The Island Fox



Literary Journal



Good morning, day, evening, or night,

Building this year's Island Fox Journal has been nothing short of awesome. Bearing witness to the diverse talent students and alumni contributed was a true gift, one that we are ecstatic to be revealing to you. Being absorbed into poetry, transported into short stories, and awestruck by visual art was what made this unique experience worthwhile because, after all, it was hard work! There is no taking away from the countless hours each team member put in to ensure this journal's success. The one mandatory meeting every Thursday was where updates were given, not where progress was accomplished. That happened during each free moment every other day of the week.

From the beginning, we had astronomical decisions to make. We had to agree on a theme! Our team knew we wanted to highlight CSU Channel Islands' main attraction: its natural beauty. Our incredible art team toyed with numerous ideas on how to capture the campus's essence and tie it into the Island Fox. They worked tirelessly day and night, just as the artists who shared their work did, just as our team did to make this publication happen. This made us realize the sun and moon are guaranteed to rise and fall with us everyday, so why not incorporate that consistent radiance into our version of this journal? We hope you too see a surreal reality that can be enhanced through angelic perspectives, such as seeing our serene campus through stained glass.

To all of the artists that submitted to the Island Fox, we express our deepest appreciation. Evaluating 200+ submissions was a grueling, yet extremely rewarding process that none of us took lightly. Thank you very much for sharing your vulnerability and imagination with us through writing and visual art; we thoroughly enjoyed every piece that was submitted. Whether your work was accepted or not, please never stop submitting to this publication because without you, we would be a dream that escapes the world during the quiet abyss of the night. Never stop creating something authentic to you and allowing it to see the full light of day.

The process of assembling a publication has been a demanding, engrossing, delightful, enlightening, fulfilling, bumpy, chthonic rollercoaster and we could not be more proud for you to view the final product. Please allow the Island Fox Journal to provide you with works of art that will elicit a range of emotions from sunrise to sunset.

With humble thanks,

Island Fox Journal 2025 Team





Introduction

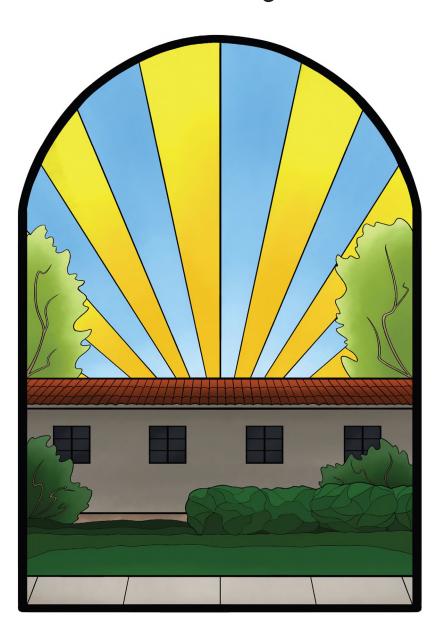
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Poetry



La Otra Hija



...the other woman...

...no—... (that's not right)

...the other daughter... (that's right)

...dressed in black... (never white)

forgotten— tormented—

dismissed— abandoned—

Was I not smart enough? Was I not dark enough? Was I not perfect enough? Was I not beautiful enough? Was I not good enough? Was I not normal enough? Was I not sane enough?

Did you push me away because I looked too much like her?

The woman with whom I shared her pale skin, black hair, and dark brown eyes.

The woman you once loved like an obsessed lover who was fucked in the head.

I stand in front of the mirror, and I see her:

eyes red from the years of crying alone—breaking herself further into madness—her body no longer a vessel of agency.

By the Gods, what did you do to her, father?

Whispers in a golden-lit room turn into small talks filled with venomous words:

"¿Quiến es esta mujer de negro?" "¿Oh? Esa es la otra hija de Vyctor."

...Other. That word again.

Silent. Still. I remind myself:

It's not my place to speak.

...The failed daughter from his first marriage. The daughter whom he spoke little of.

The daughter who didn't belong to his new life, evidenced by the many family portraits.

The daughter whose presence was never missed with each passing holiday...

(A vacant chair with an empty plate and untouched silverware—)

"Too bad she looks like her mother... She looks nothing like her father."

"She's too white to be his daughter."

Don't they see we share the same skin, father?

"Such a shame—her other sisters look more like him than she does."

"Like mother like daughter."

I tell you about the disembodied female voices. You hate confrontation too much.

Because you can never believe a word I say,

(they are the truthers, I am the liar)

As the narcissist you are, you begin with:

"They didn't say that..." "Anyways..." "Enough..."

"Stop it..." "Get over it..."

Were you ever there to listen?

A new darkness consumes me

wafting over me like a cloud of seedless dreams—fresh tears streaming down my face

Why... why couldn't you defend me?

as I peel back the warm olive-colored flesh,

I'M YOUR DAUGHTER!

until long streaks of blood hit the floor quietly.

... Don't we share the same blood, father?

The mad woman behind the mirror smiles sadistically

and laughs hysterically,

shattering the glass which both divides and unites us, eyes dancing with a new type of manic pleasure,

"Now you understand my pain with your father," she starts.

"For I am my father's other daughter as well."

Rejections



Did you have to exist?
Are you REALLY going to stay here?
Reminding ME of my constant FEAR of failure
You. Show. Up when I least want you,
Crushing ALL of my hopes
You keep me awake at night, robbing me of my dreams

Making me wonder,

What I have done. What have I done?

Am I wrong in life?

Jesus, what have I really achieved?
You make my stomach sink, bring tears down my rosy cheeks HOW—should I feel?
Nothing short of FAILURE, you made sure of that
You TAILORED me to the dark section...
... Of my mind
MY GOD... how I prayed.
All of these damned feelings away.
But no, they're amiss.
CAN I—be filled with oblivious bliss?

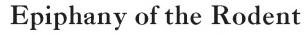
So I will stay,

In the corner of my mind Earthshakin' Heartbreakin'

LUNGS RIPPIN'

MY GOD,

Don't you just love rejection?





There's a rodent crawling in all our walls, it's infested itself with fleas and vice, buries itself fighting internal brawls, and gets its kicks killing the smaller mice

Everyone's selfish, trying to deny that we are the rodents lusting for feed We hoard, fight, drink and debase till we die, then, when caught in a trap, surprised we bleed

Best of us are cannibalized for sport, we eat each other's tails based on suspect, then wonder why we rats have no support when that old fat cat comes out to collect

One day this brutal, bloody race will cease, and us rats will lie dead: fur, blood, and grease markers of a world finally at peace



Between Two Worlds



Mataitusi Toilolo

I left an island where lanterns flickered against the dark, where a single pencil carried the weight of my future, where small was not just a place but a way of living The plane took off, and with it, the world I knew

Everything here was bigger, brighter, louder
Streets stretched endlessly, lights stayed on even when no one needed them
Voices rushed past me in a language I understood but couldn't yet hold
My brother walked like he had always belonged

I tried to keep up, but my steps felt uncertain Shoes stayed on inside, English first, always The words I once spoke so freely caught in my throat Still, I wanted to fit in, to belong

I laughed at jokes I didn't fully understand Copied the way they spoke, swallowed my voice Smiled when they asked where I was really from Explaining felt too heavy, so I let them wonder

Every day was something new, something different, something strange but exciting, a world I had to learn

I was becoming someone else, someone who knew how to adapt, someone who could pretend they weren't lost

Then one day, I tried to pray
Opened my mouth, and nothing came
The words I once knew like the marrow in my bones had faded
I had erased too much

I grieved what I lost before I even knew I was losing it
But loss is not the same as emptiness
What I thought was gone still lingers
In the way my mother calls my name, in the stories I still remember

I was not meant to stay small
I was meant to grow, to learn, to carry both the old and the new
I am not just from one place, I am not just one thing
I am all of it. I am still here.



First Gen Foreigner



David Lozano



I do not belong here On paper I fit right in But I know I do not belong here

I worry that one day they will figure me out
They will see that I am not smart enough
I am not studious enough
That I am not white enough

They will realize that I just got lucky and slipped through the cracks

They will kick me out, fill the cracks with cement, lather it with grout, and shun me for ever thinking I was one of them But I push on

The end of every semester is a breath of fresh air

Another semester undiscovered in this foreign country of academia

For a short time, I return to my native country

I am with my people, but they do not all accept me

To some, I am a hero

To others, I am a traitor

Those I am a hero to
I play the part
I act as if I am enriching my mind
I boast of my accolades
And remind them of my purpose:
To spread my fortunes in gratitude
To take them out of poverty
To be someone they're proud of
Be the fruit of their sacrifices

Those I am a traitor to I suppress my experiences

I try to show them I haven't changed That I don't think I am better I am still one of them

> I am still hood I can still kick it I am still down for my shit

The start of a new semester can be suffocating
It's time to pretend again
I remind myself how to act and talk like an academic
I remind myself who I am doing this for
But I am alone

I am alone in this country

Nobody I know knows the language and customs of this place

When I was preparing to come here

I knew no one at home could help me

But I thought I would be ready when I got here

I was wrong

I need help

I cannot ask for help
They might discover me
They will see that I am not smart enough
I am not studious enough
That I am not white enough
They will realize that the statistics are true
and send me back to my country
So I push on

I made it to the end
I walked the line with the academics
I am one of them
I have a piece of paper to prove it

The balloons and graduation caps in the sky
The cheers and claps in my ears
The tears and hugs from my mom

Why am I not happy? The struggle is gone, but I do not feel the achievement

I do not know who I am
The struggle became who I was
I was the student
I was the hero and the traitor
Now that is gone
I find myself alone again
I still can't ask for help
But I'll push on

The Sow



I saw her lying in a bed of spider lilies, so vibrant that they appeared to be glowing. Do you fear death, child? She asked in a voice so soft that if it weren't for the swaying of the stems and the cloud of warmth that left her gaping jaws, I would not have noticed.

Yes

I watched as she strained to move her massive body off the ground to face me, but she could not see. One eye milky with blindness. The other picked out by the common crow. Her snout, swollen and weeping, painted the grass a vibrant red. Sit with me and I'll show you the beauty of death.

Silence

On the third day, she took her last breath. Still, — unmoving. The warmth left her body and her limbs bloated. Still, — I waited. Even when her abdomen split open and the maggots feasted, I waited.

We sat together for many moons in silence. The seasons changed
white
green
orange

White again, — like her milky eye. Then it all melted away along with her soulless body.

Love In the Lift



Wheels hum steady on pavement. A pink bike, streamers bright—white and purple, training-wheels spin, learn to balance.

This is growing up.

Crisp morning air envelops them—father and daughter, their daily refrain.
They follow the same road, quiet streets, trees, and homes.

Until a sudden halt at the curb strip—too high to lift her pink bike, streamers bright—white and purple, training-wheels still spin.

But she doesn't need to.

With a love that covers, her father lifts them both.
Oh, the relief that settles her.

"I love you, Dad."

Trust in his embrace, the safety of love, the promise of his presence.

She pedals again, faster now, carrying the memory of his strength.

One day, she'll cross that curb alone. For now, she learns love isn't always words—sometimes, it's just a lift.

Fated



Our last day together,

I still remember

how much we both hated me.

My consequence

is your haunting memory.

If I look to my left,

we're still there in the car.

Orpheus, please, turn to me.

Am I supposed to just give up

now that you're gone?

I am flawed, broken machinery that may hurt others.

Forgive my design?

Take my hand?

I'd hoped to reignite the twin flame, but it's like

compressions on a corpse

The Dark Covenant



Long, have we waited
For a sunrise we can never see
A light we cannot touch
A luxury we cannot have
A love we cannot feel
A life we cannot live

Clever is the snake slithering like a lamb
Offering wealth
Gold made of dust from whence we came
Offering power
A mere facsimile of divinity
Offering a deal made of shadows
Written in the book of death

Strong is the blade that does not cut
We let it threaten our salvation
We let it into our nightmares, infect our dreams
We let it bleed our very souls

Dark is the covenant of the night We drink of wicked ambition We thirst forevermore We lust forevermore We satiate nevermore

Our poor unfortunate souls Born in the shadows Raised by death Bathed in blood A hallowed eternity lost

A hollow eternity found

Schiffbruchlied



It was April when I first met you:

early April, before winter broke and the world turned green again.

I raced out to the river that night,

dove headlong into the mud and cut myself on the brittle reeds to reach your side,

only for the tide to carry you away.

It was July when I returned to you—mid-July, when the long grass rippled like an emerald sea. You were faint, like the final desperate plume of smoke and steam that a flame exhales as it's doused with frigid water, but you were there, real as a ghost can be.

The water wreathed around your supine form.

Slow, sluggish, and so unlike your still-smoldering soul.

Tell me, did its cool embrace ever soothe your burns

or did it bring only more pain, choking you, filling your wounds with filth
until your skin became necrotic and your steel rusted away?

Your twisted bones lie shrouded in silt, draped in a thousand fly-by-wire shadows.

Tell me, does it hurt to watch them soar across the sea as you once did, and to know that all you once knew fell away like the earth beneath their wings as humanity climbed closer and closer to the sun?

I wonder if anyone else knows you're here, if anyone else ever comes by, sits with you, and listens to your stories. Perhaps it's only me who visits your grave, only me who knows the story of the bold, brilliant young star who was murdered and cut up and thrown in the Weser to be forgotten about.

I know I don't have what you want:

I can bring you no salve for your burns, no tidings from your sister. I cannot

exhume you, rebuild you, wind back the clock, do anything at all except reach for you through the smoky veil and sing my love across the water

and hope that it might somehow be enough.



Mis Huesos Aguantan



Emily Dorado

Mis huesos aguantan esas palabras no me sueltan se han pegado a mi como yeso

me miraste con puro desdén y me dijiste sin decir que mi nacer fue tu perder

aun pruebo las lágrimas que formaron junto de mi lunar como brisa del mar tú flotas sin notar este dolor que no puedo controlar

negada por mi propia creadora todo lo que quise fue para ti ser mi salvadora

Ahora sé que era demasiado pedir de alguien que no pudo encontrar por donde salir y sin deseo de ser parte de mi.

odio pensar en esta realidad y la cansancia que debes sentir, siempre dar dar dar por algo superficial

se que tu también lo odias a veces no se si me odias quiero darte un beso pero mis huesos aguantan este peso del yeso cementado me congelo, sin movimiento y no encuentro por donde salir.



¿Cuándo Será Suficiente?



Elizabeth Ayala

No hay escape Solo escupen Escupen "¡Fuera- lárguense, váyanse de aquí!"

Nada es suficiente Cuando se trata de nuestra gente "¡Limpien, pizquen, paguen, construye, y largo de aquí!" Manos cansadas Espaldas arqueadas Trabajando en malas condiciones Con humo en nuestros pulmones

Trabajando honradamente Sacrificando perdidamente Cuando será suficiente para que nos vean como gente digna de oportunidades Digna de ir a trabajar solo para mejorar nuestras comunidades

Y a pesar de las dificultades seguimos aquí por nuestras responsabilidades Con una hambre y sed de libertades, seguridades, y unidad Un sentido de pertenencia debido a quiénes somos: nuestra identidad

Lanterns



With glass panes and glowing eyes, we glare out at starry skies.

Keeping watch with fire and flame, we are the creeping shadows' bane.

Staring out with nary a moan, silent, still, and very alone.

We invite in evening's mists, take moonlight's hand, snag starlight's wrist.

Our hearts of fairy's flame do dance, to the sound of midnight's rhythmic chants.

We keep vigil with the moon, knowing the night will end too soon.

No cry is heard, no tears we shed, as the dawning sky turns orange and red.

So silently, we sigh as one, and sadly greet the rising sun.

With patience we wait, as the earth slowly spins, dreaming for days end and the night to begin.

Till finally the sun descends out of sight, and our flaming hearts burst with glee into light.

Corrió



"Mas vale decir que aqui corrio, que aqui quedo."

Así que voy a correr.

Voy a sostener mi corazón abierto.

Voy a estudiar.

Voy a alcanzar todos los sueños...

...que las mujeres antes de mi

no pudieron.

Voy a correr hasta que me canse

Voy a correr hasta que los talones de mis pies sangren Voy a correr sin parar.

Para que en un futuro,

NUNCA puedan decir que allí ella quedó,

Atascada sin alcanzar sus sueños

sin alcanzar sus metas.

Que no digan,

"Quedo atorada."

Por culpa de todas las penas de la vida...

Pero las penas valen la pena.

Voy a correr.

Que

los críticos

y mal dichos

los malos sueños

, mal queridos

> . los que NUNCA me apoyaron

JAMÁS me podrán alcanzar.

~ Aquí corrió y jamás se quedó.

Hold Fast



If I can't push restart,

do I have permission to die?

Those I've hurt.

The things I've done.

Am I redeemable?

In the depths of consequence, I still breathe.

This air,

am I worthy of it?

The line between martyr & rebirth—

I simply wish to amend & move on.

My past written in shame & disgust.

The future alone, but repentance in my palm.

I wish to still live.

A sinful plea from your just desertion.

I hurt you your soul.

That which cannot be changed.

But from this deplorable Sin

I will honor your memory.

I'll hold it tight,

like that night on the dance floor,

when I spun you a comet and a sun.

Out of orbit.

Goodbye.



An Astronaut's Journey



Naomi Walling

Dedicated to my childhood dog, I still sit on Saturn and think of you.

Ι

I have left Earth, and landed on the red, treacherous canyons of Valles Marineris. The cerise sand covers my toes—I spread my arms as an eagle soaring his wings. Mars once had suffocating water like Earth, but here I am free. His moon Phobos, flies around me over and over. One day, fifty million years from now, she'll crash into the withered sea; but right here I am free.

II

I had to leave Mars, the dust kept getting on my clothes. Jupiter has no solid, harsh ground, and I can float freely through the windy skies. Life is goodon the biggest planet, The Great Red Spot could swallow Earth whole if he wanted to. Day and night, day and night every ten hours. Earth is an insignificant dot from Jupiter, I lie awake being its furthest scrutator.

Ш

Venus—advertised as Earth's twin sister. The warm blanket of atmosphere The swaying trees in the green lands, I miss—So tenderly. Tears sizzle into the scorching greenhouse as my bones melt into metal; the heat of hatred strips me of everything.

I look to my right and see the Earth still spinning. My future burns in my hands, yet she's still grinning.

IV

The sun screams at me for 59 consecutive earth days. I scream back. Every problem is bigger on the smallest planet. There's no moon on Mercury to cower behind. On the smallest planet I can't run away from my past self. She can catch up, she chases me all around. In unison, my past, present, and future selves yell at each other—my own personal hell.

V

There are 28 moons to keep me company. It wasn't Mercury's fault, I keep telling myself. 28 moons and me spin in the opposite way, sitting in silence for the 2I year winter. Uranus ignores me, but he is quiet. Earth is very far from here, I can settlehere for home. Maybe I can learn to love this planet. Once I was an eagle, now I'm a mere dove.

VI

Many do not know Neptune has faint rings.

They're insignificant, and small, and useless compared to Saturn's. I weave myself in between the five faint rings and lie there.

All my memories are frozen in the planet's icy exoskeleton. Voyager 2 takes pictures of me.

I can't move or speak here—there's no reason to.

My space probe has left me, billions of miles away she flew.

VII

Saturn was busy, taking care of each of his moons. 146 moons flying repeatedly in orbit. "It's meaningless" I called out. Saturn tucks me in

his rings, "I will watch over you, while you travel home." he says.
"You must orbit Earth and upkeep human pattern."
I have to keep going, for I am a moon of Saturn.



My Chemical Captivation



Ayden R. Noland

My sweet serotonin and my one and only oxytocin
My sweet serotonin and my one and only oxytocin
Your eyes pierce like a needle, you are my drug of choice
Your eyes pierce like a needle, you are my drug of choice
You are my sweet, one and only needle, piercing my eyes
like a drug of serotonin and oxytocin: you're my choice

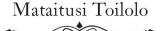
If love is blind, then my sweetheart, you have gouged out my eyes If love is blind, then my sweetheart, you have gouged out my eyes You taking my hand and holding tight, is my only dream, my dear dopamine You taking my hand and holding tight, is my only dream, my dear dopamine Dear, if love is you taking out my eyes, having and holding only my hand tightly,

then dopamine sweetheart: my dream is you gouging me blind

I never gave you roses love, the thorns prick, leaving truly nothing I never gave you roses love, the thorns prick, leaving truly nothing Poppies seem more proper for you, almost as bright as you, my opium Poppies seem more proper for you, almost as bright as you, my opium You, my rose, give poppy opium; leaving proper, never pricking thorns almost nothing seems as truly bright as you; for evermore, I love you

Dear, I'm truly out of choices. Take my hand, you are my one and only, and nothing seems as bright as your eyes. You're giving a gouging love Your eyes pierce my heart almost like the drug opium, leaving me dreaming my dopamine, my serotonin, my oxytocin: you have blinded me proper You are sweet rose thorns, and then never pricking poppy needles If only love were holding you tightly for evermore

Counting Silence



I have counted how many bottles my father has consumed in one sitting. Seven tonight, two still sweating, the others drained, their emptiness catching the light. He sits there, shoulders slumped, staring at something I can't see, or maybe nothing at all.

I try to imagine the world in his head
Is it quieter there? Softer?
Or does the liquor sharpen the edges
of everything he's trying to forget?
His hand shakes as he pours,
but the sound of the glass filling is steady,
as if the bottle knows its purpose better than he does.

I wonder if he notices me watching, counting, cataloging, as though numbers could explain the weight of his silence

Finally when the last bottle rolls on its side, it feels like a full stop, a punctuation marking the end of everything I couldn't say.



The Gods They Feared



Lilly Hartley-Pantoja

Six hundred years later,

the history books still have it all wrong.

There was no love,

only rape—

There was no peace,

only genocide-

There were no gifts,

only disease—

There were no promises,

only conquest-

They saw themselves as mighty

gods sent to save people who didn't

need saving.

They called themselves *conquistadors*, violent men with Western eyes and a lethal appetite.

They traveled across the vast ocean searching for riches and gold—only to paint the land they set foot on in a sea of crimson and steel.

We were only human
until we weren't.
They called us demons
because they didn't understand
we were only humans
just like them.

They destroyed what we knew—

by bombing and setting fire to

our cities, our libraries, our temples, our land.

Things we once knew,

they erased (not changed),

our history,

our culture,

our homes.

our identity.

They stole our children,

They stole our tongues,

They stole what they could,

They stole what they feared.

They saw this and deemed us uncivilized because we sacrificed our prisoners of war to Gods, they viewed with contempt— wretched beings with a barbaric hunger.

How did this make us any different from the ones who slaughtered the innocent in the holy name of a 'merciful' God whose mercy was a weapon of Western invasion?

But still, we remember— through the narrative they tried to erase

through the past, they called us a disgrace

through the voices, they thought they silenced.

We remembered the lives— before they laced our tongues with theirs

before they coated our skin in mixed blood before they replaced our many gods with one.

We remember— not because we must, but because we will.

Inevitable Change



I am all but willing to change in a world where change is the climax. In a reality where I should be like the sand in the ocean, never still, I am instead like a brick slathered and laid—cemented in a way so that I may never drift away or be swayed. In a place where I am subject to only the withering and tarnishing. Afflicted by outside forces. How pitiful is it that I am like this? to live an existence so stagnant.

Perhaps the time will come where after hundreds of years of snow, storms, and sunshine, my brick will turn to sand.

Inevitably then,

I will change, and I will be created again.



Bright Once Years Ago



Alexis Miron



I remember that time we caught the summer sun We ran up one day and snatched it out of the sky

The way only kids could
How it fit in our clasped hands
How the flames felt

Its wisps flickered and licked our fingers

How it danced without care, Its burn felt like forever because it was

We never did let go

Its blaze now settled in our eyes

My world revealed through unfiltered sunlight

At times now, I find it Unbearable

I look away towards

The shadows drawn by fate

Where I see you see now

Absence of fire you once had Truth can be found only under the light

Its bleak embrace blinding

But it's hope we saw in each other

Dreams we thought we'd never let go

Now left to smolder

Ash fixed to stale air

So I guard this memory of that summer

When we caught the sun

The way only kids could And how, over time.

It burned you alive



Funeral March In Yellow



Natalie Blakey

Yellow:

the color of joy, of electricity, of the sun as it crests the eastern mountains and thunders down the big red slopes on the other side, leaving a trail of brilliant fire in its tracks.

And the sun blazes,

racing across the dusty ground, the pink-stained stone, flinging up pale clouds that trace its rays as it roams from the valley to the soaring peaks, from the foothills to the scorching dunes beyond.

It stays its course,

driving across the endless desert, bold against the washed-out hills, camouflaged among the quivering aspen-leaves who see its brilliant color and welcome it as their own, and contrasted in the mountain lakes as a crow against pearl clouds.

But always the sun must set.

Every desert road runs into sand, every petroglyph fades into time, and so the very sky bleeds yellow as the bold electric lights begin to dim, and our weary star rolls onward to the western peaks.

The night doesn't rise alone,

for the mountains smell of diesel, painted gray like an old friend, and high above, the other stars sparkle white against a deep, distant sapphire sky.

Ready to welcome the sun into their ranks at last.

Yes, yellow:

the color of fading photographs, of dying leaves, of headlights painting dust-strewn rocks as an old beloved car sets a westward course, arcing away toward the horizon.

Frayed



tension is oft described as a slow boil water broiling, bubbling, bursting something simmering before it spills

but sometimes tension is just that something straining, stretching, taut that's what it was like for me

a slow boil can always be turned off the water cooling back down to normal if boiled again, it wouldn't boil any easier

but our tension wasn't a boil, it was just that everytime she came over, my rope would fray straining, stretching, straightening under her force

but strain builds over time, the rope weakening I suppose it could've been repaired refrain from further strain and mended

but she never would've done that that would require her to acknowledge it to accept she'd done any wrong at all

so my rope strained, cords slowly unravelling every hostile encounter adding more force to the pull 'till tension does what it always does

it breaks

our relationship is not irreparable but that rope was irreplaceable and something broken cannot be unbroken



The Rhythm Lingers Still



Giselle Gallardo

In the streets of Puerto Rico, where air is warm,
A boy would hear the bongos, their rhythm drawing him near.
With each beat, his spirit soared through the night,
In the heart of the island, everything is alive.

His mother's laugh danced through sunlit days, His sister's voice, a song floating on the breeze. Illness arrived without warning, swift and still, And one by one, they left echoes in his heart.

At five years old, he stood alone, lost in change. He packed his dreams, burdened by the storm, Leaving for New York, with hopes that clung to him, A heart still young, forever marked by loss.

Years passed quickly, city lights blinding, In crowded streets, he searched for a place— For family, for warmth, for someone to share— His soul cried out, unheard, amidst the noise.

Life moved forward, and love carved its path, Through the laughter and the quiet ache. He met a woman, her heart full of grace, Together they built a home, their own sanctuary.

Children arrived, their laughter spilling through each room. Grandchildren's feet moved to the rhythm of a bongo's beat. His home grew full, his heart stretched wide, And in the arms of love, he finally found peace.

Now at the end of his song, a melody rich with life, He recalls the memories—both joy and pain. From bongos in the street to the family that held him, His life had been one of enduring grace, full and vibrant. With hands on his chest, eyes close softly, In peace, without regrets, without sorrow. A life lived with heart, He had found everything he had always longed for.



Men of Many Materials



River Nagel

There I saw a wood-carved man

Standing tall upon a mountain range.

With an axe and shovel in his hands.

Divide this man, down his center.

Betwixt him into halves and count his many rings.

Know his age to be before those valley peaks did form.

Hard as oak, the shine of cherry wood, and the smell of cedar. Sawdust comes pouring off his masculine frame.

There are neither tears that fall from his eyes,

nor blood that flows in his veins

that would show this hardened man's pain.

There I saw a stone-cut man.

Knee deep in a flooding creek.

A rod and reel were in his grip.

A man with a baited hook and baited breath.

Ready to catch, ready to cook, ready to provide.

Never minding the constant flow or how it eroded his stature. Not caring about the storms that weather his granite frame.

Silence is all you will get from him.

His cracking lips will not part.

He will not confide about the turmoil in his limestone heart.

There I saw a steel-welded man.

Behind him lay the skeleton of a skyscraper.

Another masterpiece, for the grandeur of the city.

He breathes out factory smoke, like taking a drag from a cigarette.

He wields a torch in one hand and casts out rivets in the other.

He hoists the iron and furrows his brow.

His arms grow stiff, his back bends further and further.

His spine curves like a roundabout.

The sun beats down and his metal becomes molten.

Melting, melting, melting away.

The steel welded man is hard at work.

Mourning Star



I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit.

- Revelation 9:1

The descent tore the angel's wings Tattered remnants of his glory His windswept hair formed A tumble of auburn waves Dying stars illuminated the dawn A funeral in the sky

In his palms he found warmth A flickering flame Clinging desperately to life Soon snuffed out Like a candle by the breeze A star's death is swift

A tear is shed for the fallen Who will never return to the moonlit sky

Wretched Apples



My father is a sick man. I cannot forgive that man but I forgive the boy he once was.

I cry for him.

Only a boy who experiences the horrors of the world becomes a wretched man.

My grandfather was a wretched man.

I cannot forgive that man.

I hate him for what he did to the boy but I forgive the boy he once was.

Only a boy who experiences the horrors of the world becomes a wretched man.

I imagine both boys playing together on the streets

Laughing, Yelling, and Running.

Until they have to return home
where Laughs turn to muffled cries
Yelling follows punishment
and Running escapes their feet confined by the walls of their wretched
worlds.

My grandfather died alone on his bed.

He died thinking the world hated and abandoned him

I imagine the boy he once was lying there scared

waiting for the boy he played with to return.

His only peace.

Now my father will die alone.
I see his world abandoning him one by one.
He will die in his bed alone.
I imagine the boy he once was lying there scared waiting for the boy he played with to return.
His only peace.

I imagine myself as a child playing with the child my father once was on the playground.

Laughing, Yelling, and Running.

Until we have to return home.

I imagine the sad look on the boy's face.

Telling him that we will play another day.

Hugging him and going home

where my Laugh is greeted by a kiss from my mother.

She tirelessly runs the house alone but the

Yelling is only an announcement that dinner is ready

and Running is prohibited for my safety.

I tell her about the boy I played with.

She tells me to invite him over

But I tell her that his dad doesn't let him go to other people's houses.

I will die in a room filled with family and friends.My world will come to say goodbye to me.I will reminisce with the boys I used to play with.I will think of my father as the boy he once was and I will rest in peace.

Left Out in the Cold and Rain

Destiny Garcia

I find myself still looking for you
In every corner, every store, every notification, every shadow
A mother's love – once loud, now still.
A hollow ache I cannot fill.

Your laughter once filled the space, But now there's silence in its place. I sit in stillness, holding air, chasing shadows that just aren't there

Doors are closed, your voice erased, Yet every room still holds your place. I wait for knocks that never come, For arms that never brought me home.

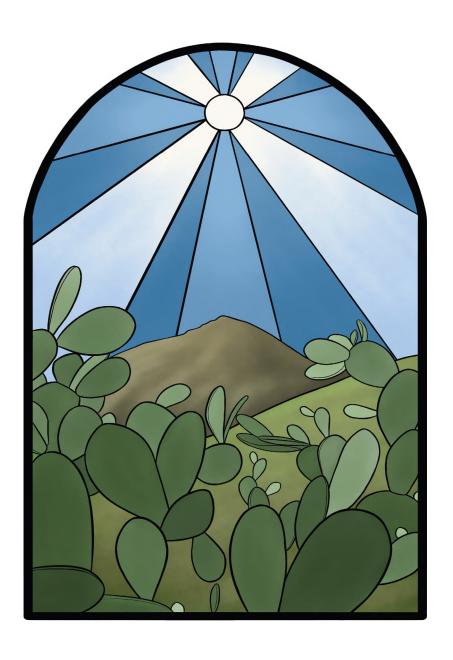
I miss the you I thought you'd be— That constant star I'd always see. But life taught me to stand alone, To stitch the wounds of love unknown.

As Silly as it seems, when everything is dark and wide I ache for you, but I'm still pushed aside.

And yet I still believe you'll find me, to mend the wounds that we cannot see

So, dispute the ache and pain,
I still love you through the cold and rain.
Even when you're not in view,
A part of me will always reach for you.

Short Stories







My eyes shoot open and I gasp for air. Awake. Where am I? Is this my bedroom? It looks like my room, but I don't remember going to bed. Actually, I don't remember much of anything at all.

The light behind my window curtain looks different, unnatural. I unwrap my blanket cocoon and open it. A concrete wall twice the height of my second story window stares back at me. Buzzing flood lights halfway up the wall illuminate a grass field for as far as I can see in either direction. Gone is the suburban neighborhood I've known most of my life.

I go to open the window, but it's just a single pane of glass. It's the kind of window you'd find in a storefront or a skyscraper, the kind of window that doesn't open. I look around the room. Everything is right where I left it: posters on the walls, books on the shelves, shirts hanging in the closet, Xbox and TV sitting on the dresser. But something's not right. The walls aren't quite the right color. The pinholes and spots of chipped paint from old posters are gone. The dent in my closet door is missing. There are no scuff marks on the doorframe. The doorknob is too shiny and too new. I try opening it, but it's locked. There's no way out.

I'm suddenly overcome by a wave of sleepiness. My head hits the pillow and my consciousness falls back into a void.

Awake again, in the same imitation of my room. How long has it been? I have no idea. Longer than just a nap, I'm sure. Something in my head tells me it's been years, maybe decades. My body feels older.

The room looks the same as it did before, but now it's messy. Dirty work uniforms and blue jeans are strewn everywhere. The top of my dresser is covered in pizza boxes and fast-food wrappers. The TV is on, but it's cracked. There's a menu screen from a video game I don't recognize. Are you sure you want to quit?

The door's still locked. I need to think, but why is my mind so sluggish right now? I go back to bed, but before I lie down, I notice some dusty old photos. There's one of me smiling with my parents on Christmas morning, another of my dog playing on the beach, and a third one of me celebrating the city championship with my old soccer team. I close my eyes and bask in the memories.

When I open my eyes again all the photos are gone, replaced with my old soccer trophy. I didn't know I had this anymore. It's plastic, but meant to look like gold from far away. A hidden chunk of metal in the base gives it the weight of the real thing.

I look back out at the concrete wall and I'm tired. I'm tired of not knowing where I am. I'm tired of wondering what I'm supposed to do. I'm tired of this room. I'm tired of feeling helpless. I heft the trophy in my hands and take a slow, meditative breath. Then, I throw the trophy as hard as I can. Glass shatters, cold air rushes in.

The fluorescent lights buzz louder through the now broken window. I'm invited closer by the smell of fresh cut grass. Clean air fills my lungs for the first time in I don't know how long. Floodlights reflect from broken glass. I climb out onto the roof and inch my way to the edge. It's not that high. I can jump. I can escape.

I land next to the fallen trophy. Pain. My eyes water and my ankle screams while I writhe in the grass. Deep breaths. Stay calm. I take a moment to collect myself. Gingerly, I stand and test my ankle. It aches, but I don't think it's broken.

I limp towards the wall. The grass is soft and dewy beneath my bare feet. The flood lights expose everything to their white light. There are no shadows here. On either side of me, the wall and the field stretch out to infinity, illuminated in uniform white.

This place feels familiar. I don't recognize it, but I can't shake the feeling that I know this place. Every painful step forward feels like a step I've already taken before.

There's an opening in the wall ahead of me. Ornate Corinthian pillars are carved into the wall on both sides. Above, there's a carving of a snake head bearing fangs. Without looking back, I step inside.

A narrow tunnel reaches back only a few feet before plunging into total darkness. I can't see anything after a few steps forward. It's quiet in here. All I can hear is the steady sound of my own breathing. I'm more aware of the smell of grass outside with my vision gone.

My ankle complains with each step. I lean on the wall to take some of the weight off. The freezing stone floor of the tunnel makes my toes go numb. I pick up my pace. I don't know where this tunnel is leading me, but I'm ready to get away from where I know I don't belong.

I take another blind step, but this time there is no floor to catch my foot. Gravity seizes me and pulls me hurtling down in the darkness. Instinctively, I reach out with my hands to break my fall. I take stock of myself. My

hands are a little scraped up and I think I feel a little blood on both of my knees, but I'm still in decent shape despite my ankle, good enough to keep moving. It takes me a minute to realize what just happened. Stairs. There are only three or four of them. I'm lucky that was all.

I feel around in the dark to get my bearings back. There are walls to my left and right, nowhere to go but forward. Carefully this time, I take another step. More stairs. This time I'm ready for them. With steady breathing and my hand against the wall, I start the descent. This staircase is longer than the first. I count nineteen steps before I reach the bottom.

I stop for a moment to collect my thoughts in the dark. My ankle hurts. There's nothing stopping me from turning back, but deep down I know I can't. I don't know if this is a way out, a way to get my life back, but I have to try.

I limp forward down the tunnel. The smell down here is a mixture of water on concrete and human waste. The floor is wet. The sound of my breathing is interrupted every time my feet slap the watery floor. The tunnel walls are different down here. While they were made of smooth concrete up above, down here the walls are made of sharp-edged bricks. I still can't see, but I imagine this part of the tunnel is older than up above. My hand finds pockmarks in every brick, worn down by time.

I count the bricks as my hand passes over each one: 1, 2, 3, 4 \dots 148, 149, 150 \dots

The water on the floor is getting deeper.

. . . 2533, 2534, 2535 . . .

The smell of waste is getting stronger.

. . . 4444, 4445, 4446 . . .

I think I can hear the ocean.

. . . 6719, 6720, 6721.

The brick wall ends. In its place is what feels like a row of vertical metal bars. I stop and rest my ankle; it's easier to support myself with a metal bar than with a brick wall. The smell down here is sickening; I hesitate to breathe. My eyes are closed, but what difference does that make in complete darkness? I can definitely hear waves crashing at the end of the tunnel now.

I keep moving forward, my hand going from bar to bar, supporting my ankle. At the fourth vertical bar, my hand touches something warm. I drag my fingers over it in the darkness, unsure of what it is. It almost feels like someone's—

"Hello there."

I gasp and my hand recoils.

A hollow chuckle. "No need to be scared," the voice reverberates through the darkness.

I stammer. "I-"

"Why are you here?" It's the voice of someone who's had time to think. Each word is spoken slowly and deliberately.

"I- I don't know."

A cough. "Figures. I was a lot like you once: lost and wandering, searching but never finding. But that was a long time ago. It's funny, after all these years, I don't even remember what I was even looking for." More coughing. "It's been a lifetime since I've seen the sun."

I feel like I recognize this voice from somewhere. "There's still hope. Maybe I can help you escape."

The coughing fit settles down. "No, escape while you're still able. I'm condemned to live my life and die down here. There is no way out for a person like me."

"But why?"

A long, solemn exhale. "I stopped moving forward." As if that were an answer to my question.

The sound of rushing water fills the tunnel.

More chuckling. "Good luck out there, kid."

"Out where? What do you mean—"

The only response is a deep breath.

A wall of water hits me. My body ragdolls down the tunnel. There's no way to know which way is up in the dark. The current is moving too fast. I can't swim, even if I knew which way to go. Instinct tells me not to panic. To panic is to die, but my burning lungs tell me I don't have much time.

The first thing I feel is the warm sand on my back and the sun on my face. Nothing hurts anymore. A seagull squawks nearby. I sit up and open my eyes. Laughing children play frisbee in the distance. A woman in a wide brim hat sunbathes with a book. Surfers offshore wait for the next set. A golden retriever approaches and licks my face and I laugh.

"Rufus, get over here!" The dog gallops back to his owner's side. "Sorry about that!"

I savor the ocean air like it's candy and lie back down in the sand. When was the last time I've seen the sky so clear and blue?

The No Man Band



Town Square was the prime spot for entertainers. It was the midpoint between the Frumps and the Flooents; where street performers could be dirty, but if they were talented, a few slivers of livelihood would be chucked their way. Many competed for turf and some have had claims for decades. The corner southeast of the square had the least amount of booming businesses, which made it the perfect spot for a one man band to set up camp. Everyday the one man band entered Town Square with nothing except his sheet music. His banjo, harmonica, and bass drum always stayed tucked in the southeast corner, only disturbed by the tarp that lay over them in the one man band's absence. No one ever touched the unguarded instruments or even posed a threat. Everyone who passed through Town Square shared a respect for the peace that was unanimously maintained.

The threshold for the citizens' mutual tolerance was disrupted once they passed through either tunnel. The east tunnel led to the Flooents, a dream land that could only be fantasized, not lived. It was said that the mile walk turned into an adventure that you wish lasted a lifetime. There, the oxygen molecules in the air cleansed your entire body and you became light as a feather, floating through the 5280 feet of irresistible sensations. Breathtaking light hit your retinas and warmed your skin, fresh air seeped into your nostrils, the anticipation of an indulgent feast called to your taste buds, and sweet serenities filled your eardrums. Everything superseded perfection.

Across the way, the west tunnel held a more strenuous atmosphere. Copious amounts of nothing-good consumed a walker as they trudged through the desolate fog of unworthiness. Fog so thick and wet it could be sliced off with a butter knife and slathered onto moldy toast coated the tunnel about a quarter mile in. Skin was either burning or freezing off. Vomiting was a common reaction to the stench that spread throughout. If everything did not feel dead enough, it sure looked like it. The only taste was the bile that came up or threatened to come up. The stillness of the air made those who passed by feel completely isolated in time. They could have been running 50 miles an hour and felt like they had not moved an inch. Some walkers would not make it back to their home until sunrise the next day; they oftentimes turned around to make the trek back to the semblance of peace. I'm not sure what they do now, if they even know what has happened.

Town Square must be vacated 30 minutes after sundown. Three gongs are administered across the entire town as warnings to begin restitution. The first gong signals sundown every evening. The second gong is a 10 minute notice to all parties: be in your respective tunnels before sundown, or face spending your last night in the square. The last gong marks the finality of the evening. Either you are in your section of town, you are in the tunnels, or you are in the square, all of which could be fatal. I would think that remains the same, even now.

The two towns, although vastly different, can both cause turmoil in an occupant's life. The Flooents have contrived a painstakingly perfect life for the residents living there. All of the unnatural resources limit the capacity for categorical inadequacy. The "food" is always in abundance and the enhanced vocal cords and lung capacity make for an endless loop of artificial chortling. Do not dare question the level of entertainment that roams the tulip covered cul-de-sacs. Each performer is hand picked by the town in a democratic fashion, whoever is the best beggar gains a spot in the lineup.

The Frumps, as one can surmise, are much less... put together. Everything is exactly as it seems, nauseatingly authentic. The carbon-rid-dled air and raw, unaltered food serve as a cruel, grounded reality. Dancing, singing, juggling, miming, whistling, trusting, and believing are all acts that stay with the instruments and smiles left unbothered in Town Square. Although, capturing true beauty is not a complete pipe dream. At least the squatters of the Frumps know what real horror consists of, therefore leaving room for the possibility of conjuring up real beauty. A concept that could only be imperfectly replicated by the Flooents' residents.

Town Square sits between the dampness of the Frumps and the radiantness of the Flooents; it thrives as the mundane. Colors are present, but not too terribly bright. Reds are seen in the bricks of buildings, blue hues line the sky, but never change. There was no presence or lack of pleasant sights to be seen. Everything just existed and functioned at an appropriate level as to not be above or below adequate. There was no potential for growth or decline in the quality of aesthetic or services provided.

There is one shop where every person frequents, no matter which tunnel they enter and exit. Sine Qua Non holds every essential for every living person. I do not simply reference food, water, clothing, or shampoo as everyone has different needs. What is crucial for one may not even cross the mind of another. A starving child may need just one piece of bread, so that is what they shall receive. A flamboyant host may be in dire demand of the perfect centerpiece for their party. All singular physical necessities can

be found at Sine Qua Non, but that does not mean anyone has what they so desperately require.

Town Square is where choice is given to all inhabitants. After the tunnels close, occupiers are given an unwavering judgment. There is no pain, neither is there peace. There is only the absence of any life that could be lived. All possibilities and paths are taken away. The long game is cut short. Some mothers find this to be best for their ultimately doomed children, whereas others never allow them to step foot in the square, in fear of the unfavorable choice being made. Switching livelihoods from one town to the next is not entirely paradoxical. More have been known to cross over to the west tunnel rather than making the desirable journey to the east, but it has been known to happen.

For instance, I made that mile-long hike.

I believed my time was up. That my hearing would never fully go out and for the rest of my chosen life, I would hear the screams that haunt the west tunnel. That the hairs in my nose would never fully be singed off by the potent smell that hides in the ravenous fog. That my feet would refuse to lift my body from my stool and carry my soul through the crushing passage one final time, and I would drift away in the southeast corner of Town Square.

Just as I felt my choice becoming limited to staying in the Town Square, a woman approached me. Her eccentric attire matched that of the east, but the pain in her eyes was flooded with experience that could only come from the west. She dropped a few golden tokens on the floor and lingered in her hunched position, eyeing the instruments in my fingerless-gloved hands.

"Are you traveling well?" Her question was in reference to my tattered shoes that had become rather useless as the soles were almost gone, just as mine was fading out as well.

"Would you like a different pair of shoes? Ones that take the gravity off of your joints, and your soul?" Her next question lingered in the air while I assessed the genuineness of her offer.

"Why yes, I really would." This was my chance. A chance I thought was no longer in the cards for me.

"Good. Be ready before the first gong with your instruments. All other belongings are not necessary." She nodded at me in assurance.

"But wait, these instruments were made by my own hands in the very place where the sound of havoc coddled me to sleep. There is no place where you reside for the sounds that come from these pieces of wood, leather, metal, and string. I do not have any belongings I want nor need, so I'm

sure you have better instruments in the Flooents."

"I understand and I am making my request pointedly. Please pack accordingly." She turned and walked away through Town Square.

As I gathered my instruments that evening, I received many goodbyes and well wishes from those who have made themselves available to me. My audience, from both the east and the west, had always been generous and loyal. Nothing I could say I deserved more than the knockabout clowns a few yards from me, yet they chose me. The first gong rang as I said my final goodbye. I did not waste any time entering into my new chance.

Entering into the Flooents tunnel was indescribable.

Some of the eastbound enjoyers of my work walked with me through the tunnel. They all encouraged me when I hesitated taking my first step across the path. I feared I was dreaming, or perhaps mistaken and that my entrance was not warranted. That I would begin to drift away and disappear before I had a chance to take in the new sensations. Fortunately, this was not the case. My access was granted and I felt an immediate change of body. My muscles untightened, back straightened, my feet took full steps as opposed to mindful shuffles. My mind remained the same, but I could feel gratitude sink into each ridge of my brain. I would live and I would live well. As I passed through the halfway mark of the tunnel, I could faintly hear the second gong. Ten minutes of my life had gone by and each one made taking another breath more exciting. The weight of my instruments began to be too much for me to handle. My bag falling off my shoulder alarmed some of the other travelers, triggering an abundance of assistance that came to my aid. Not one of them could even lift the bag, let alone carry it the rest of the way, so I insisted I could handle it, and I could.

The magical atmosphere was overwhelming. The pure oxygen stung my lungs and the clean water irritated my stomach. I could not afford to complain, so I held my breath and charged forward. Soon as my eyes adjusted to the foreign luminescents coming from the sky. Was this the Sun? Brightness was not my only clue, as the air enveloped me in a warm and inviting hug. The entire atmosphere felt like the most robust, gimmering spider web, begging for me to be caught in its beauty for the rest of my short life. I looked up to find the sky filled with colorful clouds, some pastel, some as vibrant as Sine Qua Non's neon open sign. The contrast of soft colors and temperature with striking light and images had me busy minded until the end of the tunnel. I still question whether that was truly a mile or less.

Entering the Flooents itself was no less incredible than the journey

to it. There were hundreds of golden statues everywhere, each of a different person. The clouds had lowered to where you could just tickle them with the tip of your fingernails if your arm was fully extended into the air. However, all of the wonderfulness is overshadowed by the fountain. It was simply pulchritudinous.

The woman met me at this fountain, which consisted of what I can only assume to be water, but it had a tinge of gold to it and it reflected rainbows around the entire basin. The light reflected from the water, creating a hypnotic glare that captured my entire focus until the woman cleared her throat. I do not pull my attention fully away from the sensational, glistening liquid, keeping one eye on each ripple that cascades down. With my other eye I see the woman. The pain in her eyes was gone? She told me I could set up my instruments anywhere near the fountain and begin to play. I was expecting a night's sleep or at least a meal before being put to work, but alas making demands was not my right.

I bent down to grab my bag from the place on the pearly white floor where I had placed it, but at the same time she bent down to pick it up for me. Her hand reached the handle before mine and she began to lift it. It appeared strenuous, but she indeed lifted it. Our eyes met and the pain glossed over her irises for a split second. She dropped the bag and shot up straight. She turned her feet to walk away, but remained facing me, "I will be back, please have your set ready when I return." I nodded quickly in compliance.

There was not a soul around the fountain. My instruments were set up in the same formation I had in Town Square. I stood where my stool usually sat. I would normally be opposed to standing, but it did not hurt here. I was able to extend each ligament without a scorching pain sent throughout my entire body. So, I decided to stand for this performance and worry about potential seating another day. The woman returned with a framed picture of a family and delicately took a seat on the edge of the fountain.

She inhaled deeply, closing her eyes to feel her lungs fully expand before exhaling gracefully. She looked at me with light in her eyes. No pain, no uncertainty. Just bliss.

"Please, whenever you are ready, so am I. You *must* play until the only thing you can hear is the sweet sound of your own music. Do you understand?"

"Yes I do, but there is no one and nothing else around here, what else would I be hearing?"

"You will hear everything, but it is imperative you keep playing." "I understand." I did not.

I assumed my position just as I had thousands of times before. My foot hovered over the pedal of the bass as my hands caressed the handle of the banjo. My fingers fluttered over its strings, itching to strum them. My harmonica balanced in front of my face as my lips eagerly waited to tickle the comb. All at once, I played each instrument.

The first thing to change was the air. Each sound wave I put out riddled the oxygen atoms with unbearable distress. The air that was just stinging my lungs, now felt overwhelmingly like home. My breath temporarily hitched while I adjusted to the new/old sensation. The next thing I noticed was more difficult to ignore. Screaming began from across the Flooents and I quickly stopped playing to listen closer.

"DO NOT STOP PLAYING!" Her voice bellowed from the fountain and startled me into continuing.

The screaming accelerated and I frantically looked at the woman. There she sat, completely at ease, staring at the picture in her hand, stroking the frame and grazing the people photographed. The high pitched yelps started to project from all corners of the Flooents, far past where my eyes could see. I could not take the uncertainty of what was happening, so I halted my song.

"WHY IS EVERYONE SCREAMING?" I shout over the sounds of terror.

"WHY DID YOU STOP? I SAID KEEP GOING!" The pain in her eyes is glimmering again.

"IS EVERYONE OKAY? AM I DOING THIS?"

"NO..." she trails off and clutches the picture tight, "WE ARE. NOW PLAY UNTIL WE BOTH DROP AND DO NOT STOP AGAIN OR I WILL ENSURE YOU ARE SENT BACK TO THE FRUMPS!!" Her command entered my ears and was processed in my brain. The screams slowly died down and I realized I was causing this. However, I cannot go back...

I blew as hard as I could into the harmonica and beat my hands against the banjo. My foot pumped the bass pedal so hard I would not have been surprised if the stick broke the skin.

The blood curdling screams intensified.

In the far distance I see a whimsical gigantic cottage bleed. Blood leaks through the two front windows like the tears of the damned. In that instant, bodies fall out of those windows and land on the floor. I can hear the absence of their cries amongst the collective wailing of the rest of the

town. Each death makes the screams less abundant, but no less intense and noisy.

I shut my eyes to block out the sound. They opened when I heard the screams get too close. Close enough that I knew, it was the woman. My eyelids widened at the sight in front of me. Blood trickled from her ears as she howled. She fell off the edge of the fountain and the picture went with her, shattering as it hit the floor. She clawed at the broken glass to grab the picture inside the frame. Her bloody hands squeezed it as she cried so loud I could no longer hear myself play.

It was a while before all I heard was my music. I am not sure when the agony ended and when I just stopped hearing it. I let the banjo hang on my shoulder and my body rest as I surveyed the area. There was no life left in the Flooents aside from what little I had trembling inside me.

Now, I have stood here for a long while, basking in the sound of nothing. Making sure it stayed nothing.

I never intended this. I was content drifting out of existence in my comfortable corner, passing down my instruments to whoever feels a connection to my creations. I did not want to hurt anyone, to wreck the Flooents. But now that I think back to entering the east tunnel... I would do it again. I am indebted to that woman that brought me over. She asked me to do this, how could I say no? I cannot absolve myself of responsibility, but I can carry out her dying wish. I do not let up on the harmonica, my lips cracking and my throat raw, in need of crisp water. My fingers drip blood behind the strings and down the front of the banjo. My calf cramps from the insistent pounding of my foot on the bass pedal. My body strains to keep up with the music, but I do not stop. I keep blowing and strumming and stomping until my body drops. I finally have the feeling wash over me that I had been craving for years. Absolute nothing.



Early August—at the end of the season, when the last traces of summer linger in the air. The weather is warm and cool, a reminder of the change in the air. On the surface, it seemed like a typical transition from one season to the next, but there was an unspoken sense that something more was shifting. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I felt it deep down—change was coming. I thought maybe it had to do with a new chapter for my youngest daughter, Cora. This year, she was finally starting sixth grade. No longer the "baby" of the family, no longer in elementary school. She was growing up. Maybe that's what felt different—seeing the last of my little ones step into a new phase of life.

Then there was Kylie. My middle daughter, now about to start eighth grade—only one more year before she's off to high school. I still couldn't wrap my head around the idea that she was going to be a freshman soon. Time has a way of sneaking up on you. Then Kathleen, my oldest. Just a few months ago, she made the big move to Texas for her job as a flight attendant. It was a huge change for her and, honestly, for me too. Watching her go off on her own, spreading her wings, felt bittersweet. Finally, Carter—my son—well, he was doing his own thing too. All I really had to focus on in the household now was myself, my husband, and my two youngest daughters. That realization felt strange—almost unsettling. Our home had always been so full of movement. Now, it was quieter. It should have felt like a relief, yet there was an odd sense of unease, as if something in the world around me wasn't quite right.

A month had passed, and my two youngest daughters began settling into middle school. Their routines were becoming familiar, their days filled with new friends, new subjects, and the process of growing up. On the surface, things seemed fine, but I could sense something different in my husband. Juan had always worked long hours; his job as a flooring installer took him on business trips, sometimes for big corporations, sometimes for small family-owned businesses. It was tough, but it was what he did. Work was work. He did what he needed to do to make ends meet. Yet, something about him had shifted. He was quieter, more distant in a way I couldn't quite pinpoint. Maybe it was just exhaustion.

The days were growing colder, the holidays creeping closer, and life carried on as it always did. My husband, Juan, started to complain more frequently about not feeling well. At first, it seemed minor. He would men-

tion feeling a little nauseous—an occasional stomach ache or an odd discomfort on the left side of his abdomen.

"It's just something I ate," he would say, brushing it off with a forced smile. He insisted it was probably the food one of the guys at work got for him during lunch. Maybe something didn't sit right. That made sense. Food poisoning? An upset stomach? Nothing too serious, I tried to convince myself. But the discomfort didn't go away. Days passed and he still felt the same—tired, uneasy, holding his stomach as if something inside was gnawing at him. So we adjusted his diet. For a little while, it seemed like there was a slight improvement, a momentary relief. But then, the pain would return. I grew more concerned. Something wasn't right. This wasn't just a bad meal or a stomach bug. Every time I asked him to see a doctor, he waved me off. "I'll be fine," he would mutter. But I knew him too well. He wasn't fine. Deep down, I knew why Juan had always been uneasy about doctors. His father had spent time in the hospital when Juan was just a boy, and he never came home. He had passed away in a place that was supposed to make people better. I think that loss left a fear that if he ever stepped foot in a doctor's office, he might hear something he wasn't ready to face. But I kept telling myself it had to be something simple. A stomach flu, an ulcer, maybe just stress.

Time blurred together as he lay there, wincing every now and then about the pain in his stomach. He barely moved, barely spoke. And worst of all, he didn't even go to work. That was unheard of for Juan. He had always been the type to push through anything—fevers, exhaustion, even injuries. No matter how bad he felt, he showed up. He wasn't getting better. The pain, which he had first described as discomfort, now seemed unbearable. He held his left side constantly, and then there was the weight loss. Juan had always been tall and lean, never someone who carried much extra weight to begin with. But this was different. He was shrinking before my eyes. His clothes hung looser, his face looked pale, and his skin-once warm, was cold. He was unrecognizable. He barely ate. Even with the diet changes, trying to help him take a few bites of something—nothing. And yet, he still refused to see a doctor. Even the girls were pushing him to go to the doctor. They could see it too, no matter how much he tried to hide it. I remember the moment Cora came up to me. She had just seen her dad lying in bed, looking weaker than she'd ever seen him before. She asked, "What's wrong with Daddy?"

"He's just not feeling well, sweetheart. But everything's going to be okay. He'll get better soon. We just need to take care of him." She nodded.

She was still so young, just II years old. Despite her worry, she kept her bright spirit. I watched her head off toward the fridge, going through it to grab whatever she could find for her dad. A bottle of water, an energy drink, a snack—anything she thought might help. She would quietly place them near his bed and then sit beside him, talking his ear off about her day, about school, about whatever was on her mind. And Juan—despite the pain I knew he was in—never let it show in front of her. He would nod, listen, and give her small smiles, as if everything were fine. I wasn't a doctor and I didn't know exactly what it was, but my gut told me this wasn't normal. Something was happening inside him, something serious, something we couldn't ignore much longer. As I watched him grow weaker, looking less like himself with each passing day, I realized that fear could no longer be an excuse. He needed help.

Beginning of December. Everything truly began to change. It happened slowly at first. After weeks of pushing, pleading, and nearly begging, Juan finally agreed to go to the emergency room. I should have felt relieved but I couldn't shake the sense that we were about to hear something we weren't ready for. I remember sitting in the white-walls of the waiting room, my leg bouncing anxiously as we waited to be called back. It felt surreal, like I was watching everything happen from outside my own body. When they finally took him in, the doctors ran their tests, checking vitals and drawing blood. Hours passed, then came the first answer—something was wrong. But they didn't know what. The doctor looked at me with an expression, his words were uncertain. Juan's blood levels were dangerously low. There was something inside him, something going wrong in his organs. That terrified me. How could they not know? How could trained professionals-people who had studied medicine for years—stand in front of me and tell me that they didn't have a clear answer? I wanted them to say it was something simple, something that could be fixed with medicine and rest. Instead, they sent us down a path of uncertainty, referring us to specialists, doctors who could hopefully figure out what was happening inside my husband's body. At first, they suspected it was just anemia. Iron deficiency. And for a brief moment, I wanted to believe that all he needed was some iron supplements and a little time to regain his strength. They admitted him to the hospital. He was given a small room where he would stay for a week, maybe two. The plan was simple: transfusions of iron and blood, enough to stabilize him, to get his numbers back to where they needed to be. And then, hopefully, he would come home. That first night, I stayed with him. I couldn't bring myself to leave. I remember watching as they hooked him up to tubes, needles

piercing his arms, the slow drip of the IV bag filling his veins with iron. The sound of beeping machines filled the room. Nurses came in and out. And then there was Juan. Seeing him lying there, looking so small against the white sheets, with the IV in his arms, made my heart ache. This wasn't the strong, capable man I knew. This was someone drained, someone fragile. And I hated it. I hated seeing him like that. Still, I held onto hope. Anemia. That's what they said. We'd go home soon.

By this time, the girls had started asking where their dad was. He hadn't been home since the night we left for the emergency room, and what was supposed to be a brief hospital stay had turned into something longer. At first, I reassured them—told them he would be home soon. I didn't want to worry them more than necessary, and Juan especially didn't like the idea of telling the two youngest girls too much. But I had told my two oldest, Kathleen and Carter, and of course, my mother-in-law. They understood. Eventually, I had to bring Cora and Kylie to visit him. The first time we walked down the hospital hallways together, something about it felt wrong—unnatural, like this wasn't how things were supposed to be.

Cora had her innocence shielding her from the weight of the moment. Kylie, the more serious one, walked ahead, looking back at her younger sister. When we reached Juan's room, my heart clenched. Seeing him there, lying in that hospital bed, with IV lines in his arms and the beep of the monitors filling the space—it made everything feel more real. Too real. Carter would visit occasionally, standing at his father's bedside, quiet but present. Kathleen, being far away in Texas, did what she could. She called his room every day, sometimes FaceTimed us so we could all be together, even just for a little while. It became our new routine. After school, I would take the girls home, let them freshen up, eat dinner, and then we would make our way to the hospital. It was just what we did now. We adjusted. And as much as I hated it, as much as I wanted to deny that this was becoming our new normal, I couldn't. We were getting comfortable with it—too comfortable. That scared me.

Some days, the girls didn't even want to go to school. Kylie was worried. I could see it in the way she watched her father a little too closely, like she was trying to memorize the way he looked. Cora was different. She didn't ask questions. She didn't cry. She just observed. She didn't understand, or at least, she thought she did. But she didn't fully grasp the weight of it yet. To them, their dad was just sick. He was anemic, and he needed transfusions to feel better. The girls would talk to him like it was any other day, like the hospital walls weren't surrounding them; they took turns curl-

ing up beside him on the bed, chattering away about their school day—about their teachers, their homework, what they learned, what they saw.

For a little while, everything felt okay. Maybe even normal. Juan was finally able to come home on the week of Christmas. After weeks of hospitals, IV drips, we were finally together again—just us, in our home, without nurses shuffling in and out, without the constant beeping of machines in the background. No more needles. No more restless nights on that stiff hospital chair. Just our family, back where we belonged. He looked better than he had in weeks. The color was returning to his face, no longer that ghostly pale. He had a bit more energy, even an appetite—something I hadn't seen in what felt like forever. The sharp pain that had wracked his body was dulled but it wasn't entirely gone. The girls were overjoyed. Laughter filled the house again, and for those few days, it was almost as if nothing had ever happened. Christmas felt short. New Year's passed in a blink. We soak in every moment together, making memories, going to see the winter lights, cherishing the time we now had after the long weeks in the hospital. My heart felt full seeing my family together again. But then my eyes would land on Juan and, even as he smiled, there was something still wrong. I could see it. I could feel it.

A new year, a fresh start. Or at least, that's what I wanted to believe. Juan's follow-up appointment was scheduled, just a routine check to make sure everything was back on track after his hospital stay. Then the results came back. His blood levels were still off-still too low, dangerously low. My stomach twisted at the news. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He was home. He looked better. He felt better. I remember the doctor's words: they were referring us to specialists. More tests needed to be done. Deeper exams. And so it began again. Test after test. Endless bloodwork. Urine samples. Biopsies. Scans. Anything and everything they could do to figure out what was wrong. Juan was poked, examined—he became a lab rat. I watched helplessly as one doctor after another passed us off to yet another specialist. I couldn't even keep track of their names anymore. And then, finally, we ended up in the one place I had been dreading. The oncologist's office. I remember sitting in that small room, waiting. The walls felt like they were closing in, my legs wouldn't stop shaking. Juan sat next to me, composed too composed. I knew him well enough to see through it. He was scared. Just as scared as I was. Outside the door, we could hear movement—papers shuffling, quiet footsteps, muffled voices. Any second, the doctor would walk in and tell us what had been happening.

There was a knock. The door opened. The doctor walked in, sat

down, and looked at us with the kind of expression that made my heart drop. And then he said it. Stage four cancer. Hairy cell leukemia. The moment those words left his mouth, the world went silent. Everything around me ceased to exist. The clock on the wall might as well have frozen. I forgot how to breathe. I turned to Juan. His face, already pale, drained of what little color he had left. This wasn't real. It couldn't be real. The doctor kept talking, explaining, giving details, but I couldn't process any of it. His words blurred together. This wasn't happening. This wasn't our reality. My husband did not have stage four cancer. He didn't. He didn't. But no matter how many times I tried to deny it in my head, the truth was sitting right in front of me. Unchangeable. Unavoidable. Those words echoed in my head, over and over again.

I remember the drive home, the world outside the window was blurry. I gripped the steering wheel tighter, questions flooded my mind, relentless and unforgiving. Why him? Why us? Why, God? I knew something was wrong. But not this. Not cancer. Not stage four. It was hard. I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone. Not yet. Not even our own children. I carried the weight of the truth alone because I didn't know how to say it out loud. I didn't even know where to start. How do you tell your children that their father is dying? I couldn't do it. Not yet. But I knew I had to. Soon—before Juan would be hospitalized again. Before chemotherapy would start. Before the truth would no longer be something I could shield them from. In the span of just one or two months, our entire world had flipped upside down. First, he was just anemic. Then he came home for Christmas, and we thought we were in the clear. Then came the checkup. Then the referral. Then the tests. And then—cancer. Stage four. Deadly. Aggressive.

I was terrified. I felt alone. Juan, before we could even process everything, was hospitalized before we could tell a soul. Everyone wanted to know where he was. So, one by one, I started telling people. First, my sisters. Then other close family members. The hardest conversations, though, were yet to come. Telling my mother-in-law broke me in a way I hadn't expected. She collapsed into tears. She kept asking the same things I had been asking myself: Why? Why him? Why my only son? She had already lost her husband. She had already been through the pain of watching someone she loved suffer in a hospital bed, only to never come home. And now, she was facing it again—with her son. She was in shock. She was devastated. But we were there for each other. We had a moment together, one that only mothers and wives in pain could understand. But the hardest part—the part I had been dreading more than anything—was telling my two youngest girls. I re-

member that day so clearly, as if it just happened yesterday. I had just come home from visiting Juan at the hospital. I sat them down at the kitchen table, took a deep breath, and sighed. My mind was racing. My hands were shaking. How do you tell an II-year-old and a I4-year-old that their father has cancer? I didn't want to give them false hope. But I also didn't want to take away their faith. I looked them both in the eye. My voice was steady, but inside, I was unraveling.

"I need to tell you something very serious," I said. "It's about your dad." Their faces changed. They knew something was wrong. I swallowed hard. I forced the words out. "If you need to cry, if you need to yell—if you need to feel anything—this is the time. It's okay." Slowly, I reached for their hands. "Your dad." Silence. I squeezed their hands tighter. "He's in the hospital. He has cancer. He's started chemotherapy, and things are going to change. Physically, mentally. We need to be there for him." I forced myself to keep going. "He's going to lose his hair. He's going to lose more weight. He might look different. His teeth might fall out. He'll be tired all the time. But he is still your dad." The moment those words left my mouth, I felt Kylie's hand slip from mine. She turned away, shaking her head, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"No," she whispered at first, then louder. "No. No. No. This isn't real. He doesn't have cancer. He doesn't! Everything was fine a few weeks ago!" I reached for her, but she buried her face in my shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably. I held her. I whispered that I was sorry, over and over again, because I didn't know what else to say. Then, I turned to Cora. She was just sitting there, watching us. No tears. No expression. Just quiet. Her face was blank, her little body stiff. She didn't say a word. I could see the confusion in her eyes. How do you explain something like this to an II-year-old? I felt a wave of guilt crash over me. Why did I have to tell them this? Why did they have to hear these words at all? And as I sat there, holding one daughter in my arms while the other sat frozen.

February. A few weeks had passed since Juan started chemotherapy. We were beginning to see how his body was reacting to the treatment. Some days, it seemed like he was in good spirits. I remember how often I would take the girls to the hospital, sometimes pulling them out of school early or letting them skip. It may not have been the best choice, but they needed to be there for their dad. They needed to feel that connection with him, even as things grew harder. During this time, Kathleen made a huge decision. She came back and forth from Texas, wanting to be home with the family. Then, one day, she decided to quit her job and move back for good. It

wasn't just about being near her dad—it was about being there for all of us. She helped with everything: watching the younger girls, cooking meals, running errands. Carter stepped up in ways I didn't even know he was capable of. He became the one to pick up the girls from school, to drop them off, to help with their homework. I made the decision to quit my job, too. I had to. It wasn't just about supporting Juan; it was about being present, truly being there for him through every step of this fight. Through sickness and in health—those words had never meant more to me than they did in that moment. Family had to come first.

End of February into March. It felt like everything had gone wrong, all at once. We were already in this unbearable situation, and yet somehow, it kept getting worse. At first, it seemed like my husband might be getting better, but then, his condition took a terrifying turn. His skin began to turn yellow, and his once-strong figure became painfully thin. He could barely walk, and when he did speak, it was just a few disjointed words—he was fading, both physically and mentally. We could all feel it, we were losing him. He was slipping away from us, and there was nothing we could do to stop it. Then things took another devastating turn. Juan contracted tuberculosis, and his condition rapidly worsened. It felt like everything was falling apart all at once—his kidneys started to fail, his lungs were struggling to keep him alive, and soon, his entire body began shutting down. And then, just as the doctors had feared, he fell into a coma. A coma that would last for 55 days. Every minute of those days, my heart broke a little more. The thought that my husband was dying consumed me.

Before he slipped into unconsciousness, I remember him speaking to Carter, he had made Carter promise that if anything should happen to him, Carter would step up as the man of the house. He needed to take care of me and his sisters. He told Carter to tighten up, to be strong, and to help us hold it all together. It was as if he knew, deep down, that his time with us was running out. Kathleen, the fighter, told her dad something that we all needed to hear. She reminded him that he had to make it through this. He needed to stay alive to walk her down the aisle on her wedding day. It was that moment of hope, of love, that still keeps me going. She wanted him to hold on, for her, for all of us. The doctors had told us that if he didn't improve, they'd have to move him to the ICU, and that's exactly what they did. Every time I thought things couldn't get worse, they did. And yet, through it all, I couldn't help but hold onto that one sliver of hope: that somehow, my husband would fight through this, that he would come back to us. We, as a family, were torn apart. We were all barely hanging on. I felt so exposed, so

fragile, and so utterly helpless. I felt like I was slowly sinking. I didn't know how much more I could take. Watching my husband go through this, seeing him suffer, was too much. I couldn't imagine life without him, especially with four kids to raise on my own. The thought of him leaving me, leaving us, broke something deep inside of me. There was so much anger, so much hatred for this illness. I hated that he had to endure this. I hated that my children had to witness their father like this. He was everything to me. He wasn't just my husband—he was the love of my life, my childhood lover. We had built this life together, worked so hard to come to America with dreams of a better future. We came here to start over, to give our children everything we didn't have growing up. I remember coming to America at 22, pregnant with Kathleen, all alone. Juan couldn't come right away, there was too much paperwork to deal with. So I raised our first daughter by myself for that first year, relying on family and friends for support. Every day was a struggle, but Juan finally arrived. It felt like the world had finally fallen into place. We became the family we always dreamed of, a family that worked together. But now, it felt like all of that was slipping away, the life we had fought for, the life we had built together, was on the line, and I didn't know how to save it.

During those long, painful days and nights, memories of my husband started flooding my mind—our youth, our laughter, the life we had built together. They came in waves, some gentle, some crushing. I was lost in a dark place, and so were my children. The weight of everything was suffocating. Thankfully, I had some help. My sister and my oldest children took turns staying with Juan through the night, switching shifts with me so I could go home for just a little while—to shower, eat something, grab fresh clothes—before rushing back to the hospital. But every time I left, I felt a deep guilt. He was my husband, my partner, my other half. I belonged by his side. And so, in many ways, I moved into the hospital. The doctors and nurses knew me by name. The hospital hallways, the beeping machines, the sterile smell—they became my new reality. Despite everything, there was still a glimmer of hope, a fragile belief that Juan could push through, that he would wake up and come back to us. I refused to break down in front of anyone. I couldn't. I didn't have the space or the time to cry, not when my family needed me to be strong. But inside, I was still unraveling, drowning in uncertainty and fear. I knew I had to be there—physically, emotionally—pushing him, talking to him, holding his hand. I knew he could hear us, even in his coma. I clung to that thought.

Cora, my youngest, struggled to understand. She couldn't grasp why

her dad wouldn't wake up, why he was so still, why he wouldn't talk back when she spoke to him. We explained, as gently as we could, that he was in a coma—that his eyes wouldn't open, that his mouth wouldn't move, that he couldn't respond. But to her, none of that mattered. That was her daddy lying there, and she wasn't going to stop talking to him. She would stand by his side, take his hand in hers, and keep talking, keep waiting, keep believing. And then, something miraculous would happen—something that gave us all a flicker of hope. Juan, even in his unconscious state, would squeeze her tiny hand. It wasn't much, but it was something. It was his way of telling her, of telling all of us, that he was still there. That he was still fighting. The moment she felt his fingers press against hers, her whole face lit up. I held onto that hope with everything I had. Every day, I whispered to him, over and over, You are not allowed to leave me. I told him he wasn't going anywhere. Not now, not in a million years. Not like this.

Everything after March felt like a blur—one long, exhausting stretch of time where the days and nights melted together. There were more surgeries, more procedures. It felt like we had been trapped in that hospital for years, but in reality, it had only been a few months. Time moves differently when you live in constant uncertainty. I never knew what news would come next—whether it would bring a glimmer of hope or another devastating blow. I just wanted it to be over. I wanted it to end, but in a good way. By now, everyone knew Juan's story. He had become somewhat of a legend on that hospital floor. The nurses, the doctors, even other patients and their families—they all rooted for him. They all had faith. And maybe, just maybe, someone up there was listening, because on Easter Sunday, after 55 long days in a coma, my husband woke up. The symbolism was impossible to ignore. Easter—the day of resurrection. Just like the story in the Bible when Jesus rose after three days, my husband had come back to us. I still remember the moment I got the call from the nurse. Her voice was filled with something I hadn't heard in a long time—joy.

"He's awake. He's asking for you." I could barely process the words before we all rushed to the hospital, hearts racing, barely breathing. And when we finally saw him—his eyes open, his lips moving—it felt like the weight of the world had lifted. He was awake. After what felt like an eternity, Juan was back. Things finally seemed to be looking up. He still had surgeries ahead while recovering in the ICU, but his skin was slowly losing its yellow tint, looking more like himself again. He was still frighteningly thin—just skin stretched over fragile bones—but he was alive. He was here.

Visiting Juan in the ICU came with strict rules, We had to take

turns, wearing gloves, masks, and hospital gowns just to step inside his room. Touching him required layers of protection; his body was still too weak, too vulnerable. And the hardest part? Cora wasn't allowed inside. When her dad first woke up, she had been given a brief moment to see him, just for a little while. But after that, because of the ICU's restrictions, she wasn't allowed back in. She didn't understand why. All she knew was that her daddy was awake, and she couldn't be with him. That's when I noticed something that shattered me. There was a small window in front of Juan's ICU room, and every now and then, I would glance over and see a little head pop up. Cora. She would stand on her tiptoes, peering inside, just trying to catch a glimpse of her dad. She was too young to enter, so the nurses placed a chair outside the window for her to climb on, just so she could look in from a distance. I'll never forget the sight of her tiny face in that window. She spent so much time alone in the waiting room, just waiting for whatever slivers of time she could get near her dad. And in those moments, I felt the crushing guilt of how much I had distanced myself from my children. I hadn't meant to, but I knew they felt it. I knew they understood, even if it hurt. I had to be with Juan. I had to fight for him. And I could only pray that, when this was all over, my children would still know how much I loved them too.

Fast forward to late April, just before Juan's spleen removal surgery. His spleen had ruptured, and there was no choice but to remove it immediately. The situation was critical, but before he was taken into the operating room, the doctors gave us a small gift—a chance for Cora to visit him in the ICU. It would be her first real moment with her dad since he woke up from his coma. The nurses were extra cautious. They wrapped her up in layers of protection—gloves, masks, a medical gown that nearly swallowed her whole. She looked like a tiny surgeon, or maybe even a little mummy, bundled up for her safety and his. The moment they finished dressing her, she didn't hesitate. She ran straight to her dad's bedside, her small hands reaching for him, wrapping around his frail body in a hug. Juan couldn't hug her back. His body was too weak, his arms too heavy to lift. But she didn't care. She pressed herself against him, holding on, as if trying to give him all the strength she had. They didn't exchange many words—there weren't any words needed. They just looked at each other, eyes speaking in a language only a father and daughter could understand. And then, just like that, their time was up. The nurses gently told us it was time for surgery, and Cora took a step back, waving goodbye. She was reluctant to leave, but she knew she had to.

The surgery itself went well, but after that, all we could do was wait—wait to see how his body would adjust without a spleen, wait to see how he would recover after months of chemotherapy and relentless procedures. It was a slow, grueling process, but ultimately, we made it through. Looking back, those months felt like a lifetime. It seemed like I had been trapped in that hospital for ten years, but in reality, it had been eight months—eight months of living in and out of hospital rooms, meeting new doctors, new nurses, repeating the same heartbreaking explanations over and over again. It was rough, not just for me and Juan, but for our entire family. My children, especially my two youngest, had fallen behind in school. They had missed out on so much of their normal lives, but somehow, they still pushed through. We all did.

Throughout it all, I kept picturing Juan and me walking through an endless, dark cave. Hand in hand, surrounded by nothing but shadows, I held the only source of light—a small flickering of light, barely enough to see a few steps ahead. At times, Juan seemed to get lost, stumbling further into the darkness, slipping away from me. But I wouldn't let go. I held onto him, guiding him, searching for the way out. We walked for what felt like years, our feet heavy, our bodies exhausted. But finally, just when it seemed like the darkness would swallow us whole, I saw it. The light at the end of the tunnel. It had been there all along, waiting for us to reach it. After everything, after all the pain and uncertainty, we finally stepped into the light.

At the beginning of June, things were finally starting to look up—not perfect, not back to normal, but my husband was recovering. After everything he had endured, he had to relearn how to do even the most basic things—walking, talking, eating, and moving on his own. It was like watching someone start life all over again, but he was determined. A few months passed, and with each passing day, he made steady progress. He had a nurse to help him, but more importantly, he had us—his family. We were his biggest cheerleaders, guiding him through every small victory. For the time being, he was in a wheelchair, and my girls took full advantage of that. They made a game out of it, racing to be the one to push him around—to doctor's appointments, through the house, anywhere he needed to go. They giggled as they helped him in and out of the car, always eager to lend a hand. It was their way of showing love, of making things feel less scary and more normal. Juan was slowly recovering from what felt like an eight-month battle with death itself. Those months had been filled with nothing but fear, pain, blood, sweat, and tears. It has changed all of us. It had shaken our family to its core, but it had also pulled us closer together. We had been tested in the

worst possible way, but somehow, we made it through. It was a dark time—not just for me, but for everyone around us. And yet, my husband proved himself to be the fighter I always knew he was. He didn't just survive—he fought his way back. Even now, he continues to fight, because the effects of chemotherapy and the realities of aging don't just disappear. But despite it all, things are okay. We are okay.

That terrible darkness that had loomed over us since November—it had finally passed. And most importantly, Juan was home. The many wishes, the endless prayers, the desperate pleas we made had finally been answered. It was a moment we had longed for, a moment that once felt impossible. And yet, it happened. It's strange how life works. One day, you wake up thinking everything will be fine, thinking it'll just be another ordinary day. Then, in the blink of an eye, your world changes. That's exactly what happened to us. It doesn't matter how prepared you think you are. Some things happen so quickly, so unexpectedly, that they leave you breathless. And sometimes, no matter how unrealistic it seems, the unthinkable does happen. But I've learned that things happen for a reason—even the painful things, even the things we never saw coming. And somehow, we keep moving forward.

The end...

Based on a true story.



The Moth and Its Light





I am a moth, and I am attracted to light.

It is irresistible and magnetic, and I can't understand why. It is pure and beautiful, yet distant. It whispers to me like a soft promise and comfort. It glows with unattainable perfection that I know would lead me to my inevitable demise—a dangerous fulfillment that would lead me to ruins and dust. It is a blessing and a curse. Why must every beautiful thing I yearn for be the reason for my destruction?

So I stay behind this cubicle where the daytime can't reach me. I can watch the busy bees working on another building in yellow construction suits. Their wings create a tiny buzzing noise as they lift the beams and panels into their correct place. They work in unison with purpose and precision. They move with no hesitation. No time is wasted. One step after the other, they create another building for insects like me, drifting through life with no sense of direction.

At the bottom of the building where I work, there are ants. They also work in unison, but in a more orderly and precise manner. They carry supplies in a straight line with their black uniforms and the company logo print, "Antony National Service Delivery," on their backs. Each ant carries a load, whether small or large. They work with focus, without error or delay.

The packages arrive precisely where they are needed. All of their tasks are always finished, and no supplies are incorrectly or left undelivered. Each step they take carries the weight of their purpose. This is the reason for such precision and efficiency. This is an essential detail that might seem miniscule and meaningless to outsiders.

Purpose. A profound word that I lack.

I sigh as I continue typing on my computer for work. I wear an all-black suit and tie that matches my muted gray wings and blends seamlessly into the shadows. I am an invisible presence in this bustling world. I have a delicate frame and gentle demeanor, contrasting with my vibrant and confident coworkers in this company. Anybody with eyes can tell that I am out of place. But deep down, I want to be like the others. I want to know my light and purpose. But I don't know if I can do it as an outsider. With my days remaining unchanged, I am left hoping and yearning for a future where I can feel fulfilled.

"May I have your attention, everyone?" Mavis the Mantis, our boss, stood in front of the room, exuding authority and charisma despite his calm

exterior. Mantis stood tall with his green suit and tie. He is one of the many people that I envy, as he shines and thrives in the workplace. He can recognize talent and ambition. He has these green eyes that seem to see through the soul of every creature he talks to. He is respected for all the insight and advice he gives when asked.

"Today, we welcome a new addition to our team." His tone booms throughout the room with steadiness and self-assurance. "An insect whose talent and energy is much needed for the efficiency and progress of our work. Our light in every sense of the word—meet Fred the Firefly."

Everybody stands to check out our new teammate. I usually don't care for new members. Why would I? My world would continue to spin without any changes. I would be stuck behind this cubicle till the day that I die. But in the corner of my vision, I could feel a warm glow with a gold hue that touches along the walls. The other insects clap with excitement, suddenly becoming captivated by his brightness. My eyes follow the trail of its radiance towards its owner. And there he stands.

Everything was out of place the moment I saw him. All of the things that I knew before suddenly leave me confused—all of the plans I have for my life call for a rearrangement. I could feel my heart skip a beat. My wings flutter with a sudden jolt of something unfamiliar—awe, desire, and longing. It is a light I've seen many times, yet he feels so different. Fred's light feels gentle, almost tender. He carries a soul that pulls me in and a warmth I long for, as if he is the answer I seek.

The firefly moves forward and straightens his back as he says, "It is nice to meet everyone and a pleasure to be working with all of you. My name is Fred. I've been working in this industry for almost five years. I moved here to this company because I know my skills and talent would help our team thrive and progress. I hope we can get along." He smiles as his eyes scan the room of curious and excited insects. And for a moment, our eyes meet. Something inside me clicks: Fred the Firefly possesses a dazzling brightness that I have always yearned for, but never reached.

I try to avoid him as much as possible. However, fate has other plans. He has come into my cubicle numerous times over the past few days, offering whatever food he has or asking for some paperwork. My usual dark and lonely corner has suddenly been filled with this gentle glow. My eyes search for him even when he is not around me. He is not that hard to find. And I would watch him and wonder how he moves so elegantly. He makes everyone comfortable and laughs like he has been here forever. Everyone praises him for his hard work and efficient manner.

Despite being a newcomer, where everyone expects he would mess up often (just as I had), he has done everything with flying colors. And I just watch him in amazement. My light—no, his light never dims. He only shines brighter.

"Hey Matt!" Fred calls out to me in my cubicle. I could feel his warm brilliance before he even came near my bubble. My heart starts to beat loudly. Thank God, I could still hear him talk. "We are getting lunch outside. Wanna come?"

I could never look him in the eyes properly, or my heart would come out of my chest. "No, I am good. Thank you." My eyes stuck to the computer screen.

"Are you sure? It's Taco Tuesday." He almost sings the last part.

"Yes, I am. Thank you."

"Shame. You'll be missing out on some good food if you're going to be stuck here." My head lowers to the computer board, as I know I am missing out on more than just food. "But feel free to come out. The taco truck will be here until 2, " he says, then leaves. His glow fades, and my corner returns to its usual gloomy and isolated place.

My heart beats out of my chest as if it wants to chase him. But I take a deep breath, reminding myself that I don't go to Taco Tuesday. I peek outside my cubicle and watch as he leaves. I feel my wings tucked tightly against my body as the others move so openly and freely. I've always been told that I am too weak and too plain. I am just a moth with a less appealing appearance to some of my butterfly coworkers. And I know the whispers they have said behind my back.

"He only brings negative energy."

"He looks so lonely. I pity him."

"He looks like bad luck."

Memories flood into my brain, causing a deep ache in my chest. Stop! Stop with the self-pitying and go back to work! So I do. But at the back of my mind. A thought has been nagging me, telling me that I could change. That I could change for the better. That I could be with the others. That I could be like them. Maybe I could find my purpose. Perhaps this is my purpose. To be able to change. To go through a transformation. I want to change the program that is wired within me. I want to go against the storyline set since I was created.

But how?

I hear laughter within a short distance and a faint radiance in my peripheral vision. I think I know who to ask. I wait for a chance to talk to

Fred. I heard that he might stay behind to work on the big project, so I want to take that opportunity and stay behind. I try to tell myself to approach him, but I psych myself out every time. Yet, I have to push myself. I need this change. I am so tired of my life. I crave this change as if it was my last water on Earth. I just need my firefly to guide me through this uncertainty. I see Fred going to the break room, so I immediately stand and follow him. When I enter the room, he prepares another cup of coffee.

"Hello," I say quietly as I'm facing his back.

He jumps, and his light shines a little bit brighter. He turns his head to see who it was, "God, you scared me! I didn't even notice you were here! I thought I was the only one who stayed behind. I guess you really do belong in the dark," he chuckles and continues to focus on mixing his coffee. Every instinct in my body tells me to stop. This is wrong-something is wrong. But I ignore these voices for once.

"But I want to change," I mutter quietly.

"What?"

I say a little louder, "I want to change."

"What do you mean?" He turns his body to fully see me.

"I want to be like you. I also want to shine brightly. I want to get along with my other coworkers. And I want to experience how it feels to move through life with confidence and purpose. But I don't know how. I just wanted to ask you how you do it. How do you do it because I want to be like you."

He takes a long pause as if he was processing the words that I had just said. His eyes are larger than usual as he stares at me like I am an alien from another planet. I am slowly becoming unconfident, regretting how I approached him-regretting that I even dared to talk to him. I am about to apologize until he laughs so suddenly.

"You want to be like me?" His eyes narrow as if I am joking. When he sees that I nod, his lips tighten. "You can't be like me."

"What?"

"You heard me. You can't be like me." His grip on the mug tightens, as if annoyed that we are even having this conversation. "I have something that is innate. Something that I was born with. I was born to shine, unlike you. You can't change. You can't change what you are born into. The moment you are born as a moth, your fate has been sealed. You're a creature of the dark. You live in the shadows. And, tale as old as time, you are drawn into the light. You're attracted to me. I am aware of your lingering eyes." When he drops those words, my eyes fall to the ground, feeling shame. "And

that is what you are. This is your destiny: to only yearn for the thing you can never have. It's better if you accept the truth early. It would make your life easier."

I hear his footsteps coming closer to me. He pauses momentarily, a couple of steps beside me, just to say, "I might sound harsh, but I'm only looking out for you." After that small speech, he leaves me alone in the black break room.

And just like that, I am hit again with reality, and my heart is broken. He's right. How could I even dare? I could feel my eyes getting wet and my vision blurry. I leave the building. And hope the night would just take me away.

~*~

In the next few days, I decided to quit my job. I send in my two weeks' notice to Mavis the Mantis, and he says, "It would truly be a loss to part with such a talented and resilient employee like you. But I have no doubt that you will continue to shine just as brightly in your next chapter as you have here." I mutter a thank you in response and leave his office. I see Fred in my peripheral vision, feeling his stare. I've continued to avoid him as much as I can, as he is the living reminder of my humiliation. Like a moth to a flame. Tale as old as—ARGH!

Stop! I say to myself as I can feel tears welling up, and my wings flutter closely to my body. There is no point. There is no point in all of these anymore. I...

I give up.

~*~

It's midnight and I decide to stroll in the park after getting drunk in the bar. It's finally my last day at work. A huge part of me feels relieved that I don't have to go to that dreary corner, I don't have to see him anymore. I don't have to see the working bees and ants who I wish I could be in my next life. I wish I had been born differently. To live life so differently from what I have now. I look up at the night sky, hoping the bright stars would bring comfort, but I see none. *God, you must hate me.*

I chuckle at my unluckiness and see a nearby bench. I take a seat and feel the cold wind brush me. I shiver but continue to chuckle because I don't have my jacket. My face is warm from the alcohol, but my cheeks are wet as tears continuously fall from my eyes. Another cold wind passes me, causing me to laugh with tears streaming down my face. I put my arms around myself as a response to the coldness.

What luck I have.

And that thought hit me harder than it should have. This is what I get for trying. Why am I so stupid? How can I go against the law of nature? I am just a dumb moth who got burned. I let out a sob, and I immediately put my small claw at my mouth. But then, I remember being alone at this park and giving myself some grace to let go. Tears continue to stream, my snot dripping to the floor, my mouth letting out ugly sobs. My heart continues to break. I let myself break into the quiet of the night. I place my claw on my heart because no one else would hold it gently.

"Why are you crying?" I hear a chirping sound.

I turn my head and see a cricket standing a few feet away. I immediately wipe my tears and say, "Nothing."

"That doesn't sound like nothing; I could hear you all the way over there," she then points at a fallen log near the park's edge, where the shadows are long. I look at her, slightly embarrassed, "I'm sorry. I'll leave."

"Wait. I can't just let you leave in a state like that. What happened?"

"Nothing. It was my last day of work," I say, hoping that would be enough for her to let me be.

"They let you go?"

"No. I quit."

"Shouldn't you be happy then?"

"It's complicated." Nosy cricket.

"I have time."

"What?"

"I have time for a story," She says simply. I look at her more closely. She has a defenseless frame, and something about her makes me feel safe and comforted. Maybe because of her body language. Maybe because she has those eyes, I wouldn't feel judged. Or maybe because it was late, and I was drunk... And I need someone to comfort me. So I open up to her. I tell her about my work, how I feel, and how lonely I am. I tell her about Fred and how I'm attracted to him and his light. And I finally tell her about how he breaks my heart.

"Asshole."

I chuckle and nod my head. A part of me felt nice when someone took my side. "He might be an asshole, but he was right."

"No, no, no, no, no, he is wrong. That flashhole can light up your whole world, but he's not the brightest spark in the bunch. Just because you're born in the dark doesn't mean you're destined for the shadows forever." The Cricket pauses. My wings falter. The night is quiet with a heavy

weight. "Change isn't impossible," she continues, "It's just not simple. You can't just flip a switch and you suddenly become someone else. You're meant to be you. You're born as a moth... that's not something you can change." A light breeze passes us by. "Maybe it's not even something that you should change."

She takes a deep breath, considering what to say next, "You can't... change everything. Some parts of you are permanent—what you are, your nature—those things are... ingrained. But I know that changing is not about becoming someone or something else. Maybe change is where you understand that there are parts of you that you can't escape from—that they are already there, and you can accept them. Maybe it's about finding a way to live with what you are... and still find purpose in it."

I move my head from my claws to look at her, "Purpose?"

She nods. Her antennae twitch, "Purpose isn't about being someone else or fitting into what others expect of you. It's about understanding what's already inside you and finding a way to make it work with the world around you. You've been looking for a purpose in the light, in what others have, but what if your purpose is found right here—inside your heart. Maybe in darkness, you can find something that matters. You can create purpose in your life, even if it's not bright like the fireflies'."

"I've been looking for it for a long time. I still can't find mine," I say in defeat.

"That's because you're looking in the wrong places. You're trying to be something that you're not. Your purpose may be about realizing that you are enough. But you have to believe it. You have to actually believe that you are enough. You can find purpose in the quiet moments and how you move through the world. Maybe your purpose is embracing the dark, understanding, and finding your strength there. The quiet ones—the ones that don't always shine—they have a purpose too."

A quiet understanding permeates my system, taking the weight off the confusion inside my heart for a long time. "That's what I've been doing, huh? Trying to be something that I'm not. Forcing myself into a world I was never meant to fit into."

"We all do that sometimes. But the most profound purpose could be where we accept who we are and find our own path. You just need to find your own place and shine in your own way, even in the quiet of the shadows."

We sit in silence as I process her words. I take a deep breath and watch the sun peeking through the tall building. Then, all of a sudden—a

tiny spark of... peace, or maybe acceptance, begins blooming inside me. I start, "Maybe... Maybe I can be something, even if it's not what I thought I should be... And this whole time, I was afraid to accept what I am."

"Sometimes, being exactly who you are is all the purpose you need. And that is a pretty powerful thing."

"Yeah, it is." I nod.

That morning was the most beautiful sunrise I have ever seen.

Adjustment



The air was stifling. An Oxnard resident since birth, a beach baby, I was more than used to fog, to murky skies, to the marine layer obscuring my view of the tannish buildings of Seabridge. But this morning, it was closing in on me, my throat, filling my lungs and heaving them down, pulling them into the ground. They wanted to stay home. I had no time to, though. Responsibilities, work, Walgreens, chiropractor. My days blurred together. Somewhere in the summer daze, I tried to figure out why they all seemed to lean on each other clumsily, piling onto each other so thick they couldn't see the gigantic hole in the ground they were pushing themselves toward. It could have been illness, or overwork, or exhaustion. It could have been all of those things. It could have been hatred, rage. I'm not sure I'll ever know what the primary cause of the melting pot of twenty-twenty two was.

But I did feel it all. A sixty hour a week working schedule is not sustainable for anyone, let alone a college student with an undiagnosed illness. I knew, somewhere within me, of course, that I was sick. I could feel it— in my heart and in my joints and in my weakening muscles and in my blacked out vision, spots swimming along the surface of the man-made harbor. In six years, you start getting realistic. Thirteen is a young age to feel so terrible, to be stuck in bed, unable to move or breathe, but young enough to chalk it up to growing pains. When I reached the end of my eighteenth year, and the pains got so bad I started wearing a knee brace again and started monitoring my heart rate, I knew I had to go back to the doctor.

But doctors scared me, and weren't very receptive to the nineteen year old wearing all black and a wallet chain, so with a couple of failed appointments this year behind me and far more ahead of me, I was here.

I wasn't very good at parking, still, and parked in the back of an empty parking lot. It was too early for the scenic-route speedwalkers to be out and too late for the sun-chasers to run after the yellow and orange and pink skies.

I was exhausted. My head took its place against my headrest, the light smell of leather battling with the fog in my lungs as I closed my eyes. Smells and gasses don't tend to be very physical with each other—they fight with each other in a more subdued form. Swirling around one another, intentionally cornering themselves to try to push the other out. I longed, instead, for smoke in my lungs, but I promised myself I wouldn't smoke again. Not that my promises to myself meant too much. I had also promised myself I'd

sleep eight hours the night before, and had ended up at less than half of that.

I'd thought Seabridge was a strange place to have a medical practice. On one side of the water sat a grocery store, some restaurants, and one of my workplaces. A frozen yogurt shop. I almost dreaded going to work. People questioned why I still worked there—I had another job, a job that paid better, an academic job. It gave me a made-up prestige. A step up on the pedestal with more than three levels, a step onto a staircase that my brittle knees, addled with failed physical therapy attempts and a pain that radiated like a balloon, filling slowly and slowly with the air out of someone else's, someone more functional's lungs. I was waiting for it to pop. I knew, one day, it would. But I needed money. I had a goal.

On the other side of Seabridge, the emptier side—the side I preferred—was apartments. Real estate agencies. A smoke shop, I think. It might be a dispensary. I was trying desperately not to think about the fact that they probably had cigarettes.

When I got out of the car, my knees were shaking. I can't remember what was in my hand, but I know it was a paper. It took me a moment to find the place—it was tucked away, hiding from the rest of the world, hiding from me. Oftentimes, when I look back, I think that I might have preferred it stay hidden. The glass tinting over, the fog covering the sign, the apartments above suspended in the thick air as the bottom corner crumbled beneath it. But none of those things happened—I walked in.

The waiting room was strange, and the receptionist gave me a look when I walked in. I couldn't pinpoint what she was looking at, or looking for. With the green and grey clouding my vision, I glanced at myself in the mirror before sitting to fill out my forms. I looked like I did in my daily nightmares, haunting myself. Still fresh black hair-dye seeped into my scalp, and my skin was more a shade of silver than a shade of beige. My ears were ringing. Maybe, I thought, she felt sorry for me. Everybody always droned on about not wanting pity. But if pity got me an open ear and a treatment plan, I was all for it.

It might have been sympathy she was looking at me with, but it was equally as likely to be anger. I held mine in my eyes, in the way they narrowed and took in my surroundings with skepticism. Much, much later, I found out my current partner was a customer of my job around this time. They liked me, not because I was nice or because I was good at what I did, but because I looked at customers with contempt and hatred in my eyes. Scanning, waiting, taking in as much information as I could. I'm still not so

sure I enjoy that part of myself, but I find myself returning to it. I was hungry, desperate, and angry.

When he came to get me, he took me not into what I tentatively refer to as the "operating" room— if a chiropractic adjustment can be named an operation—but instead, into his personal office. I weighed this with the actions of my usual chiropractor and attempted to pick up the pit forming in my stomach. It shouldn't be a red flag. He was a doctor. I'm meant to trust him.

At some point in the walk from the waiting room to his office that smelt vaguely of dust and overripe apples, I realized that nobody but the three of us were in the building. He could give me a discount, he'd said. For being a friend of a friend.

He asked me questions—both concerning my condition and not. I told him about the scoliosis, about the migraines, about the pain climbing through the vines of my tendons. I told him about my jobs, about my college major, about the elephant ring on my right hand. I wasn't married, though I was almost tempted to tell him I was.

But he knew people who knew me. My mom had told me to come to him. He was her friend Beth's friend—his practice was new, and he could get me into acupuncture. I was terrified of needles. Sometimes, when my heart palpitations kept me up, I'd imagine them poking at me, seeping their way into the chambers of my heart, aiming for an artery, telling their friends to come clog it with their splintery cool metal.

To avoid an awkward conversation with my mother, I told him I wasn't married. His face almost lifted—his thick rimmed glasses shifting on his almost imperfectly smooth face. He couldn't have been younger than forty, but spoke as though he was trying to appear younger, relatable. I focused on the spine figure on his desk as I spoke to him. Thirty-three vertebrae. My own were crooked, fitting together awkwardly, but this one was almost shaped like an 'S.' Yellow, nearly brown, but a contrast to the cheap-looking brown of the desktop.

By the time he took me into the "operating" room, my stomach had evened itself out. Even in that, it had found a place somewhere below the floor, in the concrete of the harbor, in some spot the contractors had forgotten to fill with the grey sludge—ruining the structural integrity of the entire building. Maybe it would collapse, after all. Not after the pit of my stomach filled the void, though. I imagined it a bright, neon green, a standout of stomach bile and whatever toxic waste I'd stolen from my job creating a rock solid brick.

He told me to lay on the table, and I did. My heart was pounding. My intuition has never failed me, but it rarely saves me either. It sprints behind me, yelling and screaming, tears streaming down its face, holding its hand out to me and looking up at me with big eyes. But behind it, a larger, more appealing figure held its hand over intuition. Danger. It was quiet, and never did much more than nod at me. I'd look down at intuition, so small seeming, so fragile, and take the hand of danger instead. It was more intimidating. I was scared of it, and I run toward my fears with all the force my knees could give me.

He told me he was going to evaluate me, but it seemed less like evaluating and more like feeling me. His hands were on my hips. His hands lightly ghosted my chest. His hands were on my thighs, bare except my shorts and the compression sleeves on my knees. He asked me to take the sleeves off, and his hands were on my knees. He lingered—too long, too long. My mind went blank. It took almost two years, in the driver's seat of my car, my partner holding me as I cried and apologized and gasped for air, to process the ways his ungloved hands felt on my body. They were razor sharp, cold, and painful. They acted as needles felting on my skin, poking and poking until I was molded into the shape he wanted me. I never told my partner that he was one of the thoughts in that panic attack. They never pried. They just held me.

He adjusted me painfully, and touched me roughly. I remember laying facedown on the table, holding my body tense to keep from wincing when he touched me. He dislocated my hip for the first time- something that will never stop plaguing me. Once you dislocate a joint, it rarely tracks normally again. It slips easier. He didn't put it back. I told him it hurt, and he told me it was part of the process.

It wasn't. My other chiropractor was gentle, warned me before he touched me, cracked only what he needed to. This man—if he was one, for I was beginning to think he might have been closer to one of the demons roaming about the earth, camouflaged except for their voice and their actions, that my theology teacher warned us about in grade nine—this man seemed to take joy in cracking my joints as though they were meat he aimed to tenderize. Maybe he did aim to tenderize me. I longed for the weight of my pocket-knife, dull, scratched, and small, but it lay in my passenger's seat. I was helpless, alone, and weak.

I thought of the things he could do, if he wanted to, as he pounded his hands against my lower back. Then lower. Then lower. "You know," he said, as he stuck something in my back, "some people can go to the chiro-

practor once, and be fine." His voice was sneering, nasally, and he spit out the words as if they were sunflower seeds onto my back. "Not you though. No, you're a chiropractic patient for life."

Face down in the black faux leather that smelled like sweat and tissue paper, a fear washed over my body. I would later quote this to others—to my best friend, to the girl I was dating, to a class during a presentation. But I would never mention the subtext behind it, I would never speak of the tone he said it in, or the feeling of his hands on the back of my neck as he did, or the way he trailed them down my spine afterward. I dug my pitifully short nails as far into my palms as they could physically go and clenched my jaw. Instead of protesting, instead of indulging danger, I just laughed and shut my brain off.

I don't remember the rest of the appointment, but I remember that there was no discount. I remember going to Walgreens afterwards. I remember crying in the parking lot—it was IO a.m. My best friend called me and screamed at me. I just sat and took it. That was who I was now. The days of my street fights, of my "stand up or step out" mentality, of my self-advocacy; I saw them fly out of my window, choke on my back tire, and lay flat in the middle of the road. I bummed a cigarette off of one of the more approachable Walgreens employees.

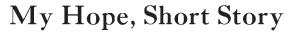
This wasn't the last time a medical professional would talk to me like that, would touch me like that, would look at me with beady eyes and see their vision clouded by opportunity—but it was the first. I'd think of it when my neurologist touched my knee, when my orthopedic ran his hand up my inner thigh, when my cardiologist stared down at my bare chest instead of installing the heart monitor I needed. I'd think of it the first time I was coerced into having sex, when their hands touched me a little too roughly and I flinched. I'd think of it when I couldn't verbalize why my partner's hands felt like needles on my waist after finding one of his voicemails.

He knew where I lived. He knew my phone number, he knew where I worked. He called me incessantly. Left voicemails, voicemails I couldn't bring myself to delete until I was almost twenty-one. He called me by name, asking when I'd be back, when I'd bring him the x-ray he ordered for me, saying we needed to continue my treatment. I wondered what kind of treatment he was talking about. I never got the x-ray, and it was used against me by other doctors, accusatory and detesting.

I had my phone on do-not-disturb all the time. I cut everybody out, walked around both of my jobs with an even higher guard than before, a culmination of this incident and others piling together to create the worst

version, the most undesirable version, of myself. I saw him again only once, when he came into my job for frozen yogurt. I was alone in the store. Darkness poured into the windows, coiling itself around me, placing itself on my shoulders. The weight should've felt crushing, but instead, it was comforting against my clumsy, clobbering heart. This was a weight I could accept, a weight that would protect me. He asked me if I was coming back any time soon, and I told him I'd found a better chiropractor. He pursed his lips, wrinkles forming in his stupidly perfect skin, and left me a five dollar bill in the tip jar.

When his practice moved to Brazil due to "unforeseen circumstances," I didn't get an email– but my mother, who had never been a patient, did.





"I had all and then most of you. Some and now none of you. Take me back to the night we met," Lord Huron, *The Night We Met*.

River Christian Morrow's obituary was written by his one true love, Esperanza Maria Sagrada. She stood on the podium of the church wearing the simple black dress that he loved, holding back the tears that wanted to rush down her cheeks. Esperanza lost the hope that her name signified the day her lover left this earth. Her usual warm, sunny, optimistic fire was put out by a freezing bucket of grief. It left her shivering, wondering... what was the point of anything?

River's obituary went something like this: "No one ever appreciates life, sorry—no one ever *truly* appreciates life. We take it for granted. We live our days thinking that everyone we love will be here tomorrow. My precious River, I promised that I would love you until your last breath and that I did.

I loved you eight years ago, when you first looked at me with those bright green eyes that remind you of the warm spring. I loved you when you laughed at all my terrible jokes and truly found them funny. I loved you when you walked through the rain just to bring me my favorite coffee and pan dulce. I loved you when you asked me to go on our first date. I loved you on our second date, our third, our fourth, our fifth... I lost count after the sixth. I loved you through bootcamp, college, and life. I loved you when you got down on one knee. I loved you when I walked down the aisle and said "I do." I loved you when you left for deployment. I loved you everyday of those months that I was alone. I loved you when I got the letter saying you had been injured and were on death's doorstep. I loved you at the side of your hospital bed. I loved you when you took your last breath... holding my hands, whispering promises that you would love me into the next life.

I love you, my dear River Christian Morrow. I vowed that not even death would do us apart, so I will love you for the rest of my life. I pray that the dear Lord has embraced you into his good graces. I miss you terribly, but know that when my time comes, you will be the first person I look for in Heaven.

I miss you, River. I love you and forever will, even when death comes for me– He will lead me to you."

The mass ended. The tears were finally released. Feeling alone and lost, Esperanza walked up the long aisle, staring at her lover's coffin, grasping the thorns of the white rose. She couldn't feel them pricking into her

hands.

The burial was short, but beautiful. All of their family members had gathered around to wish River a farewell, hoping that heaven was welcoming. Esperanza felt truly lost for the first time in her life. She had no purpose. She had no strength to move her feet away from the headstone, no strength to go back to their now empty house, and no strength to make herself complete. She had lost all hope...

Eight years ago: the night they met...

"I think you dropped this, miss," he picked up her book and stopped in his tracks when he saw her brown, bouncing curls sway back over her shoulder. Her brown eyes lit up a fire in his heart.

"Oh, thank you," she replied, losing her breath when she looked into those bright green eyes.

They stayed in awe for what seemed like hours. Time had stopped, the world had gone silent, and for that moment they were the only ones on earth with wild, beating hearts. She had never believed in "love at first sight," but at that moment, the universe proved her wrong. Love at first sight was real and he was standing right in front of her—tall, dark haired, freckles that were soft and subtle, lips that were full and looked tempting enough to... she sighed.

"Excuse me," said a stranger, nonchalantly passing by between them. He cleared his throat and she looked down, fixing her hair to be behind her ear.

"Thank you," she said again, meeting those piercing eyes, beginning to feel flushed with anxiety. She turned to go, but he stopped her.

He wanted to know more about her—he needed to know more. "Wait, miss, what's your name?"

She smiled and it melted his cold heart. "Esperanza."

He smiled, feeling oddly complete. "Esperanza," he whispered, "What does it mean?" "Hope," she said simply.

With that one word, he felt filled with ease. There were no more worries, no more doubts. He felt a sense of purpose, a reason for existing. "I think you may be the hope that I've been waiting for my entire life," he said, dreamily, not caring if he sounded bold or a little spastic.

Her eyes went wide with surprise. Her breath climbed from her chest to her throat, lodging there before suddenly releasing. "How could you even say that?" She paused. "I don't know who you are and you don't know who I am."

He smiled, "But I want to... I'm River. River Christian Morrow."

He extended his hand and she took it.

Ten Years after the night they met...

Dia de los Muertos was a big celebration in her family. They hon-

ored the dead and told stories about them, keeping their memories alive. The autumn air crept in quickly, spreading over the town, adding its gloom to everything that the dead already haunted. The wild plants stopped growing along the sidewalks in front of their house– her house. It was only hers. No more him. River Christian Morrow had been dead for a little over two years now.

For Esperanza, when he died, he took everything good with him. She had not found any purpose the day after his funeral. She found no purpose in the week that followed. Nor in that month that passed her by. It had been years since his death, yet it only felt like minutes sometimes.

She found herself realizing she couldn't live without a purpose. He wouldn't have wanted it, nor did she have a choice. From that day on, she only called herself Maria. If she couldn't be River's hope in the world, she wouldn't be Esperanza for anyone else.

With time her fire came back. It burned softly and dimly, but it was there. She wasn't who she once was, but she was grateful for that. She couldn't be the person who saw the sun and instantly felt the warmth. She couldn't look at the flowers and think that there was nothing better in the world. She couldn't go back to being the girl that had everything. She couldn't—she had lost it all.

The celebration was in full swing once the sun had set, everyone gathered in her backyard, telling old stories as they drank over bottles of beer, tequila, and wine. Tears were shed, laughter was spread around, kids played in the background, chasing each other about the entire yard. Dogs barked and cats ran as they were chased by the little humans. Little humans that were urged to be careful around the ofrendas. Maria lost herself in the moment, staring at the window of their bedroom, and for a second almost felt complete. But the second ended.

Perhaps it was the booze that she had drunk or the shortness of breath due to the laughter, but she could have sworn when she looked up she saw him in their bedroom window. Her whole world stopped for a moment and she felt a glimmer of hope. Her legs and mouth moved of their own accord, disregarding the looks of suspicion from her family.

"Todavía le duele," murmured her mother as she left, "Pobrecita. Dale más tiempo."

Maria's legs moved her up the stairs, down the hall, and to their bedroom door which was closed. She turned around and looked at the clock just down the hall, hanging on the wall. *Eleven:fifteen*. An hour before he died.

Could the superstitions her mother told her as a child be real? Do family members really visit us an hour before their time of death to give us messages from the afterlife? Had the wine been too much? Was she going absolutely insane?

She pushed open the door which hadn't been opened in over two years and fell to her knees with her mouth open in awe.

Her hand came up to her mouth as she saw River standing at the window, staring outside at all the children, running around.

Tears flowed down her cheeks and she whispered, "You're not real," over and over again in ragged breaths as she clutched her chest. She whispered it so many times, it started to sound like an old prayer.

He turned around and when his piercing green eyes looked into hers, she felt her heart break all over again. He smiled softly, almost painfully, with tears in his eyes as well. Maria closed her eyes, willing her heart to stop stammering against her sternum. When she opened them he was still there and she couldn't form cohesive thoughts.

"Esperanza," he whispered. Her heart burned in her chest hearing him say her name one more time.

"You can't be real," she begged, "I buried you at Santa Clara Cemetery. I held your hand as you took your last breath. You're dead... How are you here?"

He ignored the lump in his throat. "Día de los muertos," he said simply. As if that was answer enough. His voice breaking, he said, "I don't have much time, my love."

He beckoned her to the window. She slowly stood and with shaking legs dragged herself to the windowsill. She looked at him, her eyes burning red with tears. She looked up at his piercing blue eyes and raised her hand to touch his cheek, but she couldn't.

If this was a figment of her imagination she didn't want it to end. She didn't want to ruin this for however long she had this. She wanted to look at him, capture all the little details of him that she had seemed to have forgotten.

"I missed you," she whispered, wiping her tears on the sleeve of her white sweater. "I've missed you every single day."

He let out a deep breath. "I've missed you more, my Esperanza."

They stared at each other for a moment. At that moment they felt complete. Time had stopped, the world went silent and they felt like they were the only ones left on this earth. Oh how much she wished that was true.

"How is this possible?" Her voice was low and soft, as if frightened she could scare off his ghost with her naturally loud voice.

He looked pained once the question left her lips. "I don't know." He took a deep breath. "I don't have much time, but I wanted to tell you, Esperanza, that I love you so much. I have loved you since the day we met and I haven't stopped. I loved you in life and I still love you in death. Never forget that, please. Don't you ever forget that I loved you until my dying breath."

Tears began to rebuild in her eyes. "Not even death..."

"Could do us apart," he finished. His eyes drew to the window, watching all the kids. "You are an amazing mom, Esperanza... I'm sorry I wasn't able to be there physically, but I was there. I was supporting you the entire journey."

She hugged herself looking out the window, staring at her twins. River Jr. and Irene were the names of her purpose in life. The reasons for which she had no choice but to keep going in life. Her new found hope.

"I found out a month after you died. I don't know how I'm going to do this alone," she whispered. "It was supposed to be us, raising a family. You and I."

He looked intensely into her eyes, restraining himself from touching her. "Esperanza, you're already doing it. You're already doing amazing. You may not have me, but you are strong on your own. I wasn't all your strength, I only added to it."

"I'm scared," she confessed. The strength she pretended to carry everyday was long gone.

He sighed, looking defeated. "I know you are, but I'll be with you in spirit." He looked at the clock through the open door. "I need to go, my love."

"NO," she pleaded. "Don't go... please. I can't lose you again."

"I love you, my Esperanza. I will always love you."

She closed her eyes, tattooing every detail of him into her mind. "Te amo con todo lo que soy y seré." She knew when her eyes opened, he would be gone.

Alas, her eyes opened and he was gone, leaving behind shoe prints in the rug.

Adrift



The woods on the edge of town have always been a refuge for Shion. Her foster parents had always told her that they were too dangerous for her and, for a while, she listened to them. Then their next foster kid came along, and the next, and the next, until Shion was all but forgotten, left to explore the very place she was never allowed before. The leaves rustling in the wind called out to her like a siren's song, and the promise of peaceful serenity had been too great to ignore. It's a place that feels more like home than her actual house, a place where she can simply be, without worrying about how other people perceive her. She wasn't always such a solitary person, but since her foster parents had all but abandoned her when the shiny, new kids came in, she had to adapt. It was either that, or crumble into a shell of herself.

Now, she walks these woods nearly every day, taking in the calming sights around her. It's nearly winter, so the trees that are normally full of dark, shady leaves have shed most of them. The ground is blanketed by the dead leaves, crunching under Shion's sneakers with each step. Branches from the trees twist overhead, leaving a narrow path for her to walk. There's a trail nearby that she could use, but she's exploring today, letting her feet wander as her mind does the same. A heavy fog has rolled in over the mountains, obscuring most of Shion's view. Most people might say it's eerie here, and although Shion would be inclined to agree, she prefers it that way. Breathing in the moist air, feeling the chill as it creeps its way into her bones—she likes being out here. Better than being at home.

Despite how full of a house it normally is, Shion knows for a fact not a single soul is in that place right now. It's the youngest's birthday today, so the whole family is going out to celebrate. The whole family except for Shion, of course, because she got caught up at school. It's her fault, really. She hasn't been doing well in her English class—apparently, it was bad enough to warrant a meeting with her counselor. She was called out in her last class of the day, only five minutes until the bell rang, and she knew then that she was going to be spending the rest of the day alone. Sure enough, despite sending him a quick text, her older brother wasn't waiting to pick her up at the gate when the meeting was finally over. Should've known, she had thought to herself, no one listens when you speak first.

All she can do now is walk home alone, in this biting breeze and gloomy light, and wonder whether her mind would play tricks on her this

time, too; it wouldn't be the first time it's happened and it probably won't be the last. Last time she'd been left to walk home from school, she took the long way through the woods. As it started to get dark out, she started seeing shadows, things moving in the corner of her eye. It was nothing real, she realized, and has since made sure to stay as present as possible, letting her mind wander without letting it go too far. Moderating what she thinks, what she feels. It's a lonely little feeling, but something she decided was absolutely necessary. At least, that's what Shion likes to tell herself. Anything to get her through the day.

Something in the corner of her eye halts Shion's movement. Her head whips towards it, and she sees a circular stone structure. Shion has been through these woods hundreds of times, but she's never seen this before. Curiosity gets the better of her and she creeps a bit closer, leaves crunching under her feet with each step. As she comes up on it, she realizes it's a lonely, circular gate, no walls or pathways around it. Weaving through the middle is some sort of misty veil, transparent enough to see a cloudy version of the sights beyond it. Shion relaxes a bit, walking closer to it and peering at the trees surrounding her. When she looks back to the gate, she sees a person looking right back at her.

Shion jumps back, falling to the ground and landing with her hands behind her. It takes her a few seconds to realize that the person she saw was just herself, reflected by whatever shimmering substance was flowing through the gate. Once her breathing begins to even out again, she rises to her feet. She creeps closer to the strange thing in front of her, wondering why this is just now catching her eye. Surely this gate has been here for a while, right? It certainly looks like it has, with pieces of the stones crumbling and some kind of ivy crawling up its sides. As Shion stops a couple steps away from it, she tentatively reaches out a hand to graze against the misty veil in the middle. To her surprise, the tips of her fingers seem to actually go through it, and she recoils, snapping her hand back and stumbling backwards a few steps.

Shion tilts her head and looks at the gate curiously. If her sister's fantasy books were to be believed, this is definitely some kind of portal. It calls out to her, and she thinks that maybe she's dreaming, or her mind has wandered *too* far this time. Despite everything in her telling her that she should just go home, she can't shake the feeling that she needs to go through it. She has no idea what could happen—it's some kind of magical portal in a place that it doesn't belong; there's a small chance this could kill her. If it did, what would change? The past few months of her life have felt so empty,

so devoid of light, that not taking this chance right now might kill her anyway. Shion squeezes her eyes shut and plunges through the barrier.

The first step is easy, she barely even notices as the veil brushes over her skin. After that, moving forward becomes more and more arduous with every step. It becomes something like how Shion would imagine walking through Jell-o, and she finds herself fighting against whatever it is that surrounds her. Her lungs constrict a bit tighter with every inhale, and she hopes that whatever it is she's gotten herself into is almost over. After several excruciating moments, she rips through to the other side, feet on solid ground. She heaves out a couple breaths as she looks behind her to the portal, standing exactly as it was before she went through it. It's only when she looks up that she realizes what's changed.

The woods around her have shifted, color and life blooming like she's walked from fall directly into spring. Even then, everything is ever-so-slightly brighter than usual. The once-bare trees now seem to glow with rich, green and purple leaves, and the grass has grown back in around the path. White and indigo flowers are blossoming at her feet, and ferns of various sizes extend across the ground. Shion kneels down and brushes a hand across them, stopping to grab one of the flowers. She brings it to her nose and inhales deeply, the fresh scent reminding her of her favorite social worker's perfume. A warm, soft breeze blows through, ruffling her wispy bangs, and she can't help but sigh, listening to the birds chirping in the distance.

When she stands back up, she looks back to the gate. The crumbling stones and ivy are still there, but whatever shimmering mist that made the portal has vanished. Shion's eyes widen in panic, and she quickly runs back over, stepping through to be sure. She comes out the other side still in this strange and magical world. Her breathing picks up as she stares at the portal, eyes glued to the spot where she entered this place. Am I stuck here? Her feet carry her backwards until her back hits a tree. Panic claws its way deeper into her chest. It wraps tightly around her lungs and, at this moment, breathing is the hardest thing she's ever done. Shion closes her eyes to focus on her breathing, making sure the only thing she sees, feels, smells, is nothing. She's just breathing.

As she wrenches her eyes open, her breaths return to normal. She pushes herself up off the tree and looks back at the gate, distantly hearing a strange rustling. An idyllic sense of peace begins to fall over her at the sound. Huh. There must be something I have to do here, Shion reasons. There's a rough path extending deep into the forest, and with nothing else to do, she

stuffs her hands in the pockets of her jacket and decides to follow it. As she walks, she feels a vague sense of worry return in the back of her mind. She thinks she might remember something, but her brain is a bit fuzzy, and her eyes wander back towards the scenery before she can really grasp what it is. Her own woods had a calming effect on her already, but this place is something else entirely.

She comes across a towering willow tree, its branches extending to create a hidden alcove. Shion brushes past the leaves, entering the wide empty space. The trunk stands alone in the center of the clearing and she walks up to it. Running a hand against the rough bark, she stops suddenly when she senses something behind her. Someone gasps in surprise, and Shion quickly flips around to see the source of the noise. It's a girl around her age, wearing dark clothes and makeup, contrasting against her pale skin. She has clunky, black boots on, with ripped fishnets and earrings resembling kitchen knives. Her sandy blonde hair is pulled into two loose braids, and although Shion wants to ask what's going on, she doesn't dare to speak first. She knows better than to make the first move, to reveal too much about herself too fast, so she stays silent and hopes the other girl says something.

"Who the hell are you? Are you the one who brought me here?" the girl asks, sounding more like an accusation than a question.

That catches Shion off guard. "Me? I'm just as lost as you are, I don't..."

As Shion trails off, she notices the other girl's shoulders relax a bit. "Oh."

The two stare at each other for a few seconds, neither knowing what to say. There's something about her that feels familiar to Shion, but she can't for the life of her understand why. It's the same feeling she gets when she passes by the neighborhood signpost on the way to school, and it kills her to think that deep down, she might already know this girl without knowing at all how. She almost wants to ask about it, but even if she knew what to say, the circumstances in which they currently stand tell Shion that she shouldn't trust this girl—at least, not yet. Luckily, the other girl speaks up.

"Nice hair," she says, crossing her arms. Shion subconsciously grabs a strand of her hair; the blonde is growing out, she knows her black roots are showing. Her bangs are probably a mess as well. "Do that yourself?"

"Yeah. Scissors and box dye."

The girl flashes a tentative smile, "Cool." She looks around for a moment before blowing a harsh breath and continuing, "So you don't actu-

ally know what's going on here either, do you?"

Shion shakes her head.

"Awesome, okay," the girl mutters as she smiles ruefully, her eyes averting upwards. After a deep breath, she looks back down and says, "We should stick together then, try to figure out what the hell's going on. Two heads are better than one, right?"

Shion quirks an eyebrow at that, which spurs the girl to continue, "I just don't like the odds of exploring this place on my own, you know? An acquaintance would be nice. ...You can call me Odi."

Shion sticks out a hand for her new acquaintance to shake. "Shion."

"We're finding a way out of here, right?" Odi asks. Only when Shion nods does the girl shake her hand in return. "Well, let's get going then."

Odi starts down the opposite path Shion came from, with Shion following behind her. They walk in silence, and she twists the ring on her pointer finger. It's a nervous habit that started the moment the third foster child entered her house. That was when Shion had really started to grasp that her parents didn't love her as much as she thought they did, and not a day has gone by where she hasn't worn at least one ring, ready to be spun until her finger turned red. She looks over to Odi, who catches her staring. She simply offers Shion a smile, before returning to the comfortable silence surrounding them. It's so strange how Shion feels so connected to this girl, yet knows nothing about her.

Odi halts suddenly and throws an arm in front of Shion, breaking her from her thoughts. "Do you hear that?" she asks.

Shion listens carefully, straining to hear some kind of sign of potential danger. Around them, all she hears are the sounds of the forest. There's birds chirping nearby, some critters digging in the dirt somewhere close, but nothing out of the ordinary.

The only thing different than normal is the rustling of the leaves, louder than before despite the lack of wind. Wait a minute, she thinks, no wind, but rustling leaves? She listens closer and realizes it's not the leaves making that noise, but something else entirely. It's the same rustling she heard earlier. She lifts her eyebrows questioningly at Odi, whose gaze is still on the ground.

The noise begins to move closer and closer, coming from somewhere behind them. The two girls look in that direction, and in the distance, Shion can make out some kind of concrete building, huge and dilapidated. It almost looks like the buildings at her school, only much, much

bigger. Something rustling in the bushes next to them snatches her attention, and she can see some kind of smokey darkness bleeding into the landscape around them. She tilts her head curiously, inching closer to the substance gliding slowly towards them. It looks opposite to whatever misty substance made up the veil in the moon gate, arching out like shadows. As Shion begins to reach towards it, she hears her name called out.

"Shion!"

She flips around to see Odi backing away. Looking down, Shion notices the dark substance has surrounded her, leaving only a small patch of ground clear beneath her feet. Still, it begins to inch ever slowly towards her. She looks up in panic to Odi, whose eyes are still glued to the ground. When her gaze finally drifts upward, it is not at Shion, but further down the path. There are gears turning in Odi's head, Shion knows, because she's thinking the exact thing that Shion would in this situation: just leave. For a moment, Shion thinks Odi is going to be smart, is going to leave her to deal with whatever this is so she can find her own way out of here. Then, she does something that shocks Shion: she extends a hand.

"Do you think you can jump across?" Odi asks, "I-I'll catch you."

Shion nods shakily, puffing out quick, shallow breaths. She closes her eyes and steels herself for a moment, trying not to think about what might happen to her if she touches the shadowy fog floating around her. Images from old movies flash through her head—skin melting off of witches and Nazis—and her body is wracked with shivers. Opening her eyes, she takes one final deep breath, stepping back with one foot. Her eyes meet Odi's as she bends her knees, and with a nod from Odi, she rushes forward and leaps over the darkness. After a moment in the air, her feet land solidly on the other side as Odi's hands wrap around her arms to steady her. "You okay?" she asks Shion.

Shion nods. Odi nods in return, and then looks back to the shadowy substance amassing on the ground. It's arching out towards them faster now, and the two of them only have to share a look before they take off down the path in the opposite direction. It leads them around the edge of the forest, past a coastal looking area, and into a large, enclosed waterfall basin. The cliffs around them are decorated with flowing wisteria trees, the vibrant lavender flowers winding down towards them. Sunlight glistens on the water, and a fresh scent overwhelms Shion. The two girls finally come to a stop under a lone pine tree.

"God," Odi pants, "It's kind of beautiful here."

Shion nods her head, still gazing up at the trees surrounding them,

"I know."

"It almost makes you forget how we got here..." Odi trails off.

Shion looks at Odi, and the two smile at each other for a moment. It really does have that effect, because everything that's happened feels blurry and unsure to Shion. So much had happened in only the half hour—or longer?—that she's been here, it all blends together. Her mind does this sometimes, muddling things until she can barely even remember that they happened. With so much happening in such a short amount of time it's been worse than usual, the only thing feeling solid and clear to Shion being Odi. She's an anchor that Shion's never had before, something to connect to when her mind drifts too far. Odi's gaze finally breaks away, and Shion stays back and watches as she goes right up to the water's edge.

"Not gonna come check this out?" she asks without glancing back.
"Not the strongest swimmer," Shion replies, "Be careful."

That gets Odi to turn and look at her again, affection so clear in her eyes that Shion has to look away. She goes back to twisting the ring on her finger, waiting a few moments before looking back to Odi. She's not looking when Shion's gaze returns to her, instead absolutely entranced by the water. It swirls gently as Odi moves her hand through it, and Shion gets that warm feeling in her chest again, like maybe things are getting better. She thinks it must be this place, causing her to feel like this. It's doing something to her head, twisting her thoughts away from bad things and towards the good. Shion stands up straight, feeling more in control than she has since she stepped through the portal. Very urgently, she realizes that she has no idea where Odi is from or how either of them might get back.

Before she can think about it any more, the water in the pond seems to reach out, snaking up and around Odi's hand. Everything slows around them as she desperately looks to Shion. A moment later, with no time for either of them to try and stop it, Odi is yanked into the water. Without thinking, Shion sheds her jacket and rushes forward. If there's even a chance that she can help Odi, she has to take it. She dives into the pond, cutting through the water. Before she knows it, she's back on her feet somehow, taking in gasping breaths as a soft breeze blows past her. She stumbles a few steps, water splashing beneath her feet. It takes her a few seconds to realize she's standing on actual water, what must be the underside of the surface of the pond she just dove into.

Her eyes begin to drift, taking in the brilliant vision surrounding her. It's flat as far as the eye can see, water sitting still across the ground. The soft, golden sunset reflects off the water, and Shion thinks that if she looked hard enough, she might be able to find the secrets of the universe. She looks up and sees a scattering of clouds in the sky, some glowing with amber light. Beyond the clouds, the cosmos are painted across a blue canvas, hundreds of stars dotting the sky, even shooting through it. A soft rustling noise overtakes her hearing, and whatever panic had mounted in Shion dissipates, leaving her relaxed, if not still a bit confused.

Glancing to her right, Shion sees Odi a couple hundred feet from her. She lets out a breath of relief seeing her new friend alright and lets herself look to her other side, where she sees another girl standing just as far away, still looking up at the stars. The first thing Shion notices is the way her jet black curls coil around her face, with two small buns sitting atop her head. Her dark skin glows in the streaks of starlight surrounding them, and Shion is barely able to make out pink accents in her boots that match her pink pants. She looks friendly enough, but between the black button down shirt and expensive-looking handbag, it seems like she hadn't been previously trekking through the woods, like Shion had. She wonders what brought this girl here—what brought her here, even—and as the girl's eyes meet hers she wonders, too, if the girl is thinking the same thing.

Shion tears her eyes away from the girl and looks out in front of her, seeing another two kids across the way. The two look like they could be related, with nearly identical shades of tan skin and dark brown hair. The boy is standing protectively in front of the girl, who seems a few years younger than him. He's wearing dark cargo pants and a simple, deep green shirt. There's a curious look on his face, but his eyes dart between the other three, clearly weary. Behind him, the girl looks afraid. Her eyes are wide beneath her wire-rim glasses, and she has a hand firmly on the boy's shoulder. She looks down in the middle of this unlikely gathering of kids, and something starts to rumble deep beneath the watery surface.

All of them are at just the perfect distance for Shion's eyes to fail, their faces blurred in an infuriating way. She wants to know these people, because she feels like she already does, in some way. She tries to take a step forward, towards the kids she thinks could be her friends, if given the chance, but finds her feet are stuck in place. There's some unknown force keeping her in place, and Shion thinks that this has to be a punishment for something. But what had she done, to be kept just out of reach of salvation? Something brought her here—to the faces of these other kids—but only enough to dangle the idea of friendship in front of her face without allowing her to reach out and take it. A quick glance towards Odi tells Shion that she's not the only one struggling against these invisible restraints.

Shion opens her mouth but closes it again quickly, brows furrowing. For the first time in her life she wants to break her cardinal rule, be the first to say something—anything—but what could she say, in a situation like this? There's a million things she wants to know, but she's not even sure where to start. She hopes that one of them might know, but quick glances to the three unknowns tell her they're just as confused as she is. Her last plea, Shion looks back to Odi. She looks as though she might say something, but before she's allowed to say it, Shion feels the ground give out beneath her as she's sucked into the water. She thrashes around, kicking desperately to break whatever surface she can find. In vain, she quickly realizes, because the light of the world slowly begins to fade until darkness takes her.

~~~[ 🕸 ]~~~

Shion's senses come back to her slowly. She doesn't hear anything except the rush of wind past her ears, and the only thing she feels is the rough asphalt beneath her fingers. Asphalt? Does that mean—Shion bolts upright, taking in heaving, shallow breaths. She looks around frantically, seeing the same gaunt trees of her woods arching up over her. The fog is lighter than before, but it suffocates her just the same, snaking its way into her lungs. Something heavy weighs down on her chest, but before she lets it settle, she forces her eyes shut and focuses on her breathing. She's back in her world, and maybe whatever just happened wasn't real, but right now is. Inhaling deeply, she begins to come back to herself, feeling the warmth of the sun against her cheek. She opens her eyes and looks through the trees, beams of light shooting through the cracks between them. It must have been hours, because the sun is setting now, that same golden glow from the other world. The same golden glow, leaking into her world.

Shion doesn't know if what happened was real. Something in her brain tells her it's not possible, that it's just another daydream that went a little too far, but then a cold wind breezes past her and she notices something crucial. Her jacket is gone, left in the other world when she dove into the pond after Odi. Of course, it's not real proof, but it's enough hope for her heart to soar. She barely got to know Odi, let alone any of the others, but there's something buzzing beneath her skin and her heart is hammering, and she thinks that maybe, for the first time since she was ten-years-old, there's a chance someone out there might care about her. She doesn't have any idea of how or where to start, but Shion knows she has to find the others. If not find them, then at least find that damn gate again, because now that she knows they're out there, she won't be able to rest until she sees them again.

## Anesthesia



There were moments when we would share bits of our lives, snippets of laughter that felt almost sacred. I sought meaning in her words, searching for shifts in tone. Some moments flowed effortlessly, while others crackled with unspoken tension. Each interaction was a delicate dance, keeping my footing on uncertain ground.

The feeling was strange—faint but undeniable. It was no longer the familiar bleakness, but a soft, muted indigo, like the sky just before night. Calm, yet edged with uncertainty, it hinted at something deeper, something new, still lost in the haze.

Even in those brighter moments—when the indigo faded like a sunset spilling into lavender—a quiet emptiness tugged at my thoughts, lingering like twilight. It wasn't overwhelming, but it reminded me that the light was never truly mine to hold. I was caught between two colors, two states of mind, never fully in one or the other.

I yearned to delve deeper into our conversations, but vulnerability felt daunting. The warmth of her presence, however distant, came with a chill of uncertainty. I craved her laughter, the lightness of our exchanges, yet I couldn't shake the fear that it could all slip away in an instant.

The familiar ache of wanting settled in my bones, a reminder of the grayness I had tried to escape.

I told myself, again and again, that I didn't need her. I kept my distance, convinced that silence was safer. Yet, with each message that came in, that silence frayed at the edges. There was a strange pull, an inexplicable reluctance to respond right away. But deep down, I craved our conversations more than I ever admitted, even to myself.

Some mornings, I'd stare at her texts, letting them sit unread, pretending I hadn't seen them. But they lit something small inside me—a flicker of warm, muted amber, a color I hadn't felt in years. We'd talk about nothing—weather, music, trivialities—but each word sparked something in me, drawing me back, waiting for the next chance to connect.

One time, she sent me a picture of the sky, a soft lavender at sunset, streaked with orange. You have to see this, she said. I didn't respond right away, not because I didn't want to—but because for a second, I couldn't. There was something about the colors, something that tugged at my thoughts in a way I couldn't quite explain. Maybe it was that the world had never looked like that to me. But through her eyes, it almost did.

I began to realize I liked it—the talking. For those few minutes, the weight of the world felt lighter. Doubt lingered, waiting for the moment everything would fall apart, but somewhere deep inside, a quiet hope flickered. Maybe, just maybe, this time, things could be different. It wasn't that everything had shifted. Most days still felt gray, fading in and out like static. But the way she saw things, the way she laughed or asked questions, made everything brighter. I tried to push it away, but the feeling grew—a pale gold glowing just beneath the surface. There was one night, after hours of backand-forth messages, when she said something that caught me off guard: I like talking to you. Simple.

Unassuming. But it hit me like a wave, rippling through the emptiness. I stared at the words, trying to make sense of what I felt.

And in those moments, I caught myself wondering: What if this didn't end like everything else? What if, for once, I let myself feel something more?

As the days turned into weeks, I noticed how easily her laughter would linger in my mind, long after our conversations ended. It felt strange, how a simple exchange could spark something that ignited the dullness of my everyday life. I found myself looking forward to our chats, the way she'd send a message that illuminated the grayness of my routine, brightening even the most mundane moments.

Maybe it was her way of saying my name, soft and lilting, that made the world feel just a little less heavy. When she shared bits of herself—her dreams, her fears, her favorite songs—I could almost taste the colors she painted with her words. A gentle warmth began to blossom in my chest, a feeling I hadn't expected, like the first light of dawn breaking through the night.

I'd often catch myself replaying our interactions, those little moments when her eyes sparkled with mischief, or when a shared silence spoke volumes. It was as if each memory added another brushstroke to the canvas of my life, shifting the palette from muted hues to something more vibrant. Even in the backdrop of my lingering emptiness, there was a newfound brightness creeping in, subtle yet unmistakable.

But fear always lingered, an undercurrent that shadowed the budding connection. Would she still be there if I revealed too much? If I dared to let my guard down? I often found myself hesitating before replying to her texts, my mind a flurry of questions and anxieties, but there was no denying the pull I felt towards her.

I wanted to share more with her, to dive deeper into those conversations that made my heart race. She was becoming my favorite person, slowly, almost imperceptibly, yet the realization weighed on me like a fragile secret I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

In those moments, the colors around me began to shift again—a subtle infusion of rose, a delicate hue that whispered of warmth and longing. But just as quickly as the thought emerged, I buried it beneath layers of uncertainty. How could I let her in when I still felt so lost?

## Chainsaw



### ONE

We cruised through the mist on an empty highway in Jack's SUV, somewhere in the rainforest of Washington State. An impenetrable fortress of pines guarded the forest on both sides of the road. A bald eagle surveyed the landscape from above. Jack's music was giving me a headache.

"Would you please turn that down?" I yelled over heavy guitars.

"No way bro, this is classic Limp Bizkit. Fred Durst is an absolute legend." He turned it up and sang along, "I pack a chainsaw. I'll skin your ass raw. And if my day keeps going this way, I just might break something tonight."

Jack is only about ten years younger than me, but he just discovered nu-metal. He was really into country last year. Today he wore a black t-shirt with white Adidas stripes down the shoulders and "KORN" scrawled on his chest. His black cargo pants were so baggy that someone twice his size might be able to fit their entire torso into one of the legs. He keeps telling me he's going to put his hair in dreadlocks when it gets long enough. I'd never say this to his face, but he needs a reminder that he's a grown-ass man and that the year is 2024.

One thing that can't be disputed about Jack, though, is his talent for paranormal investigation. The shame of being spotted in public with him is worth it; the guy knows what he's doing. He's not afraid to take risks to get what we need.

Like this one time, he climbed three stories up a support beam inside of a church because the ladder was missing and we thought we could see shadows moving in the attic. He captured some of the clearest paranormal evidence I've ever seen up there. Flawless video of a full-body apparition.

We don't agree on a lot, but I'm glad to call Jack my co-investigator. I just wish he had better taste in music.

#### **TWO**

The mist had evolved into a light drizzle. I watched water build up on the windshield and then get wiped away with a squeak and a little thud. Jack slowed the SUV. "Is this the place?"

I pulled out my phone and double checked the GPS, "Yeah, looks like it."

The SUV turned off of the highway and into the forest onto a gravel driveway. Jack finally silenced the music. "I don't see anything. The hous must be way back there."

"Well the guy did warn us that it's out in the middle of nowhere. Apparently he wasn't kidding. When's the last time we even saw another building?"

After zigging and zagging down the driveway, we approached the house. It was a modest size, not huge, not tiny. The wood panel exterior had seen better days. A handful of roof shingles were missing. The front windows were boarded up. The forest encroached upon the house. Gigantic boughs grew overhead and threatened to crash on the roof during the next storm. An overflowing dumpster and a pickup truck were parked out front.

The front door opened. "Hey guys, I really appreciate you coming out here. My name is Albert. Please come in." Jack and I stepped out of the rain and followed Albert through the house's unfinished entryway. In fact, the entire interior of the house was unfinished. The floor was nothing more than cold, exposed concrete. Naked wooden frames stood where walls should have been. The smell of sawdust permeated the air. Albert set his hard hat down on a plywood countertop in what I could only assume was the kitchen.

"Our pleasure. My name is Mason Hawkins," I shook his hand.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Jack Bagels." They shook hands.

"Sorry about the mess guys. A couple of newlyweds in California just bought this place. I'm the guy they hired to fix it up before they move in next summer."

"Not a problem at all," said Jack. "So I hear that you and your crew have been having paranormal experiences here."

"Yes sir. We're hoping you could figure out what's going on and let us know if it's safe to keep working."

"You called the right team," I said. "Why don't you tell us about what you guys have been experiencing?"

"Sure thing, but I suppose I'd better start with a little history on the previous owners."

Jack fished around in his cargo pants pocket until he found a note-pad and pen.

Albert continued, "It was an older couple that used to live here. I'm not sure how long they were here for, but at some point they decided they wanted to do a little construction down by the creek at the edge of the property. The husband died in a tree cutting accident while he was clearing

a spot for whatever they wanted to build down there."

"I've always been fascinated by death," said Jack in a deadpan tone. Silence.

"After he died, I think his wife started losing her mind, and tell you the truth, I don't blame her. I think I would've too, in her shoes, all alone out here after losing your life partner. By all accounts, she never left this place again until she was carried out in a body bag at the age of 96. The place has sat abandoned ever since."

"Jesus."

"She left it a total mess here, you should've seen it before we started last month. You'll see once we go outside, I haven't even touched the rest of the property yet."

"I tell you what, why don't you show us around the property and we can start our investigation from there." I told him.

"Sure thing. I think it probably makes the most sense for us to start down by the creek. We can take the four-wheeler down there."

#### THREE

Jack and I sat in the back seats of the four-wheeler and Albert drove. We jostled down a narrow dirt road, if you could even call it a road. It was barely more than a trail, just wide enough for the four-wheeler. I had to shield my face everytime a stray branch managed to work its way into the metal frame of the four-wheeler.

The rain came down a little harder now. The forest drank it all in. The trees were a little more vibrant. The ferny underbrush stood a little taller. The smell alone was enough to remind you that you weren't in the city anymore. The clean natural air made me feel like I'd just woken up from a great night's sleep.

Albert wasn't joking earlier. The forest here was a mess. Junk was scattered all over the place. On the ride down to the creek we saw a refrigerator, a rusted out school bus, a set of bowling pins, a surfboard, a kid's plastic playhouse, a tattered and moldy sofa, a basketball hoop, a pile of tires, multiple cars, an old front door laying in the dirt with ferns growing over it, a golf bag, and on and on and on. Just a whole bunch of random shit thrown all over the woods.

"If you ignore all the trash, I still think it's beautiful out here," said Albert. "It sure beats the heck out of the gigs I normally get back in the suburbs." "How big is this property?" I asked.

"Just about ten acres. Give or take a little."

Jack was grinning beside me. "You know, we don't normally investigate locations this big, especially ones that are outdoors like this. We're more used to doing indoor locations like hospitals, prisons, and churches."

Oh no. I think I know where this is going. He continued, "If you don't mind, I think I'll try to get in touch with our forest consultant and see if he's able to lend us a hand."

"Fine by me," Albert replied, "They know their stuff?"

"Oh yeah man. No one knows this forest better than he does. He's from this area." Jack was smiling at his phone, "I just sent him a text. He said he'll be here in a second."

The creek was just up ahead. I could make out the distinct sound of flowing water somewhere in the trees.

Something moved in the bushes. A loud branch snapped, and then another. Jack was giddy in his seat. He could barely contain himself. We all saw branches moving ahead of us, about ten feet ahead and ten feet off the ground. Albert slammed on the breaks.

A massive, hairy being emerged from the woods. Standing upright, I'd say he was about twelve feet tall. His arms were uncannily long, reaching almost to the knees on his stocky legs. And his feet, well let's just say that his feet were big. Bigfoot.

Jack jumped out of the four-wheeler and ran towards him. The barrel-chested creature turned and noticed us for the first time, and walked in our direction. His strides were giant. His arms swung rigidly at his sides.

When they approached one another, Jack held a fist up in front of himself. Bigfoot pounded it, they slapped hands, another fist bump, up high, down low, and one more fist bump. "Bigfoot, my dude! What up? Long time no see!" Jack almost sang. They did that thing that bros do where they lock hands and pull each other in for a one armed hug.

"Oh, you know how it is, same ol' same ol'. Just keepin' it real," Bigfoot's voice boomed so low you felt it in your gut almost as much as you heard it. "I got here as soon as I could when I saw your message."

His fur was about the color of a golden retriever. Besides his toowide nose and the bony ridges above his eyes, his facial structure was earily human. I could see real excitement on his face upon reuniting with Jack.

The most striking thing about him, however, were his glowing-red eyes. I could never tell if they reflected light like a cat's eyes in the dark, or if his eyes really did shine blood-red on their own. Either way, they always

gave me the heebie-jeebies.

Albert was still sitting in front of me in the four-wheeler. I couldn't see his face, but I had an idea of what expression he wore.

"So, Albert, this is our forest consultant, Bigfoot." I told him.

"Wait, but—but—how—what—are you s—?"

"Just go with it. Don't ask."

"O-okay. Is-he's not going to hurt any of us, at least, is he?"

Jack put his hand on Bigfoot's back and they laughed about something down the road ahead of us.

"Yeah, don't worry about him. He's a big teddy bear once you get to know him."

I had a similar reaction when I met Bigfoot for the first time. It's a long story. Maybe I'll tell you some other time.

#### **FOUR**

The four-wheeler continued in the rain further down the trail, further from the highway, deeper into the woods. Bigfoot walked in front of us with his big, goofy gait, splashing through puddles. I swear he plays it up sometimes just to mess with people.

The trees seemed thicker down here, closer together. We probably still had a couple hours before nightfall, but the trees were already blocking out most of the light. There was the sound of flowing water nearby.

The closer we got to the creek, the more on-edge I started to feel. After doing as many paranormal investigations as I have, you start to realize that most places aren't actually haunted. Most of the time, people just scare themselves when their plumbing makes an unexpected noise or they see a shadow from a passing car. Add a spooky story about dead people, and you've got yourself a recipe for paranoia. It seems like my job these days is mostly to just reassure people. Until we got down here, I thought this case was going to be another one of those.

But every once in a while, you get to a location and it just doesn't feel right. The hair on your neck stands up. You become more aware. It's almost like you can feel static electricity in the air. It's hard to put it into words, but this, down here by the creek, was definitely one of those locations.

The forest opened up into a clearing, and the lazy creek came into view. Old tree stumps sat low on the ground. Albert stopped the four-wheeler. "Alright guys, this is it. I believe this area is where the previ-

ous owner was working when he had his accident."

Rain was really pouring down now. The creek was shallow and flowed by at a crawl, no deeper than knee level. Birch trees circled the perimeter of the clearing like living prison bars.

Even more junk lay scattered here in the clearing: fishing poles, a propane tank, a pile of rotting lumber, a hospital bed, a chainsaw, shovels, rakes, pickaxes, windchimes laying in the dirt, a naked baby doll leaning on a tree at the edge of the clearing.

We got out of the four-wheeler and followed Albert to the water's edge. Jack's rain-saturated cargo pants flapped against his legs as he walked. The studded belt he wore was really putting in some work today.

"My crew and I used to come down here on our lunch breaks, but the guys stopped 'cause we kept getting spooked. The youngest guy on my crew told me the vibes are off down here."

"I feel that. Shit's wack, yo."

"What was spooking you guys?" Bigfoot asked in his thundering voice.

"You see all those stumps in the ground? Guys would sit on them while they ate their lunches and start to feel sick. Some even say they hear voices in the forest if they sit long enough."

I looked back at all the stumps in the ground. "Alright. So I think what we'll do now is use some of our equipment to do some baseline testing before we start our real investigation tonight."

"Go ahead, by all means."

Jack rifled through a few pockets in his cargo pants before he found a digital audio recorder. "Is that one guy who died here with us now?" he asked no one in particular. No response.

"Hey Jack, can you pass me the polaroid camera?" I asked.

He reached back into his pockets and pulled out the camera.

"Thanks man."

Jack continued asking questions to nobody, and I went to take some photos on the other side of the clearing. I snapped a few and examined them. They all came out blurry. "Huh, that's weird." I turned around to see Bigfoot standing right behind me. "Hey, man. I'm trying to take pictures over here. You know cameras don't work right when you're around." Bigfoot giggled and went back over to talk to Albert, who I could tell was holding back a smile. Good to see those two getting along, at least.

I sat down on a tree stump, and that on-edge static electricity feeling intensified. A minute later, my ears were ringing. Rain drops rolled down

my face, but my skin was going numb. I watched Jack keep asking his questions to no one, but I couldn't hear him anymore. Blackness crept around the edges of my vision. I lost sense of time. It was completely dark now.

Jack shook me out of my trance. "Bro, you alright? You look pale."

I stood up and instantly felt better. "Uh, yeah. I think so. Not sure what happened there. What's up?"

"I think Bigfoot found something."

#### **FIVE**

Jack fished around his cargo pants pockets and found a heavy duty flashlight. I followed him through the torrential downpour on what appeared to be a seldomly used game trail. "He went this way, Albert should be with him already."

"What did he find?"

"I'm not sure, he didn't say anything. But he got that look on his face that he sometimes gets and went straight back into the woods."

We didn't walk very far before we came upon Bigfoot and Albert. Albert turned around when he heard us. His face showed clear signs of distress. "Guys, what's wrong with Bigfoot? Does he do this a lot?"

Bigfoot stood completely still on a tree stump, as if he were carved from granite and the stump was his pedestal. His eyes were closed. I couldn't tell if he was even breathing or not.

"Bigfoot, bro, are you alright?"

No response. Jack went up to him and punched him on the arm, enough to try and wake him up. Bigfoot's eyes shot open the moment Jack made contact. They glowed a vibrant forest green.

"Leave this place," his voice boomed like it always did, but there was a different, less human quality to it. Or maybe—his voice hadn't changed at all. There was a second, feminine, voice that echoed his own. It came from all around us. This new voice was coming from the forest itself.

The two voices spoke as one, "You humans are all the same. Destroying me, making sacrifices to me, and now investigating me. Pathetic. You try to manipulate me. Try to bend me to your will, if only you could find which thread to pull.

"The man who lived here before, Elija, intended to clear my limbs away for his own self-righteous wants. As if I hadn't given all that he needed already. He used his chainsaw to steal from me."

I heard Jack whisper, "He skinned her ass raw."

"What was that?" Bigfoot asked.

"Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt. Please continue."

"So, as I was saying, he with his chainsaw slaughtered a score of my trees before I smote him down. And of course, that left Gwyneth, his poor, poor widow. She was torn apart by her husband's death. She made sacrifice after sacrifice to me. She believed she could make amends by giving where Elija had taken. Her worldly possessions all strewn about my woods. Like I said, you humans are all pathetic."

Albert was standing right next to me, but Jack was gone. I looked around but he was nowhere to be found.

"And now you're here. You thought you could communicate with Elija and Gwyneth here in their afterlives. You dare to seek beyond the veil of life? And in so doing you enlist my beautiful creature. Tricked him into joining your ranks. Sasquatch was never meant to fraternize with humans. But it's over now. He is back in my possession. And so I demand once more: Leave. This. Place."

Albert spoke, "No, please, hold on, we're cleaning the forest up for you. Once we finish with the house, my crew and I are going to come down here and clear all the junk out for you."

"For me? Ha!" Bigfoot's laugh echoed through the trees as he reached down and scooped Albert up in one hand.

I couldn't stop thinking about Jack. "Where the hell is he?"

"Sure, you'll clear it out, but only for someone else to come back and begin the cycle anew. I say no, never again." Bigfoot tossed Albert over his shoulder as if he were a piece of garbage. Albert's scream faded into the trees beyond the rain.

Then Bigfoot looked at me, his glowing green eyes full of hate, illuminating the forest around us. Then he closed them, extinguishing the only light source.

When he reopened his eyes, they glowed familiar red again. He looked at me with a pained expression that pleaded and apologized all at once.

He closed his eyes again, and when they opened they were back to that hateful forest green. A murderous grin stretched his face. This wasn't the same Bigfoot that I knew and loved anymore. He belonged to the forest now, and the forest wanted me dead.

At that moment we both heard the sound of a small motor overhead. We both looked up. Jack was standing on a branch directly above us, rainwater dripping on our heads from the hems of his cargo pants. He held a

chainsaw high over his head. Channeling his inner Fred Durst, he screamed, "I just might break your fuckin' face tonight," And then he jumped, chain first, directly onto Bigfoot's head.

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# Hold Me Without Hurting Me

Destiny Garcia

The tension was suffocating. A silence so heavy that even the drop of a pen could shatter the fragile world currently surrounding them like a straight-jacket.

They didn't dare breathe, instead choosing to sit in the silence that was created from her revelation. Angela sat behind the wheel, staring blankly ahead, while Lucy watched her, searching for any sign of what she was thinking. But Angela only watched the rain, her expression unreadable.

Every part of Lucy's heart ached to know how Angela felt about her revelation. She wants to know that the words she spoke didn't just destroy the very relationship that she held dear.

Whispers of 'I love you,' or rather 'I think I am in love with you,' echoed around them. Despite her better judgment she spoke again, only adding flame to the fuel.

"Angela, I said I love you."

She'd broken the dam. Angela's small exhale was proof of that, she hated that it wasn't an exhale of relief. No this was something heavier, more worn down.

"Don't say that," she finally spoke.

Three words for three words. They hit Lucy like a freight train, leaving nothing but a deepening pit in her stomach.

"Why not?" Lucy asked with a soft bit of voice; she was afraid that if she spoke any louder she'd shatter the already broken moment they had settled into.

She watched as Angela's grip on the steering wheel tightened. She still wasn't looking at Lucy, her eyes still locked on the windshield, as if the droplets of water were more interesting than her and her confession. Lucy almost wished the windshield collapsed, maybe then she'd have Lucy's attention.

Finally, after a moment of silence that nearly broke Lucy, Angela spoke up.

"Because I can't say it back."

As if it wasn't silent before, suddenly Lucy felt the world quiet down, in a state of mourning for the words that she just heard.

Lucy was usually a bubble of words, sunshine, and life. But now, however, every single word she's ever known is suddenly gone. When she needed them most—to salvage whatever she could of this already breaking

friendship — she had nothing.

Angela's refusal to even acknowledge her was like daggers straight through the heart.

Say something, her mind practically begged. No, pleaded, on their knees pleading that Lucy would take whatever courage she had left and save the friendship of the one person she held near and dear.

Instead, it's Angela who speaks up.

"You don't love me," She said.

"How can you know that?" She finally asks. "How can you know what I feel?"

"Luce," her nickname sounded bitter coming from Angela. "I know you. I know how much you love to chase things you can't have."

"You think that's what this is?" Lucy asked, utterly shocked her friend could say that.

"I think you confused friendship with love," Angela said. "I care about you, you are my best friend, but Lucy, that's all we ever were, friends. You mean the world to me, but I can't love you in the way you think you love me."

Lucy found herself once again opening her mouth to argue, but coming up with nothing, not a single word to speak back with in retaliation. The temptation came to scream in impromptu retaliation. Instead, she kept silent, as if daring Angela to keep burying their grave. Lucy may have brought the shovel, but Angela was doing the digging.

"One day," Angela continued, "you will understand what I am saying."

"One day." Lucy repeated. Right. One day. As if she was some petulant child who simply couldn't understand the gravity of her words. She's not a child.

When might that one day come? Tomorrow? Next week? Next month? Next year? When would it be?

Lucy's fingers twitched slightly, aching to reach towards Angela and somehow make her- no, show her that this wasn't some childhood crush, some minimal infatuation with the one person who showed interest in her. But another part of her was questioning everything. Every moment they shared, every laugh, every touch, every flutter of the heart began to become a questionable experience.

Angela shifted rather uncomfortably. She glanced over at Lucy, her eyes full of regret and a bit of uncertainty. "I have to go, Luce," she said softly, as if she hadn't just broken Lucy's heart.

Lucy barely nodded, she doesn't even think she nodded properly. The numbness began to overtake her body. Her mind, usually awake with thoughts and emotions, felt eerily quiet.

Angela hesitated, as if debating if she should even reach for her, but a part of her wanted to reach out. Her fingers reach out, delicately brushing the air near Lucy's smaller hand. "I want you to know," She started. "I never wanted to hurt you. Never. You are my best friend and I do not want to lose you. You are my best friend, no matter what."

She moved, hoping to end the distance between them but before she could make contact, Lucy flinched away, as if Angela's touch burned. Angela froze now, suddenly feeling the weight that this conversation will leave on them.

"Luce," she whispered.

Lucy backed away, reaching for the door handle. She couldn't be in here anymore. The storm inside, which only seemed to grow in size, suddenly seemed more appealing than being here.

"Don't," Lucy finally managed, "Just don't." Her heart pounded in her chest, drowning out the sound of the raindrops pelting the roof of the car. Something inside her refused to let it end like this—not with unspoken words still clawing at her throat.

With a deep breath, she shoved the door open and stepped out into the downpour. The rain soaked through her clothes almost instantly, plastering her hair to her face. But none of it mattered.

"Angela," Lucy called, her voice shaky but loud enough to be heard over the storm. Angela turned her head slowly. Her entire body was tense, and despite the rain Lucy could see that.

Lucy gripped the edge of the car door as if it was the only thing holding her upright. "I wish I didn't feel this way," she said, the words trembling on the edge of desperation. "Believe me, I tried not to. But I do."

Angela still didn't move, but her breath hitched audibly.

Lucy took a step forward. "And no matter what you say, no matter how you try to make it about confusion or chasing something impossible—none of that changes how I feel. Not even when you broke my heart." Her voice cracked on the last word, and the ache in her chest threatened to crush her.

For a moment, it felt like the rain had swallowed the world. The look in her eyes—equal parts sorrow and something unspoken—wasn't the reassurance Lucy had hoped for.

Neither of them moved. Neither of them spoke. They just waited

there, suspended in a moment that neither rain nor heartbreak could wash away.

Lucy didn't wait for Angela to say anything else. There were no words that could make it better. No words that could undo what had been said or the fracture that now lay between them. So, she turned on her heel and walked away.

The rain was relentless, drenching her to the bone. Every step felt heavier than the last, as if the weight of her heartbreak had seeped into the very ground. Her hands trembled at her sides, but she refused to stop or look back.

Somewhere, deep down, she had always feared this moment—that loving Angela would mean losing her. And now, that fear had come true. The one person she thought she'd never lose had slipped through her fingers, and there was no going back.

Behind her, Angela sat frozen in the car, her grip white-knuckled around the steering wheel. The windshield wipers struggled to keep up with the rain, but she couldn't bring herself to drive away. It was as if leaving meant accepting the finality of it.

She had meant to protect them both, to say the right thing and keep their friendship safe. But now, in the aftermath of her own words, all she felt was an emptiness she couldn't name.

The friendship they had shared, the easy laughter and late-night talks, the comfort of knowing Lucy would always be there—it was gone. Maybe not entirely, but enough that the loss ached like a wound she couldn't close.

The rain continued to fall, drowning out the sound of her shallow, uneven breaths. In the distance, Lucy disappeared from sight, her silhouette swallowed by the storm.

They mourned together, though neither could see the other. Lucy for the love she'd confessed, and Angela for the friendship she'd lost. And as the rain fell, it felt like an ending—one they hadn't wanted, but one they couldn't undo.



## Melody of the Moons





#### Before

"She has one month of life left."

The physician watched Sayer as she delivered the news. This was often the time when an expression of shock would fall across the patient's face, or they would begin weeping, or perhaps even become agitated. Instead, her grave news seemed to seep through Sayer and drain out through his fingertips, which he kept clattering against the oaken desk. Besides the clacking of his nails striking hardwood, Sayer gave no other indication that the news affected him.

He just stared at the physician, stormy gray eyes full of focus, his mind seemingly elsewhere.

"I'm very sorry, sir."

Still no response.

Click click CLACK. Click click CLACK.

His nails began making imprints in the hardwood.

A bit odd, the physician thought, but not mind boggling. People often have very diverse reactions to news of impending doom or dread. The human mind, or any sentient consciousness really, simply cannot comprehend what it is to not be alive, so when confronted with that reality, the brain begins to conjure unique sensations and behaviors.

Still, though. Despite her internal dialogue, the physician couldn't quite place why Sayer's response, or lack thereof, discomforted her so. She knew him as a fairly intelligent man, so perhaps he was weighing his options? But what was that expression illustrated across his furrowed face... It appeared almost like...

#### Determination?

"There are options we can partake in to minimize her pain moving forward, mostly non-invasive. I suggest you visit with her at least three times a week for the next—"

#### SccccrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrATCH.

Nails dragging across surface, tearing into wood as they move. The next sound was the noise of Sayer's mahogany chair being slid along the hickory hardwood floor.

"Thank you, your services will no longer be required" Sayer said in monotone, concluding his interruption. "If you discover any new information or treatments, please send for us."

He stepped out of the room, gently closing the alder door behind him.

The physician watched the doorway for a while, moderately puzzled. When she returned to her responsibilities, she began clicking her fingernails against the surface of her desk.

### Day 1

Sayer stood over his woodworking bench, his hands working like the wind as he muttered to himself.

"One month... The two moons... How appropriate... How comedic..."

He lifted the varnish cloth off of the instrument. His hands glided over the violin's arch. Beautiful finished willow. The walnut oil did wonders in coating the instrument, making it smooth to the touch. His hands continued, moving across the bridge, climbing up the neck, and caressing the violin's scroll.

It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do. Despite how the mistakes gnawed at him, perfection could only be reserved for one project now.

Knock, Knock, KNOCK.

Sayer grit his teeth in surprise.

"One moment!"

Sayer scurried across the room, shoving the protruding contents of a nearby wardrobe back inside of it and slamming the doors. He then produced a silver key from his front pocket, walked over to the western corner of the room, and locked the basement door. From his rear pocket, he removed the varnish cloth and draped it over the violin, sitting on the bench. Only then did he turn to face the knocking, unlock the deadbolt, and open the door leading back into the hallway. A lone silhouette of a child stood in the doorway, superior light from the hall spilling past her small frame and long, poofy hair into the dim workshop.

"Papa, why do you keep your workshop locked so often now?" Said the child, her voice soft and weak.

Sayer took a deep breath, and a somber smile began to emanate across his face. "Because Maryanne, I have been working on a surprise for you. Come in, please."

He allowed her into the confines of the stuffy workshop. Maryanne didn't come in here very often, and to her it felt like the workshop got slightly darker every time she witnessed it. Sayer guided them towards his workbench as he stepped behind her and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, explaining as they walked—

"The news... wasn't uplifting, my daughter. The physician told me that your illness may only grow worse. But to circumvent such dread, I have been working to alleviate your pain. Remember your cracked violin?"

Maryanne did not demonstrate surprise or fear when confronted with Sayer's news. She merely looked up at him and replied, "I do."

"Well," Sayer replied as he removed the cloth, "What do you think of this one?"

He revealed the instrument in all its majesty, a nearby lantern casting light upon it while illuminating the instrument's quality in naked glory. It was now as if the violin itself was the only source of light in the room.

"The tailpiece is too long by millimeters. The top-block could be rounded more. The sound posts may be too large," Sayer thought to himself.

"It's beautiful!" Shouted Maryanne, lunging for the instrument immediately. She cradled it as if it were a child of her own.

Sayer's smile returned, without him realizing that it had retreated for a moment. "I'm glad you like it," he said warmly, then arched his back and leaned in closer to Maryanne before whispering "And there's more to come. Another surprise, even better than this."

She turned to him with an excited smile, which warmed his soul. To witness her smile had been a rare delicacy for a number of years now. "Really?!" She squeaked.

"Yes Maryanne. I only need to work for a bit longer over the coming weeks, but this project will be so magnificent it will bring shame to that violin when compared."

She paused at that. "Nothing can or should bring shame to this, Papa. But... Um... It doesn't have strings?"

"Not yet. But I will snatch some from the market next time I go, I promise."

She smiled once more, and the room no longer felt so dim. He guided her away from the workshop so he could prepare supper, knowing he would return the moment Maryanne fell asleep.

At the table, Sayer stared at his stagnant bowl of stew. He pondered on the upcoming conjunction of the planet's moons, and how fate must exist, as the alignment would occur exactly one month from that very evening. What was once a project of hope to Sayer had now become his only chance.

He had to get back to work.

## Day 5

Maryanne sat on her bed, her room bathed in moonlight, feeling the cool breeze drift in through her open window and prickle the skin of her bare arms. Her fingers ran idly along the smooth wood of her new violin, still without strings, as her eyes wandered to the forest's edge. Just as she was about to lie back down, a flicker of light caught her attention—a faint glow, dancing through the trees.

#### A fairy?

She blinked, leaning closer to the window, eyes widening. The tiny creature hovered mid-air, casting an ethereal glow that illuminated the dark underbrush. The same kind of creature she had only heard of from picture books. It twirled in mid air, and moved itself back and forth, between inside and outside Maryanne's window, as if gesturing towards the forest that stood directly across from it.

Without thinking, Maryanne slipped off her bed, her heart fluttering along with the strange magic in the air. She crept to the door, her breathing shallow, pausing only to make sure Sayer wasn't nearby. She hesitated once her hand touched the doorknob. Her Papa had always told her that the forest was no place for children, that strange things could unfold there, things that can harm little boys and girls. She had believed him because the forest always looked so dark, but something about the fairy made her feel safe, made her feel like there was a light in the forest waiting for her. And surely, Papa wouldn't come out of his workshop tonight regardless. Who was she to resist a call from nature, especially when any day could be her last? She turned the doorknob.

As soon as Maryanne's feet touched the grass, the fairy zoomed into the forest. The girl followed, her pale nightgown trailing behind her as her steps became quicker, desperate to keep up. The fairy danced through the trees, twirling and spinning in midair, only hanging back when Maryanne would stumble or pause to catch her breath. Right as Maryanne began to feel worried she was trekking too far into the unknown, she found herself and the

fairy arriving at a small glen nestled deep within the forest.

In the middle of the glen was an abnormally large tree stump, bathed in moonlight, and upon it—a set of coiled shiny strings, gleaming in the soft light as if it were a prize for her.

Maryanne stared at them, her breath catching in her chest. They were unlike anything she had seen, shimmering silver, glowing faintly like the fairy who had brought her here. A sudden, quiet excitement bubbled in her chest. She stepped closer, gingerly touching the strings, wondering if she should take them.

"Perhaps someone left them here..." she uttered to herself, glancing around. She pulled her hand back, hesitant. Maybe Sayer wanted her to find this? But if not, then she could be considered a thief, and she hated thieves.

"I'll leave them for now," she whispered, more to herself than the fairy.
"But if they're still here when I return..."

Without another thought, she turned on her heel and ran back home, heart racing. She snatched up her violin and rushed back to the glen, finding the strings still glimmering on the stump, as if they had waited just for her.

With trembling hands, she began to string her violin. The forest was still as she began threading the strings through the pegs of the instrument. Despite the unfamiliarity of her environment, she felt safe here, on this big stump. She could almost feel the tall pines peering down to watch her work with intent. It felt similar to the feeling of being watched, while knowing the watcher was praying for you.

The moment the last string was tightened, the violin felt... complete. She drew the bow across the strings, and the forest was filled with the most beautiful sound—melodic, mysterious and rich, like a song written from the stars. Her notes sailed through the air similar to soft whispers of wind, the melody blending with the rustling leaves and the creaking of old trees. She had never played so effortlessly.

As she finished, a rustling from the underbrush startled her. A raccoon

padded out, upright, standing on its hind legs. It stared at her for a few moments, its face expressionless and its eyes intense. Then it suddenly spoke in a soft voice that seemed like it didn't quite match its appearance.

"That was wonderful," it said, its tiny paws clasping together. "Truly magnificent!"

Maryanne blinked at it, her violin slipping slightly from her grip. "You can... Can you talk?"

The raccoon tilted its head and nodded. "Of course. Who wouldn't want to speak after hearing such beautiful music?"

Maryanne's eyes softened, her heart filling with pride. "Thank you... My Papa made this violin for me. He's why the sound carries so far."

The raccoon's nose twitched, and its head tilted slightly. "Your Papa must be very talented. The two of you have that in common. But I can see a sadness in your face... You're worried about him, aren't you?"

She hesitated, lowering her violin. "He's been locked in his workshop for days. He forgets things now... like the strings. He's working on a surprise, he says. I hope it's worth it."

A cough escaped her lips, sharp and sudden. She winced, clutching her chest. The raccoon's eyes narrowed with concern.

"You should rest, young one. All animals need their strength."

Maryanne forced a smile. "I will. But I like this place. Just one more song..."

### Day 12

Sayer wandered through the sparsely populated marketplace of the village, furious that the previous night's work had been fruitless. Chestnut was too sturdy to be suspended by anything. Linden had been surprisingly unhelpful. Oak, as always, was stubborn, and ugly. Nothing was working, and his

timeframe for finishing a project had never been so thin.

Tension didn't dominate his mind though, because between the worries and woes, his thoughts would diverge elsewhere—drifting back to the sound of Maryanne's violin. Her playing had become more beautiful, more harmonious... and he wished, just once, that the workshop walls wouldn't muffle the sweet tones. Just once—

"Sir?" A gruff voice snapped him from his thoughts. "Sir. I said that wood is out of stock."

The Shopkeeper, a burly, hairy man with presence, stood before him, gesturing to the empty wheelbarrow in a row of many.

Sayer blinked, collecting himself, and after a moment, he clenched his jaw. "What do you mean, out of stock?"

"The rarest kind, sir—eldenwood—won't arrive until next month. There have been fewer and fewer shipments of it coming in. Foresters say they ain't finding much of it anymore throughout the Commune. It's a rare shipment, like I said... Takes time."

The world around Sayer seemed to slow, the chatter of the marketplace fading into the background.

Next month.

He needed it now.

He needed that particular wood—strong enough to contain the delicate, life-filled ingredients it would hold. Waiting was not a choice.

"Next month?" His voice dropped, his tired gray eyes narrowing.

"I'm afraid so..." the Shopkeeper replied, somewhat nervous under Sayer's sudden scrutiny. "Y'know, you might've come at a good time, we've been waiting on this shipment for a number of months now. Must be fate that you needed it so close to its delivery."

Sayer tuned out the Shopkeeper's words as his eyes flicked toward the man's window, where within he noticed a large, beautifully crafted nightstand. Dark— almost black, but with hints of crimson undertones. Small amounts of light from outdoors softly reflecting off of a subtle grain pattern. Nature and Craftsmanship, harmoniously intertwined. Elden, without a doubt. His pulse quickened.

"Very well. I'll see you then." Sayer said, walking away.

Later that night, the village slept in stillness, unaware of the shadowy figure that slinked through the shopkeeper's yard. The Shadow moved silently, its hands deft as they picked the lock of the backdoor and slipped inside. The figure crept towards the sleeping man, who snored roughly in the bedroom. With one hand, the silhouette uncorked a vial, tipping it carefully to the shopkeeper's lips.

For long minutes, he stood there, staring. Watching the rise and fall of the man's chest, he had to ensure the potion took effect.

Satisfied, he moved to the nightstand, dragging it across the floor to the backdoor and loading it onto a palette. The racket seemed deafening in the stillness of the night, but the shopkeeper did not stir. Nor would he, The Shadow mused grimly, for quite some time.

## Day 18

Maryanne stood at the edge of the workshop door, her hand hovering over the knob, but once again, it was locked. Her father had become more distant in recent days, and the door to his workshop had been shut and locked more than ever before. She pressed her ear against the wood, straining to hear anything from the other side: hammering, sawing, anything that might give her a hint of what he was doing in there. But all she heard was silence.

"Papa?" she called softly, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

No answer.

She bit her lip, frustration bubbling up inside her. She knocked again, louder this time.

"I want to get in! Please!"

Moments later, the door groaned open just a crack, and Sayer's face appeared, shadowed and weary. He looked older, as though time had weighed on him more heavily in the last weeks than all the years before.

"I'm sorry, Maryanne," he said, his voice unnaturally soft. "It's not ready yet. You can't come in."

She felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes, but she didn't want to cry—not in front of him, not after he'd made her such a wonderful instrument. Instead, she nodded, biting back her feelings, and turned away. He must have known what he was doing. He had to.

That night, Maryanne sat by her window, staring into the darkness. The moonlight spilled through the trees, and when she glanced toward the forest's edge, something caught her eye. A familiar figure stood there—a raccoon, upright on its hind legs, staring directly at her.

Its eyes gleamed in the pale light, unblinking, watching her with an intensity that sent a chill running down her spine. But despite such forthcomings, there was something else in its gaze, something... comforting. A sense of companionship. A friend. She hadn't spoken to the raccoon since their last encounter, but seeing it there, so still... It made her feel less alone.

A spark of excitement ignited within her, and before she could think twice, she was pulling on her cloak, slipping out of the house, and running into the night. The raccoon didn't move, but watched her approach, its little head tilting slowly as she drew near.

Inside the glen, without a word, she sat on the stump, resting her violin on her lap. The raccoon remained, its eyes glimmering in the moonlight, as if waiting for her to play.

And so she did.

The bow naturally slid across the strings, producing a sound so pure it seemed to vibrate in the air around her. The melody flowed out of her with a life of its own, echoing through the forest. The trees swayed gently to the rhythm, and the creatures of the night seemed to pause and listen. It was a song filled with longing, hope, and something else she couldn't quite place—a yearning for something just out of reach.

In the workshop, Sayer was asleep at his workbench, his upper body slumped over piles of wood shavings. Above him, a hanging bundle of long, silvery strings swayed lightly, brushing against his shoulder with every exhale.

The music had soothed his dreams.

### Day 25

Sayer and Maryanne sat at the dinner table, though neither had much appetite. Sayer stirred his stew absently, his thoughts miles away, while Maryanne played with her spoon, eyes downcast. She had been feeling worse than usual lately, and it was beginning to show. Her cheeks were pale, sunken, and her eyes seemed distant, as though she were looking past the walls of their home at something far away.

Sayer, noticing her silence, set his spoon down and leaned back in his chair. "You know," he began, his voice softer than usual, "I was your age the last time the moons aligned."

Maryanne blinked, glancing up at him, surprised by the sudden clarity in his voice.

"It was a cruel winter," he continued, his eyes wandering upwards and his expression growing pensive. "Our family was starving. My Mama and Papa, and me. We didn't have much to eat, less so than my years as a child, and the cold was relentless. But I remember that night—the moons coming together in the sky. There was something... magical about it. It filled me with courage. I knew, somehow, that things would get better."

He paused, watching her carefully, making sure she was still following. Her eyes were half-lidded, but she was listening, nodding along. The ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of Sayer's lips.

"On the night of the alignment, I found a piece of bread—just a small scrap—at the edge of the wire fence by this house. From it was a trail of breadcrumbs into the woods, and there, at the foot of a great tree in a wooded glen, I found a basket. Inside was enough food to feed us for weeks. Bread, fruit, vegetables—everything we needed to survive the winter."

Maryanne's lips curved into a soft smile, though her eyelids grew heavy. "That... that must have been a kind of magic," she whispered.

"Maybe it was," Sayer said, his voice low and gentle. "Maybe... it was a gift from something greater. And it surprised me. "He shifted in his chair, gently leaning towards his daughter. "This time, my Sunshine, it will surprise you too. I can feel it."

"But Papa. If the forest helped save your own Mama and Papa, then why did you tell me to not go there?" There wasn't much emotion in her voice, but she tilted her head as she asked.

Sayer responded with a deep sigh. "My child, if there's anything that the moons taught me, it's that there is abundance all around us waiting to be discovered. I returned to that Glen shortly after winter, to where I found the basket. I studied it, knowing it had to be significant if the crumbs and the moons led me there. And that's when I looked closer at the tree."

He leaned even closer to her, now whispering as if there were others in the house that may be able to hear. "Eldenwood, Maryanne. A wood like no other. A material that lives longer than any person would." His eyes grew intense. "Once I uncovered its properties, I knew I couldn't let it go to waste. As I grew, I cut that great tree down, and used it to construct our workshop. It took many moon cycles to complete this process. I didn't even finish until after my Mama and Papa died."

Maryanne's eyes grew larger, but she still said nothing. Her expression seemed as if it would be one of fear, if she had enough strength to portray it.

"Oh, my daughter. You are right to assume there were consequences. I informed other Foresters and Woodworkers about the tree, how rare it is, and how to identify it amongst the pines. It became a premium material, one of the most valuable trade items in the Commune. Any structure built with it would outlast its creator. I helped the world discover a new art, one of permanent creations, a discovery I never received credit for." He shook his head slowly.

"But the forest watched me. Critters and animals would stare as I chopped and carved. It felt strange, but as I said, the forest is full of abundance. I wasn't robbing any living thing of its home, it wasn't possible for one man such as myself to disrupt an ecosystem..."

He trailed off, his voice turning into a choke. "Four winters later, we were starving again. There were no more baskets, no more gifts. I knew once my parents were gone, my workshop would be all I'd have left. So they starved. And I was alone. Until I finished my workshop, the same day I met your mother." He paused and took a small sip of water.

"So you see, Maryanne. My passions, my craft, and my love, all came from that day the moons aligned. It was fate that gave me courage, that set me on this path. And I can feel that fate will do the same for you."

He reached across the table to take her hand, but as he did, Maryanne's head drooped, and she slumped in her chair.

Sayer's heart stopped.

"Maryanne?" His voice wavered as he sprung up, sending his chair flying to the floor, and rushed to her side.

She was still breathing—shallow, but steady. Her skin was cool to the touch, her torso limp as he carefully lifted her and carried her to her room. He laid her down in her bed, tucking her beneath the blankets as a tear streaked down his cheek. He tried to remain composed as he stumbled down the hall to retrieve her water.

He whispered, almost to himself, "Don't worry. You'll feel that courage soon, just like I did. We'll see this winter through, and many more after."

He sat by her bedside, watching her pale face, as doubt clawed at the edges of his mind. For the first time in a long while, time felt like it was slowing down.

## Day 30

The house was eerily silent. Maryanne woke to the dying light of dusk, her body weak, trembling with every movement. She blinked, her vision blurry as she pushed herself upright in bed. The house was far too quiet. Her own heartbeat echoed in her ears. She tried to call out for her Papa, but her voice was nothing but a squeak.

Slowly, she swung her legs over the side of the bed, her limbs heavy as iron. She dragged herself to the workshop door, her heart pounding in her chest. The door creaked as she pushed it open, her eyes adjusting to the dim light within.

She was surprised to find the room wasn't locked, even more so to see it was empty. The air was thick with the scent of sawdust and oil, but the workshop felt... different. It was too clean. How could a man who's been here so often keep such a tidy workspace?

Her eyes fell on a nearby cabinet, and she let out a tiny gasp. The doors were slightly ajar, and as she slowly stepped in front of them, the doors suddenly swung open as wooden people spilled out—stiff limbs, lifeless eyes, all suspended by strings that kept them from fully collapsing to the floor. There were so many of them—different sizes, shapes, and faces, some too human, some grotesque and warped.

Maryanne's heart raced as she stumbled backward, her head spinning. The room swayed, and before she could react, darkness consumed her.

Sayer returned home to find the workshop door open. Panic gripped him as he rushed inside, his eyes falling on the scenery before him—Maryanne, collapsed on the floor, surrounded by the marionettes he had tried so hard to keep hidden.

"No!" he cried, collapsing to her side. He scooped her up, cradling her fragile form in his arms. "Not those ones... I had to learn the craft first! None of those will be used, I promise."

His voice cracked as he held her close, rocking back and forth. "I'm so sorry you had to see that."

But there was no time to linger. The moons were already inching closer to their conjunction, and he had to act now, or it would all be for nothing.

With Maryanne in his arms, Sayer fled from the house, his joints screaming in protest with every step. He ignored the pain, his mind focused solely on reaching the glen before it was too late. The clearing where he had left the marionette—the marionette—lay just ahead.

There, on the stump, was the wooden body. Its form was perfected, its expression vacant, dressed in clothes that matched Maryanne's. Sayer's hands trembled as he laid his daughter beside it, his eyes fixed on the bright circle of moonlight filtering through the trees above. The two moons hung heavy in the dark sky, closer than they had ever been.

He stood at the edge of the stump, waiting. Watching.

The alignment was happening.

And Sayer was watching.

And watching.

And yet... nothing.

Sayer's heart drowned as the moments passed, the silence of the forest deafening. No magic. No movement. No sign of life.

He fell to his knees, his soul crushed beneath the weight of failure.

## **Epilogue**

Time had no meaning.

Sayer trudged back toward the house, his arms heavy, his heart numb. He couldn't recall how long he had knelt in that forest clearing, waiting, praying for the moons to bring Maryanne back. But nothing had happened. He would have waited forever, if the forest had given him a sign.

The moons had aligned, and then... passed. The sky, once full of hope, had darkened with an empty silence.

When he finally returned home, his steps were slow, his limbs dragging as though they bore the weight of his defeat. He opened the door to his empty house, and the first thing that hit him was the silence. It was so deep, so suffocating that it seemed to swallow him whole.

There was no Maryanne. Only the echoes of the life he had once known.

He walked past her old violin, past the kitchen where their final meal still sat, cold and forgotten. He entered his workshop and stood for a moment, staring at the tools, the piles of wood shavings, the neat rows of marionettes, now forever useless. The room felt alien to him, as though someone else had lived and worked there—someone who had been a father once, a husband, a craftsman with hope.

Now, all that remained was nothing.

With a sudden, violent motion, Sayer grabbed the nearest stool and hurled it across the room. It smashed into a pile of wood, sending splinters into the air. With a grunt, he overturned his workbench, sending tools clattering to the floor, the sharp clanging of metal ringing through the room. He clawed and punched at the walls, tearing at them until his fingers bled, desperate to release the rage and grief that consumed him.

The cabinet full of marionettes crashed to the ground, wooden bodies spilling out across the floor in a pile of grotesque display. But it didn't matter. None of it mattered.

Sayer collapsed to his knees, sobbing, his breath coming in ragged gasps. His limbs shook, and he felt as though the very foundation of the house was crumbling beneath him.

Then, amidst the chaos, he heard it.

Click. Click. CLACK.

He froze, his tear-streaked face slowly lifting toward the basement door.

Click. Click. CLACK.

The sound echoed through the silence—a deliberate, hollow tapping that seemed to rise from deep beneath the earth. It wasn't coming from the door itself. It was coming from something below.

Sayer's heart thumped in his ears as he slowly rose to his feet. His entire body trembled, and yet, something pulled him toward that door—an invisible, angry force that he couldn't resist.

He crossed the room, each step heavy with dread, and slowly inserted the key into the lock. His hand shook as he turned it, the door creaking open to reveal the dark stairwell leading into the basement.

Click. Click. CLACK.

The sound beckoned him, drawing him down into the below. He descended slowly, one step at a time, his breath shallow, his mind numb. The air grew chill as he went deeper, the scent of damp stone filling his nostrils.

At the bottom of the stairs, his feet touched the cold cobblestone floor. He stepped forward, his arms hanging limp at his sides, his face blank and emotionless. His haunted gray eyes stared ahead at the darkness ahead which seemed to stretch on forever, but the sound persisted, guiding him forward.

Click, Click, CLACK.

And then, from the shadows, a figure emerged.

It was another marionette—tall and thin, its linden wooden limbs elongated, its jaw hanging loosely from its face. The wood creaked and snapped as

it moved, its hollow eyes fixed on Sayer. It opened its mouth, as if to speak, but no words came out—only the sound of wood crashing against wood as it closed its jaw—

Click, Click, CLACK,

Sayer took a step back, his breath catching in his throat.

Another marionette stepped out from the shadows on the right, its chestnut legs missing entirely, crawling toward him using unnaturally long fingers. Its head twitched with each movement, the joints cracked and unnatural.

To the left, a third marionette emerged—this one with a featureless oaken face, its body slumped as though its strings had been cut. It leaned toward him, its head tilting as if it were intently observing him.

Sayer's mouth went dry. His heart thundered in his chest as he stood frozen, unable to move, unable to think. The marionettes closed in around him, their wooden limbs clicking and creaking as they moved, surrounding him on all sides.

His mouth opened in a silent scream, as no sound came out. He closed his eyes tight, a small, choked sob escaping his throat as he prayed—begged—that Maryanne was far from here, in some better place, where she would never see what he had done.

He felt cold, wooden fingers gripping his wrists and ankles, yanking him further down into the darkness. He didn't resist.

He couldn't.

### Afterword

The village slept peacefully, unaware of the events that had transpired in the small house at the edge of the forest. The winds carried the scent of fresh pine, and all was quiet.

But then, slowly, a melody began to drift through the air.

It was faint at first—barely audible—but as the night deepened, it grew stronger. The notes were hauntingly beautiful, each one vibrating through the trees and across the village. It was the sound of a violin, played with such mastery that it seemed to embody the night itself.

The villagers, tucked in their beds, stirred in their sleep, their dreams filled with peaceful visions. The music wrapped around them like a warm embrace, comforting, lulling them deeper into slumber.

In the distance, at the edge of the forest, a shadowy figure stood, bathed in the pale moonlight. It held a violin in its hands, the bow gliding across the strings with perfect precision. The notes echoed through the air, carrying with them a strange magic—a magic that soothed the soul and quieted the mind.

The figure's movements were graceful—but mechanical—its joints moving with an eerie fluidity. Its wooden face was smooth, expressionless, but its music was full of life—full of everything words could never express.

The figure played through the night, its haunting melody filling the air until the first light of dawn began to creep over the horizon. And when the sun rose, the forest fell silent once more.

The village remained peaceful and in abundance for many winters after, the music still visiting people in their dreams, bringing with it a sense of calm that none could explain but all could love.

## MetaMorphose



Pulsating. Blurring. Dizzying.

Stumbling, staggering, I force my way towards the door. My head makes contact first, a dull thud of sensation barely reminding me of its presence. That dull thud emanates, rockets its way down till I feel nothing but that impact, a resounding hollow echo within my bones. A catalyzing reaction. I feel the coolness of the wood, the rough grain and smooth varnish alike. Senses return and reawaken; everything comes alive again. My eyes swell out from my skull, my vision clearer than it's ever been, yet so disgustingly full of blindness The door sits ahead of me. I force my way through.

I hear it close behind me, though I don't feel my hands grasping the handle, nor the rough-hewn wood. Instead, I feel porcelain below, glass ahead of me. Cold, so deathly cold to touch, yet so calming, reassuring in the storm of discombobulation I find myself in. Fingers grab and claw at the smooth surface, unable to find purchase. Spittle drains down, an incoherent moan escapes through the same orifice. **Damn it all**. I find no grip, no cleft to ensure my safety, so I resort to gravity. Force is leveraged, weight leaned against the smoothness, carrying myself forward, down, palms flat. I look up.

A pallid, sour reflection greets me. Splotches of warmth steal across the gaunt, ephemeral surface. Two puddles stare back, faint twinkling illuminated amidst the shallow depths. With each second, the light darts across, around, dashing endlessly from one stigmata to the next. Even as my gaze circles around, the flicker evades, a furtive rabbit easily ignoring a clumsy hound. Other revelations preoccupy me.

I look like shit.

What the hell is wrong with me? This feels... terrible. Did I do this to myself? God, why the fuck would anyone want this? Find a way out. A different solution, don't try to tough it out, make it through. Stop it.

I can't.

Breaking. Snapping. Tearing. Rending.

I can feel it all. Fucking hell it all stings, each moment that comes through, every glimpse of feeling and thought. Nothing is free from it. My hands become leaden, fingers splintered out in desperate recompense, an apology for marring the pristine surfaces beneath. The grime beneath fingernails troughs out, dirt and muck, blood and tears, an incestuous pairing staking claim upon the clean slate. The dirty imprints leave a volatile re-

minder, the stain of existence.

Bones crack and strain from one another, desperate to claim independence and loneliness, begging to be set free from the confines of attachment. Strung together, it all begs to fall apart, to ruminate upon the façade of its cohesion, to return to the nebulous singularity of existence. Muscles run taut, acid screeching to be acknowledged. Limbs sag, the weight of undesirability becomes a toll too heavy, taxing from within, becoming apparent without. It feels as if they elongate, stretch infinitesimally to drum at the floor, a naïve desperation to find rhythm and meaning, to make sense of it. My body pulls itself apart, screaming in hopes of being heard, rescued, pitied.

### Why the fuck am I doing this? Why is this happening?

My face peels, skin sacks dragging ever so slowly downwards, dropping and dripping, a cascade of toxic sludge desperate to get away from the confines of human anatomy. Naked fingers reach up to grasp and feel, to keep it all together, a desperate sculptor trying to save the remains of his work. The clay sloughs slowly down, pooling once again in fingernails, caking palms. Lips burn, stretched to and fro, grimace and smile. Cracked earth desperate for more rain, a futile effort.

Across my body, fetid pustules swell and spill out, greeting the air with startling affection. My grotesque visage stares back at me, the malicious grins punctuating each sensation with a gleeful mockery. Muck and grunge pool at my feet, soaking up through from the floor into torn callouses and damp skin. Like moldy carpet I feel the surfaces squelch and tear away, leaving a pile of sickening mulch.

Chest bursting, throbbing, heaving with exhaustion; my ribs jab and rail at their confines, wanting to earn their freedom. A dream of fresh air. Desperation. There is only rot, pestilence, a grim odor of defeat and relegation. Nails claw and bite at the surface, looking to help them find their release. Finding only traitorous ichor and supple flesh, ripe for punishment. They lash and tear, creating new crevices, carving new canyons for the discomfort to flow. A scream emanates, sharp and shrill, echoing infinitely in unanimous dissolution of the concept of peace.

My organs heave and undulate, threatening to crawl out and sprawl upon the surface. Pain returns, a throbbing ache calling out to be noticed, attended to. The moments that pass are agonizing, innards explode in pinpricks, shards of glass scraping down the walls of bloody flesh. I retch and heave, swinging wildly with each movement. It comes again and again, till all sensation goes with it. I throw my head back.

Eyes stare at the ceiling, panels orbiting the sun. The brightness, the **fucking** brightness. I burn, unable to turn away, unable to avoid its stare. Cheeks pull back, the stinging vibrations of static noise bringing them down. Singed eyes look everywhere. I see nothing, nothing except damnable light. Aching, bulging, fighting the constraints of the mind and body. The light overwhelms, muscles react, **survival**. Everything goes away.

I'm dying.

Whatever this is, this monstrosity tearing out of me, damn it all. A freak, unwanted and undeserved, a beast from the depths of the darkness.

It shall die too.

Grasping. Clinging. Rising.

Upwards, against the wall. I stagger to, the light no longer blinds me. I stare, every moment removed, each inch of skin dragged away, protections stripped from the undeserving. It gives way. Scratching, hard, malleable. I prod. There is warmth, all too familiar. The sensation alarms me, but I laugh anyway. Surely there is no wrong to be had in doing so. The voice escapes from my lungs, hearty, relieved.

Limbs are torn asunder, muscles fractured and bones strained. Claws find my body, tracing every blasted vein, the rivers that sate the hunger. Trails of blood carving their way across the surface, flowing into waterfalls that feed endless, tepid pools.

My eyes see everything, abuzz with excitement, the light is far away, the horror has become abject gaiety, joy and desperation in equal. To see, I must see. Every eye turns to look, every angle becomes unnervingly real. Bear witness to the reflection, a glorious exultation of form and passion, an exposition of reality.

I recognize the monster in the glass, mandibles dripping, eyes alight, flesh raw and pulsing. The one that clawed its way out, always waiting just below, asking to become.

There is no longer any fear. Any pain.

It is me.

Always has been.

Me.



## The Shadow of Death



# Dean Roumeliotis

What is it out there, in that deep darkness? What watches in the night, prowls in the umbra, laughs wickedly just out of sight?

It was in the whispers within my walls. It was in the flickering of shadows in the night. The almost unperceivable dark eyes that watched me. It was her hand that slowly crawled along my walls, caressing my cheek. It was so bitterly cold to the touch. The shadows. It was the shadows all along. Oh, how foolish I was to think there was ever an escape from her cold embrace.

The witch must have cursed me before we burned her at the stake. I sprinted through the misty parish grounds, fleeing my rectory, and approached the door of the cathedral. I fumbled with the keys, and I looked around wildly into the night as I heard the voices grow louder. They were laughing. The shadows howled like a twisted choir of the damned. More shadows flickered against the wall, licking the door of the cathedral. I could barely keep breath in my lungs, dizzying as I found the correct key and shoved it into the door. I thrust it open and slammed it shut, panting heavily. I calmed myself. I was safe here. For I was in the house of God. A demon would not dare infiltrate holy ground. Was that what whispered to me? Reached out a shadowy hand? A demon? It must have been. For what else could have such a horrible, daunting presence which intruded my room just before I slept?

I sighed as I crept through the cold, dark halls of the cathedral. No one seemed to be here but me. I shuddered. Even in the house of God, the darkness still frightened me. I could swear there was something there, swimming in the abyssal blackness. But that was impossible. God's power was absolute. I entered into a study with a hearth at the head of the room. I passed by the piles of notes and bibles strewn about by the other bishops. I set my lantern down in front of the hearth and picked up some kindling and a flint. I struck the flint and sparks flew onto the kindling. I placed it upon the half burned logs and blew until the fire proliferated. The room was filled with light, spilling out into the dark hall. I stood and sighed, knowing this night would be sleepless. I needed to convene with Father Darius. He would know what to do.

A movement caught my eye. I snapped my gaze toward the hall, but I saw nothing. Something had moved. Perhaps a trick of the light? I must've been paranoid. Yes, that's what it was. I had to steel myself and not succumb

to this madness. The light flickered against the wall of the hallway, my shadow standing in the middle of the light, alone, the darkness surrounding it like a legion. I stared into the darkness, not wishing to look away. There was something there, looming ever closer, just out of sight. There is something in these shadows.

No, no, no. I'm doing this to myself. I tore my gaze away. I was not going to go mad. I refused. What a ridiculous notion. Perhaps I simply had a waking nightmare. Perhaps those whispers weren't really there. I placed my hand upon a bible, paging through it until I hit exodus. I read a few lines of the ten plagues of egypt. I looked upon the last one. The final plague inflicted upon Egypt because they did not listen to God after being given so many chances. The ultimate punishment. The death of every first born son of Egypt. A plague carried out by God's own angel of death. Then I heard a noise. A soft scratch against stone. I looked up. A faint shadow cast against the wall. I sighed heavily. It was just my own. I glanced back down. But once more something caught my eye. A shadow standing over the desk. I looked back at the fire and traced it. It was my own. I looked back up at the shadow that was still standing there in the light. It was not my shadow. I gulped, petrified with fear. No, no, no. It was nothing.

"Father Darius?" I asked, staring at the shadow. It did not move. I scoffed. "Who is there?" I asked. Still nothing. It just stood there. It felt almost like it was... staring at me. No, how could that be? I frowned, moving closer to see who it was hiding around the corner. But then I stopped and widened my eyes. Two horrible things occurred to me as I stared at the two shadows on the wall. The shadow could not be, for there was nothing there to cast it. It was impossible for someone hidden to have a shadow like that. Then there was my shadow, which did not move from my earlier position. I waved my hand. Nothing. It just stared at me. I stumbled back, shaking with terror.

"This is not possible," I whispered under my breath. "You- You can't. Not here. Not on holy ground!" I yelled. The fire suddenly shrank and dimmed. Darkness seeped into the room like a wicked pestilence. I tripped and steadied myself against the stones of the hearth. In the haze of darkness, large, incomprehensible dark creatures twisted and writhed in such unnatural ways. I could barely see them, only able to catch small glimpses of flicking and swaying. Two pale eyes slowly appeared, their position shifting and twisting like a wave.

"Hello, Cainan," a sultry, smooth feminine voice spoke. I nearly collapsed with dread. But I felt a righteous fire in my soul. I shook my head,

bearing my crucifix at the thing. "Away with you, demon! You dare infiltrate the house of God!? You stand upon holy ground!" I cried. The thing twisted, shadows dancing across the walls at a maddening speed. "God is not here right now," the demon said with a haunting cadence. I shook with dread, the cross in my hands my only line of defense.

"Lies. You speak lies! Devil! I am an ardent servant of the Lord! Of our creator! You cannot harm me!"

The fire of the hearth flickered, the light shrinking a little more with every passing moment. The eyes swam in the wicked darkness, staring at me with such malice.

"Why do you deny the reality that has presented itself plain for you to see? You know it in your soul, Cainan. God will not protect you from me."

I breathed lightly, my heart beating so loud I could feel the pounding in my face. I felt sweat stain my clothes and roll down my face.

"I've done nothing but serve him. I've done nothing but live to carry out his will. Why would he allow this to happen?"

The walls were covered in a legion of strange and impossible silhouettes writhing in and out of the light. "Do not lie when Jesus is not here to forgive you. You've mocked God with your wickedness."

I scoffed, chuckling at the ridiculous notion. "Wickedness? I cast out the wicked! We burned that witch for her dark practices. How dare a cambion such as you accuse me of that which you are ultimately guilty of. You and your brethren betrayed God and sided with Satan. Not I."

The light shrank more and more, the shadows growing larger and larger. The shadows laughed in such a horrible and shrill tone. "That woman you murdered was a healer."

"She experimented with dark arts."

"Oh?" the demon asked, twisting ever closer to me. I tensed and shook against the stone border of the hearth. "And what of him?" A nude man stepped out of the darkness. I widened my eyes. No. It could not be. "Was he a witch?"

The man had the face of Gable. A man that was long dead. "What is this? What game are you playing? Stop toying with me!"

Shadowy hands emerged and grasped onto Gable's body, caressing him. "Did God ask you to desire his flesh? To have him stoned to death for fulfilling your desires?" the demon asked. Blood and bruises appeared on the imitation of Gable. I felt tears rush down my eyes. I had to look away. I heard him violently collapse onto the table.

"I heard him. I heard his voice. He asked me to do it. He had to die so I could atone! God wished him dead!"

The eyes shook disapprovingly, soft laughter echoing out from the darkness. "It was not God that spoke to you. Was it God that told you to exile the poor unfortunate souls of the undercity?"

I gritted my teeth and narrowed my eyes. "They were wretches! Putrid filth that threatened to sicken the whole city!"

"The city? Or yourself? Would Jesus ask you to be selfish? Would he not want you to help them? To care for them when no one else would? Why would God ask you to do something so abhorrent? What voice did you really hear, Cainan?"

I stood dumbfounded. I shook my head angrily, but I had no defense. She was wrong, but she was good. She was too good. The Devil is the most charismatic and manipulative of us all. Just then I had a moment of realization. "Perhaps it was you. Or your brethren. How can I be held accountable for my actions if I was coerced? I was only trying to carry out God's will. I was a good servant. You cannot take that from me," I growled. This time the demon's voice chuckled softly.

"The only one fooled by your delusions is yourself. You and I both know that somewhere deep within your heart you know you lived only to serve yourself. You never heard God's voice. It was you who demanded death. It was you who ruthlessly cast judgment upon the downtrodden and the innocent."

I spit at the thing and gnashed my teeth. "Lies! The tongue of a snake! Suffer me your bile no longer, demon! Kill me if you must! But my faith shall not sway! For I know where I shall go if I die!"

The fire snuffed out, and the light left the room. An intense chill intruded the air. The shadows grew rapidly, the creatures and silhouettes transforming into more malicious and imposing shapes. I fell to the ground and shook at the terrible sight. "I am no demon, my dear," she said, her voice flooding the room like a typhoon. A beautiful voluptuous figure of a woman stepped out of the cloud of darkness, cloaked in a wispy black robe made of shadow. She had short raven black hair and the haunting, pale eyes like that of the moon. The haze of darkness dissipated, replaced by shadowy twisting wings on her back that were so large they defied the laws of space. I was petrified, the terrifying and great presence of the creature overwhelming my every sense with cold darkness. "Be not afraid. For I am Azrael, God's Archangel of Death. I have been sent under his request to give you a gift. God is too good to be disgusted by you. But I am not. Even still, in his

infinite mercy, he has tasked me with offering you a death as sweet as a kiss."

Her voice caressed my ears, like velvet upon a cloud. But what was spoken was so abhorrent it could not be true. The shadows surrounded me, prowling like predators waiting for their meal to expose itself. It was here, in this abyssal pit of despair, that my will finally broke. I believed her. I could no longer deny it. She was an angel. "But... Why would he call for my death? Was I not a man of faith?" I asked hopelessly. Azrael smiled.

"You are the worst kind of creature there is. To commit such atrocities and justify them in his name. He gifted you this divine creation. And look at what you've done. No, Cainan. You were not a man of faith. You were a servant to yourself alone. You were a man of lies. And no one believed those lies but you. The time has come to face the truth. I am here because God still loves you. If he didn't, yours would be a death worse than any fate."

I began to weep inconsolably. I shook with fear as snot and tears poured out of my face. "Please... Let me live. I- I do not want to die. I can change. I can do good. I can atone for my sins. Please, I beg forgiveness," I pleaded shakily. Azrael shook her head, her enrapturing and haunting gaze sucking any semblance of goodness or light out of the world.

"This is not the first time God has called for you to change your ways. You chose this. Now you must accept it."

I felt anger and desperation well within me. I squeezed my fist, shaking it at her. "I won't! You'll have to drag me! I won't die! I don't deserve this! I still have more time!" I cried out. Azrael knelt, the looming shadows towering above us, seemingly extending out into the darkness for eternity.

"I can't take you unwillingly. You must embrace me. Know that if you don't, I shall always loom above you. You shall walk this earth feeling a hollow dread until your last bitter breath. It would not be a quick death. It would take an arduously long time, and you cannot comprehend the unceasing misery you would feel as you wither into a husk." A shadow formed from Azrael's hand. A shadow hand caressed me, the cold touch of death taking all that was good and happy in the world and violating it. Memories corrupted and soured, any feelings of pride or defiance were swept away by a crushing sense of dread. I slowly brought my gaze to hers, realizing that this was it.

"Where will I go?" I asked fearfully. Azrael shook her head.

"That I cannot tell you. You shall see for yourself. Do not be afraid. Every soul must face this reality. You shall die pleasantly. It will not hurt. What happens after that is for you to witness. Now, come, my dear. Embrace me." She held her arms open. There was nothing I could do. Was I to deny a divine creature of death the right to kill me? It seemed so ridiculous. Everything seemed so dreadfully somber until I slowly allowed myself to accept this reality. There was something freeing to resign oneself completely to something greater. It was a new, foreign feeling to me. And so I embraced the angel of darkness and death. She took me into her arms and rested my head upon her lovely chest. There was such a bitter, daunting coldness that overcame me. But it did not overwhelm me. Heat simply no longer existed. Light was gone, a concept that seemed like a distant memory long past. All there was and all there ever shall be is cold darkness. Her wings wrapped around us, blanketing us in an infinite abyss. I raised my head from Azrael's chest and she pulled me into a kiss. It was the most tender, most satisfying, most sensual kiss I ever had.

The light of the meager flame covered the room softly. The fire was small, almost done eating away at the ashen logs. In the center of the room, casting no shadow, was a corpse. There were no injuries of any kind. No illness that took him. He was of perfect health, but for some reason, he simply was dead, as though his soul was ripped out of his body. The only evidence to indicate any sort of cause of the unfortunate man's passing was his eyes, hauntingly pale like that of the moon. The shadows could just barely be heard laughing and whispering to each other in strange tongues, elated to do as their master, the angel of death, commanded, and drag the man's soul down to the pits of hell where he belonged.



## The Painted Vegetarian



Lilly Hartley-Pantoja

"My love, you will capture the hearts of many. A muse like you will be a moment frozen in time." His final words.

The man kissed his wife faintly upon her cherry lips, not knowing the sweet-tasting nectar would be his last. For he was the artist, and she was the meek subject. The man instructed her to lie down on her back so that he might paint his obedient wife into the majestic image of his likeness:

Demure beautiful innocent submissive childlike silent.

As the artist sat comfortably on his cushioned stool, he viewed her without seeing her. The woman dared not to make a move or sound as she lay uncomfortably against the burnt umber carpet. Like a tamed animal, she watched him closely as he concentrated on editing out her imperfections. His final words echoed in the hollow spaces in her mind: a moment frozen in time.

He began with her round breasts—filling them in for a cup size larger. Playing God, he removed a few of her ribs to slim down her waist to curve like an exotic snake. He traded her intimidating siren eyes for the eyes of a naïve doe. All this before adding meat to her starving bones— any means of enhancing her physique without her verbal consent.

The artist sought to imprison her once wild-like nature, cloaking her warm, latte-colored skin in a suffocating curtain of silk sangria—Anything to erase the rational creature posing as his personal property from society's prying eyes.

Slowly, the image of his creation emerged on the canvas: a mutilated creature of the woman she once was, with no trace resembling her humanity. She was not his wife—she was art. But also... lovely meat for him to devour whole when consumed by an animalistic hunger. Was I ever human?

Behind the artist's predatory gaze, she stared blankly into the mirror, a prisoner in her own reflection beyond this melancholy abyss. A haunting tableau unfolded: women, their scared eyes averted elsewhere, fearing the grotesque truth that echoed back at them. Men, their lustful gazes, beholding her with infatuation. Finding her position on the ground alluring yet playful, with her glossy lips gently parted and her slender arm draped over her face, just as the artist intended. A temporary fix to quench their thirsty eyes of festering lust. God, how she loathed them all.

A shadow of her former self—as the artist's apprentice—was lost in thought, her mind a labyrinth of unanswered questions:

How many of the museum's patrons noticed the floral elements that the artist missed—simply because he found the flowers beautiful?

The artist had transformed her into his botanical garden, painting her bare body in a riot of colors. Soft hues of blushing sakuras were scattered in her long, mahogany hair, cascading like a river on the floor. Deceitful snapdragons of maroon-burgundy adorned her slender neck. Champagne peonies blossomed across her chest. Lushes of emerald ivy clung to her limbs.

Beneath the floral façade, however, lay the scars where violent affections kissed her tender flesh one too many times before: lilac bruises dancing to the music of her silent screams, disguised behind lovely antique roses. Clutching onto the long stems of indigo aconite to hide her scarred wrists that mocked her with a painful reminder that she was a flower trapped in a divine vase without water—

Would any of them notice the fresh skin wrapped tightly around these sunken bones?

No amount of delectable meat could restore her gnawing hunger. The mere scent of rotting flesh alone could make her cry like a mad woman. Couldn't that be enough to evoke thoughts and emotions from the museum's patrons, who refused to view her as a vegetarian? If they did, many would speculate how she could never allow herself to consume the indulgent and mouth-watering taste of aged meat that society had to offer. Had she gone so far as to condemn herself to a life of living as a hollow vessel where roots refuse to grow? Dangerous questions lingered dementedly behind those tormented eyes filled with the decades of quiet trauma, forced to see but never to say—

The painted woman could see herself breaking—shattering—under the agonizing guise of knowing she couldn't escape beyond this domestic portrait frame hanging in a patriarchal dystopia.

Someone save me.

A soft, quiet plea for help.





The rising sun sent its glistening beams through the water and down to the tops of vibrant, violet-colored corals. One specific ray of light perfectly aligned with Kepa's resting eyes, setting off her internal alarm. She slowly lifted her eyelids and immediately appreciated the absolute beauty she had the privilege of waking up to this morning. The sight of her home, her reef, was enough to spring her out of the colorful corals she had wedged herself between the night before and into motion.

Kepa had a plan for the day. It was not an ordinary day. It was the day she completed her migration. She loved her lagoon, but instinctively knew her time here was done, and she must embark on the mission of returning to the others.

Kepa had grown very attached to her nesting place over the years. It's the most stunning waterscape she's ever come across, and she's come across a wide variety of waterscapes throughout her many oceanic journeys. The corals here are the most vibrant she's ever seen. The bright green sea grass expansively covers the sandy floor, making any place the perfect place to rest, the most comfortable she's ever slept on. The pureness of the saltwater allowed her to see further into the distance than she'd ever been able to see anywhere else. Kepa dreaded leaving the beloved Marovo Lagoon every time her stay was complete, but she kept her emotions at bay because she was a sea turtle and going the distance was her duty.

As slowly as she could, Kepa inched her way to the edge of the lagoon. She thoroughly took in the enchantment of the lively community, taking mental pictures of the beauty hiding in every corner. Kepa bid her farewell to the Sea Stars, Sea Urchins, and Sea Cucumbers hiking up the overpopulated rocks. She waved her fin at the passing group of Coral Trout and again at the Jellyfish behind them. She said her goodbyes to the school of Bonito Tuna and the Stingrays swimming below her before spotting one lone Parrotfish swimming quickly in her direction. As the fish got closer, Kepa squinted her eyes to decipher who it was; it was Kai, her closest friend in Marovo.

Every migration, Kepa and Kai make an effort to see each other. This time, she and Kai had attended the ceremony for this year's lost corals. It was a somber, joyless event, as it always was. But still, Kepa attended the ceremony every time it aligned with her migration to show her condolences as a member of the Marovo community. Afterwards, Kepa and Kai ex-

pressed their sorrows to each other as they swam toward Kai's home, a naturally-made, roomy coral den within the eastern part of the lagoon. Roomy enough to house Kai and the entirety of his very, very large family. Also roomy enough to allow Kepa to enter without damaging the structure. While Kepa only planned on dropping in to say hello, Kai's grandmother insisted that Kepa stay for dinner. Kepa stayed, knowing they were not just trying to be gracious but urgently needed her help. The algae on the coral walls were multiplying at unprecedented speeds, and Kai's expansive family could barely keep it under control. Together, they feasted on the overgrown algae as they exchanged stories of the days when Marovo's corals weren't dropping like krill.

As Kai approached Kepa, she noticed something was off about his expression. It was not the usual chipper Kai, but a profoundly distraught Kai. "Kai!" Kepa yelled as he swam directly towards her, "Slow down!" He paid no attention to Kepa and continued moving his little fish body at impressive speeds. Kepa jolted to the side at the last minute to dodge the gilled bullet coming straight at her. He did not even stop to look at her—or to say bye. This wasn't like Kai. He would never disregard Kepa like that. She had to get to the bottom of this.

Kepa quickly turned around and followed Kai, not too close, but not too far. They zipped through the main coral reef, past the seagrass flower fields, and into the alley of coral shelves. Kepa thought, we already passed his den, where could he possibly be in such a hurry to get to? Just as they reached the alley's end and the beginning of the lettuce leaf coral fields, Kai suddenly stopped. He looked left. He looked right. Then, he quickly whipped in the direction of Kepa.

"Kepa? What are you still doing here? Isn't today the day you start your journey?" Kai asked, seemingly out of breath.

Kepa grew concerned about the shock in his face and the distress in his voice. "I was just leaving when you flew right past me, it looked like something was off and I wanted to make sure you were okay, I didn't mean to scare you."

"Okay...Well, I'm fine, and I don't have time to talk right now," he paused before taking on a more serious tone, "And Kepa, please don't follow me — it is for your own good." Before Kepa could get a single word in, Kai swam off, his voice trailing as he yelled, "I wish you the best on your journey, and I will see you next migration! Bye..."

Stunned by the interaction, Kepa took a moment to think about her next move. I should just let it go, he said NOT to follow him, but now, I need answers.

Despite her friend's warning, she continued to slowly follow his path.

At the edge of the lettuce leaf coral fields, Kai swam through a small opening created by two large rocks balanced against each other, leaning on a mountain of much larger rocks behind them. The opening was far too small for Kepa to fit, but as she got closer, she could see the inside of an extensive rocky cave. Kepa took in her surroundings, noted the lack of activity around her, and cautiously peered into the fish-sized opening. Within the cave was a group of ten fish, all different species, attentively listening to Kai. She couldn't make out precisely what Kai was saying, but she could hear the intense urgency in his voice. He began swimming towards the only wall that Kepa could clearly see in its entirety. He picked up a rock with one very pointy edge and crossed out two words on a list etched into the rock and added two words to another list. Kepa squinted her eyes and read the titles of each list. The one on the left, which Kai had removed the two words from, was titled "Critically Endangered." The one on the right, which he then added to, was titled "Extinct."

Kepa quickly understood what these lists meant and frantically attempted to decipher the names of the species on each list. She first focused on the name of the species Kai just moved to the "Extinct" list; it read "Longfin Mako." Her heart sank. Another species was lost. In her thirty years in this ocean, she had never witnessed so many species go missing from the lagoon as she had in the past five years. She figured they had found another habitat, a better one, even though Kepa regarded the lagoon as the best habitat in the entire ocean. They don't migrate, she realized. She previously concluded they had found a better life, but in reality, they had ceased to exist. Tears began to form in her eyes. A knot began to tighten in her throat. They are really gone! Looking closer at the list, she recognized most of the species and felt deep sorrow for her lost friends. How can this be happening!?

Kepa Kepa took a deep breath and collected her thoughts before focusing her eyes on the "Critically Endangered" list. She saw many more familiar species, but as she got to the bottom of the list, she began to read the name "Hawksbill Sea Turtle." What—that's me! I... am... critically endangered? Kepa's breathing sped up, her heart began to race, and she felt as though there was no more air left in her lungs—she had to breach the surface. She raced to her oxygen source, gasping as she broke the water's barrier. I have to do something! I have to tell the others!

Without delay, Kepa turned around and resumed her journey to The Great Barrier Reef. Kepa had taken this journey many times before, but had yet to be in such a hurry. She could usually take her time and stay along the well-traveled route, but Kepa planned on getting to the reef in as little time as possible—a straight shot would be her best option. Though she had never ventured on this path before, for her species, she was willing to take the risk.

The first day of the migration went according to plan. She swam straight, stopped to talk to no one, and looked at nothing; all her eyes could see were the faces of her loved ones. Once the sun's rays stopped shining through the water, Kepa felt her body crying for rest. She wedged herself between the only two rocks in sight. It was terrifying in the middle of the ocean. There was nothing in her vicinity, aside from these rocks and the occasional pod of whales. It was dark and cold, but Kepa was so exhausted that not even her brain reminding her of possible danger could keep her awake.

Kepa slept soundly through the night, her body recovering from the day's sprint. She woke as the ocean currents pushed her side to side against her makeshift bed. She slowly opened her eyes and noticed the vast, deep blue around her and the little signs of life in her presence. The conditions of this area make life here such a struggle, and Kepa recognized the perseverance of the tiny kelp plant growing in the crease of the rock to her left and the sandy ocean floor. This little sliver of life reminded Kepa of her goal. She quickly got up and continued her journey.

After hours of endless nothingness, Kepa began to feel a growing sting in her eyes. Suddenly, she could not see. She was blinded. Using her sense of relativity, she quickly made it to the surface. As Kepa gasped for air, she inhaled something else, something slimy, something her body instantly rejected. Using her fins, she attempted to rid her face of this slime, but it was useless; she was completely covered head to toe in sludge, and her fins only added more and more. Incredibly confused, Kepa thought to herself, I can't breathe! What is this? What do I do? This can't be it! Thoughts

and emotions swirled throughout Kepa's head before she could calm down, come to her senses, and reason about her predicament. She realized something must be contaminating the surrounding water, so she decided to swim a few feet away and try to wipe her eyes clean once again. She kept swimming and swimming, trying to feel for non-contaminated water around her, but she was beginning to feel exhausted. Will I ever get out of this? she asked herself, pushing her body to its limit.

Finally, after twenty minutes of attempting escape, she could feel the smoothness of the water surrounding her. She breached the surface, still unable to open her eyes without feeling the intense stinging brought on by

the sludge. She gasped for air, finally able to inhale something besides gunk. Kepa attempted to wipe her eyes, but once again, it was no use. The option of giving up enticed her, but she recalled the reason for the quickness of her journey. She could not let her species down. She gathered the strength and the courage to continue on—blind and covered with the irremovable sludge.

Despite her motivation, Kepa found herself unable to move her left fin only a few minutes into her heroic journey. She tried again, but still, it did not budge. Kepa endured the sting of the gunk to open her eyes and assess the situation. She was trapped, along with hundreds of fish, surrounded by millions of connected pieces of string. Kepa looked up to see the skinny strings were all connected to a much thicker string that exceeded the water's surface and ended on a gigantic floating object. No longer able to withstand the pain, she closed her eyes.

Kepa realized that, although she could not swim with her fin immobile, she was still being propelled forwards. For the second time today, Kepa was extremely frazzled and confused about the situation she found herself in.

After the initial wave of anxiety crashed over Kepa, she kept herself calm, knowing that exerting her remaining energy to attempt an escape would not be beneficial. She began accepting her fate. The ocean has other plans for me, she thought as she reminisced on her memories with her family, friends, and lagoon. Her breathing began to slow, and Kepa fell asleep amongst the other prisoners.

A sudden loud noise woke Kepa from her slumber. It sounded like two rocks crashing into each other and then repeatedly grinding against one another. She came to her senses and remembered where she was. She became highly uneasy, swishing her fins from side to side, slapping the fish around her, and tightening the strings caught in the crevice separating her left front fin from her shell. She realized she was doing nothing to help herself after receiving many angry interjections from those around her, feeling the force of her panicked movements. She could feel that they were moving towards the surface. Something very powerful had to be pulling them up.

The string cage breached the surface and hovered in the air for a few moments before being swiftly dropped onto a hard surface, which Kepa assumed was the gigantic floating metal object she saw earlier. Her fall was broken mainly by the fish underneath her, but her head rushed toward the ground and bounced off the rock-like material. She winced in pain and began to feel a bump forming on the back of her head. Kepa began to drift

out of consciousness until she was startled by the sound of a human voice yelling, "Wait! We got a turtle over here! And it's covered in oil!"

In this moment, Kepa became more terrified than she had ever been in her whole life. Humans were a species she had been warned to avoid at all costs. Panic set in again, but she knew there was no use for expressing this. She took a deep breath and prepared for the worst. Humans meant certain death.

"So?" she heard another respond.

"So?! This is a Hawksbill!"

"Really! I've never actually seen one in person! Their shells are gorgeous and in high demand, we can definitely get a few hundred for it!"

"Man, that is so inhumane. They are on the critically endangered list. I will not be a part of taking one of their lives for money, I'm cleaning her up and throwing her back in."

"No way! She is too valuable! We can't just let her go."

The next thing Kepa knew, she could feel one pair of footsteps beneath her head getting closer and closer. She froze. She soon heard another pair of footsteps following much more quickly in the same direction.

"Get off me!" she heard one yell before many scuffs and blows came from the two pairs of footsteps.

After one large impact that sounded similar to when Kepa's head hit the ground, there was only one pair of footsteps. She was either about to be killed or released, and she could do nothing to sway the decision. Kepa could feel the presence of the human very close to her, and then she heard a quick clicking noise. She held her breath and prepared for death. But instead, she could hear the human cutting through the string surrounding her, and to her surprise, he gently removed the string caught on her left fin. She was free.

The human freed her. She was once again frozen, but with amazement rather than terror. The human gripped her shell and lifted Kepa in the air, she did not resist. She felt safe in their grasp. She could feel that they were not going to hurt her.

He carried her away from the net prison until they reached a structure that the wind was unable to penetrate. She had never experienced this before and longed to gain the ability to open her eyes once again to inspect her surroundings. She heard the flow of water in one corner of the room begin and suddenly end before the human was scrubbing the gunk from her eyes. After a few minutes of gentle rubbing, she attempted to open her eyes. I can see! she thought, as she finally witnessed the structure she resided in.

Kepa's hope and motivation was returned alongside her eyesight. She felt a feeling she never thought a turtle could feel for a human: gratitude.

Kepa looked around as the human removed the remaining sludge, taking advantage of her vision. She was met with a foreign scene. Nothing in this structure was familiar to her, except for the sea shells aligned on the edge of the transparent portion of one of the walls. She could see the ocean through this transparent square, but she could not feel the cool breeze that constantly wafted across the surface. She pondered the human's use for all the various gadgets and gizmos, but appreciated the tools aiding in her survival.

After what seemed to be an entire lifetime, the human took her out of the structure and onto the open part of the floating object. She could see that the sun was rising, its beautiful fiery orange lighting up the clear morning sky. They went down a set of stairs and stopped on a platform that rested right above the ocean's surface. The human began to position her above the water, but abruptly pulled her back into their chest. They positioned her face in line with theirs, looked her in the eyes, and whispered, "I am sorry about what happened to you. I really am. Us humans can suck sometimes, I know. But, at least there's people like me, right?" They solemnly chuckled before ending their goodbye with, "I hope you live a long and happy life. Oh, and I hope you know that you are incredibly beautiful." The human's eyes began to fill with tears as they placed her in the ocean. Kepa felt liberation as she entered the divine element and was most grateful for her savior. "Bye!" the human yelled from the platform, waving their hand at her as she swam off. Maybe humans aren't all bad, she thought.

As Kepa continued her journey, she started to reflect on the obstacles she conquered the day before. She still did not understand what she could've possibly been covered with earlier. The texture was entirely new for her, something she's never felt before. She wondered, How did it get there? How long has it been there? Will it always be there? Why did it sting?

She could certainly not wrap her head around the conversation and scuffle between the two humans on the floating object. Why would they get something in exchange for my shell? What would they get? Why is it in high demand? What does high demand even mean? Does this have something to do with my species' decline? Why would the human take care of me and release me? Are humans really the immoral beings I've heard stories of? Or is there an incentive to be evil in their culture? Kepa had so many unanswered questions, but she could only keep swimming.

Kepa soon found a place to rest for the night; finally a soft bed of seagrass within a perfectly shaped space between two rocks where she could be comfortably wedged and not bothered by the current's movement. The journey was almost complete, and the distance left should be finished in just a day. By this time tomorrow, she will be back with her family. She could finally close her eyes and rest as she dreamt about her friends and family swimming in a danger-free ocean.

When Kepa woke up the following day, she was exhausted and burnt out. Her fins were sore, and her neck was kinked. She felt like she had taken a long tumble down a deep trench. Despite her discomfort, Kepa was determined. She would not let these setbacks prevent her from reaching her community at the Great Barrier Reef. She was almost there.

Kepa was on edge the entire day's swim. She constantly scanned her surroundings and remained vigilant. Another obstacle could appear at any moment.

After an exhausting day, Kepa finally spots The Great Barrier Reef. She sees the vibrance, the life, the beauty. She begins to cry. There was no other way to express the extreme emotions her arrival inflicted. *I did it*. She rushed past the fields of corals and kelp before finally reaching her family and friends. Together, they ate the sea sponges and worked on the invasive algae. She quickly swam over, yelling, "Family! Friends! Everyone! I made it back! I did it!" Her brother, Isa, furrowed his brow at Kepa's excitement, since she had made it back every migration without any issues. Her Aunt Lelea quickly swam toward Kepa, beaming at the sight of her and hurrying to embrace her with a hug, a ritual Lelea partook in every arrival no matter the circumstances. Kepa's most frequent foraging partners rushed over as they noticed the commotion.

"Osha! Masina!" Kepa yelled, "I am so grateful to see you two!"
By this time, all of Kepa's friends and family had begun parading around her. Many whispered amongst one another, debating what Kepa could have possibly gone through during her migration, while others couldn't hold back their affection and stormed Kepa with hugs and kisses.

After minutes of unsettled questions and concerns, Kepa knew she couldn't leave her community out of the know any longer. The turtles at the reef looked up to her, she was a leader. She owed them an explanation for her dramatics. She gulped a bubble of courage and began to speak, "Everyone! I have urgent news to share." She paused, imagining the reaction she would get if she just blurted everything out, visualizing hysteria and disorder. Kepa wanted things to remain calm, but she did exactly what she intended to avoid: "We are on the critically endangered list and we are at risk

of extinction if we don't do what we can to save ourselves and I don't even know what can save us; the ocean is becoming a pool of hell; I swam through sludge that burned my eyes and remained stuck to me for hours, and then when I was trying to escape the sludge, I was caught in a string cage by humans along with hundreds of other fish prisoners; one set me free of the net and the sludge and showed me compassion, but I witnessed the true evil existing in their society when the other human suggested selling my dead shell, and we are rapidly losing the corals in Marovo — everything is changing and nothing will ever be the same!"

The faces looking back at Kepa were stunned, eyes wide and mouths open. Everyone saw and felt the changes in the ocean over the past few decades, especially the females who had to migrate every few years to reproduce, but no one had witnessed the horrors Kepa spoke of. Like Kepa, most took their time, traveling along generational paths that guided them through the many wonders the oceanic world offers, rarely veering off into the vastness of the straight path to Marovo.

Just as Kepa predicted, panic was fully underway amongst the crowd. Questions were yelled, tears were shed, anger was exerted, and some remained frozen with their mouths and eyes still open wide. Regretting her outburst, Kepa knew she must incite some order. She cleared her voice, fixed her posture, and readied her most assertive tone.

"Calm down, we will be okay. I am sorry I scared everyone. That came out too emotionally."

She paused, looking around for signs of approval. The crowd looked back at her, attentive and almost orderly. They were listening to her. In this moment, Kepa really felt seen, seen as a leader, validated by her community. "I have thought long and hard about our options regarding endangerment on my journey here, and I have concluded that all we can do is survive. We must remain vigilant of the new dangers within our habitat and, most importantly, continue to reproduce. Survival and reproduction are our only hopes. I mentioned the one compassionate human earlier, but please do not let that sway your opinions on humans. I fear this was a very rare kind of human. Please remain extremely cautious of them, they are not our friends."

The group began to calm down after the tactic for survival was concluded. They once again crowded around Kepa, but this time for the arrival ritual. At the return of the migrating female, she tells the rest of the turtles all about the beauty and enchantment of her journey, leaving out no details.

Kepa, still internally deeply disturbed by her terrifying journey,

shivered at the thought of reliving the experience. She decided to not detail these horrific experiences again, but instead told the group about only her positive migration memories, reliving the wonders of her favorite lagoon.

As Kepa feasted on the abundance of sea sponges later that night, she contemplated the rationality of her earlier statements. Yes, to survive as a species, I must reproduce, but what kind of a mother would I be if I knowingly put my children in a world that would lead to their suffering? She could sympathize with her unborn children or the entirety of her species. Kepa had no choice but to choose.  $\therefore : * \to \Leftrightarrow `` * : \cdot .$ 

It had been three years since Kepa's return. She began to see flowers blooming on the sand right off the shore and felt a new warmth in the ocean breeze. It was spring. It was mating season. She had to come to a conclusion.

For the past three years, she contemplated her future actions, going back and forth about the right choice. She realized she was far too passionate about the existence of her species to do nothing to aid in solving the problem. Though her children's life may be more challenging than hers, she concluded that she must reproduce. They will be strong, she thought. They will survive. They will make it. This is the right choice. With only a slight hesitation, Kepa's decision was made and she was embarking on her journey back to Marovo Lagoon.

After days of swimming through breathtakingly beautiful scenes, Kepa could finally feel the closeness of the lagoon. She couldn't wait to bask in the beauty of her nesting place once again. Her heart rate increased, and her swimming gradually became faster. She was so close.

As she got within eye distance, Kepa instantly noticed a lack of vibrancy from the reef. Typically, she was almost blinded by the extensive array of colors and hues. That sensation was missing. She observed the lack of life on the outskirts of the lagoon. None of her usual friends were swimming about. Her pace slowed, and she inched towards the lagoon.

Kepa was met with a daunting sight: she was looking at the skeleton of her reef. There were no more colors, no more fish, no more sharks, no more crustaceans, no more jellyfish, no more starfish, no more crab, no more snails, no more seagrass, no more algae, no more life. Nothing. Nothing at all. The reef had died, and its corpse could no longer sustain the many life forms housed in the lagoon. Her home had died, and nothing was left alive. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Kepa's thoughts ceased to exist. There was nothing more to think

about. Her home was gone. Her home was what she lived for. She completed her migrations with the intent of visiting her home. She foraged in the Great Barrier Reef to gain energy to return to her home. Everything she did connected back to her love for the lagoon. She was nothing without it.

Kepa spotted a sliver of life, a bright green patch of sea grass, just big enough to cover the underpart of her shell. It reminded her of the little kelp in the vast deep. She remembered and appreciated its determination but knew her time persevering was over. She slowly swam over, exerting the remainder of the little energy left in her system.

She thought about her unborn babies, what a terrible first sight the dead lagoon would be for them. Kepa sank down to the grass patch. She could not go on any longer. She gazed at the remains of the reef, imagining it in its natural state. She felt the sea grass one last time, appreciating its unmatched comfortability. She was grateful for the life she lived, but it was no longer a life worth living. She could no longer fulfill her duty as a Hawksbill sea turtle. For the last time, she closed her eyes and took in the warmth sent by the sun directly onto the back of her shell.

## Vepereres



The sound of the waves, they've been early quiet as of late. I don't wake up on the shoreline soaked after hours of troubled sleep anymore either. It's been... uncanny, here in The Midnight.

\* \* \*

I blink and come back to reality. I look to my phone and hear the same song from a couple of hours ago, still on loop. The Midnight, I think to myself, an isolating pocket frozen in time—cold dark-blue, endless. A beach I've found myself eternally trapped on, bearing Death's touch from the ice in the air. I can't recall how this place came to be in my head. I think it started with him, the first love.

It's years later now, and this place has taken on a life of its own—some internal dimensional biome—collecting ghosts as my life continues to fail at reaching all the lights I had dared to chase. It's like every time something bad happens, or whenever I think too much, as I always do, I wind up here. And like a broken record I drown, cough up water, scream into the sea, or jump off the pier hoping to end it all. I used to try and run off this beach, but the shore is never ending, no matter which direction I go. Sometimes, I think I see the moon in the way the dark water begins to slightly glimmer, but when I look up there's nothing, not one star, just clouds of the deepest shade of purple, almost black, all the way to the horizon.

I look back at myself in the mirror, searching for the answer to what new emotion I've been feeling lately, and fall into my head once more.

\* \* \*

I'm in my little shack on the shoreline now—ankle deep floods happen every now and again. The place is nothing special, but it helps bare the cold outside. There was a time when I didn't think anything about this desolate land would ever change, but something has changed lately. It's like the dark is fractured.

Knock knock knock.

Hm? I open the door to find a man standing there in the cold of night. I first look around him to see where the hell he came from before asking, "Can I help you?"

I don't get visitors here.

"Good evening." He says, warmly. Suddenly my knees go weak. I grip the door knob and try to rest my weight on it. "May I come in? It's awfully cold out here." His chuckle is light and feathery, but genuine.

I stare, unconsciously giving him a deep look. Maybe it's because a flaw has to be somewhere in those eyes. There's that feeling in my chest again. Foreign, yet interesting... It's been bugging me for months now. "Uhh, sure." Before I know it, I guide him into the tiny kitchen where he sits on the opposite chair of the small, circular table.

I only ever had one chair before.

"Sorry," I begin, "the kitchen light is broken. None of the lights in my house work anymore, actually. Haven't for a long time now." I then mumble to myself, "Come to think of it, I don't quite remember if they ever did." I lose focus, staring at the ocean above the kitchen sink window. The waves outside have died. Now, it's as if the sea has transformed into a lake. This has never happened before. It's always been chaos. Just seeing those waves would have my lungs collapsing in on themselves. Every crash against the sand or on the beams of the pier would rattle my bones. And now, nothing. It's like I'm in the eye of a storm.

"That's not a problem." I snap back to the man as he continues, "Good company is more than enough to keep me in good spirits. I traveled a long way to get here." He exhales. I didn't know anybody besides me was even alive in here. "You live in a very," he pauses to find the word, "... unique place."

I scoff. "That's a good euphemism for a rundown home stuck on an isolated beach."

"My apologies." He sounds sincere. "Does this area have a name?"
"...The Midnight." The place where I will one day fade away in. My future grave.

He chuckles at that. "Seems a little on the nose, Aspen. I notice the sun never comes up here. Any reason why that is?" His interest seems piqued as he leans in with crossed arms on the table. This stranger, this weird looking man with too hopeful a face, just walks into my home and asks for my life story. Even more peculiar is that I can't fight answering him back. The conversation feels like I'm catching up with an old friend, excited to know everything they've been up to since our last meet-up, but knowing the reality of our gap in time and how we've been apart for far too long. When time passes, we change. It feels strange yet comforting being with someone you share that with. I have never met this man before, so why is the feeling so parallel?

Now it's my turn to pause. "Hmm. I'm not sure. Can't seem to find my way off this shore-" I stopped, realizing what he just confessed to. "I'm sorry, do I know you? H-How do you know my name, exactly?"

The man's smile remains gentle, and I don't detect a hint of malice in his posture. In fact, that damn feeling in my chest that's been bothering me for months is now burning as I look at him. Am I having an ongoing stroke? He sits back up straight in his chair, his palms clasped together on the table's edge. His tone is more serious this time, but nothing of anger or annoyance. It's firm and cool, like a speech someone gives for upliftment, or in times of need. "I've known you all your life, Aspen. We've met only once before, but this is our first official meeting. You were young then, the sun your blanket. Too young to know any better about the world."

"Well, the sun doesn't come up around here. Hell, the moon doesn't even show up for me. The only thing around here is-"

"Your endless loop, yes. This pocket of time, filled with somber and poisonous nostalgia." He cuts me off. "Before I answer your questions, how about we just have tea first?" There's something about his tone that feels honest and calm, but I'm unsure. I've been so unsure for months now. Everything is off. The water is off, the cold is off, and even the damn memories are off. What's happening to The Midnight? Who is this man? Is this feeling coming from him? Where did he come from? This is my home, my pain. Why is he here?

I abruptly get up, ready to kick him out, but something is gnawing at me to give this a try—just one simple conversation. The order of this place will return soon, and I'll be free to drown again in the sea. Okay then. I close my eyes, take one deep breath, and sit back down.

So, we talked. The more I settled into my chair, the faster I saw his character. Quite frankly, I'm a bit put off. This man is like no one I've ever met before. Every word that comes out of his mouth makes me feel at ease. Sometimes I laugh so hard I'm almost brought back to reality: my room and its mirror. I nestle into the feeling in my chest, noticing its warmth, and the way it pulls my lips into a soft, light smile. He's a bit wild in his gestures, bold in how he carries his words, and his voice is charming, chanting. I feel almost... He also asks deep, thoughtful questions, and listens with such intent that I find myself taken aback. It's like he sees me. It all makes me tense with the feeling.

I can't have him poking and prodding around the smokey void of my mind. Not when I always end up in here and spiral; now knowing that someone sees that, I'm not too sure I like the feeling of vulnerability. It's almost as bad as drowning. Where is the answer to all this madness I've been feeling? I can't keep doing this. The moments that make life worth it are happening before me, yet all I can do is analyze the mysterious pulses within

that are making me feel disturbed.

When was the last time someone did something for you? My first love. I told him I loved him, but to tell me no. It was the most selfless thing I've ever done for myself, killing my own heart. Letting him use my blade to end it. The same blade I used for years to fight for him and love. It was also the most selfish thing I've ever done, telling him to slay me. That was almost seven years ago now. Now it feels like a different life.

Is that a good thing? At first I didn't think so. I kept wanting to miss him, but it turned out I just missed the feeling of being in love, of having hope. I never thought I'd see the day where I grew from him enough to try again. I did, though. I'll never forget him, but I found how to breathe without him.

And are you over the last person you tried with? Did you love him? That one wasn't love. At least, I won't admit it to be. I was ready to love again, but I made sure it never went that far after learning my lesson the first time around. Jumping in too soon, you know? He's far gone now, and I wish him well.

How did you end up here in this place? I don't remember. One day I was just a normal kid hoping and playing in the sun like everyone else. I guess as you get older, you realize what comes after sunsets. Maybe it was my homelife? My first love? Never having friends? Could be a number of things. All my life I've been stuck in my head, so maybe it slowly emerged over time, and then all at once it was here.

Tell me one thing about this place that makes it worth staying? The memories. Everyone from my past, at least, those who left me. The ones I felt close to. They're still here. It's in the air I breathe, the water I swim in. I can't leave them. I know how it ended, and I know they're never coming back, but for some contradictory reason my window is always open for them. That's why I'm here, hoping they'll come by one day, even for a little while, and then we'll chat and catch up through the window before they're on their way again. And I guess I still hope that the sun will come up for the first time.

Do you want to leave this place one day? I've never known anything beyond The Midnight. What's that saying—better the devil you know?

Am I the devil you don't?

I breathe out. "I'm sorry. I believe I've been a good host, but I'd really like to know who you are now." Although kind, I'm firm in my words. He looks down at his cup, swishing around the last bit of his tea. "Sir, you seem very nice, and this has been fun, although strange, but I need to know how you know me. Who are you?"

He pauses. "You have let me in the home you built for yourself, and

while I believe it is a beautiful thing we finally met, I see that I am still not welcome here. Not yet, at least." He starts to get up. "Keep on doing what you're doing. I know you feel The Midnight is inescapable, but things change. You're changing, Aspen." Once more his words ring true, and there's a pulse in my chest. It's as if all of time stopped for just a fraction of a second, and in that frozen moment, everything, all the secrets The Midnight holds beyond the dark veil, were shown to me. I thought, just for a second, I saw the sun. I'm brought back when I see he starts walking to the door. His hand touches the knob before he turns to me and says, "I go by many names. I think the one best suited for now, with yourself, would be..." He smiles, "Charmolypi. It's Greek for-"

"Happiness," I breathe out, cutting him off. A type of happiness that blossoms from the root of sadness. The Midnight, my home of isolation, a place where the morning never dawns. But everything has been off lately. Then there's him, my first visitor, a man who somehow found me all the way out here in the darkest parts of my mind where I've wallowed for years. These shadows I hoped would bring a savior finally answered back. But he's not real.

Okay, things have changed: my endless loop of painful memories no longer works, there's no more waking up drowning, the cold doesn't break my bones anymore, the feeling in my chest that... that's it. I know who, or actually what, he is. My eyes fill with awe realizing he's no man at all.

\* \* \*

"Holy shit." I'm in my room again, working on some poetry. I finally have it figured out—what's been off this entire time. I look to the wide, closet mirror. "I forgot what that felt like." I tell myself, only the walls of my room and the glowing monitor before me witnessing the clarity.

\* \* \*

He's my feeling.

He nods, understanding the clarity I have just come to, and opens the door. He sets one foot out before I blurt out in a little desperation, "I'll see you soon, hopefully."

He looks to me one more time and says softly, "Maybe. But don't count on it." He winks.

"Right." I say, knowing the answer now: "Just, let it be."

Let the world turn.

Stop trying to freeze time.

Be okay with the unknown of what happens next.

Let your life play out, your next move will come.

The door closes.

Out of the corner of my eye, the light above the table flickers. I've never seen the color of those walls before. I think I like green.



## Death of the Rat King



Delia Fischer

The air grew thin. Each breath became more strenuous than the last. We desperately searched for an exit that didn't exist, clawing at the dirt walls of what we all feared would be our grave. There was nowhere to escape, crushed together as teeth tore through fur until the air grew thick with the scent of iron. Our tails knotted together, forming a grotesque mass. We were destined to be swallowed up by the darkness.

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I shot upright, drenched in sweat, still gasping as I tried to will the air back into my lungs. The chill hit me before I could fully process my surroundings, but the familiar scent of cigars and pinewood pulled me back into reality. I was in a car. It was Benny's prized 1975 Jaguar XJ6. The snow gathered on the windshield told me that it had been sitting here awhile. We were parked facing the sea alongside the largest warehouse on the harbor that had long since been abandoned. Benny sat in the driver's seat, knuckles white as his naked hands gripped the wheel. He was staring at me. For how long? I couldn't say, but I was certain that there had been no attempt to wake me. His gaze never faltered, even when our eyes met. He didn't even seem to notice the blood that had begun to seep through the bandages wound tightly around his fingertips.

"Are you alright Bats?" I ask, pulling off my gloves and tossing them in his lap. "Why have we stopped?" I had known Benny for a while. There had even been a brief time where we lived together. He had always been a bit off. It freaked people out how he would stare right through them like he knew something they didn't. He had bad eyes, but could see well enough to do his job. I'm sure that's why he was picked. Boss always had sympathy for those who didn't deserve it.

"How many years have I known you?"

"Quite a few," I say as I pop open the glove compartment. Bingo. I had found Benny's favorite cigars. Now all I needed was a lighter.

"Give me a number."

"Alright, let's see," I pause, rolling a cigar between my fingertips. "I met you when I was nineteen, so it's been about fifteen years." I had met Benny the day I applied for the job. Though admittedly, there wasn't much of an application. It was handed to me on a bloodstained platter and I accepted it.

"Three hundred and forty-two."

"Pardon?"

"The amount of people I've tortured in fifteen years."

I nod, patting my pockets. "You know Bats, there's no need to speed this up. It's still early." It was only half past seven. "We have until midnight to sort this out."

I watched as his lips tightened, twisting into a frown as he stared down at his bloody bandages. "Call me Benny."

"Alright, Benny. How about we go for a stroll?"

\*\*\*

We walked along the empty harbor. The snowfall seemed to swallow up what little I could see of the city. I glanced over at Benny, watching his eyes shift with each step. His lips twitched, as if biting back words he didn't want to say. Call it cruel, but I enjoyed watching him stumble around, refusing help of any kind. I could only imagine what the world looked like when you could hardly see two feet in front of you. He was the one who hated wearing his specs, so it was out of my hands. Though, if I had to see the things he did, I wouldn't wear them either. As we neared the edge of the harbor, I stopped, grabbing the collar of his leather coat to keep him from walking straight into the sea.

"Take a deep breath," I say, still gripping his collar.

"What? Are you planning on pushing me in?"

"I wasn't before, but I am considering it now."

"If you keep prolonging this, I might just jump."

"I don't believe you." Just to be safe, I tightened my grip. "How about a metaphor to pass the time?" I took his silence as a yes and began.

\*\*\*

"So imagine there are six rats all sitting at a table for a game of Russian roulette. Each rat had their own revolver with a single bullet in the chamber. They can choose to aim the gun at themselves or one another. The game continues until there is one rat left alive. In this special game, after each death, a bullet is added to the chamber of each gun until the five remaining slots are filled. Are you picturing it Benny?" This time he was looking straight at me. The small crease between his eyebrows and the tightening of his jaw indicated his growing annoyance. But as usual, he humored me.

"Yeah."

"Ok... good. Rat six gets unlucky and dies in the first round to his own bullet. Rat five, in the second round, questions what the point of the game is, but is quickly silenced by rat four who chooses to shoot him dead.

No one dies in the third round. Are you keeping up?"

"Just get on with it. It's cold as shit out here."

"So now there are four rats in the fourth round, and rat number one, the boss, let's just call him the rat king, had been aiming his gun at himself the entire time. But on this round he decides to aim his gun at Rat number four—It's empty."

Bats simply nods.

"In the same round, rat number 4 aims his gun at the rat king. Another empty chamber. It's the fifth round now and rat number two, the rat king's right hand man, shoots and kills rat number four. So now there are only three remaining."

"So at this point there are four bullets in each chamber?"

"Right."

"If that's the case, then more should be dead by now."

"Alright, for the sake of consistency, let's just say they spun the barrel at the beginning of each round. Satisfied?"

"Not really, but continue."

I wasn't sure what compelled me to go on. There was a part of me that feared what would happen if I stopped. There's no doubt that Benny had been preparing himself for this moment for years.

"Where was I? Right, so, now there are three rats... with four bullets in the chamber. Rat three aims his gun at rat number two. It's also empty. Rat number two aims his gun back at rat number three. He fires, killing him.

Benny had taken off the gloves I lended him and stuffed them into his coat pocket. His fingers twitch beneath his bandages. For the fifteen years I have known him, he has never mutilated himself in such a way before. I didn't feel like asking why he did what he did. I figured it was guilt. Maybe he had just gone mad.

"So now it's just the rat king and his right hand man. The rat king aims the gun at himself. Click. It's empty again."

"These must be well oiled guns."

"Focus, Benny. I'm almost done," I say, releasing my grip on his coat. "Rat number two aims and fires at the rat king, killing him instantly. He is declared the victor, but once all the guns had been cleared from the table he realizes something is off. All six of their tails had been knotted together."

"That's it?"

I nod, watching him unwind the bandages from his fingers, letting

them fall at his feet. The wind sends most of them floating off into the sea.

"So, we are all caught in a system with limited agency. Those who ask questions will be silenced. Those who challenge authority will be punished. A boss without his men is weak and won't survive. Many of us are led to believe we can leave the system at any time, but it's a lie. There is only the illusion of freedom."

I nod once more.

"I suppose I'm rat number three. I've never turned on you though."

The old wood beneath our feet creaked violently as the wind began
to pick up.

"It's just an allegory," I say, pulling my collar higher to shield my face from the icy wind. "Are you really going to make me go through with this, Benny? Why not finish the job yourself. You know you're making this a hell of a lot harder for me. It's not like we're strangers. We're practically brother's at this point."

I watched his breath escape in shallow puffs, body hunched over in an attempt to shield himself against the biting cold. His fingers had stopped twitching. The numbness crept in enough to dull his discomfort. He shifts his weight, letting his boots scrape against the ice before finally turning to face me.

"It's what you were ordered to do. I'd... appreciate it if you could do this one last thing for me. Nothing has ever been done right by my hands. I still have my pride. We fed this machine until there was nothing left to give. Those of us who are left have nowhere else to go. It's not like we're honest men."

I knew he was right, but what if we could change our fates. What if the remaining rats had refused to play? Would they be able to figure out another method of survival? I wanted to tell Benny that he was giving up too quickly, but it was as if he was reading my mind.

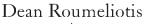
"None of us are escaping this city. They're watching the roads, our homes. They're just waiting for the right moment. I don't want to wait around, up all night wondering if the shadows I see outside my window are gonna get me. Any minute they can decide it's time to drag me off to hell. I can't do it anymore Delano."

"I understand," I say, reaching into my coat pocket for my revolver. "I'll take care of it."



## Until Death Do We Come Together







Caelus stood upon a rock, leaning against a tree in a sparse forest, idly humming to himself, wondering what kind of wine he was going to gulp down tonight. He sighed, cracking his neck. It was a rather stale night. He never did like summer. The stars were beautiful, but there was always a certain kind of magic to the winter times. One he suspected not many felt.

"Hey, boss," said a scratchy man's voice. Caelus blinked and looked down at an animated skeleton.

"Yes?" Caelus said with a sigh. Skelly pointed with his thumb eastward.

"We breached the wall," he said. Caelus widened his eyes, hopping off his rock.

"That was fast," Caelus said with a raise of his eyebrow as he twisted around and walked toward the gaping hole in the kingdom wall. All of the archers seemed to have retreated, and Caelus could see a sizable resistance deeper in the courtyard leading into the city. The ground burst around Caelus's feet as he casually traipsed across the ground, undead zombies and skeletons tearing themselves away from their graves to serve their master. There was a rather bountiful treasure of corpses just under the earth. Caelus could see their necrotic essence as he looked around. Surrounding him were new and old servants-some skeletons with scavenged swords and bows, some zombies, some constructs of bone twisting into shapes of scorpions and spiders of sizes varying from rat to giant. Caelus regarded the most powerful of his army, the golems, which took a rather messy effort to craft, but were well worth it. Some were made of flesh, others bone, others amalgamated pieces of iron armor and swords and shields. Caelus sighed impatiently, halting his force of a thousand undead servants just outside the wall. He allowed the forces of the kingdom to bolster their ranks before charging in. It was a trick as old as a hag. Sometimes, that's what Caelus felt he was becoming, waiting for these damned humans to just defend their city already. Once they finally had enough men in their ranks, Caelus commanded his army to charge with a dismissive wave, and the slaughter began. It was almost too easy. For every man they lost was a man Caelus gained.

Sabrina sighed as she scrubbed the royal robes upon her washboard.

She tried humming to herself, but she just... couldn't. There was something weighing upon her chest, not allowing her to hum. "Ello, miss," Kora, a large maid with brown hair, said. Sabrina regarded her mindlessly. Kora had a large bundle of clothes in her hands, placing them down onto a nearby table to fold them. "Did you hear about the party next week? The prince is having rather special guests set to arrive. I wonder if he's looking for a wife!" Kora said the last part in a whisper. Sabrina nodded and monotonously scrubbed the robes.

"Mmm," she said, sighing heavily. Every night of her life for the last ten years, she stared at these damned clothes, always sullen with grime from the prince's frequent libations. She felt as though eventually the washboard would grate her fingers away. Perhaps she'd reduce to dust. Perhaps that wasn't so bad.

"Is something on your mind, miss?" Kora asked with concern. Sabrina forced a smile and shook her head.

"No, I'm fine."

Kora tilted her head. "You seem out of sorts."

"Of course not. I'm just tired. Worry not, for all I need is some rest." This was, of course, a lie. Sabrina was considering turning into dust. The prospect seemed better than having any disappointing hope. It wasn't exactly what one would call in order.

Caelus considered what house would make a good spit for a nice slab of meat. He'd have to find the cookery to grab some seasoning. Shouldn't be too hard. Green flames roared across the wooden buildings of the city. They were just regular flames, but his minions seemed to love the display, and it was a rather easy trick to pull off. His minions all hollered and cried out with enthusiasm as they decimated the kingdom with ease. A man was no match for a scuttling bone construct of any size, big or small. The zombies were a surprisingly strong sort, and of course the golems were nigh invincible. The most vulnerable, but plentiful, of his army were the skeletons. Caelus checked his nails. He cringed. They were always so filled with necrotic flesh. Part of the sordid job. He'd have to find a river. He sighed again. Yet another item on his agenda. It was always something. A flaming roof collapsed, sending a large piece of lumber careening toward Caelus on the street. Caelus rolled his eyes upon witnessing the danger, glancing at a skeleton at the back of his ranks. The skeleton exploded into individual bones, shooting like arrows into the flaming lumber, launching it away and shattering it to pieces further down the street. The skeleton next to the one

Caelus used glanced over with his eyeless skull and frowned, something a skeleton could not technically do but Caelus could see it in their demeanor.

"Was that Skell?" Skellian asked. Caelus stretched his arms as a legion of panicking people screamed and desperately escaped the city behind him.

"Yeah, she'll be back in a few minutes. Hey, can you tell them to hurry up? We're not here to pillage," Caelus said. Skellian narrowed his eye sockets, placing his hand on his jaw as he watched the violence of the army.

"They are telling me they got dire hawks," Skellian said. Caelus groaned.

"Of course they do. A necromancer can't catch a break these nights, ey? At least they don't have a griffon," Caelus reasoned. Skellian scratched his skull with his boney fingers, cringing. "Actually, boss, they... uh..."

Caelus glared at him. "You're kidding. Damn all. Fine, I'll do it myself," Caelus said with frustration, body swapping places with his minions to travel the ranks toward the front lines.

Sabrina walked down the dark, empty halls of the castle, blowing out every other candle. It was the last of her nightly duties. With every breath, she slowly grew weaker, not from exhaustion, but out of monotony. She was half ready to drive the damned candle into her eye. Leira and Ponnie walked down the hall with dishes, and Sabrina squeezed her nails into her hands, knowing they'd mention-

"Sabrina! How goes your... affairs?" Leira said in a hushed, mocking tone. She had a wicked little smile. The two women slowed down to keep pace with Sabrina. She wished they were going different directions.

"Oh, Leira, don't mock the woman. Sir Kale is an enviable suitor, my dear," Ponnie said in a motherly tone. Sabrina gulped, forcing a smile.

"Alas, we are no more," Sabrina said through gritted teeth. The two women both gasped. But nothing could be more mocking than those damned gasps. She knew what they were really thinking. Yet another man in the castle that Sabrina seduced only for him to fall for another. Sabrina huffed, coincidentally snuffing another candle.

"A tragedy of the highest degree, my dear," Leira said, doing everything she could to hide her vicious mockery. Ponnie flicked the girl and turned back to Sabrina, who just stood still, staring at the smoking wick. Ponnie nudged her back with the dishes.

"Don't worry, girl, you will find a mate yet. You are the fairest of us all, after all," Ponnie giggled. She left with Leira. If there was one blessing,

it was that Leira didn't have a final word like she normally did. It was almost worse, though. The phantoms of what Leira could possibly say haunted Sabrina as she stood still.

"It's surprising you still have berries left to pick."

"You are a sheath that could comfortably handle ten swords."

"A well-traveled road. Frequently used, but never the destination."

Indeed Sabrina had attempted many love affairs over her decade at the castle. There wasn't much else to do. She crept over to the end of the hall, staring at the last dim candle she was meant to blow out. She didn't, though. She just stared at the flame flicker, slowly burning the wax away. Some men she seduced, others seduced her. Every time, she gave them not only her body, but her heart too. And every time, well, it was a mistake. Every man would stay for just a bit longer, every man would work that much harder to earn her trust, to earn her love. And almost just as soon as they did, a lady would catch their eye, another maid-hells, probably a street rat would turn the head of one of her partners. For some damnable reason, she thought things with Kale would be different. He was a tender man. He was patient and smooth and handsome in a humble way. A true, honorable king's guard. And she let herself shed away all that weariness that had built up over so many years. And then he laid with an apothecary, of all things. And she had witnessed it personally. No, she was no road, nor fruit bush, nor sheath. She was a reptile, hardening her skin every time she shed. Her skin was becoming so hard it felt like she could barely move within it. Sabrina sighed, feeling a twinkle in her heart where once was a blazing star of passion and hope. A decade of men snuffing out the star left her with nothing but a distant little candle flame. It would be easy to just... blow it out. But for some reason Sabrina did not quite understand, she protected the flame. Sabrina slowly backed away from the final candle, ruining the pattern of lit and unlit candles. No, she would not blow out that candle tonight. Not that one.

Caelus spit out the blood of the griffon, which covered his entire body after slitting its throat with a sword made of blood and bone. His necromantic cloak was still steaming where he'd nearly been hit by a fireball from the beast. He twisted his head, magically ripped the blood away from his face and clothes, and turned back to his armies as they laid waste to the city. A green essence of death whispered through the wind and encroached upon the griffon's corpse as Caelus raised his hand up to rally his minions. They all roared as the griffon rose from the dead, its fresh corpse sprawling

its wings behind the back of Caelus.

"To me my minions! To the-" Caelus frowned and coughed. He held his finger up. His minions turned to each other and shrugged. He coughed a few more times then cleared his throat. He sniffed and took a deep breath. "Sorry. What was I saying? Skellson?"

A skeleton poked his head out from the middle of his ranks as a house collapsed behind them. "You said 'To me my minions! To the!' Chills! I got chills, boss!"

Caelus nodded. "Right. Thanks. Okay. Ahem." Caelus twisted his head. He tried to find the passionate death lord in him to give his minions something to rally for, but he found nothing. He sighed. The moment was already ruined. "To the castle. Slay the prince," Caelus said in a monotone voice. His minions turned to each other, shrugged again, and then roared with enthusiasm to lay waste to the kingdom.

Sabrina stomped wearily toward her quarters. She yawned, though she didn't feel that tired. It was just boredom. Always the-

"Milady! The kingdom is under attack! You must follow me!" Sir Raymond yelled from around the corner. He grabbed Sabrina's hand and led her down the hall in a sprint. Sabrina's heart beat out of her chest and she couldn't think straight. In her entire decade not once was the kingdom under threat. Why did she have to curse monotony? At least she wasn't at risk of death. Dying alone late in life versus... Well, dying early but in love didn't seem so bad. Damn it, Sabrina. She had to focus on surviving tonight. She could ruminate death later. Adrenaline flooded her veins and she focused only on following the knight. Sir Raymond ran with her down the hall and bashed through a door. He shoved Sabrina gently inside, and she saw some maids and castle guards all sitting around the kitchen. They all jumped up to their feet, seemingly not worried about the attack at all, with smiles on their faces.

"Surprise!" They screamed. Sabrina stared slack jawed at the group. Leira laughed as Sir Raymond came to her side. Leira had a cake in her hands.

"Happy birthday, Sabrina," Leira said. Sabrina frowned at her.

"Is this a... party for me? Who's idea was this?" Sabrina asked with disbelief. Leira sighed heavily.

"Mine. I-" she glanced at Sir Raymond. "I had inspiration. We thought you deserved something nice. After all, you've been with the castle for ten years now. And 24 is a big age," she reasoned. Sabrina raised her eyebrows.

"I'm 25 today."

Raymond widened his eyes. He was clearly the one to tell Leira. Everyone behind them glanced at each other, murmuring, disagreeing how old Sabrina was. Sabrina rolled her eyes and turned to leave. Leira scoffed and stepped forward.

"Wait! It wasn't easy having Reyna let us make an extra cake. Would you please stay? At least blow out your candle," Leira said. Sabrina looked back at them. They all seemed hopeful she'd stay. She didn't understand why. She'd been scorned by half the men here, including Raymond. And Leira was always the worst. But she felt bad about the cake. So she decided to stay. Leira placed the cake on a table and brought over a little candle, placing it delicately right in the middle of the cake. Sabrina bent down as everyone cheered for her to blow it out. Sabrina inhaled, then stared at the candle. 25. She was 25. And still single. Alone. Her youth was escaping her. And it just felt like blowing out this candle would somehow resign her to a fate of being a mistress rather than a lover. An old maid instead of a lady. A hag instead of a... well, it seemed she ran out of analogies. In any case, she just couldn't do it. There was this awful, unreasonable, ridiculous hope that she could somehow find the one. That the perfect man would just burst through the wall and sweep her off her feet or something. But that was a fool's hope.

Caelus burst through the wall of the kitchen on the back of his undead griffon. He rode right past the screaming maids into the halls of the castle, making note of the spices he passed by.

Sabrina fell to the ground and screamed, having witnessed a man on top of a necrosed griffon burst through the wall and sprint past them. The maids held each other as the knights yelled out and sprinted toward the griffon. The maids were all alone, and two horrible reanimated skeletons rose from the edge of the hole in the wall, their bones clinking and scraping against the stone. They had stolen swords in their hands, and they howled wickedly at the maids, brandishing their swords. Sabrina cowered into the arms of Leira and Ponnie, awaiting her early death with no consolation of love. The worst of both worlds, like everything else in her brief, sad life. The skeletons approached them but then stopped, leaning on their swords as they turned to each other.

"But look at them, Skellia. We are clearly just naked humans. How can you deny that?" Skellio reasoned. Skellia grinded her teeth and shook

her head, frowning with her immovable eye sockets while the maids continued to scream bloody murder.

"What is your definition of nakedness? We are not even the same species. We are a temporally different stage of their existence that exists independent of them. So to draw comparisons to their skin and muscle as clothing is a ridiculous argument," Skellia reasoned. Skellio waved his arms around.

"No, think about it. When they put leather-dead, dry skin of animals-on their body, they are clothed. So if they take their own skin off, is that not a further state of nakedness? The absolute most naked a human can be?"

Sabrina felt her throat scratch from all the screaming and frowned, realizing the words that were coming out of the creature's mouths. It was too surreal to be believed.

"But they cannot be the same creature and flay their own skin. They'd die and become a separate entity. Therefore they can never truly be naked, since it is a state that is impossible for them as a creature to exist in. Understand?"

Skellio groaned. "We are clearly never going to agree with each other. Let's just kill these helpless, innocent maids and then find the prince like the boss said to do," Skellio said. Skellia nodded in agreement and the two raised their swords above their skulls. Sabrina shut her eyes and screamed, disregarding her confusion in exchange of dread for her death. Her life flashed before her eyes. Lover after lover after romance after romance. All ending in tragedy.

"Stop! You two, why are you trying to slaughter these helpless, innocent maids?" Caelus called out as he ran back into the kitchen. Sabrina shuddered, shock filling her as she realized she was still alive. She opened her eyes and blinked, glancing around until she saw him. A man with straight raven black hair slicked to the side, sharp, handsome, young features, and an imposing black necromantic armor and cape. Sabrina could only stare at him, unsure whether to be entranced or horrified. The skeletons glanced at each other with confusion.

"I thought you said slaughter the helpless innocent maids," Skellia said. Caelus groaned with annoyance.

"No, I said: 'My daughter has an effortless, magnificent braid.'"

Skellio and Skellia gasped... somehow. "Really? Damn," Skellio said disappointedly. Caelus buried his face into his hands.

"No, I said 'Slay the damn prince!'" Caelus yelled. The skeletons

started and ran away. Caelus sighed wearily. Sabrina frowned, recognizing that sigh. Caelus turned to them as the candle in Sabrina's cake started a small fire in the kitchen.

"Can one of you point me to the prince's quarters? I always get lost and I'd rather just get this over with."

The maids were beside themselves with dread and shock, weeping softly into each other, Sabrina in the middle of them staring at the necromancer dumbfounded.

Caelus blinked a few times and cleared his throat, assuming Sabrina was just in shock. Caelus rubbed his face with another sigh, muttering to himself how he'd have to navigate yet another damned labyrinth. He turned to leave. Sabrina leapt from the arms of the maids onto her feet.

"Wait! Down the hall, left, take the stairs, right, left, left, third door on the right," Sabrina said. She didn't quite know why she had helped this lord of evil slay her own prince. Caelus glanced back and halted for a moment, raising his eyebrows.

"Better not be the way to the dungeons. I've fallen for that much too often," he said with a twist of his head, starting for the door out of the kitchen. Sabrina felt a strange conviction in her heart as the fire of the kitchen proliferated more and more. The maids finally had enough sense to rise and leave.

"Wait!" Sabrina called after him. Caelus stopped and frowned, glancing back at her. She really was in shock.

"What?"

Sabrina gulped. She'd been spared. She shouldn't be pushing her luck. But it didn't seem worth living if she didn't try. What did she have left to lose?

"The prince. Why do you wish to slay him?"

Caelus waved his head around and blinked a few times. "What? What- What do you mean?"

"Why do you go through all this just to kill the prince? What has he done?"

Caelus stepped forward toward her, placing a hand on his hip. He considered the question. "Well... Look, there is a certain order of things. Greater purposes are at play here than you'd ever understand."

Sabrina frowned with suspicion. "Oh, so, you have no reason then? You've laid waste to this kingdom for nothing?"

Caelus scoffed, at a loss of what to say back for some strange reason. He realized how ridiculous it was that he was even entertaining this conver-

sation. "Listen, you random wench, I don't make the rules, I just do what I am meant to do."

Sabrina scoffed, crossing her arms and pursing her lips. "So, what, you kill and destroy for fun?"

Caelus scoffed and chuckled wearily, shaking his head. "Fun? Gods no. I wish..."

Sabrina nodded slowly, a curiosity about this strange, tall, hand-some... evil... necromancer driving her forward. "So, what then? Is the prince secretly evil? Have you seen a terrible prophecy where the men of this army shall bring forth a greater calamity? Or are you simply so evil you just wish to sunder all that is good?"

Caelus shook his head incredulously. "What? Lady, what is at stake for you here? Who in the hells are you?"

Sabrina stepped forward assertively, forgetting why she ever found the man or his minions terrifying. "Right now, a woman wishing to find some sense in this chaotic mess of a world we all inhabit. But clearly the forces of evil and chaos are just as lost and confused as the members of mundanity such as I."

Caelus stared at Sabrina, finally considering her looks for the first time. She was beautiful, for a human. More beautiful than most ladies and princesses he'd seen. Even in a modest maid's dress. Caelus shook the thought away. "I'm not lost, alright? I am precisely where I am meant to be, doing precisely what I am meant to do. I am a necromancer. I necromance."

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Well, it sounds like you're a slave to routine, just as I. Let me guess, you throw yourself at whatever kingdom is closest in the pursuit of some kind of fulfillment but you are ultimately left empty, every night becoming more of a chore and more difficult to take every step?"

Caelus smacked his lips, startled at the accuracy of her words. "I... is this a trick? Are you some kind of higher being?"

Sabrina laughed. "That is the first time I heard that one." She batted her eyes at Caelus, then felt a warmth within her that did not originate from the flames slowly immolating the kitchen. It was a mad thought indeed. But life was too short not to try. "Well, no need to play games any longer. Let's get on with it. Be a man. You're a necromancer after all. Either necromance me or necro-romance me." Sabrina blushed slightly but kept an air of assertiveness.

Caelus was absolutely stunned. Had she just... propositioned him? "You do know what I am, right?" Caelus asked. Sabrina looked around

facetiously and nodded.

"A commander of the dead, ruination of kingdoms, a necromancer. I've courted men far more calamitous than you," Sabrina assured. Caelus scoffed.

"You're seriously trying to court me? A lord of the dead? This is ridiculous. You must be mad."

"Indeed I am. Now, get on with it, I don't have all night. What will it be?"

There was a certain charm to her brazenness. Caelus realized he'd never met a person, let alone a woman, who wasn't in fear of him. And she was so very dashing in a strange way. "So what, you just want me to take you?"

Sabrina snorted. "Well, at least take me to dinner first. Haven't you ever courted a woman before?"

Caelus felt himself blush. He was a necromancer. Necromancers don't blush. "Well, no, only succubuses and sirens. They normally did all the courting. I just let them drain me of my... energy."

Sabrina curled her lip and raised her eyebrows. "Well you shall not be sufficiently drained until you show me you're willing to make an effort. You have a whole army, I expect excellent attendance to my needs."

Caelus put his hands on his hips and scoffed with disbelief. "You want me to turn my undead minions of deadly death into servants for you?"

Sabrina shrugged. "Either that or you slay me where I stand."

Caelus couldn't help but smile. "You are the maddest woman I've ever met. And I've met doom singers and chaos worshippers."

"I think you'll find a growing disillusionment for life will sour one's mind very much."

"Ironically I'm having a growing disillusion for death."

"It seems we compliment each other then."

"Perhaps." Caelus felt something strange in his cold, dark heart. Was it... warmth? He felt lighter when he looked upon her, as though it was easier to stand and breath and be. Caelus felt a sudden nervousness intrude him. "Well, let's see, I was thinking about dinner before this, actually."

"Oh?" Sabrina said, noticing the shift in his disposition with a flutter of her heart.

"Indeed, a large fresh steak roasted over an oaken inn. Spices from the castle cookery ought to make a rather suitable meal, ey?"

"Ah, yes, I like that. A true gentleman, and he can cook! Rarer than a unicorn. We should raid the spices before they incinerate. Pray you don't

necromance the cow and spoil the meat."

"You'd be surprised how preservative necromancy can be. It can do other things too. Ever heard a zombie sing? The thump of a golem's feet upon the earth? The clattering and clanking of skeleton bones? It's surprisingly symphonic."

Sabrina bit her lip and laughed at the thought of an army of the dead providing a melody for dinner. She snatched some suitable spices from the roaring flames. "Well, that does sound rather necromantic indeed."

Something resurrected in Caelus's soul when he saw Sabrina laugh. "What can I say? I am something of a hopeless necromantic myself."

Caelus whistled, the undead griffon charging into the burning kitchen. The griffon knelt and Caelus made sure to look as handsome and competent as possible as he mounted the beast. He smirked as he held his hand out to Sabrina. Sabrina had taken a man's hand to ride upon a horse's back many times, but never a grand beast like a griffon. She could barely believe what she was doing. But the land of the living was clearly never going to bring her that which she desired. So she took the necromancer's hand, and he swept her off her feet, helping her mount onto a dead yet majestic creature. The griffon launched out into the smoky night over the flaming ruins of the kingdom. Sabrina gasped and clutched onto Caelus tightly, a feeling Caelus was unfamiliar with. An embrace. It was lovely. Sabrina was entranced and petrified by the thrill of the sky wind in her hair and the majesty of the world from the view of the gods. But then, she dragged her eyes down to the burning ruins below her. The burning ruins of a kingdom built over a century inhabited by so many. There was something frightening about that sight, and it was then she realized the necromancer in her arms was the one who caused it. She felt a chill down her spine as she realized what she'd done.

"Why? Why cause all this destruction? There were innocent people down there. Even if you did not slay them, they were poor, and now they are homeless. I need a true answer, Necromancer."

Caelus could feel her increased distance and new coldness even with her arms around him. The griffon went into a smooth glide and they slowly swept over the fallen kingdom. He'd never had to justify his actions. He sighed.

"These high princes fight frivolous wars, sending their good men to die over border disputes. The blood of this kingdom is spilled for nothing but greed. I decided if I attacked them first, gave them an existential threat

to rally against, they'd stop becoming fat and lazy upon their thrones. They'd do something for their kingdom. The kingdoms are hemorrhaging people, and the citizens of this kingdom will flee to the ones nearby, bolstering their numbers and offering work where it is needed. The kingdoms will rebuild greater and stronger than ever before with something to unite and defend against, and these fallen men will serve me instead of being left to rot elsewhere beyond their home."

Sabrina did not know how to feel about his line of reasoning. She did not care for this kingdom, and there was never anything there for her. But she also didn't enjoy seeing it burned to the ground, to see all the death and terror caused by just one man. Caelus seemed to shudder slightly. "I do not do good things. I am a necromancer, my dear maid. I am a blight upon this world, a villain for them to one day slay. But I do see beauty in death, unlike what mortals might be able to see. To be able to repurpose the eternally damned for something new and useful, even as ugly as it can be, is the beauty of it all. My minions enjoy their existence. It might have grown boring, but it's also fulfilling. At least, it once was. I think at some point, I lost myself, lost the point of it all. Until now, at least, my dear maid. Even still, if you wish me to land you in a fine kingdom that would be glad to take you as a maid, I will not protest."

Sabrina caught her breath. The notion of returning to normalcy was startling. Her mind became a tempest of questions. What was wrong with her that she was not horrified but intrigued by the reasoning he gave her? And why did it seem to make so much sense? Was it possible that this man, who brought ruin to kingdoms and killed so many soldiers, might have been well intentioned? What was evil to her? Was rich men slaughtering their own armies in futile battles better than a necromancer slaying them in a battle to protect their kingdom, using their deaths to create something new? A thrilling and maddening conclusion made itself apparent to Sabrina. She was not disgusted by this arbiter of death even after he admitted to his crimes, but entranced by him. A hot, flaming resolution came over her as she finally made a decision. The land of the living had nothing for her. The land of the dead was strange and new and scary, but it was also alluring, and beautiful in an odd way, the very same way the necromancer described.

"Sabrina."

"What?"

"My name. It's Sabrina, not 'dear maid', though I am flattered by the attempt of a title of endearment before you even found out my name."

The necromancer chuckled and then turned to look at her from

atop his undead mount, and he smiled at her. Sabrina's heart fluttered once again. He was so very handsome, and his eyes were full of such wisdom and understanding.

"It is not often two souls match so perfectly. It seems strange things happen when they crash into each others' paths. I apologize, I think, perhaps, I have been hasty in my courtship."

"Well, it's how courtship happens in the land of the dead, right? Connect one's soul to another before the exchange of names. Makes sense to deal in souls within the realm of romance even if it is strange, considering the kind of company you keep," Sabrina mused. The necromancer cracked a wry smile and then dipped the griffon down, causing Sabrina to squeal with surprise from the sinking feeling. The necromancer stabilized the griffon and took a deep breath, soaking up the night air, enjoying the tighter embrace that Sabrina offered him.

"Caelus."

"What?" Sabrina asked after shaking her hair out of her mouth, chuckling from the thrill of flight.

"My name. Caelus."

Sabrina smiled wide. A strong, handsome name for a man such as he.

"It's not very gentlemanly to not have asked after your name sooner. I apologize. I shall make it up to you. Stay with me long enough and you will see that the dead are quite strange indeed, but can be even more beautiful than the living in certain lights." Caelus lowered the griffon toward the kingdom. Sabrina squeezed herself tight to Caelus, excited for the possibilities the future held. She looked back down at the ruins of her old home. She no longer looked upon it with sorrow or disgust or fear. For from the ashes of death something new and beautiful would be reborn like a phoenix. That's what Sabrina was now. No longer a reptile. She was a phoenix. Reborn anew, beautiful, greater, and brighter than she ever was. Caelus rebirthed the fire in Sabrina's heart, just as Sabrina resurrected Caelus's will to live.

#### Prometheus



The miasma of light and bursts of fire break the serene silence and stillness of empty space, silent fireworks heralding the future of humanity. A dozen atmofighters, the last batch to have been rushed into production and completed, vie for dominance around Prometheus 6, long since stripped of its valuable materials—the ships battle in short bursts, concise and measured in each of their volleys. Every avoided bullet and missile streaks off into the void, aiming for an unlucky soul on the other end of the vacuum. A lone atmofighter sputters towards one of the asteroid's ports, its engine burning away its last breaths.

As Keiran's battered ship scrapes to a halt along the metal floors of the landing bay, the port's emergency bulkheads grind to life, their shuddering vibrations rattling the interior of his cockpit. An electronic chime goes off in his helmet, a notification of a newly opened communications channel, an invite from a madman.

"This is Wizard-2, I'm on Prometheus. I'll try to stop this from the inside. Those nuclear warheads must be secured," Kieran says, changing to the newly opened channel before any of his subordinates can rebut. Looking around the docking bay, he sees the other strike craft, landed neatly in the back corner of the chamber, the pinup girl painted in a risqué magician's outfit just behind the nose laughing cheerfully at his cluelessness. "I would've thought you'd be out there in the mess."

"And yet, I knew you'd come here, buddy," replies Ajax's slick voice over the open channel. "So here I am."

Steam covers the view from Kieran's cockpit as the large chamber pressurizes, the bulkheads finishing the enclosure. Checking his PDW and the rest of his emergency combat kit, Kieran counts the seconds, waiting for the pressurization process to finish. If Ajax had wanted him dead, there is little reason he wasn't yet.

"You and I, we're like both sides of a coin, Kieran," Ajax coos. "We feel most alive in moments like these, fighting for something. We're connected like that. It's why you were my wingman, you know?"

"Not anymore," Kieran responds as he releases the latches on his cockpit, climbing out. For a moment, he warily eyes Ajax's atmofighter, aiming his weapon at the cockpit. He knew its bullets likely wouldn't penetrate, but should Ajax exit his craft as well, he'd have him. The first two steps forward dissuade him from the notion. He wouldn't be in there,

though it looks intact enough. Instead, he turns towards the control tower, an oblong metal box jutting from the rocky walls of the port.

"Yet here we are, together again. You knew I'd be here though, didn't you? Felt it. Why else would you fly out here with your ship so battered to begin with?" Ajax prods.

A personnel door at the close end of the landing bay slides open. Discontent with having to play into Ajax's hands, Kieran advances, his weapon trained at the doorway.

"And why would you let me? Why talk to me at all? You want me to stop you," Kieran asserts. As he reaches the entryway, he peers in. A familiar pilot's suit greets him at the end of the hallway intersection.

"I wanted you to understand, buddy. To really see," Ajax responds, arms raised and outstretched towards his former comrade.

"I see well enough," Kieran says, pulling the trigger and loosing a short spray of bullets down the hall. The bullets ping and clang against the wall as Ajax deftly leaps sideways along the intersecting hallway. With a grunt, Kieran bolts after him.

"Always ready to pull the trigger, I like that about you," Ajax says. "They really should've given you that promotion."

Kieran reaches the corner, peering around it before pulling back as a few shots from a sidearm come whizzing towards him. Kieran's breath catches in his throat for a second. He cannot be too brash in his pursuit; that's what Ajax is goading him towards. The hallways were no friend of his, though, and he was at a disadvantage as the pursuer. He also had limited bullets; his training taught him to assume the enemy may never run out. But was Ajax thinking the same?

"You won't catch me by sitting around the corner and waiting, you know?" Ajax remarks. Their training was meticulous, but the situations one was placed in were, too often, far messier and uncontrolled than the simulations and guidelines.

A bright glare illuminates the hallway as Kieran ignites one of his emergency flares, throwing it down the hall before releasing a brief spray of bullets towards Ajax's position. Taking the potential opportunity and bursting around the corner, Kieran averts his eyes until he passes the burning flare on the ground. Reorienting, he faintly hears the march of Ajax's footsteps further and further away.

"Good trick. How many more times can you pull that off?" Ajax taunts.

"Probably less times than you could shoot me," Kierna wryly admits,

chasing after his adversary.

The hallways of the asteroid shudder and shake as a rapid succession of alarms begin to cascade across the structure's systems. Kieran is jolted momentarily as he impacts the wall. His feet slowly float back to the ground, touching down with a soft thud. The station's gravitational rotation was now slowed by the conflict ensuing outside. Taking the momentary disruption as an opportunity, Kieran pushes off the wall and bounds down the hallway towards Ajax's position. Kieran throws his last flare as the corridor opens into a larger cargo transport shaft. The gambit succeeds, as Ajax fires another pair of shots toward the light source. Taking his chance, Kieran kicks off into the larger corridor, returning a volley of fire towards the source of the gunfire before ducking behind a retired cargo jack.

"Why betray us and join the enemy, Ajax? Just because you wanted to fight more? Or were you always a coward traitor hiding in plain sight?" Kieran asks, navigating around the jack to leverage another volley towards Ajax. Briefly feeling his weapon, he curses silently as he realizes that his overzealous firing had cost him most of his ammunition.

"Betray us? You bring too many personal feelings into this, Kieran," he answers. "I just want things to be better, Kieran. For all of us!"

Kieran is quickly blindsided as the jack is slammed into his side, knocking him over and sending his firearm skidding away. Ajax pushes himself over the jack, going to aim and fire his handgun at him. Scrambling, Kieran's hand finds the grip of a wrench, sending it towards his assailant. Reacting quickly, Ajax avoids the improvised projectile, but cannot prevent Kieran's reprisal, which sends his own firearm into the air.

With a kick, Ajax pushes Kieran away from him. The two come to their feet, their options nearly exhausted. Their eyes lock, a memory of allegiance sparking between them as they reach towards their belts. Each of them pulls loose the metal band looped around their waist, attaching it to a hilt that provides a small electric pulse that shocks the band into rigidity.

Blades clash as the two pilots come to blows. The vibrations of the clanging metal echo through their pilot suits, reverberating within their bones and coming to a diminished whisper against their skulls.

"Peace would have been better; that's what we needed! The war was over! Your insanity doesn't need to cost the world," Kieran grunts as he pulls back from their struggle. The lessened gravity from the asteroid base's systems failures causes his backstep to become a leap, bounding away from his opponent, who now presses a pursuit.

"A false peace! We would continue to fight in the shadows until another war came! It is in human nature to crave conflict. To become it," Ajax yells, thrusting forward with his blade.

The dull pulsing of the base's alarm barely registers to the two, their eyes focused on their opponent, prepared to strike or defend on a moment's notice.

"They wanted us to believe in a great nation, in our individuality and our spirit," Ajax continues, pressing his offensive. A deft kick to Kieran's side sends him careening into another room. His back impacts with a viewport, its gaze cast out unto the unending vacuum of space.

Ajax pauses his assault momentarily, the viewport behind Kieran drawing his attention. A sliver of Earth illuminates the blinking stars, a giant beacon of life amid the vastness of uncertainty. A giant planet of hypocrites and fools, prepared to fight and die over false notions of allegiance and loyalty. "I see no borders from up here, Kieran, no flags and nations. Tell me, my friend, what use do we have for our borders – for our countries if they send us off to kill one another?"

Kieran's foot touches the viewport as he springs back towards Ajax, gliding towards him, sword at the ready. Momentarily, he thinks of Earth, of home. He thinks of the war and what it cost—the homes he has seen destroyed, the lives irreparably shattered as a result.

"So your plan is to destroy your homeland? To resort to its annihilation, you animal?" Kieran pushes back. His blade clashes again with Ajax's, bringing the two face to face once more.

"Not just mine," he replies, stepping back from Kieran's advance. "All of it. This whole twisted world needs to be shown the truth of our kind."

Kieran's pursuit falls slack momentarily as he realizes what he has heard.

"You mean it," he says. "To blow up the whole world."

"I mean to test humanity. If anyone survives, I pray they learn a lesson from this," Ajax laments. "This is my means for a world free from war, from the scourge of modernity. As with any great change, there will be hardship." Ajax pulls a small PDA free from his pilot suit. "With the press of a button, Prometheus's engines bring it crashing down to Earth."

With no complacency for hesitation, Kieran lunges, his blade piercing through Ajax's abdomen. A choke of blood sprays against Ajax's helmet, obscuring his face from view. His hand on the PDA remains still. Between ragged, wet gasps, Ajax presses the device towards Kieran.

"You were always ready to pull the trigger," Ajax says, choking out a laugh.

As Ajax goes limp in his arms, Kieran holds up the device. He looks out at the blankness of space outside the viewport once more, uncaring and unknowing, and then looks back down at the device.

"Coward."

## Art/Photography





## Abolish Ice



Janely Quijas





## Reaper's Oak (2024)

Joshua Flores





## Hydrangeas



Hope Stewart





## Lamb to the Slaughter



#### Chloe Mannara

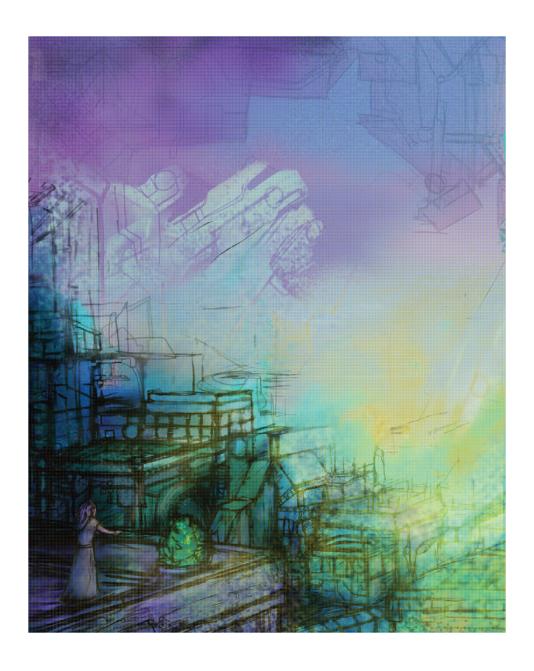




## Something Splendid and Blue



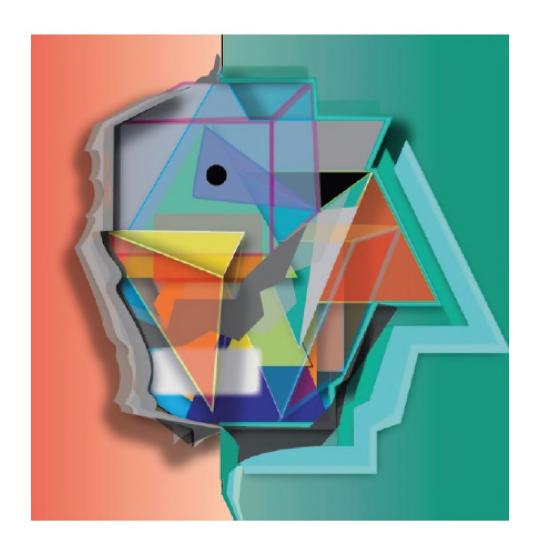
Luis E Garcia





## Abstract Portrait

Jesus Delgadillo-Galindo

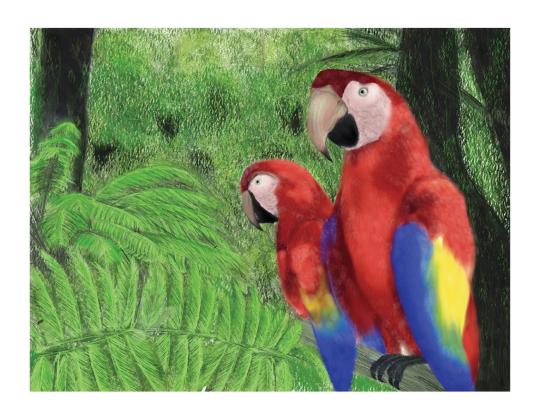




## Rainforest



#### Valeria Franco





## Alebrije, 2024



#### Mónica Hermelinda





## Purgatory



Natalie Blakey

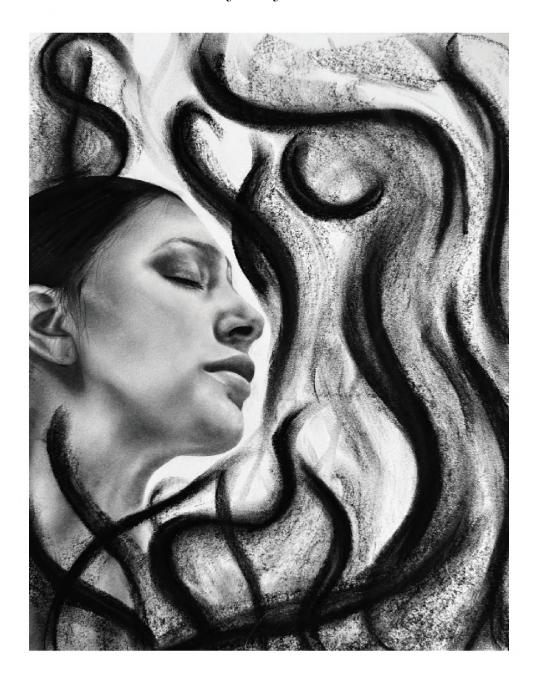




## Prayer



Janae Jolie





## My Past, Present, and Future



Frank Candela





## Blythe Self Portrait



Janely Quijas

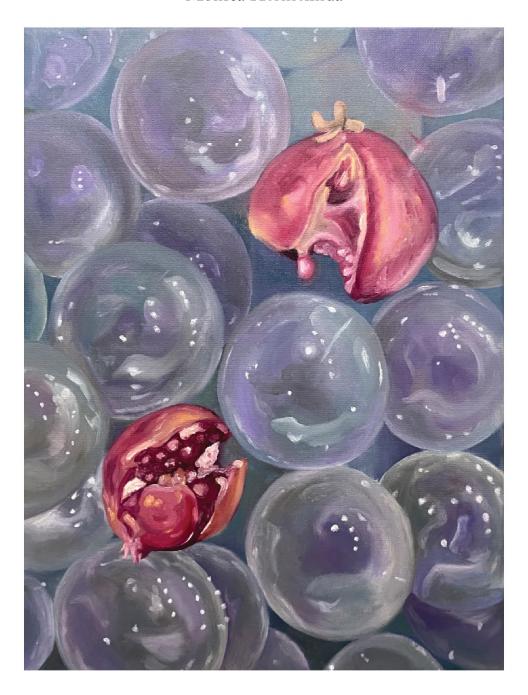




## Serendipity, 2024



#### Mónica Hermelinda





## Spirit of the Fanged



#### Hannah Ann Nicole Binuluan





### Two Dancers



#### Chloe Mannara





## GLAMOROUS POLLUTION

Saba Azmat





## Remember Red Summer



Luis E Garcia





## Guardian of Prosperity



#### Hannah Ann Nicole Binulaan





## Francis Elson as an Adult Today



Kimberly Smith





### Comfort



Janae Jolie





## Passing Storm



#### Frank Candela





# Francis Elson as a Child in DP Camp



Kimberly Smith





## Domingo



Jose Ramirez Velasco

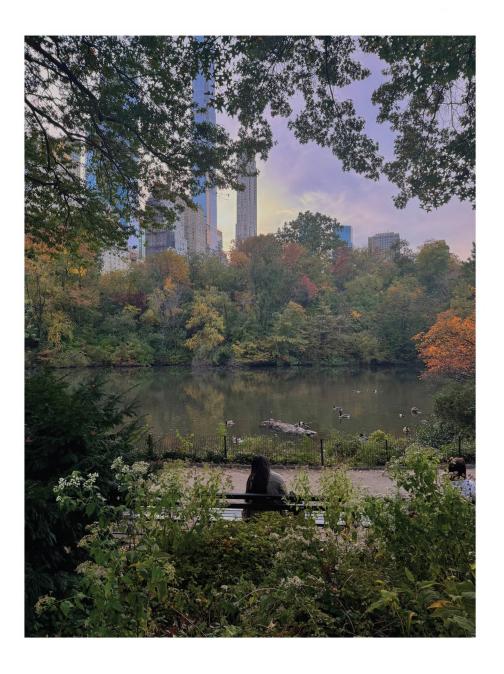




## Walk In But At Central Park



Christine Marquez





## Spinning Glass



#### Christopher Consaga





## Danza De Los Diablos



Jose Ramirez Velasco



## Meet the Team



#### 2025 Island Fox Staff



Leah Jones Managing Director

Leah is ready to graduate! She will take on the world with a tight budget using her psychology degree and creative writing minor. Joining the Island Fox Journal 2025 team has shed light on how much she enjoys working in a collaborative environment with extraordinary, creative people. She is remarkably proud and grateful to be involved in a true work of art. Even more so, she found her life purpose is to forever pursue a well-placed, perfectly timed, blissful nap.

If you're reading this, that means you won the scavenger hunt. Your prize - a beautiful copy of the Island Fox Journal 2025, brought to you by the wonderful and fun 2025 team, made possible by the creative and diverse students of CSUCI. It was an honor to help my fellow teammates put this together, and seeing students' dream come to life on the page couldn't be a sweeter reward.



Jennifer McDonald Managing Director



Carla Thompson *Liaison* 

Hi there! My name is Carla Thompson. I'm a senior in the English department with a creative writing emphasis. Being a part of the Island Fox has shown me what team work truly means. As well as being part of a group that puts out a fantastic journal every semester. It's truly inspiring. It also made me realize the time it takes to put something like this together within a semester versus all the time in the world.



Alexis Miron

Oh, hey. My name is Alex. I'm an English major with an emphasis in creative writing. English was not my first language and at one point in my life, attending college seemed like a far away dream... But here I am! I am honored to have worked alongside some very talented people and to have had a hand in creating something so special for the campus. Cheers to everyone who submitted to the Island Fox 2025! Hope y'all enjoy!

My name is Beta Roney, and I'm a senior English major with a Creative Writing Emphasis and a minor in Studio Art.

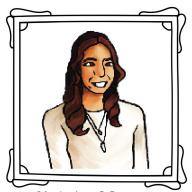
Getting to do the art for The Island Fox Journal 2025 has been amazing! It's been super fun to get to contribute so much to the journal and learning so much about the publishing industry. I'm glad I got to have such a great experience in the sunset of my college years.





Natalie Blakey Art Director & Marketing Director

Once upon a time, a little girl imagined an idyllic feline society; she imagined their holidays, their currency, their religion, their language. She imagined teleporting cars and flying ships. But still, that little girl never imagined that one day she'd have her art published, or that she'd get the chance to work on a journal that would inspire so many other artists. Her cats and cars and ships must be so proud of how far she's come.



Christine Marquez
Marketing Director &
Typesetting/Layout Director

As a little girl, I never gave up on the dream of becoming so much more—not just for myself, but for my family too. My whole life feels like a personal victory, a tribute to the II-year-old me who faced so much at a young age. I will always find a way to honor her and show her how far I've come. Now, as a young woman, I look back with pride,

knowing she would be so proud of the strength I've gained along the way. The future is bright, and I'm determined to make my own path, one step at a time.

As a Biochemistry major, I never expected to find myself working on The Island Fox, yet here I am—piecing together words instead of molecules. From early-morning inspiration to late-night edits, every hour put into this journal was worth it. I hope these pages reflect even a fraction of light and creativity that brought them to life.



Jae Robles
Typesetting/Layout Director



Emma Hitchcock Solicitations Director & Reading Fivent Coordinator

Hey, Emma here. I've been a storyteller all my life, but I never imagined I'd work on a journal like this! It was amazing to see so much wonderful art made by the people on this campus. Working to make the Island Fox this semester was pretty stressful, but extremely worth it! I'm so proud of the work our team put in, as well as the wonderful submissions from the CI community. I hope you enjoy the journal!



Regol Ramirez
Editorial Director &
Submissions Director

Mornin'. This project gave me a taste of what it'd be like working in publishing and editing, and shown me how much I enjoy the act of it. Catch me at Weho being a bartender after getting this English degree. And with the strength of Red Bull, I was able to pull this off along with my fellow peers. Enjoy!

Eyyy, it's Dean, English major with a creative writing emphasis. It's been real great working with the Island Fox. My thanks to the team who were lovely and I enjoyed the opportunity to read everyone's submissions this semester and submit myself. Thanks to you all, readers and teammates alike.

Cheers!



Dean Roumeliotis Submissions Director



Ryan Mak Editorial Director

I've always thought that anyone can be an artist, that anyone can create something that expresses themselves. Through sharing that creativity with others, I believe that we can understand one another better. Last year, a friend of mine told me that my submission inspired them to write, so I hope that you find some inspiration somewhere in this journal to understand and to be understood.



Vanessa Vasquez Solicitations Director

Hello! My name is Vanessa Vasquez, and I'm a graduating senior year after being on hiatus for some time. My major is English with a creative writing emphasis. I'm grateful to have been apart of the Island Fox 2025. Which was a unique experience, and a chance to get to know my peers in a fun way. The work submitted this year is inspirational. The process was a taste of how much goes into putting it all together and the publication process. Looking forward to what's next to come in life. Peace and Love.





From left to right:

Back Row: Vanessa, Jae, Christine, Carla, Beta, Regol Front Row: Emma, Leah, Jennifer, Dean, Ryan, Alexis, Natalie

#### Special Thanks:

Faculty Advisor
Adam Gilson

Cover Art Beta Roney

**Divider Art** Natalie Blakey

#### EVERY ARTIST WHO SUBMITTED TO THIS PUBLICATION

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