Albert

"I know, and I totally understand if you want to go back home." Said Ribbly

"It's too late for that now, I've already been gone for too long, I'm just stuck here now." Albert said

"It's not too late, if you do not want to be here anymore, I can send you home, and make you return to the exact moment that you left." Said Ribbly, "I strongly ask you though, that you stay and learn magic with me."

Albert said and pondered on what the wizard had said to him.

"Nobody at home has probably even noticed that I am gone." Albert said, "I'll agree to stay with you under one condition."

"What is it?" asked Ribbly.

"You can't make me go through any of those ridiculous tasks anymore, and you have to tell me the reason behind everything that you do." Said Albert.

"Done." Ribbly quickly replied "If you get out of that car, we can get started with you first lesson right now."

"Let's do it!" Replied Albert.

Albert opened the door and followed Ribbly back into his house. He was finally doing what he wanted, he was on his way to becoming a wizard, and he was happy with this.

while she watched August play with his toys. When August grew older, he began to take on most of the household chores himself for his aunt was getting old with age.

"Scrub and wash the clothes in the hamper, please. I'm gathering herbs from the forest today, but I'll be back to make supper,"
Aunt Martha's would read one winter morning.

So August would proceed to scrub and wash the clothes until all the dirt and filth were well removed. But instead of walking away, August would tie one end of the rope around one of the branches of the tree in their backyard, and tie the other end around the drain pipe on the cottage wall. August had seen his aunt do it plenty of times and the task proved to be as easy as it seemed. He would hang the clothes on the rope and work on a rather large puzzle while he waited. The clothes would finish drying about the same time August's aunt came back from her peaceful walk in the woods. She put her basket of various herbs in the sink and greeted August. Aunt Martha would then reward August with praise for what he had done.

"What a diligent boy," She would say, as she watched him grin with pride. "I shall cook you supper for you must be exhausted."

That night they ate buttered bread and peas for supper, after folding the laundry together.

The next day Aunt Martha would say, "August dear, go out into the garden and pick the tomatoes. I checked on them yesterday so I know today's the day for picking. I can't pick them myself for I am sewing your trousers."

And August would reply with "Yes, Auntie, I'll do anything you ask of me."

August slipped on his garden boots and walked around the cottage to the vegetable garden. He picked the tomatoes and placed them in the basket with care.

Out of the corner of his eye, or maybe by the sniff of his nose, he sensed the daisies. They were his least favorite of the garden. All the other plants in the garden were for practical use, like eating. Green beans, beets, pea pods, lettuce, green onions, carrots, strawberries, squash, pumpkins, blueberries, corn, blackberries, potatoes, black beans, raspberries, and tomatoes all seemed to fit in.

He didn't see the use of daisies. All they did were stink up the garden even though his aunt had insisted that their beauty gave it a woman's touch. August noticed that they were drooping more than the last time he saw them. His aunt would need to water them soon. He carried the tomatoes inside and set them by the sink. He saw his aunt was still sitting in their armchair, sewing away. August marched out to the garden and pumped water into a pail. He plugged his nose with his left hand and watered the daisies with his right. August still hated his daisies but his aunt loved them. So he could learn to tolerate them for her.

When August had finished telling her all that he had done, his aunt praised him saying, "What a kind boy you are. Why don't you play outside while I make supper?"

They had tomato soup and cheese that night.

The next day his aunt told him to "Fetch water from the river, for I am feeling too weak and tired on this day."

August replied, "Yes, Auntie. I will do anything you ask of me, " with a waver in his voice.

The river was the dividing line of the grasslands, where August lived, and the forest. August took his time to reach the river and took no time at all to come back. Running into his aunt's arms, pails only filled halfway with water, he cried and clung to her. August would later deny that he had cried at all.

"What took you so long, dear? Why are you frightened?" his aunt asked.

"I saw something in the woods," August whispered. "I tried not to gaze at the dark path, but I saw ... I saw--"

"Hush dear, it's alright, it's alright. You have nothing to fear here."

His aunt pet his head and hugged him close- something she had done many times before -while they sat together on the armchair.

"I'm sorry," August said when his tears had dried on his cheek. "I spilled the water in the pails. I failed you."

The tears rolled down August's cheek once more.

Aunt Martha turned August's face to look at her.

"August, you are a smart, kind, diligent boy," she told him. "You have so much to offer the world. You do everything I ask you to except when I ask you to take risks and explore the world. The one thing you need is bravery. Bravery is what allows you to do what's right when there is danger all around you. I know that in time you will learn how to be brave even if the odds seem stacked against you."

"But how does one become brave?" August asked.

"You will become brave when what you love the most is at stake. Then you'll know what bravery is August. Then you'll know."

Her eyes filled with emotion and they gazed into his. August, not understanding but affected by her emotion, matched her gaze.

They had carrots and potatoes for supper.

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Three days later, Aunt Martha left a note for August as she always did when she went out.

"Dear August,

I will gather herbs to bring to your grandmother today. She is sick and frail so I will stay at her home to take care of her. I know that I have never been gone for so long before but I know that you will be fine on your own. If anything happens while I am gone, take the map out of my bottom drawer. I will be back to you in five days.

Love,

Auntie Martha."

Indeed, Aunt Martha had never been away from August for more than a few hours and August had never been alone at night. Pushing the note away, he tried to also push away the feeling of dread that had crept up on him and rested its clammy hands on his shoulders.

"You're an older boy than you were before, so you will be fine on your own," was what he whispered to himself.

On the first day, August made sure to be very productive in scrubbing the dishes with warm water and tidying his room the way his aunt preferred it. The first night was difficult for August. Aunt Martha would usually be there comfort August from his nightly terrors and grim fantasies. But she was not there that night.

"We're safe here," he said. One, two, three, four days flew by. August spent them burdening various chores alone, which he did usually, except this time he wished he wasn't truly alone. One, two, three, four, nights stalked the cottage. August spent them hiding under his blanket, waiting for the morning light and Aunt Martha.

Then the fifth day flew by and the fifth night came. It crashed and roared and shook the trees. The curtains were shut tight in the cottage but blue flashes of light could be seen through the thin fabric. August did not see the flashes. He was hiding under a blanket near the fire. Trying to block out the noise, he pressed his hands to his ears and shut his eyes tight. To August all the world had been transformed into a monster that could topple trees and destroy mountains by the evil poison that was the night. He screamed against the patter on his roof, the howling of the wind and the crashes of the world outside in hopes to drown them with his own terrible sound.

"I do not know how to be brave!" he shouted at the storm.

But the sound did not stop so he was left alone and shakin

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The sixth day Aunt Martha did not return. August decided that he couldn't go any longer without her. He found the map in her bottom drawer and caught sight of her golden locket. August secured her locket in a small pouch fastened to his belt. Searching into the back of the closet with his hands, he found the black chest. With a key in hand, August opened the chest to obtain what he sought. Inside was a cloak and a hatchet. Before leaving the safety of the cottage he clasped his father's cloak around his neck and pulled on his garden boots. Through the gate and into the garden August trudged. The morning light was slow to come and quick to go in those winter days so he used his lantern to pick the vegetables. After he had packed his food he walked away from the cottage and towards the woods.

He came to the river an hour later. He was immediately reminded of the pail incident and winced. "*I failed her then so I should make up for it now,*" August thought. But then he looked into the forest on the other side of the river and his determination disintegrated. August had been so sure of his decision to find his aunt -- like his decision to fetch water -- but that was because he forgot about the effect the forest had on him. Every time he looked into the darkness of the woods he felt his stomach twist and turn like the trees at the entrance did. August sat down at the water's edge, conflicted. He found his reflection staring back at him. A memory came back to him and he took out the locket from its pouch. Aunt Martha and August had gone to the river before, although he was much younger then. He remembered giggling at his reflection, fascinated. Her reflection smiled at him with the golden locket hung around her neck.

"That's your reflection, August. Legend has it that travelers from long ago would be granted wisdom from the river spirit . . ."

Deep in thought, August drifted away from sights and sounds of his present world. The pendant slowly slipped from his hands until it plopped into the stream.

From within the center of the river a blue light began to glow. A silky voice seemed to originate from the light. "*Greetings, young boy. I am the spirit of the river. I have tumbled down the mountains and raced through the rolling hills since the beginning of time itself. I have reached lands far beyond here and witnessed earth's never ending cycle,*" it announced.

August stared at the river in disbelief.

"Surely, now I have finally gone mad for I hear a voice inside my head," he thought aloud.

"*I would never do what you are suggesting. That is a disgraceful act that I refuse to take part of. Great and wise spirits should never invade a person's private thoughts,*" the river spirit assured August.

"Huzah! I have not gone mad, there is just a spirit speaking to me!"

"*I have guided your kind for centuries on their quests,*" the river spirit continued. "*I gave every one of them a word of truth and*

a word of advice. Now it is your turn to be granted these gifts before you go on your quest."

"What do you mean by 'my kind' -"

"In order for you to obtain a word of truth I must have your full consent. If you will allow me, I shall peer into your soul and see the truth of your character. Then I shall -"

"Consent to what?"

"If you will allow me, I shall peer into your soul -"

"No, I heard you. I just don't trust you enough to give you my consent. How do I know that you will not grab and drown me when I lean over the river? Or possess my soul the second you 'peer into it'? You are a spirit after all. My aunt told me stories about evil spirits."

"I assure you that I bear no evil and have no desire to take possession of someone's soul. Possession not only corrupts the soul's host but the spirit as well. As I was saying, after I see the truth of your character then I shall reveal a truth unbeknownst to you about yourself. I will not grant you the truth if you do not wish to hear it."

"I give you my consent," August said after some consideration.

The light traveled to the side of the river August was on. August stared into the light and the light seemed to look back at him. They stared for what felt like eons until the light pulled away back to the center of the river.

August stared at it expectantly.

"What you think you do not have is already inside of you," the river spirit said, finally. "My word of advice to you is to keep the locket. You'll need it on your journey."

The golden locket was washed onto the grass. August hadn't realized he had forgot about it. He picked it up and secured it in its pouch.

"Goodbye, August," the river spirit said.

Before August could protest the light dimmed out and the river seemed to be a normal river again. He crossed over the old, creaky bridge.

August looked into the woods. He looked into the deep darkness that shrouded the trail. But this time he did not turn back.

Fiction-

Meisi Settle

All the Way To The Podium

Her long, brown ponytail flew back in the wind created by the speed of her boat. She was a member of the Seattle Canoe and Kayak Club (SCKC), racing in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, at the 2018 Sprint National Championships. As she crossed the finish line, multiple seconds before the rest of her competition, the announcer exclaimed, "And lane 5, Nevin Harrison from Seattle takes the gold yet again! 200m sprint champion."

Nevin had always been one of the fastest female sprint canoeists in America. She started when she was 12 years old, in 2014. She first heard of the sport through a sailing camp at Greenlake. Her counselor, Angela Wang, told her about how she was involved with sprint canoe. Nevin fell in love with the idea of being advanced at a particular sport and being passionate about it, since running, soccer, and softball didn't necessarily satisfy her. Angela also mentioned all of her accomplishments involved with the sport, including that she was apart of Team USA and made the finals at the ICF (International Canoe Federation) Junior & U23 Canoe Sprint World Championships. Being open to try it, Nevin asked Angela if she could hop into a canoe on the last day of her sailing camp. Nevin had always been a natural, all-around athlete, and thought this wouldn't be too difficult. However, when she knelt down into the canoe, she

felt very unstable, and found it to be much more strenuous than expected. Her perseverance and determination to improve is what drove her to officially join the sprint canoeing realm. She loved how canoeing did not come easy to her, and that she had to struggle to be able to do it. Her hard work since then has paid off and helped her achieve many of her goals.

Traditionally, at the Sprint National Championships concluding banquet, it is normal to announce the athletes who qualified from Nationals to represent Team USA at the Olympic Hopes Regatta (OHR). Nevin was selected to go last year, and she anticipated going again this year, in Poznań, Poland.

As the announcer was reading off the names of people chosen to go to Poland, Nevin heard her name called out. She was excited to get the chance to race at the Olympic Hopes Regatta, but she knew she would have to train diligently, with just under a month to train for the biggest race that would take place in early September.

The national canoe coach, Aaron Huston, who would also be traveling to Poland for OHR, was also an assistant coach for the Gig Harbor Canoe and Kayak Racing Team (GHCKRT), located not too far from Seattle. Nevin was able to bring her boat to Gig Harbor and train under his tutelage with the team. This became a part of the regular routine, and the Gig Harbor athletes came to know Nevin better, welcoming her into the team family, even though she was still an athlete for SCKC.

When the time came to race in Poznań, Nevin felt ready, even though she was extremely nervous. She knew that before every race she consistently became anxious, but her training with GHCKRT and Coach Aaron had prepared her well for this kind of discipline.

After going through a proper warm up for her race, Nevin was ready. Butterflies were flying in her stomach. However, she knew she couldn't let nerves get in the way of her performance, or disappoint Team USA, Coach Aaron, or even herself.

"1 minute to start," the starter shouted to all the young ladies participating in the competition.

"Okay, Nevin, you can do this. Don't worry about the other girls, just focus on what you have been practicing and your technique. You can do this!" Nevin said to motivate herself.

The starter of the race said, "Ready, set," and then blew the air horn.

And the girls went off. They were flying down the race course, since it was only a 200 meter sprint. As Nevin was paddling, she felt a lot of pressure. The United States was counting on her to win. She was expected to be first. So, to encourage herself as she zoomed past her competitors, she thought, "I am the best. These girls can't beat me, I have to win. Let's go!"

Approaching the finish line, Nevin watched herself inch closer to the end of the course to set up her timing right so that she could shoot her boat forward just before she crossed the line. Out of breath, she looked back to see how close she was. The second place recipient had just crossed the line. The others followed in succession.

After the awards ceremonies and returning home, Nevin had decided she would switch paddling teams and join Gig Harbor's team, since the national canoe coach was part of that team. It was a long process of convincing her parents. Because she lived in Seattle, the commute would be about two hours, round trip. But her parents finally relented and agreed that with Aaron as her coach, she would have more potential in her paddling career.

In addition to this new agenda with all the practices an hour away from home, Nevin had the dream to go to the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, Japan. Knowing this would be the start of a very long journey, she began by making her idea known, and asked for donations to afford this once in a lifetime experience. She also talked to her coach and wondered if this is a reasonable goal for her.

"Yes, this is a really cool opportunity for you, and I believe you are ready. You have a long road of training and hard work, but you are capable because of your persistence, motivation, and talent. You know I wouldn't say this just to make you happy and fulfill your dreams. I truly think this is something you could do, and do well in it," Aaron reassured her.

Nevin set up a GoFundMe website, offered to babysit kids, and do anything to earn the money to go to Tokyo. She stopped her regular dinner dates with friends, Starbucks runs, and attempted to save up the money that was needed to attend canoe camps that would prepare

her for the strict competition in Tokyo, and to actually travel to the Olympic Games.

As time went on, training became more serious than ever. Nevin started to monitor what she was doing each day. She had a notebook full of what she ate, how much training she had done, the intensity of her workout, and her heart rate at certain times of the day. She became aware of what her body could handle, pushing it to its limit almost every day. She emphasized how much sleep she received, as well as maintaining a strict, healthy diet. She set small goals to accomplish as baby steps to her final desire. Nevin also went through rigorous mental training. To be able to race at the Olympic level, she learned that she couldn't just be physically in shape. Having mental strength is paramount. Knowing about the race, the competition, and her own race plan could change the outcome of her performance.

At this point, it was November of 2019. Nevin had participated in numerous races nationally, including Seattle, Georgia, and Oklahoma, and internationally in South America and Europe. She raced at the 2019 Sprint National Championships and the 2019 Olympic Hopes Regatta. She, of course, competed well and received a gold medal for all of her races. She also was able to afford intense canoe camps, based in Canada and Florida. She learned many new things, including many different coaches' opinions on how to race, and their input of strategy for success.

Aware that the summer of 2020 was just around the corner, Nevin planned her last minute training ideas and strategies. She was thrilled that her dream was becoming a reality, and that she now had younger paddlers from her team to look up to her, despite the fact that she still felt pressure. However, she did feel pressure. She assumed her team was just expecting her to win at the Olympics. Nevin also had doubts, and questioned how fast these people competitors really were going to be. Although she saw most of her competition at the trials race, she thought about how much they had trained since.

A few months went by, and Nevin found herself exiting an airplane that had landed in Tokyo. Words could not describe her emotions. She was severely nervous about competing, but also elated to have finally made it.

At last, it was time to really focus and block out all the distractions, with only four hours to the start of her race. To warm

up and fully prepare herself for the biggest race of her life, she started by thinking everything through. She recalled that having a mental side of the sport really helps. Nevin talked herself through her race plan, strategizing that she would start with fast, short strokes, then gradually lengthen them out into longer and more powerful ones, and finish strong with throwing her boat forward.

Realizing how this event was and how immense the competition would be, Nevin was overwhelmed. She began to doubt herself, and asked if everything she had worked on for the past few years had been enough or even worth it. Tears rushed down her cheeks. She had never been so nervous in her life. She remembered how close the other ladies were to passing her in the Olympic Trials races. Feeling the stress and pressure from the whole world watching, Nevin tried to pull herself together and start physically warming up.

First, she went on a short run, just to get her blood flowing. Next she started her dynamic stretching, including pushups, squats, and shoulder exercises.

It was about an hour and a half to the race now. Nevin decided to go out for a double warm up, meaning she went out on the water for her first warm up in her boat. On the water, she did some technique drills, just as she had practiced at home. She broke down each part of the stroke to master the entire stroke. Then Nevin spent time on her start. She put her boat to a complete halt, and pretended it was the real race. She whispered to herself, "Ready, set, go!" and was off, only practicing the first segment of the race. She thought her practice performance was good, and that she had a positive connection with her boat and the water.

When Nevin got off the water, there was only about an hour left until her race. She grabbed her phone, plugged in her earphones, and relaxed her muscles and nerves until it was time to get back on the water. Music really helped her concentrate. She had a playlist specifically to energize and incentivize herself.

Time flew by, and it was time to shine. The whole world would be watching on television, and her family and friends would be cheering her on. However, she couldn't let her emotions affect her racing. As she set her boat down in the water, she did her last set of stretching and warming up. Finally, she paddled away from the dock, and slowly made her way towards the start line.

Typically at races in the United States, she would encourage her fellow competitors, to be polite. But when it came to international racing, she could not talk to the other racers. Nevin had to convince herself that they are her enemies, and that they had to be intimidated by her. For example, earlier, during her warm up, she had to act tougher and faster than what she might be able to maintain, just to strike fear into the others.

"Approach the start, one minute to start," the starter of the race shouted.

Each racer lined up in their assigned lane.

"I can do this, this is just like at home. It's just a regular 200 meter race. Pull yourself together, Nevin!" she said to herself. She tried to suppress the nervous feelings in her stomach.

"Ready, set, go!"

Just as the official yelled "Go" in the microphone, Nevin was off. She had catapulted her boat at the start, and was neck and neck with her competition.

She recognized that she needed to keep up her speed so that she wouldn't fall behind. These women were really fast.

Nearing the finish line, Nevin pulled slightly ahead of the pack. She only had a few meters left to go. She kept sprinting ahead, and started to expand all her energy. There were two other ladies ahead of her, and she knew a bronze medal wouldn't be sufficient. She put in everything she had, using every last bit of energy. It was only 10 meters left now, and she started to time herself so that she could shoot her boat forward abruptly. As she leaned back and threw all of her weight to the back of the boat, her canoe exploded forward, crossing the line.

"Wow! We have our top three racers at the finish. It's hard to tell who snatched that gold medal, with just the naked eye. We will have to look at the photo finish to determine the champion of this race," the announcer said excitedly.

The air was tense. People were silent, waiting for the results to return. The Americans watching were hoping that Nevin was able to pull through and capture the gold medal.

"Oh, and now it looks like Nevin Harrison, for Team USA has taken the gold medal title!" the announcer proclaimed.

Nevin was overjoyed. She could not contain her emotions, and as a result, began to sob. She could not believe how close the race was, and how much strength it took. When she pulled her boat out of the water and carried it up off the dock, people were swarming her. They told her that she had just broken the World Record with a time of 00:00:40.08. She was shocked. Not only could she pull off a first place, but she also made history with a new World Record and Olympic Record.

Shortly after the finish of her race, Nevin was invited to rise to the first place podium. No words could describe this feeling. Standing before the world, representing Team USA. As she stepped down from the podium, reporters were swarming around her eager to get an interview. They asked her many questions, and Nevin tried to answer them as accurately as she could. She was overwhelmed by all the attention and the sensation of being victorious.

"I just want to say thank you to all my supporters out there, back at home in the United States. I wouldn't be here today without them. I'm just so grateful to be here, and have this amazing opportunity to have raced. I also want to thank my coach and friends for pushing and encouraging me through this whole journey. I couldn't have done it without any of them," Nevin explained. She was just so cheerful to have made it all the way to gold.

When Nevin returned home, she was surprised to see the Gig Harbor paddling team welcoming her effusively. She was happy to see them, and was thankful they were there with her. On the inside, she began to reflect and notice how much people cared about her, by donating and being there for her. She knew she would never forget this unique chapter in her life, and would always be thankful for the people encouraging her. Also, her friends and family granted her so much that she could never repay. This was truly an unforgettable event in her life.

Zada Boitano

Wake Me Up

"I, Sebastian King, am here today to tell you a story... my story. I was first born in Erly, Pennsylvania, a few years after my lovely sister, Amanda..." Sebastian gestured to his sister at the podium next to him, and she wiped a tear from her face and smiled slightly. "...At the age of twelve, I was diagnosed with traumatic brain injury following a car accident that Amanda and I had been in. For sixteen years, I had lived with pain from agonizing migraines and stiff muscles that caused me to be in and out of a wheel chair. And finally two days after my twenty-eighth birthday I slipped into a coma that lasted seven years. Eventually, I woke up, but for days I laid paralyzed except for my fingers and eyes, unable to speak. After months of physical therapy I was finally able to keep living the life I was meant to. The day I was released from the hospital the doctor told my sister I was no longer in any pain, and this was very much true."

Amanda walked into a room, it was colored with an off-white cream color, the one you would see in Downton Abbey, the kind of color that middle aged women aspire to have rooms in their home the color of but no one ever does. She touched the chilled body, and looked back at the nurse hinting for her to have some alone time with her brother. As soon as she did, Amanda sat on the bed and played with Sebastian's hair. Tears streamed from her face.

She took a deep breath, allowing her to say "I miss you so much. Please come back to me."

"Now, I know it's crazy to believe but when I was in the coma, it was like my body was in one place, but my spirit was in another, I was somehow able to look down from the sky and watch every thing happen to me. Which is why my sister," said Sebastian "has been my hero through all of this. She is the one that kept me fighting for my life. I thank her each and every day for being the big sister people dream about having. She is smart, gracious, kind, and a fighter." herself. She came to visit me all the time while I was in the hospital. She would read my favorite section in the newspaper to me, comb my hair, and be there for me in my time of need. She fought for me when I couldn't, and for this reason, my sister, Amanda is my hero."

Sebastian wiped at his tear-filled eyes and looked over to his sister, she left the podium with swollen cheeks and eyes with streak marks down her face from her tears.

"Another person that was there for me during this, was my best friend Craig." He joined him on stage, at the podium that Amanda once stood, took a deep breath and began to speak.

My best friend since I was six years old, who was there for me through thick and thin, whom I would never change or replace, the best friend who people could only dream of having as an acquaintance, this person was Craig. He sat next to my bed, he came once a week right after his job as a secretary maintenance company just down the road from the hospital where I stayed. He'd come in, tell me the latest news about our favorite sports team. Sometimes he and my sister would come together, not often though. I remember one time he came in, he and his girlfriend(Cindy) had just broken up after two years of being engaged, and eight years in total. I wanted jump up and hug him, comfort the closest thing I had to a brother. Let him know that I am still here.

"Sebastian, I thank you for our friendship, I will love you forever, brother." Craig looked back at Sebastian and returned to his seat among the rest of Sebastian's friends and family.

"I am thankful for each and everyday Craig," Sebastian said as he sat down, and waited for him to respond, "Must not have heard me." Thought Sebastian.

The next person to join me on stage was my mother. She is my night and shining armor, protected me from bullies, injuries, even when I was asleep. For the first few months she would come in daily, after that... every other day. I could tell she was hurting, I knew it was because she thought she had lost her first son a few years before she had me, and might lose me too. More than anything, I wish that I could give her a sign, that I love her, and will be with her soon.

At one point in time, I had a bad spell of seizures. I would have them frequently over the course of a few months, this was challenging for me because my family did not visit me during this time, and this was when I needed them the most. I continued to be very sick and feared for my life. The look of concern on the doctors and nurses did not help. I feared that they might take me off of life support because I was doing so poorly. Like I did my freshman year of high school, the first time I had come back to school since the accident, we had meetings after meetings about my inability to keep up with the curriculum. My teachers would tell my parents, that because of the brain trauma, I was unable to work and keep up with the class. The only people that stayed loyal to me was my family. People who didn't know me before the accident, treated me differently than others. I felt like an outsider no matter where I was, as long as they knew my secret. The feeling of being given up on, and eventually even my family had told me that the accident was no longer an excuse. I felt like I was living through high school again.

After months of needing to be revived every few days, dangerously low blood pressure, and the need for somebody to be constantly watching me, it all stopped. I had hit my lowest point, but I survived and just like magic I began to heal in a matter of days. I had more brain movement in the past three days than what I had had in the last three years. Somehow I was going to make it.

"The day I woke up, I was greeted by a bright light, as my eyes adjusted to my surroundings, I saw my mom, dad, best friend, and Amanda. They cried and hugged me and each other. The two weeks from when I woke up to now was pretty much a blur, but from what I remember was having a lot of different doctors do tests on me.

I looked down at the large group of people I had been talking to. I saw my mother sobbing and my sister ran to her side, also crying out. I understood how one might shed a few tears of joy, but many

other people in the crowd were crying as well, as though they had lost someone. A cold stiff hand touched my shoulder, I turned around to find a man whom I had never seen before. It took a moment to seep in, but as memories, and stories sunk in, I understood that I was looking at my older brother, who had died years before I was born. Erin, looked at me with a sorrowful look and then it hit me like a wave. He took my hand and led me into the light that had been shining behind me the weeks I had been awake. As we stepped though, I was greeted with an abundance of joy, there was a gate not one-hundred feet away, draped with the most lovely of plants. We inched closer to it, and the most bazar things were surrounding me, I would look down and my self stepping on mounds of cotton candy, when I reached down to touch it, it would simply disappear into thin air, the way fog did when you ran into it on a cold winter morning. I took a breath in and smelled something unexplainably different to each individual. For me, I imagined the rocky shores of Greece, and you walk down the stone stairs, and are welcomed by crystal clear waters. It felt like Heaven. Erin led me through the gate, and up the stairs to an enchanting palace. There were small homes, and people wandering all about with wonder in their eyes. They looked at me and gave me sympathetic and bashful eyes, I blushed back speechless as I was overwhelmed with the beauty of my surroundings. I looked at Erin and he looked at me, we walked through a small back road and we entered one of the many small homes. He sat me down on a couch that felt like marshmallows.

He turned to me and said "Welcome to Heaven, brother."

At first I was shocked but as Erin explained to me, that during the time that I was getting better, something happened and I went into cardiac arrest and the light I saw was the entrance to Heaven. That the reason I wouldn't remember the two weeks before my speech, was the process of my soul leaving my body. When I "woke up" was really me dying, and when they were crying in the hospital hugging me, was them being there as I took my last breath. I didn't understand this, because I believed that I really was interacting with them. Then he told me about my funeral. The time that I had been telling my story, was really my friends and family at my funeral. Erin left me to be alone and I cried and cried for hours.

"How could I be dead I thought, "How, why, this can't be real" I thought over and over again.

After I had been alone, and had time to think things over, Erin walked in. Without any thought, I got up and hugged him, this time he was warm against my skin and now we both cried. I had never met him, but somehow, I felt connected to him. He told me the story of when he had died at the age of six, after suffering an allergic reaction while being home alone. That he too, watched down on the paramedics trying to revive him, how Amanda, only two at the time cried to her mother and father. When they carried him away in a body bag, how he had been taken by an angel. For hours they talked, explained, and cried, but by the end they both found comfort in each other and Sebastian felt as safe as can be.

For the next few days, Erin led him around the city and introduced him to everyone they saw. And after time, his death became a little more bearable.

"I have been dead exactly 186 days" said Sebastian to Erin.

"I don't know the math, since I died at six to figure out how many days I have been dead" joked Erin. The two acted like they had known each other for years.

"I have something to tell you" said Erin to Sebastian.

"What?"

"I don't know if it happened to you when you were alive, but it did to Amanda, Mom, and Dad. I waited to tell you, but... I think it's time you know. After life, you can still visit earth and people who are alive."

"How could you not tell me!"

"You took death much worse than others, I thought that it would be to much for you! I am so sorry!"

"I can't believe you Erin! I could have seen my family again, said good bye! You took that away from me!"

"It's not what you think!"

"Then explain." Sebastian snapped.

"You can't really talk or anything, all you are able to do is send messages and hope that they understand."

"What do you mean?"

The first few years after I died, I would come back to earth much more often, but I would knock my favorite book off of a shelf, or slam my door, or leave trails to my favorite hideout in the garden."

"So you haunted us?"

"Yes, but in a good way! I made my passing easier for you guys. Then when you came along, Mom and Dad became happier, and didn't cry as much. So I stopped doing it as much. But whenever you hear maybe my name being called, or you happen to see a boy who looked just like me. That is me sending a message to you. And I will help you do the same."

Erin led Sebastian back into the light, they appeared at the front door to his parent's house. Sebastian felt so happy being back at his home.

"You must do this on your own, now." Said Erin.

Sebastian nodded in a way to show his understanding. Erin strolled back into Heaven. Sebastian first peered into the window of their door. He took it all in, the couch he and his sister would watch movies from, the table they would spend hours coloring on, the chairs that their parents would read endless stories to them on.

He took a breath and walked in. Nobody was home, so he continues to walk through the house, he gazed into his room, still decorated, just the way he left it the day he had been in the car accident. In a way he was sort of surprised that his parents had not moved his things out, but also happy that they hadn't said good bye to him just yet. He walked around his room and looked at everything he used to love. He saw his old blanket from when his grandparents gave it to him on his fourth birthday. Then he laid his eyes upon something very close to his heart. Then he finally understood what Erin had been explaining to him. He took the item and laid it on his bed. Now it was up to fate to give the message to his family.

After he had reminisce in his old home, he sat outside on the steps to the front door awaiting the arrival of his family, finally his mother and father stepped out of their car and walked towards the house. This was Sebastian's cue to leave. He said his good byes and headed back into the light, knowing that they would get the message.

Back at his new home, in Heaven he sat with his new friend, and brother and waited to see their parent's reaction.

"So what did you leave?" Asked Erin.

"You will have to wait and see."

Mrs. King walked into her son's room and ran to his bed, she picked up a card and began to cry, her husband, hearing her wails rushed to her side, where he to began to cry too. They spent the rest of the night curled up in Sebastian's bed. They talked all night about their favorite memories, and everything and anything to help them move on. As they began to drift off to sleep, Mrs. King laid a card that Sebastian had written them after a big fight.

It read:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I know I am mad at you right now, but I will always love you more than anything in the whole world. I am so thankful to have you in my life, and I am so lucky to call you my parents. I love you with my whole heart.

Love, Sebastian

Natalie Doelman

An Unfortunate Town

"No, this is not happening. Nope. What do you mean? No, this couldn't have happened. This is some kind of sick joke. Knock it off Maisel. Tell me you aren't serious. He wouldn't just do that. Not on his own accord. Nope," Jane could feel her eyes watering and her hands were shaking as she held her phone to her ear. Jane was a petite woman with long honey brown hair and deep blue eyes.

"I'm sorry, your brother is gone and he's left everything to you. Even the note."

"Well, I guess I'll head back to Maybelle this weekend. I'll call Mary and tell her. She won't take it very well and I figure it's better if I'm the punching bag," she hung up and took a deep breath before calling her sister.

"Hello?" a voice from the past answered Jane.

"Hey sis, John committed suicide."

"First off, never call me sis again. Second off, it's been 5 years since you talked to me, a simple 'How're you?' would be nice. And thirdly, suicide?! I am in my third trimester, a shock like this can't be good for the baby. Good golly, not John. Not our baby brother. He was so happy. What happened?"

"I don't know. I guess was just the next victim of the Maybelle curse. I'm going back this weekend to deal with his house and business."

"Well you better. With a baby on the way, you can hardly expect me to fly all the way back to Iowa. Also, it's been 5 years. What are you doing with your life? I take it you've left Maybelle."

"Yeah, I'm in Boston now, but I've travelled all over the U.S. appraising antiques and inspecting museums. And you? I assume you and Charlie got married and now you're expecting?"

"It would have been nice for my only sister to show up to my wedding, but I'm over that. Yes, we're expecting. I'm in California now and I'm never going back to Maybelle. I don't understand why John stayed. Anyway, I have to dash."

Jane couldn't believe it. Mary just hung up. Whatever, she was used to it. People just hanging up on her, that is. She grabbed her cross-stitch basket, sat on the couch, and cried. In the middle of her sob session, her phone rang again. It was Joel. She dried her eyes and picked up the phone.

A deep, comforting, solid voice said, "Hey sweetheart, I heard about John. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. I just need to be alone for a little while. Wait, how did you know about John?"

"Don't worry about it darling, Mary called me to check up on you. I'll leave you be to process this, but I'm here if you need me."

Before she could protest, he hung up. They weren't even together anymore, for Pete's sake. She broke up with him weeks ago, and Mary never even heard about Joel, let alone get his phone number. She shook off her suspicion and focused instead on her trip back to Maybelle. Finding a flight was easy enough; facing the town would be the hard part.

Three days later, she stepped off of the bus at the Maybelle stop after an hour and a half debate with herself over whether or not she should actually go. She was immediately consumed with the staggering smell of manure. It was a smell she could never forget and brought back bittersweet memories. It was kind of good to be back. Maybelle was the stereotypical small farm town with it's one-room schoolhouse, hatred toward the city, and, of course, farms. It was the kind of town where everybody knows everything largely due to the gaggle of old ladies who heard the latest gossip from their various posts around the town who then spread it to the younger ladies who congregated outside the general store to talk and sip tea. Jane figured the girls she grew up with would now be of the age that they would be the young gossips, married, and most likely with one child. She knew as soon as she passed the "Welcome to Maybelle" sign with a white background and a few flowers painted on, someone would see her and before she reached the far side of Main Street, the whole town would know and a few skeptics would creep out to the only four way stop in town (the stoplight had been removed some 20 years prior), but avoid eye contact. Since it was nearing the Christmas season, everyone would be extra grumpy.

She took a deep breath and stepped her loafer-clad foot over the line, followed by its matching pair. It had been nearly a decade since she'd seen the house she grew up in. It was the first building you came upon when walking into town. It was the classic small farmhouse with its white exterior and brown shutters. When her parents had died when she was 17, she and her sister had taken over and, when they had left, John lived there. Her parents were not the first victims of the curse, nor was her brother the last. Although it wasn't written down, every positive person who tried to spread happiness to the people of Maybelle mysteriously died. This started all the way back in 1876 at the town's founding. The town was started by a cult seeking isolation and they have kept many of the secret traditions and the attitude alive in the town to this day. A quiet smile crept to her lips as she passed the house. Her parents may not have been able to fix the town, but they made her childhood as happy as they could. She moved along and passed other houses all the while feeling gazes upon her from the townsfolk hidden in their homes. When she made it to town, she took the first right, onto Maple St., and walked into City Hall which doubled as the fire station, the police station, the Chamber of Commerce, and the visitors center.

"Well, well, Mart! Look what the cat dragged in. If it isn't Jane Clements. After all these years." Miss Maisel, who had been the librarian, city clerk, and events planner for as long as anyone can remember, said in the fakest sweet voice Jane had ever heard.

Mart, her nephew, replied, "I'll be darned. Jane! In the flesh. When we was graduating, you said you would never come back come hell or high water."

"Yet here I am. I'm just here for a few days so don't get your knickers in a twist. John died and I need to know what to do now."

"I'll just let you get this one Mart, I can hardly stand to be in the same room as a Clements let alone do a favor for one," Miss Maisel excused herself.

"You look good Janey, real good. A little too city for me to still be interested in case you're wondering."

Jane laughed, "Thank you. I'm not interested in case you were wondering. I'm just here to sort out all John's affairs."

"Well shucks, I shoulda guessed. Say, while you're here, why don't me and you go giggin' like when we was kids. Maybe I can get all that city outta you."

"I guess one or two frogs wouldn't hurt. Sure. How about tomorrow? Remember, it's not a date. Do I just sign here?" Jane pointed at one of the release papers Mart had put in front of her.

"Uhh, no. Right here actually," Mart guided her fingers with his larger calloused-yet-soft hand.

They briefly made eye contact. No, this couldn't be happening. Jane had left Maybelle for happiness in the city and, after ten years, she had hardly been back half an hour and was falling for Mart, her childhood best friend. Oh boy, had he changed. He had gotten taller and stronger and his eyes had turned a deep blue. Nope, she refused to let this happen. No one can be happy in Maybelle. After a few more papers and a couple awkward eye contacts later, Jane headed back to the house. In her hand was a ziplock bag of all the "evidence" from the police station. She still had her key from over a decade ago and, to her surprise, it unlocked the door. The house was almost exactly as she remembered it, just a little more run down. She went to her old bedroom and set her suitcase down. She sat criss-crossed on the bed and opened the ziplock bag carefully pulled out the contents. She unfolded the note and it read:

Dear Jane,

I hope you are well. I tried to break the curse and fix the town, but it failed. Miss Maisel dropped her bags and I tried picking the, up for her, but she hit me with her cane. Freckles face Tommy had a son who was lost but when I offered to give him a lift, he told me to bug off. These pushed me over the edge. My whole. Life has been spent on trying to fix this town, but it has been futile. I'm giving up.

~ John

Jane was confident John didn't know cursive nor would he ever use the word futile. Something fishy was going on. She felt an overwhelming urge to call Joel for reassurance, but instead forced herself to make some oatmeal. As she was putting blueberries on top,

there was a knock on the door. She answered and found Mart standing there with his backpack from when they were in school.

"Can I help you?"

"Uhh, yeah. Mamma kicked me out for talking to you. She said she shoulda done it sooner. I'm a man now, Mamma says. And well seein' as I don't got nowhere to go, I says to myself, 'Why don't I stay with Janey?' And here I am."

"Poor little lamb. Of course you can stay."

She led him inside and set a bowl of oatmeal out for him. Mart was a little slow, maybe that's why he was the only nice one in town. His mamma used to put him in the barn out back when they had company over because she was so ashamed. It wasn't how slow he was that embarrassed her, it was the love he radiated. He used to give hugs to everyone who would let him while his family was selling their crops at the market. They had been best friends since the first day of kindergarten. He had always liked Jane. Sometimes, he would spend weeks at Jane's house when his momma was mad. He would knock on her window and sleep on the floor after his daddy had been drinking. He didn't seem to mind. Mart didn't seem to notice how dysfunctional his family was and he just turned it around and loved everyone. Now things were different. Jane had a home and a job and Mart was still in Maybelle. They were adults now.

"Jane, I love you."

Jane stopped short and spit out her oatmeal.

Mart, you don't even know me anymore. It's been ten years and we've both changed. I liked you in high school, but you chose to stay here. Now I love you as a brother. I'm really sorry."

"So you wouldn't marry me?"

"What?! You wanted to marry me?! I've been here for less than six hours and you were going to propose?!"

"So that's a no?"

"Yes, that's a no. Here, I'll tell you what. I turn 30 in two years. If I'm still not married, I'll marry you only if you promise to leave Maybelle with me."

"I would go to Antarctica for you. I'm sorry Jane."

The rest of the day was smoother. John had a this-and-that shop in the next town over so Mart and Jane visited it in Mart's square-body pickup jacked up enough to make any country girl's heart throb. Especially Jane, who was already fighting off feelings for him. They rolled the windows down and turned the country music up just like they were in high school again. She felt genuinely happy for the first time in too long. Turned out John had left his shop to his assistant, which made things easy for Jane in that regard. The hard part was resisting the urge to tell Mart she liked him again. Back in Maybelle, they pair went to the overpriced grocery store called "Everybody's Favorite" but nicknamed "Nobody's" because it was nobody's first choice. They kept their heads down and felt the suspicious glares from the townspeople as they bought their milk, bread, and Mac-and-cheese for dinner.

"Don't mind them Janey, they're just jealous."

Mr. Warner, the owner of the store approached them and spat, "Hurry up and get outta here. Nobody wants your happiness. I'll have you arrested for disturbing the peace with all that smilin'."

Feeling rambunctious and full of joy from a day with Mart, Jane put her hand on Mr. Warner's shoulder with a big ol' smile and said, "It's nice to see you too. Have a fantastic day Mr. Warner. Merry Christmas."

The look on his face was absolutely priceless. She was used to this look of disgust, but she felt good. Leaving the store, she could have sworn she saw the silhouette of Joel in the house of Miss Maisel. Oh well, it was probably nothing. Besides, she had the Mart situation to deal with.

Three wonderful days passed and they were filled with joy and Mart. She couldn't stop thinking about him. Talking to him was so easy and he made her feel good. Joel had torn her down and constantly reminded her how lucky she was to have him, but Mart genuinely liked being around her and felt lucky to be with her.

Then things crashed. There was a knock on the door in the middle of the night. Jane hissed in Mart's ear to grab the shotgun but not to shoot unless she said so. She opened the door to find Joel standing there with flowers.

"Sweetheart, honey, baby, I've missed you. Please come home. You don't belong with him," Joel got on one knee, "will you marry me?"

"Two proposals in one week!? This must be a record or something. Joel, I don't love you. I can't marry you. Wait, how did you know where I was or that Mart was here?"

"Don't worry about it my sweet little pumpkin. May I come in?"

"Sure, I guess, but I need you to leave in the morning."

After shaking off the strange midnight visit, she put him in the guest room and went back to bed. Tossing and turning, things started to fall into place. Maybe it really was Joel she saw with Miss Maisel. Joel wrote in cursive and used fancy words. Joel knew about Mary and John despite the fact she never introduced them. Her heart started racing, but then she realized there was no motive. Well, it was an interesting thought for sure, even if it didn't pan out.

Joel didn't leave in the morning. In fact, he stayed for one whole painfully awkward and creepy week. He kept telling Jane he loved her and wanted to marry her. He even tried to hit Mart across the back of the head with a two by four. Come to think of it, Joel and Mart looked remarkably similar. No wonder she had dated Joel.

Jane was cleaning the kitchen when she saw an envelope poking out of Joel's bag. Intrigued, she pulled it out and saw it was from Miss Maisel. She demanded why he had it and what his connection was to her. She pulled him by the ear to the table and sat him down. She presented her suspicions with Mart and the shotgun behind her. She read the letter and discovered Miss Maisel was his aunt. No wonder Mart and Joel looked similar, they were cousins. The town had hated John so much that Miss Maisel had offered to ask her nephew, who was a forensic scientist in Boston, to come stage a suicide. Joel had the skill to stage it effectively, but lacked the knowledge of what John was like. Fearing Jane would figure it out, he came to Maybelle to propose because once they were married, Jane could not testify against him in court.

"Congrats, you finally figured it out, but it'll never hold up in court. It's your word against the whole town. Plus this dimwit," he said, jeering at Mart.

The rest of the day, Mart stood by him with the shotgun telling him not to try to escape. Sweet Mart tried staying up all night too while Jane went to the nearest city with unconnected law enforcement to come help. He fell asleep and Joel stole out in the night. Jane returned to find Mart frantically crying about how he let her down.

"Shhh, shhh. Honey calm down. I'm getting you out of this town. We're going back to my home. You're coming whether you like it or not. But first, we have something we need to do."

That day was spent buying a borderline crazy amount of Christmas lights. In the night, they snuck into the town and made Main Street look like a landing strip for Santa. Maybelle was predominantly bitter elderly people who turned off their hearing aids and went to bed around seven so there was no need to be incredibly discreet in their spreading of Christmas joy. They plugged in the lights and were nearly blinded by their masterpiece.

"Ya know what? I will marry you, Mart."

She took his hand and they hopped in his truck. They both knew the town would hate their new decorations, but they felt satisfied knowing they would have to take it all down and bicker the entire time about who was doing more and whose fault it was. She smiled at him and knew she was going to be just fine. Maybe the curse was broken. At least, for Mart it was. For the first time in history, something good came out of Maybelle.

Reese Wyman

The Dinner Party

"Hello?" Caroline said in answer to the ring of her phone.

"Hi, this is Alicia," the person on the other end of the phone answered.

"Oh, how have you been, Alicia? The last time we talked was probably three years ago, right after your thirtieth birthday," Caroline exclaimed to her phone.

"Just dandy, Caroline. I haven't seen you in a long time though and I think we're overdue for some sort of get together. I was thinking about having you over for dinner, possibly tomorrow if you're available?"

"Actually that works great for me," Caroline responded.

"Awesome, so I'll see you tomorrow night around six o'clock?"

"Sure, I can make that work."

"Oh, and bring some other friends with you. The more the merrier," Alicia happily stated

"Ok, I have a couple that I'm really good friends with. Travis and Victoria, can I bring them along? They are both in their mid twenties, and they are very attached to each other. Such a nice couple."

"Yeah, they sound wonderful to me! Alrighty then, I'll see you tomorrow, with Travis and Alicia."

"This going to be a nice get together, bye!" Caroline said with glee.

"Definitely!" Alicia responded as she hung up the phone.

"And cut," a director yelled from behind a megaphone, "Alright people let's get this show started now that we have a backstory to show the viewers. Caroline, phone the surprise contestants. Make sure you remember their names from when we set up that barbecue so they don't get suspicious in any way. The better the surprise, the better the reaction, and the more viewers."

"Ok, will do," Caroline responded.

"Victoria! Your phone is ringing. It says it's Caroline," Travis shouted to his girlfriend who was downstairs in their apartment.

Victoria was slightly confused by the name of the caller as she ascended the stairs to grab the phone from her boyfriend.

"Caroline?" She said in a confused state of mind, "Oh, yes. Now I remember her. We met her at someone's barbecue party a week ago."

"Better answer it then," Travis said as he handed the phone to her.

"Hey Caroline. What's up?" Victoria answered.

"Nothing much. But hey do you have any plans for tomorrow night at around six o'clock, per say?" Caroline said with a happy voice.

"No, why?" Victoria answered.

"Oh, one of my friends, Alicia, is having a little get together slash dinner party thing and I was wondering if you and Travis would like to come?"

"I don't know. I mean going to a friend of friends dinner party? Sounds a little awkward," Veronica replied.

"I don't see why it would. It's just a get together. Come on, please?" Caroline said in a begging voice.

"Hm . . . Ok you got me. Sure, Travis and I have nothing better to do, might as well," said Veronica with a little chuckle.

Caroline cheerfully said, "Yay! Can't wait to see you there. Remember it's tomorrow night at six and I'll send you the address."

"Ok, see you then," Veronica said as she ended the phone call.

After Caroline had finished the call she texted Alicia saying that the dinner party was on and to be ready for the couple to come over that next day at 6 pm. Now, all they had to do was notify their team members that the unsuspecting couple would be entering the scene at about six o'clock, and to have the cameras rolling. This might just become their episode yet.

Veronica still wasn't so sure about how she felt going to someone's house that she didn't know. But she tucked that feeling away saying to herself that after all, it's only a dinner party.

The next day had come and Veronica was reminding Travis that they had to go to Alicia's house for dinner.

"Do we have to go," Travis whined, "I've had a long week and I'm tired."

Veronica said in response, "Oh, shush. You sound like a baby and I already said we'd be going. Besides, we don't have anything planned for today and why not? Dinner Party! Yay."

"Yeah, I guess. But it's odd I have to say. Going to this person's house that we've never met," he replied.

The day had passed and it was time for Veronica and Travis to head over to Alicia's house. The couple hopped in their car and drove to the address Caroline had given them. After about half an hour, they finally reached Alicia's house. They hopped out of the car and went to knock on the front door. They both had the odd feeling of entering the stranger's house. But they were greeted by a smiling face.

"Hi, my name is Alicia. It's so wonderful to finally meet you two," said the warm, friendly face of a woman.

Veronica entered the house with no more thoughts about going in with that strange feeling. But Travis, on the other hand, was dragging his feet from the car to the front door until he reached the front door where Caroline ushered him into the house. The first thing Veronica did was compliment Alicia's house. She had dove right into their trap but Travis hadn't. He was still unhappy about the situation and sat quietly only adding to the girls' conversation every once in a while.

Time had passed and the three girls had been sipping on wine for the last hour, enjoying themselves. Travis observed the girls having a jolly time since he didn't want to be there and he was noticing some strange things about Alicia. The way she talked, the way she held her wine glass, and the way she looked. He knew something was very different about this person. Alicia's acting skills were usually superb when it came to rolls like this and she was instructed to act oddly and this was her best way of showing that. He just couldn't fit the pieces together quite yet that they were going to the victims to a show of epic surprises. Little did he also know that everything was being recorded. That his sour face would soon be seen by at least a hundred thousand people.

As more time passed Travis couldn't help but think that the night would never end as he watched his girlfriend talk and talk. He finally decided to say something as they finished their dessert around the dining room table.

"Umm, Veronica?" Travis said in a quiet voice.

"Yeah?" She replied as she turned his direction for the first that night, finally acknowledging him.

"Uh, can I talk to you else where? Just a second? Please?" He had to beg her just for a small conversation.

"Sure. Be right back girls," she said with a smile to her new "besties".

Travis walked around toward the front door so the host and Caroline wouldn't hear them. Little did they know that there were camera's and microphones all throughout the house.

"Honey, I see that you're having a good time, but I want to go home. Not only that but don't you think Alicia is a little weird. I mean did you see the way she was holding that wine glass and the way she talks. She only talks about herself. Have you not noticed that? She holds it like a sippy cup for babies! Now that's weird and-," He tried to continue but Veronica interrupted.

"Travis, she's super fun and quirky. Oh, she's just a good person. Why do you question that? Not every person in this world is out to get you. Now, if you don't mind I'm gonna go back to my wonderful new friends," she said hastily only wanting the conversation to end faster so she could leave.

Veronica gave him one last look and an eye roll as she turned around to join her "friends". She was clearly annoyed by his eagerness to leave. Travis finally decided enough was enough and thought up a devious escape plan. Sneak around the corner, hide between the two bookshelves by the front door, then quietly open and run out the door. He was counting down in his head. Three, two, one! Go!

He took a quick peak around the corner and saw Veronica, Caroline, and Alicia, now standing in the kitchen, but still chatting with each other. He saw they were still deep in conversation, somehow. He wondered as he watched how long they could talk. It had already been

several hours. So he noticed they were distracted and made a swift jump across the open hallway and squished himself between the two book shelves. Travis thought Success!

"What is he doing?" Alicia said.

"Beats me," Veronica replied.

"Hey, Travis! What are you doing?" Caroline said with a laugh.

"Shoot!" Travis said under his breath.

"Are you trying to leave? Come on over and join the conversation," Alicia exclaimed from across the room.

Travis was rubbing his head in hands as he stood there in between the two bookshelves, slightly humiliated. But he noticed something peculiar as his eyes met the floor. A red wire tapped to the ground that ran underneath both bookshelves, through the kitchen, and around the corner. He thought to himself, well, it's probably just a phone wire or some bad electric work as he stepped out into the full view of the three girls.

"I think we should be going now, girls. It's been a fun time but really," he responded.

"What? No. You're staying. If I were you I would stay," Alicia shouted.

Travis was thinking about what she said, "if I were you I would stay." What exactly did she mean by that?

He responded in a slightly nervous voice, "No, Veronica and I should really be going. Right Veronica? Yeah, let's go."

"Okay, Travis. I see that it's almost eleven o'clock now. So sure, we can head out. We've had a wonderful time, so I guess we'll see you around?" Veronica said as she started to collect her things.

"Finally," he muttered.

"Oh no no no. Nope. Not gonna happen," Alicia abruptly shouted, "You two can't leave now. The fun has only begun," Alicia said through a smirk.

Caroline had slowly started to back away from Alicia towards Travis and Veronica with a troubled face.

"Crap, Crap, Crap!" Caroline whispered to the couple, "Did I forget to mention Alicia has um a couple different personalities?"

"Um yeah, Caroline, you forgot to mention that piece of information! And may I ask what personality she has switched to now?" He said.

A concerned Travis whispered back as they watched Alicia standing there in the kitchen with an unpleasant look on her face that gave the trio even more fright.

"Well," Caroline said, "the only other personality is the, the, th- . . ." She trailed off in a shaky voice.

"Spit it out Caroline! She's staring at us like a crazy lady," Travis said shaking Caroline by the shoulders.

"The murderer!" Caroline said in a scared whisper.

Veronica turned around to the front door, conveniently right behind them. But Alicia had locked it on there way in. This led to them eventually understanding that Alicia had been switching between personalities since they got there.

"What do we do?" Veronica screamed in panic.

"Run!" Travis responded.

The three ran like chickens with there heads cut off. Aimlessly in the house they didn't know how to escape with a murderer on the loose. Travis and Veronica ran and ran. They could hear their hearts pounding in their chests and, not a single other sound.

"Oh no! We've lost Caroline." Veronica whispered to Travis as they sat hidden behind closet doors.

Then suddenly Alicia's voice rang through the house saying, "I'm coming to get you."

The couple whimpered in fear thinking all hope of surviving this murderous dinner party host was lost. Travis looked all around the closet they were in and noticed that strange red wire again tapped to the floor and disappeared under a door hidden by coats. Out of curiosity Travis picked the wire and gave it a tug from under the door and heard some stuff crash and fall over.

"What was that?" Veronica whispered while trembling.

Travis shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm going to open the door, Okay?" He said.

"No! Why? Alicia might be in there or something.

"We really have no other option," He sighed.

Travis opened the door to see cameras, lights, a camera crew, and Caroline. In the back of the room they had just discovered said in big letters "Gotcha!" On a banner. Then right next to that said "A Reality TV Show". Veronica and Travis looked at everything and everyone with big eyes and their jaws dropped to the floor in disbelief. Veronica saw Alicia behind Caroline and fainted out of stress of running from a so called murderer. Travis stood there still dumbfounded.

"Gotcha!" everyone in the room shouted unanimously.

Nelly Ramos-Laguna

The Face of Beauty

A tall city landscape, rising higher. The blue and green lights flashing throughout the night. A cold breeze blowing, silently like an invisible presence, across the faces of the 70,000 people in the stadium. The wind on the verge of uncomfortable, but with the heat of all the sweaty bodies, it was a nice refresher.

Behind the rowdy noise of the crowd, Laura sat watching the game unfold. In her long black winter coat and matching winter boots she sat munching on a bag of popcorn. Although she didn't understand the point of football, she enjoyed the experience, the jumbo popcorn, the roar of the crowd, and spending time with her busy father. However like most weekends her father had a business meeting and in his place sat Laura's driver. Not a limo driver, but the driver that helped her get around. His name was Clayton Bradley. He was kind and smart, but Laura imagined a friend her age, and Clayton was more of a parental figure.

"Clayton," Laura said while still munching on her popcorn, "I've been thinking that maybe tomorrow you could drive me to Pike Place Market, since you know, my father cancelled our weekend," she said in a tone that Clayton could never resist. Laura was playing the role of the helpless girl in the wheelchair so that she could get one night out and away from her lonely apartment suite.

"Uh, well your father has instructed me, um, to, um, not really let you leave the house, because, er, well, um, your conditions." He said nervously.

"Well that goon always says that, but I'm fine, I'm always fine, you know that more than anyone," Laura explained in her soft voice.

Laura had lived everywhere in the United States in only 17 years. Moving around three to four times a year, all for her parents, and their jobs. The plane never seemed to slow down enough to make real friends and Clayton Bradley had been there since Laura's birth. Clayton took care of her for the seventeen years that Laura was alive and he had helped her become the person she was now.

Clayton seemed hesitant as always, but when he found his voice he was ready with an answer.

"I suppose so, but if your father finds out, just know I may not be here the next day," he said jokingly.

The next day Laura woke up in her comfy bed to the sound of a honking car, outside her window and 8 stories down, some people were in the middle of an argument. She quickly rose, startled, and began to get dressed. Just like every morning, she called her mother in to help her get dressed before she left for work. Her mom looked identical to Laura, brown hair, green eyes, and an oval shaped head with a rounded chin. But Laura and her mom's personalities, were anything but identical, and their relationship anything but good.

"Bye," was all her mother would say in her honeyed voice before leaving, but not what Laura hoped to hear. The television shows and movies had always portrayed a happy ending, and although she seemed to have it all, the ending for her was never truly joyful.

The city was no longer something to feel in awe about, for Laura it was a regular day and Pike Place Market was her backyard, and even to her backyard, she could never go. The days she was free to go, she felt like she could move around freely, although still stuck in her chair.

Clayton was already in the car waiting for Laura. The car was a new shiny matte black lamborghini and her dad had gifted it to Clayton as a thank you for all his troubles.

As Laura arrived to the market, the smell of fresh flowers grew in her nose. Violets, her favorites. It was a unique smell and a comfort to Laura. Stands of flowers, fish, jewelry, paintings, t-shirts, all you needed. Although it brought comfort, it was public, and any public area was to be inspected by Clayton. Laura thought it was unnecessary, but then again, when had anyone taken her thoughts into consideration.

While Clayton turned his back to do a full inspection around the area, Laura escaped into the crowd. She wanted to be alone for once and not surrounded by that which shielded her from the world and her own life. She rushed through, hoping to not get caught by Clayton.

Laura had never realized how many skills she had on her wheels until she was speeding through the crowd. The rush drew her in and she began to lose focus on the crowd ahead. CRASH! Her chair, tilting back and forth, was bound to fall. Laura panicked on the inside and her heart began to race. An arm reached out and pulled her up straight to a halt. After relaxing her breath she examined the block in her path. She had run into a girl, a stranger, whose box of apples had fallen to the ground. She had short curly brown hair, brown eyes, and a worried look on her face.

"I'm so sorry, I was not watching where I was going, I'm so sorry," the girl explained anxiously.

Laura thought for a moment, thinking of all the things she could say.

"No it's okay, I'm okay," Laura replied back.

Laura was fine but the girl did not seem convinced.

"I'm serious, no worries, it was my fault anyways," Laura said again.

"Are you sure? I should have looked up and my momma always says I look down, and well, I don't like to look people in their eyes because I guess I'm just that way and I'm so sorry it was my fault," the girl rambled.

Laura now had a decision, this unknown girl who had talked to her unlike the rest of the world, or to remain constricted with Clayton. In two seconds she had decided that instead of looking for Clayton, she had an opportunity to take. Possibly, she could make a friend. A person to confide in, laugh with, go shopping with, and just like that her mind went to the illusion of movie perfect happy endings. Thinking of the boring activities with her restrictions, Laura decided to stay and talk with this girl, at least to stall from going back to Clayton.

" Excuse me, what's your name?"asked Laura.

"Can I ask why, cause u seem suspicious, rushing around," the girl responded quietly.

"Just curious, but if it helps, I'm Laura," she explained.

The girl said nothing for a moment, as she looked towards the smashed apples on the ground, it seemed as though their conversation was over.

Laura felt it was time for her to back off and leave, something she had said had clearly hurt this girl's feelings.

"Are you ok?" Laura asked.

The girl replied "Iris, my name's Iris," she paused, "My dad liked Irises they were his favorite flower" Iris spoke again.

"So that's why he named you Iris," said Laura with a smile.

It turned into a sad face and then a frown when she thought about her own father and then the 'liked' that Iris had used in her sentence. She disregarded the first thought and pondered on the second.

"I'm sorry, did he pass away?" Laura asked hesitantly.

Laura knew it was a rude question but her curiosity was overpowering.

"Yes a long time ago, but anytime people bring up my name, it takes me back to that time" Iris responded.

Minutes passed and their conversation came to a close. Laura needed to find Clayton. Iris had a job to get back to. Laura came to the realization that Clayton had most likely assumed a kidnapping or similar crime had occurred. This was not a good situation to place Clayton in and she became anxious.

When Laura finally found Clayton he had called the police but was not mad with her, she was handicapped and apparently it was hard to be mad at a young handicapped girl, Laura had come to realize. She sat in the car and gazed out the window at the fading blue sky. There she thought about her friend. Well not friend, she thought, but it was the first time she had a conversation with someone her age while living in Seattle. She had never had a real friend and Iris wasn't like the others, afraid to hurt her with words or gestures that somehow all correlated to her accident and her wheelchair.

When Laura was only five her nanny had tried driving without a car seat. Clayton was out of town for a family emergency and her parents at their doctor jobs as always. The car had turned over and Laura had been paralyzed from the waist down. Her nanny was fired and had suffered a broken rib and mild head injury. Laura's father then proceeded to do what he always did, he sued the nanny.

Laura returned the next week on the same day to look for her new friend, but could not find her anywhere through the crowds of people. Laura felt saddened. Her chance at finding even one teenage friend was gone. She spotted lavender flowers, and quickly her mood changed. It was okay if she didn't find Iris, she could make new friends, right? Before she had time to answer at her own thought, she rolled over to the flower stand, and behind them was Iris.

"Iris!" Laura yelled.

Again, the conversation began and it felt like they had known each other their whole lives. Somehow they were so similar even though they were opposites of each other. They talked for hours about their parents, and lives.

They talked until Laura was too tired to go on.

"See you later!" said Iris.

"See ya Iris," Laura responded after the girls had exchanged numbers.

They texted most days and Laura became the support that Iris was missing and their bond was that of sisters.

One day while on the phone, the question of where they lived came up.

"Well I live close to the pike place market in a tall blue building and it's not as big as some of the other places I've stayed in but I feel comfortable here, how about you?" Laura asked.

"Well, I've lived in the same place all of my life and I'm very comfortable here as well but it's small and kind of an old building, it's not by any Pike Place but it's by a grocery market," Iris responded.

Laura felt the hesitation that came from Iris's voice.

"I was thinking that maybe we could meet up at my house and you could sleepover, I've never really had one," Laura responded.

Laura was seventeen and had never had a sleepover? Iris thought about how odd this was.

"Uh, I can't I have certain family situations and I'm not allowed to," explained Iris.

Was Iris making an excuse to avoid the sleepover?

"But I guess you could come over to my home and I could introduce you to my siblings," Iris insisted.

"That sounds good Iris!" the girls were excited.

After hours of planning out her busy schedule and asking permission from both parents, Laura picked out a day and Iris agreed.

Clayton dropped Laura off at the front of the building on Monday morning, and he waited until she was safely inside the unknown building to leave. Laura was confused she hadn't pictured it this way but it looked big and she was excited to see the inside. She knocked on the door once, then twice, and finally the third time, the brown door of the brown building swung open.

"Laura, I'm so glad you could make it!" Iris said excitedly.

"Me too!" Laura yelled back.

The girls walked in and stood in the hallway not saying anything for a couple moments. Laura noticed that there were clothes, shoes, mops, glasses, notebooks, and anything else you could think of to be useful spread around the room.

After the awkward silence rose away, Iris showed Laura her room. Laura noticed there were more rooms than at her home, but each room was small with a single mattress in each.

Next, they visited her siblings.

"Hi my name's Laura" Laura greeted.

Each little sibling was timid and seemed afraid of Laura and her unknown personality.

"They are a little shy but this is Lena she's the smallest, Tommy the second smallest and the oldest after me is Kevin, but he's only eight," Iris explained.

Laura had another question that was brewing in her head but she wasn't sure it was a good question.

"Any last questions, that's pretty much my life," Iris said jokingly.

Here Laura found the opportunity but she was still hesitant.

"Um, where are your parents, do you live alone?" Laura asked.

Iris's face sunk and her emotion went away. Iris sighed.

"Well, my dad is no longer with me, and my mom is always out with her friends and she only comes back for one hour a day. It was fine at first but it's too much now," Iris explained.

"I'm sorry for the loss of your father," Laura said softly.

"Thank you," said Iris gratefully, "he was a firefighter and he gave up his life for someone else, and it makes me happy because he was so brave."

"But, your mother has no reason to act that way. The fact that you haven't done anything makes me angry, she's your mom, you need to say something" Laura explained.

"I understand that you may think that but it's my mom and I really don't want to get into this right now," Iris responded.

"Iris, I have been stuck in my chair my whole life, and it has taught me that I can not take the little freedom I have for granted. You can stand up to her, because what you have told me she makes you feel is not okay," Laura repeated back.

Iris began to look saddened and Laura felt she had stepped over her boundary. Iris would tell her stories of late nights when her mom would get back from being out and she would yell at her and call her worthless and sometimes even hurt her.

"I think you should go Laura," Iris said in a soft-spoken voice.

"Please, just think about it Iris," Laura said back.

Iris was tearing up.

"It's not that easy, I can't," Iris said in a brittle voice.

Laura had no idea she would feel this way.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," Laura said.

"Because you don't understand, you aren't like me," Iris was now in tears.

Laura sunk down to her and grabbed her arms.

"What she's doing to you and your family isn't right!" Laura exclaimed.

"But, I'm nothing, I'm ugly, and I have no strength. I'm weak and ugly. I can't do anything" Iris yelled through her tears as she loosened her arms from Laura's grip.

"No you are not Iris, you are my best friend and you are strong, and you are beautiful!" Laura said screaming to be heard over the crying.

"But to her, I'm a nothing, I mean nothing, I am not strong enough to leave, not strong enough to keep going, I'm nothing" Iris said sobbing in tears.

"Iris, you are the best big sister I could imagine, and you are not anything your mom tells you, and I think we need to find help" Laura explained.

"Laura you don't get it, if I call the police or child services, my siblings will have no place to go, and-" she hesitated " why did I do this, why did I try to make a friend and bring them in to my problems. You're just trying to fix me because you desperately need a friend and you live the luxurious life and so what your parents aren't there I wish mine were still alive, your just trying to fix me like a little project. Go find someone else to feel sorry for and just leave!" Iris said angrily.

"I can't leave you here alone, you're my friend" said Laura tearing up.

"No, we aren't friends, please just leave!" Iris exclaimed.

Laura was scared of her once best friend, and Iris was hurt and Laura didn't think she could fix that.

"Iris!" Laura cried out.

"Leave! I don't want to see you again... ever!" Iris cried out.

Laura left and called Clayton. When Clayton picked her up, Laura said nothing, and the trip back home was silent. Laura felt like she needed to talk to someone and get things off her chest, but there was no one here, no one for her. The only person that came to mind was Iris, but the thought made her sob silently. All night she thought about what Iris had said, and she could not sleep.

Weeks passed, Laura went back to her "regular" life, with the thought of Iris in the back of her head. She had contemplated many times whether to call, but each time ended in sobbing. After a month, Laura

had almost cleared the thought of Iris from her mind, but she was reminded of her every time she thought of her wheelchair.

One day her phone rang and she figured that Iris would be the last person to call her. Laura answered and suddenly a rush of emotion flooded her face. Iris was speaking to her, sobbing, just like the last time she had seen her.

"Laura, I didn't know who to call and I'm so sorry but someone broke into my house and I don't know what to do, I have no one and my mom left permanently and-" Her words were rushed and she was crying.

Laura panicked, this was the person who had yelled at her and made her feel terrible but she needed help and she couldn't leave her to suffer on her own.

"Uh, call the police, I'll be on my way" Laura said quickly before she hung up the phone.

By the time she arrived the police were there and they were searching the house.

"Laura!" said a voice from behind.

Laura turned her chair and Iris came running to hug her.

"I don't even know what to say, you didn't need to do this and I'm sorry, so sorry" Iris said.

Iris bursted into tears, Laura hugged her, and again they felt closer.

"Um, excuse me Ma'am," a low voice said from behind.

The girls turned around to see a man dressed in a dark blue uniform, he was definitely a police officer.

"Yes," they both replied.

"We have cleared the area and you can now come inside to look for anything unusual," said the officer.

"Ok, thank you," said Iris.

Although she did not say anything, Iris was nervous about what she would recognize as missing and how it would make her feel. The small steps leading up to the door felt like climbing a mountain with a

higher and higher altitude. Her breathing was rough and she felt scared of going into her own home. Where a stranger had been. The officer opened the door and Iris was filled with the emotions this house had brought her in the past. She stepped into the house and began to look around. That seemed normal there, this seemed normal here. The differences were so hard to imagine and she didn't know. The box on the shelves, the jewelry in then box, the little box that held something of her fathers. Just to make sure, she opened the box that contained the last tie, her father had worn before he had died. A rush of heartbreak appeared but the thought could not be explained. With no idea what was going on, she cried. No one else was in the room and she was alone. She realized now that she had always been alone. Lost and without love. No love from her mother, and no love from a father. Only the nice thought that love was possible.

Iris grabbed the little box and was on her way to the police. As she closed the strange door, she turned to see a friend. Laura was standing there waiting and supporting her. Not a mother or a father, but a friend.

Instead of heading to the police she ran to Laura and gave her a hug. After the police were gone Iris's little siblings were home.

"Lena, Tommy, Kevin, we're going to stay with my friend for a couple nights, is that alright with you guys?"asked Iris.

"Yes!"they exclaimed. They weren't sure where they would be going, but if their sister was taking them, they felt it was right.

Laura called her parents but they were out of town so it didn't really matter.

When they were all at Laura's house and the little ones were tucked in to bed, their conversation began.

"I'm so sorry for what I said before, I felt terrible right after you left," explained Iris.

"No, it was my fault, the choice to stand up to your mom was yours to make, I shouldn't have gotten involved," said Laura.

All at once they started laughing.

"I guess friends fight, but I've never really had friends, so I don't know," said Laura chuckling.

After that they grew up in different parts of the world but kept in touch. Iris would never forget the friend that had taught her that loving herself was before anything else.

MaryRose Johnson

The Possibility of Lasting Love

The butterfly has been an embodiment of beauty forever. The perfect symmetry of their wings can take anyone's breath away, but did you know that it takes approximately four weeks for a caterpillar to become a butterfly? Something so beautiful and perfect could never happen over night; it's preposterous to think perfection can be achieved right away. A caterpillar must be ready to become a butterfly and then it takes weeks for it to finally become one. Now this story isn't about butterflies, or beauty, or even perfection. This is a love story about two people and, like a caterpillar going through metamorphosis, it's going to take time for the two to finally reach each other. They don't know it yet but no matter how far the distance is between them, they, without a doubt, end up together. So settle in your seats, because this is a long ride but a beautiful one, and it's about to start.

Emily Jamison tightened her long brown ponytail and continued carrying the two large bins of equipment to the main cabin of the summer camp where she was working. She has worked at this camp every

year since her freshman year of high school and with two more months until she goes to college, this will be her fourth and final year.

"Do you want some help with that?" A deep voice asked her.

"That would be great, thank you," Emily replied, she couldn't see who it was but as the stranger lifted a bin from her arms she smiled. "Are you new?" She asked the stranger, who was wearing a staff hat.

"I am, yesterday was my first day. I'm Jack by the way," he remarked.

"Emily. Nice to meet you Jack," Emily replied, smiling.

It was a beautiful day with a clear blue sky and gentle sunshine. As they reached the main cabin, Emily and Jack continued talking as the two waited for the camp to open. They learned they were both about to go to college, and they talked about Jack moving here the previous year, and about how weird it was that they had never met before.

Jack and Emily had gone to different high schools but their town was small enough that most high schoolers knew most of the high schoolers from the other schools in the area.

Emily teased Jack on the fact that he was only working at the camp to get away from working another summer at his dad's company. Jack teased her on the fact that she had gotten into Stanford and was choosing to go to NYU instead.

Fate works in strange ways and, by some stroke of luck, Emily and Jack were assigned to the same group that day. When the day was over, Emily didn't hesitate to say yes when Jack asked if she would like to hang out sometime.

That summer, the two spend nearly every second together. They bonded over their shared curiosity in what the next chapter of their lives would bring them and their shared interests. It seemed to them that that summer was like a snow globe, immobilized while the rest of the world continued to go by. They were in their own little world, but, no matter what, they couldn't keep reality away.

"Jack, you're leaving in a week for Seattle," Emily said one night as they watched the stars from the roof of Jack's house.

"I know," He said quietly from next to her. The two words had weight, and the pressure of them felt heavy between them. Emily knew the meaning too. They knew that they were going to have to say goodbye

and that was hard for both of them but they were also both excited about what the next year was going to bring them.

"Do you think we fell in love at the wrong time?" Jack said in a near whisper. Emily turned her head to look at him.

"No," Emily said after a moment, "I think we were meant to meet each other here and now." She smiled at him and he smiled back. They faced the stars again, enjoying the last few moments of their quiet and peaceful world.

Emily and Jack had the shared outlook that they needed to find themselves in college and dragging each other along would ruin their relationship and personal growth. So when the time came, they let each other go because they each wanted the best for the other and themselves.

In two years, during winter break, both of them independently decided to come home. It was a beautiful snowy day and Emily decided that she wanted to go to her old favorite cafe to see if they still had her favorite holiday order. When she got to the cafe, a familiar person was standing in front of her.

"Jack?" Emily exclaimed in surprise. Jack turned around at the sound of his name.

"Emily!" He exclaimed grinning, "It's so good to see you!" The two hugged, grinning at each other.

"I haven't seen you in so long," Emily said, "I was actually just thinking about you when I was driving over here, do you remember--"

"When I couldn't find any parking so we had to park two blocks away, and then when we finally got here there were two open spots?" Jack said laughing.

"Yes!" Emily laughed with him.

Jack insisted on buying Emily's drink and the two decided to catch up in the cozy warm cafe that used to be their favorite.

It seemed just like old times except they had so much more to tell each other. They never talked about the boring stuff that you tell your family about when you come back from break, but the things that really mattered, like the fact that the guy who sat next to Emily in her gender and equalities class said 'like' as least five times in a

sentence-which Emily and Jack both hated- and about how none of Jack's friends enjoyed Korean food- which Emily and Jack both loved.

They hadn't even noticed that the sun was almost gone from the sky and that the cafe was about to close until the last employee told them it was closing time.

They both looked at the employee like she was the bearer of the worst news possible, but they quickly decided it was okay because they had to see each other again before they both left. With one last smile they departed, but their smiles followed them both throughout the rest of their time home.

That summer, both decided to stay at school, and the next winter break they missed each other by a day, but the next summer they met again at that same cafe.

"I have a confession to make," Jack said after they had finished catching up, "I've come in almost every day while I've been here on the chance that I might see you."

Emily smiled as she said, "I was planning on doing the same thing."

They laughed, as Jack told the story of one day last week when he thought a different girl was Emily and accidentally scared her.

When they both went back to school after that summer something seemed slightly off. Emily found herself wondering what it would be like if Jack went to NYU with her, and what conversations they would have when they were at cafes and restaurants in New York. She couldn't help but think that maybe it had been the wrong idea to end things with Jack so long ago.

The next year they both graduated from college, both mature and with a strong sense of who they were and wanted to be. Jack had graduated with a degree in high school education and already had a position lined up back home, while Emily had graduated with a degree in political science.

Emily and Jack both traveled back for the summer again but this time their minds were hardly on seeing each other. That is, until they ran into each other yet again.

The farmer's market is always one of the most beautiful places in town during the summer. From the brilliantly bright flowers to the smell of honey and fresh fruit, everything seemed peaceful and calm.

Emily was picking out a bouquet of flowers for her mom when Jack nudged her on the shoulder.

"Hey stranger," Jack said smiling.

"Jack," Emily smiled back in greeting. "I'm starting to think that maybe we are supposed to end up together. Why else would we keep randomly seeing each all these years?" Emily laughed at the look on Jack's face and quickly added, "I'm just kidding."

Jack smiled at her for a moment, "Emily there is someone I want you to meet," Jack waved a woman over, "This is my fiancé, Lily."

Emily's mouth almost fell open but she regained her composure quickly. "It's so nice to meet you, Lily, I'm Emily."

"Emily! Jack was telling me how he hoped we would run into you, so nice to meet you," Lily said. She was tall, blonde, pretty and from what Emily could tell, she was nice too. Emily's smile faltered as she looked between the two.

"I had no idea you were engaged, congratulations!" Emily said with a little too much enthusiasm.

Jack looked at her for a moment like he could see right through her. His smile seemed to falter too. "Thank you, we are getting married this spring,"

"Is the ceremony going to be in the botany garden in Wilson Park?" Emily asked.

"No actually, it's going to be at Saint Theresa's," Lily replied. Emily nodded and smiled but looked at Jack sideways, he had always said he wanted to get married at the botany garden.

After some more conversation about the wedding, Emily paid for her flowers and said goodbye. She looked back as she was leaving and saw Lily and Jack picking out their own flowers.

A tear fell down Emily's face as she got in her car but she wiped it hastily. She had forgotten to tell Jack that she had decided to go to law school at Stanford.

A month later Emily left again for school, she came back on break a time or two but she and Jack never ran into each other. It seemed that their story had ended.

Three years later Emily graduated and decided to move back home to be close to her mom. She got a job at a local firm and for the first time in her life felt like she had finally found herself.

With two weeks until she started the next chapter of her life and her new job, she decided to head to the park where her friends and her used to hang out in high school, just for nostalgia's sake. She sat on a bench and started to read a book. It was sunny and warm but not too warm, perfect for a comfortable day out. The sky was blue and filled with surreal white clouds. The only sounds around were the distant voices of children laughing and the cheerful chirping of birds in the trees above her.

"Emily?" She looked up from her book startled. She looked at the person in front of her for a moment before smiling quietly.

"It's been awhile Jack," she said as she set her book down beside her.

"Only three years," He said laughing. "How have you been? I heard you just graduated law school, that's amazing!" He said as he moved to sit on the bench with her.

"Thank you," Emily said, "I'm just glad to be done with school honestly. How are you? How's Lily?"

Jack shifted slightly, "We actually called off the engagement, it just didn't feel right."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Emily said slowly as she processed what this meant.

Jack looked at her for a moment just smiling, "Emily we met each other seven years ago."

"It was that long ago?" She realized he was right. It had been seven years since that had met at that old summer camp and seven years since that had left to go to college. It seemed crazy that time had gone by so quickly. "We were so young back then."

"And foolish," Jack says he takes a moment before adding, "Emily I think the biggest mistake we ever made was saying goodbye to each other."

Emily looked at him, the sun was shining making his brown hair appear to almost have golden streaks. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something land on her book; a butterfly.

"I don't think there is anything stopping us from meeting again," Emily said slowly.

Jack smiled and Emily smiled back, they shared a knowing look. It had been seven years since they meet, seven years since they had fallen in love, and seven years since they had said goodbye. But they were completely different people than they were then and if seven years was what it took for them to finally be at a place where they could be together, they both knew they would go through seven more. This time, they were going to start the next chapter of their lives together, just as it was always meant to be.

Joseph Cedarland

Memories of the Desert

It had started at a young age. The need to be distant. The want for something more. Away from the small-town feel and all the things that it entails. He wasn't always like this. Things had been different for him when he was younger. There were memories of happiness, glee, and joy. Yet, they were fade and drab and of older times. As he grew, the feelings, the memories, and most importantly, the people, changed. And rightfully so. Everybody changes, and it's just a question of how people change. For better or for worse? Awning, Indiana had little to offer besides a small house and big gossip. Worse still, everything was owned by the Laurel Family. Laurel Hardware, Laurel Grocery, Laurel Factory. Even the church was donated by the Laurel Family. And he was one of them.

Charlie Laurel was the heir to the entire empire. Everything was laid out for him. All he had to do was take up the mantle and become the town millionaire. Yet, it meant nothing to him. He still felt worthless. His father was worth millions and he still felt unworthy in his sight. As if Charlie was indebted to him for all the expensive schooling and clothes. His brother, Eli, and sister, Elizabeth, didn't have to bear the same weight as he did. The need to get away was rooted from this. The feeling of indebtedness that hit him as the oldest.

The pounding of the engine began to be annoying. A few people were in the dining car when Charlie entered. None of which he recognized. Good *he*

thought. Conversing was not his thing. And in Awning, people will chat the ears off of a 'body if they're not careful. He sat down and ordered a meal. The sound of a Gramophone could be heard in the corner; it's crackly raspiness bellowing out new tunes. Jazz as they called it. He had been away a long time and didn't know what had become of America until about two months before. The train was coming to the station. Awning, Indiana: Population 9,000. That's was the sign at the station read. The small-town feel began to odor his mind like some perverted thought or haunting. The sign was new, though. It had a fresh coat of paint and was hung from a new iron pole. And besides, the town was about a thousand people smaller when he left. He had forgotten that towns change, too.

The steam of the locomotive began spouting up from the workings of the engine and a step was placed where the passenger cars would stop. The conductor stepped off first, then helping a woman passenger disembark. Charlie grasped the hand rail and rested his foot on the step. He jumped off and looked around. While the steam made the ability to see very detestable, he could still know where he was going. Though he did not like it here, that didn't mean he was going to get lost. He knew this town like the back of his scarred hand. *So it begins* he thought. The journey home. He could feel his mind trying to come up with detours. Why not go to the Parlor to get some ice cream? Maybe go to the bar or the billiards hall? As much as he wanted to not go to his house, he had too. If he went through the town and completely ignored his family, it would break his siblings' hearts. For their sake and theirs alone, he went home. The family home was located on a high promontory overlooking the town. It was called Bonaventure, after Bonaventure Laurel, the founder of all things Laurel in Awning; Bonaventure was three stories with a cellar and looked creepier than the Winchester Mansion.

He strolled through most of town without incident. Most people went about their day and didn't care hide or hair who was in town. That was one of the few things he admired about Awning. Its citizens were hard workers and would focus on whatever they set their mind to until it was done, regardless of what distractions may be. He kept his head low, just to be safe. He watched the feet of people walking by. As he kept walking, a person came out of the dress-shop. They came from the side so he didn't see them. And they didn't seem him either because of the massive box they carried. The collision was quick and to the point, as any collision should be. The box spilled out its contents: a beautiful lace dress. Charlie almost slipped but maintained stability. The person once hidden by the box screamed in horror as she picked up her muddy dress. Charlie went to help her. The recognition was almost instantaneous. Rebecca looked up. He put his hands on her arms and smiled. Her face turned as red as her hair. She thrust his hands off with hers.

"Why, Charlie Amherst Laurel! First, you leave me without so much as 'Goodbye!' You stay away for years and years. Then, you come all the way back to Awning and bother to tell no one! Then you bump my new dress into the street! You're inconceivable, you know that?!"

Charlie laughed that laugh of his. Nostalgia filled the air. Memories of running in the fields after school and holding hands by the west bridge filled his mind. Somethings are worth coming back for.

"Not even a 'Hello, Charlie. How's your life?' You treat me like I was some book that you lost and then you found again."

"You might as well be! Do you know what I've been through because of you?"

"Enlighten me."

"They all said you were dead like the rest. That you had been killed. And we were practically pledged to each other. And you didn't come back! You left me here! No one treats me the same! To them, I'm already an old maid. And I'm 23!"

She kept on babbling and babbling like some old brook.

"Rebecca!" Charlie barked.

Rebecca Chambers was never more silent and scared. Her face shifted color. His face was harsh and angry, his smile no longer existent.

Then, he grinned.

"It's good to see you."

Rebecca shifted once more to that beautiful smile and cheerfully wonderful face that was hers truly. She embraced him and the two began to laugh cheerfully. Charlie picked up the dress, put it neatly in the box, took her by the arm, and the two walked on. The pair walked and talked as if he had never left town. As if...well, that was another matter. They walked out of the main part of town and came to the junction between the road that led to Bonaventure and the rest of Awning.

"I gotta go, Becca. See the old man and rest of the family. I-uh-hope we can see more of each other. Like the old days, right?"

"Of course," Rebecca said, "I hope everything goes well with your folks. Explaining everything and all."

"You know, Becca, I hope so too."

And with that, he kissed her on the forehead. She wasn't surprised, for it was a habit of his when they were younger before...well, when times were different.

Bonaventure looked gloomier than ever on the day of his return. It was sunny and the dark colors of the giant mansion were non-reflective and dull. None of the servants were out in the grounds and the gardens were abandoned. Leaves blew around and around in tiny tornadoes and the ground was dewy. The door, not two yards away from him, was the first obstacle. With hat and single bag in one hand and weary finger muscles in the other,

he slowly grasped for the doorknob. With its cold form firmly in his hand, he breathed, and began to turn the knob. He pushed forward. There was nothing to talk about when it came to the interior of Bonaventure because it was that dull. A painting or two, a couple candles, and the first plight of stairs.

He heard voices and the stairs began to creak from the weight of at least two people. They made their way down the old stairs, not expecting to see the form of Charlie Laurel. He looked to see his siblings. Eli, who was overjoyed, ran down the stairs, embracing his brother. Elizabeth just stood there in shock and awe. She was just a child when he left.

"I can't believe it's you, Brother! You came home at last! You can't do this again, you know that, right?" cried Eli with relief.

"Next time I leave, I'll tell in advance," Charlie chuckled, patting Eli on the shoulders, "My God, you have truly grown. Both of you. I am—I'm happy to see both of you. It's been so long."

"Eight years and two months to be exact," said Elizabeth, while proceeding down the stairs.

"I didn't know you were a timekeeper, Lizzie," Charlie paused, "You remember I used to call you Lizzie, right?"

Elizabeth nodded slowly, tearing up as she did. She ran to him, bumping Eli out of the way, and hugged Charlie. He put his hands around as she cried. She had been just a child. Something made Charlie dispense with the embrace, some old feeling of boarding school and etiquette class. He turned to see the old, firm figure of his father. He wielded a cane now and had that same old captain-of-the-ship style beard to compliment his wrinkly, crackled face.

"Is that my boy?" his wrinkled mouth breathed. It tried to create a smile.

"Hi, Father."

Charlie didn't know what to say beyond that. He wasn't too close to his father. Father started to approach him, his cane making a distinctive tapping noise on the red-carpeted floor. He seemed to take a good look at Charlie, checking to see if anything had changed about the man. When everything seemed to be approved by his standards, he smiled again and brought up his hand.

"It's good to see you, son. Very good. We'd all thought you were a-goner. Not receiving any letters from you and all. We were about to sit down for some lunch. I—I'm assuming you would care to join us? Maybe we can talk about everything that happened to you."

"I'd love to join you." Charlie said politely.

"Good," Father remarked, "Eli. Elizabeth. Why don't you see what's going on in the kitchen. See that we have a hardy meal. I will be in the study with your brother."

The two nodded in compliance and walked to the kitchen. Charlie followed Father into his study. It was kinda like a meeting place for them. As a boy, he would taken their to have a talk of some kind on some usually pointless topic. That was the annoying thing about his father. He always spoke to him on the same topics, pounding his lectures into him like a hammer with a railway spike. He entered to see the study the same. Three of the walls of the medium-sized room had bookshelves, the fourth having a fireplace. A bear-rug was on the floor, there was desk in the corner by the window that faced Awning, and a photograph of a woman was on the desk. Charlie grew tense as he looked at it. He sat down in the chair in front of the desk, never taking his eyes off of the picture. His father took his place in his seat behind the desk like a judge on the podium. He went to speak.

"So, Charles, how was your experiences abroad?"

"Good, I guess. I learned a lot."

"Good. The foreign lands teach a man a lot about the world. You learn much from the people there and all the ins and outs of their society. What about the war?"

Charlie figured it would come to this. He had preparing for it, waiting for him to ask that question: How was the war?

"The war," Charlie began, "was like any war: unforgettable. It was unlike anything anyone will ever witness in their lives."

"I see. We, here at Bonaventure, were surprised to hear you had joined up. We didn't expect it. Tell me, my boy, how was the fight? Did you fight with honor?"

"Depends on your definition of honor. In this war, honor was like the waves of the ocean. It was high and sometimes it was not there at all. Especially where I fought."

"What do you mean? Did you not fight in Europe? In France?"

"I didn't, Father. When I enlisted into the Legion, we were transferred to Morocco. The local tribes were being stirred up by the Germans and were causing trouble for the garrisons. It was quite the struggle. It-it was quite the place to see. The....desert is a...wonderful place."

"Hmmm," Father paused, "you mean to tell me, my boy, that you did all this and wrote only once to tell us you joined the French Army? Damn you, boy, haven't I taught to communicate with your family?"

"Father, with all due respect, when you are fighting the Berbers in the middle of the desert, you're hopes of getting a letter through are slim indeed. Besides, why does it matter?"

Father was naturally put aback by this. He stood up.

"And why didn't you come home when the war ended. This is 1922. The war ended in 1918. Yet, you come home now. Why?!" he hit the desk as he said this.

"I signed on for the war, you're not wrong. But, I had an obligation to stay. The fight still raged on in Morocco and they still needed men to

remain. So I stayed on and fought. Now, it is over and I have come home. You taught me that when there is a job to be done, you finish it all the way through. Aren't you satisfied that I followed your teaching?"

The stench of old infighting and arguing between the two began to come back. The pressure was the rising in the room. His father was the first to let out some steam.

"Well, I'm satisfied that *for once*, you heeded my advice. Well done. Now, I want to talk to you about throwing a welcome-back party. It would be a good re-introduction back into society from all your *uncivilized galavanting* in the desert. Also, I am in need of good men at the factory. I want you to--"

He never got to finish, because Elizabeth came in and announced that the meal, tomato soup with sandwiches, was finished. The tomato soup was not too thick or not too runny, yet the fact that it was not dense didn't make the luncheon any less tense. Of course, Eli and Elizabeth were inquisitive and asked much of their eldest brother. Father didn't speak much but did occasionally deliver a comment to contribute. Charlie answered all their questions but constantly maintained a veneer of warm smiles and selective vocabulary. The after-dinner experience was uneventful, with Father going off to smoke his pipe and the younger siblings cleaning up the table. That night, he was taken to his room, where he had once had many a time when he would open the window and escape to go with his friends. Those days, he remarked, were far from now. He thought of them as he drifted off to a sleep of memories.

He dreamt of that one fateful, eventful July when he and his college mates and Awning friends went on a European trip. They were 18 young men, desperate to leave home and enter a new world of excitement. He remembered the smells, the sounds, and the sights of Paris. He dreamt of the run-ins with the gendarmes and all the wonderful memories during their Parisian stay. But, that all changed, as a conflict began to brew from the mighty coffeepot of war. A conflict which Charlie and his friends all wanted in on. How naive he was. He awoke to the family rooster, Abe, cockle-doodle doing into the bright, new morning.

* * *

The welcome-back party thrown by Father interested a diverse group of individuals. Charlie, of course, was supposed to welcome his guest as they came to Bonaventure. Soon, the yard was filled with automobiles and carriages as people packed in to see if Charlie Laurel had really come home. For the most part, they were those who Charlie had known as a child. Rebecca came, which put him at ease. The last thing he wanted was to be stuck with a bunch of old people who had scolded him when he was young. Rebecca joined him at his side as he retired to the gardens. As the two began to converse about life, a haggard form came into Charlie's line of vision. A person Charlie had not seen in a long time. His wheelchair was moved towards him.

"Paul!" Charlie exclaimed.

Paul Colton, resting in his wheelchair with his blanket, looked up to see his old friend. Paul was the third of the Colton Triplets, three magnificent gents who had been Charlie's friends for life. He was all that was left. Charlie went to him, kneeling down to be on the same level as he. Paul smiled that kiddish smile of his that he had acquired as the reckless Colton triplet, yet he was obviously very troubled on the inside. Nevertheless, it was good to see him.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again, Paul. How are you doing?" Paul just nodded that he was alright. Another man came from behind the current scene. It was Harley. Harley went up to Charlie and gave him a hug. Like Rebecca and Paul, Harley was also a good friend from too long ago.

"You old son-of-a-gun, how you doing, Charlie? I didn't reckon you'd-" Harley paused.

Harley looked down at Paul, whose face was now riddled with sadness. Charlie patted Paul on the shoulder. He looked up at Harley.

"I'm good, Har. It's good to see you. Both of you. I'd hoped you'd come. I'm glad we could be here together, all of us. You, me, Rebecca, and Lil' Pauly here. Come on, we can talk about some things together."

And so they did. Rebecca left, of course. She wanted Charlie to talk some with his old buddies. She had also made sure that they had come, for Charlie's sake. It was good for him.

Charlie, Paul, and Harley sat down together at a table in the middle of the gardens. Paul was gloomy-faced and Harley seemed weighted down by some burden of desert sand and blood. Charlie knew all too well what it was. He looked at Pauly, poor, naive little Pauly. The poor chap had been through hell and it was too much to bear for Charlie to look at him. It was too much and it brought back memories. Awful memories.

"So, Harley, I was wondering where the rest of the boys are. How's Phil and Dobbs and uh-Jim?" Charlie inquired.

"Well," Harley started, looking at Paul, "Dobbs is alright. So is Jim. Phil's uh-he's ok."

"Do you know why they didn't come? I was wondering why? It's been so long since we've all seen each other, I figured we could grab a drink or something. Maybe-like old times?"

Harley contemplated this as he nodded. Something flared in his eyes, some premonition of warning or hinting at an unfortunate truth. Things were not as they seemed, Charlie knew that.

"I guess we could. I don't know. I'd have to contact them, all. The round-up will be harder. We're all so busy, I guess."

Yes, there were lies in his voice. A hint of lies and a scent of bourbon was on his breath. All was not well here. Why was Harley holding back? The answer seemed to be Pauly. Pauly was a primed weapon, make a mention, a mere comment, a meager notion about Morocco, the war, the Berbers-

particularly the Berbers, and Pauly would pull the trigger. It was a shame to feel helpless in his presence. The man had lost a leg. How do you comfort a one-legged man? Pauly was ashamed too, ashamed of being useless, a charity case, and ashamed of leg that he covered it up with that blanket of his. Pauly had gotten worse since he lost it. After all, these men, his friends, had all come back when the war ended. He didn't. That had clearly taken a toll on these men. He was the only one that showed no fear, no sign of shock. The only one who'd been a comforting, sane friend to talk to. People handled war in different ways. But there was something else. Something lingering in the winds of concealment. Something Charlie was voracious to find out.

The party began to decline and Charlie, the conflicted host, showed them out. Harley helped Paul out, saying goodbye to Charlie and "assuring" him that he'll get the boys together. Charlie pretended to agree with his friend's scheme, and felt himself slipping. Since when were things so tight with his friends? He hated doing it, putting on a fake smile and fake concurrence. He guessed it wasn't new, as he had done it with his siblings. But that was different. They didn't understand and could never. Charlie then said goodbye to Paul.

"So long, sport. I'll make sure to visit you, all right? I'll come by soon."

With that, Paul smiled an exuberant, joyful smile. He looked as if he was gonna jump out of his wheelchair, one leg and all, and just start dancing. He reached out his hand. Charlie took and shook it, winking at Paul.

"I'll be along shortly. You just be expecting me."

Rebecca was the only one that stayed, for she had been invited to dinner at Bonaventure. She began to walk the grounds with Charlie. This had been their lives before the war, except wilder and more rebellious. Rebecca had come from a Puritan family and had objected to her courting Charlie because of his father. Charlie, on that basis, wouldn't have blamed them. They, however, still courted without consent and became evermore distant from their families. She was different, he had noticed. She wasn't as wild as she had been, but then again, neither was he. But it wasn't time for a sob story. It was time to get answers.

"Becca, Harley lied to me. I know he did. He said the other boys are alright, but they aren't, are they? Harley lied to me. Don't do the same. Please."

Rebecca looked at him like an ashamed child caught in Sunday School. She slowly nodded. For some reason, as much as he wanted the truth, he felt empty as she gave it. He had expected this to be the case and upon her confirming his suspicions he felt relieved and saddened.

"They're not alright, Charlie. They all are hurting, every last one them. Even Harley, who tries to cover it up with his charm and smiles. He

still hurts. I heard he was in his boarding room, screaming and wailing, throwing things and yelling for the pain to stop. Paul never speaks anymore, Phil is....is in the state asylum. He used to shake violently and scream. Like something was eating him from the inside. It's terrifying. He's been there since he got back. Dobbs never leaves his room up above the general store, and Jim...he got killed. He ran out and was hit by a truck. Most thought it was an accident but the sheriff think it was intentional. That he tried to get hit."

Charlie was silent, now. He had feared that they wouldn't recover from the oasis and from Taza, but it had gotten worse. A parasite of fear and terror had been swirling inside all of them. From the moment that Freeman, their friend and first casualty, had been killed in the desert, it had been manifesting growing and growing. They had been stimulated by the war, its gore, and its scenes. They had come home and couldn't experience the same sensation of killing and gun smoke. It must of driven them insane. With no one to talk to too about it, going off into their own hells and isolation. No one would understand the feeling to kill they had experience, the feeling to watch a man die in their arms. A *friend* dying in their arms. He realized how much he should've come home with them.

"Dobbs is at the store?"

"You can't visit him, Charlie. You can't. You don't know what it'll do to him. Please, Charlie." "I'm going to, Becca. I have to. I had a duty to these men, not just as a counsel, a big brother, a superior officer. But as a friend. I never forsake my duty. I will be back, my love. Wait here for me. Please."

Rebecca, not one to comply, refused. She held on to the ship for as long as she could. But she knew that there was no avoiding the rock that was Charlie's arrogance. As much as she knew what would happen, she gave in eventually. Her ship, her fighting spirit, gave in to Charlie. She let him by. As soon as he began the walk to town. She ran for Bonaventure. He wasn't going to go alone.

Charlie strode into the general store, fist clenched. Determination stalked his mind. He had no idea what to expect but since Dobbs was a drinker, it wasn't good. The clerk at the counter was put aback that he wanted to see Dobbs. He shrugged, finding it useless to argue with a Laurel, so he showed him up the steps and into the unknown where a broken man was going to be tried to be put back together by a puzzle fanatic named Charlie Laurel.

An hour or so passed before Charlie stepped down the old, creaky stairs and descended back into the known. He turned around the concealed corner to see his brother, wearing a black suit like an undertaker. Following an upset Charlie was certainly a deed that needed to be undertook. Eli stood there, smiling slightly through his tiny, childlike lips. Rebecca, that sly woman. He had to marry her. Eli motioned for him to

follow, which he did, of course. Conversation was coming into the station. In fact, the first the two had had since Eli was 15. Since before the carnage of the Great War, as many were now calling it.

"So I'm assuming Rebecca sent you?" Charlie pondered.

"You wouldn't be wrong, there. She was gonna come but had to help Elizabeth with dinner. She told me that you were determined to see Dobbs. No doubt... you did?"

"I did. He was," Charlie paused, trying to find the best suited words, "drunk beyond the pale of any drunkard I'd ever known. And liquor ain't legal here is it?"

"Not anymore, it ain't. The temperance movement got into Wilson's head. He banned everything. The store clerk still has connections, though. Dobbs must pay dearly for it."

"I assume so. He-didn't want to see me. He realized it was me. He started rambling about me not coming back. At the end of the war. He was drunk but he was right. I feel like I failed them. All of them. Things would have been different if I had come back."

"They would be," Eli began to say, changing his tone lower, "but Father would've still reacted the same."

Charlie stopped him and grasped his shoulder. "What do you mean? What's going on? You seem downtrodden."

"I mean I had a future, brother. I love you, Charlie. We all do. But when you left, Father wrote you off as dead. The minute they sent Lonnie Colton back here in a box, he thought you had the same fate. Sometime after that, Father started taking me to the factory. He showed me how everything worked. As I got older, I started to realize what he wanted."

"He wanted you as the next heir."

"That's right. And if I became the new 'black-sheep,' the mantle would go to Elizabeth. For the first time, Father actually paid me any attention. He showed compassion and consideration. Something I haven't felt....since Mother died. Since he shut out his light to everyone and barricaded himself in Bonaventure. I had purpose in his sight. Purpose, Charlie. Real, rich, uncanny purpose. Something everyone wants. I wanted it and got it. But, you came back. Now, I am nothing in his sight. I am the ghost in the shadows of his progeny. I don't know what to do now."

Charlie felt his pulse slow. He felt a wallowing bulge in his throat, growing and growing. Why was a father like this? That he would throw his children out of place when things stir up and prospects are risen? In this case, him coming back. Returning from the depths of the desert, from the war and chaos, from the dry, cracked mouth of the Sahara.

"Eli," Charlie spoke, somewhat speechless, "I can't be sorry enough. I didn't want it like that. Know that, please. Whatever you do, always remember that. I love you and your sister and I can try to put up with Father. Truth be told, I don't want work from Father. Truth be told, I don't

know what I want. After seeing everything changed, my old friends hollowed away by haunting memories, and my Father advocating for a choice I don't want to make, I don't know what to do. I don't know. But I do know one thing: you will inherit, I promise you that. You and Elizabeth. I believe Father and I have something to talk about."

Rebecca and Elizabeth, attempting to cook while trying not to be frazzled about Charlie, heard the door open suddenly. They looked through the kitchen door to see the form of weary eagerness and the figure of discipleship enter. One strode behind the next, reaching their goal in the study. The women followed in their footsteps to see the confrontation. Because no confrontation is truly like the arguing and slandering of a father and son at war with themselves and each other. Father didn't not see the hurricane coming and no time to protect himself from its gust of wind and water.

"Father," Charlie started, "how dare you throw your children away when I return! How dare you assume that I want to work for you! You think I returned for you or money or work! Honest to God, I came only for my siblings' sake! I didn't want to come here and see you! But I did! You were setting up Eli for success. And he enjoyed it! But the moment the prodigal returns, you treat him as if he was the pigs the prodigal fed! I don't want the businesses, the money, any of it! I only ask for you make Eli succeed and that you love him and Elizabeth!"

Charlie was somewhat out of breath when he stopped his tirade. His face was bright red and he was angry as a stepped-on mouse. Father was white in the face. But he knew as well as everyone else that this had just been warming up. The orchestra was about to play their opening piece. Father's feature flushed red with blood.

"How dare you, you despicable, ungrateful, and reckless idiot! Have I taught you nothing? Have I not taught you respect for your elders? Have I not offered to send you to the finest schools? Oxford or Cambridge? Have I not offered you the finest clothes? The finest of everything money can buy? And you stand there, an unsavory character, and order me around in my own household!"

"Me ordering you around is something I picked up from you. You're the one who expects people to do something the way you want them too and if they don't, you punish them and shame them and disinherit them! I believe in rules and democracy but I do not believe in dictation!" Charlie exploded.

"Aw, so you assume I'm a dictator? You know, son, I wished you had stayed in the desert. For the peace of all concerned, I wish you had!"

The Intermission had begun. That was enough to silence the pair for a few brief moments. Sweat was now trickling from Charlie's crimson head. Father remained in his chair.

"It's paradise in the desert, Father. It's like no other place in the world. The vast sands seem barren and dry. But they teem with life. The air

is so wonderful. The water, though scarce, is sweet. And truly, compared to the hell you put me and my siblings through, I would love to have stayed there. But the desert is not all good. Every Garden of Eden has its snake. The desert is cursed with death of many millennia. And I had no exception. The experience was still the same. Do you have any idea what I've been through, there?! I lost every friend I ever had over there. They all got killed. Massacred! Sliced up into little pieces or shot to death. The desert and its people took from me every friend I had. Those who weren't killed died on the inside like Phil or was scarred like Paul. That one battle at the oasis wiped us all out. That battle took from me many dear friends. It took from Pauly his brothers and leg. From Phil, his sanity. From Harley, his charm. From Jim, his will to live.

Charlie paused. He seemed to be far off. Away. As if he had immersed himself in that one day.

"I can still hear the screams. *Their* screams. Their pleas for help. Crawling wounded on the desert floor like blind moles. That battle made us something new. Something we couldn't be proud of or ignore. How dare you, Father. *How would Mother feel of you treating your children, your flesh and blood, like pawns that you could away and black sheep you could slaughter and not care about?!*"

The orchestra finished and retreated backstage. Sweat rained down Charlie's soaked upper half. He breathed like a bellows and look like a popped blood vessel. Father was whiter than a milk-bottle in winter. He was speechless through and through. There was no combatting, no arguing, no rebuttal that could somehow defeat what had just been spoken, or shouted for the most part. Father began again, staring at the photograph of the woman on his desk.

"How dare you bring your mother into this!"

"Some people need to be remembered in talks like this," Charlie stated, more calmly this time, "Mother was the light of our lives. When she gone, you went into your shell, setting up barriers. Your life became your factory, only what you wanted to go out and come in did. Our lives with you changed so drastically when hers ended. Please, Father, by all that is holy, I-beg you, please. Give them every opportunity I had but didn't want. Just because I didn't want it doesn't mean that they shouldn't have it. They deserve it. Please, just please, give them this opportunity."

The silence was beyond measure, beyond any form of being bearable. Charlie's emotions has drastically changed. He was not as enraged, or not as much, than he was humbled in his father's sight. That emotion would feel odd to anyone who had just witnessed the ferocity this man showed against his father with one long and messy tirade. Yet, he was humbled, nonetheless. Not for his sake but for his siblings. He was not one to beg but this was important to him and frankly there was no other way of going about it. He

came to his father's side, kneeling and looking directly into his old, tired eyes. The old man looked at him, then to the others.

"I...I'll....I will give them this opportunity," Father said wearily,"but on one condition: Charles, you must leave this household. You've shown me today that you are the same. That you are unchangeable. That in accusing me of being the dictator, you yourself have become one. A demanding, reckless punk who thinks that I'm going to give into everything say or else. And while I will give your siblings a chance you had, I will not tolerate the level of disrespect you have given me in my own house. I will not be treated like this. I won't have it. You are no longer my son. You must leave and not return."

Thus, the Laurel Symphony ended. Charlie, almost instantly, went to retrieve his things. In those next moments, a great soap opera began in the Laurel Opera House. One of the greatest arias was sung, accompanied by the voices of his siblings. He waltzed up the stairs, began to pack his things, and began the Exodus out of Bonaventure. There was truly a cry from Bonaventure that night, one of lament and sorry. Even the servants say they found tears on papers on Father's desk. Charlie exited dressed the way he came. With a hat, a suitcase, and himself. He had no choice. It was his family's relationship. Without him, his siblings could flourish. They could make names for themselves as the new masters of the trade. The new heirs of Laurel Industries, Laurel Hardware, Laurel Grocery, and the Laurel Factory. He, a teary-eyed old ruffian, a man of adventure, and a man of the desert, was leaving for what he believed to be a good cause. For what better reason than to leave for love and for the sake of one's sister and brother? To this, no counter argument was spoken, for Charlie Laurel slipped away into the night and was lost by Awning, Indiana. Forever.

Fate is not that cruel, however. The servants at the Colton Mansion swore that towards the near hours of that morning, as their master, the insomniac Paul Colton stared out into the darkness trying to find closure, did in the form of a mysterious figure(s) that rose up out of the night. They claim they heard Paul and other voices speaking and a cry echoed from Paul. The fact that their master was talking for the first time since his return from the war was a shock, so they went to investigate. Yet, when they did, they found him alone and sitting quietly in his wheelchair. The servants always wondered who visited him, often citing, as they were superstitious, that his dead brothers visited him and brought him company. One servant thought that angels had visited him to comfort him in his internal struggles, as he did often face now that Charlie had returned, a reminder of the struggle in Morocco. Yet, whenever the servants asked about the night or brought up Charlie Laurel, he always smiled. As life progressed for the amputee, he began to talk more and more, much to the bewilderment of the town.

The younger Laurel siblings brought more fortune to the family than their father had ever dreamed. During the economic collapse, they spent much of their time offering services and trying to keep the town together. A second war came, much like the first. Eli was too old for combat, and helped by raising awareness for those who did. In those years, the Laurel Company prospered and helped the war effort the best they could. Both siblings had families and rose them the best way they could, using very few of their father's teaching methods.

And of Father: he died. Two years after big argument between him and Charlie, he succumbed to a heart attack. As he was dying, he reportedly said, "I'm sorry about your brother. I didn't mean to..." Once again, he never got to finish. He died and was buried with all the other Laurel patriarchs in the cemetery, donated by the Laurel Family.

Some time after Charlie left, a strange note was found in Rebecca Chamber's boarding room. The owner of the boarding house, Mrs. Turner, went to awake Rebecca for breakfast. When she didn't answer the door, Mrs. Turner, a Puritan woman, unlocked it, expecting to find Rebecca asleep or just ignorant of the knocking. As she was about to scold Rebecca for not hearing her, she realized she wasn't there. Her luggage was gone, her clothes, everything. However, there was a note on the bed that read: *Here's my rent.* Under the note, wadded up, was cash. Mrs. Turner soon realized that the window was open in the room. She looked out it, seeing two sets of footprints, in the somewhat muddy ground below. The prints were fresh, created just that night. She went downstairs, ignored most of her customers, and followed the prints. They led all the way to Reverend Filton's house and from there to the train-station. Asked if he had visitors, Reverend Filton replied, "I should just put a sign out that says, 'If the lights in my house are turned off, then I ain't marrying nobody.'"

Jake Galvan

A Caravan from Canada

On Thursday , December 13th, a caravan of 7,000 Canadian immigrants gushed into the town of Langley, a sub city of Vancouver, which rested a few miles north from the Washington-Canadian border. Fleeing boring politics and free healthcare, the immigrants are determined to enter the United States, legally or illegally.

It all started somewhere in the Canadian Wilderness a few months ago, word had just arrived that President Trump had been elected to office which excited many Canadians. "Finally something actually interesting coming from the U.S, we've been waiting for an opportunity like this for years", a young migrant woman told us as she and thousands of Canadians were marching south towards the border. When asked why they were going south, The Bellarmine Report was given a variety of answers. Some said they were fleeing south for warm temperatures, reasoning that if birds could migrate freely why couldn't they. Others had more politically sensitive answers.

"Life in Canada is too boring, all our government does is talk, talk, talk, and work, work, work, but where's the drama? In the U.S their political leaders are much more open with their problems. Kim Kardashian, Paul Manafort, and Donald Trump, there isn't a day where you don't hear about their emotional problems. We are coming because we want the drama and something new in our life." Laurence LaPointe told us a month ago, when the Bellarmine Report first visited the caravan. LaPointe, like many others, had left her family to migrate to the U.S.

Another migrant was heard giving their motive for fleeing Canada " I just can't seem to live with such a gorgeous prime minister. He's such a level-headed and perfect man, nothing can go wrong in a country with Justin Trudeau."

The caravan's mood is very hopeful and peaceful. Many of the migrants responses to The Bellarmine Report were uplifting, yet carefree. But as the Caravan numbers sharply increased and it began to make more publicity, the life of a migrant became much more dangerous. Migrants have been reportedly kidnapped and taken to other fake, no-good, school-run newspapers and forced to tell their side of the story. Canada has done extensive measures to try to keep the number of fleeing citizens to a minimum but to no prevail. A few weeks ago, the Canadian government had emplaced barriers onto the highways and surrounding roads that stated "No Poutine" and "Detour, next left.". The migrants though, walked around them.

This stunt enraged President Trump and a day later he tweeted from his bunker in the New Jersey golf club, "In about seven days, Canadian migrants, many who are stone-cold liberals, will arrive at the U.S border. We must never surrender! God be with us!" Unfortunately, Mr. President was wrong about the estimated time arrival for the caravan because a few hours later, they entered Burnaby, a town north of Vancouver.

Burnaby, like most of the cities in Canada, was founded in the middle of nowhere by nomads, who, knowing North America's luck, were probably descendants of the biblical murderer and nomad, Cain. For most people, it was just a dot on the map, but for the caravan, it quickly became their headquarters. Buses, began shuffling through the city towards the border, although most of them were those exquisite and ostentatious Duck Tour boats, that happened to have its dock by the U.S border.

A day after the arrival at Burnaby though, Felix Swift, a renowned news anchor for Canadian media, broke into a semi-truck carrying printer ink, and sped towards the border. Canadian authorities tried to capture the migrant madman but his driving skills were just too great. While escaping, Swift made a v-log explaining exactly what he was doing. "I play a lot of video games, so I basically know the controls and everything for this truck. I mean I took drivers-ed so that basically substitutes for my license, right?" Swift told his audience as he drove through a children's playground in order to evade the Canadian Border Patrol. After an hour of being chased

throughout Vancouver, Swift smashed through the multiple fences that served as the U.S border and entered the United States. Fortunately, a few yards into the U.S, Swift lost control of his vehicle and plummeted into a nearby pond, where he was later rescued by an American Moose. Nobody was hurt but many were surprised.

Donald Trump later tweeted "Epic Fail. CNN to blame?" A few minutes later he followed up with, "The border is too strong for Friendly, Floundering, Felix. He couldn't handle a few seconds in America. Our Border Security is that good." President Trump seemed to forget that "Friendly" Felix had almost run over many border patrol agents, both Canadians and Americans, smashed through multiple fences, and left the border in a vulnerable state. Not to mention that the truck was carrying hundreds of printer ink cartridges that later leaked into the pond and killed many, many, endangered American aquatic specimens.

The U.S-Canadian border has been labeled one of the most dangerous in the world, surpassing the DMZ a few nights ago. While there haven't been any specific actions that has pushed the border into this state, this labeling angered the North Koreans, who are very proud of their "Most Dangerous Border" title. In a interview with the royal, Kim Jon Un, Un accused President Trump of undermining him.

"The United States will fall to its knees if it continues to try to mimic my kingdom. North Korea will use force if necessary to show its border dominance." Un boasted " There can only be one mad man in the world, and Donald Trump is not that man." [L] [SEP] The Bellarmine Report has not confirmed what force North Korea is planning on carrying out, but with all the chaos going on, it will probably go unnoticed.

The Bellarmine Report was also given the privilege of visiting Joint Base MacMahon-McChrystal Border Control Center. Or M&M as some called it. The base sits in five miles from the border on top of a hill. According to the Border Patrols, this is because in the case of a breach, the base would be completely safe and the patrols wouldn't have to combat the migrants unless it was absolutely necessary.

Most troops refused to talk to any visiting journalist but The Bellarmine Report was able to get a few soldiers opinions.

"They're savages, savages, I say" said a rather rattled border patroller, " Trying to sophisticate us with their manners, politeness, and good looks. But besides their scary personality, I think the American people have nothing to worry about." The border patroller then pulled out a notecard covered in writing and began reading from it "The integrity of this country will not be hurt by the incoming principles of the stone-cold criminals that want to enter this beautiful and well-run country."

As the days go by and the caravan gains more numbers while getting closer to the border, President Trump has deployed more and more border agents to the frontlines. There have been rumors that the United States Government have hired spies and undercover informants to tell them about the caravan's actions. Reports say that any border agent discovered in Canada was tarred and feathered and then sent back to the U.S. The immigrants say that they aren't doing this to make the U.S look like a big chicken, but more like an American Eagle, since eagles and chickens have the same color scheme and that tar and feathers were the only thing migrants had excess amounts of for some reason.

The Canadian migrants have used spies and espionage themselves. MacMahon-McChrystal Border Control Center was holding its annual Christmas party, when border agents discovered they had a imposter in their midst. Sergeant Juan Garcia and Private Maxine Rouge were on patrol, when they noticed a rather suspicious vehicle approach the security gate. While the security guard had let the vehicle enter the base and proceed to the party area, Garcia and Rouge were still suspicious. So they abandoned their post and followed the white, windowless van. The van was parked in close vicinity to the party area and two men exited the vehicle and begin unpacking the van's contents. Then the men began assembling tables, chairs, and cooking items like portable stoves, ovens and ice chests.

It seemed that these men were just party caterers, and for a second the pair of border agents relaxed. Instead of going back to their post

though, the duo walked towards the caterers to get some food. When the agents had noticed what was on the menu, later led the caterers to their doom. Canadian Bacon, French-Canadian poutine, and Beaver Tails, it became quite obvious that Garcia and Rouge had stumbled upon imposters. No one knows what happened to the Canadian spies but it has been rumored that Garcia and Rouge were ordered to kill them, and afterwards the border agents realized the spies possessed organ donor cards and now they are underground somewhere resting in peace, in a fridge.

Meanwhile, the White House was in panic. President Trump and his cabinet initiated a press conference to address all concerns about the incoming caravan. During the conference Mr. President shared some frightening statistics that put many Americans on their toes. "I hate to drop a bombshell right now but my team and I have discovered a frightening fact, f-a-c-t, that eighty percent of the migrants are stone-cold criminals, while the other twenty percent just want to rob us from our jobs." At first the conference room was silent, but it quickly became filled with chaos since Secret Service Agents, hearing the word bomb-shell, tackled President Trump to the floor.

During the issue with President Trump's word choice and the Secret Service, The Bellarmine Report acquired a accurate statistic saying that eighty percent of statistics were made up. When we mentioned this to President Trump, he answered with "I believe only eighty percent of that statistic, and if I did my math right, that would have one hundred sixty percent of immigrants be criminals and forty percent be job stealers." The Bellarmine Report has yet to do the math.

On Wednesday, December 12th, the migrant caravan left their sanctuary and marched towards Langley, a town just a few miles from the border. This was supposed to be one of the final pushes for the caravan. For about a month and a half, the Canadians have been marching south, determined to reach the U.S. Now their destination was just a few miles away.

It was when the caravan seeing Langley coming up, let down their guard and catastrophe struck. Only a few hundred yards from their

destination, the caravan was ambushed by Canadian Border Security. Both bullets and tear gas rained down from occupied buildings. The migrants in the front were instantly killed as the caravan began to retreat.

The retreat, though, was pure chaos. Migrants were running in all directions, leaving behind everything and everyone they cherished. Children lost their parents in the confusion. Border agents dispersed the crowd and arrested several, beating them as they dragged them to ominous, jail-like cages.

" At first it was just a loud pop and suddenly lemon colored gas started to fill the air. My eyes burned, my sinuses stung, and I choked on the acidic taste in my mouth. I could hear screaming and then wailing coming from children. I kept my head down and began running, I couldn't even tell what direction I was going. I felt dizzy but refused to stop moving. It was probably the scariest moment of my life." Laurence LaPointe told us what happened to the caravans front line.

Most of the survivors had fled to Vancouver and Burnaby but they were quickly reinforced by more than a thousand incoming migrants. In a few hours, the migrants were back, this time, armed with a motivational speaker.

The speakers name was John Bannon. Surrounded by thousands of migrants, Bannon approached the occupied town of Langley with a megaphone. No one knows if the border agents were really motivated or just scared, but within five minutes, Bannon was able to persuade them to join the caravan's ranks. During his motivational speech Bannon promised. "If you join, I assure you, you will not have to deal with extremely boring Canadian politics."

The United States is in panic mode. President Trump has not been seen on Twitter for days and it is rumored that he fled the country. After months of hardship, the Canadian Caravan had finally entered the United States and is currently running a huge victory lap, literally. The destination: Washington D.C. The Bellarmine Report was told the

caravan is invading D.C in hopes of instilling democracy into this district.

Jessica Silva

Murder at Christmas

The door of the bar swung open as three friends in their 20s trotted in contently, chattering about their week and their weekend to come. The bartender flashed them a grin and asked them what they'd like to drink. They took a seat at the bar and ordered. Nate, Tyler, and Curtis received their drinks and let out a sigh, almost in unison. They each shared laughs, conversation, and were looking forward to the upcoming 3 week long winter break after the long week. Nate ordered drink after drink, carefree, despite Tyler and Curtis's warnings of drinking too much. After some time had passed, Nate started to feel his drink a bit too much. Nate was pretty out of it, and felt his stomach twist and turn, and his most recent drink start to come back up. He got up and staggered in the direction of the side door, swaying side to side, his limp arms barely catching himself as he crashed softly into various nearby obstacles. He eventually made his way out the door to the alley way, and shoved the door open. He half jogged half hobbled his way to a trash can and puked a few times. As he slowly lifted his head from the trash can, his stomach felt a little better, but not much. His vision was a bit blurred, but he noticed a tall dark cloaked figure standing further in the alleyway. He focused his eyes intently on the thing standing before him, and he noticed it grasp a small object which looked to be knife, and thrust it violently into another smaller figure who appeared to be mouthing "help," but no sound came out. Soon enough, the small person fell to the cold uneven pavement and laid there unmoving. The tall cloaked figure turned toward the sound of clambering near the trash cans. Nate saw it make its way swiftly toward him, and Nate made a failed attempt to run back inside. He ran straight into a trash can and stumbled to the ground. Nate watched in horror as the dark cloak stood towering over him, the only thing noticeable about him was his piercing glare that stared into Nate.

Tyler and Curtis waited patiently inside the bar for Nate's return. They scanned the room for Nate's face, but only found a couple of the regulars that they had seen the few times they had been to this bar, the worn down pool table that always sat in the far corner of the bar, and the old dart board that had probably never been replaced in all the years that it had hung on the wall. Tyler and Curtis waited and waited, but there was no sight of Nate. Soon, they became worried and stepped out into the alley way to check on Nate. They stepped through the door and to their shock and horror, they saw Nate leaned against the wall of the building clutching a knife with blood on it, a growing black eye on his face, and standing over a motionless man with his shirt stained red.

The three friends were completely frozen. Tyler could not take his eyes off the motionless victim laying on the cold, rough pavement. Curtis' eyes were racing between the victim, his friend, and the knife with a rusting silver blade that was covered in the deep red of the victim's blood. Nate turned so he was facing down the long, dark alleyway to shun his face from the horror-stricken looks he received coldly from his friends, as well as from the the eyes of the victim, which haunted him. Tyler was the first to move. He forced himself to look at his friend and away from the victim.

"Nate," Tyler began shakily, "what have you done?" Tyler finished sharply. Nate simply stared blankly, first down the alley, then at victim, then at Tyler, then back down the alley. At once Nate stood up, and holding back tears tried to explain what happened, but the words barely came out.

"I... I didn't though. I s-swear, not me, him, he grabbed me, and-and he hit me, and-and-and," but his voice got choked up, and he finally broke down in tears. He wept as quietly as he could, but he couldn't contain himself. He looked at the knife in his trembling hands and dropped it suddenly. He put his head in his hands and continued to emotionally let himself go. He didn't like crying in front of other people, especially his friends. He kept a straight face for as long as he could muster, but he felt his face tense, get beat red, and let hot tears flow down. He did this as he kept repeating, "why, why why" to himself while crying. Eventually he regained his composure slightly

and he lifted his head up, still letting out a few tears, and felt a headache grow from everything that had just happened.

Finally Tyler grew impatient. "We're going home to the apartment, right now, and Nate when we get there, you are going to tell us everything," said Tyler, "everything," he reiterated. Nate nodded solemnly as he continued to cry very quietly.

This was where things got tricky. Tyler and Curtis knew that it looked as clear as day that Nate had killed an unarmed defenseless man with a knife, but they also knew Nate. They knew the person who would help them with their homework when they were struggling, who would do all the little things for strangers like holding the door, and he would never, not in a million years, harm anyone, even as intoxicated as he was. As Tyler and Curtis shared this thought with each other, they began to worry. Tyler was freaking out over the crime itself. The thought of murder made him shiver and shake with fear, and to think that there was even the slightest possibility that Nate had done it made him terrified to even be near his friend. This was a fear he had never felt before. Curtis' mind was racing. He mainly thought logically of those who had seen Nate run out into the alley, and once it was discovered that there was a body out there, it would not have been tough to put two and two together. Curtis made a quick decision to grab the knife and hide it in his overcoat before riding in the taxi with Tyler and Nate.

Nate was shaking as he sat down onto the worn down leather taxi seat. He felt a pit of fear right inside his stomach, like butterflies, but so much worse. His eyes were still watery, as if someone had hit him in the nose, and his eyes uncontrollably watered. If someone said anything to him right now, he might break down and lose it again. Curtis had tried to remain calm throughout it all, but now that he had taken the knife, he too had a pit of fear in his stomach. Tyler was concerned with the idea of murder, and that Nate may have in some way been involved, even if it was an accident. At this thought he quaked and shivered as the cab pulled out onto an always-busy street in Brooklyn. As they told the driver the address of the apartment, they watched a police car with its lights on stop right in front of the bar they had just fled. "Lucky us," the driver began, trying to be

innocently comedic, "we almost had to go through a full police investigation of two drunk guys going at it."

"Yeah," Curtis responded with a forced laugh after he processed the severity of what this meant. He turned to Tyler and whispered in his ear as quietly as he could, "If only he knew the extent of how terribly lucky we are right now." Tyler nodded disbelievingly.

They arrived at home and paid the driver for his service. As soon as Nate got out of the car he broke down again crying, this time not as loud or as out of control, but still crying his eyes out. They entered the apartment complex, and went upstairs to the third floor where their apartment was. Curtis unlocked the door, trying his hardest not to appear as worried as he was in front of the other two. They went inside where Curtis and Tyler sat on the brown leather couch and Nate at their small dining table. They sat in bitter silence for what seemed like hours upon hours, when in reality it was only about fifteen or twenty minutes. Finally Tyler spoke.

"Nate tell us the whole story, we know and you know what it looked like, and if that's not true, then you better tell us the truth right now."

Nate looked up at Tyler with watery eyes, he took a few moments to calm himself as best he could. He attempted to form words, but no sound came out. He restarted. He calmed himself, attempted to form words but again, no sound was spoken. Now Tyler had grown frustrated and also began to despair over his friend. Tyler's eyes started to water. At this he turned away from Nate, and failed to hold back tears. He stormed out of the room and slammed his door shut. Curtis sat close to Nate, right next to him, and put his arm around him. Now Nate let himself go completely. He didn't try to cover his tears, he embraced them. He put his head onto Curtis's shoulder and let himself cry as much as he needed at the moment. Curtis said nothing because he knew that anything he said wasn't going to help.

About another thirty minutes went by, and Nate finally stopped sniffing. He got up, blew his nose, wiped his eyes and attempted to

make them look less red, and then with his hands brushed some of his shaggy chestnut brown hair out of his face and to the side. He went out into the room. He took up a pen and paper, and started to write as quickly as possible what had happened in the alley way. He cried softly through most of the writing, but he got through it. He knocked on Tyler's door. No answer. He slid the sheet of paper under the door and sat back down on the couch next to Curtis. A few short minutes later Tyler came out of his room, stood in front of Nate, and threw his arms around him in a loving embrace. Tyler still asked to hear the story aloud from Nate. Nate calmed himself, and was prepared to tell the story.

"I wasn't feeling well, so as you saw in the bar, I ran out into the alley to get sick. I threw up a couple times and leaned against one of the walls. That was when I saw him. Some tall guy in dark cloak and dark clothes having a confrontation with some other smaller guy while threatening him and asking him for money. When the little guy started to put up a fight, that's when he, when-when" his voice started to break, he trailed off, took several deep breaths, reminded himself that the guy wasn't there, and repeated a mantra to himself a couple times. He focused, and resumed his story. "That's when he stabbed and killed the smaller person," once again Nate took a few deep breaths, and quickly resumed, "I saw everything happen even through my drunkenness. The tall guy started coming towards me. I tried to run away, but I was too out of it so I stumbled and fell. He was standing over me, and he grabbed me up and slammed me against the wall. He punched me a couple times, one of which gave me a black eye and knocked me down. I wasn't unconscious, but I could barely function at that point, so he grabbed my hand and put the knife in it. I became in touch with my limbs and feeling came back to them, and that was when everything kind of set in. I realized what had just happened, and I was, I was, I was petrified." At this point he stopped and the room fell into silence once again.

Curtis was first to break the silence after several minutes went by and the emotion in the room had lessened. "But wait, if it was his knife that he put into your hands, won't his fingerprints be on the knife too?" "No," Nate began solemnly, "he was wearing gloves."

Next Tyler chimed in, "guys, we have to go to the police. It's the only option."

"And what am I supposed to say? That I was drunk, and someone guy framed for murder, but no one saw this happen and I don't have any proof so just take my word for it? I would be handing myself over to the cops," Nate retorted.

"Well there's not another option, we're in college, we're not detectives. It's not like we could figure out how to solve a murder investigation with no witnesses and no proof. No one even knows the guy was there. And you don't even know what he looks like!" Yelled Tyler, raising his voice before calming down. He looked at Nate with pleading eyes. "Nate, we have to go to the police. They'll know what to do. Plus, if we don't and the cops think it's you, it'll be too late."

Curtis now gave his input, "guys hang on a minute before we talk to the cops." Curtis looked at both Nate and Tyler sternly, "we are going to do that eventually, but I think we should talk to my cousin. He works for a small law firm in downtown Brooklyn, not far from here. I will tell him I am speaking to him as our lawyer, and then even if he wanted to, he couldn't tell anyone without getting his license taken away."

Nate quickly responded, "yes definitely that sounds like what we should do. We'll go to the cops at some point, but we should know how to go about this from a lawyer first."

Tyler was hesitant, but he eventually agreed that it wouldn't hurt to talk to a lawyer first. At this point they had stayed up well into the morning and the sun began to rise. They sat down and had a small breakfast with some coffee. Then they set off to downtown Brooklyn to Curtis's cousin's law firm.

They pulled up to the uneven sidewalk in front of the firm. It was a small firm alright. They entered through the creaking wood and glass door and walked on the hardwood floors to what appeared to be a secretary's desk. "Do you have an appointment?" The woman asked. "No,"

Curtis began, "you see I'm Curtis Thompson, and my cousin Brian Thompson works-" but he was cut off by the woman. "I'm sorry sir but if you don't have an appointment we can't get you in. We're very busy."

The three of them looked around the empty law firm, and grew agitated at the woman. "Please just let Brian Thompson know that his cousin Curtis is here about something really important and we could really use his advice for something that..." but he trailed off because the woman stopped listening and went back to work at her computer. Curtis rolled his eyes and took a seat on the couch in the waiting room. He called his cousin several times, left him voicemails and texts, but he could not contact him. Tyler then spoke, "If he doesn't show up within the next half hour or so, we are going to the police." Nate opened his mouth to protest, but closed it at the realization that that was what needed to be done.

About twenty minutes went by, and Nate grew more and more worried. He prayed for Brian to come out and help. Then, almost as if his prayer had been answered on the spot, Brian walked out into the waiting room. "Hey Curtis, how's it going man?" Brian went over and Curtis gave him a half-hug. Curtis responded firmly though, "Brian, thank God you're here, we really need your help." "Well come into my office, sorry about the wait I just finished with a client, but I have break between clients for about an hour right now so you're in luck."

They went into his office and sat down. Curtis told Brian that he could not repeat this to anyone, and proceeded to tell Brian everything that happened to Nate. "Wow guys, this is not looking good." Brian responded after the long story. "Yes thank you we've established that Brian," Nate retorted sarcastically. "I'm sorry, I'm just pretty on edge. What can we do?" "I would say going to the police is definitely the right thing to do. Put the knife in a ziplock bag and take it with you. All three of you tell the police everything you know, everything you saw, and everything you heard. Tell the police whose fingerprints of yours are on the knife and exactly how and when they got there. Offer to help the police in any way you can."

"But what if the police can't find the real killer and blame it on us, since we had the murder weapon, and everyone saw us at the bar and

saw us drive away after. Can you guarantee that we will not get nailed for this?" said Curtis. "No Curtis, I cannot guarantee anything. I can't even guarantee that the police will let you leave the station after this. But it's the right thing to do, and if the investigators do their job, the real killer will be caught" said Brian.

Afterward Curtis, Tyler, and Nate thanked Brian several times for talking to them. They went home to discuss their next move. When they got home they got serious about what to do next. Tyler continued to pitch his idea to go to the police, which Nate of course continued to disagree with. They thought long and hard about whether to follow Brian's advice and Tyler's original idea to go to the police, or to try and gain some answers on their own first. After a long conversation, some arguing, and several non-unanimous votes, they came to the conclusion that they would put the knife in a ziplock bag and put it in an old shoe box in between some magazines just for a few days while they searched for the true perpetrator.

First they needed a plan for how to catch the killer. Unfortunately they had no leads, and didn't even know what the killer looked like. The only lead they had thus far was the victim. The three of them had gotten a good look at the victim. Plus the three of them majored in computer science and cyber technology. In high school they had run-ins with hacker groups and had learned a lot about hacking. With their knowledge of computers, they hacked into the police department's computer and looked at the victim's case file. They found out the victim's name, as well as some personal information about him. Curtis didn't think this information would really help them since they couldn't exactly walk back into the bar and ask questions. However, Tyler and Nate thought of a plan to find out information without being seen at the bar. They couldn't immediately talk to Curtis about because it involved his girlfriend. They needed to get into the bar and ask questions but they could not return to the scene of the crime because they would be recognized. They needed someone else, preferably a girl to go and ask questions for them. Curtis was the only one of the three with a girlfriend. Her name was Sarah and they were all good friends with her, so Tyler and Nate decided to go to Sarah's apartment the next morning and ask her for help.

Tyler and Nate left to Sarah's apartment the next morning. They went to Sarah and told her everything in confidence. She was shocked, and felt terrible for Nate. After her initial reaction, they told her how she could help. "We need you to go to the bar and pretend your the victim's friend, that you heard what happened to him, and that you needed to find out what happened for yourself. Do you think you could do this?" Tyler asked with pleading eyes.

Sarah was a little shaken up from all she had just heard but agreed to help as much as she could. She also agreed that she would be the one to tell Curtis and convince him to let her help. Tyler and Nate gave her the information about the victim that they had gained when they hacked into the police case file, and left the apartment to let her look through it. She would stop by later at their apartment and they would go over the plan together.

After Sarah reviewed the file, she went to the guys' apartment to tell Curtis that she could and was willing to help Nate. At first Curtis was not onboard with the idea, and was upset at Tyler and Nate for asking her and for not telling him first. However, after Sarah relentlessly assured Curtis of her safety and knowledge of the victim and case, he eventually agreed to let her help as long as they waited in the car outside the bar. After Curtis was onboard with the idea, they started to plan out what exactly they were going to do. They decided that Sarah would wear a wire so they could hear and record everything, and they also came up with an emergency word in case she felt unsafe. They waited until evening that night to go to the bar, and in the meantime, Sarah reread the case file, preparing for the night to come.

Evening came, and they went to the bar. "Remember, if you feel unsafe, use the word, and here, brush up on the questions you'll ask one more time," Curtis said to Sarah. Sarah reread what she would say, and entered the bar. She walked directly toward the back and took a seat at the bar. The bartender came over and asked to take her order. She ordered a drink and began a conversation with the bartender.

"I remember my friend Mason recommended this bar to me. And now it pains me so much that I was not able to come here with him. This was

where he had his last drink." At this the bartender became intrigued. They continued the conversation, Sarah faked a tear here and there and soon she pulled out a picture of the victim, and asked if the bartender remembered him. "Oh yeah, I remember that guy. I'm sorry for your loss, he seemed like a good guy. It's tragic how he passed. I remember the day he came in and the terrible thing that happened to him outside" the bartender said to Sarah. She then questioned him further on the topic of how it happened, and what happened prior to his untimely passing.

"Well," the bartender began, "he ordered a drink and sat down, but after a few minutes some big guy in a dark overcoat started to get in a heated argument with him. It seemed like more than an argument though, the big guy was yelling and sayin threatening things to Mason, while Mason tried to explain things to him. Eventually Mason stood up to the guy and held his ground, but then the big guy asked him to settle it outside. At first I was thankful for that because I didn't want them tearing up my bar, but if I had known what was coming, I would have stopped it, and kicked the big guy out" the bartender said remorsefully.

"What happened while they were outside? Was that when it happened?" Sarah asked pretending to hold back tears. "Yes unfortunately. But I don't think he did the actual killing, despite what it sounds like so far. There was this other drunk guy who fumbled out there shortly after looking like he was gonna puke, and his two friends followed later to check on him. That was when someone called the cops and yelled that Mason was, you know, and those three guys got a cab and drove away right after. It was awfully suspicious. I think a bad mix of alcohol and who knows what else caused it to happen," the bartender responded solemnly.

"Back to the other guy, the big one, do you know what they were arguing about? Could you hear what they were saying?" Sarah questioned once more. "Yeah, it was hard to tell exactly what it was about despite how loud they were, but it sounded like Mason owed the big guy money, and a quite a bit of money. That seemed like the only thing they talked about, something about how Mason asked for more time for some reason or another, but I'm not really sure about that

part. I know for sure it was about money though." The bartender responded. Sarah had one final question for the bartender and it was the most important question. "We're able to see the big guy, do you know who is? Would you be able to describe him?" "I do think I recognized him. Now this isn't proof so don't quote me on this, but based on what the conversation was about and what the big guy looked like, I'd say it was Lenny Pizzo. He's a relatively well known loan shark who takes out people who don't pay up. He doesn't try to kill them, just tries to rough em up a bit, but it has ended badly a couple times. In this case I think he knocked Mason around quite a bit and then the other drunk guy finished the job. I also hear the police looked for Lenny at one point, but there's no evidence against him, which is why I haven't reported anything, plus I don't want my head in his sights." There was a somewhat long pause between the two as the bartender filled her drink again. Eventually he spoke again, "I hope this has helped you gain some closure, it's an awful thing, what happened to your friend, and I wish I would have stopped those drunk guys from hurting him and you like this." She nodded quietly along with him, and after he finished talking she thanked him for the "closure," tipped him well, and left the bar.

The three guys had been listening this whole time and were extremely happy to see Sarah. Curtis gave her a tight hug and they all told her how great she did as they drove back to the apartment. Meanwhile, the police were making their own rounds. They had also talked to the bartender and several patrons at the bar and had much evidence that it was Nate. They were missing the murder weapon so they could not prove this yet, but all this circumstantial evidence was enough to grant them a warrant to search the friends' apartment. The police had talked to the cab driver who drove them home to find their address, so now they just needed the sketch artist to finalize a sketch based off the bartender and the other patrons' descriptions of the three boys to take to the apartment complex manager to find out the apartment number, and they would be able to search their apartment, which is where they would inevitably find the knife with the boys' prints on it. The police were closing in fast, and the boys needed to hurry and find proof that Lenny Pizzo was the true killer.

After their long but successful night, the four friends slept in and discussed their next plan the following morning. Sarah had spent the

night in celebration of their minor victory and because it was really late when they got home. She now went home but asked the boys to definitely keep her in the loop. The three of them made coffee, ate, and decided that they would use their computer skills to find Lenny. One of the things briefly mentioned when the bartender was talking to Sarah was that Lenny had recently started using a phone instead of doing things more off the grid and old-fashioned like he used to. This was the perfect opportunity to track him down and find proof that he was plotting to take out Mason. They got on their computers and started researching Lenny, finding ways to track him, and spent the rest of the day trying to get into Lenny's phone. At the end of the day, they finally broke through and were able to get into his phone. By this time it was late at night, so they called it a day, and were determined to finish tracking Lenny the next day.

Very early the next morning they heard loud bang on their door. One of them looked through the peephole and saw that it was the police. They rushed to save their data and close down their computers quickly while Curtis stalled the police. They successfully saved and closed everything on the computers, but they did not have time to grab the knife that they had stashed in the shoe box. After Curtis had thoroughly read through the warrant while trying to buy them time, the police turned the apartment upside down looking for anything incriminating. Soon enough, they looked through the old shoe box. In between some magazines was the murder weapon. Nate was horrified. He knew what this meant for him and for Curtis because as soon as they got the prints back they would come for Curtis as an accessory. At the moment they arrested Nate, and took the other two in for fingerprinting. Luckily, they had no proof that Curtis and Tyler were directly connected with the murder, so they were released for the moment.

Tyler and Curtis rushed home and started hacking and tracking Lenny's phone. Several hours later, as they were just beginning to break through, they heard more pounding at the door. It was the police again. This time they had analyzed the prints and they arrested Curtis as an accessory to murder. However, by this time Curtis and Tyler had finished tracking Lenny's current and past locations, and they had broken through to his text messages. Now Tyler just had to make a mad dash to print out the text messages and

show the police Lenny's current location so they could make the accurate arrest. Tyler's heart was racing the whole time. He knew that he was Curtis and Nate's only hope of being proven innocent.

Tyler hacked through the phone and came to the texts, which he immediately printed out. They showed Lenny saying that he had waited long enough, and that Mason needed to pay him. Other texts were about past beatings and murders of other innocent men and women, as well as texts about the plotting of Mason's murder. Tyler rushed to the police with everything he needed to bring in Lenny, and the police looked it all over. The police were impressed the boys' work, and proceeded to look into the possibility of Lenny Pizzo as the killer. With additional witness statements, as well as the bartender's statement and the new found information, the process of proving Nate's innocent became a reality. It would take a little bit of time with paperwork and whatnot, but the police made it clear that Lenny Pizzo would go to jail for a long time, and the Nate and Curtis would come out of it scot free.

Later, Nate and Curtis were released from jail. They celebrated their work together to save Nate, as well as their good work putting away a killer. At this moment they knew nothing could stop them in life, and felt happy and satisfied. They also remembered it was the beginning of Christmas break, something which seemed usually normal for them, and they proceeded to enjoy Christmas just in time, together as friends and a family.

Riley Baerg

F to Pay Respect

Francis lifted each portion of his foot as he slithered across the devastated battlefield. Closer and closer towards the concrete bunker, taking in the sheer horror of the carnage surrounding him where his fellow comrades once roamed. Wails and commands echoed from inside of the bunker. Boog's muscles pulsed as he drew closer to the ominous opening to the cramped holdout. The cold stones brushed against his foot as he slowly crept in, careful not to alert any possible intruders. As Boog pressed up against a wall leading to a larger corridor he heard the piercing sound of artillery. All went quiet. Continuous shouting pursued the sounds of feet slapping the cold ground; this time the sounds were coming to him. Gun at the ready, he aimed towards the sizable portion of the hall.

"Private! What in Grogg's name do you think you are doing?" The proud general stood puzzled, towering over Francis with an undeniable dominance. Boog froze in his tracks and released his weapon from his steady grip in a rush.

"I apologize general. I was unsure if the bunker had been overrun by the East." Boog rebutted after a short pause. One more moment and the general of this entire fight would be demolished by the bullet of an unsuspecting private in a fit of uncertainty.

"Back to your post maggot, we have a war to win. We don't need a rogue

soldier running this show, we need a true leader like myself." Boog felt a large sense of fear, but a bit of embarrassment on the generals part. Why would one think so highly of themselves? "Don't just stand there, move!" Two soldiers on each side of the general grabbed hold of Francis and forced him out of the way of the entrance.

Ideas of what to do next filtered through his mind as he continued down the bunker's corridor. This was most certainly a battle lost on the West's part. And it was Boog, and his lasting comrades whose heads were on the line next. Hundreds, possibly thousands of invertebrates

lost their short-lived lives on this very day, even as Boog rotated through post to post his soldiers were being killed on the field. What kind of gastropod was he? A weak little snail, or a bountiful, strong, formidable slug? This was surely a snail move to make, but he was born into the Boogie bloodline, snail moves were not to be made as long as he lived.

Francis pondered, "What would father do?" For days after his run-in with the general. His people were living in hopes of a hero to rise up and to end this formidable war. Boog belonged to the WWSC, or the Western Winthorpe Slug Collective, a military power who decided to rise against the Eastern side of Winthorpe Farms themselves. This movement instigated a strange sort of biochemical warfare involving a sort of explosive that could burn the skin of a slug off in an instant. From day one Francis was taught that the only way to fight this quickly developing technology was to fight using the same weapon. As this race continues to unfold, the question still stands, who would take total control of Winthorpe Acres? Francis was no hero, he was just a post-watcher who stood no chance out in the apocalyptic wasteland that is the garden.

Day's continued to pass as Boog saw himself as less of a help to the cause, as he stood solitary at his post in the bunker he daydreamt of greener pastures. His family and friends soared through his mind like gnats in the summer, there was not a moment in the day that went by without the people he loved on his mind. Francis's wife, Marjorie had first set eyes on him in their college days when she witnessed him getting beat up in the alleyway of a local watering hole. From first glance Boog thought he had died and went to heaven, and this was an angel. Though he was severely maimed and injured in the alley that night, he was still right, Marjorie was his true guardian angel.

Years flew by and the couple of love-slugs soon became husband and wife and bore thirty children. The family lived in harmony for the moons to come. It was until King Slugworth IV had been overthrown by Charles Douglas, the seemingly peaceful politician turned malicious mad man of Western Winthorpe. Once Douglas's reign first began the civilians thought nothing of it but a coup d'etat with power given to a neutral man. Yet within just weeks Douglas began to wage war

against the East, a military draft soon followed. The fate of the Boogie family lay within the hands of an inexperienced, new ruler. The hopes and dreams of raising a family away from warfare were crushed once Francis received a letter in the mail. Everything he knew and loved was to be taken to war, to fight on behalf of the WWSC.

The family sat in wait of the next bus to pick up the only source of income they had. Without a fatherly figure and no money to their name, they would most likely end up in poverty, scraping gum off the underside of tables to make ends meet. So in a act of defeat and farewell, the Boogie bunch waved goodbye.

"Farewell my sweet offspring, I do bid you farewell! Your father will return home to embrace you with all of the love I can muster!" He gathered them together for a final embrace. "Marjorie," he called out, "watch over these children I will return home soon, but until then never let them out of your sight." Boog wept.

"Of course my love! Please return, we did not deserve to receive such means of misfortune." Francis grasped Marjorie's hand passionately.

"No matter what, put the children first. If I should not make it home, let my next of kin carry on my legacy." One last kiss and goodbye and Boog entered the large, mobile, metallic structure lettered 'G-R-E-Y-S-L-U-G' on the side. Boog, in his short time in the free world, never had the chance to learn how to read. He took one glance at his family before he began his departure on the windowless bus. Once on the road the Sergeant at the front of the bus took roll call. It didn't take long for the stone-faced man to call out his name.

"Francis C. Boogie? Do we have a Francis C. Boogie." He yelled in a commanding voice spanning to the back of the bus.

"Yes, here." Boog chirped up and stood from his seat.

"You will refer to me as sir, is that clear?" The Sergeant replied with authority.

"Sir, yes sir." Instantly made inferior, without contest Boog was now under the rule of the WWSC before he even knew it.

Boog awoke from his daytime slumber to the sound of shells cracking in the dusking sky. Manly screams surrounded his ears, overwhelmed, Francis crumbled to the ground like the dropping of his gun to the general. Where was there to run? Boog wasn't even sure if he could stand at this point in time, he felt the chaos around him. Memories flashed through his head, "What would father do? C'mon what would father do!" Francis screamed to himself.

His father was no coward like Boog, he was a borderline hero in the wars previous. It was time for Boog to carry on his legacy in the form of newborn bravery. Francis stood from his then fetal position and ran from his post in search of the source of shells. Suddenly, to the sound at least ten times louder than a gunshot rang a shell no more than five feet where Boog had been laying on the ground. Now a considerable distance away, Francis stood stagnant in a lightning fast reflection of what could have been. Yet there would be no time for selfishness, no time to think of himself, he slithered out the door as fast as his muscles could go.

Boog turned down corners, ran down stairs stairs, waddled as fast as his foot could through hallways and corridors in search of any way out of the, now devastated, building. At last there was one opening to exit the monstrous concrete structure, the mortars and cannons had seemingly ceased in the moments following. Francis heard a large grumble throughout the air, "What are they planning? Some sort of mega bomb?" Boog asked himself. And it turns out, he was correct. The slugs from the East had something special in store for the now pathetic compound. Now that they were weakened it was time to make them their test subjects.

Boog heard the soaring of a jet overhead, though he could not pinpoint it exactly he knew where it was heading. It was obviously a sort of bomb. But Francis Chardonnay Boogie would have never expected the Eastern Slughood of Winthorpe Farms to develop a *biochemical weapon* so quickly! Francis skidded to an immediate pause, he sat and stared in awe of the grace of this murderous

killing-machine of an explosion. He braced himself for the sheer carnage that would ensue in the moments to come.

The impact of the explosion came as a man made, unnatural, low-magnitude earthquake. But the little slug hero still stood, in fact all that surrounded him was miraculously still there. The ground was covered in a thin layer of a grainy white substance, the bomb had failed seeing as Boog still remained. He felt a slight itch all over his body as he began to think that this was no failure of a nuke. It was a resounding success of a biochemical weapon! Francis slithered away from the death zone as quick as an ant. The itches quickly escalated into a full on burn, his foot began to take a large toll on the weakened slug. The last thing Boog remembered was hearing commands yelled out all around him and the impact of his petite body slamming on to the salty ground.

The soldier awoke to black, surrounded by nothing but black and streams of sunshine filtering through some sort of gauze tied around his head. Was he in the army's hospital? Was he back home, in bed and back with his plentiful family?

"Move! All of you boys move this instant! We got someone special with us today, and I would like you fools to treat him with respect." The unknown man's voice boomed through the gauze-like headband. "Up and at 'em little bugga, we got some things to take care of." The man blabbered on, this time in a condescending voice like one you would use with a child. Boog was no child. He was a bombing survivor, a borderline hero like his father before him! Who in Grogg's name would treat a war hero like this? The thought came to him, he was not home, not in some army infirmary, he was taken hostage!

"Where am I? Who are you? What have you done to me?" Francis asked, knowing it is not that simple to get an answer from a officer as stubborn as this. He was in no position to ask questions to anyone. Another soldier stepped forward and took the gauze off of Boog's head, only to find that it was a burlap sack that was tied tight around his head, ending a constricting grip over his movement. He sat in a chair within a courtyard of sorts, surrounded by at least twenty soldiers who likely resided in the East.

"Sweet little slugger, where is your faith? We are here to *help*, not hurt you, just give us what we want and you will be on your merry way." The officer was obviously apart a high rank to have the power to free a prisoner of war this easily.

"What do you want from me?" Struck with fear, Boog replied in a fearful tone.

"May I ask, what is your favorite food?" Not quite what Francis expected but if he was asked more questions like this he was as good as free.

"Well I do enjoy a three-leaf lasagna from time to ti-" The man let him speak for a moment before he upholstered a firearm from his belt. Boog stopped, now fearing for his life, betrayed with the use of false sense of insurance.

"I could rip out your lifeforce and sleep like a snail in a tomato garden. Do I look like a man who likes games, little boy?" He interrupted. His intent to kill was obviously strong, the man had done this hundreds of times. He was a professional.

"Well you asked me what my favorite food was so I answered you." Francis was unable to detect his own snarkiness in his comment, he figured his judgements were fair. The officer did ask what his favorite food was.

"Details! Information! Tell me all that you know, I don't have the patience for this." Uncalled for most definitely, Boog figured that since the man came off as nice this would be a walk in the park.

"Well why didn't you just ask? What is it exactly that you need?" Still unable to adjust to the fact that this interrogation could end in his own demise, Francis proceeded to play a fool.

"Does the term 'Salt' mean anything to you?" Salt? The word was completely alien to the gastropod. "Hmm, boy? Ringing any bells?" It

was now obvious that the ignorant slug had no idea what was even happening. "Alright boys, pick him up. We got a little surprise for this guy." The two soldiers that took the burlap off him wrapped a rope around his neck and a blindfold around the eyes. The East had total control and walked Francis like a dog on a leash.

Walking to the overgrown shed seemed to take hours, once the blindfold was removed, Boog could see that the sky was losing its color. The soldiers threw Francis into the shed and tied him to a pillar connected from the neverending ceiling to the ever-so-close stone flooring. What stood before him shook Boog directly to the core, a ten inch tall capsule of the white rocks that burned him that day at the bunker. Listed on the side read 'S-A-L-T', once again his illiteracy would prove fatal in this desperate time of need. Tens of what Francis could see as scientists, surrounded the capsule, taking note of any irregular patterns.

The officer stood before Boog, giving a menacing stare right in the eyes. "This you grub, is salt." Things began to click for Francis, this is the biochemical weapon and the very thing that nearly killed him just days ago.

"Wait a minute. So you're telling me, without a shadow of a doubt, that these burning white rocks, is *salt*?" Boog sat in disbelief, this is the biggest thing uncovered by the West since the beginning of the war! "You grogg! You nearly killed me! What is the matter with you." He was on fire, like his skin when touching the salt.

The officer stood, dumbfounded, by the gastropods utter stupidity. He had not a single worry about enemy casualties, this was war and Boog didn't even notice. He began to test his restraints, wailing and writhing his way out but the rope would not budge. The man stayed watching him struggle for a few moments then chirped to his inferiors, "I've had enough of this eyesoar, boys take him away."

In unison, the two soldiers replied, "Yes, General Kenobi." Now screaming for his life, Boog was ripped away from the General and the salt room. To quiet him down the guards slapped him over the head

until his squealing began to subside. After a sizeable journey over a hill, Francis was ushered into a dirt mound of a prison. The jailhouse wreaked of pesticides and raw eggs, the cells consisted of pebbles and sticks for bars. It was utterly impossible to escape, this was state of the art technology and he knew it. The guards threw him into a cell and closed its doors where everything he could see around him faded to black. Unsure whether he would ever be free again, Francis C. Boogie awaited his imminent demise.

It felt like years. He was fed once a day, gruel and slop smelling like a forgotten dumpster. Limited access to fresh water that almost always tasted like the dirt in which surrounded him. No bed to sleep on, only the dirt floor of which now he had come accustomed to. No sunlight except for the gleams that shined through the smallest holes on the stick gates that confined him. Boog's life was over and he knew it from the moment he saw the cell, there was no way out so why would he ever try. He had let down the WWSC, his family, the king. He had information that the West desperately needed to seek total control over Winthorpe Acres. The salt was now a key factor in the deciding who would win the everlasting fight.

He had to break free, bring back the information, become the hero he wanted so desperately to be! Bring pride and heroics to the Boogie bloodline! Francis got up from off of his floor and began to plot to escape, he began by taking in his surroundings and the things he was given. Dirt on the dirt floor, he could dig through it as far as he needed to break out of the mound itself. But to do that would take time, and would most likely require a distraction, his mind continuously went back to the gruel he was given. If he played his cards right he could shape it into a shell of himself so if anyone came to check on the prisoner they would see a pile of slime in the shape of a slug that may trick any guard.

Boog had put his plan into motion by collecting all the gruel he was given in a week, to salvage the most gruel he would need to go hungry and hope there were no random searches of cells. The gruel stockpile had become plentiful and Boog began to dig the hole through the floor of his cell. He had no way of knowing which way to go but he needed to send it in order to go free and save the WWSC and his family back

home. They needed the information, but Boog's life was on the line. Francis decided, his life was not even close to the importance of the mission. Operation Gruel Hole was now a go.

He used utensils he was given to slowly chip away at the mushy floor. Days upon days went by and the mass of gruel began to take shape as Boog began to become a full on insomniac. The only time to truly work would be in the dead of night. So not only was Boog wasting away due to impending starvation, he suffered the tragedy of insanity due to his self-depriving of sleep. And as the days ruthlessly rolled on, the worse the situation became. Francis was practically a shell of his former self. His body, now covered in rashes and blisters, trudged through his own personal catacombs. The situation was seemingly hopeless, with no sense of direction there was no sure way of escape.

Night after night Boog went to work, he indeed respected the grind but this was more than the simple grind most are used to. It would be months after he first incarcerated into the mound when he would finally see a chance at escape. He had dug far enough to the point where he could hear raindrops slapping the side of the prison. He found this as a firm sort of motivation. In a frenzy Boog stabbed the wall and dug with all his weakened body could muster. And it didn't take long after for him to reach the first form of natural light in months.

Francis slithered back through the trenches one more time, this time to carry out the remainder of Operation Gruel Hole. He propped up the decoy and covered up his tracks by placing his only belongings over the entrance to the hole. Boog sped through all his hard work and took his first steps outside, climbing down the side of the bountiful mound. It wasn't until he hit the soaked grass patches that he considered himself safe.

The mound was now just a speck in the distance. Scatterbrained, he ruffled throughout the surrounding grasslands seeking survival. Boog stopped in his tracks, he heard a low, rumbling, sound that echoed through the forest. Spinning in circles in search of the origin he spotted a small military vehicle coming his way. He ducked in speculation, if this was the East he was dead where he stood. It

inched closer and closer as Boog's anxiety grew. Just feet from where Francis hid the vehicle suddenly stopped.

"Who are you? Come out with your hands up!" Boog marveled at the sight of three WWSC members holding him at gunpoint. He had never been so happy to be threatened.

"My name is Francis C. Boogie, I am with the WWSC. I was captured and held in a prison for months, I escaped not to long ago. Please help me." Boog pleaded for his life now, and the soldiers were not backing down. One of the cadets exited the vehicle and searched the slug for any hint of danger. He looked at the driver post-search and nodded. He bagged Francis and forced him into the back of the vehicle. No more than thirty minutes later they had stopped and Boog was forced out of the vehicle and was moved into what seemed to be another bunker. But this time he recognized its smell.

He was forced into a folding chair, doors slammed, he was tied down, and then was finally unbagged. "What the Grogg do we have here?" He was met with a hard stare from the general of Western Winthorpe.

"General. My name is Francis C. Boogie. I was taken months ago by the Eastern Slughood and General Kenobi, and I have received critical information about their weapons." Boog rose his voice.

"Untie him." With a wave of his hand the general had the helpless slug untied. "Now you are going to tell me exactly what you had seen, heard, even tasted during every moment of your captivity." General pleaded with the now valuable private. Boog told him every single thing he could remember along with the weapon he encountered. "That would certainly explain a lot, you see months ago, at the time you were captured by Kenobi and his men a bomb went down. Casualties at the base are still being tallied to this day. You, good sir, have given us the missing piece we needed. I think it's safe to say that you are a hero. And I am honored to have served as your general." He stood and saluted the gastropod with pride.

Francis was honorably discharged and was sent home to see his family for the first time in years. He could not contain his excitement, he had done himself, his family, his people a great service sacrificing all he could ever give. He took the bus back to his home and slithered as fast as he could out of the station and to his home he had left behind. Boog knocked on the door, ready to give all the love he could to Marjorie and his children. But the person who answered the door was not Marjorie or any of his thirty-some children.

"Who might you be?" The man asked with authority.

"I'm the owner of this home, thank you for asking. Now where is my wife and children?" Boog was petrified, what had happened whilst he was away.

"You mean Marjorie?" He asked confused. Boog nodded reluctantly, what has this man done? "I'm her husband. What's it to you?"

Olivia Haller

The Love that Never Was

Her silky brown hair along with the elegant violent dress complimented the tasteful diamond necklace around her frail neck. It was the month before she would get married to the love of her life, or so what everyone had told her. She was planned to get married to Jonathan Carper, a real estate agent that came from a well known wealthy family. They had been dating since their freshman year of high school and everyone had seen them as the perfect couple. They were prom king and queen their senior year and were voted best couple in the yearbook three years in a row. They had graduated high school together and even went to the same college. And now they were living in a one million dollar apartment in downtown Los Angeles while they were waiting for their five million dollar house to get finished building.

His mother was a doctor and his father had two inventions that made him one of the richest men in Los Angeles, so as you can imagine they were filthy rich. Her family was the complete opposite, her dad worked three jobs just so that they could stay on their feet and her mother passed away when she was twelve years old. She had three younger siblings and they lived in a small house just outside of Los Angeles. At first his family wasn't accepting of her family but they had gotten closer over the past years and were fully trusting of their relationship. They were getting ready to go to their engagement party and as she looked in the mirror all that she could think was that she was making a mistake marrying this man. She knew she had loved him for as long as she could remember but she was not in love with him.

She was putting her finishing touches on her look for the evening. She applied a vibrant pink gloss onto her lips and sprayed her Chanel perfume (gifted by her handsome fiancé) all over her body.

"Are you ready to go?" Johnathan asked her.

She nodded her head and preceded to the door, and out of their apartment complex. It was a bright and sunny day, no clouds to be seen. She could hear the cars, the pleasant aroma from the baked pastries and cakes from the bakery across the street that gave her a feeling of enjoyment in her depressed state. She could hear the sound of the noisy city, and could even look up and see the downtown buildings towering over her making her feel like a character on a game board. A stretched limousine had been waiting for them outside, it had a shiny appeal to it that reminded her of her black Valentino heels Jonathan had gotten her last year for Christmas.

As they were on their way to the party, she felt wretched as she was trying to figure out how to pretend that she was in love with this man. She knew that their thoughts were ambivalent to each other, and thought that he would never understand how she was feeling. As they were driving to the venue, she could feel the heat getting to her. She started sweating uncontrollably.

"What's wrong? Why are you sweating so much?" He asked her

"It's just, really hot in here." She replied

Jonathan turned on the AC and all it did was make her drenched face dry again. It could not do anything about how she was feeling. No one could help her at this moment, only her.

She had thoughts about stopping the car and running away but she casted them off when thinking about the damage that would cause. They arrived to the beautiful dining hall their party was to take place and she was even more nervous now.

"Are you ok? You look a little pale." Jonathan asked

"Yes I'm fine I think I just need to use the restroom." She responded

She ran into the restroom and got there barely in time to throw up her whole lunch. She started to feel her body give out on her and when she stood up she fainted right on the bathroom floor.

She awoke in the hospital, hearing doctors' walk to and fro, seeing flowers and balloons across the room that people had brought her, she was still very confused and not fully aware of what had happened. She looked over to the right side of her bed and she saw her fiancé, she knew that the right thing to do was to be happy to see him, but she wasn't.

"Hey babe, I'm so glad you are ok."

She gave him a small grin and went back asleep. But she was awoken by a loud open of the door and when she opened her eyes she saw a tall, handsome doctor walk in the door.

"How are you doing Emily?" he asked.

"I'm doing fine, what happened to me?"

"Well, we did some tests and you are pregnant ."

"What! You have got to be kidding me."

She thought that she had gotten physically sick because of her stress and anxiety but she never would have thought that she would have been pregnant.

"This is great honey! Aren't you happy?"

Her face turned pale, and she could barely breathe through her clenched throat. The feeling she had felt in the moment made her feel like her life was over. That everything she had worked for had slipped away from her small, clammy hands. She would have been able to get out of a marriage with Johnathan but now they were going to

have a baby together! There was no way she would be able to get out of this mess with clean hands. She sat in her bed just thinking for a few moments while everyone in the room looked confused to what she was going to say next. She sat up staring at the wall.

"Honey, what's wrong? Aren't you happy?"

She was conflicted and didn't know what to say, so she thought of the best possible solution.

"Of course I'm excited, I'm just surprised."

She had been lying right through her teeth. Her fiancé had given a huge smile and went to hug her. Why had she done this? She had lied to her best friend in the whole world. Why couldn't she just tell him how she was feeling?

Two months had passed by and they were sitting in their apartment on a windy, but still sunny day. Jonathan was on his laptop, catching up on some work he needed to get finished, and she was doing some planning for the wedding. The thought of her walking down the aisle, feeling miserable, could not go away from her mind. She had to tell him, it was never too late.

"Johnathan," she said with a sorrowful face.

"Yes honey?" He said looking up from his laptop

"I don't think I can do this. It is just too much and I don't think I like it."

"Well if you don't want to go with white tablecloths we can always go with blue."

"No, that's not what I meant. I don't think I can get married."

"Why would you feel that way? We love each other and that's all that matters," he was now standing up and talking in somewhat of a yelling tone.

"I just don't know if I'm ready for all of this. We are still young and I don't want to go through all of this if I'm not fully ready."

"Why are you doing this to me? You know how much my family has done for you and you still want to ruin everything? No, I'm sorry you can't back out now. We are in way to deep, we can figure things out after we are married."

Her heart dropped and she was giving everything in her body to keep herself from bursting out into tears. How could Johnathan do this to me? If he really loved me he wouldn't put me through this. If he really loved me he would try to understand what I am going through. Everything had gone back to the same it was before the conversation, as if nothing happened.

The next day she had woken up still upset from the day before, but feeling relieved she had told him the truth even if it wouldn't change anything. It was the week before their wedding and the only thing that was keeping her sane was knowing that it she could get a divorce after and she would be able to live a normal and free life without Johnathan. She had never seen that side come out of him before. He had always been a kind, gentle hearted man, but yesterday she saw another side of him. She had known that there was no way she could go through with this marriage and she would file for divorce right after the wedding. But now, she had a bigger issue in mind. She was pregnant with his child and she still hadn't figured out how she was going to handle it. She was still only 24 years old and she didn't know how she was going to take care of the baby let alone not having the father around. She thought about this long and hard and even though adoption might have been the safest route, it was something she would never be able to do. Maybe she should stay with a Johnathan for the baby's sake? His family would be able to support a baby while her father could barely support her own family let alone a baby. She felt her anxiety kick and and she knew that she needed to get some fresh air.

She went down the elevator, through the man lobby, and walked outside to the noisy, crowded streets of Los Angeles. She could feel the cold breeze whisk across the side of her face and she could feel her mood getting lighter already. She strolled down a few blocks and saw a familiar face.

"Rachel Lee. Is that you?" She said in her high pitched, annoying voice. It was her enemy from high school, Emily Cramer. They had been best friends leading up to their sophomore year of high school when she tried to steal Jonathan away from Emily. They had become rivals when Johnathan chose her over Emily, and she had been jealous and angry ever since.

"Hi Emily, how have you been?"

"I've been amazing, I just got married a month ago, got a job at the Starbucks just across the street, and I am pregnant with my first child! How are you doing? I got the invitation to the wedding and I can't wait!"

She fell silent. She knew she had not given her an invitation to the wedding so it must have been Johnathan. How could he invite the girl that almost ruined their relationship to their wedding? This walk had not been as productive as she thought.

The next day she was finishing the last minute preparations for the wedding that was now a week away. As she was sitting on the couch, with her legs propped of on the white colored ottoman, she could smell the new keurig coffee pot brewing her morning special and she could see the city of downtown LA when she looked through the door-sized window panels across her apartment. She reaffirmed the venue, cake decorators, and the catering company. Jonathan walked in with his black suit that fit perfectly on his body. They had still barely spoken a word to each other since their argument. He would often ask her about the wedding but had acted completely different than before. He would even occasionally roll his eyes when she said something and would yell at her if she had done something wrong. She had gotten a feeling that he wanted to marry her for the wrong intentions.

"I thought you were going to work today."

"No, it's my day off. I'm going to hang out with some friends from high school."

"So you don't want to spend your day off with your fiancé?"

Now having an angry expression on her face, she had gotten up and was only a few feet away from him.

"I thought you didn't even want to marry me. Now you want me to spend the day with you?"

She went to sit back on the stiff, uncomfortable couch and thought that for once he was right. How she said she wanted him to spend time with her when she had already told him she didn't want to get married to him.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

He then left and slammed the large, heavy door behind him. She could not believe she had never noticed how cruel he could be until now.

It was the day of the wedding and she was still trying to figure out how this would all work out. After they got married she could arrange a very secretive divorce so that they would let their family and friends know when the time was right. She was getting her hair and makeup done and she heard a knock at the door. She hoped and prayed that it was anyone but Johnathan. She opened the door and it was Jonathan's mother, she came in and immediately gave her soon to be stepdaughter a hug.

"You look so beautiful! Aren't you so excited!"

"Yeah, I think I'm just getting a little nervous."

"Oh honey, just as long as you love him and you know that this is what you want you should not be nervous about anything."

She felt her whole body get numb and considered telling her soon to be step mom how she had really felt. That she had not felt any of those things and she was only getting married to him because she didn't realize before that it was a bad choice. And a part of her thought that if she left right then and ran as far as she could, it would ruin Jonathan and he would never forgive her.

"Actually I..."

"Oh I almost forgot."

She bent down and reached into the purse perched on a chair in the corner of the room, pulled out a box as big as her palm, and placed it into her hands. She opened the box to find a silver necklace with a heart locket laying in the box. She opened the locket and sees the engraved symbols J and R forever, aka Rachel and Johnathan forever.

"What do you think?"

She tried to hold in her emotions as much as she could.

"I..."

She paused for a moment trying to find the right words to come out of her mouth.

"I love it."

She seemed timid and unconvincing. She looked into her scared and almost in tears eyes.

"You are sure about all of this?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?"

She gave her one last hug before exiting the room. She could tell she knew something was wrong. Almost everything in her was telling her to run as far away that she can and never come back, but that small part of her was so convincing that she stayed. Her bridesmaids came in to her room shortly after, getting their hair and makeup done, and helping her get into the \$10,000, white Givenchy dress she had picked out. It was long and elegant and she felt like a princess wearing it. You could only see a small baby bump forming as they had to refit the dress after she found out she was pregnant. It was her dream wedding dress and she couldn't believe she was actually wearing it. That was the only part of the morning she enjoyed, she couldn't enjoy the rest because it was filled with people telling her how perfect her and Jonathan were for each other and asking how happy she was. When she was really just lying the whole time.

It was an hour before she would walk down the aisle and she had never felt more upset. It was all just an act to the outside world and she wished they could have just waited another year so they might have been able to work things out. But no, he had to propose. She could feel her hands shaking and her palms getting abnormally sweaty. Their wedding coordinator came into the room and told her it was time. She was an old, sweet, gray-haired woman that reminded her almost of her grandma.

"Come with me sweetie."

She picked up the part of the dress that touched the ground and walked behind the old woman. As they got to the right place she saw her dad standing there waiting for her. She had never felt this nervous in her life and felt like she was going to puke all over the floor like she had done before the engagement party.

"It's time." The wedding coordinator said.

The gigantic doors opened and she could see thousands of people standing there with huge grins on their faces and she could see her fiancé waiting for her.

"I can't do this." She yelled

She ran away in her expensive dress crying away all of her mascara as she took off her five inch black heels to run away from the nightmare that just occurred. It didn't seem real to her, she felt like she was one of those runaway brides in the movies, except, this was real life. She stopped after running for about an hour at a motel that looked like it hadn't been revamped since the 1980's.

"This will do."

When she got inside the only thing that she could smell was wet dogs and cheap cologne. But she then remembered that she had stashed a wad of cash in the secret pocket of her dress that would last her about a week. She walked up to the front desk.

"Rough night?"

"Yeah, can I just get a room."

She handed her a key and when she went up to the dirty, old hotel room she fell onto the bed and thought about what she would do, but she had no answer for her questions. She just closed her eyes and plummeted into a deep sleep.

Sydney Ball

The Getaway

The young flight attendant who looked as if she hadn't slept in a while escorted me to my seat 3b. Trying to hide her exhaustion, she offered to place my purse into the overhead storage. I spread my belongings on the seat beside me, which was vacant as I was told by the flight attendant. Eventually, the plane began to take off, speeding up as it covered more ground. The first class flight attendants came around for a second time offering us toiletry sets, blankets, and a hot towel. Throughout the duration of the flight, I was very pleased with the service, but was looking forward to being back on the ground.

"We will be making our decent into Edinburgh International Airport in approximately three minutes. Please fasten your seat belts and make sure your tray tables are clear and in an upright position. Please do not leave your seats until we are safely in the boarding zone. Thank you for flying British Airlines." The flight attendant announced in a monotone voice.

When the plane stopped, I wiped my eyes, and stretched my legs that had been numb from sitting in the same uncomfortable position for most of the 12 hour flight. I was still exhausted due to the fact that I had been sleeping in an almost upright position, but was awake enough to manage. I slowly made my way off the plane carrying only a carry on bag and my purse. I wasn't exactly sure where I was going, but I just went anyways. As I exited the outstretched jet bridge I remembered why I was here. I had just broken up with my boyfriend of two years and was not in a good state of mind, and had to get away to a place where I would not know anyone. For someone like me, traveling across the world for something other than work is not something you would typically catch me doing.

Ever since I was little I dreamed of being a famous actress. My parents were both known in the public eye, so I knew I would not have a problem accomplishing my goal. Throughout my childhood I was followed by paparazzi and was always given attention by fans of my parents.

"Cameron! How do you feel about being the daughter of Mark and Ruby Davis? How do you deal with all of the craziness?" Paparazzis often asked.

"Umm, It's great... I mean..." I would say back in an uncomfortable voice.

When I was little I didn't exactly understand what was going on. I didn't know why people approached me, and especially why they asked how I deal with all of the craziness. What craziness? Little did I know I would eventually find out what they meant.

Years have passed and I am now in my mid 20s. I am a successful actress and own a clothing line. Throughout the beginning of my career everything was going well, and I wasn't experiencing any drama, until my boyfriend and I's jobs started conflicting.

"Nick, I told you I'm working all day. I thought you said you would be home and would be able to take care of the dog." I exclaimed in a frustrated voice.

"You told me you would be home, I told my friends I would go out with them today." Nick responded with annoyance.

Over a couple of months the tension between us began to grow. Nick and I tried to work things out, but we could never seem to bring ourselves to agree. It just wasn't the same as it had been when we first met. With my career rising, it was just not the right time to be in a relationship. After many weeks of contemplation, I decided Nick and I had to break up. Despite the fact that nothing was working out it was still hard to do.

"Nick, I think we both know what needs to happen." I struggled to say through my tears.

"Yeah, I agree. We need a break." He said with disappointment.

We both decided that it was best for us to split up and go our own ways. Even though we did not get along most of the time, and our jobs were always conflicting, it was still a difficult decision. I could barely get through the day without thinking about him. I had already been seeing a therapist for a few months and thought it would be a good idea to talk to her about it.

"Cameron, maybe you should take some time off from work and go out of town for a little while." My therapist told me.

"Yeah, but what about work. I can't miss any or I will get behind." I said back. Finally,

I thought about what my therapist was trying to tell me and I knew I had to take time off and get away. It was not like me to listen to what other people had to say. I was the type to make all my decisions for myself. A week later I found myself standing in the bustling Edinburgh airport all by myself. Not to mention it was Christmas time when everybody's traveling. I stood there for a long time. I didn't know what I was doing or where to go.

"Ma'm, do you know where your going?" A voice said from behind.

The man cleared his throat and spoke again.

"Excuse me, miss, are you lost."

"Oh huh, yeah I'm trying to get to the rental cars." I said with a worried tone.

"Well, it's your lucky day! I'm heading right that way. You can tag along with me if you'd like." The man replied.

I went with the nice old man. He seemed harmless. I mean he could barely walk without his cane. We carefully walked through the terminals doing our best to stay out of peoples way. Eventually, we made it to the parking garage. We said our goodbyes and went on our

way. I rented a mid size Volkswagen, similar to one of my cars in Los Angeles. It was a little tricky to drive at first due to the fact that the steering wheel was on the right side, but I got the hang of it. For the next couple of weeks I was staying in a small cottage in a small town called Stirling. Before I came to Scotland I had never heard of it, but I was very glad I found out about it because it was beautiful. On the drive to the cottage I could see nothing but rolling green hills covered with sheep. It was more beautiful than I imagined.

Time had passed and I had eventually made it to the cottage. Surrounding the entire property was a worn down white picket fence. I unlocked it and made my way through. Greeting me at the front door was a kind lady with a heavy Scottish accent.

"Hello, I'm Olivia. You must be Cameron." She said welcomingly.

"Yes, I'm renting your cottage for a couple of weeks." I said back.

"What a beautiful place. The stone is very pretty." I said in awe.

"I had never seen anything like it. In Los Angeles the houses are beautiful but you don't see too many made of solid stone."

Olivia dropped the keys in my hands and headed off right away. I walked through the rooms observing the antique decorations. The wood floors creaked every step I took. This was different than my three story mansion on Sunset Boulevard, but it was cozy. When I arrived to the cottage it was already late and I was jet lagged so I decided to get a bite to eat then head to bed. I decided to walk to a cute little restaurant just down the street. As I was walking I noticed someone who looked in a daze. It was an old man with a cane who looked as if he got lost while going for a walk. I approached him and asked if he was okay.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you lost?" I asked in a concerned voice.

"Oh I was just taking a little stroll, I think I'll be fi..." The man paused.

"It's you. The guy from the airport!" I said surprised.

"Ha ha ha. You can call me James." He responded.

"Great to see you again! Would you like to join me for some dinner?" I asked.

"Well of course I will." Said James.

As James and I walked to dinner we made small talk. Turns out he was a movie director when he was my age, and had retired since. I told him why I was there and that I had just broken up with my boyfriend. We got along great despite the age gap. He was the most genuine friend I'd had yet, and we just met earlier that same day. Although I was terrified to go on a trip across the globe alone, James had made the transition much easier. After dinner James and I stayed at the restaurant for a good hour just talking. For the first time in weeks I wasn't thinking of Nick, and I was happy. Eventually we both went home. That night it happened again. As I laid in bed I felt lonely. No matter how much Nick and I did not get along, I still missed him, and I wondered if he missed me. Not that I really cared or anything. Not having anyone to talk to I laid there in silence until I fell asleep.

The next morning I woke up at about ten. This was unusual for me because as an actress I was used to waking up before the sun. It seemed like I had so much time on my hands. I didn't know what to do. Usually I am fishing around for an extra hour to finish my work or to read a book, but now I can do whatever I want. The night before James told me about the Stirling Bridge, which I "had" to visit, according to him. James told me The Stirling Bridge was where many battles were fought but the main one was the battle of Stirling Bridge. He told me that you can take a canoe ride under the arches, which sounded like a fun idea. I decided to head out and see if he would like to join me.

A few minutes later I arrived at his elegant stone cottage at the top of a green hill.

"James. Would you like to join me on my trip to the Stirling bridge? Maybe you can teach me some of the history on it." I exclaimed.

"I would love to. Just let me pack up my bag and I'll be out in a jiffy." He responded.

We went on our way until we made it to the Stirling bridge.

"So, tell me. Why are you here alone again. I'm sorry I just can't quite remember with this Alzheimer's." James asked politely.

"Well, not very interesting, but I'm here because I recently broke up with my boyfriend and thought that traveling to the most remote place I could think of would make me feel better." I replied hopelessly.

"Turns out it doesn't really."

"Oh your silly. If you think that a kindhearted girl like you lost your boyfriend. You are completely mistaken. He lost you, and if he isn't sad about it he's not worth your precious time." James replied confidently.

I had never heard something more inspiring. It seemed like James always knew what to say and when to say it. I was finally starting to feel like I could move on from Nick.

"Ring! Ring! Ring!" My phone rang in my back pocket.

"Ugh of course. It's Nick. What could he possibly want from me, I made it clear we're over." I explained to James.

"Just ignore it. What good will it do to answer it."

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"Uhh... okay." I strugglingly said

I struggled to decline Nicks call. The picture of us in Malibu on our one year anniversary popped up on my phone that I forgot to take off when we broke up. All of the flashbacks of our dates and our fun times we spent together kept coming back to me. But with the help of my new best friend James, I powered through. I avoided Nick and I had a fun day at the Stirling bridge. I felt like I could stay in that moment forever.

My trip to Scotland was sadly coming to an end. I was happy and sad all at the same time. I was thankful that I got to experience this eye opening trip, but was very sad because I knew that I would never be able to see James again. Throughout the end of my trip I often forgot why I even came here because of all of the beautiful things I got to experience. Over all of the landmarks, rolling hills, and sheep, the most important thing I got to experience was a change in myself. With all of the stress and pressure I put on myself, I had forgotten how to live. I forgot how to hang out with friends and family. All along I thought the most important thing was to make money and be a famous actress. But in the end, none of these things really mattered. It doesn't matter how rich or poor you are, as long as you live your life and are happy.

It was eventually my last day in Stirling. Throughout the whole trip I learned so much. After all these years, I finally realized who I was, and that I didn't need someone like Nick trying to change that. James agreed to drive me to the airport and drop my rental car off for me. I was a little unsure about that at first due to the fact that James is way past his driving years, but decided to live on the edge and just go for it. We pulled into the departures drop off and I began to tear up. I never realized how important it was to take time for yourself and not worry about work and everything else that is going on in your life. I cried because I finally found a friend who actually wanted to get to know me and not just use me to get famous. I struggled with the thought that I would never see him again. I got out of the little white Volkswagen and grabbed my luggage.

"Bye James. I am never going to forget you." I said with sincerity.

"Bye Cameron. Now you never forget everything I told you." He responded.

As I walked away I turned my head and nodded a quick thank you to James. He gave me a big smile and drove away. I continued into the busy airport preparing myself for all of the hectic lines and crazy security. I knew I didn't need to worry, that's just who I am. A busybody twenty year old, trying to figure out her life. And as far as I'm concerned I'm doing a pretty good job.

Madison Gray

Remember

I wake up and instantly feel the pain of an awful migraine. I look at the clock and realize that I'm almost going to be late for work. I jump out of my bed and rush into the bathroom to get ready. I look into the mirror and see that I have a bruise on the top of my head. I try to recall how I got that bruise but nothing came up so I pushed the thought to the back of my mind and rush to get ready. Once I'm dressed, I quickly grab my car keys to my rundown truck, and rush out of the door of my apartment building.

I had trouble getting to work today, I was having trouble with directions. It felt like I haven't driven there in months which is weird because I was just at work yesterday. Once I get to work, I dash into the building. I'm a writer for the most popular newspaper in the

state. I get into the room with all the cubicles and all my coworkers stare at me like I am a ghost.

"What do I have something on my face?" I ask, confused.

My best friend jumps out of her desk, runs up to me and hugs me as tightly as possible. I just stand there confused with my hands staying at my sides.

"Where were you? Are you okay? We were so worried about you. We thought you died," my best friend, Abby said, crying.

"Are you feeling okay? I was only a half an hour late to work. That doesn't mean I died, girl!" I giggle.

All my coworkers were still staring at me. Abby looks at me confused.

"Blake, you've been gone for over a month. The police couldn't find any evidence of your disappearance so they assumed that you were dead,"

I just stare at her like she is crazy. That can't be true. The last thing I remember is going to work yesterday and then going home and falling asleep. But what if it wasn't yesterday. How long has it been since the last day I remember. All of the thoughts swarming in my head cause me to get overwhelmed and I faint.

I open my eyes and see my boss standing over me looking concerned but also a tad bit angry. I sit up and see that I'm still on the floor and that a bunch of my coworkers have gathered around me. I rub the back of my head as I sit up.

"How long have I been out?" I mumble.

"Only about a minute," my boss, Derrick, says. "Come with me to my office."

He holds out his hand for me to help me get up then I grudgingly follow him to his office. All my coworkers continue to stare at me. Even through the big glass wall that separates us and the cubicles.

"Where were you, Blake?" Derrick says as he sits behind his desk. He looks at me expectantly.

"I don't know. I'm so confused. All I remember is going to work yesterday... or whatever day I went to work," I take a deep breath.

"Then the last thing I remember is going to sleep that night."

I start tearing up. "I don't know what's going on!"

"Okay. You should contact the police and maybe go to the doctor to check your head. You can have the week off to figure yourself out, but I will expect you to be back by next week."

"Okay, thank you." I say as I get up, still confused. I walk out of his office and everybody pretends that they weren't watching and immediately goes back to typing on their computers. Abby gets out of her desk and walks over to me.

"What did he say?"

"He said that I can take the week off to 'figure myself out," I sigh.

"I don't know what's going on. Where was I for a whole entire month? What happened? I wanna believe that you guys are pranking me, but I can tell you all are telling the truth."

"I wish I could tell you what happened. Stay at my house," she said, giving me her house keys. "Just in case your house isn't safe."

I nod. She hugs me again one last time. I walk out to my car and make an appointment with my doctor for later today. After that, I just sit there with my head in my hands trying to remember something. I looked at my phone and I realized that it's been about a month and half since I could remember anything. Nothing is making any sense.

Abby is the only person I have in my life. My parents died in a car crash when I was twelve. I met Abby at the adoption center. She made herself my best friend as soon as I got there and I couldn't be more grateful. Nobody wanted to adopt anybody older than five, they all wanted the cute little babies. So, Abby and I stayed there until we

were eighteen and got a place together when we moved out. She was the only one who was probably worried about me when I disappeared.

I go to the doctor. He tells me that there is nothing wrong with my head. The only thing wrong was the bruise.

"Are you sure? Is there anything else that may of caused my memory loss?" I ask.

"Not that I know of. I'm sorry. There's really nothing anyone could do. I would just recommend going on with your regular day life."

I say okay, not really meaning it. How could anybody just forget that you don't have any memory of the past month? I need to figure out what happened. As soon as I get into the car, I see an unfamiliar picture on the floor. I grab it and see a picture of me as about a 15 year old, with my mom and dad. My parents died when I was twelve, so this made absolutely no sense. On the back of the photograph, "REMEMBER" was written in sloppy, rushed looking letters. I try really hard to remember something, but I just end up more confused. Why did I have a picture of my parents from when I was fifteen? Are they still alive?

Instead of going to Abby's place, I go straight to my apartment from the hospital, deciding that it is probably safe enough. Once I get home, I go straight to my closet where I have a shoe box filled with old pictures. I look through the pictures and find a picture of

me a month before my parents apparent death, and I look way younger than I do in the picture that I found in my car. Even more confused than ever, I sit in front of my closet and look at the older picture of my parents and I. Suddenly, a memory flashes in my mind.

I remember waking up in a unfamiliar room and my mom coming into my room. In the flashback, I look in the mirror and see my current twenty year old self. Back in present time, I look back at the picture. I need to find out more about my parents.

I go back to my car and look around the area I found the picture in. I grab a gum wrapper planning on throwing it away, then I see something written on it. An address. I immediately go to my phone to plug my address in. An hour away. East. There's no towns in that direction for at least a couple of hours. This can't be right. I have to try at least or I'll spend my whole life wondering what would've happened if I went. I go back to my apartment, pack my bags and drive away in record time.

After an hour of driving, my phone tells me that my destination is on my left. Trees. That's all I saw. No destination. No road to any place. I decided to park my car on the side of the road and start walking the direction that my phone said to go. About twenty minutes later, I was ready to give up. Then, in the distance I saw a building. I started running as fast as I could. It was a motel. How was anybody supposed to get to it when it was surrounded by trees

and the only people are miles away? The door to the motel was wide open. It was a mess. There were papers and office supplies scattered across the floor. Tables and chairs have been flipped over. It looked like a there was a tornado in the building.

I entered the motel, stepping around all the junk on the floor carefully. I look around the main building. I couldn't find anything out of the ordinary so I went to look at the motel rooms. The first room I checked was unlocked but there was nothing in there. After looking through at least ten rooms, I find something in the last one. Unlike all the other rooms, this one was locked so I got a chair from one of the rooms and hit the window. Oddly, it took several tries to get through the window like someone really didn't want anyone to go into this room. Once I got into the room, I tried looking in the closet but it was locked. For some reason, I knew where the key to the closet was. I immediately go back to the front desk and find a set of keys in a drawer behind the desk. I went back to the room and struggled to find the right key, then finally I did.

When I opened the closet, there was another door. A metal one, with no key. Beside it was a touch screen. I tapped against it.

"Please place your hand on the screen." A robotic voice, commanded.

I squeezed my eyes shut and hesitantly placed my hand on the screen, hoping that it would work.

"Processing..." The robotic voice says. I nervously tap my foot on the ground. "Access: Granted. Welcome Blake Harding."

I jump up in excitement as the metal door slides open. The first thing that awaits me when the door opens is a elevator. I get into the elevator and look at the 5 buttons I instinctively click the button with the number five on it. When I get to level five the robotic voice states,

"Blake Harding. Arrived."

The elevator doors slide open and I am instantly greeted with the sight of my supposedly dead parents. For the second time today, I faint. When I wake up, I am in the unfamiliar room I saw in my flashback. My mother appears moments later. I sit up abruptly and stare at her confused. Then, I start bawling. My mother walk over to me and hugs me gently.

"Oh darling, you shouldn't of came back here. How did you remember how to get back? Did the serum not work? Did your memories come back?"

"What serum?" I ask, confused.

"I guess that answers my last two questions. But how did you remember how to get back?"

"I didn't. I guess I left myself clues to get back here." I say, showing her the gum wrapper and the picture of us that I had in my back pocket. "What is the serum you're talking about?"

"It's a memory loss serum. It wiped you memory of the past month that you had been staying here. It was what's best for you. But you can't take the serum twice, so you're stuck here. I'm sorry."

I sat there, more confused that I had been in my entire life. A memory loss serum existed. That's crazy. What was this place? Why was I forced to forget it? I take a second to gather my thought before I ask my mother,

"What is this place? And why are you here? Why did you and dad leave me?" I scowl at her.

"I'm so sorry honey. We didn't want to, believe me. This is a place for people like your dad and I. Everybody here has something in our bodies is contagious and can severely harm people in the outside world. It was happened during a failed experiment at the lab that your father and worked out at. We were trying to make the memory serum, that now have made, but this was a failed test. Someone made the serum a gas and it spread in the air, in the lab. Most people died from the gas. The people that survived live here away from others. We don't know how we are contagious, so for the time being we are to stay here, so we don't harm others."

"I still don't understand. Why am I not dead? Why did you have to erase my memory?"

"You are immune to it, like the rest of the survivors here. But since you didn't have direct contact with the gas, you are not contagious to people in the outside world. I erased your memory because I wanted you to be free of this place and the experiment we did was illegal, so they wouldn't let you leave unless we erased the memory of you being here."

I sigh and stare at my mother, still shocked that she is standing here in front of me. Despite all of this, I still love her. I embrace her and whisper,

"I miss you."

"I missed you too sweetheart. I'm sorry you're stuck here for a while. We will figure all of this out soon."

