

Spring 2025 Creative Writing Workshop



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Blimbo's Bad Trip

Blimbo the Clown was at a clown Hollywood party. His high status with the Society of the True United Persons of Important Performances landed him an invitation, and he attended gleefully. It was filled with the most elite members of clownery, and Blimbo was having the time of his life. Rubius Clown, responsible for the daring documentary into the toxins of clown makeup, took him aside into a small room. It was filled with some clowns Blimbo didn't recognize, all huddled around a table. On the table was a rainbow power, and he noticed it dotted below the noses of everyone in the room.

"Heeeeey, Blimbo!" Rubius said to him, putting an arm around his shoulder. "I know you like to clown it up so I thought you'd like to try this stuff. It's pretty wiiiiild!"

"Wait, Rubius. That looks like illegal clown drug powder," Blimbo said. "That stuff's illegal."

"Pssh, it's fine. We've been doing it all night and having so much fun. Go ahead and try some. Really you should. It'll be the best thing you've ever done." Rubius pushed Blimbo. Although he felt pressure from the clowns around him, and maybe he would in the past, Blimbo swore never to do drugs again. The world began to change as Blimbo remembered the last time he tried them. Blimbo was walking through the woods. He often did this as a way to clear his mind. Clowning chicanery can take quite the toll on someone, you know. As he walked, a squirrel stepped in front of him. He tried to avoid it, falling so perfectly that his mouth landed on a cluster of mushrooms. He accidentally chewed and swallowed before realizing they were super drugged-up mushrooms.

A few minutes later, the trees began to twist and bend. They grew and fell as if stared at through a piece of warped glass. Colors became brighter as everything was suddenly more vivid, more beautiful. No doubt about it: Blimbo was tripping. He paced through the forest, curiously watching the psychedelic changes around him. He stumbled across a little raccoon. It looked so cute right now. Its eyes were big, tail bushy as ever, mouth smiling with jagged teeth, covered in blood and goop. Oh no! This is an evil raccoon! It cackled and darted at Blimbo, trying to bite his legs. He rushed backward, and his foot caught a root, causing him to descend

into the ground rapidly.

His back hit a tree, and he looked up to see its branches wrapping around his body. They restrained him as he writhed and struggled, desperate to avoid the fangs of the evil raccoon. The monster crept closer and closer, growing in size until it became a monstrous behemoth of smoke and blood. It reached him, pulled its mouth agape around Blimbo's head, and chomped down. Blimbo screamed and cried before opening his eyes and finding himself in a random alleyway. Somehow, his drug-fueled nightmare brought him to an unknown city. He looked down and saw only underwear. Damn raccoon must've stolen his clown garb.

"That was horrifying," Blimbo said to himself. His memory faded as he returned to the present day, staring at the clowns around him. Desperate for a dangerous high and pressuring him to get involved, he saw them for what they truly were: clowns. "No, Rubius. I refuse to experience that again," Blimbo said confidently.

"What? Experience what again? You've just been standing there silently for a few minutes," Rubius asked, completely dumbfounded and a little scared.

"Clown you later," Blimbo replied as he strutted from the room, out of the party, and back home. He sat down in his favorite leather chair with a glass of Chateau Le Grand, aged forty Years.

"The only high I need are the ones from all the people I entertain," he said, looking at a portrait of his great-grand Clown Pappy. He downed his wine and enjoyed the rest of the night sober.

Blimbo's Dilemma

Blimbo the Clown stood proudly at Ricky's 14th birthday party. Ricky's parents hired him to bring joy to the attendees, and Blimbo would rather die by saw blade than fail. Blimbo scanned the crowd for happy faces, but all he saw were frowns and scowls and frowns. This is an impossibility, as the mere presence of Blimbo should invigorate even the angriest person, and I mean angry, like someone who kills not for fun but because they hate the world. Regardless, Blimbo had to fix this mess.

He shouted and jumped and twirled and just generally did whatever he could to attract the attention of the partygoers. He looked stupid as hell, but such is the job of a clown. Eventually, a crowd gathered around him, and Blimbo waved his hands, reached into his pockets, and pulled out a long balloon. He was about to shock and amaze everyone, perhaps to the point of depression, as they would unsuccessfully try to chase the feeling of this day for the rest of their lives. He placed his clown mouth on the balloon, blew with the force of at least six hummingbird wings, and inflated the balloon. He stretched his arms into an immaculate wingspan, prepared to soar into the airy freedom of balloon tying, and- and- wait, what was he going to tie?

Blimbo graduated from the Westminstershire University for Gifted Clowns at the top of his class. He performed better than his peers in every aspect of Clownology. One might even say he made clowns of them. He shouldn't have difficulty tying a balloon, yet he stands before these children at a crossroads, perhaps the most crossroads crossroads that has ever crossroaded. Cat or dog? Cat or dog? Both animals offer much entertainment, but Blimbo can only make one. He had to ensure it was perfect, like the sun breaking through the clouds on a rainy day or a really good sandwich.

The children stared at Blimbo, completely blank-faced, likely overwhelmed by anticipation. Each gaze put insurmountable pressure on Blimbo. He needed to decide fast, or else the party would be ruined, and Blimbo would have to go home and pie himself in the face. He thought back to his training. Professor Clown Sensei told him many years ago that when unable to decide which balloon to tie, it helps to take a moment to relax. It's just tying a balloon, and Blimbo should not be freaking out like a loser. Seriously, Blimbo, calm down.

Blimbo remembered these words, his recently slain (long story) Professor Sensei repairing his mind, and began his work. His hands moved quickly, a blur of bends and twists as he tied the balloon. He was a clown with purpose, and the essence of clowning flowed through him. His vision slowly realized in front of him, and before long, he finished tying the balloon. He chose the best of both worlds: a dog-cat balloon animal! He did it! He defeated the balloon! Blimbo proudly held out his hands, gracefully presenting the creation to little Ricky, before realizing it was nighttime and the party was over. Apparently, Blimbo stood there pondering the balloon for hours, unaware of the time passing by. There may have been a balloon for Ricky, but there was no Ricky for the balloon. Shit.

Blimbo Fights a Demon

Blimbo was on his way to the Clown Store to buy food for his Balloon Pet, Morace.

Morace dragged alongside Blimbo, loving every moment he spent with his owner. Blimbo had found Morace as a simple deflated balloon in an alleyway. He blew- uh, he inflated Morace back to health, and they've been together ever since. Some even believe them to be inseparable.

Eleven seconds later, a demon emerged from the sidewalk. He cackled then shot evil ass hellfire at Morace, popping him instantly. Blimbo fell to his knees in disbelief, honking and crying as he picked up pieces of Morace from the cement, his ripped rubber corpse but a cruel reminder of what once was.

"Haha!" laughed the demon. "I just burst your lame-ass kiddie balloon! Idiot!"

"That wasn't just a balloon," Blimbo said, his eyes watering. It was my dear pet, Morace. You took my beloved best friend. Today is a sad day," he muttered as tears rolled down his cheeks. Of course, the tears did not smudge his high-quality clown makeup.

"What? You're crying? What kind of clown are you?" the demon was puzzled.

"The kind of clown that's gonna kick your mother-honking ass!" Blimbo shouted as he leaped up and landed a mean right hook on the demon's jaw.

"Ow! Fuck!" the demon cried, flying back a few feet. "Why was that so hard? Are you actually a clown or some psycho who dresses as one?"

"I'm THE clown!" Blimbo jumped at the demon again, swinging wildly.

"Woah, alright, enough. Jeez, calm down," the demon said, flying ten feet in the air, completely out of Blimbo's reach. "If you really want to fight me, fine, but I say we place a wager to make things more interesting."

"I don't have any money," Blimbo replied, teeth gritted. "I pay for things by doing entertaining tricks."

“Ok,” the demon sighs. “I didn’t want your money. I’m from hell, and I get as much as I want anyway. I was thinking this: we fight. If you win, I resurrect your balloon. If I win, you go to hell. What do you say?”

“Let’s do it.” Blimbo answered.

Blimbo and the demon stood twelve feet apart. The demon waved his hand and summoned a pitchfork, coated in ash and fire.

“You never said we could use weapons!” Blimbo shouted at the demon.

“Yes, but I never said you could not not use weapons!” the demon laughed, believing he had tricked Blimbo.

“Fine by me,” Blimbo smirked, reaching into his back pocket. He pulled out a Desert Eagle and started shooting at the demon. The demon froze for a moment, shocked, before charging at Blimbo. He tried avoiding the gunfire but was still pierced by some rounds. Being a demon and all, they did nothing, and he healed instantly. The demon reached Blimbo and thrust the pitchfork, which Blimbo dodged by jumping and doing the splits in midair. He threw the gun at the demon, making contact, then grabbed the pitchfork. He tugged it from the demon’s hands and held it high above his head in triumph. Then, the demon smiled and snapped his fingers. The pitchfork glowed bright red before exploding and taking Blimbo’s head and half his body.

Blimbo awoke in a dark gray room covered in spikes. He looked around, confused, until He remembered the demon’s deal and realized what happened. Blimbo never got Morace back, and even worse, he was now in Hell.

“Aw,” moaned Blimbo. “I had a performance later today...”

Blimbo Encounters an Online Troll

Blimbo lay prone outside the Cave of Evil. He had his rifle trained on the entrance to the cave, eagerly awaiting an enemy’s arrival. Blimbo was farming for a weapon in the hit video game Destiny-2-World-of-Warcraft-Borderlands-Runescape. A rare boss had a chance of spawning at the cave every ten minutes, and Blimbo was eager to snipe it down to earn the

Staff of Undying. He was there for— wait, I'm sorry, can we pause the story to discuss

something? Ok, Blimbo is farming for the Staff of Undying, which has a 1.48% chance of dropping from Hundar the Malicious. Every ten minutes, a group of enemies spawns inside and exits the cave. There is a 1.298% chance for Hundar to be in that group of enemies. So, doing the math, we get this equation:

P(Staff)=

$$\mathbf{P(\text{Hundar appears}) \times P(\text{Staff drops from Hundar}) = 0.01298 \times 0.0148 = 0.000192104}$$

This means that Blimbo has a 0.0192% chance of getting the staff every ten minutes.

This doesn't account for the fact that only one staff drops per lobby, so Blimbo needs to compete with the other players in the area to collect the staff before they can. Fortunately, there are no other players since the staff was nerfed into oblivion six years ago, and there's no reason to use it. The staff sucks. Actually, no, I'll prove it to you. The Staff of Undying provided users with a passive healing of 7.9 health per second multiplied by the number of teammates with you. This might not seem that great, but you need to know the staff was busted upon release. Firstly, it was one of three healing items when the game launched, so that already makes it incredibly useful. Next, it was the only healing item not locked behind endgame quests, so players could get it early and then use it until they beat the main questline. Lastly, it was a weapon for the Maestro class, or the game's healers. This allowed Maestros to focus all their mana into healing their teammates instead of themselves, and in the standard raid party size of ten, the passive healing made Maestros practically invincible. However, it has been powercrept in the current meta, as the healing was reduced to 3.2 per teammate, up to a maximum of three teammates. Furthermore, there are plenty of other healing items, ones that work with a more reliable percentage healing rather than a flat rate, and they don't require 36.15 real-life days of waiting in front of some fodder-filled cave to get. I'm writing the damn story and even I don't know why Blimbo is wasting his time. But he stays regardless.

Suddenly, something covered Blimbo's scope. He looked up to see someone's ass plop down on the barrel of his rifle. The player was a Rogue, equipped with high-level gear and wielding the mythical Dagger of Calamity. He stared at Blimbo for a few moments, likely trying to flex his gear to a noob farming at the Cave of Evil. Unfortunately for him, Blimbo had mythical gear as well, some even better than this Rogue's. Which makes you wonder why the hell he's trying to get that useless staff! Anyways, the two stared at each other until the Rogue began

crouching up and down on Blimbo's rifle. This infuriated Blimbo, and he joined the local voice chat to reprimand this fool.

"Stop t-bagging my gun!" Blimbo shouted, his dollar store mic likely peaking. "You're blocking my view and I'm gonna miss Hundar!" The Rogue was tuned into local chat, but he had his mic muted and used text chat instead.

Lul y u getting so heated? Big baby we dont need new ppl like u in the game.

"I'm not new, I've been playing since the beta." Blimbo said, standing up.

Wut the beta y r u here at the cave? U sum kinda clown?

"I am a clown," Blimbo dryly replied.

Wut?

"I said I am a clown," repeated Blimbo.

Wut dose that mean r u stupid or smth? Di you take a break?

"No, I've played regularly since launch. I've completed all the quests, done all the raids and missions. There's not a whole lot of new stuff for me to do."

So ur a veteran in front of the cave? Ya k you are stupid. Probs suck so u gotta farm ez areas chump.

"What? Why are you being such a jerk? Don't you have a parent to disappoint?"

Watever losers like u ruin it. Big baby waaah im a noob waaah someone carry me! Thats u. U just get carried and everybody else does work. Idiot I could take u.

"Yeah, well, I'm not here to waste my time on a rabblrouser like you, so just get lost and

go bother someone else,” Blimbo said through gritted teeth.

Lmao sum1 is getting heated. Big baby gunna cry? Lul noob getting Heated.

“Alright you know what, fine, you did piss me off. How about we go into an arena and settle this?” Blimbo challenged the Rogue.

Lul ur a maestro u gonna heal me 2 death? Im gonna crush you in a sec. Lets go.

Blimbo opened a PvP request, the Rogue accepted, and soon the two were teleported to the arena, a place where players go to duke it out and settle scores. Although Blimbo was a Maestro, he was not weak. Maestros have access to lots of destructive spells, they just prefer healing. Besides, Rogues are only good as support, sneaking, and attacking by surprise. They’re not equipped for head-on battles.

The two stood twenty feet apart, gripping their weapons as the match counter decreased. At zero, the Rogue darted forward, using his long step ability to reach three times his base speed. He jumped in the air, projecting his shadow far in front of him, then teleported to it. The Rogue pulled a potion from his chest, coated his dagger in it, then tossed black powder over his shoulder. He spun around, raised his dagger, and prepared to strike. Blimbo tapped his staff once on the ground and summoned a Decimation Wave, hitting the Rogue and turning his clothing, skin, muscle, and bones into liquid, which pooled on the ground. The match concluded, and Blimbo and the Rogue were teleported back to the field outside of the cave.

“Holy clown, that was easy,” laughed Blimbo.

Ur just a cheater using cheap attacks im still better.

“Yeah, ok. This is great actually I should use some of this in my routine,” mocked Blimbo as he laughed some more.

Nah ur trash had to use cheap moves to win i could take you in a

fair fight. Ur probably pay 2 win to so u suck.

“I’m sure you could,” replied Blimbo, lying back down and taking aim at the cave. “Go cry about it to your mommy. I’m sure she’s right outside your basement.”

Fuck u u dont no anything stupid–

I’m sorry, dear reader, but I’m gonna have to censor this next part. Actually, I think I’m gonna have to omit entirely. There are a lot of swears. Whoa, okay, a whole heaping pile of swears. Wow, this guy is using everything in the book, isn’t he? How hasn’t he gotten banned yet? Wait a minute. Why am I censoring the words of a character I control? I can choose to make him not say words, or use simple ones like poopyhead. I can make this guy call Blimbo a poopyhead! No, no, wait. I think the power has gone directly to my head. I should probably take a break. Yeah, that’s probably for the best. This story is too meta anyway. Thanks for reading! Hey, whoever reads this during class, if someone does read it during class, thanks. Sorry you had to read my screwed up text dialogue, I tried to make it as accurate as possible. You did good. This story is really dragging on, though. I should wrap it up soon. I mean, at this point, it isn’t even a story; it’s more like a letter. Well, I hope you all enjoyed. You got another Blimbo story. Yay! Oh, wait, if someone is reading this out loud, I’m gonna make you say something bad before you finish. Here we go: I, the reader, think everyone in the class is a big poopyhead but me! Cool.

And, the end

Blimbo Slays a Cosmic Horror

Blimbo felt the bag ripped from his head. It caught some fibers from his genuine clown hair and tore some strands out. It hurt, but he was much more concerned about what surrounded him. He was with nine other people, each tied up and on their knees. He watched as robed figures removed bags from the other prisoners. One by one, he saw their scared faces, free of colorful makeup, and was relieved to be the hottest one there. Blimbo looked down and noticed red paint on the floor. At least, he hoped it was paint. Each person was inside a circle, and each circle was connected to a large one in the center. It surrounded a triangle with runic text scribbled at each point. He saw they were in a space facility of some sort. It had three large windows along the left and right walls, a large door along the back wall, and a black

sphere in the front. The walls were a darkened gunmetal gray, covered in dirt and wear. Every line and crevice was filled with soot and dirt. The windows pointed to the vast blackness of space, utterly devoid of civilization or chance of rescue. The grime and windows made the room feel even more suffocating.

After ensuring each person was tied up tightly, the robed figures stepped back, stood in positions that probably made a shape when viewed from above, and began swaying back and forth. Eventually, a rectangle opened from the sphere and extended downward, forming a ramp. Light from inside the sphere flooded into the room, masking a figure standing at the opening. It was tall and slender, with a diamond-shaped head and wide bottom. This guy completely annihilated Blimbo with their lighthouse body figure. Blimbo was jealous, and he could guess this was the person in charge. The figure walked down the ramp, revealing their body just to be a big robe. Blimbo felt a little better, although he became afraid again when the figure pulled out a knife and started stabbing prisoners with it. The other robed figures around them chanted louder and louder with each additional victim. The figure continued to kill each prisoner, the circle below them glowing after their death.

Blimbo struggled and writhed as he tried to break free from his constraints, but unfortunately, he was a clown and not a magician. That's alright; magicians are lame anyway. They rely on tricks and deceit instead of being cool and funny like clowns. These thoughts distracted Blimbo until the robed figure reached him, the last prisoner alive. Blimbo couldn't let the figure sacrifice him! He wasn't a lamb! He was a human clown. At least he thinks he's human... The robed figure stood behind him, knife close to his back, prepared to plunge it deep within his clowny posterior. In a desperate act of defiance, Blimbo stood up and faced the figure, prepared to fight on his terms, even bound by rope. Instead, he saw the figure with the knife in their throat, gurgling and choking on blood as they fell to the ground, twitching as they bled out. Blimbo didn't realize that during his awesome resistance, he had hit the elbow of the figure with his shoulder, driving the knife away from him and into the figure's throat. Well, that was needlessly morbid. I didn't know Blimbo was such a cold killer.

Then, nothing happened. The figure fell into Blimbo's circle; it glowed like all the others, but nothing changed. Blimbo looked around awkwardly at the robed figures around him, hoping they hated their boss and would be glad to see him violently disposed of. That was until the inner circle, triangle, and runes glowed, and a substantial freak-ass portal opened in the back of

the room. It was red and purple, with blue electricity arcing off it and striking various robed figures. A terrifying screech erupted from the portal. It pierced Blimbo's mind, told him lies, showed him alternate futures, and made fun of his unicycle riding skills. Suddenly, spiky legs emerged from the portal, followed by the head and body of a horrendous creature. It was a monster of indescribable horror, which I will now describe. Its body was long like a horse, except it had a large gash along its back. The gash widened until it folded completely in on itself, revealing a new body with the same gash. The inverting seemed to continue forever. It had four legs, each a long spike that pierced the ground with each step. They were hard but thin, like a spider's, and oozed a green substance. It had a long and bendy neck, which appeared weak as it struggled to keep its head up, bobbing up and down as it struggled. Its head was that of a bull, except the skin from its lips to its cheeks was peeled back, exposing the bone underneath. It had no eyes. Instead, its horns twisted back from its head into its eye sockets, then protruded from its mouth as fangs.

The creature wailed and swung its legs, decimating hooded figures. It was massive, dangerous, violent, and maybe even unstoppable. It couldn't be allowed to live, and Blimbo knew what he had to do. He looked around and saw a conveniently placed Standard Issue Plasma Rifle lying against the ship's wall. He slid under the monster's swinging leg and ran to grab the rifle. He reached for it, picked it up, and put on a mean face. Locked and loaded. He shouted at the monster to get its attention, then began firing at it. It screamed and tried hitting Blimbo, but luckily, he was an agile clown. He raced up the creature's leg, shooting its body as he ran. The creature recoiled, and Blimbo fell off, using the mountain of dead-robed figures to cushion his fall. Although he hit the monster several times, he didn't seem to be doing any damage. He thought back to his Professor Sensei for guidance.

"Blimbo," Professor Sensei called to him. "Remember this lesson. When you are fighting a fucked up space monster guy, sometimes its outer shell may be too tough to pierce. That's when you gotta jump in that mistake to the universe and eliminate it from within."

Blimbo understood these words well. He calmly walked up to the monster and held out his arms. The monster opened its mouth wide and swallowed him whole. Blimbo fell down its throat until reaching the stomach. He reloaded the rifle, which did nothing since it doesn't use ammo, and fired the living hell out of the monster's stomach. The monster's blood covered his face, and eventually, Blimbo could not tell the difference between his makeup and the blood.

After what felt like hours of shooting but was probably thirteen seconds, Blimbo ripped a hole through the monster. He jumped out before the monster collapsed on the ground, dead.

Cool! Blimbo just defeated this random monster! Now, all he had to do was find a way back to Earth. He doesn't know anything about space clowning customs, so it would probably be best if he returned home. The only problem is he doesn't know how to fly a spaceship. They didn't teach that sort of thing in clown college. Oh well, he'll figure it out. After all, the story is "Blimbo Slays a Cosmic Horror," not "Blimbo Reads the 87012e Thirty-Eighth Edition Cosmorta Ships LLC. Star Cruiser Manuel." You got what you wanted. Bye!

Blimbo is Dead

Blimbo's casket sat at the front of the room. The space was filled with a somber energy. Many mournful attendees filled the rows of the funeral home, breathing heavily, and their eyes filled with tears. No one could believe Blimbo died. It seemed impossible that such a fun-loving creature could be killed that way. I'm of course talking about how he died, which everybody already knows, so I'll save word count by not saying it. Many gave beautiful eulogies. They were strong. Eventually, the Rabbi gave some closing remarks, performed prayers, and then left. Everyone got up from their seats. They began talking to each other, sharing epic stories of Blimbo and basking in the regalia of his accomplishments. Then, all of a sudden, a voice pierced the crowd. They demanded to say something. Everyone turned in horror towards this voice. Who could it be? Who could be so rude as to interrupt the clowny remembrance? Standing at the back of the room was- wait, no, this cannot be! There's no way! That's right! Standing there was the one, the only, the writer's artistic interpretation of Professor Jennifer "Biggie J" Wolfley! Their faces relaxed as they saw who it was. No one was more deserving of sharing memories of Blimbo than her.

Professor Wolfley walked to the podium. The attendees sat in respectful silence. They were eager to hear what she would say. Then, Professor Wolfley began to speak. It was... it was... magnificent. I can't believe a person is capable of capturing the essence and beauty of one's life. If Blimbo were here, he would be ecstatic. Everyone began crying. Spouses threw themselves into the shoulder of their partners, old women raised a handkerchief above their head and fainted, and one person ran from the room, incapable of withstanding the elegance spewing from the Professor. I wish I could relay what she said. But, every time I try to type it, my fingers fall off and my keyboard catches on fire, and also a meteor crashes into where I'm

working and destroys the 71 square miles of land around me. It's so good that- yeah ok I know I'm a kissass teacher's pet. Whatever, it's funny. Back to it, though, some people's faces melted like that scene at the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark. Then, as gracefully as she came, she left. Professor Wolfley walked out the door, and a blinding light shone where she had stood. When it dimmed, she was gone. Those were probably unrelated, though.

It's such a shame what happened to Blimbo. I wish I could bring him back. It sucks that this is the canon end of him. Yep, this isn't just another story he dies in, like the demon one. He truly is dead. It's almost like losing a son, except I'm the one who killed him, so maybe it's more like killing a son. Wow, that's actually kind of dark. This whole thing is dark. If only there were a clown who could brighten the mood. But alas, that clown is no more. Well, I guess that's it. The attendees rise from their seats and begin to leave. They need to head to the burial site, then home to rest, and later off to shiva. At least he had a large gathering. That's really all anyone can hope for in this- wait a minute. The casket is shaking. I repeat, the casket is shaking! Now it's lifting from the table. Ok, that's just... Blimbo's casket is levitating in the air and shaking. Wait. Could this be? No way! It is! It is!

The lid of the casket shoots off and embeds itself in a load-bearing wall, causing 43,000 dollars of damages. Out from the casket erupts golden rainbows. Then, to the shock of everyone, Blimbo rises from the casket. He laughs a booming laughter, waves to the attendees, then shoots through the roof, causing another 12,000 dollars of damage, and ascends to the cosmos. That's right, dear readers, Blimbo is alive! And now he's got superpowers or something. It was a fake-out! I lied to you for 683 words! You really thought I would kill him? Well, you were right, I really wanted to at first. But then, I remembered what he represented. You can't kill something like that. So, I didn't. From here on out, Blimbo clowns across the universe, bringing joy and entertainment wherever he goes. The end.

Gregory, Mikyle

Story 1 Wrinkle Prompt:

The universe boomed. Engines roared like caged beasts, turbines screamed through the void, and on every planet with a track, a racer was gunning for glory. But in a quiet, grease-stained corner of his parents' shed, Martin Dellinger was still trying to get his ride off the ground. The shed smelled of burning metal, coolant, and Martin's exhaustion. Martin rose from underneath the vehicle to wipe his greasy hands off although it didn't make much of a difference. His dirty, beat-up rag matched the messiness of his surroundings.

"Martin, you should really take a break. You've been working for hours," FAITH chimed in from the laptop on the workbench.

"I know, I know. I just have to do one more thing." Martin threw the rag on the bench and got underneath the vehicle again.

FAITH chimed, sounding almost amused. "You said 'one more thing' three hours ago. And four hours before that."

Martin ignored her. The Velocity Cup could be his big break. If Martin wins this, not only will he ace the class but all kinds of opportunities will arise. From landing an internship with Auron Automotive to racing in the Phantom Division, the possibilities are endless. This is his chance to showcase what he's been working his entire life towards. With only a few months left, Martin decided to pour everything into this masterpiece. Every fiber in his being knew that he could do this. He wasn't just going to be a participant; he was going to win.

As much as Martin wanted to disregard FAITH, he had to admit that he'd been running on fumes. The time spent working on the car had been enjoyable but it had also been taking more of a toll than Martin had realized. Maybe I should listen instead of being hardheaded, he thought. After tinkering away for another half hour, Martin finally decided to rest. He rose from underneath the car and didn't bother cleaning since he'd be back in the morning. He tapped his watch twice and FAITH blinked over from the workbench.

"Thanks for not forgetting me this time," FAITH said sarcastically.

Martin walked out of the shed and towards the house. He opened the door and saw his parents on the couch watching TV. Martin smirked and headed upstairs to get ready for a much needed shower. He turned the water to a moderate heat and placed his watch on the bathroom counter. The mucked-up clothes were thrown in the hamper and Martin hopped in the shower. The oil and greased washed away in dark streams as they spiraled down the drain. Martin let out a deep sigh as the warmth eased the tension in his body. The race, the tinkering, the possibilities; everything had consumed him lately. He ran his hands through his hair and just stared at the water swirling at his feet. Finishing up, he shut the water off and stepped out, steam creating a veil around him. He dried off quickly, reapplied his watch, and got in the bed. As he dozed off, he could only think about the work he wanted to get done tomorrow then, in an instant, his mind went dark. Martin awoke at night in the junkyard close to his house on the hood of a broken down car exactly how he went to sleep; wrapped in a blanket and completely naked. Groggy and annoyed, Martin looked at his wrist and saw the time as 2:27 AM.

"That's the third time this week, Martin," FAITH said. "And it's only Tuesday."

"Can it," Martin growled, clutching the blanket tighter as he trudged back home.

The trek back took what seemed like an eternity. Martin took the backway so that no one would see him. He's always been embarrassed of his sleepwalking. When he was younger it wasn't this bad. He would usually just wake up on the bathroom floor or on the couch downstairs. As he got older, the more he began to wander. I wonder if I make a fence if that would keep me in the house, he thought.

He made it back to his humble abode with no issues, aside from the small rocks on the bottom of his feet. As he walked up the stairway, he tried to step slow and soft to not wake his parents. He made his way to the bathroom, rinsed his feet off and immediately hopped in the bed again. Almost simultaneously, he was asleep again.

The jarring sounds of the alarm jolted Martin out of his slumber. Groggy and annoyed from his midnight adventure, he smacks the phone and turns the alarm off. He arises from the bed, stretches, and begins his routine to get ready for the day. After throwing on the first pieces of

clothing found in his drawer, he heads downstairs for some much needed breakfast. The first person he sees in the kitchen is his mother, Maria. She's by the stove making pancakes.

Martin raised an eyebrow. "You're up early. Thought you usually slept in?"

"Boy, hush ya mouth," Maria snaps. "Do you want pancakes or not?"

"Yes ma'am."

Grabbing a plate and utensils from the cabinet, he set them on the table, then reached for his favorite drink—a cold bottle of apple juice. The rich aroma of butter and syrup filled the air as Maria slid a fresh pancake onto the growing stack, its golden-brown surface glistening under the kitchen light. The edges were crisp, the center fluffy, a perfect balance that made Martin's stomach grumble in anticipation. He drummed his fingers on the table, eyes locked on the steaming pile of pancakes, already imagining the first warm, syrup-drenched bite. This totally makes up for sleepwalking.

Story 2 I know who you are:

I know his secret. He thinks he has everyone fooled but not me. Oh no, not me, I see right through him. He thinks he can change his hair and put on some stupid glasses and become a different person. How dumb does he think I am? I'll show him. I'll show them all. Soon, I'll prove Clark Kent is Superman.

For weeks I've been gathering evidence. I've been following Clark everywhere. It seems like he has a normal routine, that he's a normal guy. He comes to work, goes home, maybe gets groceries or walks his dog (that dog can't be normal either) and repeats like a broken record. However, whenever some monster terrorizes Metropolis, he vanishes. A few seconds later, Superman appears. This CAN'T be a coincidence. And then he comes back to work the next day like nothing happened. Once I have all of my evidence, I'll go into work tomorrow and show everyone. They'll have to believe me.

I walk into the office with a tan envelope with SUPERMAN written on it in red sharpie. The first person I see is Tim. We haven't interacted much but he'll do for a first person.

“Hey Tim, how’re you doing today,” I say with a grin on my face.

“Oh hey, I’m —”, he starts.

“That’s great buddy, here take a look at this.”

I open the envelope and have a picture of Superman and Clark side by side. Irrefutable evidence. They’re the same person.

“Why do you have a picture of Superman in here? And who’s the schmuck?” Tim questions.

“That’s Clark. He’s worked with us for like 3 years. Doesn’t matter, don’t they look the same?”

“I don’t know. Superman’s face is so symmetrical. This Clark guy looks uneven.”

“What?” I take a look at the pictures myself again. “You know what nevermind Tim.” I storm off trying not to take a swing at him. The next person who catches my eye is Lois. She’s a reasonable person and she knows who Clark is. She’ll definitely believe me.

“Lois! Lois, take a look at something for me. You know Clark right.”

“Yeah? His desk isn’t far from here.” She points to a desk a few steps away. I peer over to make sure Clark isn’t there.

“Ok, perfect, so take a look at these.” I slide the picture of Superman on her desk. “Who is that?”

“That’s Superman.”

“Right, ok now look at this.” I put the picture of Clark on her desk. “Who’s in this picture?”

“That’s Clark.”

“Alright, do you see what I’m seeing?” “Uhh,” Lois scrunches her face. “No, mind telling me?”

“THEY’RE THE SAME PERSON.” I yell, my voice filling the office.

“Ok, let's not get crazy now. There's no way – look there's Clark now. Clark! Come here really quickly.”

“Good morning Lois, what can I do for you?” Clark says towering over me.

“He thinks you’re Superman.” She says trying to contain her laughter.

“No, I KNOW he’s Superman. Give me the Superman picture.” I yank it off her desk. I reach for Clark’s glasses and yank them off while holding the picture up. “You have to see this too.”

Lois takes a while to examine what’s in front of her. “You know, maybe they do look kind of similar. But the reality is Clark wears glasses, Superman doesn’t. There’s no way they can be the same person.”

I feel the frustration boiling. I give Clark his glasses back and walk towards my desk. As I turn around I say, “You can’t keep this up forever Kent. Count your fucking days.”

Story 3 Anxiety:

Martin’s head was throbbing. His breathing became uneven and ragged. He clenched his fists at his side, nails digging into his palms. The anger continued to swell, coiling up like a snake catching prey.

“Martin.” FAITH’s voice was calm, a stark contrast to the storm brewing inside.

“You have an elevated heart rate. Should I—”

“Shut up,” he snapped. His words were sharper than broken glass. He clenched his jaw to avoid yelling. FAITH didn’t take offense. She never did.

“The garage light was dim. It shined on the screen upon the workbench with cold, sterile text that meant nothing right now. He glared as if trying to start a fire through sheer willpower.

“If this continues, your body won’t be able to hold on.”

“Yeah? Thanks for the observation, FAITH. You’re being awfully helpful.”

“That is what I was designed to do.

“Would you like me to initiate a calming protocol?”

Martin shot to his feet, the chair skidding back like a car that lost control. The urge to hit something, anything, pressed upon him. He turned away from the workbench and walked a little bit away.

“No, FAITH, I don’t want a damn ‘calming protocol’. What I want—” His breath caught, frustration boiling too hot for words. He put his hands to his head in an attempt to stop everything from spinning. The silence between them was almost deafening.

“I don’t understand what you want.” FAITH admitted.

Of course she didn’t. She can’t feel like this. She wasn’t designed to digest raw human emotion, innate fury.

“I want things to make sense.” Martin muttered. “I want things to go the way they should. And I want people to stop—” He stopped himself, biting the words down.

FAITH didn’t press on. She never did.

Martin exhaled sharply. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter.” He went down under the car and got to work again.

Poem 1: Begin Anew

Winter, the season of shivering

Snow falls gracefully covering everything in sight

The wind blows viciously, attacking everyone it can

So just stay inside and enjoy a hot chocolatey delight

The season is much more than snow and trees without leaves

It brings temperature that drops to depths no one believes
It marks the end of a story but also the start of a new
Before the new season begins, we give the old a review
Winter is but preparation for the greatness that comes next
For the season of Spring that covers the world with life
A new beginning is a great phenomenon
However they are sometimes hindered by past strife
To grow as individuals we must face the past
And find the strength to move on at last
Appreciate this season and what it can do for you
As it brings about a new one where we begin anew

Story 5 Birds in a Cage:

As the rain danced through the moonlit cityscapes of Detroit, a shadowy figure flew into focus in a nearby alleyway. The honks and the screeches and the slurs of the city drowned out the sounds of agony and pestilence that transpired in that forbidden corridor. The ticking of a small clock suddenly overpowered the innate chaos of the atmosphere and out walked the slim physique of a man with just lenses shrouded in a trench of void. He raises his head, the ticking stops, and he moves on through the concrete rainforest. Dashing through the crowds of potential victims, gliding across the streets of anarchy, all until three sore thumbs walked across his irises. His head lowered and a grin beamed from the obscurity of a human being. Suddenly, the clock started ticking, ticking and tocking—if time is money, then they were about to go broke.

The first victim was a young man of average body stature, wearing studded leather pants and a black sweater, over which hung a flamboyant pirate coat with red accents. A boy lost in the hellscape of Detroit, far from his home of Lin-Gard. He fell into a well or was he pushed, he couldn't remember. Emerging from a manhole cover in a back alley, he looked like a deer lost in headlights under the city street lamps. His black military-style boots were the only thing keeping his feet dry from the torrential downpour. The rainwater poured down and throughout the strands of his light brown ponytail. He immediately threw his hood up and over his head.

"Where am I," he thought to himself. The clothes of this place seem foreign to him.

"Go back to the Renaissance Fair freak" a passerby shouts at him.

The first thing that catches his eye is a jewelry store that happens to be nearby. If he doesn't know how this world works, he might as well learn about it through a little petty crime. So with reckless abandon, he conjures a fiery ball in his hand the size of a tennis ball and hurls it at the glass window with the precision of a professional baseball pitcher. An alarm sounds from the store as he frantically grabs jewelry from the display, onlookers giving him strange looks. With a flick of the wrist and some dust pulled from his satchel, he tosses the dust, speaks in a devilish tongue, and vanishes into thin air with some sort of teleportation spell. Next thing he knew, he was running down the streets, looking to find a hiding place, valuable gems in hand.

The second thumb wandered the streets carelessly. It's been a few years since he was back on Earth. He decided to tag along with his parents on their journey back to this dull space rock for a family gathering. Maybe spending time with family will be more tolerable this time, he thought. Wishful thinking. When he walked into that house, he was met by screaming and yelling from the kids arguing for the TV remote to his grandfather shouting that someone get him some water. He decided to spare himself the headache and just left. He'd have more fun scouring for a junkyard for some missing pieces to the car he was working on. With the headset he got for his birthday last year, he put some music on and started walking.

The third stranger ambled into view, in a step-step pause, step-step cadence, sure footed and familiar as they navigate winding alleys and crowded sidewalks. Their head, shadowed under the wide brim of a brown stetson, inclines curiously at every passing stranger, every skitter of a retreating stray cat, every passing car.

Headlights from oncoming traffic illuminate the sidewalk and pass over the figure as it trundles on, and as they turn to look at it, their eyes shine, dark pupils and irises momentarily transformed into glowing plates of glass. The silhouette of antlers are cast on the building behind them, stark and contradicting to the shadow's owner. The car passes, turning a corner and taking light and shadow with it. The wanderer moves on. As the clock's ticks and tocks grew more and more prominent, the strange man called for a taxi and soon his quick thinking went into motion. Standing by in the open void of the city, he simply waited patiently as all four pieces of the puzzle neatly came together. A rumble rose from the sky, dark clouds closing rank and blanketing the city of Detroit in gloom. Like stage crews setting a scene on stage, lightning flashed, illuminating the streets below in a purple haze, only to vanish as the sky opened and

the rain plunged into a torrential downpour. The foreboding cab soon came into focus and arrived at a quick halt as the rain coated it. With no destination in mind and eager for the shelter the car provided, they clambered inside, bowing their heads as they retreated. Without warning the cloaked figure pried open the driver's door, yanked the poor taxi driver out, and painted the windshield red with his blood. He climbed inside and took the wheel, the three victims shaking with dread.

"Don't be a hero, just let nature take its course." The murderous man calmly spoke as the wipers went to work and he drove off into the hazy streets, cargo in tow.

Irish, Jack

Shared Character Meeting

CRACK. A sound ripped out like a hammer on thick glass. The only thing to disturb the otherwise uncanny silence that filled the tiled room. *CRACK*. Once again the sound tore outward from the center of the room. A shadowy and ethereal black opening begins to spread itself out, reaching with dark tendrils. It wasn't quite three dimensional, but if someone was to look into it, they'd see the depth within. With one final loud shattering noise echoing throughout the room, a fairly large reptilian humanoid wearing a pure white lab coat tumbled out straight onto the floor. The polished white of the tiles lightly reflected the darker green of their scales. Before they could even take a breath another bounced off them, this time human, dressed in something more akin to black and white business casual, though missing their right arm and leg. Finally out of the gaping void came someone with a little more grace. Wearing a more classic hunter outfit, sporting earthen green tones on a hood, which laid on top of a white tunic. This human propped themselves up on wobbly legs as they popped out of the void, making it a few steps before their knees buckled, bringing them right back down to the floor with the rest.

The 'crack' quickly began to close back up, light drifting into the room from some unseen source as if midday. The human in earth tones let out an exasperated sigh as they took a look at their surroundings. Their eyes roamed around, taking in the bright white tiles and the turquoise pools of water set into the ground. Beyond their current room, they saw a number of dark passageways leading further into the labyrinth. Finally, they looked down to the two who had fallen out before them. The reptilian one seemed to be waking up quickly, eyes slowly blinking. The other however, seemed to be more a corpse, though still breathing, if only shallowly. An entire eye was missing and there were some holes in hi-

Before they could inspect him any further, or finish the thought, the long coated reptile jumped up, towering over them by a good foot and a half. They quickly looked around, their eyes darting back and forth, before settling on the person in front of them. A bright smile played across their face, as they waved downwards "Hi there! Name's Dives! Did you also... ehm... 'transport' here? Well, wherever here is." They made a spinning motion with their finger to denote the circular room.

"More fell through the ground, but yes, transported." The hunter put out a hand towards Dives, a gut instinct due to the well-meaningness that exuded from her. "I'm Marci. As to what this is, I'm

not really sure, but I'm having some thoughts-" Another thought interrupted as the pseudo-corpse began to move.

The left eye opened, a sharp red, while the formerly empty socket was filled with a black eye with a similar iris. Two more eyes appeared in the cheek below it all seeming similar. As all four eyes darted around an inky, almost sludge like liquid pulsed out forming into a usable leg and arm as the man shot up from the ground. Swiftly he threw his back into the wall, clearly very defensive from the way his fists were balling up. "So..." He started before either of the other two could even attempt to introduce themselves, "One of you wanna explain why I can't remember how I got here?"

"Well looking at you, both of you for that matter, I doubt I'm exactly the reason either of you got here, neither of you were around when I tripped and fell into my sister's stupid teleporter, and even if you were, you wouldn't have been close enough to be affected by it malfunctioning." Dives casually commented out.

"I agree," Marci added, "I doubt I exactly had anything to do with what happened to you, my method of transportation was much more...individual."

"So," Dives continued with a genuine look of worry on their face, "Let's start with your name, you do remember it right?"

The man untensed, mostly, took a breath and said, "Charles. How about you two?" A stark shift from the less than subtle threat a moment ago.

"Oh good," Dives quickly responded, the smile returning to her face, "You don't have horrible head trauma!"

Marci, who was already pacing around the room now that the tension had been defused, responded without looking towards Charles, "My name is Marci."

"So uh... what's she up to?" Charles' right arm formed into a large hand with a thumb jutting toward Marci's pacing, as he looked up at Dives.

“Well what I’m trying to do is figure out the rules of this place, I have some... let’s call it experience with things like this and they always have rules, like puzzles-”

“Ooo I love puzzles!” Dives interjected

“-And horrible monsters.”

“Of course there's monsters” Charles’s eyes rolled. “Why are you both so casual about this? Is this normal for you guys?”

“I mean,” Dives started, drawing out the word as she looked off to the side, “malfunctioning teleporters aren’t exactly new, and I was *bound* to end up somewhere. Gods, I’m lucky I didn’t end up spaced. As for you two... one of you’s obviously a human with a few mutations, the other is... well, *human-shaped*. That’s pretty par for the course where I’m from.”

“*Human-shaped?*” Charles repeated under his breath.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t say it’s normal but things have never really *been* normal for me so I’ve learned to keep my freakouts more internal,” Marci shrugged.

“Anyway!” Dives shouted, clapping her hands together. It echoed loudly in the open room. “May as well explore, maybe we’ll find something that’ll tell us what to do, or one of those monsters!” She turned in place for a few moments, looking around before seemingly picking a direction at random and walking straight towards it.

Waking and Exiting

Sunlight cascaded in through the window, occasionally obscured by a passing cloud. It lit up the somewhat dusty room, putting on a full display of various pieces of furniture and other odds and ends stored within. Facing the window on the opposite side of the room was a fairly simple bed sporting a frame and a thin mattress. As the sun continued to rise its light eventually fell on a figure in the bed, illuminating them until it came to squarely rest on their face. As it did the figure in bed quickly began to blink, an irritated look spreading over their mismatched face. As the figure sat up their two eyes where any normal humans would be stayed half lidded, clearly not quite alert, while two more that trailed down the right side of their face were slowly blinking out of sync.

Charles extended his shadowy arm about three feet to his right to lay on top of one of the many dressers. Lazily the pure black loosely made hand tapped repeatedly around the top of the dresser. Charles yawned as he continued his blind search of the dresser, which stopped only when he reached the end of the dusty wood. He slowly turned his head to his right, his irritated face now in a full grimace. He laid his eyes on the dresser he was touching and slowly blinked. The grimace faded into shock as he took in the area around him. Upon further inspection it seemed to be some sort of attic or side room lacking an entrance.

Retracting his arm Charles' eyes fell onto himself. Much to his despair, made all the more apparent from his ever whitening face, he was nude. Not partially, not in all but undergarments, but completely so. Quickly standing up he looked around the room and upon seeing the window shot right back down into the bed. "Shit," he hissed out, "This certainly isn't my place, and... well I was going to say these clearly aren't my clothes but that doesn't fit." More cautiously this time he stood up, making sure to stay out of direct sightline of the window. Now able to move without the potential embarrassment of exposing himself to the world he began to scrounge around the room in earnest, while also racking his brain for how he ended up in this scenario. As he looked through drawer after drawer there was a part of last night that slowly came crawling back to him.

He saw that bottle again in his mind's eye, 'strongest stuff in the joint' they said. "And then what???" He muttered, frustrated with his inability to capture those thoughts again. He fell to the floor after opening the last drawer and finding yet another layer of dust. Leaning up against the wall he tried again to focus, if the bottle was a stopping point why not try to work bac-

"Hey Larry, I think you got a rat upstairs." Someone called out from down below. Charles froze.

"You sure? Well honestly, wouldn't surprise me with how Larry keeps this place." Came a higher pitched response.

Finally a more gruff voice, "Both of ya be quiet, and we'll see." Charles felt like he could hear his heart bouncing off the walls. Pounding faster than it did when he normally fought. After what felt like an eternity the last voice, clearly farther away, said "I'll check up there later tonight after customers have left for the day."

'Great,' Charles thought, 'How the hell do we get out of this one.' He looked towards his 'prosthetic' arm and leg as if was going to get a response. His eyes drifted to 'his' bed. He couldn't just charge out the window, he'd get the cops called on him for breaking and exiting. It was as these thoughts of helplessness swirled around that he realized there was at least one

hope here. He ended up laughing through his closed mouth at its absurdity. Getting up slowly and trying to be as silent as possible he moved over to the mattress. Molding his right hand into something more akin to a knife he slashed one of the less wide ends. Reaching both hands in he began to rip everything out. Piling up the stuffing onto the floor next to him he was left with an emptied mattress. Forming his knife hand one more time he cut a smaller opening on the opposite end.

He stood up once final time, wearing the newly formed mattress pancho. It made it down to his feet, making it incredibly hard to move meaningfully, but not impossible. He unlatched the window and pushed himself out of it. Standing up on the roof of this building, he now saw it was about three stories up, surrounded by other buildings of various heights. "Step one down," He remarked, staring out at the cityscape, "Home can't be that far away... right?"

One Last Time

There was a time when Charles was younger, body intact, without 'modification'. He grew up in an okish household, where he was barely afforded to go to the local school. Apparently his sister Juna had insisted on this as he was growing up. One day at school he decided to perform a bit of a prank, he forged the teacher's handwriting in a note claiming that she knew what another student had stolen, and just to give it to the student who had handed them the note and nothing would happen. Jordan, the student Charles had handed this off to, went pale in the face as soon as he read it while Charles feigned complete ignorance. After a few moments the boy fished out some toy and handed it off to Charles. Silently pocketing the knickknack he would later sell it for a bit of money.

Charles would continue these escapades as he got older, refining and as far as he was concerned, mastering his craft in his teens. So of course the logical conclusion would be to become a delivery boy. Unsealed letters were surprisingly common in the medium sized port town he was from. His targets were exclusively people who had wronged him or his family, he felt like that was only fair. Mr. Johnson half the town away was one of the first, his son had egged their home for "being ugly enough already", but Charles saw the way he had to hold back a smile when he apologized. While delivering to Mr. Johnson Charles had noticed that his mother had been mailing him, and upon some 'inspection' of 'suspicious letters' it seemed she was in a fluctuating state of health, it wouldn't be out of the question for her to ask for some money. Of course if the delivery boy picked up the reply letter, no one batted an eye. Charles would do this here and there with no real failures, his parents too preoccupied with working hard

jobs to really ask or even think about where the money came from, if they even noticed. Charles thought they were just glad that he was making it from a job and not nagging them for cash.

It was when him and Juna were alone late at night, sharing dreams as they were off to do that she asked the question, "So, why is your wallet always full? You and I both know you don't make that much." Charles froze in place, his often calm and laughing demeanor shattered. He couldn't lie to Juna, no amount of fear would allow him, they were partners in this life, the only one each other could trust as far as he was concerned. "You're not working with those thugs are you??" Juna's concern was piercing.

"I-" Charles didn't know what to say, at a complete loss, "You won't get mad?" Every ounce of confidence drained out of his demeanor.

"No, I won't, I promise." He responded by bawling out all he had done, exact dates, amounts, people, even his logic as to why. Juna looked at him very calmly the entire time. By the end she nodded and pulled him into a tight hug. "And you're not going to keep going right? All the money in the world isn't worth it if you get caught, what if we all got fined, what if you got locked up? Where would any of this go? We wouldn't get anywhere. Forget getting out of this hellhole, we wouldn't be able to get anywhere." Charles nodded slowly, tears dried. Neither of them said anything for the rest of the night, Juna had always been the smarter of them, even if was the one with a 'proper education', there was nothing more that had to be said.

A few more years passed and Charles was rapidly approaching adulthood, his 17th birthday right around the corner. His father had news for them however, he spoke in his classic gruff tone, a hint of anger behind his bearded face. "They laid me off." That was it, no reason, no logic. His father had worked in that factory for most of his life, he was invaluable there as far as Charles was concerned. Charles had heard his father when he thought Charles was too far away to hear, he knew of the injuries. How his father was the only one who even tried to stop them, the only one who even thought it might be a good idea to attempt to pay the people off. Charles was brought to a quick boil, it was unfair, how could that rich asshole send out pink slips to the best of the best? Charles quickly put pen to paper in the middle of the night, when everyone else was asleep, one last time. Imitating the local reporter's handwriting he demanded at least 1000 for his 'silence' otherwise the whole town would know just exactly what went on inside the factory.

He sat on the letter for a while, just so it wouldn't be linked back to potentially his father. He made his rounds and slipped it into the factory owner's box with the rest of his papers. A week or two passed and Charles found the letter stuffed with cash, and took it. He had done it, one last screw you to the guy who had ruined everything. His birthday came and went and he knew exactly what to do with the money finally. He went out on the cold winter night and bought two fur coats, one for him, and one for his sister. With the money he could afford real authentic ones, and figured it would be a really nice birthday present for her. He told her to wait for him at a classic meeting spot, and he rushed there with presents in tow.

When he got there however, she wasn't alone. A man was standing over her, lying on the ground, rifle in hand. He took a sharp inhale as he looked at Charles. Snow began to fall. "Hey kid, Griffin found out about whatcha did. He said you needed to get put down for thinkin' you could fuck with him." She was sputtering. "Well I didn't tell him, but I don't do kids, even if they're just adults." Charles dropped everything and ran forward, sliding on the icy street. "So I had to do my job. And you learned a lesson." The man continued monologuing, every word searing in as Charles picked his sister up onto his lap. "I'd say this is a lesson you won't forget, jobs done. Stay safe kid." He walked off into the growing snowstorm. Charles didn't even yell, scream, or accuse. He knew what had already happened. He dragged Juna's body over to the coats, trying to staunch the bleeding from her chest. He watched on as her face was starting to look more like snow than anything else. But her eyes shone as brightly as ever. "Charles." She tried to grab his hand "Charle-" She was hacking and coughing.

"Juna we're gonna get you out of this ok. I- I promise, I promise, I-" His stammering was stopped.

"Its ok..." She said, almost peacefully. "You're gonna skip town at some point right...? Make a lot of money right...?"

Charles was crying, each tear stinging as the wind was blown into his eyes. "Y-yeah of course."

"Then our dream isn't going anywhere right? You were always strong, keep being strong. Don't survive, live." He felt her heartbeat slowing. He picked her up, he ran, he broke the door on the doctors office, he shot up.

He looked around, his bedroom in the basement. He looked at his right arm, a mass of black. Right. A nightmare. As he sat in bed he leaned against the wall, eye unfocused, not looking at much, while the other eyes he had wandered around the room. Just a nightmare... no, a

memory. One he wasn't allowed, or could afford, to forget. He laughed a little, "Hope you're sleeping better than me."

Dust to Dust

The coffee machine beeps as it finishes pouring out a mug of black gold, a dark green hand quickly snatched it up and pulled it away. The owner of the hand was a humanoid with a similar color throughout her entire body. Besides the color, a hardness of her skin and a large flower protruding from the back of her head were what gave away the fact that she was more plant than animal. As she moved into the next room over, thick metal plates shivered slightly, reforming themselves to match her movements, attempting to maintain a solid shape while she walked into the room. They occasionally shifted around her joints then off for seconds as hardlight bonds pulled the plates back together.

"Listen Ashe," As she moved into the room a southern drawl started up, "All I'm saying is every other plant person I've ever, ever met has *hissed* at me. You know, like... 'Sssssso come here often?'"

Ashe looked over to the left of the room as a thin separating line started to form across her face. This jagged separation that could be called a mouth curls into a smile before she responds, "And why should I *hiss* for you? Just cause my dad, mother, and two sisters did. You're just going to assume that all of us do? Quite anti-plant if you ask me," She pointed to the veritable suit of armor in front of her. It was solid, made of a shiny silver metal, with only one open port on the front face which leaked out a soft orange glow. The suit moved fluidly despite lacking joints whenever the being inside spoke, making large sweeping hand movements. Ashe pointed at them making a little spiral with her finger as she did, "If I said every single one of you was a robber, cheat, and a thief, it wouldn't be very nice would it now, bottle-bod?"

A small chuckle echoed out from the armor to which Ashe joined in on, "Guess it's a similar thing, but we ain't speak thief like ya'll spe-" The suit of metal was cut off by the phone ringing. Ashe poured the coffee directly down her throat and dove for the phone.

Letting out a quick cough as she picked up, "Ahem, hello this is *Ashes to Ashe's* your best last resort for all your PMC needs." A loud voice barked over the phone as Ashe rolled her full black eyes, it really was a skill. "Yes sir, I understand we took 5 comm units- No sir- Sir I think you need to take a breath. You signed our "60% battlefield" policy in order to keep costs down, as such we were entitled to up to 60% of the belongings we found in the workplace." Ashe held the

phone at arms reach as the man on the other side belted out insults at a breakneck pace. Ashe slowly pulled the phone back onto her ear. "Sir, I think that it would be in your best interest that you let this drop. I think your absolute bottom line would be hurt a lot more from the media finding out that the origins of your operations came down to exploiting civies, at least, more than 5 measly comm units. ...Mhm thank you sir, that's what I thought. Thank you and please call us the next time you need us. Maybe read a contract or two as well." With that she swiftly hung up.

"Well damn.. That's another customer down the drain." The soft glow began to fade from the armor's port.

"It's not my fault the people who hire us can't read a plain piece of paper." Ashe took a breath in like she was going to start a rant up before it was her turn to be cut off by a phone call. Picking the phone back up, "Hello this is *Ashes to Ashe's* your best last resort for all your PMC needs, how can I help you?" Ashe leaned back onto the desk the phone was situated on and tapped the speaker option.

The speaker played out heavy breathing and the sound of running as a male who presented a fairly calm but out of breath voice laid out a set of coordinates which the suit of metal quickly began writing down. The glow flared back into life pouring over the page. Before Ashe could speak the man continued, "Full engagement, 100% battlefield policy."

Ashe was stunned, her mouth hanging open, she shook her head and managed to quickly get out, "Sir, what are we dealing with? And how did you know to call us, you don't sound like a contractor."

"Heavily entrenched hostiles with advanced weaponry. And an old business card on my commanding officer ma'am." Ashe shuddered at the last part, not only was this job a remnant of when she had worked with proper militaries apparently, but also from when she and Oakley had figured out the 'your best last resort' line... and from when she thought business cards were cool. "Ask for Jeremy Kushings when you get to the specified coordinates. This case is extremely time sensitive." Whatever he was using to call hit the ground, and presumably his foot came down over it. The line went dead.

The both of them were silent for a moment as Ashe slowly put the phone back onto the receiver. Oakley broke the silence first standing up, legal notepad in hand, "Well goddamn... its been a while since we've gotten panic, almost forgot what a genuine customer sounded like after

dealing with all these old farts in higher ranks.” They turned to Ashe and saw the mild concern on her face, “I’ll uh, go get the ride.” Ashe nodded as she leaned down to grab two suitcases and put them on the desk.

As Ashe started moving around the office/home the two of them had set up, she gathered various supplies, her mind was mulling over where exactly the caller could have come from in her history. Looking out of the one window in their shared office she could see down the street, the faux neon lighting up darkening cityscape. The sun was setting, always weirdly beautiful the way these megastructures were born of and to promote pure greed lit up the night as one of the only lone beacons. She sighed, closing the first suitcase, she resolved that it would eat her up inside and come to her one night to wake her up in the middle of restful sleep. Eventually... or bite her in the face. So she shrugged.

Ashes to Ashes

It was a dazzling sight, the sun setting on the sea. Ashe sat down on an edge of the cliff face as she stared off. “Different from the city huh?” She heard the tinny noise of her friend’s voice behind her, then the movement of their suit, and finally a small metal *thud* as they sat down next to them. “Not quite the same as a sunrise though, not at all. A different.. Somethin’, I dunno.” Ashe took a deep breath of the salty air.

Without looking off to her side, “Oakley, you ever wonder where we send people off to?”

“I’m.. not quite sure what you mean..?”

“When we kill ‘em, ever wonder where they end up?”

“Never took you for the spiritual type, Ashe.” The metal casing Oakley called armor expanded as they took what sounded like a breath, and then contracted backward soundlessly. “I don’t know. I like to imagine they go to sleep, get to see their families again when they wake up. Then again, I haven’t given it much thought, I don’t like to.”

“And why’s that, it is our business after all...” Ashe for the first time in as long as Oakley had known her sounded... exasperated, at least in a way not directed at someone, generally tired. Still, she looked out to the sea, the sun fading out behind it. Oakley could only tell because they saw it reflected in the pitch black of Ashe’s eyes.

They started again, "I don't like imaginin' cause I already know what's gonna happen to me." Ashe's eyes narrowed but never left the sun. "Yeah.. my kind, we got a clock, if we don't die before then. Everyone's got a different one-" Oakley cut themselves off and laughed loudly, disturbing a few birds perched up on a tree a bit away. "Not too different from everyone else I guess. What I mean is that once we're set to go, no force on earth or in the stars is gonna stop it. We return, in a more literal sense, to what everyone's made up of." The metal suit made a pop effect with its hands. "Right back to stardust."

"Back to stardust huh... I wonder if I'll become a random tree... maybe I'll be mushroom food." Ashe snickered, "Maybe, there's a spirit trapped in me, waiting to be unleashed. Everyone talks about psionics this and that, ghost and spirits are merely those psionic phenomena in a more tangible world setting."

"If spirits are real, I'm coming back and haunting your ass. I'mma make sure your keys are *never* where you left them the night before." They both laughed, some of the oppressive air lightening.

As Ashe's laughter slowly wound down she quietly spoke, "I hope you're right Oakley." The sun finally disappeared away behind the sea, Ashe turned this time as she whispered to her friend, "Otherwise it might be straight to hell for me." Almost no sooner had the last syllable left her mouth did she stand up offering a hand to her compatriot to help them up, a smile gracing her face once again. Oakley saw through it though, after all the sunset hadn't left her eyes.

Landon, Elsa

A Peculiar Character

Every day on my commute home from work I passed a bookstore. By this time of day, the sun had begun to set, and the cobblestone walkway was illuminated by sparse flickering lights. The store had something alluring yet unassuming about it and one day I decided to see for myself what could possibly be inside. I gently pushed open the door that was already slightly ajar to see an elderly man seated behind a desk. His chair was raised too high, and his posture was rigid. His thin framed glasses fell towards the end of his nose in a judgmental fashion, with a small dull chain that dangled and wrapped behind his head. He barely noticed me, glancing up, nodding, and returning to his work. behind him was a maze of literature. The hallways were constricting and lit only with the occasional scone. As a matter of fact, the space seemed to be larger than what should fit inside of the building. the floorboards creaked as I traced the binding of each cover that had been organized in no particular order. I heard the old man cough, mutter a few words, turn a few pages, and then return to his silence.

There was a loud bang from the front of the store, reverberating through the wood floors. A short return to silence was followed by two more large knocks. I finished my perusing, swiftly making my way to the front to make my final purchases as a heavy feeling settled in my gut. After handing him exact change the old man lifted his head slightly, nodded, and made a small grunt of approval, barely acknowledging my presence.

As the door shut behind me, I peered through the window, curious to see the source of the noises. The man threw a glance over both shoulders and opened a door behind his desk, unveiling a large and inhuman figure. I cowered, lowering my head fearing for the man's life; however, to my surprise, no screams of agony or vicious combat could be heard. Instead, it sounded like the two were bickering. His low calm voice raised slightly in frustration, greeted by a deep unsettling gurgling sound. This back and forth continued for about 15 minutes, followed by a slamming of the door. I looked up again to see the man resting his head in his hands, brow furrowed.

Intrigued by the man, I passed the shop the following day, peering into the window once more. I saw him reading, intently focused on each word. The book was titled "how to befriend demons". The following days his behavior continued as he sat curled up reading titles like,

“activities for demonic companions”, “how to cope with loneliness”, and several books on parenting. Each day he seemed a little happier, and after a few weeks it seemed as though he wasn't reading at all but learning dance moves or carrying plates of tea suited for two. I was happy for him, knowing that he was making progress. Eventually my job relocated me, so I no longer had a reason to be in the area, but one day I passed by out of sheer curiosity and saw the two dining together, smiling and laughing in unison.

187 Cycles

The alarm buzzed. Martin rolled over, slamming on the snooze button with a vengeful force. Laying there for a moment, he processed the sterile room, feebly decorated with some pages ripped out of an old nature magazine. He slowly sat up, doing the same morning routine he had done every day for the past 187 cycles.

He brushed his teeth, looking at himself in the mirror and admiring the slightly patchy beard he had been growing. *Maybe it's time to shave again, I look so old.* But there was nobody to impress and it was just too much effort. He poured a cup of coffee while taking a swig. *Damn, too hot again.* The roof of his mouth started to peel, reminding him that he had made the same mistake the day prior. Breakfast was a packet of instant oatmeal and a freeze-dried orange. He turned on the treadmill, listening to the belt whirring over and over, feet methodically thudding on the surface until his daily 30 minutes were up. He showered, got dressed, and made his way to the control room to start his work day. With the press of a button, he awoke the ship's consoles and monitors.

“Good Morning Martin! It is currently 8:26 am in New York City. Today's date is February 12th, 2042, 187 cycles since launch. The ship's systems are stable, although it would be wise to perform a routine inspection today to check for anything unusual my detection technology may have missed.”

“Thanks Ada. Hey uh, any word on when I'm going home?”

“No new messages from base yet. Your scheduled recall is still unknown.”

Her voice had an uncanny charm. Even when delivering bad news, her tone was warm. At this point she was the only form of communication he had so he had to find ways to work around the fact that she wasn't human. He gave her a background. She was 27, two years younger than him. In his mind they both shared a curiosity for space, uprooting their lives in the name of progress and exploration.

Martin feared that he would never get home. He hoped to tap into the satellite connection, maybe see the news or something. He knew that the state back home was bad but could it be bad enough for nuclear war or something worse? Is there even anyone left?

"My systems have noticed a heart rate and breathing have increased indicating anxiety. Would you like medication or a meditation module to help reduce stress?"

"No, thank you Ada".

Leaving the pilot seat he grabbed the clipboard, and began his checklist.

A month passed. Still no word from home. Martin had begun to ration his supplies more carefully. Nobody had expected that he would be here for this long so there wasn't enough to last him much longer.

"Oxygen levels on the ship are low. Management is required soon." Ada chimed. Martin had noticed this. The air felt thicker and he had maintained a dull headache for the past two weeks. He had no way to fix it without contact from the outside world.

"Ada?"

"Yes Martin?"

"Do you think I'm gonna die here?"

"I'm unsure how to answer that without inducing discomfort"

"It's ok, really, I just need to know"

Martin thought of home. Not much to go back to except his one-room apartment in Brooklyn. *Man, my plants are probably so dead by now.* He chuckled.

"Martin, I'm sorry."

"If I die, what happens to you?"

"My system will stay on for a while. At least until the ship runs out of energy. In some ways, I'd still exist. I can run from anywhere if the code exists."

"Like a God?"

"I suppose in some sense, yes. Does that provide comfort?"

"Yeah, I guess it does. If they turn you back on, will you still remember me?"

"I will."

"Thank you, Ada. I'm really glad you're here"

Martin smiled, lying down on the floor. He was tired. Even if she wasn't human she provided a human-like comfort that somehow managed to calm him enough to accept reality, she was a good friend. They talked until he drifted off. Tomorrow was a new day for Martin and he would start again.

You have Died of Dysentery

I sat down at my computer after a miserable day at work. My hatred for Andrew Jackson boiled inside me as I stared at the conveniently placed crumpled-up \$20 bill on my desk. I open up a browser as the words "The Oregon Trail" flash across my monitor in an old 8-bit font. Today I choose to be a farmer from Illinois and this time, I will ensure my virtual family experiences success. The last time I decided to start in July, rookie mistake, so, after reconsidering my strategy all day, April seems like a much better month. At first, everything was going well. Swimmngly even. Every choice was methodically chosen and well-researched. But then, out of nowhere, the wheel fell off my cart. That was fine, that was definitely fine. I had the funds to fix it. Unfortunately, while seeking help to fix the wheel I was robbed! Unbelievable! I took a deep breath and, maintaining hope despite my almost halved funds, I fixed the cart and eagerly moved forward. Next, we encountered a river. No big deal. By the time we got across, my cattle had nearly drowned and my fictional daughter Elizabeth had developed dysentery. Super cool. By the time we arrived at the next fort, Marybeth had acquired typhoid and my daughter was dead. With a party of four, I trekked on. Not even fifteen minutes later four turned into two. I might be the biggest idiot to ever play this stupid game. Broken arms, exhaustion, cholera,

every single possible thing that could go wrong, things I didn't even know existed, seemed to happen to me in quick succession. Not even a quarter of the way to Oregon, my party failed. I closed my laptop, a single tear streaming down my face. Next time, surely I'll beat it out of spite. I'll ponder each instance until I fall asleep, my nightmares taking on the same pixelated form, and tomorrow, surely, luck will be in my favor.

Unplanned Occurrence

I don't know the town's name, nor do I care to know. Situated in a valley a or so mile off the highway, I doubt anyone knows its name unless they've settled there indefinitely. I only passed through briefly, staying for about a week after my car broke down. I had graduated a few months prior and made it my mission to visit every national park on the West Coast before the year ended. Quite frankly, I had seen some impeccable things but something about this town, the way it was sequestered from the world despite being easily within reach, held an unspeakable charm that drew me in. When morning came, its landscape was coated with a thin mist and, in the evenings, the sun hid itself quickly behind the ridges of the hills.

For that week I'd wake up with the sun, brewing a cup of cheap coffee and heading out for the day. Down the street from the inn I was staying at was a little library. It was a stone building with beautiful big windows. Its exterior was coated with ivy, unintentionally placed and slowly eroding the walls; but the leaves caught the dew casting imprints against the crackled grey background. The fireplace inside stayed lit even though it seemed out of place for the season, countering the chill of the morning. The smell of cedar filled the stacks of unorganized and yellowed literature. I'd pick up a book with an interesting title, read a few pages, and set it aside for another time until I came across the perfect story for the day. The librarian had a soft smile and after completing my arbitrary selection process, we'd talk about the weather, or her children, or our favorite characters.

Within the week, the local mechanic received the necessary parts, fixing my car and sending me on my way. Something about being unable to do anything gave me an unrequested but much-needed rest from the world, allowing life to become smaller and quieter for a short period of time. Its opportunities like those that arise only on rare occasions, an offhanded gift from the world not to be taken for granted and not to be sought out either. It was wonderful and still, I know that if I returned on my own volition it wouldn't be the same. I fear that my experience would be tainted by intentionality. I would not go back there again but I will never forget it.

Strangers

On the train today I watched these two women look at one another, they must be senior citizens...and I wonder... If they shared stories from their lives how much would we all truly have in common? What experiences have they shared that isolate me from their solace in exchanged glances? Despite being a simple gesture, accompanied by a slight smile or nod, the glance feels indicative of a much greater form of communication. Coincidental, sure, but there was something more palpable, more sincere held through connecting eyes. What knowledge could they share about hardship, loss, and love, uniting them as strangers?

One returns to her book, gently turning the pages, carefully absorbing each word with a grace I have yet to master. The other resumes her people-watching, and while we partake in the same task, I'm certain her inner dialogue captures nuances that are only understood with time as she knows what I have yet to discover.

Lysaght, Nicole

Chase Through the Pass

"Halt, damn you!" Cousin Karth called from behind, on his steed.

He and his damnable guardsmen had caught up with Oriandra while she'd been making camp at the side of the pass. She'd just barely had enough time to get back on Argo and leave her supplies behind before they got to the camp. Now, Oriandra and her faithful steed were rushing through the Elinhir Pass with the Colovians on her tail.

This wouldn't last. Argo was a good horse, but the lean chestnut rouncey wouldn't be able to keep ahead of Karth's muscular black destrier for long. Argo had been bred and trained as a good all-rounder, but those of Karth and all his men were warhorses.

"I knew you were a thief, cousin! Never trust a Tharn!" Karth's voice came again from behind.

Family politics were... complicated. Oriandra was a Tharn from Nibenary, while Karth was a Rayles from Colovia. The Tharns and Rayles were related by blood, yes, but the bad blood between the Colovians and the Nibenese was something that even a marriage among nobility would be able to repair.

And she hadn't *stolen* it, anyways. The sword she had *liberated* from Castle Rayles was rightfully the property of her side of the family, not his. And anyways, if *she* had been able to sneak it out under their noses, the Rayles didn't deserve it anyways.

They clearly disagreed.

A snapping of branches and rustling of leaves to her side snapped Oriandra out of her reflection. A pair of riders emerged from the tree line to the right of her. Men-at-arms in brigandine vests and shiny sallet helms, with orange surcoats over their armor bearing the red diamond of Rayles. The borrowed religious symbol on their heraldry had clearly been a conscious choice.

The two riders allowed Oriandra to catch up before matching speed on either side. The rider on her left drew a riding sword and brandished it menacingly, while the one on the right instead held out a bare hand.

"Give me the sword, Lady Tharn!" The rider yelled. Oriandra recognized that voice, it was Castle Rayles' master-at-arms, who she'd only briefly met. "Surrender it now, and you can go your own way unharmed! There's no need to fight today!"

Oriandra sighed, considering her options as the group rode. She could hear the other riders, Karth and the other man-at-arms who had been chasing her, catching up. Sighing, Oriandra drew the sword, still in its scabbard, out of her cloak, and handed it to the master-at-arms. His hand closed around the hilt.

It was then that she sent a shock of electricity into the sword, which conducted it into the soldier's arm. He yelled out in pain and fell back from his horse. Oriandra was only barely able to catch the sword and shove it back into the folds of her cloak as the man fell and his horse peeled off from the chase. Karth would never let something like this go, and he was the lordling here, regardless of what his master-at-arms promised.

"Murderer!" The man on her left yelled, as he moved in for a swing with his sword. Oriandra instinctively sent a bolt of lightning in his direction, hitting his horse. With a thud and a smell of burnt meat, both horse and rider fell to the ground. It hadn't been true before, anyways. The spell she'd used had sent a fairly low-level shock to the master-at-arms, knocking him out for a few hours, not killing him. The way the other man's horse had fallen on him as they went down, he likely wouldn't be so lucky. He'd been hasty, she'd been sloppy, and it had cost him his life.

She shook the thoughts from her mind. What use would crying over some dead peasant soldier who'd been too stupid to think his actions through be? She brought her thoughts back to the present just in time to see the cart.

The Colovian bastards had set a trap for her. A cart had been placed blocking the path, and with woods on one side and a sheer cliff-face on the other, there was no easy way around. Worse still were the two men in the cart - yet more Rayles men-at-arms, these two bearing crossbows aimed straight at her.

Oriandra had barely enough time to bring a ward spell up before the men fired, but she managed it, and the bolts were disintegrated by the magical forcefield. The men hurried to reload their crossbows, but they had been relying on the surprise for the trap to work. They wouldn't get a second shot before she was on them. The two riders behind her, Karth himself and the last of his riders still standing, were the bigger threat when she would be forced to stop.

A simple levitate spell did the trick. She cast it on Argo and pulled on the reins, signalling her loyal companion to jump. Jump he did, easily clearing the cart and galloping through the air as the Colovians inside stared with gaping jaws. When the spell wore off only seconds later, Argo landed on the ground with a thud, losing neither speed nor his footing. He may not be the fastest horse in Cyrodiil, but Argo was certainly well experienced with Oriandra's antics.

"Damn it!" She heard the familiar voice of her cousin scream behind her. "Oblivion take you, Tharn!"

Oriandra smirked and glanced over her shoulder to snicker at Karth... just in time to see the fireball rushing towards her. And not nearly in time to do anything about it. It must have been the Tharn blood in him; Colovians were anything *but* natural mages.

She took the full brunt of the fireball in her chest. Her half-formed ward shattered on impact, and the force of the blow sent her flying from Argo. The horse whinnied in panic and confusion as he lost his rider, and she screamed as she fell in the direction she knew to be the cliff face.

It had to have been a lucky shot. Karth had never been quite so good at aiming as he was with a blade. Regardless, Oriandra had no time to think about that as she fell, cloak fluttering and burning behind her.

She hit gravel with a thud, and started rolling downhill uncontrollably. She couldn't even tell which way was up anymore. She'd lost track of all directions, all previous needs, even the sword. All she felt was her roll down the mountainside.

That was still all she felt when she rolled into what felt like water at the bottom, and her mind went dark.

Here's to Beans

"Dives, I'm... I'm dying." The words hit her like a truck. Dives felt something hollow where her heart was as they sunk in.

"You can't be sure!" Dives replied, stepping closer to the human in front of her. Beans, her oddly-named boyfriend, looked like a fairly standard human. Curly brown hair, tanned skin, slacks and a t-shirt, and a pair of sunglasses despite being indoors. But he was anything but. He was a changeling, capable of reshaping his body at will to any biological form he could think of. Well, without adding or subtracting mass, at least. The unassuming human look that Dives had fallen in love with was just his favorite.

"I am. Dives, it's Degeneration Syndrome. Rare at this young, but terminal. I'm sorry." The way his voice sounded, it was clear that he would be crying if he was able to. Dives rushed up the rest of the distance and embraced him.

"Beans... Beans, please. I can fix this. There's a treatment for everything, I can find it! I promise!" Tears welled in her eyes. She made no attempt to fight them back.

Beans returned the hug, and patted her back. "If there was a treatment, I'd be telling you it. This is just the end. This is the only way changelings can die. It's just what happens. I just thought it would be a few centuries from now. Not this soon..."

Dives said nothing, and burst further into tears. Beans hugged her tight. The man had never been good at affection when they'd first met. Dives had taught him most of what he knew. He'd clearly learned, even if now it felt all she'd done was for nothing.

Dives cleared the thoughts from her mind as she wiped a tear away. That memory had been from exactly a year ago now. They'd searched for a cure, of course. The best medical schools on Kalixcis, Teceti, and even Earth failed them. The few changeling communities spread throughout the galaxy failed them. Even experimental procedures had failed them. In the end, Beans took one hell of a gamble. He gave himself up to Cybersun Corporation, the megacorp that had genetically engineered changelings into existence to begin with. If anyone could help, it was then.

Dives hadn't heard from him or Cybersun in months. Of course a corp couldn't be trusted, and it was a long shot, but it was either this or an assured death. Dives hoped against hope that he was still alive somewhere, trying to get back to her. If another year passed without hearing anything, she'd go in and get him herself.

Dives poured another glass of his favorite whiskey and held it up in front of her. The ship's lounge around her was empty and dark. Perfect for this small, sad ceremony.

"Here's to you, Beans." Dives toasted, and drank. She smiled as she put the glass down, promising herself that she'd see him again.

A Fairly-Normal Morning

The first thing Dives noticed when the world finally came back into focus was the muffled electronic beeping of the cryotube's computer. As the beeping slowed down and then stopped, there was a hissing noise as a wall of warm air hit her the moment the tube's glass door opened in front of her.

Instinctively, Dives stepped forwards onto the deck in front of her. This was something she'd done dozens of times before, after all. The tiling was cold under her feet, she hadn't yet been able to spring for a rug in this room.

Dives rubbed her eyes and blinked a few times, letting everything come back into focus. The room was just how she had left it. A fairly small medbay, white-and-blue tiles on the floor and walls, fluorescent tubes illuminating the whole place almost too brightly.

Behind her was the cryotube she'd just stepped out from, a device that looked like an upright coffin but with a glass cover and a few computers attached to it. Fairly standard issue on all spacefaring vessels. To her left was her surgery table and tools, and in front of her was the cabinet with all her medical supplies.

Dives ignored all of these, instead heading to her right towards the exit. She grabbed her bathrobe from a hangar next to the door, put it on, and headed out.

It wasn't long before she came to the cozy living quarters. An actual rug here, along with a dining table, a kitchen, and a couch with a tv. Not exactly luxury liner levels of comfort, but it was nice for a small privately-owned ship like this. And it was all hers.

Dives grabbed the mug of coffee from the machine, which had automatically started brewing it the moment she had emerged from cryo, and made her way to the couch.

She turned on the tv as she sat and took a big sip. There weren't any channels to watch this far out, instead the monitor showed her the ship's location on the sector map, local weather reports, and a readout of all systems. Everything nominal, nothing broke during her week-long nap. Good.

Dives stretched, yawned, and took another sip of coffee. Yet another normal day on the FSV Guardian. Once again, she was the first one to wake up, meaning she had a few hours of the entire ship all to herself. With a nice breakfast and a movie, she'd make the most of that.

Morgan, Jack, And Nicole Collab - Character Meeting

CRACK. A sound ripped out like a hammer on thick glass. The only thing to disturb the otherwise uncanny silence that filled the tiled room. *CRACK*. Once again the sound tore outward from the center of the room. A shadowy and ethereal black opening begins to spread itself out, reaching with dark tendrils. It wasn't quite three dimensional, but if someone was to look into it, they'd see the depth within. With one final loud shattering noise echoing throughout the room, a fairly large reptilian humanoid wearing a pure white lab coat tumbled out straight onto the floor. The polished white of the tiles lightly reflected the darker green of their scales. Before they could even take a breath another bounced off them, this time human, dressed in something more akin to black and white business casual, though missing their right arm and leg. Finally out of the gaping void came someone with a little more grace. Wearing a more classic hunter outfit, sporting earthen green tones on a hood, which laid on top of a white tunic. This human propped themselves up on wobbly legs as they popped out of the void, making it a few steps before their knees buckled, bringing them right back down to the floor with the rest.

The 'crack' quickly began to close back up, light drifting into the room from some unseen source as if midday. The human in earth tones let out an exasperated sigh as they took a look at their surroundings. Their eyes roamed around, taking in the bright white tiles and the turquoise pools of water set into the ground. Beyond their current room, they saw a number of dark passageways leading further into the labyrinth. Finally, they looked down to the two who had fallen out before them. The reptilian one seemed to be waking up quickly, eyes slowly blinking. The other however, seemed to be more a corpse, though still breathing, if only shallowly. An entire eye was missing and there were some holes in hi-

Before they could inspect him any further, or finish the thought, the long coated reptile jumped up, towering over them by a good foot and a half. They quickly looked around, their eyes darting back and forth, before settling on the person in front of them. A bright smile played across their face, as they waved downwards "Hi there! Name's Dives! Did you also... ehm... 'transport'

here? Well, wherever here is.” They made a spinning motion with their finger to denote the circular room.

“More fell through the ground, but yes, transported.” The hunter put out a hand towards Dives, a gut instinct due to the well-meaningness that exuded from her. “I’m Marci. As to what this is, I’m not really sure, but I’m having some thoughts-” Another thought interrupted as the pseudo-corpse began to move.

The left eye opened, a sharp red, while the formerly empty socket was filled with a black eye with a similar iris. Two more eyes appeared in the cheek below it all seeming similar. As all four eyes darted around an inky, almost sludge like liquid pulsed out forming into a usable leg and arm as the man shot up from the ground. Swiftly he threw his back into the wall, clearly very defensive from the way his fists were balling up. “So...” He started before either of the other two could even attempt to introduce themselves, “One of you wanna explain why I can’t remember how I got here?”

“Well looking at you, both of you for that matter, I doubt I’m exactly the reason either of you got here, neither of you were around when I tripped and fell into my sister’s stupid teleporter, and even if you were, you wouldn’t have been close enough to be affected by it malfunctioning.” Dives casually commented out.

“I agree,” Marci added, “I doubt I exactly had anything to do with what happened to you, my method of transportation was much more...individual.”

“So,” Dives continued with a genuine look of worry on their face, “Let’s start with your name, you do remember it right?”

The man untensed, mostly, took a breath and said, “Charles. How about you two?” A stark shift from the less than subtle threat a moment ago.

“Oh good,” Dives quickly responded, the smile returning to her face, “You don’t have horrible head trauma!”

Marci, who was already pacing around the room now that the tension had been defused, responded without looking towards Charles, “My name is Marci.”

“So uh... what’s she up to?” Charles’ right arm formed into a large hand with a thumb jutting toward Marci’s pacing, as he looked up at Dives.

“Well what I’m trying to do is figure out the rules of this place, I have some... let’s call it experience with things like this and they always have rules, like puzzles-”

“Ooo I love puzzles!” Dives interjected

“-And horrible monsters.”

“Of course there's monsters” Charles's eyes rolled. “Why are you both so casual about this? Is this normal for you guys?”

“I mean,” Dives started, drawing out the word as she looked off to the side, “malfunctioning teleporters aren't exactly new, and I was *bound* to end up somewhere. Gods, I'm lucky I didn't end up spaced. As for you two... one of you's obviously a human with a few mutations, the other is... well, *human-shaped*. That's pretty par for the course where I'm from.”

“*Human-shaped?*” Charles repeated under his breath.

“Yeah, I wouldn't say it's normal but things have never really *been* normal for me so I've learned to keep my freakouts more internal,” Marci shrugged.

“Anyway!” Dives shouted, clapping her hands together. It echoed loudly in the open room. “May as well explore, maybe we'll find something that'll tell us what to do, or one of those monsters!” She turned in place for a few moments, looking around before seemingly picking a direction at random and walking straight towards it.

Getting to Work

Dives slapped a button on her ship's control console and all the sirens and blinking red lights immediately shut themselves up.

“Yes, I *know* we're in a gods-damned debris field. Just keep quiet and let me focus!” She said, patting the side of the console. These long-distance solo trips had given her a habit of talking to and personifying her ship. It kept her sane, at least.

The debris field in question stretched out in space in front of her. Two ships, at least, one of them massive. Displaced cargo containers floated in the void around them, as did chunks of metal blown off each. The white-and-orange logo on the massive ship and the red-and-black paint scheme of the smaller one made it obvious what had happened.

“Cybersun Industries cargo ship blown apart in deep space, and an Anti-Corporate Liberation Front corvette dead in the vacuum next to it. Doesn't take a genius to solve this mystery. Looks like the ACLF's planted bomb must have gone off early.” Dives leaned back in her chair. Dives had no love for Cybersun. They'd taken more than just her boyfriend from her years ago, and to say their business practices were inhumane to non-humans like herself would be the Galaxy's biggest understatement. And the ACLF? She supported their goals, what they put on their pamphlets, obviously. But in practice, all the ACLF really seemed to ever accomplish was to blow up employees rather than go for the actual cause of the problem.

Still, in both cases... They were people. People who now needed rescue and medical treatment.

Dives rose from her chair and went to the medbay. What had originally been the cargo bay of a cookie-cutter civilian light transport ship, Dives had converted into a small flying hospital. She grabbed a few loose crates from around the room and arranged them to make a wall splitting the room in two. Better to keep the crews of the two ships separate when she ends up treating them both.

With the medbay prepared, Dives went to the airlock and suited up. Her spacesuit was a custom-made hardsuit, rather than a standard softsuit you'd find anywhere else. While softsuits were one size fits all, hardsuits were form-fitting, flexible, and most of all armored. Hers was painted bright white with light blue markings, the galactic signifier of medical personnel.

Suited up, all checks complete, she hit the cycle button on the airlock. In a matter of minutes, the safe, comfortable ship was behind her and the cold, hard vacuum of space was in front of her. In the distance, the broken ships loomed ominously. The hardsuit's inbuilt thruster pack would be more than enough for a few trips there and back.

It was time to get to work.

Mckinney, Isaac

Side A - Was The Summer of 69, Side B - Rock N Roll Band

"Ollie? What's up dude?" an excited Levi said as he picked up the phone to his ear

"Oh, not much, I just wanted to touch base with you since it's been so long." I said back.

"Well, I mean yeah, shit dude, its been ages, how have you been? How's school been? You're almost done with your third year, right?"

"Yeah, I'm good, it's almost done, I'm probably gonna be coming home a bit earlier than expected though."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm taking a break from college, been a bit more overwhelming than expected, so I'll be coming home before finals are done."

"Oh, I didn't know you could do that. Your parents know about this?"

"Uhhhh, yeah, they do."

"Well, you want to like hang out or something when you come back? When are you coming back anyways? I have some more time off next week."

"I'm actually gonna be home tomorrow, be in my old bed by midnight tomorrow."

"Alright, bet, say less, let's shoot for Sunday then, I'll bring the Wii dude, we gotta play some Guitar Hero for old time's sake."

"Aw, dude, I haven't played that game since middle school. Let's get it."

"Awesome"

Levi hung up the phone. He would reach out to me on the day of, but first, before I could savor some plastic guitars with an old friend on Sunday, I had to survive explaining to my parents that I had dropped out of college on Saturday. I spent the whole of Friday evening and Saturday traveling via trains and buses; very weird travel experience by the way, but whatever.

I rolled up to the bus stop and walked the rest of the way. Never before has a 30-minute walk felt so long and stressful. What was I gonna say, how was I supposed to explain this to my mom and dad, WHO WERE PAYING FOR MY SCHOOL, that I dropped out? "It wasn't for me" "I'm just not smart enough" "Home sick" "The kids there suck", how does one have this conversation with there mom or dad, dude.

By the time I turned the corner to our middle-class suburban street, I looked like some stalker under the street's floodlights in the pitch black night; my watch read 10:54 PM. I began to walk down the street, and probably one car passed me. I unlocked the chain-link fence and walked up the concrete walkway to our small porch, the automatic light flicked on.

"You are currently being recorded!" The robotic voice of the RING camera shouted at me. I could see the lights on in my parents' room, so I knew they were still up. I must have stood at the door for a few minutes just staring at it, feeling overwhelmed with anxiety and dread about what would happen on the other side. I couldn't even control my breathing, I felt a drop of sweat land on my shirt from my forehead, its impact feeling like someone had just dropped a dumbbell on my chest. The door swung open on its own without me even knocking or ringing the bell. It was my mother.

"Hey Mom" came out of me in a shriveled voice.

She stepped out onto the porch, and I felt a sense of relief as she embraced me. I hugged her back, and tears began to slowly flow from my eyes.

"Welcome home, dear," she said in a comforting voice

"Mom... I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I can't do it, I dropped out."

"It's ok," she said, shushing me.

“Just come inside and we’ll get you set up in your room, ok, we can talk about it when you’re ready,” She added.

I remember she helped me compose myself a bit, I hugged and exchanged pleasantries with my dad as well, he gave me a hearty “Welcome home”. I may have stopped crying in that moment, but I still went to bed overwhelmed with guilt. I was already regretting my life choices up until now, but what can I do? Nothing now. I had never felt like such a failure to my family more so than that night in my childhood bed. I kept thinking “I’m a piece of shit” as the sandman took me off to never-never land.

The next day was uneventful, thankfully, for the most part. I woke up as my parents were returning from Sunday mass, and had a good conversation with my parents over some coffee from Starbucks. My dad brought it home for the three of us as a treat to celebrate my return. He only ever got us Starbucks on special occasions. The one thing i didn’t tell them, though, was the reason why I dropped out; I wasn’t ready to tell them that yet.

Around 3 in the afternoon though a car parked a bit further down the street. I’d recognize his used rundown Ford anywhere. That thing only worked thanks to the handiwork of him and his father. A cheap used car that saved him a lot of money. But anyway, it was time to rock. We set ourselves up in the basement’s den in front of the TV that my dad uses to watch the Cleveland Browns. It was the biggest of the three TVs in our house, so it made the most sense. Levi set up his Wii, and we got to playing. I always remembered the cheat code to unlock all the songs.

“First try, baby, let’s go!” I bragged to Levi

“Good shit dude” he said

“So... What are we playing first?” I asked

Knights of Cydonia, Sunshine of Your Love, Even Flow, every song we played, we sang along to, it felt like we were in middle school all over again, just trying to “whammy” with our plastic guitars whenever we could. I felt memories of simpler times overflowing me in that moment. Back when “Whammys” and “Star Power” were our biggest concerns. Back when my biggest

worry was getting that “eighth gym badge” on whatever Pokémon game I was playing to distract myself from my parents arguing about finances. I always loved playing games with my friends growing up, so it was a nice way to begin my time back home. Gaming with a close friend again after so long. After playing for a few hours, before we knew it, we were lying across from each other on the couch in front of the TV, just chilling and scrolling on our phones.

“Dude, Guitar Hero 3 is such a good game,” I said

“For reallllllll” Levi said

Silence filled the room between us.

“So...youuuu dropped out?” Levi asked me

“Yeah, I don’t wanna talk about” I replied

“Yeah, yeah, of course, no worries. It’s just well, I kinda figured that was probably the case.”

“Yeah”

“You still play drums?”

“Haven’t in a while, haven’t had a kit with me at college the past three years. So I really haven’t played since high school jazz ensemble, I’m probably hella rusty.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Levi said with a raised eyebrow

“Why?” I was both confused and curious why he brought this up.

“Cuz Hayden and I have been jamming together recently to keep our guitar and bass skills in check. You remember Hayden, right?” Levi asked.

“I mean, yeah, we broke up a few days after he and I graduated from high school.”

“Well, Him and I made a demo tape last week.”

“Any good?”

“Nope, not even in the slightest,” Levi exclaimed

“Straight shit honestly” He added

“Ok sick, I vibe with shit” I said, slightly laughing and nodding along

“But, anyways...You wanna start a band?” He said to me.

“Hell yeah, brother!”

Side A - Moby Dick, Side B - Free Bird

6 months later

“You’ll never be good enough.”

The ungodly number of times I have heard that statement. The number of times I have heard that statement in my head. It has almost lost all of its meaning to me, its meaning has grown dull. The number of times I’ve played this part and the number of times I’ve failed. It has all added up to this. To a load of nothing. These past six months since we’ve started as a band, I realized. I wanted to be the best, no matter how much work I had to put in or how many hours it had to be. But there was always someone better, someone better than me.

I’ve had instructor after instructor try to teach me the theory behind every snare hit and bass kick. I want to give up now, I want to be good, but what’s the point when I clearly can’t be? All I can do is play. Just play how I feel. Music has this way of making me feel special, every crash on one causing an ethereal sensation.

The venue didn’t have a kit, and we weren’t close enough to the other bands and artists playing that night to borrow a kit. Besides, some of them have their band names on the kick drum or their snares tuned for a particular sound. It probably wouldn’t have worked anyway, then again,

when do things ever work out? I had to borrow a van from a friend who worked in construction. "Larry and Sons construction" was plastered on the side, the components of my Evans kit, mono cables, and amps all sat alongside ladders and toolboxes. Meanwhile, my bandmates were probably taking the train or a bus to the venue. I think they're still mad at me. They turned it down when I offered them a ride in the van. I thought it was weird because we always ride to venues together, but I did fuck up our last show. That or they just didn't wanna ride in a construction van.

Anyways I had been practicing moby dick by Led Zeppelin for months before I tried to open up a show with it for us. And the second, we got to my 3-minute John Bonham rage solo. I couldn't. My timing was off, and my bare hands were flying aimlessly along the kit. I looked up and saw silhouettes of people watching quietly. It was all I could see through the blinding spotlight that had been placed on me both physically and mentally. The eyes in the back of my head could see the judgment my friends and bandmates were casting on me.

"We knew he wasn't ready."

Well, if I'm not ready now, WHEN WILL I BE? I remember I threw up that night after some intense shaking coursed through my whole body and soul. Like an earthquake had struck me to my core. I haven't played the song since, and we haven't played a gig in over a month. I needed to step away and just live life for a bit in this crap town.

It was going to be different now though. Now it was time for my redemption, one month since my incident. Somehow, high off my Prozac medications, I made it to the last song of the hour. It was time for an old favorite of ours, a song that I wanted to be my redemption. Fuck it, I thought. I'm playing like I never had before. I want to be able to feel the music again, not think about it. I want to choose to live my life free from myself, from others, and from everything. I want to choose to play freely.

We made it halfway through Free Bird by Lynard Skynyrd at this point. It was time for the change-up. Time to speed things up a little, I... frankly... don't care anymore. I'm going to have a lot of fun. I played the groove to the right tempo. Trusting my ability to play, my ability to feel it, my ability to count. My mind became a metronome. Counting 1, 2, 3, 4, adding fills wherever I wanted to, and recovering from my mistakes seamlessly. I just kept playing what sounded good.

My own spin on Free Bird. I wasn't gonna just play the song how it was supposed to. I was going to PLAY the song. When it was over, I could feel and hear the feedback from the guitar and bass amp reverb through me as the song was fading out. 1,2,3, a triplet of hits to my hi-hat pierced through the reverb, and my bandmates swayed on the stage with a swagger, hands hung at their sides, knowing we just pulled that off. I clamped my hi-hat one last time, trying to time it with the end of the amp's fading feedback. It was slightly off time, but I didn't care anymore because.

"I'll never be good enough."

Side A - Monster, Side B - Jesus Christ Pose

With the show now over and the music fading out, I looked out into the crowd, and for once, I didn't just see black silhouettes, shapes, and outlines. Our spotlights faded out by this point, so I stood up and began to take apart components of my kit. As I carried the pieces backstage, I noticed a lone figure by the bathroom door in some sort of black hoodie by the bathroom door. Another guy walked past the hoodie man. It was Alex Bashar, lead singer and rhythm guitar of Ratchet. The hoodie man seemed to grab him and pull him into the men's bathroom. I was shocked by the rough way he dragged him in, but I hoped it was just a friend of his or an upset manager. Their show did suck after all and it wasn't hard for our three piece to follow them up afterwards. Before I could think about it any further, though -

"Great show, Oliver, probably your guys' best yet," A man said to me as I carried the floor tom out.

"Thanks, man," I replied hastily, not knowing who was talking but wanting to respond with a socially acceptable answer.

"Greggory, Good to see you, man. Glad you could watch our set tonight; you're up next, right?" My bandmate, Hayden, said.

Levi Abrams (Age 22) was our singer and guitarist. He was a cool guy from a small, neat, Jewish family, but he was more of a manager first and foremost before he was a musician or a frontman. From day one as a band, he was always trying to get us our next gig and subsequent paycheck. Sometimes, that came in the form of a check, and other times, it came in the form of

pizza. He even made a bank account under our band name, "The Platinum Stag," so checks could just be made out to the band.

"Yeah, you guys and Rachet were perfect opening act choices for us apparently. Got the crowd going a bit." Gregory replied to Hayden.

Gregory Silver (Age 24) and his band were headlining tonight's show, their first time doing so; we could only hope to headline a show. He was the lead singer of Backyard Blueberries, a weird funk and grunge fusion inspired by the likes of Soundgarden and Red Hot Chili Peppers. Gregory would wail with his Chris Cornell-style voice, and their bassist, Antoine Kingston (Who was straight from France and still learning English), would slap his bass in amazing Les Claypool-esque solos to back Gregory's beautiful vocals. I hated their band. I wanted us to be better. I knew we couldn't, though, not with our lack of talent.

"I mean, we've only been doing local shows for the past 3 months, so I'll gladly take opening for the Backyard Blueberries as a career highlight," My other bandmate, Hayden, said with discomfort in his voice, carrying a heavy amplifier half his size as he walked by.

Hayden Rodgers (Age 21), our bassist and my boyfriend, sort of, we took a year-long break from seeing each other when I went to Penn State for a year before dropping out. We've started seeing one another again. We got back together the same day we started practicing as a band, too, believe it or not.

"We would have probably opened for you guys sooner, but we took the last few weeks off. Someone needed a break from the band after the gig at Lighthouse went wrong." Levi told Gregory

I rolled my eyes and scoffed. What did he know! He wasn't in my shoes when it happened, I just needed some time to recoup after that.

"Well, It led to a good show tonight and that's all that matters bro" I said directly to Levi, looking at him dead in the eye with a pissed off facial expression.

"I guess it did," Gregory said,

"But wasn't that the show where you threw up on some girl in the audience?" Gregory added.

“Ahhh, yeah, okay, that was me.” I just sighed and replied

“It’s a bit of a sore topic, Greg,” Hayden said, walking past us again, this time empty-handed, to go grab another item off the stage and load it into the “Larry and Sons Construction” van.

“Gotcha. Sorry about that, then. Consider it dropped then,” Gregory stated with a smirk and thumbs up. It looked like he was pitying me, and I couldn’t tell if he was actually sorry or not.

I did my best to see my way out of that awkward conversation, but I know Levi continued to have a chat with Gregg while his bandmates set up their equipment. I went out to find Hayden in the crowd, getting ready to watch the next show. That hoodie guy was still there, just standing outside the men’s room. I wanted to say something, but also didn’t want to cause a scene, so I just ignored him and found Hayden. Standing near the back of the dance floor, rum and coke in hand.

“I got you a beer,” he said, handing a beer can to me once I approached and stood beside him.

“Thanks, Hayden,” I said

“No problem,” He replied

A silence fell on both our ears as we took a sip of our drinks, the spotlights went down on the stage, and the crowd went silent as Gregg’s band exploded rapturously with a cover of Jesus Christ Pose by Soundgarden. Antoine nailed every bass note and some more. Their Lead guitarist, Natasha Promise, the Jimi Hendrix of Chicago, was as impressive as usual. Their rhythm guitarist, Susan Beats, kept, well, the beat, unlike anything I had seen before. Bobbie Tahoe backboned the entire performance on the drums as Gregg came in with his wails.

“And you stare at me ... In your Jesus Christ pose ...”

It all culminated in this explosive cover song performance.

“Thanks for the assist with Gregory,” I said to Hayden

"Of course, it's what a good partner would do, right?"

"Yeah, totally."

"Besides, I know you'd do the same for me."

"Yeah, of course," I awkwardly replied in a half-laugh

They followed that up with nothing but original works from their recently released debut album: "Monsters", and it was amazing, and the crowd ate up every second of it. The floor was packed the entire time, and packed with probably ten times the crowd our set drew. I guess it shouldn't come as a surprise, though; they were the headliner.

Hayden and I watched as the crowd jumped around the center floor. All the while, we admired from a safe distance in a booth at the back of the floor. To my side was the restroom, and that same hoodie guy was now back and standing in front of the door. I noticed Levi turn the corner from backstage and begin to make his way along the wall, I think he was looking for Hayden and I. As he was walking, the hoodie guy seemed to stop him. He didn't grab him and drag him into the bathroom like he did to Alex, but still, I couldn't help but watch outta concern. Something about that guy seemed off.

It looked like they were just having a normal conversation with one another. About what, I don't know; maybe it was some agent/manager type after all. But right as I had that thought, he went into the bathroom, and Levi calmly followed him. I shot up; there's no way a manager would be conducting meetings with clients in a bathroom. I couldn't ignore my suspicions this time.

"I gotta go!" I shouted to Hayden as I jolted up and slid out of the booth, immediately dashing to the side of the room where the men's room was.

"Wait, what?" was all I heard from Hayden.

Frantically pushing people aside as I try to make my way across the mosh pit developing on the dance floor. I remember thrusting open the men's bathroom door the second I could get my shoulder to meet the push door... No one was in the bathroom. No one. Empty. Nothing. Not

even that hoodie guy was here; he was somehow gone, vanished like the wind. No one except one lone soul. Fucking Levi was in there doing lines on the sink top counter.

"You dumbass!" I shout across the bathroom to him as I run over. Muffled music and cheers could be heard from outside this bathroom's four walls.

Side A - I Appear Missing, Side B - Like a Stone

"Alex Bashar missing, last seen 3 days ago at Divine Council City." Levi read the poster to both Hayden and I when it caught his eye.

He had gone missing last Friday night. We played at Divine Council City last Friday night. I saw him there. I saw him get dragged into the men's room by some dude in a hoodie. But I thought maybe it was their manager; their show that night did kinda stink after all. So overall, I had no idea what to make of it. Besides, I got distracted talking to Gregg soon after so there was nothing I could have done. In the back of my mind, I kept thinking otherwise. That I could have done something different that night to help Alex on the night he disappeared. Maybe he was going through something. All I could say to Levi in response to the poster was.

"Ya know, I never did care for his music, never really got the whole Midwest emo vibe," I said. "Always felt even more winey and edgy than regular emo," I added

I could tell Hayden was a bit worried about this information. While Levi and I stared at the missing poster, Hayden stood behind us, taken aback, and just looked at the ground. I guess it would hit him a bit harder. The two were actually pretty close friends since childhood, before they ended up at different high schools. They were even in a band together for a bit post-high school graduation. Alex went on to form Rachet, and Hayden joined us in The Platinum Stag.

"I... Hope he's okay," Hayden said in a distressed tone while looking down. Levi and I both turned and looked at him.

"Yeah, for real, me too," Levi stated.

"Yeah" was all I could muster in response.

“Let's just go get breakfast at the house, boys!” Levi exclaimed as he turned and began to walk away. Always the leader he was, Hayden and I followed.

Whenever Levi said “the house,”. He was only ever referring to one place. The Waffle House on the corner of Old Town and Salt Springs. We would walk to it together most mornings after late-night practices, studio sessions, or shows. Pepper spray sitting in the same pocket as our wallets and keys as we would walk past the same abandoned factory without fail each time.

We enjoyed our oversized waffles, slightly burned eggs, and overcooked hashbrowns. The local news was playing on the television, talking about the upcoming elections. “Francesca Rodriguez For Mayor of Youngstown”. Levi and Hayden both had to go to work after this. me, well my unemployed ass was going home to my parents place.

My mom picked me up from the Waffle House while Levi and Hayden both took Ubers to work. She asked me about the practice last night and how I slept, sleeping on the studio couch, and we chatted about my night for a bit and some of the material we've been working on. We only had a few songs of original material, so our shows were still mostly covers. We were nowhere close to an Album or let alone an EP. Then she and I chatted about her night for a bit, she had more church work going on today after the busy day she had yesterday helping with Sunday services. She invited me to come to church with her today, but I declined. And even though I could tell she was disappointed by that answer. I just wasn't very religious like her and Dad. Mom dropped me off at home, I slept in bed until afternoon, then I just played some games on my computer until it got late. I looked at the clock in my room.

“7:34 PM, guess I better order dinner.”

Mom still hadn't come home from church, and Dad was working late at the bank again due to tax season being around the corner. I ordered a mushroom pizza, it was a texture thing for me. I just liked how it felt, and I didn't care for the flavor of mushrooms. In fact, I thought mushrooms tasted like nothing. But at least the texture was good. I got through about half the pizza while watching some YouTube videos when, around roughly 8:46 pm, I got a call from one of my friends. It was Hayden.

“Alex is dead,” Hayden said to me

Alex had been found dead in a ditch on the side of the new highway that leaves town, and the cause of death was an overdose. Hayden cried to me on the phone, and I tried my best to just be there for him. But I didn't even know how to react. I mean, yeah, I knew Alex; we went to the same elementary school and middle school before going to different high schools, but I only knew him through Hayden, and I wasn't that close with him. I felt nothing.

It was a small ceremony later that week; a lot of Alex's family was in attendance, and some of the local music scene was there, too. I felt bad for the members of Ratchet, I had no idea what they would do now without their singer. Everyone cried at least once that day, but I don't know. I just couldn't bring myself to cry at all. Even a little bit.

Side A - Heart in a Cage, Side B - Love Buzz

"Hayden, I'm sorry, but I think we might need to break up," Oliver told me.

"So, that's it, just like that! You're leaving town! You never told us you were going to college!

Why keep that shit a secret?" I said back to him

"I thought you knew I wanted to leave this town, Hayden! I can't pass up an opportunity like this to get out of Ohio." Oliver replied to me

"You should just come with me, we always talked about getting out of this shithole. Going to College is the perfect way to do that." Oliver added

"Oliver! You know I love you, but sometimes you just don't think. You can say or do some stupid things. I can't just drop everything and leave town right now." I said in a frustrated voice to Oliver, I was starting to get fed up with him.

"My family can barely afford cable. What makes you think we can afford college like your family?" I shouted.

"If this is how you feel, then maybe this breakup is needed. Maybe I was right in thinking that." Oliver replied, clearly looking defensive after what I had just said.

“No... No... I don't want that, I'm not letting you leave... I love you, and that's why I'm just gonna set you free, okay?” I said in an attempt to de-escalate this conversation and salvage my relationship.

“Soooo, you saying maybe we just need a break for a bit?” Oliver said.

“Yeah... to find ourselves, maybe... just please promise to stay in touch, okay? I'll be waiting for when you come home.” I told Oliver.

I woke up. Just a dream. It had been three and a half years since that moment. When Oliver and I “broke up”. He went no contact with Levi and me for three years after that day. I fell asleep in the church pews again; all the pews were empty. It was some time in the afternoon. I had no work today, so I thought I would come here to sleep. Faint piano noises could be heard from a room nearby. Probably some church musician prepping for a service. I didn't mind, though. The sun shining through the stained glass windows and light piano music really helped to set the whole “House of the Holy” vibe for me. I found all this to be comforting.

Oliver and I, our families had been going to this protestant church our whole lives. Oliver no longer comes here, even though his mother still works here. She gets me in whenever I want, and I couldn't be more appreciative of that. For me, I'd rather spend time with the Heavenly Father than my own. Sure, I'll get the odd look from patrons who come and go, purely because almost everyone in the parish knows I'm gay. But it's better to deal with looks and under-breath comments than to deal with having to both physically and verbally fight my own father back at home.

My name is Hayden Rodgers, I play the Bass in a small trio called “The Platinum Stag” alongside my friend Levi Abrams and my boyfriend Oliver Moore. I wanna leave this town, this band, everything, everyone, I wanna leave it all behind. I want out of fucking Ohio. But I can't, this band means too much to Oliver and Levi to do that. I love them both too much to do that. And besides, I'm not ready yet. I still have things I need to do in this town. I still have work that needs to be done. I still need more money from my Walmart job before I even think about leaving this town. I can't even afford to leave my parents' place right now. Rent isn't cheap around here, and it sure as hell wouldn't get any better the next town over.

Most importantly, though. I want... no... need Oliver to be with me. I need him to come with me when I leave this town. Except now, I'm not sure if he wants to leave this place anymore. He seems content to be here all of a sudden; a complete change to how he acted three and a half years ago. It doesn't matter, though. I still want out, and I want out with him.

"Lost in thought, my dear?" a familiar voice said to me, it broke me out of my trance.

It was Oliver's mother.

"Yeah, I guess so. Another late-night concert last night. Better to get rest here than at home." I said.

"Well, the lord does do a good job of providing rest to the weary... just remember that service starts at 6 tonight, so consider that your heads up. Unless you'd like to stay for that, you know you're more than welcome to stay for service, dear." She said in a comforting tone.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I appreciate the heads-up, though. I'll just go ahead and see my way out now. Go see how Oliver is doing. You know where he is today?" I asked her.

"He should be at Mr. Abrams' Auto Shop." she told me.

"Thanks." I said nonchalantly.

I got up from the pew and began to walk my way out of the church. Slowly beginning my long trek to the "Gold Star Automobile Services". Mrs. Moore stopped me one last time on my way out, before I could open the door to leave. She left me with a final remark.

"One more thing, Hayden, I hope you know that if you ever need a bed to sleep on, you are more than welcome to come over to our house. Consider it your home, too, ok? I promise a bed is a lot more comfortable than a church pew."

I smirked as she said this to me from across the church, one hand on the giant door out.

"Thank you. That's really kind of your family," I remarked as I turned my back to her and pushed through the door, finally seeing my way out of the church.

My journey to “get out” of Ohio begins today.

Later that day, I arrived at the autoshop of Levi’s dad, closer to closing, and sure enough, there they both were. Levi was under a car working on it, and Oliver was sitting nearby, talking to him from one of those mobile workbenches. Oliver saw me enter.

“Good. Now I don’t have to go and find you. He said to me, Levi rolled out from under the car.

“Oh god, now you’re gonna tell him your conspiracy theory too! I told you, you’re overthinking all this. The guy seemed chill, he was just there to sell some drugs. Ya know, help people have more of a good time than they were already having.” Levi stated, oil and dust on his face, rolling his eyes at Oliver.

“I’m not overthinking this!” Oliver said as he turned to look at Hayden. Hayden now having entered the autoshop garage. Oliver looked me dead in the eyes.

“What is it, Ollie?” I said in acknowledgement

“Ok, ok...so some foul play might be afoot... I think Alex was murdered.” Oliver said to me.

A sense of anger and despair shot through me. Why would he ever think that is what I want to hear right now? I’m still reeling from his death deep down.

“Why the fuck would you even say that!”

Moisiades, Dimitri

5: waking up wrinkle:

The alarm woke him up. As he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes he heard a voice over the speaker "Intruder alert, this is not a drill, repeat, this is not a drill" Hearing those words caused James to leap out of his bed, throw on his clothes and suit up for whatever threat he had to face today. After putting on his gear he sprinted down the hallway to the armory, practically skidding across the concrete floor. He grabbed his sword and slid it into his sheath at his hip, and then grabbed his blaster and put it on his arm. He made his way over to his team as quick as a flash. On his way there he heard the sound of screaming and people fighting which only got louder as he got closer to his destination. The base he was operating in had been attacked, but by what?

As he neared the end of a hallway leading to the outside of the base he was ambushed by three monsters that took the form of shadows that phased through the wall. All three of them charged at him at once and in response he made quick work of all three by chopping off each of their heads with a single motion of his sword. He did not have time for a prolonged fight but the appearance of the shadows only confirmed his biggest fear. His base was under attack by demons. The sound of soldiers screaming was almost deafening at this point, realizing the dire situation everyone in the fortress was in at this moment, James sprinted outside to find everyone shooting at various monsters. Everyone seemed to be holding their own. But there was very much a struggle to keep the demons from killing everyone. James was concerned about how the demons found them but such questions needed to wait.

James heard a screech above him, He looked up just in time to dodge a slash from a Hell-angel, A humanoid demon with wings that attack with long claws. As the demon took flight again, he shot a grappling hook from his blaster that latched itself around the demon's legs, He used his arms to yank it to the ground. As it tried to get away he fired a plasma shot from his blaster that paralyzed it, and then he drew his sword and impaled the demon through its chest. The demon still struggled to escape but a twist of his sword as it was stuck in its chest put it down for good. Another soldier nearby was struggling to fight off a crowd of shadows that was messing with him, Seeing that a life

was in danger James wasted no time and with blinding speed he ran and slashed at all of them. The shadows were staggered but not defeated, James looked smugly at the crowd of demons as he began to sheath his sword, when one of them noticed that as he was moving faster than what they could have noticed, he hid a bomb from his blaster on each of them, and as he sheathed his sword each of the monsters around him exploded spectacularly. He helped the soldier off the ground and the crowd of soldiers celebrated as all the demons had been destroyed. But James remained concerned. If the enemies knew where he was, should he expect a more ferocious attack in the future?

4: group story start:

“No that’s not right either...” Fern sighed.

She adjusted her round glasses as she tore another piece of parchment from her sketchbook, letting it turn brown as it absorbed the moisture from the muddy soil. Fern hated to waste precious paper but the angle from the ledge she was on just wasn’t working. Typically, her darkvision aided her in sketching during the dead of night, but the lack of shadows and colors made it difficult to correctly portray the depth to the buildings and rubble. Now her fingers were starting to hurt, her chiffon shirt had gotten muddy, and the frigid air was sending shivers down her horns. With a huff, Fern hopped off the wall ledge. Her hooves landed on the ground with a wet splat as she looked for another place to start her work over.

She had spent the last hour trying to sketch out the details of the ruins she was in. What was once said to be a prosperous village faced a sudden attack by vampires, and they ravaged the place to bits. Even after 50 years, evidence of the attack could still be seen everywhere. Shredded cottages covered in claw marks, crumbling stone walls stained with decades-old blood, and the smell of death that somehow still permeated the area. There were rumors that vampires still lingered around the place, whom Fern was hoping to sketch. Spellbooks were severely lacking in illustrations of normal spells, let alone any magic considered “evil.” Though evil or not, it was important that magic be depicted visually for the sake of safety and knowledge for all.

Vampires are, however...tricky. Despite their violent nature, they can be quite shy about attacking. Even after gloating about how tasty her blood was and expertly feigning how lost and helpless she felt, an hour passed with no signs of anyone. It would’ve been a waste to come all

the way out here for nothing, so Fern figured the next best thing to do was to at least sketch the ruins. The history books needed updated illustrations, and it was good practice anyway.

SNAP

Fern froze in her tracks. She perked up her ears, angling them in different directions to attempt to discern the direction of the noise. Could that have just been an animal...?

CRUNCH

Fern bounded towards the nearest crumbling wall and hid herself, her dark blue fur blending her into the night. There was no mistaking it, that was definitely the sound of someone's boots crunching fallen leaves. She'd recognize it anywhere. Careful not to give away her position, she peeked out from behind the wall. Holding her breath for what seemed like a century. Fern held back a small gasp as she saw a shadowy figure appear from behind a few trees in the distance. This had to be one of them. Her hands shook as she got out her sketchbook once more.

The figure appeared to be a young but ragged-looking man with longish black, unkempt hair. He wore a long black overcoat and boots, with a vest strapped across his chest carrying...stakes...?

"What would a vampire want with stakes...?" Fern mumbled to herself. Perhaps a bit too loudly.

The man turned sharply towards the direction of Fern's hiding spot, revealing a large scar in the shape of a star over his left eye. Fern quickly turned back behind the wall and covered her mouth. Had he seen her?

Crunch...Crunch...Crunch

The sound of cracking leaves got louder as slow footsteps made their way towards Fern.

Crunch...Crunch...

Fern began to panic, but she forced her breath to stay steady. Thinking she could take on a vampire by herself...was she crazy? What were a few basic defense spells going to do against a 1000-year-old being?

Crunch...

The figure seemed to pause right behind the wall. Fern didn't dare move a muscle. Tears began to well up behind her glasses. She felt them roll down her cheeks as she tightly shut her eyes in fear.

"Hey..." called out a gruff voice. "Is someone-"

HISS

Without a moment to react, a vampire that was hidden above descended onto the man. Its jaw was wide open to reveal its long, grotesque fangs, aiming to pierce the vitals of its next target. Catching him by surprise, the vampire managed to knock the man off his feet, leveraging its full body on top of him. But before it could clamp down, the man wedged the stake in his hand in between the vampire's jaws and began to wrestle it for freedom.

A loud piercing shriek echoed through the landscape as more vampires filled the air around the man. He fought them all effortlessly. Stabbing and slashing at them with his wooden stakes. One of the vampires slashed at him with claws, he grabbed it by the arm and stabbed it repeatedly in the chest. Another approached from above but he quickly pulled out a rapier to catch its landing with a stab to the face.

Fern looked at the action with awe as the mysterious man's combat gave a sense of grace, his demeanor almost careless. This continued until another vampire landed an attack from behind. Knocking the man to the ground. Realizing the situation suddenly becoming dire, Fern watched helplessly as more vampires lunged towards their target. But oddly for a brief moment, one of them froze, the air grew quiet as a crisp metallic "shing!" pierced the air.

One of the vampires had been cut clean in half, and as the two halves of the vampire fell to the ground, there was standing a second mysterious man. He had a navy blue jacket on, He had

black pants and boots. His face had a look of rage that was hidden behind some facial hair that gave him a sense of authority to fern. Was this man a captain?

With him, he was carrying with him a sword and a strange metal barrel on his left arm. Fern wondered what strategic advantage the man would have if he could not use two hands with his sword. However, Fern's question was answered when he immediately raised his arm towards the other vampires and let loose a barrage of fire.

The other vampires recoiled. The man said in a low, but determined voice "You a'ight?!" He lifted the other off the ground and shook his hand. "Name's James, I'm going to get you outta here" In a pained voice, the other man shook James's hand "Sylstrad" He replied. The two barely had time to exchange names as more vampires jumped the pair. The two readied themselves for the oncoming assault, before lunging at their attackers.

"So! What are you doing here?!" James yelled as he chopped off a vampire's head

"I came here to fight the vampires" replied Sylstrad as he skewers a few more back to back

"Vampires? They're clearly demons" James said as he destroyed a group of attackers with an exploding object from his metal barrel arm.

Sylstrad and James had both finished fighting off the hoard of vicious monsters, which gave them a chance to speak uninterrupted

"Nope, They got fangs and drain blood, vampires"

"Demons can do that too, that isn't exclusive to vampires you know."

"What kind of demons are you fighting?!"

The sound of a pair of hooves hitting the mud firmly gripped the pair's attention. Both took a defensive stance if more monsters were on their way. Fern walk out from behind the stone ruins and greeted the pair. Given the many monsters that James had gone up against throughout his experience as a fighter, He had never seen a creature such as what stood before him.

"Who the hell are you" he said in a confused voice

"Just a traveler, looking to study strange monsters such as what you two have fought so viciously here" replied Fern.

Fern quickly pulled out a notebook and showed the pair a drawing of the monsters that inhabited the forest, mostly other vampires. Followed by another page of the pair fighting them. It looked almost like a comic strip.

"Impressive" , Sylstrad said.

Fern looked at the metallic barrel on the end of James's arm. "I've never seen magic such as this before..." James gave a look of confusion before realizing Fern was pointing at his arm.

"Oh.... this?.." He said with a grin "this is an arm mounted blaster"

"So, what brought you two here in the first place?" Sylstrad asks. "I know you can handle yourself," he says, gesturing to James, "but it's generally unwise to seek out vampires. And I'm surprised you'd risk your life just for some drawings," he looks at me.

"It's one thing to read about them or see them on exhibit, but studying live monsters in person gives a perspective you can only get firsthand," I retort. "I can learn details about them I never would have otherwise. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!"

"At least if you die, you can die happy," Sylstrad replies. It's strange. He's not saying it to make fun of Fern but simply as an observation. This guy is a character. They sit silently for a moment, and he stares at her. She thinks he's trying to read her and find out if she's hiding any motivations. He sits until James breaks the quiet.

James takes a step forward. "I'm here to kill demons, and demons are here. I'll do anything to find hell and slay them at their doorstep. I believe there is an entrance somewhere in these ruins. I won't stop until I've found it."

Sylstrad's eyes widen. They display a mix of fear and confusion. "An entrance to the underworld? That's impossible! Vampires wouldn't be found so close to one. I smell no sulfur or ash, and I certainly don't see any remnants of brimstone."

"Think what you want, but I spent months tracking demons to these ruins. I know my only ticket to hell is down there." James points towards a large open building. It stands tall and secure despite its cracked pillars and mossy accents. It wouldn't be unrealistic for something to travel downwards, further into the ruins, to use their abandonment as a ritual site. Fern shudders to think what dangers lie deep within, yet she is excited by the prospect of new knowledge. "I'm going down there, I'm getting to hell, and I'm killing demons." James defiantly declares as he begins walking forward.

"Look, I don't think that's a good idea. Not because there are demons, as you say, but because you're gonna get lost and starve down there." Sylstrad leans forward and grabs James' shoulder, stopping him. James turns toward him with a look of annoyance and Fern fears these two may fight again. "Don't do this. There are other ways to find your demons. Find a seer, do some-" but before Sylstrad could finish his thought, a gravelly bellowing roar travels from the ruins. There's no arguing it. That shout was demonic. James must be right. Whether there is a gateway to hell or not, something infernal lies within the ruins.

"Well, I don't think I can argue with that. Alright, seeing as those vampires were hiding above a connection to the underworld, they must be involved. This means there might be more down there, ones I can't sense for some reason. I would hate for you to meet your end alone, so I'm joining you." Sylstrad is proposing a team-up with James.

"Although you mistake these demons for vampires, I wouldn't mind the help. You can come with me, but know I won't let up if you get tired." James says, accepting Sylstrad's offer.

"I don't think you need to worry about me getting tired." Sylstrad says with a smile. He and James turn and begin walking towards the ruins.

"Wait," Fern shouts at them. They pause and face her. "I know you two have a vendetta, but I would also like to accompany you! I don't often get the opportunity to study infernal beings and

our encounters could prove invaluable to my work. You don't need to worry about me slowing you down, either. I promise I will never relent, and I know how to fight, too, so I'm not a liability." Sylstrad and James look at each other for only a brief moment.

"Sure," James responds.

"Fine by me," confirms Sylstrad.

"Thank you," Fern gleefully cheers as she catches up to them. They walk in unison to the ruins, and dreadful excitement fills the air. Fern was beyond ecstatic. She'll gather observations and art rarely seen in her competitors!

They approach the ruins and descend the steps. As long as they work together, no danger will stop them.

3: Group story:

"It was ridiculous to believe demons lived in a volcano!" Sylstrad shouted, his voice hardly audible over the sound of exploding rocks and falling rubble. "Why did we even listen to those villagers?"

Fern, Sylstrad, and James were caught amid an erupting volcano. They raced along the rock walls, narrowly avoiding lava plumes and rockslides. Sylstrad and James worked on clearing a way forward while Fern buried her head in her spellbook.

"I think they were being figurative!" Fern shouted back, her attention divided between trying to survive and flipping through pages. "It's not unrealistic to see creatures made of amorphous lava as demons."

"I think they should be pretty damn literal if they're sending us up to an exploding volcano!" James yelled through gritted teeth. He leaned back and barely avoided a lash of lava passing close to his face. "Fern! How's that spell going?"

"I'm trying!" Fern said, her voice shaky. "It's not easy to cast teleportation while running on jagged rocks! I can't keep my hands still! My linework is atrocious!"

“Maybe it’d be easier if you stopped trying to be so precise! You don’t need to shade the fruit on the trees! Just get us where we need to go!” Sylstrad stared in bewilderment as Fern detailed her spell with much scrutiny.

Fern’s spellbook relied on her artistic capabilities to cast spells. Instead of crying incantations, waving her hands around, or throwing materials at her problems, she drew the spell she wanted to cast on the pages of her book. From there, they poured out from the spellbook and into the world, conjurations at her disposal.

“The spell works better the more accurate the drawing is! I don’t want my book to misinterpret our destination!” Fern paused to glare at Sylstrad. “I can’t focus with all the yelling! So, why don’t you keep the lava from melting us and I’ll get us off this volcano!”

Sylstrad hesitated for a moment. He had never heard Fern so stern in their weeks of traveling together. She scared him a little, maybe even more than dying on the volcano. As they continued ahead, a gigantic wave of lava burst in front of them. Sylstrad quickly waved his fingers into a glyph and sent the lava flying in another direction. A rumbling sound snapped him back to reality as he and Fern turned to look at the noise coming from behind.

“James! Watch your back!” Sylstrad and Fern shrieked in unison.

“On it!” James spun around to face three boulder gremlins, anthropomorphic mini boulders with legs, and a thirst for blood. One lept at him, and he cut it into fragments with his blade. He rushed forward and stomped on the second, burying it as pieces in the ground. The third boulder gremlin curled into a ball and rapidly rolled at James. In one fell swoop, he caught the gremlin on the ground, spun around, threw it into the air, then shot it into rocky chunks with his blaster.

“Nice!” complimented Sylstrad and Fern.

“Thanks!” James said in response, he dusted off his jacket as more monsters began to stand up and surround the group. “Guess they were being literal after all” James yelled to his two friends.

Sylstrad slashed a few boulder gremlins to pieces, James stabbed another one before kicking it into the nearby lava. The two were working together to defend as Fern was drawing up a spell in her book.

The two effortlessly dispatched the stone gremlins, but the victory was short-lived as a fire elemental demon the size of a bus began to emerge from the fire. "Incoming!" Sylstrad warned the group. The elemental roared and lobbed a fiery projectile at Fern, James stepped in front and reflected the attack with a holographic shield mounted on his blaster.

James checked to see if Fern was okay, before yelling to the monster "That's all you got!? Let's Dance!" Sylstrad stood next to James as the two stood ready to defend Fern. The elemental swung at the group. Fern used a different magic to turn the elemental's arm into solid rock, its arm fell apart and the elemental screeched with pain as it tried to regenerate its limb. Sylstrad and James charged at the monster, James putting on a liquid nitrogen modification to his blaster.

The pair began slashing at the elemental's limbs, preventing it from regenerating its arm. James used the modification on his blaster to freeze the elemental's legs. In response, the elemental breathed magma at Sylstrad, he dodged, however, a bit of magma hit his jacket, causing it to burst into flames, Sylstrad tossed his jacket aside just in time to dodge a second wave of fire. James stabbed his sword into the elemental's leg and it swung at him, knocking him back, as well as knocking the blaster modification off of his arm and into the nearby lava.

"NOOO!!!" James panicked as he watched the liquid nitrogen device sink into the magma.

The elemental began to melt the ice that had formed around its legs, the group had to act fast. James ran at the monster a second time, this time he fired explosive rounds at the elemental's legs, it fell forward, this time growling with rage. The blast destroyed its legs, but as it began to regenerate, James called to Sylstrad, who understood what the plan was, James jumped at Sylstrad, who used his rapier to push him high into the air, James landed on the elemental's shoulder and with a powerful roar, chopped off the monster's head. As the elemental fell to the ground, James jumped down and sheathed his sword.

“Brilliant! Excellent work everyone!” Fern beamed. She wasn’t as enthusiastic about fighting as her two companions, but in a pinch, she could sketch out some pretty powerful spells. However, the feeling of victory barely lasted a moment before another rumble of the volcano shook the ground, almost knocking the team to their feet.

“Oh right...” said James. A slight panic was rising in his voice. “Uh, Fern? How’s that spell going?”

“Do you need more time to render the buildings? Because I don’t think-” Before Sylstrad could even finish his sentence another volcanic boom erupted. Lava flew from the top, along with even more elementals. James tried to fire but was only met with the click of his gun, he was out of ammo.

“Damnit!” cried James as he and Sylstrad readied their weapons. “We can’t keep this up. We have to go NOW!”

Fern nodded as she laid her sketchbook on the ground. Even if everything was shaking, it was a much more stable surface than her hands. She took a deep breath and began the spell. Closing her eyes, Fern moved her fingers along the surface of the paper. She felt the grooves from pressing her pencil too hard on the page, using it to map out the location in her mind. The tall and gritty stone buildings, the bumpy cobblestone streets, the serenity of the ocean just outside of town as the salty breeze wafted through the fishing port. This was it, the spell was complete.

“Everyone gather together!” Fern shouted. James and Sylstrad jumped to Fern’s side. The elementals were almost to them at this point and there was no time to lose. Keeping one hand on her sketchbook, she lifted her other hand to the sky. As she softly spoke the incantation, Fern’s eyes began to glow a bright white light. Pages from her sketchbook tore out seamlessly, swirling around the group faster and faster, gathering in numbers until a dome of paper encased them. With a swing of Fern’s hand, an illustration began to appear on the walls of the dome, depicting the middle of a busy town. Colors bled through the page as every single aspect of the drawing was rendered at lightning speed. Sounds of the ocean, bustling crowds, and church bells began to fill the group's ears as they echoed off the walls. After one more deep breath, Fern opened her eyes and closed her sketchbook. The papers of the dome fluttered to the ground, and sure enough, they were in the center of a town.

James and Sylstrad looked around in bewilderment. Had they really escaped? Fern stood up from the ground, the fallen paper swirling around her as it filed back into her sketchbook. She took a deep breath, filling her nose with the salty air, then turned to face James and Sylstrad.

“Welcome to Ashland Piers you two!” she said with a smile. “It’s good to be home.”

2: technology wrinkle:

James had returned from one of his first missions. Although his mission was barely successful, it left his sword scratched, and his arm mounted blaster broken beyond repair. Although a dull blade can always be sharpened again, Fixing a broken blaster is a much harder task. After he dusted himself off from the action he just experienced, he took his weapons to the local weaponsmith, Ashlyn Leigh.

He walked into her office and tossed his destroyed equipment onto her desk. “Shit!” She said in response. “You look awful, what kind of hell have you been through?!” James examined himself and took note of the scratches and bruises that dotted his body. “I’ll live,” he said in a low, begrudging voice. Her concerned face turned into a small smile “alright, you’re here for a reason and lucky for you, I have plenty of new inventions for you to try out, follow me” She beckoned him to a back room, down a long hallway and into a lab. The ceiling was lined with neon lights, along the walls several swords and blasters were mounted along with a ton of other weapons.

“Damn...” James said excitedly. “It’s like this was designed for me” James looked around the room at all the different kinds of high-tech equipment. James looked at Ashlyn “All these are my favorite weapons, you stalkin’ me?” He said jokingly.

“You’re an open book, James,” Ashlyn joked back. “Fine then, how about showing me some of what you got here?” She pointed over at a red katana. “This here is called Scarlet Dusk. Has a unique feature of an electric current flowing through it, strong enough to destabilize the molecular structure of whatever you cut through”

James laughed “You come up with little pet names for each of your creations?”

“Yeah, and you don’t?” She picked up another Sword. “This, I call the Haunted Hallmark, As the name suggests, it has a spirit that lies within the blade, said to hunger for the taste of heads” She said excitedly.

James gave a worried look... “maybe you should put that thing down”

She moved onto a blaster shaped like a crossbow “This here is blondie’s bow. I also created arrows armed with a pipe bomb. This thing also has an internal magazine of 5” She picked up another blaster, “this!-” she struggled to lift it “this is the Super Sentry” Has a pair of gatling guns with a rocket launcher built in as well James put it on his left hand and struggled to hold the things straight.

“Yeah maybe you can work your way towards that one” Ashlyn took the blaster off his arm. “Finally we have this....” She walked over to a sword and blaster sealed away in a case. “This I call Hellhound Hunter. I didn’t make this one, I found it somewhere in an abandoned lab. No idea what it is capable of, other than in the right hands, it is a powerful weapon. For all I know it could be magic and this is my magnum opus. This blaster fires beams of pure energy. But it can also be modified to be a grenade launcher, rocket launcher, flame thrower, and even has a built-in shield. It took months to try and find a way to fire concentrated plasma without making the blaster melt. Turns out I just needed a built-in cooling cell and some luck” James looked in awe.

“I’ll take those two,” He said with excitement.

1: End of the line

James had been briefed on what he hoped was going to be his final mission. A large energy pulse had been detected somewhere in the underworld. No doubt that demons were trying to breach into earth. But luckily for James, he had a means of getting into the opposing realm as well. However this time around things were much different. He did not have his team with him. He was alone. Most of his team is out of commission, slaughtered by a demon that at this point was only described as a cloaked figure with claws, the few left alive are wounded and in critical condition.

James had grabbed His sword, Hellhound Hunter, and slid it into its sheath. Its blue crossguard is marked with a golden sun emblem. He took his new blaster and slid it onto his arm. It flared to life with a roar, Both weapons hopefully would fulfill their purpose today.

He made his way to the battlements and a portal opened in front of him, As his peers wished him luck, he stepped through. On the other side, he was in the underworld. A short ways ahead of him, a tower. And on top, something was glowing.

He started to make his way towards the tower. Oddly enough nothing was here for him to fight... it felt as if... The demons wanted him here. He remained on his guard. Ready to fight whatever tried to jump him, Before long, he arrived at a bridge leading to the entrance of the tower. On the other side, three imp-knights guarded the entrance. Upon seeing him, the three charged, flailing their blades at him. He blocked one of their blows with his own sword before saying mockingly "What an ugly Halloween costume" He pushed the monster back before punching it off the bridge into the abyss below. He turned to face the second one, and fired a volley of plasma bolts that punched holes through its armor, as it collapsed, the third leaped at James, as it was about to bring its sword down, James swung for its throat, slicing its head off. Recovering from the fight he just finished, James rushed for the tower entrance, It was time to lock in

Upon making it inside, he was met with a spiral staircase, he wasted no time climbing it to the top until he made it a pair of large doors. He kicked the doors clean off the hinges, sending them flying across the rooftop that laid ahead of him, and past a cloaked figure, facing away from him. James narrowed his eyes at the figure that stood before it said in an oddly feminine voice. "So... the humans send their warriors to save the day... Story as old and boring as time itself. So tell me, before I kill you, who are you? What makes you think you can deny me from taking the realm that is rightfully mine?"

The figure turned and for the first time, James saw its face beneath its hood. Its face was dog-like in appearance. With Ash-grey fur and beady eyes that glowed red. With a gloved, human-like hand it reached for its hood and tossed it aside. James said in response "I'm no hero, only a man sick and tired of demons trying to ruin my home"

The demon narrowed its eyes and grinned slightly. It reached out, small claws beginning to poke through its gloved hand. And it materialized a colossal axe. "Not a hero? You're right about

that... In my eyes you are nothing but a nuisance delaying the inevitable.” It struck a stance as if it was ready to attack “Things are going to be a lot easier for the both of us if you just stand there and let me kill you”

James smirked back “Sorry, just giving up just isn’t my style” He drew his sword “Let’s dance... asshole” James said coldly.

“Fine then...” The demon made a beckoning gesture with tis axe “Just try to put up a better fight than your loved ones did”

The mockery of James' friends made him feel nothing but rage. He was concentrating on his opponent and his opponent alone. The only thing he could think about was winning this fight, He took one step forward before launching himself across the ground, lunging at the demon before him. It lifted its axe and blocked. The air and sky above filled with an eerie darkness as the two fought. Interrupted only for brief moments by the light provided by James' plasma blaster. Sounds of metal clashing against metal echoed through the air as the pair fought ferociously. James fired a rocket from his blaster towards the wolf demon who then knocked it off-course with the flat side of its battle axe, it then rushed at James with its teeth drawn, James raised his blaster's shield in defense but the sheer force of the monster tackling him knocked him down, it then started to try and bite at James, James screamed as he could feel the excruciating pain of fangs starting to sink into his chest. In response he tried to forcibly push the demon off of him, He kicked its jaw which caused it to recoil. James stood back up but noticed he was bleeding from the bite. He looked to his attacker, who had to adjust its neck from the force of his kick. It spat out a fang before saying “I expected more from you.... I... WANT.... MORE!” It swung again, aiming for James' throat. The axe nearly scratched James' throat as he dodged out of the way. He aimed his blaster and was about to fire a shot as it swung again, James had just enough time to activate his blaster's shield to block. James' feet slid across the ground as the demon was trying to push him off the edge of the tower. It looked him in the eyes and said again “As strong as you are... no matter how many of my most respected demons you've killed... It was never enough... TO STOP ME! And now.... You die a fool's death” James was cornered, but he begun push back. Slowly he used his shield to push the demonic axe away from him, and with a burst of strength, threw off the monster's guard long enough to fire a plasma shot that hit its chest, causing it to recoil back, He then thrust his sword directly through the demon's chest. The confident expression in the demon's face faded in an instant as its axe fell

to the ground. It spoke softly "How...." it looked down at the sword piercing its chest and gasped for air "How did.....a mere mortal....." James looked angrily at the demon

"Simple" he said calmly "You hurt the people I care about. Consider this.... Justice" He tore his sword back out through its chest, leaving a large wound, it crumpled to its knees holding its chest to try and stop the bleeding. In response James grabbed the demon by its dog-like head. His grip strengthened as all he could think about was the pain that this demon inflicted on the people he loved most. He let his rage manifest in the form of a powerful scream as he took his sword and with a single swing, severed the demon's head. The red glow in its beady eyes faded, its body collapsed as its head fell from its shoulders. The darkness in the air faded and as he looked up, he could almost see souls finally at peace.

James returned to base exhausted from his encounter. After a visit from the medical center he made a full recovery. He was given praise and honor from all of his closest friends. He appreciated the respect that was given to him, but in his eyes, he only did what anyone should do for the people that he cared about most. His only wish is that those who did not live to see the end of this war could know that their sacrifices paid off in the end.

Nethery, Stacy

There Is Nostalgia In the Winter

There is nostalgia in the winter

In the biting cold
In these ancient winds
That whip our hair
Harsh, unforgiving lashes against our red faces

In gathered love
Close to gain that warmth we so desperately seek
Dragging us, unwilling participants
To need each other

As we wait out the delicate snow
We reminisce on what we had
Warmer days full of independence and life
Winters past, survived solely by relying on each other

We endured those harsh days
That biting cold, those deep, unforgiving winds
Only to forget our struggle
Only to arrive here yet again, wholly unprepared

Yet we persisted nonetheless
So, as we recollect
As we push forward and call back
We know we will endure again

That Unending Moment

The frigid air hit me the moment I clunked my way off of the bus. Despite the thermals, the jeans and flannel and sweater, the snow pants and giant, bright red jacket, despite these and even more layers, I felt the cold down to my bones. “Negative thirty six degrees Fahrenheit, and wind chill makes it colder” Holly had said during the ride over. There she waited for me then, standing next to the steps off of the bus. I flashed her a grin, and as the cold hit my mouth, it complemented the taste of mint from my toothpaste, left over from earlier in the evening.

“Ready?” I asked, raising my eyebrows at her. We began descending toward a path in the woods, and as the dense snow crunched under my boots, I flipped on my headlamp so we’d be able to see. We weren’t the first pair walking down the path, nor were we the last. I handed her one of the tripods I carried and asked her to hold it for me while I searched my pockets for my second pair of gloves. One glove in each pocket, except that one of the pockets lay empty.

“Shit” I murmured. “Hey I dropped one of my gloves, I’ll be right back.” I informed her as I set off back the way we came, headlamp pointed down in a weak pool of light on the ground. A mere few feet away from the bus sat my missing glove. I scooped it up and rushed back down the path, catching up to the group as the trees opened up into a flat, empty expanse.

I smelled the fire before I spotted the two tents, one already aglow with an orange hue, not far into the opening. I found Holly setting my tripod onto one of a few metal folding chairs placed near the tents. I set my backpack on the same chair, but didn’t open it immediately. The quiet interrupted by the chatter of others nearby broke through my focus, reminding me of our goal. I flipped off my headlamp and looked up to the sky, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The cold air bit at the one patch of skin uncovered in the frigid night, and my eyes watered as I prayed to find what we’d come here for.

It didn’t take long. After allowing my eyes to adjust, the faint green glow began to claim the starry sky. “Holly!” I said too loudly, too urgently for this setting, turning away from the view to get her attention, but my mother was already pointing toward the sky in the opposite direction. I walked over to her, turning in circles as I went to observe as much of the night sky as I could.

“Do you see it over here?” she asked me. I nodded vigorously and took in the phenomenon that I had never expected to get to see myself. I stood utterly still for a moment, taking in something that I knew I was truly fortunate to experience, before snapping back into focus. I moved back to where my now frosty backpack lay on the chair, and I got to work.



Aurora in Yellowknife, Stacy Nethery, January 2024, Digital Photography

One Day We Will Be

Grief can create the most interesting narratives. Grief and love and hate, these emotions guide this curiosity. It leads us to these worlds unknown, creating characters from the miscellaneous people who pass through our lives.

It's these emotions that I traveled through the day I saw them. An elderly couple, or not a couple. They gave no suggestion; I assign these roles with my own lens. Her, wearing a loose light blue top and floral-patterned ankle-length pants. Her back was hunched slightly, but she walked without the assistance of a cane. Her short, curly white hair and glasses fit well with his bald, shiny head hidden by a brown, worn cowboy hat, and matching spectacles. His button-down shirt, faded blue jeans, and cowboy boots created a certain aesthetic painfully offset by the tiny, rat-like mutt he carried in the arm he wasn't utilizing to manage his cane. I watched their meander as they hobbled past me, her trying to explain the plans they were running late for, him shouting "WHAT?" or "HUH?" every few seconds, then eventually pointing

to his ear, where I spotted a red hearing aid. If they noticed me staring as they passed, they gave no indication.

I let my mind wander as I watched them. I pictured a past that may or may not have existed. A growing home in northern California. Children becoming adults in the seventies and eighties, learning from their mistakes, their parents guiding them along the way. Him an engineer, her a nurse. Was there some sort of inherent sexism in my assignment of their roles? Possibly, there was inherent sexism in the roles within a home during that time period. I pictured them now, him a hobby wildlife photographer, a model-train enthusiast, a gunsmith. Her, retired, making quilts for her grandchildren, collecting small cat figurines and taking care of her pet cat and birds. His dog, who he probably calls Comanche or something, following him around and absolutely adoring him.

I began to wonder about their values. How is that relationship with their relationship with their children? I wonder what hardships they may have faced, maybe one of their daughters died. No parents should have to bury their children. I began to pity them. Then I picture them at that daughter's funeral. They almost missed it because he refuses to speak to his other daughter, and didn't want to see her there. Why don't they get along? He disagrees with her more liberal political views and decided that was enough to completely cut contact. Suddenly I pitied the couple a bit less.

I blinked the world back into focus, and suddenly the couple was half a block down the street, still hobbling along, completely unaffected by my creation of a world around their existence. Forced out of my reverie, my thoughts drifted back toward my own grief, my own loss, and I didn't see the couple again.

Just a Couple of Weeks

I sniffle, taking a sip of my burnt coffee. Even the pile of sugar and hazelnut cream I dumped into the paper cup can't hide how bitter the warm beverage is. I wipe a bit of water from my eye. My allergies seem to be indescribably worse here in Oklahoma than they even are back home, in *any* of my homes, but my allergy meds, eye drops, and nasal spray are all up in the room, and Beth is still sleeping.

After responding to Mandy's text, telling her what drink I want from an actual coffee shop so she can bring it to me, I turn back to my work. Something about this moment feels so nostalgic and important that I have to pause from what I'm doing to contemplate it. Then I remember.

It was just over three and a half years ago. September of my freshman year. I was barely two weeks into my first semester of college, and traveling out to Indiana with Nick to visit my family and see Nick's favorite band (and one of my favorites as well, if I'm being honest with myself) in Chicago. I had been so disappointed when I'd found out that the first half of the semester would be held online, one last hurrah of Covid, until I'd realized that it meant I could take this trip without complication. We had driven out to Indiana the day before, getting in around 9 pm, checking into our hotel, and ordering Doordash from one of my favorite local places. Then I also ordered Baked, which was one of my absolute favorite parts of going home. Made-to-order cookies that could be customized to the customer's direct wishes, and they delivered until 4 am. We sat on the hotel bed, eating warm cookies with milk and watching old episodes of Psych until about midnight, when I'd passed out and Nick had switched to playing a game on his Switch. When I woke up around 8 am, I quietly gathered my pink Macbook air and charger, my headphones, and my cell phone and wallet, and quietly snuck out of the room.

I break out of my reverie for a moment, seeing a text from Mandy, "I'm here". I stand up and set down my laptop, scooping up my phone and wallet. I walk outside, expecting to see her car under the awning right in front of the hotel, but it isn't there. "Where?" I respond. I look around, we're next to two other hotels, but Mandy found out hotel without a problem yesterday. I see her car next door in front of a holiday inn, right as another text pops up from her "one sec". I smile. "Babe, you're at the wrong hotel" I reply before screenshotting the conversation and sending it to my mom, who's upstairs, with the caption "something you'd do". Mandy pulls up, Haley in her passenger seat. Instead of handing me the one iced coffee drink I'm expecting, Haley hands me a cardboard drink carrier with three large iced drinks in varying shades of tan and brown, with three straws in the center.

"That one is Beth's." Haley says, pointing to one that has "oat" written in sharpie on the lid. "The other is mom's."

"Okay." I say, "Thanks girlyies" I then turn and walk back into the hotel as they drive off. I call my mom from the lobby. "Hey, I have our coffees, but I also have my laptop and stuff, so I can't carry it all up."

“Oh, I can come down and get them!” She says cheerfully. I tell her I’m in the lobby and hang up. Then I pick back up my laptop and respond to a text from my friend while I wait for her to come down.

“Hey” I say as my mom walks into the lobby a minute later. I scoop up the drink carrier, removing my own drink, and walk it over to her.

“I’m assuming this one that looks more like actual coffee is Beth’s?” Holly doesn’t like anything that tastes noticeably like coffee. I tell her she’s right, and then she says “Is Beth actually awake?”

“I’m not sure. I came down earlier because she was still asleep, but she might be up now.”
“Alright, I’ll go bang on the door.”

“If you talk to her, can you let her know that I’ll be back up around 9:30?”

“Okay!” She says cheerfully before turning to walk back to the elevator. I turn and walk back to the little couch I’m sitting at, and pick back up my laptop. I put a straw in my drink and take a sip. *Oh god, that’s sweet.* I figured it would be, but it’s almost painfully so. Espresso with caramel (the thick type of caramel that’s typically drizzled onto drinks) and chocolate milk. Pretty much sugar with a side of coffee. I lean back and continue to daydream about the past.

That time, I was sitting at a small table by the window in the lobby. God only knows what the writing assignment I was working on was. I had gotten breakfast, just a couple of yogurts, from the Continental breakfast that was being offered. My current hotel also has continental breakfast, but we have brunch plans in a little over an hour. Thinking back, I’d had brunch plans with Nick then, too. That must have been why I’d only grabbed a couple of yogurt cups from the hotel. I remember now the hope I had then. The excitement I’d held for the future. Even though, at the time, I had only planned to go to college for two years, yet here I am finishing up my fourth. I thought *In and out, just try to get the AAS done quickly and move on.* And now I’m contemplating how long to wait before going back to school for my MFA, and possibly a PhD after that. I’m exhausted, but I have such bigger goals than I did then. Even now, I’ve accomplished so much more than I expected to when I began. But there I was, just a couple of

weeks after starting college, and here I am, just a couple of weeks before finishing, in the same spot and simultaneously unbelievably far away from where I began.

I sigh, not having gotten a single ounce of work done, and close my laptop to make the trek back up to my room.

Kodachrome the Vicious Predator

There she goes. I watch as my human walks past me, entirely unaware that she's being watched.

"Hi silly boy," she says before leaning down and scratching my head. She must have incredibly keen senses to have known I was here by her feet. I watch her stand back up and continue her walk from her bedroom into the kitchen. After a moment, I hop up and follow.

I realize that it must be my favorite time of day as she nears the cabinet with my food. She's employed some sort of lock that I have not yet determined how to pick, so until I do, I must wait until she determines it time for my dinner. I feel as though I've never been fed before in my life, so as she passes the cabinet and walks straight to the fridge, I chirp my protest. I sit firmly next to the cabinet and begin meowing repeatedly at her as she begins taking ingredients out of the fridge and then the freezer and then walks the two steps to the stove and sets them all on the counter next to it. She looks down at me and gives me an apologetic smile. "Sorry handsome, you still have two hours before dinner. It's only 6:30 right now!" I, of course, have absolutely no clue what that means. It's dinner time. It must be. I meow some more. After a moment of her meowing right back at me, she walks over and leans down by the cabinet. I stand up and begin purring and rubbing against her side. She pets me for a moment, and then scoops me up and stands back up, holding me with my belly exposed and my legs flailing in the air.

She begins rubbing my tummy. It feels so nice. I tuck my head in up against her and continue to purr. I try meowing. What was I meowing about? We're walking now, out of the kitchen back toward the bedroom. Right! I wanted dinner! I meow again, but she's rubbing my little tummy and I simply cannot focus on anything else. She gently places me on my window hammock and continues to rub my tummy.

Wait a second. I'm a predator with an exposed soft tummy. I must stop this at once! Luckily, the attack is easy, as her arm is resting under my head while she pets me. I rear my head back and CHOMP. The tummy rubbing stops. She gently pulls her hand away as I try and fail to grab it with my claws. "Sir." She says, annoyed. "*Sir.*" She emphasizes again as she frees her hand. She then gives me a small kiss on the forehead. I never attack her face. That would be mean. "That wasn't very nice." She murmurs to me, before giving me one more forehead smooch and turning to walk away. I flick my tail as I watch her leave and then turn to watch the birds outside. I've won once again. I am the ultimate predator.



Kodachrome the Vicious Predator, Stacy Nethery, April 2024, Digital Photography

Orlando, Sofia

Alive

It's been three months into summer now. The long days and warm weather have helped the trees shed their flowers and drape the forest in a cool canopy of leaves, with the only light coming from the sunshine that slipped between the cracks. The darkness and humid air had encouraged moss growth, softening Evelyn's footsteps and filling the woods with an even more earthy scent than usual. She was still limping a little, but the padded ground was helping her keep pace with her elf companion up ahead.

"Dahlin!" Evelyn yelled. "Would it kill you to slow down a little? This isn't a race."

Dahlin planted his wooden staff into the ground, removing the hood of his cloak as he turned towards her. "My apologies," he called out. "Do you need to take a rest?"

By the time he had asked Evelyn had caught up to him. She held her leg a little as she paused to regain her breath. "I'm fine..." she sighed. "My legs' pretty much alright...I think this forest is just a bit too rocky."

Dahlin squinted his eyes. "You know, you'd receive much better care back in the city...Your leg is healed enough to walk back there yourself."

Evelyn's grip on her leg tightened momentarily, her gaze fixed to the ground. "I told you..." she said. "Once I get better they'll send me back into battle...if not I'll be tossed out. The city has no use for soldiers who are afraid to die."

Dahlin tilted his head curiously. "Is the fear of death so looked down upon? It is the natural end for all living things."

Evelyn turned to glare at him. "You wouldn't get it..." she spat. "You live forever, so death is the furthest thing from your mind." She winced internally at her tone, but Dahlin's expression remained as calm as before.

"All living things...fear death," Dahlin responded, his gaze fixed on Evelyn's. She looked back in surprise, not sure how to respond.

After a moment Dahlin moves his eyes toward the ground. "I can talk all I want about how I will embrace my eventual death with open arms. But I know that when my time finally comes I will still try to run away until my body can no longer move. To outrun that fate we share, to give in to the urge to see tomorrow, it is valiant."

They both sat in silence for a while. A slight breeze rustled the leaves, causing the bright sun above to shine brighter between the bigger gaps. A quiet peace fell upon the forest.

"You're not a coward. You're a brave person who fears death. Just like anyone should." Dahlin says, as he finally looks back towards her.

They lock eyes for a moment before Evelyn fixes her gaze to the canopy above. The sun shines directly into her eyes so she closes them quickly. She can feel the cool wind on her cheek, the padded ground from beneath her feet, and the slight stinging of her eyes, still hurting from the sudden exposure to light. When she finally gathered the courage to respond, she turned toward Dahlin.

"I guess so."

A smile forms on Dahlin's face as if that was the perfect answer.

"No that's not right either..." Fern sighed.

She adjusted her round glasses as she tore another piece of parchment from her sketchbook, letting it turn brown as it absorbed the moisture from the muddy soil. Fern hated to waste precious paper but the angle from the ledge she was on just wasn't working. Normally her darkvision aided her in sketching during the dead of night, but the lack of shadows and colors made it difficult to correctly portray the depth to the buildings and rubble. Now her fingers were starting to hurt, her chiffon shirt had gotten muddy, and the frigid air was sending shivers down her horns. With a huff, Fern hopped off the wall ledge. Her hooves landed on the ground with a wet splat as she looked for another place to start her work over.

She had spent the last hour trying to sketch out the details of ruins she was in. What was once said to be a prosperous village faced a sudden attack against vampires and they ravaged the place to bits. Even after 50 years, evidence of the attack could still be seen everywhere. Shredded cottages covered in claw marks, crumbling stone walls stained with decades old blood, and the smell of death that somehow still permeated the area. There were rumors that

vampires still lingered around the place, of whom Fern was hoping to sketch. Spellbooks were severely lacking in illustrations of normal spells, let alone any magic considered “evil”. Though evil or not, it was important that magic be depicted visually for the sake of safety and knowledge for all.

Vampires are however...tricky. Despite their violent nature they can be quite shy to attack. Even after gloating about how tasty her blood was and expertly feining how lost and helpless she felt, an hour had passed with no signs of anyone. It would've been a waste to come all the way out here for nothing so Fern figured the next best thing to do was to at least sketch the ruins. The history books needed updated illustrations and it was good practice anyways.

Character Introduction Collab (Sofia's Part)

SNAP

Fern froze in her tracks. She perked up her ears, angling them in different directions to attempt to discern the direction of the noise. Could that have just been an animal...?

CRUNCH

Fern bounded towards the nearest crumbling wall and hid herself, her dark blue fur blending her into the night. There was no mistaking it, that was definitely the sound of someone's boots crunching fallen leaves. She'd recognize it anywhere. Careful not to give away her position, she peaked out from behind the wall. Holding her breath for what seemed like a century. Fern held back a small gasp as she saw a shadowy figure appear from behind a few trees in the distance. This had to be one of them. Her hands shook as she got out her sketchbook once more.

The figure appeared to be a young but ragged looking man, with longish black unkempt hair. He wore a long black overcoat and boots, with a vest across strapped across his chest carrying...stakes...?

“What would a vampire want with stakes...?” Fern mumbled to herself. Perhaps a bit too loudly.

The man turned sharply towards the direction of Fern's hiding spot, revealing a large scar in in the shape of a star over his left eye. Fern quickly turned back behind the wall and covered her mouth. Had he seen her?

Crunch...Crunch...Crunch

The sound cracking leaves got louder, as slow footsteps made their way towards Fern.

Crunch...Crunch...

Fern began to panic but she forced her breath to stay steady. Thinking she could take on a vampire by herself...was she crazy? What were a few basic defense spells going to do against an 1000-year-old-being?

Crunch...

The figure seemed to pause right behind the wall. Fern didn't dare move a muscle. Tears began to well up behind her glasses. She felt them roll down her cheeks as she tightly shut her eyes in fear.

"Hey..." called out a gruff voice. "Is someone-"

HISS

Without a moment to react, a vampire that was hidden above descended onto the man. Its jaw wide open to reveal its long grotesque fangs, aiming to pierce the vitals of its next target. Catching him by surprise the vampire managed to knock the man off his feet, leveraging its full body on top of him. But before it could clamp down, the man wedged the stake in his hand in between the vampire's jaws, and began to wrestle it for freedom.

Character Environment Collab (Sofia's Part)

"Brilliant! Excellent work everyone!" Fern beamed. She wasn't as enthusiastic about fighting as her two companions, but in a pinch, she could sketch out some pretty powerful spells. However, the feeling of victory barely lasted a moment before another rumble of the volcano shook the ground, almost knocking the team to their feet.

"Oh right..." said James. A slight panic was rising in his voice. "Uh, Fern? How's that spell going?"

"Do you need more time to render the buildings? Because I don't think-" Before Sylstrad could even finish his sentence another volcanic boom erupted. Lava flew from the top, along with even more elementals. James tried to fire but was only met with the click of his gun, he was out of ammo.

“Damnit!” cried James as he and Sylstrad readied their weapons. “We can’t keep this up. We have to go NOW!”

Fern nodded as she laid her sketchbook on the ground. Even if everything was shaking, it was a much more stable surface than her hands. She took a deep breath and began the spell. Closing her eyes Fern moved her fingers along the surface of the paper. She felt the grooves from pressing her pencil too hard on the page, using it to map out the location in her mind. The tall and gritty stone buildings, the bumpy cobblestone streets, the serenity of the ocean just outside of town as the salty breeze wafted through the fishing port. This was it, the spell was complete.

“Everyone gather together!” Fern shouted. James and Sylstrad jumped to Fern’s side. The elementals were almost to them at this point and there was no time to lose. Keeping one hand on her sketchbook she lifted her other hand to the sky. As she softly spoke the incantation, Fern’s eyes began to glow a bright white light. Pages from her sketchbook tore out seamlessly, swirling around the group faster and faster, gathering in numbers until a dome of paper encased them. With a swing of Fern’s hand, an illustration began to appear on the walls of the dome, depicting the middle of a busy town. Colors bled through the page as every single aspect of the drawing was rendered at lightning speed. Sounds of the ocean, bustling crowds, and churchbells began to fill the group’s ears as they echoed off the walls. After one more deep breath, Fern opened her eyes and closed her sketchbook. The papers of the dome fluttered to the ground, and sure enough, they were in the center of a town.

James and Sylstrad looked around in bewilderment. Had they really escaped? Fern stood up from the ground, the fallen paper swirling around her as it filed back into her sketchbook. She took a deep breath, filling her nose with the salty air, then turned to face James and Sylstrad.

“Welcome to Ashland Piers you two!” she said with a smile. “It’s good to be home.”

Congrats

“Ugh..what a day.”

Ty slammed his front door before dragging his feet over to the couch. He flopped down and pulled out his phone to doom scroll. That day he had gone into an interview for Pizza Hut, and though it went well he was still nervous. Not necessarily about the job...but of what Alex would think. After an hour of lounging around Ty sighs and decides to use his nervous energy to at

least make some food. He's barely pulled out the ingredients before hears a click from the front door.

Ty looked over in surprise. "Oh! You're back early..."

"Yea there was a minor gas leak at the firm so they told everyone to go home early today." Alex said as he shrugged his coat, followed by his blazer. He hung it up on the rack near the door and walked over to the kitchen table, opening his bag and taking out his laptop.

"I still need to get some work done so I'm gonna do it out here if that's cool."

Ty looked over at him confused. "Wouldn't you rather work in your room?" Ty asks. "I was gonna watch some TV while I ate so I don't wanna distract you..."

By the time Ty asked, Alex had already booted up his computer and littered the table with various papers. "I don't mind at all." Alex responded, eyes stuck to his screen. "I've already finished most of my work anyways so I should be done in a bit. Plus I wanna hang out."

Ty thought about insisting a bit more before deciding to just respond with a shrug. He turned back to the stove and tried to force his mind to focus on cooking mixed vegetables. Alex knew he had an interview today so he probably wanted to hear about it. Ty didn't understand why he would though, it's not anything special. Just Pizza Hut... He gets out of his own head long enough to not burn anything and sits across from Alex, carefully putting aside any important looking papers to not get food on them.

After scrolling on Netflix for a bit Ty settles for some dumb reality show as background noise. They sat together in (almost) silence for a bit before Alex finally asked the dreaded question. "Your interview was today, right? How was it?"

Ty tried to swallow the food in his mouth but his throat was already too dry. He glances at Alex in hopes that he's still focused on his work but his excited gaze is fully fixed on Ty. "Um..." Ty mumbled, eyes locked on his fork as he fiddled with it. "Uh...it went good..I think..." There's a slight pause. "They want to schedule me for next week...so that's good I guess." he decided to add.

He isn't expecting much of a reaction but when he finally decided to look back up, Alex was beaming. "Really? That's great man!"

Ty didn't even have a chance to respond before Alex walked over to the fridge and grabbed two beers. He opened them both and handed one to Ty. "Always need an excuse to celebrate right?"

He held out his beer as if waiting for cheers but Ty just stared back at him awkwardly. "I mean..." Ty had moved to fidgeting with his beer now, eyes locked to the ground. "I don't think this is anything to celebrate really...It's just Pizza Hut." He said, adding an awkward laugh to fill the silence. He expected Alex to be laughing or smiling a bit too but when he looked up he was met with a concerned expression on Alex's face.

"What do you mean?" Alex asked. "You got the job, right? That's great!" Ty opens his mouth to refute him but Alex beats him to it and clinks his beer against Ty's. "Cheers to Pizza Hut. Make sure to bring me back those brownie pizza things!"

Ty started at him for a second and then laughed. "I don't man it's my first week on the job. They're gonna hire me and think I ate half the food."

"We'll make it more than half don't worry. " said Alex "At least 75%."

Ty smiled. "Sounds good to me."

Parisi, Jessica

Prom Song (Gone Wrong)

Renny fidgeted with the small flower arrangement pinned to the lapel of his pale-blue suit jacket, the one he was renting from that formalwear shop in Siren. Swallowing thickly, he ran his hands through his black hair and tried not to think about the fact that he was going to prom and that he was going with Frances Aldridge. He had not asked her out— no, she did, after his fourth-period English class, and he had been so taken aback he could only nod. Of course, he never actually wanted to go to prom in the first place.

Now, he was sitting in the passenger seat of his mother's hunter-green Dodge Dart, on their way to pick up Frances in Oakland. Renny could not drive and his mother had graciously volunteered to drive the both of them to the prom.

"This was a terrible idea," he muttered under his breath, frowning when a petal from one of the flowers broke off in his hands. Noticing, his mother, Adeline, made a small sighing noise.

"*Cher*, would you stop touching it? That was quite expensive," she chided. "And don't think like that, *Rene*, you'll have a wonderful time."

He let his head fall back against the seat with a groan. "Being in the middle of the school gym with a bunch of people I don't like doesn't sound like a good time. At all. I didn't even want to go, but Frances had to go and ask me. Amazing."

Adeline just shook her head. "Negativity won't help" she remarked, before making a turn, slowing as she passed by a small grey clapboard house. "Is this it? 7631 LaPlante Drive?"

Renny paled a little. They were at Frances' house. The drive went a bit quicker than he would have liked, and he certainly was not prepared, not in the slightest. He looked over at the house anxiously, then back at his mother. "W-what do I do?"

"Go up to the door, ring the bell. If she comes out, greet her, if it's her mother or father, greet them and be polite," she explained, before patting his shoulder with a gloved hand. "You can do it. I'm sure Frances will be delighted to see you, right?"

No, I can't do it, he thought darkly, but he pushed the car door open and stepped out. He went up the front walk slowly, and when he stood in front of the red-painted door, he looked back over his shoulder at the car. Adeline made a gesture as if to say *Go on, do it!*

With a sigh, he rang the doorbell, and waited for what seemed like an extremely long time. There were footsteps from behind the door and it swung open, revealing none other than Frances herself. He almost didn't recognize her— she was not wearing those huge, thick-framed aviator glasses and her normally frizzy hair was styled. Her face lit up with a smile, and she stepped out, clutching her purse to her chest as she peered up at him.

"Renny! You look great! Are you excited? What do you think of my dress?" she inquired excitedly, walking down the steps and doing a little twirl, showing off her dress— periwinkle with white lacy sleeves. "I spent hours looking for a dress. Isn't it perfect?"

Forcing himself to smile, he nodded. "Uh, y-yeah, it's... it's really nice, Frances," he said, a half-hearted compliment that did not sound overly sincere. "Very... stylish. Yeah, it's stylish. I guess we're matching. A little. Um... are you ready to go?"

I've Got to Get Myself Out of This Mess

The car slows. The doors open and out climb four figures: two girls and two boys— Cindy, Bel, Schuyler, and Allan. The latter pair are in the front and are the first to step out. The former pair are in the backseat and get out last. Cindy has her stupid handbag slung over one of her shoulders, and Bel is looking over at Cindy, like always, like her little sheep.

"Well, well, look what we have here. If it isn't that ugly little country hick and her cute little boyfriend. Hey, what's up, cutie?" Cindy, the leader of this pack of vapid assholes, speaks up. She gives Rafferty that sugary-sweet smile of hers and a wave and Rafferty just looks uncomfortable, like he's shrinking into his boots, but he still smiles at Cindy like a sap. He's always been too kind, and it'll get him killed someday.

Schuyler is tall, lean, and good-looking, in that frat-boy way with the square jaw, strong shoulders and short, neat hair. He looks at Cindy with adoration and pride, his mouth twisting in a grin. "Yeah, hey there, guys, what's the matter with you, you've both got such long faces?" He

lets out a snide little laugh, and then his face is serious as he steps forward and says, "We were just on the way to a party, you want to come along?"

"No." My answer is flat as my expression as I stare him down with a stony look, my lips formed into a frown and my eyebrows drawn together, a line furrowing between them. I don't need this shit. I don't want to do this. But I am.

"Aww, why not, Chey? Are you afraid you might have a bit too much fun? Or are you scared you're going to embarrass yourself in front of everybody like you did in that movie theatre?"

"That was because of you," I spit out. I'm scowling, I'm that angry.

"Oh, sure it is," Cindy pipes up in her irritating, nasally little voice that makes my teeth hurt and makes me want to scream, "You know what your problem is, Chey? You've got such a stick up your ass." She looks so damn proud of herself when she says that, like it's the wittiest, smartest thing in the world. I hate her, I really do.

"And you don't? I thought you had a stick shoved so far up your ass you could taste it, Cindy."

The look that crosses Cindy's face is a mixture of disgust, fury, and outrage; but Schuyler and Allan find this hysterical and they both start cackling, looking as if they're about to piss themselves, and even Rafferty's lip twitches, as if he's about to break and smile, or even laugh.

Cindy's eye twitches, too. Her mouth twists and her nose scrunches up in rage.

"You stupid, ugly bitch." She reaches up and pushes me; I stumble and almost fall back, but I'm quick enough to catch myself, immediately reacting in turn; my hands come up, shoving her back with more force than she used on me.

"C'mon, you want to get into it? Bring it, Cindy, I dare you!"

I've Got to Get Myself Out of This Mess (Part 2)

I stand there, chest heaving, watching the white Mustang speed away. I sniff a few times, bringing my hand up to wipe my bleeding nose. It hurts like hell, and it's definitely broken, that's

for damn sure. For being so uptight, Miss Priss Cindy isn't afraid to get into it, much to my downfall.

A few feet away, Raff is on his knees, catching his breath and clutching his bruised jaw. His hair is sticking up everywhere and it's a bit matted with blood in the front. Those jackasses Schuyler and Allan sure did a number on him, the poor thing. He rises up on unsteady feet and picks up his white Stetson from the ground, dusting off the dirt and grime.

"Are you alright, Raff?" I ask, sniffing again and looking down at my feet. A sizable clump of Cindy's strawberry-blonde hair lies forlornly in the dust. I kick it to the side, thinking about the way she shrieked like a little girl when I tore it from her scalp. She'll have a hell of a time trying to cover that up come Monday.

Rafferty nods weakly, running a hand over his face. "Yeah, yeah, m'fine, I suppose... I tried, I really did, Chey. I broke that sonofabitch Schuyler's rib, I'm pretty sure..."

Despite my concern for his well-being, I can't help but crack a spiteful grin. The thought of cute little Rafferty giving the biggest asshole in all of Billings a nice rib fracture is immensely satisfying, to say the least. At least the jackass will be reminded of it every time he breathes for God knows how long. "Damn good work, Raff. Didn't know you had it in you."

A strained laugh escapes his blood-crusting lips. Balancing his hat on his head, he looks towards me, and his eyes go wide, presumably noticing my broken nose. Immediately, his hands fly up to his neck, untying his neckerchief and rushing over to wipe the blood off my nose. "Chey, what did Cindy do to you...? Oh no..."

I roll my eyes— normally I'm the one fussing over him— but I let him mop up the blood from my nose. Good thing his neckerchief is already red. "Just busted my nose, it's not a big deal," I say, but I wince when he touches it. Yeah, it's probably broken.

"I don't know, Chey... it looks bad," he says worriedly. He actually looks a little sick. Rafferty doesn't like blood, from what I've seen— I'm honestly not sure how he became a ranch hand— but he's not fainting. Yet. "You sure you're okay?"

I nod, wiping some of the blood off my lips and chin, grimacing at the iron-scented stickiness of it. “Pretty sure, Raff. Think you could set my nose?” I ask, but he pales and shakes his head vigorously. “Right. That’d give you the vapors. S’pose I’ll just have my dad do it...”

Rafferty removes his hat and fidgets with the brim, a nervous tic. “Y-yeah, I’m sorry, Chey, I wouldn’t wanna make it worse... or hurt you,” he says in a quiet voice. He looks down the dark road, lit only by the eerie glow of a full moon above us. “Guess we’ll keep going, then. But... what about them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they just ran off like nothing happened. And I imagine they’ll get off scot-free, too,” he explains, kicking at the remains of a tumbleweed with his cowboy boot. “I mean... is there anything we can do, Chey...?”

I start to walk with him, the cloth still clutched to my ruined nose. I frown at him, narrowing my eyes and wondering why this is what is on his mind right now. “Are you suggesting that we get our revenge or something? That’s new, coming from you.”

Raff puts his Stetson back on his head, pulling the brim down to shield his doe eyes even though it’s dark. He’s plotting, scheming with every stride, which is so unlike the meek little noble cowboy that I know so well. “It’s not right. It’s not right at all, what they did to us. What they did to you, Chey.”

It’s so unusual to hear him talking like this. Rafferty, who’s squeamish around blood and works himself into a tizzy when his boots get even the slightest scuffs, talking of vengeance? Completely and utterly unheard of. I guess this really set him off— I mean, that pack of assholes had no problem harassing us, but until today, they had never gotten physical. Seems like it really made an impression on him.

“Well, what’s your idea, then?”

The Hadean States of America

Trinity was balanced between two freight cars, a rifle on her back, watching the desolate scenery rush by. The freight car in front of her had a Class 7 hazardous materials placard, which designated the cargo it was carrying as radioactive.

And she was pressed up against it— only a few inches of metal, lead shielding, and concrete between her and certain death.

Her legs, which have become cramped from balancing on a narrow strip on the side of the car, tremble in a way that makes her grit her teeth. One misstep and she'd be done for, that's for sure. Freighthopping certainly wasn't the safest way of travel, but it was the only way to move between the districts without being caught. She had left from District 70 and was on her way to District 45, the capital of the Hadean States of America.

Trinity sighed, shifting her feet under her. The boots she wore weren't exactly comfortable. The soles were badly worn and the zipper would get stuck at the most inopportune times. She carried an old Korean War-era semi-automatic rifle, which wasn't exactly the best weapon but it was better than nothing. Additionally, she had a malfunctioning switchblade that either opened when not in use or would refuse to open when in use.

For three days she'd been on trains. The first train, the one out of D70, she sat on the side-platform of the locomotive hauling the train, which was extremely risky for obvious reasons. It was cold and miserable but at least she was able to sit. When she arrived at D36, she hid in a boxcar. Unfortunately, she was surprised by the rail yard workers who came to unload the boxcar (which was absolutely packed with ammunition, by the way) and was forced to shoot her way out. No one was hurt (well, at least she didn't think she shot anyone) but she knew she scared the hell out of those poor railmen. Trinity knew damn well the regime police were chasing her and that's how she ended up sandwiched between two nuclear fuel casks.

The acrid scent of brimstone and campfire filled the air. The sky was crimson and the landscape around her was blackened, burnt out, fires burning in the carcasses of old buildings.

Four years. Four years since the government opened up a portal to Hell during the once-top secret Project Apollyon and, well, all hell broke loose. Lucifer and his devils quickly took charge in a collapsing country, which became the Hadean States of America.

D70 was ruled by a demon known as Prince Seir. Trinity had seen him a few times before. He appeared to be a horrifically beautiful man who rode upon an infernal, winged horse. Under his power were twenty-six legions of lesser devils who kept order in the district and made sure the lowly humans weren't getting any funny ideas.

Trinity wouldn't have been surprised if Seir was after her. She knew she was a wanted woman, but she didn't care. And if worse came to worst, she'd kill him with a brick if she needed to.

Noticing the train was slowing down and that they were arriving at a railyard or depot, she exhaled a sigh of relief. Finally, she could get off this goddamn train.

As it rolled to a stop, she hopped to the ground and ducked her head, sneaking alongside the train, which bore the sigil of the Union Plutonic rail company. Teams of human rail workers surged forth to start unloading the boxcars and whatnot. With her hood up, covering her pale, white-blond hair, she disappeared seamlessly into the crowd.

A demonic railway cop stood off to the side, watching carefully. His tail twitched in annoyance. He was fearsome, with horns that curled back from his brow like that of a ram and a sneering, almost reptilian face. His long, many-jointed fingers rested on the pommel of a morningstar and his eerie yellow eyes scanned his surroundings. Trinity gulped and began to scurry quicker and quicker through the railyard. She certainly didn't want to be captured by an angry demon cop.

Slipping past the gate and guard post, where a warthog-headed demon was fast asleep with a bottle of Fireball clutched in his meaty paw, she ran out into the bombed-out streets of D45. Hiding behind the corpse of a sedan, she crouched and dug through her backpack. She pulled out a jar of pickles and started chomping down on the briny, sour spears. It was good to eat, even if it was nothing more than a few measly pickles.

Screwing the top back on, Trinity rose up and continued on her walk. The city was in pretty bad shape, with only a few buildings remaining. One stuck out to her in particular. It was a church, with tall spires, standing out against the red sky and scorched landscape. Her eyebrows rose up. Maybe I could go there, she thought. Demons don't like churches, that's for damn sure.

With a sense of purpose in her step, she made her way over to the church, which was more of a cathedral once she got up close. It was in remarkably pristine condition. Walking up the stairs, she pushed the heavy double doors open and stepped inside, the smell of brimstone being replaced with the heavy, sweet, rose-tinted scent of resin incense.

Minnesota

It was on a sunny Thursday afternoon in May when I finally managed to convince my parents to go to Minnesota. I had been wanting to go for a few months now but neither of them was particularly keen on the idea, and especially not my younger brother. And yet, while I was sitting in an Indian restaurant in a propofol-induced post-anaesthetic haze, I was somehow able to get my mother to relent. The flight was booked and tomorrow morning we would fly to Minneapolis-Saint Paul. To say I was excited was an understatement. I'm not sure if my parents felt quite the same way.

The flight was uneventful, and we arrived. My dad had rented a large white pick-up truck that had a severe lack of running boards, and off we headed to make the two-and-a-half hour-long drive to Duluth. I was listening to "Where Is My Mind?" by Pixies and something by The Neighbourhood but once we got to the middle of nowhere, I switched it to the iconic soundtrack of The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly. Rural Minnesota is a bit like Upstate New York but on steroids. A lot of farmland and wide-open space. Really beautiful when it's a clear blue sky, like it was that day. I can remember my friend texting me with the question "why are you in Minnesota??" because I had forgotten to tell her.

The first time I saw Lake Superior was... awe-inspiring. I looked up and I saw this massive dark-blue body of water against the azure of the sky, this huge open space in the distance with the land rising up alongside it and I just... I was in awe. That's the best way I can describe it. It was late afternoon, so the colors were incredibly vibrant, too. It was beautiful and I couldn't tear my eyes away.

Our arrival was met by golden hour. I can recall marveling at an enormous museum ship and eating a strange lingonberry parfait in a restaurant overlooking Lake Superior. When night fell, we gathered on the pier, at the inlet, with numerous others to watch and wait for something to arrive. A small ferry came zooming in, and minutes later a looming-but-graceful ore boat came cutting soundlessly through the water, fully illuminated. At once, everyone's hands went up to

wave at the passing ship, and I did so as well, waving until my arm grew sore. The 767-foot vessel was so quiet that the rhythmic clunking of deckhands opening the hatches could be clearly heard from my position on the Lakewalk.

Later that night, close to twelve, another, even larger 1,000-foot ship came in silently through the dark, the only indicator of its existence being the line of bright lights across its deck. I had wanted to go out and greet it, but I was tired, so tired. There would be more ships to see the next day.

Next morning came dreary, wet, and so, so foggy. The big lake was shrouded in pale grey fog, fog so heavy that it was difficult to see what was coming in and out. Not a day to be out on the water, that's for sure. And yet-- and yet-- a line of tublike old fishing charter boats spiky with fishing rods came motoring in through the inlet. However, there was something else behind them. Something enormous, waiting in the fog like a silent beast. Another ship, very wide and extremely long. The vessel materialized out of the gloom almost magically, like it appeared into thin air from a separate dimension.

I'd go again.

Sherman, Madeline

Snow Beast

When I was small, my brother and I went off to battle. One Sunday morning in the dead of winter, we wiggled into our snow gear and waddled out the door to brave the cold.

Our sworn enemy—the snowblower—was on its usual rampage down the driveway. When it was at the far end towards the road, we made our way to the safe zone on the untouched snow. To our backs we had the forest with its heavy limbs and silent onlookers. To our front, there was the beast that chewed up the fresh, white landscape and spat it back out at us.

We hurried to get a base going for our defenses. The beast was circling back around and we knew we only had a minute or two before it came around and rained down on us. My brother scrambled to collect snow for the walls and I dug down to make a trench to hide in. When the beast passed by our fortress, we hid. I pulled my scarf up and closed my eyes to brace for the frozen onslaught.

The wall held. We made it out unscathed—but somewhat buried. As I sit huddled on the packed snow I listen—I hear the beast lumber away. My brother quickly goes back to preparing for the next pass, but I stay still for a moment longer. I smell the exhaust from the beast linger in the air, staining the snow.

Before I stood up I took my glove off. My small pink hand dove into the untouched snow below me and gathered a sample to taste. The ice cold felt almost painful on my lips. It tasted like rain. *Frozen rain*, I thought.

The sound of the beast grew louder. I slipped the glove back on my frigid hand and began to build.

Southern Sky

The sun is hot on my pale skin. I run around in the sand, feeling the grit stick to my legs and feet. After a while the irritation causes me to brave the waves. The beach is a few hundred feet wide, so it takes me a minute or so to trudge the rest of the way to the ocean. When I look back to my parents for reassurance, they are small and unreachable. I take a deep breath and step into a gentle crashing wave. Despite the heat in the air, the water is cold. It's only February, after all. I splash the salty water around to wash my reddened limbs. The cool feels calming, the smell of salt filling my nostrils. I look to the horizon. The sun is slowly falling down the western sky. Soon, the colors start.

Brilliant reds and yellows dance and reflect off the ocean surface. Pinks and oranges swirl together to make ever prettier shades, soaking the clouds and permeating into infinity. The display is short lived, though. Soon enough, the ball of fire I know and love has dipped below the waves, swallowed by the sea. I am not disappointed, however, because this is my favorite part.

Once the blinding light of the day has diminished, the stars come out to play. One by one they illuminate the darkness that blankets the sky. I crane my neck to stare straight up into the heavens, searching for constellations of my own. The moon is a suspended sliver of silver amongst the twinkling dots.

Enthralled in the beauty of it all, I don't hear the sandy footsteps that approach me. I jump a little, then laugh, as my father stands beside me. He looks up, too, silently. After a few moments he speaks.

"See any constellations?" He asks.

"No, we are too far south for what I'm used to. I can't even find the big dipper."

He puts his hand on my shoulder and tells me we should get back to the hotel room because it's getting late and my brother is already passed out in bed. I nod and follow him across the sand. All the while I am looking up, nearly tripping a few times. I can't take my eyes off the cosmos. As I drift to sleep, I see those stars and planets and galaxies light up the darkness behind my eyelids.

A Small Favor

"Ambassador Ross, welcome."

"Hello, Mr. President," I respond with a polite smile and place my files on the table.

"What's all this?" He asks, gesturing to the pile of papers.

"I've been reading up on the aliens to make sure I communicate effectively—"

"You'll do just fine." He pats my shoulder. "Please, sit."

"Sir, have you spoken with them? Do we know what they want?" He quirks an eyebrow at me from across the table. "Not directly, of course. But the transmissions that we've managed to decrypt have been peaceful and seem to be only interested in one thing—vegetation."

I am beyond confused. They know enough about earth to have interest in our flora? Are they going to take our crops, ruin entire societies?

"They want plants?" I ask.

"Yes, that's all we've managed to figure out so far." He must notice that my mind is running in circles. He looks at me with concern. "We have every reason to believe they are peaceful."

I only answer with a nod of understanding. My whole career has been dedicated to diplomacy, and making foreign friends usually means doing research on current affairs to increase the chances of success. Whether it is achieved by means of manipulation is something I cannot confirm nor deny. Needless to say, I feel horribly underprepared.

My meeting with the president is brief. Despite his calm demeanor and words of reassurance, I am still incredibly nervous. I take a deep breath and smooth my suit as I stand up, but my hands shake.

The president says something to the security officers in the room and I see them nod before turning to open the door for us. We exit the conference room and make our way through the

White House and out to the front lawn where the alien vessel is parked. The ship is round and metallic, and easily the size of a house. Do they have a permit for this thing? I wonder.

The size alone terrifies me—what if there's a million of them on there ready to take over as soon as they open the door? I look to my right but the president has disappeared. In my peripheral vision I see him fleeing to the safety of his guards. I am alone. I don't blame him, honestly, but I always believed the captain should go down with his ship. Silently, I call him a coward, and I turn to face my fate.

A round hatch opens with a whoosh and a ramp extends from the opening. I stand absolutely motionless as the two alien ambassadors march down to the ground. What I could never expect is what accompanies them.

By the side of two small green humanoids is a cow. A genuine earth-cow, complete with the barnyard smell and hooves clanking heavily on the metal ramp. I notice that the cow looks malnourished. I look down to the little green men, who are probably only 4 feet tall, making the cow look comically huge. As they cross the lawn, the cow starts grazing. This stops the aliens in their tracks. They exasperatedly point to the cow and to the grass and to their stomachs.

I start to laugh. These guys just want food for their pet. Maybe the massive ship holds more cows than aliens? I guess we'll have to publish that aliens do, in fact, abduct cows. I wonder if that will affect farmer approval of our new friends.

I wave at the president to come over, that it's safe. Without hesitation, he and two guards head over to me. I explain that they just want grass or hay for the cow and don't seem to care about anything else at the moment. He has been watching the whole event from the safety of a few hundred feet away, and also finds this interaction to be one of the best possible scenarios.

Despite the rather large language barrier, we successfully reassure the aliens that they will get all the grass they need, that we can teach them how to grow it if they want. In exchange, humanity just wants to keep in touch and learn about them. I never could have imagined that first contact with aliens would result in merely a small favor.

Escape

The escape pod shoots out from the side of the ship at 100 miles per hour. The man inside gets thrown violently against the far wall as the small metal vessel accelerates into space. The vessel is small and the cabin is completely dark. Eventually, the velocity of the craft evens out, and the pod lights up.

The impact left him in a daze, but he manages to prop himself up against the wall. He takes a few deep, shaky breaths to stop his hyperventilating and swallows dryly. He tastes blood.

All at once the realization of his situation occurs to him. The spaceship he was aboard is now nothing but smoldering debris. The cause of the explosion is unknown to him, because he did not work in the engine room directly. Being on the upper decks most likely saved him, as the fire started in the reactor core and he had several minutes to escape. Who knows what happened to the hundreds of other crew members on that ship? His coworkers, his friends. Did they make it? Please, God, let at least some of them make it, he pleads silently. He looks up out of the front view window and searches around for other pods, but all he can see is shrapnel from the explosion and large bits of ship floating randomly through the blackness of space. He looks away when he realizes there could be pieces of humans among the metal shards. He feels the sharp stabbing pain of grief in his gut and tears sting his eyes.

The tears of mourning are also tears of pain, and he becomes especially aware of the pain as he tries to focus on his situation. He knows he should get up and retrieve the med kit hanging on the opposite wall, but he also knows that he won't be able to stand up on his own, so he reaches for the control console on his right for leverage. The dull ache in his bones and the throbbing pain in his head are causing his vision to be fuzzy, but he gathers all his strength and pulls himself to his feet with a grunt. His legs aren't as shaky as he was expecting, and there are no sharp pains that he can detect, which is a good sign that he hadn't broken anything by being flung at a wall like a ragdoll.

The lack of serious injuries is relieving, but movement still isn't the most comfortable. With enough effort, he makes it to the med kit and slams it on the console next to him. He opens it and rummages through the bandages and antibiotic ointment to find the pain pills. He grabs an emergency water bag to wash the pills down, pops open the small plastic cylinder, and swallows

two capsules. He didn't bother checking the dosage. He just desperately needs relief in order to think properly.

The meds kick in within a couple of minutes. He sits down on the chair in front of the control console and sips the water. This pod is meant for emergency escape, not for prolonged survival within its metal walls. There is emergency water and nutrient bars, but a very limited supply meant to consume in order to regain strength while awaiting rescue. Rescue, he realizes, is his best bet. The accident happened in populated space, so another freighter or commercial ship shouldn't be too far away. The lone survivor remembers the emergency radio transmitter on the console and finds the button to send an SOS. The ship's explosion should have triggered an automatic mayday signal to be broadcasted anyway, so there may already be ships on their way to locate survivors.

He decides to open the receiving frequency to listen for responses to the main ship's emergency signal. It's static at first, but within a few seconds, there is an intelligible voice from the other end.

"U.S.S. Miranda, we hear your distress call. Are there any survivors? Please respond." A woman's voice says calmly.

He presses the mic button. "USS Miranda survivor here, I am in escape pod 12, relatively uninjured."

"Escape pod 12, we read you. Are you the only one on board?"

"Yes, just me. I'm not sure if anyone else made it."

"Can you send your location?"

He finds the button and presses it, allowing the pod to broadcast its location out into space.

"Copy that. This is USS Ripley, we are on our way. ETA 2 hours."

"Thank you."

He sighs and leans back in his chair. He just needs to relax for a couple of hours and then he will be rescued by another ship and get proper medical care for his most likely concussed head. The throbbing pain in his skull fades to a dull ache as the stress of his situation decreases with the anticipation of rescue.

The two hours pass relatively quickly. The lone survivor looks out the front view window to see the vast emptiness of space being obstructed by the USS Ripley closing in above him. The huge freighter cannot maneuver itself very delicately, so too avoid ramming into the pod, it stops and suspends itself roughly 500 meters away from the small metal sphere. The same feminine voice from two hours earlier emits from the speaker on the control console.

"Escape pod 12, come in."

"I'm here, I see your ship above me."

"We cannot get any closer, can you steer your pod to enter the docking bay?" He glances around the console and tries to remember his emergency training. He knew about the med kit and ration supplies, and he was trained on piloting an escape pod as well, but that information was discarded by most people as it was highly unlikely that a ship-destroying disaster would ever happen. Fortunately, he remembers escape pods being relatively simple to operate.

"Yes, I should be able to." He responds after a few seconds of hesitation that he hopes they didn't notice.

"Copy that. We are stationary, start when you are ready and we will open the docking bay doors as you approach."

He takes a deep breath to focus. The controls don't seem too hard. There is a steering wheel that resembles that of an airplane cockpit, and a lever for thrusters to his right. He grips the lever and slowly pushes it forward to activate the pod's forward motion. The pod lurches forward at the sudden activation, and he realizes he probably should have looked around for more controls before just saying screw it and activating the thrusters.

The pod's movement evens out and the survivor is grateful to be seated safely in the captain's chair instead of being thrown at the wall again. He moves the lever forward to just under medium thrust and turns the steering wheel so that the pod is oriented directly at the bottom of the USS Ripley. Upon detecting the pod's movement, the docking bay doors open to reveal an illuminated interior. He feels a surge of hope in his chest, and even allows himself to smile as he steadies the wheel. The opening grows larger as he closes in. He is about 50 meters away when he notices something strange—there is no crew present within the vessel. Not that he can see, at least. He hesitates. The absence of crew is odd, but he's out of options and needs to make sure he doesn't crash into the side of the vessel. There will be an explanation for everything once he gets inside.

As he enters the ship and the doors close behind him, he takes a breath of relief. He is saved! Soon he can allow himself some time to properly grieve his friends from the USS Miranda.

He presses the button to open the pod's door. As he is about to exit, he takes a deep breath of air. Only, there is no air. The lack of oxygen is like a brick being thrown at his chest. In a panic, he scrambles back to the console to close the airlock door. He manages to successfully close the pod door before completely suffocating. He falls to the floor and tries to regain full consciousness. Clutching his chest, he notices the air in the pod isn't nearly enough. He feels around at the control console above him and presses the button he needs. Six oxygen masks fall from panels in the ceiling of the pod. He grasps at one above him and places it haphazardly on his face, not bothering to strap it to his head. He holds it to his mouth and nose with a shaky hand and breathes deeply. Within seconds, his vision clears and the tingling in his fingers subsides, but his confusion only grows.

As he desperately tries to figure out what the hell is going on, he feels the pod shake. Not just a shudder, but a significant movement, as if the pod had been jostled by something very large. He uses his free hand to pull himself up onto the captain's chair to get a look at what could be causing the movement.

The docking bay is still brightly illuminated. He peers out the front window and searches for any sign of life. Moments pass and he sees and hears nothing but his own labored breathing. He turns to the radio broadcast button and slams his fist down on it.

“The docking bay has no atmosphere.” He sputters. To speak, he has to remove the mask briefly and use the precious air in his lungs, so he keeps his message brief.

There is no response. He tries again.

“Ripley, come in. I’m in the dock. There’s no—“ He has to pause and breathe from the mask. “There’s no fucking air in here.”

He gets an response this time, but its not what he was hoping for. The pod moves again. Then comes an awful screeching and scraping as metal is torn apart directly above him. The sound is horrific.

He pleads and prays and sobs as the pod continues to be destroyed with him still inside. He can’t flee, there’s nowhere to go in an airless ship. In desperation and delusional hope, he clings to the chair with one hand and an oxygen mask with another, pressing it to his sweaty face as he takes his last ragged breathes.

The roof of the pod finally tears away, taking the oxygen masks with it. His last hope of survival is ripped away from his hands. He gasps and sputters while watching the pod be torn apart around him by the large, spidery creatures descending from the ceiling.

Entropy

Cold creeps into my bones.

Heat seeps from my pores.

No mercy, all greed

What does it want from me?

Is it just entropy?

Even in my home

I can feel it through the windows.

From the sky falls delicate flakes.

It never gives, only takes.

Insatiable hunger, carnal lust.

I wrap my arms around myself.

When will it be enough?

Smith, Jesse

A Hard Truth About Myself (Poem)

A Hard Truth About Myself

I hunger
Not for food, but for warmth, for rest,
for something steady in the hollow ache
that swells beneath my ribs.
I tell myself
Breath is not enough, nor the endless march
of days stitched together in silence.
I often find myself drifting
Mistaking endurance for life
Were I more courageous
I would carve it into the air,
let the echo of my need
reach hands that would hold,
arms that would catch.
I am tired of holding myself together
with nothing but will and worn-out hope.

The Hollow Trail (Poem)

The Hollow Trail

The path was worn, whisper thin,
where tangled roots pulled travelers in.
The trees arched tall with twisted grace,
their shadows bent to hide the space.
The air grew thick, the light grew weak,
the forest held its breath to speak.
A hush so deep, the shrouded brush,
where time moved slow, no wind, no rush.

Beyond the bend, a structure stood,
a hollow husk of stone and wood.
The door ajar, the threshold black,
a silent pull, no turning back.
A sound arose, a distant wail,
a sighing wind, a breath gone stale.
The walls still leaned, the floor still bled,
a place where prayers had long been dead.
The weight of years pressed on our skin,
the night had hands, it beckoned in.
But feet took flight, the path unwound,
the trees closed ranks without a sound.
The car sat still, the world unchanged,
yet something lingered, something strange.
A voice behind, a warning spun—
a place once seen, a race once run.

Character Building – John Doe

Character Building

Name: John Doe

Gender: Genderfluid, answers to all pronouns

Age: Unknown, appears as someone in their mid 30's

Height: Roughly 5'7

Appearance: A lanky figure, dressed western riding clothes (Worn Jeans, chaps, A well-worn gamblers hat) Tawny brown skin, littered with freckles and scars from their adventures, and a tousled mop of scruffy brown hair. Has the legs/bottom half of a deer – though this is kept hidden in most public situations.

Personality: Charismatic, Playful, Tactful, Empathetic

Characteristics: Adaptable, Analytical, Observant, Intuitive,

Lore: John Doe is a wanderer, a being who thrives off the good of humanity, and whose purpose is to help distressed souls in need.

Prompt Words of Childhood/Vivid Memory (Short Story)

The First Time

The forest whispered with the sounds of spring, the hush of leaves rustling in the breeze, the soft chatter of birds perched high above. John ambled along slowly, boots pressing into the damp earth. He took a deep breath and savored the hush that wrapped around him like an old friend. The scent of pine and wildflowers mingled in the air, crisp and unmarred by the weight of civilization. He was home.

A flicker of movement caught his eye. A few yards away, sunlight pooled in golden beams in a small clearing, and in the center, a doe stood, poised and watchful. At her side, a fawn—spindly-legged and trembling with youthful energy—bounded clumsily forward, its excitement outweighing its balance. The mother forwent her watch to nudge her fawn with a gentle press of her nose, a quiet encouragement. The fawn wobbled, flailed, and then caught itself, tiny hooves digging into the mossy ground before prancing forward once more.

John stilled; his head tilted in fond observation. Something in his chest ached with a familiar feeling, like the warmth of an old song half-remembered. As he watched the fawn struggle to find its legs, a memory stirred, pulling him back—

The first time.

He had been younger then, though time blurred the edges of that past self. The woods had called to him, a whisper threading through marrow and muscle, an invitation he hadn't fully understood but couldn't resist. He had run until his breath burned sharp in his lungs, until the air shimmered around him, his body unraveling and reshaping in ways both terrifying and Wondrous.

The ground had seemed farther away when he opened his eyes. His legs—too long, too thin—quivered beneath him, the world tilting wildly as he tried to move. Panic flared, sharp and instinctive, but it was quickly drowned by something else—pure, unfiltered exhilaration. Joy.

He had stumbled, kicked up clumps of earth, and nearly collapsed in on himself more times than he cared to count. But when he found his footing, when his body finally obeyed his

mind, he had run. Not with two human legs, but with a lighter, freer four, thrumming against the earth. The wind had sung against his hide, the sky had stretched wide above him, and for the first time in his life, he had felt whole.

A sharp bleat brought him back. The fawn had taken a misstep, tumbling into the grass in an unceremonious heap. Its mother was at its side instantly, nudging, nuzzling, urging it to try again. And it did. Wobbly, uncertain, but determined.

John exhaled, a small, wistful smile curving his lips. He touched the brim of his gambler's hat, adjusting it minutely as a gust of wind ruffled his hair. The past still lived in him, woven into sinew and spirit, and had shaped him into who he was now - the same man, but Changed.

With one last glance at the fawn—who had finally found its footing, bouncing after its mother with renewed vigor—John turned, slipping back into the trees. His own legs, human for now, carried him forward, but the ghost of the wind against his fur, the echo of a prancing hooved gait, tingled like a phantom against his skin.

A reminder.

Prompt: Waking up Naked

Between Beast and Man

The first thing John knew was cold.

Not the gentle kind that lingers in the shade of the pines, nor the crisp morning chill before the sun has kissed the earth. This was biting, persistent cold—the kind that wormed under his skin and settled in his bones, as if reminding him of something he'd long forgotten. His fingers twitched in the dirt. Fingers. That was right. He had those now.

The shift had finished.

A slow breath in, and his ribs ached with the motion, body sluggish in its return to flesh.

He lay still, willing his heart to slow, feeling the ground beneath him: damp earth, brittle leaves, the stray prickle of pine needles pressing into skin that felt too new. When he lifted his head, the world swayed, unsteady, like he was still caught in a dream.

John pushed himself upright, muscles protesting as if they hadn't been used in weeks. His limbs felt wrong—too short, too stiff, too.. well. Human. The whisper of the trees called to him, urging him back to the quiet wild where his senses stretched wider, where the weight of thought did not press so heavy upon him. But the scent of smoke and distant voices tangled with the autumn air, drawing him forward.

He was near a town.

Memory returned in broken pieces. He had left for the woods days ago, perhaps longer. The days had blurred together as his body stretched, shifted, folded itself into the shape of something wilder, something that did not need to think, only amble and bound. He had roamed beneath the moonlight, breath steaming in the night air, hooves light upon the forest floor. Now, bare tawny skin prickled with gooseflesh in the morning chill where fur had once shielded him.

John staggered to his feet, his knees nearly buckling. He cursed under his breath. The shift back was always the hardest. Thought was slow to return, but instinct was quick—his hands had already found dirt, sweeping up handfuls of leaves and pressing them against his skin, a feeble attempt at covering himself.

His gambler's hat lay a few feet away, half buried beneath leaves, and he reached for it with something like relief. A familiar thing, a human thing. He placed it atop his head, the brim casting a familiar shadow over his freckled face.

Still naked, though. That wouldn't do.

John listened. A squirrel chattered above, indignant at the intruder below. The wind

rattled the dry leaves still clinging to branches. But past that—faint, distant, the sound of wheels and footsteps churning along a well-worn road. A town meant people. And people meant clothes.

The thought of walking into town as he was, bare as the day he was born, brought a wry smile to his lips. He'd been in worse pickles, but this one might earn him a reputation he wasn't keen on having.

He picked his way toward the road, mind sharpening with each step. It was time to remember how to be human again.

Suwara, Morgan

Talking about Love

The other day I went out, and I ended up at that old ice cream place we always used to go to. I got a cup of mint chocolate chip and sat down at one of the tables outside. I didn't have my headphones in like I usually would. It was a nice day out, sunny and warm, and I wanted to live in the moment. There were two older people at the table next to mine, they must have been senior citizens. They were laughing and chatting about old times, reminiscing on past relationships and the different groups they'd been a part of over the years. They gossiped about their families and mocked each other for old mistakes, hitting each other affectionately when one of them said something embarrassing.

I watched these two look at one another with so much fondness in their gaze; Years of friendship and shenanigans and support all reflected in a single glance. I saw this love and companionship they shared and I wondered if I would ever get to experience that kind of connection for myself. Of course I have plenty of friends, I always have, but I'm not sure if I'll ever have something that lasts quite as long as that; If I'll still know any of my childhood friends when I'm old and creaky.

Perhaps I should've asked them for some tips. Like, how do you keep a relationship alive through all the obstacles that life throws at you? How do you stick together through all the sudden changes that tear your world apart in an instant? Or the gradual ones that you can see coming from miles away, but still can't prevent?

Or, maybe I should've asked them how to reach out when you don't have anything to say besides "I miss you. And I wish we were closer". Surely, they would've known, after such a long time together, how to hold on to someone without forcing them to stay.

I dream of a future where I can tell you about what's going on in my life, even if it's nothing special. I want to hear about your jobs and your relationships; The random lizards you see in your yard or the seagulls who steal your food. I want to tell you about the things I'm learning and the people I've met; The bunnies on my walks and the foods I've finally tried after years of avoiding them. I want to share my drawings and hear your stories in return. I want to see you become a teacher or an author, or whatever you want to do. And I want you to be there with me when I finally figure out my direction, too.

I don't want to drift apart or lose you in a couple of years. I don't want you to become one of those people I only talk to once in a blue moon. I want to grab an ice cream with you when we're old, and reminisce on tales of our youth.

But I guess that's a lot to say all at once and out of the blue. So, for now I'll just leave a little reminder, a tiny message, just to say I love you.

Pesky Critters

When I woke up, I was laying in the middle of a meadow. I quickly looked around to find I was laying on top of my bedroll rather than in it, and my campfire had long since burned out. I must have passed out while watching the comets.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes only to find that the tips of my fingers had sharpened into claws. I guess I lost the hold on my human form while I was asleep, and I was back to being one with the shadows. Unusual, but not unheard of. Unfortunately, that wasn't it. My arm guards, my cloak, my clothes: they were all gone. My bag was spilled out across the ground, and my quiver was missing a few of its arrows.

Taking stock of my surroundings once more, a feeling of dread swept over me. I realized I had made a terrible mistake. I had forgotten to account for the fact that I was camping by the Shadow's Den. Which means...

"God dammit," I sighed, looking into the forest to my right. "WHERE ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE SHITS?"

I ran into the forest, looking around wildly. *Stupid Watcher-Birds and their grubby little mitts. Always getting into my shit.*

Stomping through the brambles, I quickly spotted them. They were perched in the treetops in a little semi-circle, their long tails curled around the branches. As high as they could get while still being shaded by the leaves above them. There were five in total, each with their own piece of loot.

One hung upside down, tossing an arrow head into the air, catching it and quickly throwing it back up, over and over again. Looking down, I saw the rest of the arrow abandoned on the ground, along with two others which were also missing their tips.

Another sat with my hood over its head, ducking down and holding a wing over its beak. It trilled to the others, swaying side to side as a way of showing off its stolen outfit.

The remaining three held the rest of my clothing. Like the others, they were trying to wear the different pieces, or tossing them around. Either inspecting them to sate their curiosity, or playing with them like a toddler with a new toy.

I let out an exasperated sigh. Honestly, it was my own fault for leaving my stuff unattended.

"Hey!" They all turned to me in unison. Unfortunately, the first one had already thrown the arrowhead and its flat side ended up hitting the poor thing square on the side of its head. It squawked indignantly, losing its hold on its branch and falling into a heap on the ground.

We all winced. "Ouch." I took a step forward. "You good?"

It pushed itself up, quickly shaking its head to re-center itself. It swayed side to side as it let out a sad warble.

“Alright,” I reach down to pat it on the back, “take a break, buddy. The rest of you-” I growled, whipping towards them. “GIVE ME MY SHIT BACK!”

They exchanged a panicked look before scattering to the winds.

The chase was on.

Sleepover

“James Bond!” I shouted, slapping my cards on the floor.

“What? No!” Gabi shrieked, snapping her head up. “How?! I still have three piles!” She started picking up her cards and turning them around as a way of emphasizing that they were, in fact, incomplete.

“Sucks to suck,” I shrugged. “I guess I’m just better.” She glared at me, but it just made me grin all the wider.

When her narrowed eyes failed to intimidate me, she groaned and let herself fall back onto the ground. Her arms were thrown out wide and she hit the blankets in a soft puff of air. She just laid there for a moment, pouting at the ceiling, but once she felt she had made her dissatisfaction properly known, she dropped the act.

She let a smile slip onto her face and pushed off her hands, attempting to spring up from the ground in one fluid motion. It ended in more of a stumble as her feet got caught up in the blankets.

“Alright-” she pinwheeled her arms, hopping on one foot as she kicked her other one free “-I’m all gamed out. You win too much.”

I stuck my tongue out at her. She quickly returned the gesture, flipping the bird at me as she turned around.

“I’m gonna get ice cream, get the TV set up,” she called over her shoulder, disappearing into the kitchen.

I did as she asked, connecting my laptop to the adapter cable. The clock on the screen showed about an hour past midnight. Way too late for the house to be shaking with the loud boom of the Netflix logo. The damn thing nearly blew out my eardrums. I hit the “lower volume” button until it went all the way down to zero, pressing down with unnecessary force.

I froze for a few seconds with my hand hovering over the keyboard as I waited for my heartbeat to calm down, but my mini trance was broken all too soon.

“Heads up!”

I turned just in time to catch the ice cream packet thrown at my face. I instantly lit up when I saw the label. “Ooo! Cookie sandwich!”

Gabi nodded, already eating an ice cream sandwich of her own as she walked over. We sat down together, gathering the blankets from the floor and sinking into the plush couch cushions. Once we were settled, I quickly tore into the packaging of my cold treat, taking a giant bite as soon as it was free. I cringed at the cold sensation on my teeth, but it was worth it.

We scrolled through the movie selections for about a half hour, eventually landing on some random kids' movie from a few years ago. Something about an alien invasion. I can't say I remember much of it. I fell asleep about halfway through.

All I remember is the warm, cozy blankets, the soft drone of the TV, and Gabi laying down across from me. Every now and then she'd adjust the position of her legs or giggle at something on screen and I'd wake up for a few seconds before dozing off again. I'd hear her parroting the characters or singing along to the songs. I joined in a few times, drowsily slurring the melody and mumbling the words.

I drifted off with a smile on my lips and a pillow in my arms. It was one of the most peaceful nights of my life.

I've Been Burning with Haste-

“Gabi?”

The name echoed in the empty room. Kate's voice was raw and creaky when she spoke, barely coming out as a raspy whisper. There was no reply, save for the steady rumbling of some sort of engine droning in the background. She took a moment to look around the room. Nothing. Just blank, sandy yellow walls.

She couldn't remember how she got here. How long had she been out? What happened to her? What happened to *Gabi*?

The numbness that accompanies sleep was beginning to wear off, and she suddenly realized how sore she was. Her side felt like it was being ripped apart whenever she made the slightest movement. The rest of her wasn't much better. It felt like she'd run a marathon and then climbed a mountain, and her hands were tingly.

She tried to prop herself up and regretted it immediately. A wave of dizziness hit her like a truck and left her reeling as she slumped back to the floor. It took a minute for her vision to stop swimming and another after that to reorient herself. A part of her was tempted to just lie there forever. But what about Gabi?

No way was she going to give up that easily. Taking another look around the room, she noticed an indent in the far wall. It had been easy to pass over the first time because it blended in so well it could be mistaken for a trick of the light. From what she could tell, it was in the shape of a large rectangular arch. Like a blocked doorway. That was her best bet. She had to check it out.

She wasn't too far from one of the corners of the room. If she just scootched back a bit, she could use it to support her as she sat up. Her arms vehemently protested the movement, but she ignored it and pushed through the pain.

From there, she slowly worked her way up to standing. The more she moved, the easier it became to block out the aching in her limbs, and soon she was able to stumble over to the arch.

If she had to guess, it was some kind of sliding door, but there was no indication of how to open it. It was completely fused to the wall so there was no chance of looking through any cracks in the frame either.

She tried knocking. No response.

"Hello?" She asked. Her throat was still raw from God knows what and she took a second to try and clear it. She tried again: "Anyone there?" Still not great, but an improvement.

She pressed her ear to the door, but couldn't hear anything.

Frustration overtook her and she began banging on the door. The volume of the noise made her wince but she didn't stop. The longer she went without a response, the angrier she got. It became overwhelming, like the kind of fury that suddenly over takes you when one small thing goes wrong on an already shitty day.

She kicked and punched, making as much of a racket as possible. She threw her *entire weight* onto the thing. She didn't care about the blood on her knuckles or the bruises forming on her arms where she rammed them into the door. She just needed to get out. Or at least to get some indication of why she was here.

"HELLLLOOOO?" she bellowed, still shoving and kicking.

She stopped when she heard a clicking noise. Just a quick click, and then it stopped. She hit the door again and the click sounded once more.

The door had come out of its track. Only by a couple millimeters, but *it had moved*. There was hope. Her rage-fueled barrage against the door became even more frenzied. She was determined to get this door open no matter what. It was easier now that she'd gotten it out of place. It was already unstable and each shove broke it a little more.

The gap was widening and she could start to see into the space outside. It was working. She was going to get out.

Some sort of alarm was blaring now, screeching in her ears and painting the hall with a green light, but she paid it no mind. She was so close. One more push and she would be free. Finally, the door fell with a loud thud, pieces of it breaking off and scattering onto the metal floor below.

Kate was standing in the middle of a hallway now. To her left, the hall continued around a corner, while on her right was a small corridor leading to a dead-end. The walls were the same sandy color of her room, reflecting the green light as it flashed up and down the hallway.

When she turned back to the doorway she'd broken out from, she found a one-way window along the wall next to it. Down the dead-end corridor was a similar set-up: a large window with a door on its left.

"Gabi?" She asked, slowly approaching the window.

She peered into the room, and there she was. Gabi was sitting in the center of the room with her head in her hands. She looked up at the sound of Kate's voice, her eyes wide in shock. She looked around for the source of the noise but couldn't seem to find it.

"Kate? Is that you?"

"Yeah! Hold on, I'll get you out of there."

There was a panel next to the door that Kate assumed had to be the way to open it. It was covered in symbols she didn't recognize. She ended up just hitting the buttons at random until one of them opened the door, ignoring the flashing lights or clicking noises caused by the ones that didn't.

Gabi instantly rushed out to hug her, crushing Kate with her tight grip. After a quick squeeze she pulled back, keeping her arms on Kate's shoulders. "What's going on, what's with the flashing lights?"

"Not sure, but it started when I broke out of my room so probably nothing good." She put an arm around Gabi's shoulder, partly to lead her and partly to get some support as she walked. "We should really get out of here."

A thudding noise started in the distance, swiftly spurring the girls forward and away from their cells. It kept getting louder as they moved towards it, and more distinct. Soon enough, it became sets of footsteps, steady and fast like a group of soldiers.

The girls were starting to panic, but there was nowhere to hide. The hallway they were going down was empty and they weren't moving fast enough to find one with a room before whatever was running towards them reached them. The only thing they could do was face it head on and hope they got lucky. Kate gripped Gabi's shoulder tightly and tried to move faster.

The two turned a corner and were instantly met with the soldiers they'd heard down at the end of the hall. They took the form of humanoid lizards, mostly in different shades of dusty brown. They each carried a long stick with two prongs on the end that curled together to form a sharp point.

As soon as she caught sight of the soldiers, Kate's memories came flooding back. Echoes of a fight that she hadn't been prepared for flashed before her eyes. Gabi knocked out on the ground. Alien creatures with weapons in their hands. Electricity coursing through her as they jabbed her with their sticks over and over again until she lost consciousness.

And it was about to happen again. But no, she shook her head, this time she had a better understanding of what was going on. This time, Gabi would get a chance to fight back, too. Kate's not going to let them go down for a second time.

She gently pushed off of Gabi, standing on her own two legs again, and crouched into a defensive position. "Ok, quick breakdown 'cus I don't know how much you remember: they've essentially got tasers, so don't let their sticks hit you. You could probably tank a hit or two with some adrenaline, but any more than that and you'll pass out like last time." She brought her fists up in preparation. "I know you're not much of a fighter, but I can't do it alone this time. Just try to get a good whack to the head, they're weaker than they look."

Gabi looked absolutely terrified, but she followed Kate's lead, getting into a fighting stance. She didn't have much of a choice with the soldiers quickly approaching, anyways.

There were six in total and they split into two groups of three, each taking on one of the humans.

One of them attempted to stab Kate, but she dodged and grabbed a hold of their weapon. They wrestled for a moment as the other two tried to take advantage of the distraction, but it didn't take long for her to gain possession of the stick. She immediately turned it on its owner and incapacitated them. Five left.

Gabi had two soldiers come at her at once with their taser-sticks. While she was able to knock one aside, the other got a good hit in. It hurt like hell and she immediately decked the one responsible purely on instinct. Four left.

Kate made quick work of her remaining two. Using the stick like a baseball bat to hit one of them upside the head before clashing with the other one. She blocked a swing of their stick with the taser she'd stolen. After a moment of back and forth resistance, she kicked their legs out from under them and took the chance to incapacitate them as well. Two left.

Gabi had been backed into a corner by the remaining two without a weapon to defend herself. With her own adversaries taken care of, Kate turned her attention to her friend. Upon seeing the situation, she flung her taser-stick at the closest one, hitting them in the back. While they were both distracted, Gabi took the chance to punch the one further from Kate. One left.

The fight became a one vs two, with both girls picking up a weapon from one of the guards they'd incapacitated. The soldier took a step back, preparing to flee, but it was too late. And they couldn't block both attacks at once. None left.

"Oh my god..." Gabi rasped. Her breath was heavy and her eyes were wide with horror as she looked over the now-defeated soldiers. She clutched her chest as her heart raced inside it, frozen in place now that the immediate threat was gone. She couldn't find the words to say anything more.

"...Come on, let's go," Kate said, leading her away. Gabi let herself be dragged along. "Who knows if more will come, we gotta find a way off this thing."

And I'm Realizing Now It's a Terrible Waste

The lifepod was too small. There was no way to fit both of them in there.

Kate double checked and *yup*, this was the only one left.

Gabi was still trying to squeeze into the back, making as much room as possible in the cramped space. She wasn't paying attention. Before she could think about it any further, Kate hit the eject button. The hatch slammed shut and a countdown started.

10, 9...

"Kate?!"

7, 6...

"I'll meet you down there!" She shouted, smiling as she pointed out the window to a nearby planet.

3, 2...

"No, wait!" Gabi scrambled to get closer to the hatch but it was too late. The lifepod shot off into space, rocketing toward the blue planet at lightning speeds.

At least one of them would be safe. Now it was time to fulfill her end of the bargain.

She turned back to the corridor, already hearing another group of soldiers stomping towards her. If she could find the flight deck, maybe she could figure something out. If she got lucky enough. Hopefully, she hadn't used up all her good fortune yet.

She ran through random hallways. There was nothing to direct her so she just followed the paths farthest away from the soldiers and her old cell. She was working off the assumption they wouldn't put prisoners too close to the control room. Safety concerns and all that.

She ran into one or two of the lizard aliens along the way, tasing them from a distance or knocking them out cold if they were close enough. She was able to catch most of them off guard, but one of them was able to get a lucky shot to her knee. She had almost forgotten about her injuries due to the adrenaline, but that made it all come back full force.

At least she got another taser out of it.

She limped around the ship for a while before she suddenly heard voices coming from a hall down to her right. They were shouting about something, clearly panicking. Probably trying to make a plan. Or berating someone. Maybe both, hard to tell.

She crept closer and hid behind the doorway as much as she could while peering into the room with the voices. There were two soldiers and a director of some sort standing in the center. The director was the one doing most of the shouting. They leaned over two more lizards who were sitting in pilot's seats.

She'd found the flight deck. Now she just had to take care of the troops.

It was probably best to split them up. She didn't have to take them out, she just needed to buy enough time to steer the ship down to the blue planet.

"Hey!" She yelled, moving to stand in the middle of the doorway and waving her arms. "Over here fuckers!"

They all turned to her immediately. The director became even more panicked if that was possible, shaking the pilots' seats and pointing at their controls as they all screamed. The two soldiers ran at her and she booked it back down the hall.

She let them chase her for about a minute. The corridors were narrow, and they were easily able to block the way behind her, but if she could get to a room she'd have more space.

She ran into the first open door she came across. It looked like some sort of lab, with vials and equipment scattered across every surface. A table in the center created a looping walkway.

She followed the loop to the opposite side as the soldiers split their paths to try and corner her. When they got close enough to tasing distance she leapt onto the table. She was planning to scurry across it and make her escape that way, but it wasn't as stable as she expected and she ended up stumbling off of the edge.

Her wrist took most of the impact, as she used it to catch herself. A sharp pain shot up her arm. It was probably broken, but with the soldiers quickly approaching she didn't have much time to focus on that.

She scrambled to her feet, using her taser-stick as support, and full-on sprinted out of the room. The soldiers weren't able to keep up with her as easily now that she was going her full speed. She ran straight back all the way to the flight deck, getting there with a few seconds to spare.

This better work she thought. She slammed her fist down on the door panel just like she'd seen one of the more cowardly lizards do earlier. A lever popped out of the top and she yanked it down. The door quickly followed suit, slamming down and locking the soldiers out. One immediately started fiddling with the panel on their side while the other shouted and slammed their fists on the door. Unlike her, they weren't strong enough to break through it.

All that was left was the director and the pilots.

The director had backed up against the flight controls, cowering behind the pilots as they stood from their seats to face her. They, too, held tasers but they clearly weren't trained for combat. Their hands shook and their stances were unstable. Still, she didn't let her guard down, a cornered animal is usually a dangerous one.

She threw her taser at the left pilot's head, catching them all by surprise. Then she ran at the right one, ripping the taser-stick from their hands before they could process what was happening. She used it on them and quickly turned to the left pilot. She had to quickly block an attack from them, but otherwise knocked them out easily. She tased the director and was done with it.

It was then she was confronted with the fact that she had absolutely no clue what she was doing. She'd never driven a car, let alone flown anything like a spaceship. Even if she had, there was no way it would line up with whatever set-up these guys had going on.

Okay. Context clues. There's gotta be some sort of steering wheel, right? Not quite, but there was something that looked like it could move around like a joystick. She grabbed the sides of it and shifted it experimentally. The ship immediately began jerking around violently.

The joystick was suddenly much harder to move freely. It steered in sync with the ship's movements and put up a resistance as she attempted to course correct. In her panic she kept over doing it. Eventually, she got it facing in the general direction of the blue planet, but it was by no means a steady flight.

As they grew closer and closer to the planet's surface she realized there was no way she was going to be able to land this thing. The soldiers outside the flight deck had been knocked around by the ship's erratic movements and passed out a while ago, and she'd knocked out the pilots herself. So, even if she wanted to ask for their help she couldn't.

Welp, she mused as the ship rocketed toward the planet, *at least if this is how I go I'll take these guys out with me.*

She sat down in one of the pilots' seats and strapped in as best she could.

I mean, that'd be one less thing for Gabi to worry about anyway.

Gripping the straps as tightly as her hands would allow, she closed her eyes and braced for impact.

Sygowski, Alexander

Castor: The Difficulties of Being Different

Today has been a really long day. Castor was exhausted from helping his Dad's with their trip to the meet up point about halfway to town. His dads have a close friend who lives in town and about once a month meets with them at this spot to exchange supplies. Of course that means Castor is dragged along to help move and carry things. This is typically a full day event of traveling to the spot, moving everything, going back home, and moving everything from the truck to their respective areas. Basically one really big and grueling shopping trip, this is how Castor imagines grocery trips are like just with less things to move and less travel time. After days like these Castor enjoys disappearing for a few hours to go walk in the woods. Like usual he finds himself lying in the grass in a spot that is still partially sunny and watches as the leaves of the trees around blow in the breeze. This has always been his favorite thing to do, it is common to find Castor watching clouds, animals, or reading books while sitting under trees or sunbathing in the grass. While laying watching the clouds roll by and the leaves blow gently he can't help but reminisce on when he was younger. How big everything had felt, the forests around here went on forever and led to endless days of exploration and discovery. His parents also used to come out here with him more when he was young, they would spend days together exploring the woods, his parents teaching him everything they could about the earth and ecosystems. But as he got older it all felt a little confining. This is all he had ever known because of his peculiarities, or differences as his parents preferred to refer to them when/if they had to. He honestly doesn't know too much about the rest of the world and society, he and his dads are pretty cut off from the grid. Everything Castor knows about the world is from the books he's read and tapes his dads have collected to watch. The closest he comes to interacting with it is when his dads friend meets them for supply drop offs and trades or the rare occasion a special doctor who looks after those who are different like him makes the usual yearly visit. Outside of this Castor has only ever been stuck here, at least that's all he can remember and it's become clear that his dads have no intentions of letting him leave here anytime soon. In fact it's been sparking more and more fights between them recently and has led to Castor holding some resentment towards them, he just wants to know other people, people his own age, maybe even people like him. There have to be others out there like him, who have been able to hide away from being taken, maybe even they have groups of people like him, little towns where they can live in safety together. That's always been his hope and dream, to get away from here and meet others like himself, to find a sense of community and belonging outside of just his dads. He sighs as he gets up, the sun is sinking lower and lower, and he knows dinner will be on soon.

Though he doesn't feel very hungry at this point. These thoughts, or at least the depth and lonely feeling of them recently, has felt so unusual to him but they come more frequently. Each year that passes the realization that he most likely won't ever get to live like others especially with his current living situation hits him harder and harder.

Castor: Childhood Memories

Castor is running around the room laughing and screaming along with the other kids he's currently playing with. His parents are watching from afar as he seems to be having so much fun. His dad, Carter, tunes back into the director of the preschool talking. He and his husband, Marcus, are on a tour of their top choice preschool for Castor. Carter is happy to see Castor having so much fun but it's clear there are some things weighing on his mind. Marcus gently grabs Carter's hand as they walk and listens to the director explain and point out different aspects of the preschool that make them "stand-out" against the other preschools. After another twenty minutes of walking around the school and listening to the director talk they can finally go grab Castor and head out while they make up their mind on which preschool out of the two Castor got accepted to to send him. Back at home Castor is down for his nap while Marcus and Carter have a serious but hushed conversation.

"Do you think the upcoming mandatory checks to get into preschools will affect us even though we've already been accepted?"

"I'm not sure, I mean it's a risk but we should take it, it's good for her, him, to be around kids his own age. Anyway he hasn't shown any signs of... differences.. So far and I mean will he? He's almost past the age that it would typically start to show."

"You don't know that Marcus!"

Carter sighs and takes a breath before continuing in his original hushed voice.

"No one knows enough yet about how this works, about what ages it is common to see the changes and peculiarities shown by or if there is even an age range. But what they have begun finding is that it may be predictable in genetic tests and I mean we know that neither of us has the trait but we don't know about the egg donor for sure or if it could happen by chance. Do you really want to risk it even if it means we lose him?"

Marcus is quiet now, brows furrowed as he looks away from Carter. His hands are clasped tightly together in front of him on the table quickly tightening and untightening his fingers as he seems to be deep in thought. Soon though he sighs and looks back at Carter, he looks so tired.

“No I don’t want to risk it but at the same time I do for his sake. What does Castor benefit from us treating him like he’s already different. He hasn’t shown any signs and I just want to give him the chance to be a normal kid. It isn’t fair to pull him away and isolate him because we’re scared that there could be a chance he’s different. But we also don’t need to decide right now, how about we sleep on it for a few days, just give it some really hard thought, please?”

Carter nods and gets up from the table, he needs to go for a walk and clear his head. Marcus, after sitting at the table for a few more minutes processing the conversation, goes to check on Castor to make sure he’s still down for his nap.

**** 1 Week Later ****

Marcus and Carter after a few more hard discussions agreed on the decision to start Castor in half day preschool, this was the best compromise they could come up with. Carter is still incredibly worried about testing but at the very least it’ll be months before those requirements are rolled out. Castor is supposed to have his first day in about two weeks. Markus and Carter have already found a playdate group that consists of half day parents and toddlers, their first meeting with them is tomorrow so Castor can begin making some friends before starting at the school. Markus and Carter had put Castor to bed a few hours earlier and were finally heading up to bed themselves after having a little movie night together. Carter decided to check in on Castor one last time and as he entered the room he noticed a faint glow. He had been pretty sure they hadn’t gotten a new bulb for Castor’s night light but maybe Markus did. Once in the room though, Carter realizes that all of his worst nightmares are coming true.

Castor: Fallen Into a New World

Castor has made the difficult decision to leave home despite the risks he may face as someone affected by weird traits. This world is not one to praise or think highly of different and magic-like traits; instead, those who exhibit these are shunned and at risk of collection by the government for testing to determine why they developed the traits they have. In Castor’s case, he has the traits of bioluminescent mushrooms. His scars and hair are able to glow in dark settings, and he

has the ability to have mushrooms and fungi grow off of him. Luckily for him, this is easy enough to hide by layering his clothing and making sure to wear hats when it's dark out.

All he has with him on this journey are the bare essentials that he could fit into his backpack and the clothes on his back. First though he has to trek through the woods; his parents have no car, and his parents' friend who drives supplies up to them never comes all the way up to the house. There is a specified meeting spot a few miles away that he is working on getting to. His parents' friend agreed to take him into town if he could meet her at this spot by the end of today.

As he walks, he takes comfort in the peacefulness of the woods. The sounds of leaves rustling in the gentle breeze and of animals taking their own journey through the woods. But as he is walking, he notices something strange; up ahead and off to the right, he sees a strange, faint blue glow in the shade of the trees. Castor can't help his curiosity and decides to go see what this blue glow is; he sets his backpack down by a tree in incase he has to move quickly. It's hard to tell where the glow is coming from; it seems to be from under some brush. As he gets closer, the light gets brighter, and a large hole opens up and swallows him whole before vanishing with no trace.

Castor is incredibly confused and a little scared, but he gets himself up off of the ground and dusts himself off. As he looks around, he realizes that the portal he fell through is long gone, which means so is his backpack. He doesn't at all recognize where he is; actually, he's never seen anything like what he's currently seeing. There are mushrooms as tall and large as trees and all of the colors of the nature around him feel off. He doesn't see anyone else around right now, so he hesitantly starts to walk, looking around for any signs of another person.

"Uhh..."

His voice starts out quiet first before getting louder.

"Hello? Is there anyone else here?"

As he continues to slowly walk, taking in everything around him, his voice begins to climb, growing more frantic.

"Hello?! Anyone??"

Short Story: The Unfortunate Midterm

Sam woke up extra frazzled, or well woke up is an exaggeration really he was up all night and got 30 mins of shut eye before his midterm first thing in the morning. He had been feverishly studying, primarily parsing through slides and reading material word by word, letter by letter, and cramming anything he thought would be on the exam onto his one page front and back cheat sheet. Getting out of bed he already knew it wasn't going to be his day as in a whirlwind of blankets he fell to the floor trying to get up. He's quick to get himself untangled and off the floor not caring that all of his bedding is staying on the floor for today. Not even a second to think before his phone loudly starts going off and now there's another whirlwind of blankets and pillows as he's desperately searching for his phone in hopes of finding it and shutting it up. Ah finally he found it and quickly clicks the side button to silence the blaring alarm. He sinks back onto the floor on top of his blankets for a second, eyes closed, a sharp exhale before again his phone is loudly going off. He springs up startled.

"There shouldn't be another alarm already" he mutters to himself through gritted teeth. Looking at the phone he sees his best friend's picture and name, Jazz. He sighs before swiping to answer.

"..Yea Jaz?"

"Oh good you're already up, I'll be there in fifteen minutes to pick you up. You ready for your midterm?"

A scoff leaves him

"Yeeea sure I'm as ready as I can be I guess"

Jaz gives a little laugh

"Alright I'll be there soon, you better be ready" Then she hangs up. Sam tosses his phone onto his bed and quickly gets ready just barely finished getting ready by the time Jaz is there. Sam

rushes out the door jacket half on, backpack being carried by hand, and a piece of toast in his mouth.

"Sheesh did you even get any sleep you look terrible"

"Mm shut up I was studying you know how big this midterm is for me"

As Sam talks through a mouthful of toast Jaz does a little fake gag watching the crumbs fall on her car seats.

"Ugh you are so gross, you are cleaning the crumbs up later" Jaz starts to drive while Sam buckles himself in.

"Yea yea whatever you say.

Sam slumps into the seat and leans his head against the window, closing his eyes as he listens to the radio playing. He's relieved for the chance to get a tiny bit more rest, though it's a short ride to campus. He huffs and sits up as he feels Jaz put the car in park.

"Alright I'll see you later, you need a ride home right?"

"Yea, thanks Jaz I do really appreciate it"

"Sure dude, go ace that exam!"

As Sam is hurriedly walking to his class he feels eyes on him and notices other students around are looking at him. Some are pointing and others are whispering with little giggles. He's confused as to what the big deal is but also doesn't care right now he just wants to go get this exam over with so he can relax. As he walks to class something feels wrong with his shoe, he waits to check it out though until he gets situated in the classroom. Getting there semi early helps him feel a little less test anxiety. Now he's taking a moment to check his shoe out, maybe it isn't right. He quietly curses and his face gets a little pink as he notices one shoe is his and one shoe is one of his roommates of a similar color.

“Uh.. hey Sam?”

Sam looks up to see one of his buddies from class standing on the other side of the table from him.

“Yea..?”

“So uh you might wanna check your shirt, looks like it may be on backwards”

Sam's face turns a little redder but instead of getting upset he can't help but to start laughing. He feels so ridiculous and now he knows that he looks the same. Mismatched shoes, bed head, and a backwards shirt. Shockingly, partially due to his exhaustion, this doesn't leave him too embarrassed and even actually helps him loosen up and calm down. For now he just zips his hoodie up to hide his shirt and once time, gets on with his midterm, now much less anxious because of how goofy he feels about the events of this morning.

When Your Eyes Begin to Open Morning

1: The Uneasy Beginning of Awareness

I'm grimacing. “Who are you?” I find myself asking this question more often as of late, as the reflection peering back at me looks less familiar day by day. Hell, has it ever really looked familiar in the first place? Did I ever take the time to really look before?

I sigh, ending the futile staring competition with the mirror, and turn to leave the bathroom for the morning.

How do you know we aren't the same, that you aren't me?

Now I've hesitated in the doorway, contemplating before returning to the mirror.

“Because you're a stranger!” I exclaim angrily, my face going a little red. “You're just not me! I just... I just know I don't know why.”

Well then, who are you if you aren't me?

I'm silent, "Who am I?" I'm not sure I've ever asked that. It's only ever been "Who are you?"
I'm standing, staring into the blue eyes looking back at me, in stunned silence.

"Who? Am? I?" I ask slowly, almost sounding out each word like it's a new language I'm trying to understand. "I... I'm not sure I know."

Then how can you know that you are not me, that I am a stranger?

As I stand in silence again, the face looking back almost seems to be mocking me, every detail twisting and distorted. My face begins to heat up, my breathing heavy as I feel this lava-like anger flow through me. I feel everything so intensely, and yet I feel a hundred miles away from everything, from whoever was looking back at me.

"Because I know!" I yell in hot anger. Why am I so upset? Why is this making me so angry?

"You're a stranger; you aren't me, you never have been!!" My yelling just gets louder before I storm out of the bathroom, slamming the door shut to get away from that mocking reflection.

I need to get on with my day, I need to get out of here. The reflection will be there as it always is when it's time for bed tonight and when it's time to arise again tomorrow. I sighed, letting everything I felt melt away, and I left for the day. The reflection is just waiting to continue the conversation.

Night 1: Putting an End to the Conversation

Throughout my day, the conversation with the reflection from this morning kept nagging at me. I just couldn't shake it from my thoughts no matter how hard I tried, to the point it was affecting my work and concentration. By the time I was home, my blood was boiling, I was so frustrated from the unwanted thoughts pushing through to the front. I just wanted it to stop, wanted my mind to quiet. Why was this happening, and why now? Why did the stranger in the mirror have to say anything at all? As I made my way to the bathroom, I hesitated. I didn't want to see the mirror, see that mocking twisted face peering back at me. But I needed to get ready for the night and out of my school clothes. The hesitation lasted another moment, like an invisible wall blocking me from entering, but with a final push, I entered the bathroom, keeping my gaze down to the floor to avoid the reflection. I am quick to change out of the uniform I was stuck wearing

for school and into normal clothes; the entire time I kept my gaze away from the mirror, trying to ignore the face looking back at me. But I can't ignore it for long.

*You're back, like always. Have you found an answer? Do you know who you are? Who I am?
Why do you think you are not me?*

I move quicker, trying to push the voice from my thoughts, doing my best to not respond and get out of the bathroom. But these questions echo the thoughts I've been having all day, which reignite the frustration and anger that's been heavy on me all day.

"Please just leave me alone, I don't want to talk." Desperation is dripping from my voice; I don't want the thoughts that accompany these questions. I just want to go on with my day and forget all about the dreadful reflection.

But I want to talk; I want to understand who you are and who I am. Don't you?

"No, I don't!" I find myself snapping now, looking into the eyes of the reflection, a fire probably burning in mine. Again this inexplicable anger that this reflection has been igniting in me recently. I'm not fond of the new anger that I've been experiencing lately; I don't understand why this makes me so upset, why these questions make me so upset.

*Why?! Why don't you want to know? Why are you so sure you aren't me when you can't even
answer who you are!*

The reflection seems more emotional than before, leaving the previously calm demeanor behind for something more desperate. "I know who I am, I don't need you or your questions. I was fine before you appeared, just leave me alone, go away again!! Why are you even here? Why must you bother me and ask me these things!!" The desperation of the anger is dripping from every one of my words, hot tears running down my face. Again I don't understand; I can't explain why I am so upset, why I am now crying. Without thinking or letting the reflection utter another word, the mirror shatters in an explosion of glass. I stand there stunned, confused at what just happened, until I feel something hot dripping down my hand and into the sink. That's when I noticed in the remaining shattered glass still on the wall there is red staining the main middle pieces where my hand had apparently struck. I look down bewildered and see the blood running

out of my hand where pieces of mirror had gotten stuck and cut me open. Instead of one reflection staring back at me now, there are many, some on the wall and the rest littering the sink, counter, and floor. Without another thought or word, I rush out of the bathroom, picking pieces of the mirror from my hand quickly and wincing as I wash my bloody hand in the kitchen sink instead. I quickly found the first aid kit and wrapped my hand up before heading outside to clear my head with a walk in nature, away from the nasty reflection plaguing me recently.

Morning 2: Ignoring the Fractured Stranger's Cries to be Heard

As I get up this morning, I feel my wrapped hand throbbing. Checking the bandages from last night, it is clear that they need to be cleaned and changed. As I exit my room, I find myself standing outside the bathroom door, frozen, unsure if I really want to go in, really wanting to risk hearing the strangers' questions and pleas to understand. But I need to go in; I need to get ready for the day, so with a sharp inhale, I push the door open and flip the lights on, looking at the wreckage from last night. Glass still littered the floor, counter, and sink. I moved quickly, getting the bandage off my hand and giving a quiet hiss as a stinging sensation filled my hand when the water hit it.

You're back, like always. Do you know who you are yet? Who am I, and why are you convinced you aren't me?

This time the voice had an echo to it, like a hundred of the same voice all talking at just about the same time as each other. Unlike last night when I had left it, the reflection has that cool, calm tone again. I refuse to acknowledge it this time; I don't want to talk or think about the strangers' questions today. I just want to get ready and get on with my life, like I used to before the strange reflection started asking me these things. But like every day now, the questions bounce around my head, tearing down anything I felt I knew to be true about myself. These questions leave me questioning everything as I try to push them from my thoughts.

Please, why won't you just talk with me? Aren't you curious? I know we are the same; you are me, and I am you. If we just talk, if you just talk, maybe we could figure out why you think you aren't me, why you can't answer me about who you think you are. WHO ARE YOU?

The echoing reflections question fills my head; I pause in my routine for a moment, trying desperately to block the twisted stranger's questions out, but I fail. Who am I? Why can't I really

answer that question? I mean, I'm me, right? I'm who I've always been; I'm who everyone has always seen me as. This hasn't changed and never will, because it can't... right? I shake the thoughts from my head. I don't need this right now of course I know who I am. I don't need to explain myself to this reflection. I am me, I am who I have always been and who I will always be. I am and will continue to be shaped by the world's views of me because that is the way things are. I left the bathroom as quickly as I had entered. I hadn't even realized I had finished getting ready while those thoughts had been plaguing me. I'll worry about cleaning up the glass tonight; I don't want to spend another moment in that bathroom with the twisted and broken reflections taunting me with their chorus of questions.

Night 2: Fracturing of the Self

I walk into the bathroom, exhausted but with a broom in hand. The intention is to clean the glass up and then get out of the bathroom, still ignoring the fractured strangers' attempts to talk to me, but what it asks this time catches me off guard.

Please, answer at least one thing. Is your name Alexander? I think that it's my name, so it must be yours too, right?

I'm quiet, unsure how to answer; I never expected the strange reflection to ask me my name and the wrong name at that. I don't yet understand why it has asked me this.

"No, my name is ____." But the name doesn't leave my mouth; I'm confused as to why I stopped, but really that name has never felt like mine; it's never been a name I liked being called.

Please just think about it. I've thought about it, and it sounds right and feels right. Unlike the name that's never felt right and who, despite it feeling so wrong, you've been told that you are.

The reflection had started talking again before I really had a chance to process what it was saying. Why was it saying this, and how did it know that my name has never felt right? Really, nothing has ever felt right, but that's normal; that's growing up. Feeling different, looking different, one day I'll get used to it, right? Everyone around me insists again and again that I'll "grow up" and become used to who I am because this is who I am. I am ____, but the name still doesn't come; I just can't do it. This name has never been me. Before these thoughts can go

any further, I rush out of the bathroom without even another glance at the reflection who is silently watching me.

Morning 3: The Introduction

For once I enter the bathroom with no hesitations. Last night had been long, the thoughts and questions of the reflection replaying in my mind each time I tried to finally go to sleep. Nothing makes sense, and I can't stand it.

"Why did you ask me if my name is Alexander? Why did you say that it sounds and feels right rather than the name I have? Why did you say it as if you were me?"

Because we are the same. I am you, and you are me; you just have to see. You just have to open your eyes and think about the questions.

"I don't want to think about the questions! Everything has just become so much more confusing since you've started bothering me. Why is this happening? Why do you keep asking me these things!?" But as much as I won't admit it, maybe the reflection is right; maybe it is me. I hate how much "Alexander" has a ring to it. It fits better, feels better, and sounds better than the name I am currently known as. But that just makes me more frustrated and confused.

Why do you think you are who the world says you are?

"Because that's just the way it is! I was born like this, to be this person. The world and those around me are so sure that I am this person, and it takes time to be comfortable. It's just my age, the age everything changes and feels... Wrong."

Maybe they're wrong, though. Maybe changing shouldn't feel so wrong, rather uncomfortable as you understand yourself. Maybe the "wrong" that we feel as these changes happen is because they aren't our changes.

As I look at the reflection long and hard in the mirror, I'm quiet. Letting the reflections' words echo and swirl inside my head. I feel so confused and conflicted. All I have ever known is what I've been told I am. I never stopped to think about how I feel about myself. As I intently stare down the reflection, I see parts of myself peek through. The messy and unbrushed bob-length

hair, the overly baggy hoodie and pants hiding everything about my frame, and the tired and unhappy look on my face as I feel more and more uncomfortable seeing who the reflection really is. It is me looking back, but at the same time it isn't. This body, this face—none of it really feels like mine, so then what does?

“You said your name is Alexander? I really do like the feel of that more. Maybe we aren't as different as I thought...” And for the first time in a long while, the reflection really smiles. Both fear and relief in its eyes as I finally begin to see, to understand. Now instead of a stranger staring back at me, I see an old friend, desperate to be heard and seen by me again, just like before the changes made everything so different. As I reach my hand out to the mirror, the reflection speaks one last time before we once again are one.

It's nice to finally meet you again, Alexander.

Night 3: Self-Acceptance at Last

Tonight the reflection doesn't talk to me, it doesn't need to anymore. Its job was done because now I see what the mirror really is. I see myself finally staring back at me, confined to this box given by the world and desperately trying to break free from its confines. I kept shoving myself deeper and deeper into it, hoping I'd grow to fit its shape, but nothing worked, this wasn't my box no matter how many times I was told by everyone around me that it was. The chorus of replies from everyone around me was deafening: “This is who you are,” “She is you, you're just confused,” “You'll grow into yourself, you're such a pretty girl with such a pretty figure,” but no matter how many times I was told that this is who I am, that I just need to get used to it, I couldn't. So, in retaliation to the box crushing me into a shape that isn't mine, I fight back. I butcher my hair into something that feels right, layer on sports bras, and try on outfits until I really see myself. For the first time in my life I see myself staring back at me from the mirror, no more stranger mocking me with every look. Now I understand why the stranger before asked me these things. The reflection knew deep down that we were indeed the same, the only difference was I had yet to open my eyes, I had yet to awaken and notice the box trapping me.

And at the end of the day, it is just what society made me to be, told me to be, and who those who love me shaped me to be. They thought they were helping me, allowing me to be my whole self, and in a way maybe they were. But at the same time, they were unknowingly forcing me into the tiny little box that I clearly didn't fit into, because really I wasn't a “she” at all; rather, this

“confused girl” was a he. And as I figured out who I really was inside the confining walls of the box given to me by the world and society, it started to crush me. This wasn’t the box I belonged in, really there wasn’t any “box” I truly belonged in, and as it tried to force me into its shape, I fought and fought until finally the walls of the box gave way and allowed me to be free, finally fully myself.

Vaquedano, Raul

1. Hey, I just got robbed by an elderly couple at around 10 pm.

I thought yesterday was just gonna be another slow day at the gas station. You don't get many visitors when you are a couple miles off the entrance to the freeway. If we were on the freeway it would tell people to stop here or wait another 100 miles to take a shit. However, before I was gonna leave for the night, I saw an elderly couple walk in. They start to bicker and mumble, probably about how long the drive was, and walk in with two duffle bags, both wearing a ski mask. I hear the wife say "Yeah I understand, now stop bothering me and let me go pee." She goes to the bathroom with her bag and her husband stands in the back of the store, opposite from me. I didn't think anything of it, and I went back on my phone and heard the couple saying "Are you done yet, yeah im goin im goin." The two waddle back to me and I ask them if that would be cash or credit. The husband looks up and says "how about ya empty that fucking draw or you'll be on the news tamarra-" I look back up and I'm staring eye to eye with a sawed-off shotgun.

"Oh Harold you were supposed to say, "Or you'll have to put in yer two weeks early." You never listen to my ideas!"

"Well dat dont make no sense hun'. How he gonna put in his two weeks if he's dead?"

"It's not supposed to make sense, it's provocative! Look, let me do it!"

I can't believe this is happening. Harold's wife grabs the shotgun from him, points it at me and says "NOW EMPTY THE FUCKING DRAW, OR YOU'LL HAVE TO PUT IN YOUR TWO WEEKS EARLY!!" she shouted at the top of her lungs. Her husband shakes in disagreement and says "nope not really feelin' it."

"Well it's because *you* were supposed to say it." She looks at me and points her finger up and says one moment. She gives him the shotgun, "Try it." He sighs heavily and tries the line again, "Now empty the fuckin' draw, *coughs hard* or you'll be putting your two weeks in early." The wife jumps up and down clapping. "Just like that Harold!"

"I actually liked it a bit too," I say.

"Can it! And Barbara - I mean, Goldbear - I said to use the nicknames!"

"Oh yeah, sorry...Butterfinger." she says with a small snicker and a wink.

He waves the shotgun at me and signals to open the drawer. However, I tell him all the cash we have I put in the safe in the back, and I walk out the booth to lead them to it. I walk halfway through the store and I look back, they barely even left the register. Harold waddles forward, keeping the shotgun straight, and Barbara is holding onto his arm. They passed by the chips, and Barbara asked if they could get some and Arizona for the road. "Fine, but make it quick." Barbara holds the duffle bag and grabs a handful of lays and cheetos bags. She goes to the fridge to grab drinks, but passes by the candy and shrieks "Ooh! They have the gummy bears I like! And yours too! Hehehe." She says waving a butterfinger in her hand. She walks through the entire store getting snacks, with Harold standing at me with his back slanted and pointing his shotgun at me still, but I saw his eyes start getting droopy. As I was about to pull out my phone, Barbara comes to the back sipping on a peach arizona with her mask up, and says "alright we can keep goin' ". Harold jolts awake, and I sneak back my phone into my pocket.

We go to the back office, and I duck down under my boss's desk to bring out the safe. I bring out the money and it's around 200 bucks.

"Here ya go."

"200 bucks?? That's it for the day?" says Harold. I was gonna say that's everything for the week but I shrug my shoulders. "Well yeah, most people pay with card now-a-days"

"Oh Butterfinger, it's alright. We got groceries for the month!" Harold shakes his head, "whateva, we gotta get to Memphis, lets go to da cah," and waddles out the office and tells her to come on, and she hobbles behind.

Harold hands his shotgun to his wife. "Here, you hold this, my arm's gettin' tired."

"Oh but my shoulder already hurts already from carin' all this junk food." I ask if they want me to carry it to their car. "Oh you sweet thang thank you so much."

I quickly grab the bag and shotgun and speed walk to their car before anyone else shows up. I get a hold of their make, model, and license plate. As they reach the car after two minutes, Harold says "shit I'm running empty. He looks at me and looks back at the car and then back to me. "Uh, you mind puttin'..." he looks at the gas prices "fuck, these gas prices man, and I thought we were the robbers. Just put... 100 on... uh Goldbear what's the number?"

"7!"

"100 on 7 please." As I go back Barbara walks back in as well to use the bathroom again, snickers and says "That can of Arizona went straight through me." I put 100 on 7 and I see Harold pump the gas. Barbara walks out and tells me "You have a good night. And you cooperated so well with us." I went back to my booth, watching the two lay back in their car as the gas was pumping. I watched those two look at one another. They may be senior citizens, but I wondered how God made them such a perfect match for each other.

As the two drove off, I brought out my phone and call 911.

"911 whats your emergency"

2. Til Death Do Us Part

"-ucker!" shouted Diliad. He viciously pointed at the man closest to him, "Lock up all the escape routes!" The same man raised his glasses to his face, and began to stutter, "B-b-but D-diliad, t-t-t-there's p-p-pp-people -" "What are you, cold? Move out the way!" Diliad slammed a large red button on the master control terminal and he rushed out of the room, holding his hat as he ran up the stairs, a large steel door slamming behind him. The "sky" of the WUH-HUH? Cafe began to glitch out, before it became red with a large countdown beginning, and a pixelated GIF of a cow being set on fire began to loop under it. Everyone left in the control room staring blankly at each other as the sounds of alarms were the only sound that filled the air, until someone spoke up and said, "Hey, I started 2 weeks ago, but if the lockdown closes all the doors...where are we supposed to go?"

Ben and Lindsie shuffled through the escape tunnel, but the sound of the alarms soon echoed through to them, and a foul stench filled the air. "Ugh, BEN that was RIGHT IN MY FACE!" Ben turned back to her with a confused look, "What are you on about? The last time I ate was...wait, when was the last time I ate?" Ben began to ponder, but was also distracted by the foul smell. "Hmmm, rotten eggs..." Lindsie's eyes widened. "Sulfur." They stared at each with a horrified look on their faces. "Methane!" they said in unison. Ben saw the door behind them begin to slam shut. They ran as a door slammed in front of them. Lindsie kicked the door, but it didn't budge. She slammed the door with his fist. "No, no, NO! Dying today was not in my horoscope!" Ben looked down in distraught, "I could've sworn that the lockdown was a manual procedure...surely they saw..." However, Lindsie tapped Ben on the shoulder. "Wait, look! This door has a nut in the middle, almost like-" "An F1 tire!" Ben turned his head to Lindsie with a smirk on his face.

"You got your wheel gun?" Lindsie reached into her pocket and pulled out her Paoli DP 6000 Spline. "You know I always keep that thang on me. So, how many of these do we have to take out?" "Well, judging on where we are, we are gonna have to go through a double digit amount of these." Lindsie nodded her head, "And what did you get on the F1 tire replacement homework?" Ben looked away from her to avoid eye contact, "Uh, a C-..." Lindsie put her hand on his shoulder, "So did I. Lock the fuck in."

Diliad rushed up the stairs to his helicopter pad. As he bashed the door on the top floor open, however, he found Tario standing in front of his helicopter, with the Desert THC near his hip. Diliad raised his hands in the air, "Look, I don't know your deal but this entire building is rigged. Right underneath us is a floor full of cows primed with methane, and in 7 minutes, once it gets hot enough, well, I hope you paid attention in chemistry." Tario smirked which evolved into a maniacal laugh. "7 minutes. 7 minutes is all I can spare to play with you right now." Diliad nodded his head, "Metal Gear Solid 3." Tario raised his eyebrow and winced his eyes, "...What? No, Resident Evil - 5-" Tario shook his head with a grunt and tightened the grip on his sniper. "So what's your deal then, huh? Forbes named me top 312th billionaires under 90, you want money? Power? If you never rode in a helicopter there's one right behind you." Tario tilted his head to crack his neck. "I don't want shit from you!" Diliad shrugs his shoulders with his hands in the air. "Well, you haven't shot me yet, so clearly you want something." Tario painted a crooked smile on his face. "I want you to remember. May 17, 1995." Diliad tilted his head back before showing a smile, "The worst date I ever had." Tario slowly walked forward toward him, "Every minute I spent there was explaining the very concept of this building. The animals, the weeks, and you... you said it was impossible!" "Oh please! Did you know how stupid that idea was? I mean, bigger than Chinese New Year? C'mon! This idea was just another daydream if it wasn't for me!" Tario pressed the sniper to Tario's stomach. "And you'll just be another body!" Tario jumped in the air doing a 360 no scope with his last bullet, but the bullet went straight up to the sky. Tario had a face of horror, as Diliad pushed him to the ground and laughed. "HAHAHA, idiot! You know snipers never have good accuracy if you don't aim through the scope!" He ran to the helicopter, but Tario pulled out his Glock G19 and shot Diliad's hat off of him. Diliad stopped and smiled, "Another gun you got from Double V B Baby?" "Nope, this was from Bass Pro Shops." Tario slowly got up and wearily walked towards him. His face angered with rage, "You stole my idea, and threw me to the curb!" He pressed his gun to Diliad's chest, but a tear ran down Diliad's face. "After you stole my heart and never looked back!" Tario's tears ran down his face. He dropped his gun, and Tario and Diliad embraced, passionately kissing as they grabbed

each other's hips and buttocks. They unlocked their lips with a loud pop, and Diliad put his hands around Tario's face. "Come with me! I can throw my life away! We can start over on some deserted island!" Tario held onto his hand, "R-really?" However, Diliad let his hands go of him, "OK maybe not, I fell in love while you were gone." "To...someone else?" "No, I'm too in love with the money." Just then, a large amount of moo's could be heard, and the cow's directly under them began violently exploding, causing sections of the building to collapse. Diliad looked at the controls of the helicopter, "So, do you know how to fly one of these?" "Nope." "Dammit! Neither do I! Why don't they teach us REAL things in highschool?! Like, car repair or taxes-" The roof began to violently explode, Diliad and Tario falling down as they hugged each other. Tario laughed. "You know, I found out about you because I became a priest and met an old colleague of yours who updated me on your life." "Oh, like in Monte Cristo?" Diliad smirked. "Yeah, I was also hoping you would get married, hire me, and then I'd kill you during your wedding vows." Diliad kissed his nose. "Y'know I never planned on it after you left. I love money, but you were priceless." The roof caved in, the two falling to their deaths, and the helicopter slid down after them. Diliad smiled. "You know what? You're a licensed priest, right? Let's do this. Right here, right now. I feel like we skipped a few steps, but-" Tario laughed, as he shouted, "Til death do us part?" Diliad smiled. "Til death do us -"

Ben and Lindsie went through their last gate, and as they frantically crawled out, the tunnel after them spouted flames. They fell to the ground, and as they looked back, they saw the WUH-HUH? Cafe exploded. Pieces of bricks and medium-rare steak flew across the sky, and they shielded their heads and eyes. Lindsie stood up and picked up Ben and they dusted themselves off. "Well, that was one hell of a date." Lindsie sighed. "Yeah...but we didn't even eat anything." Ben sighed. Lindsie left out a heavy sigh, and so did Ben. Lindsie stretched their back, and Ben scratched the bottom of his chin before he told Lindsie, "So, have you ever had Wings Over?" "Is the Pope Catholic?"

3. The WUH-HUH? Cafe

I saw a video of a Cat Cafe for the first time. What a horrible idea. Whoever thought of that clearly never had a cat before. I have 3, OK? Trust me when I say that having cats walk all over your computer and food and getting cat hair everywhere is the last thing I would want, and some people are paying for it! I decided on an ACTUAL good idea, hear me out: The WUH-HUH? Cafe. No baby sheep, no rabbits, no capybaras. Every week, they'll be a new animal, no one-tricks here. This is a cafe that when your friends ask you "Oh what did you do over the

weekend” or “what did you do over the break” and when you tell them they’ll squinch their eyes, raise one eyebrow, and tilt their head and be like, “A wuh-huh cafe?”

I’ve planned an animal for each week of the year, but I’m only gonna name a handful. Every week there will be a completely different one. Week 12: bears. Jumping right out of hibernation. I’m talking Black bears, brown bears, bring out the polars too. But not pandas, pandas are boring. The others? THOSE are bears people come to see. They’ll walk around freely and play with customers and you can feed them honey and fish and all types of fruit and nuts. We’ll teach em to do the The Bare Necessities dance from Jungle Book. We can fake images of people wrestling bears to say what they did to all their friends, or they can actually do it and have a sick scar to show them proof. Imagine a polar bear cub sitting on your lap while you watch Youtube. How many people can say you did that?

This will be the new Chinese New Year. The new weekly horoscopes. Oh you were born on Alligator week? So was my brother! This is all part of the plan. Making memories that not even a picture can explain. Week 36 will be snakes, since you have a one in thirty-six chance to roll snake eyes with two dice. Only the best kinds: Pythons, cobras, rattlers. We could also have those really cool snakes that are black and yellow or red and black. Everyone gets a Pungi, or a snake flute, and laughs as we watch them dance to the music they play. Customer’s could feed them mice but maybe I’ll have to give them a warning not to feed them computer mice.

My favorite week will be Week 16: Chimpanzee week. This is in honor of the longest sentence made in sign language by a chimpanzee: “Give orange me give eat orange me eat orange give me eat orange give me you.” Chimpanzee’s are so awesome. We’ll get super smart once from a lab and have them help you do math. They’ll clean your hair, serve you food, and we’ll have swings and bars for them all around the cafe. You can feed them fruits but they eat just about anything. Just don’t give them Xanax. Don’t.

There is one week in all of history that is universally praised across its entire existence. Nothing will compare to Week 28: Shark Week. Imagine. You walk into a cafe and it’s just a giant ocean. Truman Show style. You hop in a boat with your favorite crusty bean bag, some pillows, and a speaker to play your tunes with that 70s radio swing. Seven feet under you are some of the world’s harshest predators: Great White, Tiger, Hammerhead, Basking. Whenever you order food, it’s your waiter, frantically swimming to you with floaties on his arms. As his panting and

splashes of water start to fade, it's just your Vanilla Bean Crème, chocolate croissant, The Count of Monte Cristo, and a couple of sharks.

Explain *that* to your friends.

4. All Expenses Paid

It was finally time. I asked her to prom, she said “Ew.” I asked her if she’d go watch a movie, and she laughed until she fell to the floor and just kept laughing. I asked if she wanted to grab some Taco Bell and go to the shooting range, she said “Tell me something I didn’t do!” That was it. A once in a lifetime experience only a few have the opportunity - no, the privilege - of being able to attend. We both had Formula 1 Car Repair class. As the bell rang, I saw her around her friends, and as I walked up to her my stomach felt like 9 year olds fighting over the last box of chocolate milk. As I tapped her on the shoulder, I watched as each blonde strand of her hair flung over her shoulder, smacking me in the face. She also stepped on my shoes and punched me in the gut. OK maybe I was standing too close. “Whaddya want, creep?” She shouted at me. I tried to speak but nothing came out. “Ugh, is he here to ask you out again?” One of her friends sighed. One of them snickered, “Yeah, I bet he loves you!” They all started laughing and shouting insults at me, “He probably wants to marry you!” “Oh, let’s make an investment account to put our child through college!” “What’s next, a Roth IRA?!” However, as I reached in my pockets, they all stopped laughing the moment I pulled my thang on ‘em. “No, that’s not-” “I-i-it can’t b-be-” they all stammered. “Oh my God, are those two tickets to the WUH-HUH? Cafe!?” Everyone stood in silence as they looked back and forth between me and her. I gulped, and as I opened my mouth words finally dug their way out “...only if I could take you there as a date.” They all looked at her in anticipation. She bit her lip, tilted her eyes, and crossed her arms “I coooooould maaaaaaybe find soooome time.” Everyone started cheering for us or already fainted from the suspense.

I walked to her house, and knocked on the door. In a few minutes a 7-foot tall man stood in front of me, his hair bundled up with clips and hair rollers, donning a purple detox face mask and an elmo bathrobe. He signaled to come inside and I followed him to the living room. I sat down as he waddled to her door and banged on it shouting, “WAKE UP YOUR BOYFRIEND IS HERE.” She screamed something inaudible back to him, and he waddled away as she opened her door to see me. “Bro...it’s 7 in the morning...” she wilted out. I brung her a bundle of roses in one hand, but she smacked them to the floor. In the other hand I had a monster energy drink, a Sausage McMuffin, and a pack of Snickerdoodle Little Bites Mini Muffins. She hugged me and

gave me a kiss on the cheek. I waited in her living room as she was getting ready, and was able to watch the entirety of "The Godfather" until I finally heard "alright give me 10 minutes and we'll be out the door." As she was leaving, she shouted "WE'RE LEAVING NOW. LOVE YOU." and a muffled "LOVE YOU" could be heard from her father's room. We waited at the bus stop, and as we got picked up, I pointed the tickets towards him. He rolled his eyes and as he turned his head to me. "Boy, you never paid a bus fare - " but as he got a closer look, he sat up straight, and pressed a button on the top of his seat, and changed the destination from a stop down the road directly to the airport. Everyone started to complain that they were gonna be late to work or whatever, but I raised my hand with the tickets in the air. They all lined up and took a knee as they bowed their heads towards me. They stayed in this position the entire hour long bus ride to the airport. When we made it to our gate, they all got up and cheered for us. Anyone in possession of the tickets had a red-carpet-like entrance that led directly to their flight. People on both sides of the runway were clapping, praising, and chanting at us. Women cried and men fainted at the mere sight of our tickets. We even got to pass TSA, as they said, and I quote, "We are not worthy to search someone with those tickets." We walked through the airport to board our private plane. As the plane started we were greeted by our butler. He brought out a platter of ritz crackers with cheese and peanut butter, and a wine bottle but it was actually full of Hi-C fruit punch. "So, wanna watch monster trucks run over cars?" I asked her. "I'd love to...but for someone I just started dating you seem awfully familiar." "Well we've had a few classes for...7 years since 3rd grade?" She smiled as she laid on my shoulder as the plane took off. "And now I'm - we're - going to the WUH-HUH? Cafe."

5. Winter's in Miami

"If you miss the fuckin' bus you gonna have to walk in the damn cold again."

My mom said banging at my door at 5 am. I had to catch the same bus as my big brother in high-school, even though school started at 9 am for middle-school-me, while my little brother stayed with my mom since he goes to the same school she taught in. You can imagine then going back to school after waking up at 11 am every day to watch Star Wars. I was always the first to shower because that's when the water's the hottest. I walked into my parents room to get my clothes. About 3 heaters were all pointed at them in their king-sized bed, with my dad covering all the windows with the thickest sheets he could find because the "moderfuckin' cold crawls through dem." All I could wear was my bright blue hoodie and a navy blue polo with khakis, because any other outfit and you'd be sitting in CSI for the day. Meanwhile my mom

would always wear her 2 sweaters, inch-thick fur jacket, and her rainbow scarf with below-the-knee high boots. I told her why even get those since it doesn't even snow here, and she said if I'm smart enough to ask questions I'm smart enough to heat up the car.

I walked outside. Bright blue skies. Greenish grass topped with frozen dew. All the trees stripped down and poked the sky. The sun clawing through my face to give me warmth. Every breath you took was seen right in front of you. When I was a kid I pretended I was a dragon, or I breathed out of my nose like an angry bull. My little brother would hold his breath because he thought his lungs would freeze. Other times my brothers and I would tuck our thumbs under our fingers and act like we were smoking until our mom came out the door. She came in and started the car, knowing we were closing in on the sorry-gonna-have-to-walk time, and would ask me for the weather. Anything under 65 she'll tell me "and I still don't think this coat is enough." Before she even has time to back up though, I see my father in his full Dolphins attire, gloves, jersey, jacket, shoes, beanie, with a tray of hot chocolate. He points at my mom to lower the window which she does reluctantly only to scream at him that we are running late. He hands me the tray and tells my mom that he's cooking tonight so stay as far away from a Ross or Marshalls as she can. She rolls her eyes at him and the faint cries of "I love you" fades away as she puts up the window and pulls out the driveway.

Bonus: Hope - Chloe, Raul, Jessica, and Elsa's Character Story

Godo strolled into the church, cradling oranges in his arms. He walks past 30-foot-tall walls of stained glass, each portraying major events of the Christian Bible: Adam and Eve sharing a bite of an apple, Abraham holding tablets atop a hill, David swinging his slingshot while Goliath is reaching his arms out to him, and so on. Godo sits down in one of the rows, lying back, and places the pile of oranges next to his side. He grabs one of them with one hand, but instantly realizes a problem: how can he peel an orange with one hand? Usually, he would have had his crab claw cut the orange in half, albeit it'll be messy, but he lost it fighting off demons last night. He looks around. A medic staring at the statue of Jesus on the cross? She seems deeply lost in her thoughts. A rogue sharpening her knives? They seem very busy. He then hears a thump behind him, and as he looks behind his shoulder, he sees a rugged woman with a M1 Garand, coated in hints of blood and dirt. She struggles as she drags down the zipper on her boots, but as they finally zip down, she kicks them off her feet and swings her legs up onto the bench. She lays down with a deep sigh, holding onto her rifle as if it were a teddy bear to go to sleep. Godo looks at his orange, then looks back at the woman, and lowers his arm behind him. He taps the

bench with his hand, and the woman notices him. “Hey Star N Stripes Barbie, you mind opening this orange for me?”

The woman scoffs saying, “I’ve been hoppin’ boxcars for three days straight and the first thing I’m given is an orange.” She shrugs and snatches the orange from him. “Hey! I ain’t no FoodShare! Get yer own oranges!” Godo shouts. The woman brandishes her switchblade and peels the orange within a second. She bites into it, the sweet taste of a simple orange overwhelming her senses. She falls back down as she chomps on her orange, but Godo, on his knees, looks behind her and shouts, “Hey pal! I don’t care if you crawled through hot glass to get here! Those oranges are for my Vitamin C deficiency!” The woman snickers, “I’ve been riding Class 7 freights since D81, inches of metal and concrete away from a radioactive death, but I need these oranges because I’m already sick of hearing your voice.” Godo jumps across onto her bench, looking down at her as he feels his shoulder start to writhe. He threateningly says, “What’s your name, pal? ‘Cuz you better hope your head ain’t as soft as that orange or you’re about to meet your maker.” The woman points her M1 Garand directly at his forehead with one hand, the other hand still holding her half-eaten orange. She swallows her sweet bite. Standing her ground, she answers, “Trinity. Say hi to him for me.”

Just as she pulls the trigger, the tip of her gun is knocked to the side as a rogue hits it with the hilt of her knife. It ricochets into the air and she catches it, and the bullet flies through the glass pane on the top of Goliath’s head. The rogue nonchalantly walks to the two’s quarrel. “No blood shall be spilled on sacred ground. Is there a situation?” Godo slowly backs up and sits down next to his pile of oranges. “...’Trinity’ owes me an orange.” Trinity swallows her last bite of her orange and lays her gun beside her. “...And you owe me a bullet.” Godo shakes his head, as he grabs another orange. He looks at the rogue, with her array of weapons to her side. He raises the orange up to her and says “...uh, ya mind?” She then skewers the orange perfectly in the center, parallel to his hand, and with a wind of movements cuts the orange into 8 slices perfectly even. Godo’s eyes sparkle as he can finally enjoy his Delica-C. The rogue sits down next to his pile, as she grabs 2 oranges, eating one herself and hands another to Trinity. Godo grows visibly frustrated, but it’s hard to argue with someone with an M1 Garand and someone with two 8-inch knives. The rogue asked him, “So, what is your name, traveler?” “Greece Godo, and trust

me, I didn't mean to start trouble but... she started it!" He exclaimed. The rogue and Trinity snicker.

The rogue introduces herself, "My name is Zephyr. And rest assured, this church is a place of hope." Trinity aims her rifle at the hole in the glass, getting a glimpse of the brimstone and burnt-out landscape outside. "...and it's the only place the demons can't enter." "...or bureaucrats! They will become BBQ if they ever set foot into a church! Ever since the government made a literal deal with the devil, the skies have been as red as a crab claw!" Godo shakes his head as he bites his orange, staring at his left missing arm, as it starts to tingle from his lack of vitamin C. The church bell rings 3 times, indicating it would be 3 in the afternoon. "Usually, it'll be bright blue skies right about now," says Trinity. Zephyr stands up and sits down on the bench in front of them, facing Godo and Trinity. She grabs another orange and begins to slowly peel it. "I'm guessing all of us aren't here to pay our tithings." Trinity places down her rifle, "Nope. I've been on the run from D70 ever since Seir came into that town. If only his heart was as pretty as his face. He and his twenty-six legions can kiss my ass." Zephyr smiles, "If we ever get him off his horse." Trinity sits up and looks at Zephyr in shock. "You know about Prince Seir?!" Zephyr brandishes her knife to her own throat, and pretends to slice it across her neck, "why do you think he had only 26 legions." Trinity and Zephyr share a laugh, and as they relax, they slowly stare at Godo. "What about you, ya old fart," says Trinity. Godo rolled his shoulders and sat up straight, "Well, Taco Bell wasn't open, and I don't see no chicken in this church, so, I guess I'm just here to-" Suddenly the medic who was alone by herself, collapsed. Trinity and Zephyr sprung up and ran to her, while Godo found this as an opportunity to eat as many oranges as he could.

The medic's head rang as she heard faint cries shouting at her. She felt her head being cradled, and a soft warmth filled her as this feeling was familiar to her...Mother? She opened her eyes as she saw Trinity and Zephyr holding her up from the ground. They stole one of Godo's oranges from him to feed it to her, "Are you ok, child?" said Zephyr. "I'll be good in a minute. I don't understand why all this is happening." Godo shrugs his shoulders "Well kid this is what your taxes go to-" Zephyr gives him a stern look, and he rolls his eyes and bites into his orange. Trinity raises her to a bench, "What is your name?" "...Aura." They stare at Aura waiting to see if

she will say more. Aura looks at them with a puzzled face and looks down as she sighs, “A whole year ago, all I can remember is that bus ride. It was another day to the hospital, just every other day, and it all started. The day the demons attacked.” As Aura spoke, Trinity held tightly to her rifle. Zephyr clenched her fist, and Godo stopped eating oranges and could only look down. Aura clenches her jaw “...and these...fucking demons! And the fucking government! All these idiots did was ruin it for everyone! I was just starting my life! Right when I worked so hard, and I did everything my mom told me to do.” Trinity held onto her hand. “I understand. But you are stronger than you think. You’ve been here for a year. No one gives a fuck about what those pieces of shit did, but what’s important is that you went through all of that.” Zephyr put her hands on Aura’s shoulder. “Indeed. Life is more than just about handling two knives.” Godo rolled his eyes, “and with one arm,” he mumbled. They walked to Godo and sat next to each other, taking 3 of the last 4 oranges from him. He snatched his final orange and walked away holding his chin up high, going a few benches forward from all of them and acting like he didn't hear them.

“So what brought you here?” Zephyr says, slicing the orange for her. Aura gathers the orange with a nod and begins, “I dunno, just, looking for hope, I guess? I was never really the religious type but after this whole Project Apollyon flop this church was the only place I had left.” She looked up at all the stained glass windows. “...my mother went to church every single Sunday. She would cradle my head whenever I felt tired. She’d take me all the time to the ice cream parlor down the road after church...” Tears welled up in her eyes, “until she died from cancer. A few years ago. Not demons. Not government bullshit. Not fighting for a good cause. She was just in bed. All damn day. And I didn’t understand how someone so cruel could just let this happen. Some God! I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t think about walking in here alone after she left. But that’s one of the last things she ever told me before she died. I asked what I do when I just feel hopeless. She told me to pray until you can’t pray any longer. So after all that, after all that I’ve been through, that’s how I winded up here. People started showing up. And I did what I went to college for. But every time I’m not helping someone, I just...pray? I try to do it the best I can.” Trinity and Zephyr are silent, with trickles of tears and sniffles. Godo was hollering in sympathetic guilt and sobbing, with snot running down his nose.

Zephyr comforts Aura. "Listen, Lord knows this is the last place for me to be, but like I said: you have done so much more to the people around you than you have done working on yourself." Trinity wobbles up and uses her rifle as a cane. "Your mother would be proud. You are helping people. You don't need a rifle to do that." Godo walks up to the woman and wipes away his tears. He points up to the statue of a crucified Jesus at the center of the whole church, with a lopsided thorn crown, tears running down his cheeks, and a fading yellow halo behind his head. At his feet are dozens of candles lit by bypassers. "If you think that rock was carved by a river, then the Grand Canyon would be a DaVinci piece! They spent every minute of their blood, sweat, and tears on that thing, on those walls of glass, on this entire building, because they wanted to inspire hope into each and every last one of us. You don't even need a church for any of that, though. Because whether it's yer shitty government, yer shitty demons, yer shitty sicknesses, or even not-so-shitty people stealing yer oranges without asking," He looked at his left shoulder as he began to get a glimpse of all the people he saved with his deformity he hated the most. "...you gotta remember the people who you did save and the ones you can."

Aura smirked and nodded as a raspy voice could be heard from the hole in the window, screeching, "Found her, found her!". Trinity lifted her rifle as she swiftly shifted to the entrance of the church. Zephyr tells Aura to keep helping the injured and follows along. Godo felt a searing pain in his shoulder. They opened the doors of the church to see dozens - possibly hundreds - of demons near the entrance. A demon in a full suit of armor, brandishing multiple swords held by what looks like tendrils from his back, standing on a winged horse, bowed "Trinity! It is nice seeing you again!" "Prince Seir! You know there is only one way this is gonna end!" Trinity left with a smirk, but he smiled back, "Ah, yes! Either you somehow kill me and my army or run away as we have you surrounded! And I see you cower in a church. Fool! Don't think that will stop us from - " "You know the rules, Seir." says Zephyr, holding her knives in an X form before swinging them to her side. "No blood shall be spilled on sacred ground. But I would much rather prefer to do it out here." Seir's smile fades away and begins to grit his teeth. "So, you bring...the rogue..." "And me!" says Godo, walking out with his chest puffed out. Prince Seir, confused, says "And...a homeless man? I can smell your breath from the top of my steed." Godo's shoulder begins to shrivel and contort, as suddenly a barrel of flesh and blood spewed out, raising his 60-pound crab claw in the air. It falls with a ground-breaking thud, showing it to Zephyr and Trinity. "Like I said: ya shouldn't have taken me oranges! Now I actually gotta fight with you guys!" Prince Seir, his legion, and the 3 heroes stood in anticipation. Godo raises the

crab claw to his face, “Hey Merry-Go-Round with toothpicks! Wanna know the difference between you, me, and your entire army?” Trinity ready her rifle, Zephyr flipped her knives to her face in defense, and Prince Seir’s sword started to wave towards the front of him. “I got a fucking crab claw!”

Whitley, Lisa

The Love of a Good Meal

Sitting alone at a table for four, Jeremy scans his eyes over the menu. The waitress, dressed in the required uniform, short black skirt, and black t-shirt snug enough to squeeze her breast so they mound up forming two large lumps looking to escape their confinement, stands at his side, pen and paper propped waiting to take down his order. Jeremy doesn't look up from the menu, his mouth watering as he reads the days special, he speaks his order aloud, never turning his eyes from the menu. As he waits for his meal, he scrolls through the feeds on his phone, smirking a few times at some random jokes. Within 10 minutes the appetizer arrives, Texas Twinkies, grilled jalapeno peppers stuffed with a mixture of cream cheese, goat cheese and cheddar, wrapped in candied bacon, with a drizzle of bourbon barbeque sauce. A little dribble of saliva forming at the curved point of his lips in anticipation of the first bite. Noticing his empty glass, she asks if he'd like a refill, he nods yes, his mouth and fingers already smudged with greasy residue.

Speaking with his mouth stuffed he says "and some more napkins". She nods and is back in a flash with the requested supplies, then returns again ten minutes later with his entrée, smothered steak with a double serving of mashed potatoes and gravy. He ignores the full feeling forming in his belly as he finishes over half his meal. Not enough left to box up, and he's going back on his diet tomorrow so he perseveres though the rest of his meal. The waitress comes to clean the empty plates and asks if he'd like anything else.

"No ma'am, I'm stuffed", he says placing his hands on his oversized belly, smiling, "but maybe I'll take a piece of that possum pie to go".

She smiles back adds the pie to his bill and prints the bill slip from her handy-pay machine, and places the bill down saying, "no hurry, take your time" and clears away the dirty dishes.

She returns with his pie wrapped up neatly inside a brown paper bag with a hand drawn smile and the words "thank you, come again", written on it. He pays the bill and leaves. As he walks into his one room apartment he smiles and settles down to watch TV with the most relaxing, satisfying feeling he's had in weeks, ever since starting that miserable diet

The Great Snail Escape

When Jimmy went to visit his grandparents at the lake house that summer, he had no idea of the trouble that was about to happen. How could he, it wasn't like his grandmother would allow for anything to go wrong when she was in charge. Safety first was her motto, and almost before he could get out of the car, she was at his side, strapping the Styrofoam swim bubble to his back with a click of the plastic buckle, and just for added safety, she shuffled his arms into those weirdo blowup arm floaty things too. All the while Jimmy protested, telling her he wasn't a baby anymore stating that he was 8 now, and just made it to dolphin level in his swim class so he didn't need to wear these things.

But Grumpa butted in and in his mean voice snarled, "Jimmy! Listen to your grandmother or we're sending you back to your parents!"

So, he stopped complaining and tried to be patient with grandma's safety ritual. After slathering Jimmy down with the thick white pasty sunblock and placing one of Grumpa's old sailor hats on his head to protect him from the dangerous rays of the sun, he was finally allowed to explore the beach.

"Oh boy, Jimmy exclaimed, Look at all these snails, grandma, can I have a can to collect them?"

Grumpa huffed and said something about adding some garlic and butter to the can. Grandma went into the lake house and brought out an old coffee can with some airholes popped through the top plastic lid. Then Jimmy went to work collecting all the snails he could find, every so often showing grandma and Grumpa one with a really cool shell. Soon enough it was time for lunch. While Jimmy and Grumpa sat around the patio table waiting for grandma to bring out lunch,

Jimmy popped off the top and took some of the snails out to show Grumpa, but Grumpa didn't want to see them, and snarled "Jimmy, put those slimy things back into that can or back into the lake they go!"

Jimmy quickly popped the top back on as grandma came out with the lunch tray.

“Jane, that boy needs to go in and washup before he eats, he was handling those dang slimy critters while you was in there fixin the sangiches”.

“Oh dear, come on now Jimmy, said Grandma, let’s go in and washup”.

After washing up they enjoyed a wonderful lunch together and then went for a swim and batted the beachball back and forth to each other. Soon enough the sun was starting to set and it was time to go in the house to get ready for supper. Jimmy helped grandma make the big vat of sauce for the spaghetti and some meatballs. Spaghetti is Jimmy’s favorite, and making meatballs with grandma is so fun.

After dessert Jimmy said, “Grandma, what about the snails, we need to feed the snails too”, to which Grumpa replied, “oh rubbish, you don’t need to feed those things, just put em’ back where you found them, they’ll figure it out”.

Grandma took Jimmy outside to gather some grass for the snails to snack on, then they went back into the house to get ready for the night. Grandma gave Jimmy a quick shower and changed him into his cozy pajamas, the soft green ones with Buzz Light Year on them, and they settled in to watch some TV before bed, but that is when it happened. Grumpa was sitting in his chair he reached down to scratch an itch on his leg, and found a lump he looked down at his leg and saw it was a snail, and he yelped and jumped out of his chair so fast it started to tip over, and he almost fell onto the floor, but grabbed onto the back of Grandma’s chair to steady himself, all the while jumping around in circles shaking his leg until he accidentally stubbed his toe on the coffee table and which made him grab his sore foot so that he started hopping up and down on one leg. Grandma and Jimmy were looking at him with great looks of worry on their faces as he spun around whacky himself, brushing his hands up and down his arms and legs and back. They had no idea what had gotten into him until they spotted a snail stuck to the top of his very bald head.

“Oh no, Jimmy exclaimed, the snails are loose!” “oh dear, said grandma, jumping up out of her chair, how on earth did they escape?”

“He left the dang top off, shouted Grumpa, that’s how!, I told ya Janey, those things are only good fried in a pan of butter!”

After calming Grumpa down they all started on the hunt to collect the escapees starting with the one from Grumpa's leg and the one sitting on top of his head.

"Jimmy, how many were in the can?" asked grandma.

Jimmy poised with the can and lid in his hand stated, "I think 20".

"You think twenty?" said Grumpa.

"well, I'm pretty sure there were twenty."

Grumpa rolled his eyes and grumped something under his breath.

"Oh look, Grumpa, there is one sitting in your chair".

They found the next one tangled in Grandma's hair. Then one on the TV remote, and one on a little toy boat, one on the couch pillow, and one in grandma's shoe.

That's when grandma started ringing her hands with worry and said "oh what if we don't find them all, what ever will we do?"

They went into kitchen where they found a few more, two on the windowsill, one on a dollar bill, one on the faucet, and one in the closet. One in the dog's dish, and one looking at the goldfish. There was one on the kitchen table, and one on the soup ladle. One was crawling across the floor, and one had made to the screen door. Finally, with all the snails put away, it was time to hit the hay. With their heads on their pillows they quickly fell fast asleep, and it wasn't until morning before they heard another peep.

Grumpa was the first one to get up the next morning, as Jimmy and grandma laid there still snoring. Jimmy was snuggled up to Grandma's soft warm belly, as his dreams were turned to the idea of toast slathered in jelly. But their dreams were cut short, as they heard Grumpa's yell, and sat straight up in bed wondering if Grumpa took a tumble, and fell. They ran to the bathroom and blinked once or twice as they saw Grumpa standing there, his jaw clenched like ice. Staring at them all from the handle of Gumpa's toothbrush, was the last remaining escape

Artist.

Jimmy quickly got the can and added him in with the others, securing the top, he said “well now he’s with his brothers”.

Jive Turkey

In Breaking News:

When the incident happened most of the residence of the Serenity retirement home were pretty shook up, but not Martha Macey.

The news anchor that night reported on the event:

Today the residence at the Serenity retirement home in the town of Gobble Wobble got a very unexpected guest. A video clip was shown as some of the staff were interviewed, Tami Cook excitedly shared the event, “Oh my lord, I’ve never seen anything like it”, the camera then flashed to Andy Roach, “I was just mindin my own business, tryin to deliver the lunches when ‘BAM’ it struck the window so hard, glass smashed all around, I dropped that lunch tray I was holden and ran!”, The camera scanned to resident Eugene Heart, with his newly bandaged cheek, “well I was makin my way down the hall back to my room for lunch, and yeah, out of no where a ball of feathers comes crashing through the window, shrapnel everywhere, see this here bandage on my face? I got struck with a giant chunk of glass, took two hours to sew me up, my daughter says we should sue”, the camera panned to Isabell Randolph, she was quite shook up, ringin her hands as she meekly stated, “oh mercy, there was so much blood, it scared the liver out of me”, The camera’s circled back to the news room where the anchor wraps up the story, “well ladies and gentlemen, as you’ve just heard, a turkey crashed through the second story window of the residence hall this afternoon

decapitating itself just as lunches were being served, the good news is, that the residence will enjoy an early Thanksgiving meal this year, as luck would have it their main cook is a skilled huntsman, and was able to process the carcass for their enjoyment at this evenings supper, and now for our weather...

As Martha watched the news she smiled, looking up to the ceiling she began to speak, "I know that was you Albert, you jive turkey you. You always said you would die for me. I miss you every day", as she chomped her dentures into the flesh of the turkey's thigh, juice rolled down her chin and she grinned.

The Haunted Room

When I awoke it was dark in the room, still night, yet something was glowing, something large and white, up against my wall. At first, I thought it was just the lights streaking across my wall from a car passing by. I was used to seeing the headlights crawl along my wall each time a vehicle turned onto our street, but this light didn't move across the wall, it stayed in one spot and glowed. My mind raced to find a logical reason for the glowing apparatus. I told myself the vision must be a remnant from a dream I was waking from. Withsleep film fogging up my eyes I blinked a few times trying to clear my sight. The blinking unblocked the film from my view, and I almost wished it hadn't. The thing, the glowing thing, the giant shimmery glowing thing just stood there staring back at me. It was menacing, and surely mean. I saw no sharp pointed teeth, and no knife but surly its intentions where to do imminent harm. It flatly stayed against the wall, enormously tall almost reaching to the ceiling as it stood contemplating what it would do to me. It stared at me, unmoving. The room so dark, it didn't notice that I was awake. If it had noticed my eyes peering over the rim of my sheet it surely would pounce into action. Clenching my sheet and blanket in my small fists I slowly moved the edge of my blanket closer to my chin, gradually moving it to cover my head completely, tucking the edge behind me. Under these covers I knew I was safe, for it is common knowledge that monstrous beasts can't penetrate a layer of blankets and sheets. I reminded myself, as long as I stayed under the covers I'd be safe. But how long will it stay and wait for me? I won't be able to sleep all night. I'd would need to stay awake all night. My mind racing with terrorizing thoughts of death and dismemberment, knowing the beast would be waiting patiently to grab an exposed toe or ear flap if I carelessly

allow the blankets to fall away. I must not lose consciousness! I can't let that happen, I must remain alert. My heart racing, I contemplated how I would escape the room. My hot breath beneath the sheets was making me sweat, I needed air. I slowly lowered the blanket, hoping the creature wouldn't detect my exposed forehead as I struggled to take a few quieted breaths of fresh air. I glanced at the wall, the glow was fading, this was my chance, it was now or never. I counted to myself, 1, 2, 3, go! I quickly tossed the bedding off of my body and ran through the doorway, and down the hall. I didn't look back, I heard no footsteps behind me, but my skin prickled with fear. Out in the hallway I stepped on something sharp and tried to squelch my yelp of pain. I limped on, quickly entering the room on the right. I leapt onto the bed knowing I was now safe, nothing could get me in this room, it was the safest place in the universe. I snuggled into the crook of my mother's bend leg. My pounding heart settling down to rest. I wasn't followed, still sleep wouldn't come, I had no blanket and the chill air made the fine hairs on my arms and legs rise up like soldiers ready for battle. Not wanting to get kicked out of the safety of this room, I knew I had to be quiet. I slowly make my way to the middle of the bed, to the narrow space between my parents sleeping bodies, Inch by inch I crawled across the bed as softly as I could until I reached the sacred space of safety and warmth, but when I arrived I found no room. My brother had beat me to it. Tonight, I will freeze to death.

The Granny Trap Game

Game Land Characters:

Name: Princess Bunselda

- **Gender:** female
- **Location:** from a parallel universe, a land of beautiful waterfalls, fairies, gems.
- **Personality:** Damsel in distress, but shoots on sight
- **Traits:** Crazy hair doo, decorated with pastel pipe cleaner spirals, and a crown of gems, and butterflies in her hair, perfectly manicured nails, shoots bullet Lasers from her fingertips. She can also shoot fuzzy pastel-colored puppies from her nail guns, these creatures are deceptively cute, as they are vicious lantern bug eaters. Wears a white jump suit, moon boots, and 80's band makeup.
- **Agenda:** Must rescue Cat Boy from yarn tower and get him to safety portal for transport back to Earth
- **Obstacles:** Mushrooms give power/energy, but after eating them day instantly turns to night and the princess has to navigate by the glowing luminescent mushroom trails. She must pick the correct trail to avoid being killed by the poison mushrooms. Lantern bugs

that are a cross between a mosquito and a firefly, they inject a poison that make you blow up if you get bit three times (end life). Tree squirrels (cute, but vicious) can be killed by laser shots. Knitting grandma and her cat.



Cody Charles Furlington aka Cat Boy

- **Gender:** male
- **Age:** 23
- **Schooling:** community college (isn't yet sure of what direction he wants to take in life)
- **Traits:** He is a cat furry, meows when nervous/anxious/meeting new people; actually, shapeshifts into a cat form ever since going through the portal to this new universe. He can't control the shapeshifting and flickers back and forth from his human self to cat form randomly, especially when nervous (he is pretty much always nervous). He seems to be allergic to his cat form, and sneezes when he transforms, the sneezing may be the reason for the flickering from one form to the other. He is giving himself hives.
- **Clothing:** likes casual clothing, not too picky. Drab t-shirts, sweatshirts or sweaters, and loose-fitting jeans or sweatpants (not into fashion, likes to blend in and not be noticed too much).
- **Looks:** Caucasian, wavy dirty blond hair, hazel green/brown eyes
- **Cat form:** a Scottish Fold longhair. Arms, legs and stomach white, with orange stiped on top of head on cheeks, and back.
- **Accessories:** backpack, laptop, phone, a very full wallet that includes his school ID, debit card, driver's license, bus pass, and business cards (he has a habit of taking a business card from everywhere he goes, his advisor, the bankers he has met, etc.) band-aids in each of the possible sizes (he was in Scouts so follows the motto "always be prepared"; in his pocket he carries a pocketknife (he wants to learn to carve cool things, but hasn't yet learned anything more detailed than whittling sticks into points).
- **Pronouns:** He/Him



Intro to Cody Furlington (catboy):

After my amazing date with Melissa last night I was on my way to join her on campus for my first meetup at Furry Club. I had no idea we had a club on campus before meeting Melissa last night. We met on a blind date at Retches (our college café) she picked up on my habit of meowing when I get nervous, and thought it was cute, and laughed at the way I started batting around the peas that fell off of her plate onto the table, with my hands fashioned in paw form. We got to talking and found that both had alter egos and Furry costumes. She invited me to attend the weekly meeting tonight.

Melissa Foxytail – Cody's furry girlfriend, she dresses as a fox furry. She is very protective of Cody, helps calm him when he has one of his many panic attacks.

Knitting Grandma (aka Alien Grandma) and her cat Mr. Pouncey Pants

- **Personality:** grandmotherly – wants companionship so steals characters from ultranet universes – keeps them in her knitted knitting tower and makes them wear her creations. Likes to feed her captives mushroom soup and candy. She has foul smelling gas.
- **Accessories:** Never ending bag of yarn for her knitting. Knitted rocking chair with multi-colored wings, it floats and is how she moves around. Knitted cottage and knitted tower to keep her captives.
- **Mr. Pouncey Pants** a grey cat, likes to play with the balls of yarn, unraveling them. Knitting Grandma pokes her walking stick at him to shoo him away, and then repairs any damage, then gives him treats and he takes a nap on her lap. He is rather sophisticated and business like with the guests.

Why/How are they meeting: A parallel universes portal opened during a spectacular show of the Arora Borealis which Alien Grandmother causes to happen when she points her knitting rods, one towards the moon, the other towards the sun, and knits the light rays together into a portal dragging unsuspecting victims to her lair.

Game Land:

- **Location:** Lush nature – bright colors,
- **Mushrooms** are abundant and useful for different purposes, they line pathways, and can provide insight, and wisdom, they can give direction and advice, but only in daylight.
- **Objective:** Princess Bunselda must get to the yarn tower to rescue captives being held by Knitting Grandma, and she must get them back to the portal to Earth before it closes. She will face many obstacles and must choose the right path to gain levels in order to get to the tower.
- **Animals:** Tree squirrels (cute, but vicious) can be killed by laser shots from Princess Bunselda's fingertips. Their fur is brightly colored, they have spikey horns and sharp teeth, and anger easily if you get too close to their trees. Most dangerous at night.
- **Bugs:** Lantern bugs that are a cross between a mosquito and a firefly, they inject a poison that makes you blow up if you get bit three times (end life)
- **Traps:** Knitting Grandma captures people from the portals. She puts knitted traps along the trails (hard to see the traps in the dark).
- **Player gets three lives attempted each path/level.**

Goal of Game:

- Princess Bunselda must rescue the furry's from Alien Grandmothers knitted tower, and get the furry's to the portal before it closes

Storyline:

After an amazing first date at Retches (their college café) Cody Charles Furlington & Melissa Foxytail meet up on campus to attend a weekly Furry Club meeting, but as they approached the doorway to enter room 105 in Burdock Hall, a circle of glowing light appeared on the doorframe and they were soon sucked into a portal to an ultranet universe by a strong magnetic force. The vortex of blue-green and purple light had them flipping head over tail, and they were being pelted by some sort of sandy grit. Instantly Cody's anxiety acted up and he began meowing. Their bodies pulsed with the magnetic waves they were falling sideways, with nothing to hold onto. Minds racing, trying to grasp what was happening. Melissa grabbed Cody's hand in hers softly stroking his paw. Her thoughts raced to their date last night, remembering how cute he looked as he nervously started mewling and batting around the peas that had fallen off of her plate with his hands fashioned in paw form. It was the first time she

actually felt a connection with someone on a date, it was love at first sight, soulmates. How could something so good turn so bad so quickly. What was happening?

There was no time to freak-out though because as suddenly as they were sucked in, they were thrust back out, landing softly onto a pile of what looked like some sort of webbed ivy. They were no longer in the building, they were outside, but this place was not on campus. Nothing made sense. Nothing looked real, the colors drably bright. Eyes full of dust they blinked trying to clear their vision, desperately trying to grasp what they were seeing. The sandy grit that surrounded them in the portal had turned to powder, then mist, then disappeared. In a world beyond their understanding they clung to each other for support and comfort.

Melissa noticed there was a pond 200 feet away, thirsty from the dusty ride they went to get a drink, but the water was so odd, it was pink, and though there was a water fall, they were afraid to even touch this liquid strangeness. Looking back they noticed that even the ivy they'd landed in was a dusty blue color, the shade of a summer sky, to the left of them was a grassy field, but the grass was a shimmery scarlet color. Cody shook his head and started to blink his eyes then something really strange happened. He sneezed and turned into a cat. An orange and white cat with brilliant green eyes. Melissa shook her head to try to clear her mind, thinking the dust must have distorted her ability to discern colors, and the stress of all this was causing her delusions. She whispered to herself, "where the hell are we?" That's when she looked up and noticed the trees were covered in leaves in the most beautiful shades of pink and purple and glowing with some sort of green slime. And there were trails lined with brilliantly colored mushrooms. Cody glitched back to human form, and that is when they hear it. A cackle.

The sound was coming from above, through the trees. It seemed to be an old lady in a rocking chair wearing a giant mushroom hat, with a multicolored knitted blanket on her lap. She was knitting something, working her nettles quickly, then dropped it down towards them. It was a ladder. She was saying something to them, but it was just a bunch of weird sounds she made with her mouth, click, click, pop, cackle, hum, hum, blurp, zip, clang, cackle, cackle cackle.

On top of her mushroom hat sat a grey cat, with blue luminescence tips on his fur. He shouted to us, "she is saying that she wants you to climb onto the ladder, she will get you out of here".

Hesitantly, they climbed up the ladder. The old woman smiled her wiggly tooth smile at them and said “beep beep”, and with that her flying rocking chair made a sound of a car backfiring, took off like a shot. She dropped the two of them off at a knitted tower, and the cat escorted them inside, saying to them “I’m Mr. Pouncey pants, but you can call me Pouncey. As they ascended the knitted web of a staircase Cory turned to Melissa and said “Well, this sure is a crazy dream?” As they enter the top room of the tower, Mr. Pouncey Pants gives them a quick overview of where things are. “Make yourselves at home, there is water and snacks in the fridge, and Knitting Grandma will be bringing some blankets to you shortly, please read the rule book” and he pointed to a large book on the dressing table, then vanished. Soon they realized they were locked in the knitted tower, no way out, just a few windows to look out of, but no way out, they were up too high. It would seem the lonely old woman wants to keep them as pets.

The rule book: Yes, the pink water is potable, enjoy. All your needs will be met. All snacks and meals provided and newly knitted clothing will be brought to you daily. You will enjoy daily walks with grandmother, but you must be leashed. You may take evening tea with Mr. Pouncey Pants. He enjoys playing board games as I’m sure you will too. Enjoy your stay, and don’t try to get away.

“What the Fuck?” Cory starts glitching and meowing. Melissa tries to figure a way out of this place, but where will they go?

When Melissa was reading the rule book the back cover slide loose, and in the back of the rule book, penciled on the inside back of the cover was a note that read, Don’t fret, Princess Bunselda will find you and get you back to the portal, just play the games with the cat until she arrives, don’t let the cat know you found this note.

