



INCITE 2019

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Paul Keery, our 2019 INCITE Judge, is a professional writer with many years of experience writing articles and blog posts about business, education, history, information technology, and law.

A Message to Our Authors

How many times have you liked the characters in a story or movie so much that you want to hear more stories about them? But there aren't any more. So you start writing your own stories about them. Welcome to the world of fan fiction!

Fan fiction writing is often derided and despised as lazy and unimaginative. Critics often say beginning writers should create their own characters and plots.

But learning how to plot, to create strong characters and to 'tell, not show' isn't easy. One of the best ways to develop these skills is to follow another creator's template and see how it works – and how it doesn't. An audience already exists for these characters, and they will be quick to tell you how well you're doing.

Many professional writers started out as fan writers. As they mastered their craft, they wanted to work with their own characters and ideas, to tell stories that couldn't or shouldn't be told in another creator's world. So they moved on to create their own characters and worlds so they could tell their own stories.

Who knows? Maybe some of the contributors to this volume will become the authors whose professional work we will enjoy in years to come. If they do, remember — they got their start writing fan fiction.

Very Best,
Paul Keery

Message from the Conference Host: MacLachlan College

MacLachlan College is proud to host CITE 2019 with the theme “Interweaving the Strands (Startling Discoveries Often Result).” The theme began as a conversation in an English Department meeting around the topic of intertextuality. What is it exactly? It seemed to us something more than allusion and something less than plagiarism. At some point, however, the ideas really took off, and we arrived at the notion that literature itself is a vast intertextual network, perhaps even an emergent intelligence! We were just getting on to Marshall McLuhan when ... the bell rang.

Nevertheless, the initial explosion got the rocket moving in the right direction. By “strands,” we imagined as the curriculum strands of speaking, reading, writing and media study; the strands of conversation, observation and product; the strands of thinking, feeling, action, and reflection. By “interweaving,” we imagined something intertextual (of course), something hands-on, something vital being woven into eclectic fabric in a teaching and learning situation. The “startling discoveries” came when we saw the wide range of fascinating workshops that grew around the theme. And so, it is to the workshop facilitators that we offer our first thanks.

As for the writing prompt, the theme seemed best expressed by fan fiction. Spock meets Stranger Things meets A Star is Born. We knew that our judge, author and journalist Paul Keery, was well suited for the task. He is man with an abiding interest in pop culture and an encyclopedic knowledge of it. Thank-you for your discernment, Paul. We are also very thankful for the student authors who wrote their passion, as well as for their teachers who guided the process with editorial delicacy. Moreover, we are thankful for Adrian Hoad-Reddick and his expert craft at editing, designing and producing this 10th anniversary volume.

Continuing in this vein, we are indebted to the ongoing efforts of the CITE executive for making the conference and the InCITE collection a reality. We know that they are driven by the belief that English education matters deeply. Moreover, we are grateful for the fundamental support that CIS Ontario provides.

Finally, many thanks are due to our team at MacLachlan whose vision and attention to detail made working on this year's conference so gratifying: Heather Birnie, Michael Piening, Samantha Brewer, Lisa Thompson, Lauren Granville, Brad McFarlane, Martha Bonner and, in particular, Leslie Leys.

Gregory J. Dominato | CITE 2019 Organizer
CITE Conference 2019, MacLachlan College



Interweaving the Strands (Startling Discoveries Often Result)

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Table of Contents

Grades 7 & 8 Fan Fiction

6	Andrew Kang Star Wars: In Defense of Superweapons
11	Katie Fruitman Ponyboy and The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat
16	Angela Duan Escape from the Cloud Kingdom
20	John Zhongyang Hu The Star
24	Neha Daswani Sweet Revenge

- 29 Sofia Dawson | The Person That I Thought I Was, The Girl I Used to Know
- 34 Alina Wang | Agent 3'S Journal Logbook
- 39 Saira Luthra | A Hobbit's Fate
- 44 Joni Maguire | Two Wolves
- 50 Mia Kohn | The Wake of His Dreams
- 51 Ammie Dai | Tom.
- 56 Simon Cox | The Unwanteds Fan Fiction: Quill's Revival
- 62 Emilia Melardi | A Tale From Asgaard In Hel

Grades 9 & 10 Fan Fiction

- 67 Jensen Timmins | Escape to Sealand
- 73 Kathryn Tuns | The Wait
- 77 Diba Dindoust | Gone with the Wind Fan Fict

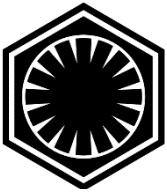
82-101 a gallery of visual art and photography

- 102 Luc Forbes | The Call
- 104 Daniel Ma | Dead Eyes Leave No Stories
- 111 Amy Nam | Modern Family Pre-Pilot – The Dunphy's First Day of School
- 114 Angela Yang | The Adventurous Train
- 119 Grace Geng | Sustaining Shadows
- 125 Trevor Phillips | Lord of the Flies Fan Fiction: Maelstrom

Grades 11 & 12 Fan Fiction

- 128 Serendipity Holloway | Minerva McGonagall
- 133 Hillary Krofchak | Fanfiction sonnet sequence: "Night in the Woods" video game
- 136 Georgia Gardner | Cutting The Strings
- 141 Adia Sisson | Harry Potter and the Abused Boy, Chapter 1
- 146 Hannah Weiss | slow dancing in a burning room
- 150 Annabel Devlin | The Princess Bride: The Sequel
- 157 Ben Laurin | Fanfic Short
- 162 Jace Jaeden Ellis | A Shocking Revenge
- 167 Carly White | The Offred Before

STAR WARS: In Defense of Superweapons



To: First Order High Command
From: Admiral Radiin Piett of the 7th Fleet
Regarding: Starkiller Base Proposition
Date: 25 ABY (Galactic Standard)

With the proposal of General Hux's project to build Starkiller Base, the first superweapon since both Death Stars, I have heard concerns from officers across the branches of our military arguing against the development of another superweapon. Citing the first and second Death Stars, they have taken the view that these superweapons have caused nothing but trouble for the Empire and are not worth even a fraction of the credits spent on them. Given the end results of both projects, they could hardly be scorned for these viewpoints. However, having served as an officer in the Imperial Navy since it's conception, I hold a far different viewpoint of such superweapons. Based on my personal experience in the Empire, I believe that such a weapon, if implemented properly, can become the backbone of our new order. In this analysis I assert that the Death Stars' failures were the result of human error; that the chaos after the destruction of the first and second Death Stars was the result of losing key personnel and not the result of losing the battle stations; and that superweapons are necessary to ensure a lasting galactic order.

Root Cause behind the Death Stars' Failure:

To begin, we must establish why the Death Stars failed. Contrary to the consensus, the failure of these superweapons cannot be blamed on flaws in the technical design but rather major mistakes of the construction and command personnel.

The poor leadership demonstrated by Director Krennic and later Moff Jerjerrod during the construction of both Death Stars, was one of the most humiliating blunders in Imperial history, and the final designs of both battle stations exist as exemplars of this failure. Director Krennic, during his time overseeing the first Death Star, made blunder after blunder. He allowed Galen Erso, a kyber-crystal specialist and known rebel sympathizer to contribute to portions of the project outside of his expertise. While admittedly Galen Erso could not be executed because of his importance to the development of the super laser, there was no reason for him to be allowed to participate in other sections of the project. Director Krennic ignored common reason and the result was that “[Galen Erso] used [his] position to implement a weakness into the superweapon” (*Galen Erso, OBBY*). Despite having learnt from Director Krennic’s errors, Moff Jerjerrod yielded similar results to his predecessor. Even though he did not recruit treasonous engineers into the project, his timetable for the project had misordered the priorities of the project. He prioritized the exterior plating over the super-laser over securing the reactor. This compromised the late Emperor Sheev Palpatine’s planned ambush entrapment maneuver against the Empire. By choosing to prioritize the completion of other parts of the Death Star over securing the reactor from starfighters, he allowed for the reactor to be detonated. This, according to Imperial analysts, “was the turning tide that lost the Imperial forces the Battle of Endor” (5ABY).

Even given the defects of the architects of both superweapons, the leadership commanding the Death Stars was equally at fault. In both the first and second Death Stars, the leadership commanding the station could deploy

forces to compensate for the station's technical flaws but chose not to. Under Governor Tarkin, the Death Star I did not launch any defense against the rebellion fighters during the Battle of Yavin; he was blinded a belief that Death Star was invincible. This, as General Tagge, the eventual Grand General of the Imperial Military would remark, "was the key factor contributing to [the Death Star's] destruction" (0ABY). In spite of having already witnessed the consequence of underestimating the rebellion, the Empire repeated its old tactics during the Battle of Endor. Moff Jerjerrod, who was in command of the superweapon, chose to fire indiscriminately rather than targeting key rebel vessels. In the worst-case scenario, a change in these tactics would have allowed the Empire to at least limit the rebels to a pyrrhic victory. Instead, the rebels humiliated the Imperials in command of the Endor-Defense fleet. This humiliation gave the galaxy the disastrous belief that the Empire could be easily overthrown, and this very belief eventually led to the Empire's downfall.

After analyzing the poor decisions made across the construction and command personnel from both Death Stars, it comes to light that the failure rests not with the battle stations themselves. The true error on the Empire's part was appointing incompetent politicians and architects rather than admirals and other military personnel to command the battle stations.

Cause of Chaos from the Destruction of the Death Stars:

Aside from fatal vulnerabilities, another concern that many admirals and generals have is that the massive amount of credits invested into superweapons coincides their destruction with the fall of the First Order. However, the aftermath suggests that the chaos after the destruction of the first and second Death Stars was the result of losing key personnel and not the result of losing the battle stations.

With the destruction of the first Death Star, the Imperial Military was thrown into disorder. With numerous key leaders falling in the line of duty,

the military struggled to reorganize its power structure. However, it should be noted that chaos was not caused by the loss of billions of credits but rather by the loss of key leadership after its destruction. In a communique to Cienna Ree, an ISB agent noted that "... [following the loss] of key personnel, the Imperial Navy, in [its bureaucratic chaos] ..." (1ABY). This message was one of many similar communiques sent between officers then. Notwithstanding this chaos, the Empire was able to recover quickly - they struck a decisive blow against the rebels three years later during the Battle of Hoth. This continued to hold true for the second Death Star where, of the many loss suffered during the Battle of Endor, the most significant was the tragic death of the icons of the empire: Emperor Sheev Palpatine and Lord Vader. Had they survived, the Imperial Civil War leading to the rebellion's eventual usurpation of power, would have never occurred. Gallius Rax, commander of the Imperial Remnant remarked that "had Palpatine not died, [I would have not] needed to [reunify] the Empire" (5ABY).

It was the loss of key personnel that resulted in the chaos after the destruction of the first and second Death Stars. Such consequences would be identical regardless of whether they were stationed on a corvette or an executor-class star destroyer.

Fundamental Philosophy of Superweapons:

Overlooking the previous arguments, the quintessential intension behind the construction of superweapons is their ability to consolidate a government's power to deliver stable order to their subjects. The Tarkin Doctrine, from which both we and our predecessor based our political decisions, states that:

"...This natural state can be exploited to a far greater degree, as the average citizen deals in symbols, not rational analysis. If we present the galaxy with a weapon so powerful, so immense as to defy all conceivable opposition against it, a weapon invulnerable and invincible in battle, then that weapon

shall become the symbol of the Empire. We need only a handful, perhaps as few as one, of these weapons to subjugate a thousand worlds. It must have force enough to dispatch an entire system, power enough to shatter planets. The fear such a weapon will inspire will be great enough for you to rule the galaxy unchallenged..." (*Tarkin Doctrine: Paragraph 9, Wilhuff Tarkin*)

If we wish to return to the glory of our predecessors, we must secure absolute order over the galaxy. However, we lack the resources of the old Empire, and even then, our predecessors were never able to hold order through sheer military size; they relied on fear. If we wish to continue following Tarkin Doctrine's philosophy, we must continue possessing a weapon that can bring such fear. Among all feasible options, a superweapon is the ideal choice.

Conclusion and Recommendation:

Super weapons are essential to secure peace and stability for the next millennia. Of all the failures in the previous Death Star projects, none of them were inherent flaws in the philosophy, but the result of human error. Therefore, the debate should not concern whether we should construct such a weapon but rather who we should employ to construct and command the said weapon.

I have absolute confidence that General Hux will serve as a great architect of this next generation superweapon. Of all the human errors I have outlined, there have been none which General Hux has not corrected: he has already included an impenetrable shield to minimize the potential for human errors, and the minimalization of leadership on said superweapon will minimize the harm done to the First Order, should the station ever be destroyed.

I advocate, for these reasons, that the High Command fully commit all resources to the realization of an instrumental order.

**Background Information: Admiral Radiin Piett, is an imaginary figure inspired from Admiral Firmus Piett's son in LEGENDS (which is no longer canon).

Ponyboy and The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat

Darry, Soda and me sat staring at the countertop. Everyone was quiet. We had just been to our parents' funeral. That was a lot to swallow. Suddenly, a sore headache hit me. It was what they called a let down headache. I was letdown alright.

"Hey Ponyboy, we ought to get out of here," Soda couldn't sit straight. "Let's go to The Dingo."

"Sure," I agreed.

"Darry, ya comin'?" Soda grinned.

"Nah," That was all Darry said. He didn't even get on us about being back on time.

"What's up with Darry?" I asked. Soda's hands were smooth against the wheel.

"He's just sad is all."

I didn't tell Soda the rest on my mind. It seemed that things were getting worse. Since Darry started taking care of us, he had started brooding. He was probably still sitting there, staring at the countertop.

Me and Soda started towards The Dingo. A rumble had broken out so I came near the crowd to get a better view. Soda had gone to get us Cokes.

"You think you're so great but you ain't seen nothin' when it comes to the rough breaks." A greaser started. A'ight. So put down your beer and brave it out!" The greaser drew a silver knife from his pocket and aimed it towards the wrist of the Mick, but he didn't make it. The Mick threw a punch in mid-

air, clobbering the greaser's chest.

The crowd roared. I didn't really know what to make of the rumble. It seemed that the Mick and the greaser fought for the fun of it but when it comes to a rumble no one is really at fault.

Suddenly, a tall Soc approached me. Not now, I thought.

"Greaser, that's a nice ponytail you got. Real tough." The Soc's friends laughed. They were probably thinking of what I would say next, but I knew better than that.

I observed the Soc. He wore madras and khaki and two leather oxfords that looked like they were given to him by his father, or something like that. He was about six feet tall with an athletic build. In his left hand he wore a leather glove.

"You better not leave me hanging. What do you think, boys? If he don't talk, what should we do with him?" At this point, he was trying to get a rise out of me.

Soda walked over to the Soc with two Coke bottles. "Don't you be talkin' to my kid brother like that."

The Soc pressed his fingers together. "We have a foul one here." The other Socs laughed.

Sodapop dropped the Coke bottles and grabbed the Soc's shirt. He cursed under his breath. Whatever he said was enough to make the Soc pull out a knife.

"Take this!" He said, and swiftly cut Soda's forearm.

We ran to our Ford as quick as we could. Blood was dripping down Soda's arm as he climbed to the wheel.

"Shoot!" he yelled. "We're being followed."

I looked behind me. The Socs were trailing behind us in their mighty tuff Corvair. I reckoned the Soc didn't like to be stood up.

We took a detour. Soda swerved to the right ever so slightly and did the same to the left. Eventually we made it to the east side.

"I think we distracted ourselves." Soda managed.

I couldn't help but smile.

When we got home, Johnny was waiting for me on our the front steps. "How you holdin' up?" He asked. "Fine," I said, but I wasn't. I didn't want my parents' deaths on my mind.

"Johnny, you'll never believe what happened," I started, trying to change the subject. I told him about the car chase. About that tuff Corvair, Soda's big swerve and all of the excitement. What I didn't tell him is that I hadn't ever really had a run in with the Socs. Sure, I had been jumped the odd time. I always got those disapproving looks while I was at school, but I never knew the feeling of white trash.

Johnny grinned at the excitement of the car chase, then seemed to read the scare on my face. We really did talk without saying nothin'.

"Do you think I could sleep here tonight?" Johnny paused, "The old man was worse today," his face started to make that puppy eyed expression.

"Of course" I was quick to say. "You know our door is always unlocked."

"Thanks, Ponyboy." Johnny let out a quick smile, one that I knew meant our friendship would stand the test of time. "You know, your mother and father both had a sort of light in their eyes." Johnny paused for a minute, "I've never seen that in my folks."

I was starting to regret letting Johnny stay the night. He was supposed to make me feel better but instead he was almost talking to himself.

"Well, Johnny," I began, but then I saw Johnny's eyes widen. "What is it?"

"It's your mom," Johnny gasped, "And your pa. Ponyboy, look!"

"Johnnycake, shut your trap! My parents are gone and you might as well believe it. I didn't even wanna talk about them dyin' anyway. Johnny, you've gone haywire!"

Johnny just pointed before I stopped to look.

I was in disbelief. Words couldn't even describe how I felt. About two feet away from me Mom and Dad were walking towards me. My parents had come back from the dead. Was I dreaming? I was too happy to care.

I called on Darry and Soda.

My parents walked towards me in an unreal moment. I pressed my hands against Dad's shirt and tugged Mom's hand around mine. I had missed them long enough. We just stood there for a moment. They had only been in front of me for five minutes and yet, I knew things would go back to the way they were before they had died.

Suddenly, Sodapop and Darry emerged from the house.

"How?" Darry gasped. He came to join in.

"Jesus Christ," Soda grinned the biggest grin I had ever seen. Only, of course he had to open his damn mouth. "How is this even possible? I saw your bodies right before my eyes. Now, you ain't gonna tell me this is some kind of joke? Are you? Because--"

"Pepsi-Cola," Dad began to say, "Some things are better left unsaid."

Soda started to cry. I cried too. I hadn't heard Dad speak in months. Mom didn't even talk. All she did was flash her golden smile. That was enough for me. As far as I knew, Mom, Dad and Jesus were the only ones who came back from the grave.

Johnny broke the silence. "Well Mr. and Mrs. Curtis, it's real nice to see y'all. I was gonna spend the night here but you probably want some time with your gang."

"Don't be silly, Johnny," Mom's lips had moved.

Six hours after the most unreal moment of my life, Johnny and I were lying in bed. I still had so many questions but I was just happy to have my parents back.

"You awake, Ponyboy?" Johnny asked me.

"Yeah, I reckon I won't be able to sleep for awhile." I replied.

"Is it just me, or is there somethin' outside the window? Ponyboy, look! There's something out there."

I rolled my eyes.

"C'mon Ponyboy, I wasn't lyin' the first time around. Look!"

We both screamed as we heard the glass break. The Soc with the leath-

er glove was in my room. What was he doing here?

“Listen, greasers. Now I’ve been tryin’ all day to find you and it looks like my hard work has paid off. Which one of you wants to try me first?” He pulled out his shiny blade.

Johnny and I stood our ground. There was one of him and two of us. We could easily defeat the Soc.

Suddenly Dad opened the door. “Get out of my house, you Soc!” He said. You better get out this minute, or I’m callin’ the fuzz,” Dad hated the Socs as much as we did.

“Fine then, Pop. Let’s have it your way. I want the grease with the pony gone.”

I dashed as fast as I could, thinking I could take him down. It was too late. He drew his knife real close and before I knew it, Johnny and Dad were in my way. The Soc was real fiery and we were no match for him.

I started wailing but it was no use, “No, not Dad! Not Johnny!”

Dad started to make his way up, but Johnny was bleeding by the chest.

“No, not Johnny!” I couldn’t stop. I had already gained two back today, I wasn’t about to lose one. “Not Johnny!”

The Soc’s glove was covered in Johnny’s blood. “Bloody murder!” I screamed. Bloody murder!”

Sodapop touched my forehead. “Easy, Ponyboy. It was only a dream. Dad ain’t here.”

“Bloody murder! Not Johnny...” I whispered.

Escape from the Cloud Kingdom

Skyfire woke suddenly, panting. His head hurt and it pounded like he had been holding his breath for a long time. Where am I? What happened? He looked around, squinting at the bright, harsh sunlight that shone from the sky. He was in a bar cage about four wings length on each side with a solid, but light material for a floor. And around him, the horizon was filled with endless clouds.

On his left was a dead eagle and some berries: his capturer wanted him to stay alive. On his right was a weird leaf-shaped object that looked very familiar. Not even bothering to sniff at the food, he sat up slowly and went straight to the leaflike object and held it up to the sun to examine it carefully. It was white and bleached, and on it in black, messy, rotting patterns wrote far left, bottom corner. The command was simple enough, but something else bothered him. He had seen something like this before when he was finding a place to make a village for hybrid dragons.

He and his friends are hybrids, cast out of their tribes to places like Possibility and Sanctuary. Their goal is not to make a village out of hope or refuge, but to make a place where any dragon could live comfortably without having to be looked down on. Skyfire was looking around the Diamond Spray River when he found a leaf that looked very similar to the leaf with the clue. So that's where I recognized the leaf from, he thought.

Skyfire tried to remember which direction the leaf was pointing towards before he moved it. It should be facing the door so he went to the far left, bottom corner of the door. On the corner of the platform, right outside the cage, there was a little cylindrical package made with the same solid, light material as the floor, and a chain link connecting it to the cage. He dragged the chains inside and unhooked the package. Opening the package, he found

a key and a note, with a map on the back saying: Sorry for doing this. Please use the back to escape and get out of here before your interrogation tomorrow. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.

Swift! Skyfire suddenly recalled. It looked exactly like Swift's handwriting; he's seen it once before. Skyfire found her not too far from the weird leaf reaching up to grab something, but as soon as she saw him, she darted away. The only thing that she left was a stone that was etched with her writing.

"Wait!" Skyfire yelled, running after her: "I only want to talk!"

Skyfire chased her through the trees, but she was very agile and soon was out of sight. Skyfire really wanted to talk to her because her scale color was very interesting and exotic. She looked like a cloudwing; the tribe of dragons that had formed before the war of the sandwing succession. But noone has seen one in over 21 years so they were thought to be extinct. They were actually a skywing-rainwing hybrid, but they became their own species soon after.

He cut straight ahead in hopes of catching up to her, but she just swerved away. Skyfire lept on a tree to try to find her direction better. The leaves rustled where she ran. He chased her into a cave, but as she was running, she stubbed her claw and it was bleeding. He rushed over and examined her claw like any nice dragon would do, but she pulled away.

Now Skyfire could see her more clearly. She was a pale blue colour like clouds with veins of gold coiling around the horns and spreading to the huge wings and long, prehensile tail. She was sleek and looked swift, and her piercing gold eyes shone in defiance.

"Hey, are you okay? I just wanted to talk," Skyfire huffed. He took out a leaf wrap from one of his pockets and wrapped it around her talon. "You are so fast. What tribe of dragon are you?"

"You're not getting anything out of me!" she snarled.

"Are you a cloudwing?"

"How did you know!? And why do you care? It's none of your business!"

"I read about your kind from a..."

Suddenly, Swift's gold armband flashed and her eyes shot up in alarm.

"Quickly, hide somewhere!" she looked very worried. "It's the queen!"

Right after Skyfire ducked under a staticlite, the queen went up in a projection against the cave wall. He heard Swift and the queen talk for a bit before there was a long pause followed by the queen's angry voice.

"Why is there a skywing sneaking on you!?" the queen roared.

Skyfire sighed. There was no need to hide from the queen now. He was never good at hide-and-seek or any of those games.

"Hi, your majesty," Skyfire bowed. "I am Skyfire of the mixwings."

"So there's a new hybrid tribe now, huh?" the Queen smirked.

"Yes, your majesty."

"Well you're not gonna survive for long!" the Queen shouted.

"But your highness..."

"Swift! Lock him in the cloudbottom prison, now! I'll interrogate him later."

Skyfire gasped back into the present, trying to breathe in the thin air: the altitude was really high. His head swirled and throbbed and he was swaying. He needed to get out of there soon or else he would faint and suffocate. Skyfire slowly walked to the door and used the key to unlock his cage.

Outside, he saw that the cage was connected to the main stronghold by a chain link. There were not any guards in sight, - probably because nobody could get to them - only a few cloudwings gathering the stray clouds. It was hard for Skyfire to hide, and even harder to stay afloat, but then he saw a huge stormcloud that was about a dozen dragons length apart.

With a burst of speed, Skyfire shot out of his prison cell and flew to the stormcloud as fast as he could. He was almost there until someone knocked him down onto a platform and pinned him to the ground. He stared right into the sky blue eyes of an angry, snarling cloudwing. But he was only shocked for a second, and then he easily knocked the light skywing guard out of his way. As soon as he was done, he knew he had made the wrong

move because now he was surrounded by a group of guards, one of which was Swift.

Swift caught Skyfire's eye, and looked at him sympathetically. She didn't just want to save him, she also had feelings for him.

"Attack!" the lead cloudwing yelled. All of them swarmed in and Skyfire waited for many small, but ferocious bodies to knock him down, but that didn't happen. Instead, Swift knocked two cloudwings down with her tail and clawed another in the face, giving time for Skyfire to escape. At almost the same time, Skyfire and Swift took to the air and flew into the stormcloud to be concealed. Skyfire's wings could almost not keep up and he was out of breath just from the skirmish, so his wings gave in. But just in time, Swift got a chunk of cloud and spit something black on the cloud, and made a platform under him. Skyfire looked at her questionally.

"Anything that's solid up here is made with cloudstuff," she replied. Skyfire could see the cloudwing guards coming in the distance.

"So that explains the white leaf that was rotting," Skyfire huffed. The guards were getting closer.

"Before I go, I just wanted to tell you that I'm an animus. The gold armband..."

"...was enchanted by animus magic!" Skyfire finished.

"Run far away and don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Swift pushed Skyfire off the platform just as the cloudwing guards landed. Skyfire opened his wings and soared away. He hoped that Swift was right about her being okay. He risked a glance back and saw her being carried away.

Skyfire still had so many questions. How did their venom work? What happened so that they had to take refuge in the clouds? And how was he going to rescue Swift? He needed to save Swift because somewhere deep inside him, he knew that she was very important to the prophecy. He glided in the direction of Possibility, hoping to find some of his friends to help save Swift.

The Star

The season was in the air at Whoville, the town of the Whos. The calendar rejoiced as its days were checked off, one by one. Bells joyously rang as the hour hand on the clock tower struck 7. It proclaimed “Christmas, it is Christmas time” The Whos danced and laughed, their hearts merry. Lights were strung up, garlands of festive lights and brilliant ribbon. Light, fluffy snow fell, a carpet of white covering the dark green forest. The Yuletide scent wafted into every Whos home, a mouth-watering aroma. Resounding through the town, a distinctive sound was heard. It was a remarkable sound, not one sound but many. Loud sounds, singing sounds, instrument sounds, a Christmas sound. In the heart of Whoville stood the Christmas tree, its grandeur towering over the surrounding mountains. The Whos each hung an ornament after much tippy toeing and standing on each other.

Wrapped in velvet and strings of lights, the tree twinkled. Something was missing, where was the star? Was it lost? Missing? What would Christmas be without a star? Luckily, the star was found intact under the tree. Relieved, the Who’s placed the star on the pinnacle of the tree. Shining brightly in the splendor of the world. The star hung in the sky, captivating all. Slowly but surely, the Whos gathered around the tree in their faded Sunday clothes. Old and young, tall and small, rich and poor. They stood hand in hand around the star, a circle of unity, of love. They began to sing with voices of angels. The beautiful pure sound echoed across the mountains, reaching all. Including the Grinch. Sitting on his mountaintop, his hands over his green ears, closing his eyes. The Grinch tried to keep the noise out, but it found a way to sneak in. He covered his eyes, but he couldn’t resist peeking. His heart beat quicker and quicker. Thump, Thump. The anger he had holed up in the void of his heart now exploded. 53 years, he had put up with this Christmas. I’ve had enough

of this, I must end Christmas once and for all thought the Grinch. But how? He scratched his head, thinking. As the sun glinted off the star, the Grinch thought and had an idea. A horrible idea.

The Grinch trudged off to Whoville to carry out his plan. Passing animals took flight as they saw him. Shivering, he pulled his red scarf around his neck. He approached the town which was alight with Christmas. A Who patted the bench and while frantically looking around, asked "Have you seen my cane?" The Grinch grabbed the cane from underneath the bench, snapping it like a twig. "Here it is" he said, handing the splintered pieces to her. Looking at the dismal on the Who's face, the Grinch felt a pang of guilt, but he shook the feeling away. Ears covered, he skulked to the town square. Frost covered the windows, and icicles hung from the houses. Bright, happy music floated into his ears. A group of Whos went from house to house, joyfully singing. The Grinch put his hands over his ears, annoyed by the music.

In a rush, he stumbled over something, his feet went flying and he tasted the cold snow in his mouth. Flustered, the Grinch shook the snow off his green coat and scowled at whatever had caused him to trip. A man knelt, trying to help the Grinch up. "Who are you" demanded the Grinch, standing up by himself. The man was dressed in an odd coat. "I am Ebenezer Scrooge" replied the man. Scrooge rubbed his eyes once; the strange creature was still there. He vigorously rubbed them again and blinked twice, the strange creature was still there. "Who are you or what are you?" inquired Scrooge, disbelief etched on his face. "I am the Grinch" replied the Grinch gruffly, annoyed by the delay. The man stood up, brushing away the snow. "How strange, I only remember that I was sitting on a bench when a wind carried me off" said the man. "A bell rang clearly in the distance as the short hand hit 9 on the tower, as if on cue, the carolers began to sing again. Scrooge cupped his hands around his ears, his neck outstretched "What is that sound I hear?" he asked. The Grinch turned and walked away, giving no heed to the man's questions. "Wait, I know what it is" declared Scrooge "Why, it sounds exactly like it's Christmas." The Grinch suddenly stopped walking and turned around. "Why

must you talk about Christmas” yelled the Grinch. “What is Christmas but a time of greed, why I’m going to stop Christmas once and for all!” Scrooge straightened his slightly crooked top hat “I used to hate Christmas! However, I realized that Christmas is about giving and community, it comes from other people”

At this time, the wind seemed to blow just a little quicker, a gust of wind engulfed both the grinch and Scrooge. All that was seen for moments were flashes of green and white. The gale slowly died down, its power exhausted. The Grinch and Scrooge found themselves standing in a narrow hall. The Grinch’s heart pounded quicker and his hands trembled. “No, it can’t be” said the Grinch, panicked. He saw a young orphan hesitantly take a step forward into the hall that was bare of Christmas. Outside, children played and laughed as they celebrated the holiday. The young orphan was by himself. He saw the young orphan stare through the hazy window. He saw his past self. “I once was an orphan myself, Mr. Grinch” said Scrooge, empathy in his voice.

Then the wind started again. His childhood flashed by in an indistinct tempest of wind. The wind settled down again as the Grinch and Scrooge found themselves standing in a neighborhood, the Grinch clenched his fists tightly as the other Who boys hurled snowballs at him. The furious wind started back up again, and the Grinch and Scrooge found themselves on his mountain cave. The grinch that he saw was a reflection. “Grinch you must not get angry” said Scrooge. “Leave me alone” yelled the Grinch.

The winds overtook the Grinch and Scrooge and the Grinch reappeared at the place where had first met Scrooge. “Christmas is not bad, Mr. Grinch” said Scrooge. “I know there’s some good hiding in you.” The Grinch did not hear him. His eyes glowered like burning, crimson ornaments, consumed by anger. Turning the other way, the Grinch began to run. His footsteps struck the ground stiffly, as his heart beat faster. He wanted to end Christmas, to stop it. His feet flew across the air and in a fit of rage, he crashed into the Christmas tree. It shook slightly, a rustling of the branch-

es and the star fell from its height, rapidly descending. Smashing onto the ground. It shattered into a million pieces, leaving shards and fragments. The Who's turned, staring at the Grinch, horrified.

Looking for a way to escape, the Grinch darted back the way he came from. He saw Scrooge and desperately wanted to ask him something. Furiously doubling his pace, the Grinch raced against time, against hope. Where had Scrooge gone? At that moment, the clock struck 12 and the bells sounded again. Ring, Ring, time had won the race. A gust of wind blew, and Scrooge bowed his hat to the Grinch disappeared, gone forever. Hope had vanished and the Grinch left glumly, his head hanging, tasting the bitter flavor of failure.

Preparing to cross the street, he saw an elderly Who unable to walk across the street. He reached his hand out and guided her across the street. Safely on the other side, she said "Thank you." Holding two pieces of wood in her hands, she left, leaving the Grinch standing there with his mouth wide open. He felt a strange tingly feeling inside of him. Suddenly it didn't feel so cold, it felt warm. His face relaxed and his eyes were calmer. The world opened its doors to the Grinch, embracing him. As he walked on the sidewalk, he reflected on what Scrooge had said. Maybe, Christmas isn't in presents or trees, it's found in the heart. Love and Joy comes from the people around us. Ring! Ring, the sound of the bells rang through the town square merrily. Old and young, tall and small, short and tall, Who and Grinch held hands together as they began to sing together. They seemed to glow with joy and hope. And as he sang, the Grinch's heart shone, a beacon of hope, a true star.

Sweet Revenge

A fan fiction based on the “Stranger Things” series.

As the clock struck 11 PM, and the Snow Ball ended, Eleven, Mike, Dustin, Will, Lucas, and Maxine decided to bike back to Will’s house and hang out together. An eerie calm prevailed over the empty streets of Hawkins. All that could be heard was the chirping sounds of crickets. After the group of friends reached home, they headed straight to the kitchen and raided the pantry for snacks and drinks. After grabbing what they needed, they decided to sit out on the porch, as they feared they might be too loud and accidentally disturb Will’s mother, Joyce Byers. As they were rushing out of the kitchen, Maxine tripped and grabbed onto the handle of the fridge door for support. “Ow!” she cried, “That hurt!”

“Are you okay?” Lucas asked, “You’d better be careful.”

“I’m fine,” she responded as she got her balance back and rushed to join her friends, not realizing that she had left the fridge door ajar.

They arranged the chairs in a small circle and huddled up in warm blankets as they gossiped about the dance. The group was having a great time as they joked around, and in particular poked fun at Dustin who danced with Nancy. Exhausted, with everyone taking a turn to talk about the best part of the night, they soon fell asleep on the chairs outside.

As they slept, the cold winter sky became filled with an ominous red hue. A bolt of lightning lit up the night sky and within seconds a boom of thunder reverberated overhead as the Shadow Monster appeared. The Shadow Monster entrapped Eleven with one of its appendages, exactly as it had captured Will months before. The Shadow Monster now had complete control over Eleven’s mind and body, a formidable danger as the monster now

had access to Eleven's super human powers. No one was aware that she had been possessed. With Eleven's power along with its own, nothing would be able to stand in its path of total destruction. The Shadow Monster was hungry... for revenge.

As the next few days passed, Maxine, Dustin, Lucas, Will, Mike and Eleven met more often as they were on Christmas holidays. The group had begun to notice that Eleven was acting a little strange. "Is it just me, or has Eleven been acting a little odd lately," Mike whispered to Dustin and Lucas.

"Lately? She's always been a weirdo," Dustin smirked.

"Dustin! Stop joking around! I'm worried about her," responded Mike.

The following morning, Alex, the paperboy went out on his morning routine delivering papers to the residents of Hawkins. When he did not return from his delivery route, his mom got worried. She called his friends to ask if anyone had seen him, but no one had; Alex was unaccounted for. A couple of days later, the attendant at the gas station just outside town was also reported missing.

The mood of the holiday season turned somber as fear began to ripple through the town of Hawkins; day after day people went missing or were found dead. The Hawkins police searched for evidence, however there was none to be found. There was no broken glass, no signs of a forced entry, no tire tracks, no fingerprints, no blood, no signs of struggle — nothing. Based on this and his past experience, the Chief of Police, Jim Hopper, pieced together that the attacks were related to the Shadow Monster.

Hopper decided to share his suspicion with Joyce Byers, as it was her son who had been taken by the Shadow Monster months ago. On his way home from the police station he stopped by the Byers' house and knocked on the door. "Hey Joyce, can I speak with you for a few minutes?" Hopper asked.

"Sure, come on in," Joyce said as she motioned for him to come inside.

Hopper made himself comfortable on the sofa and remarked, "I have a strong feeling that the Shadow Monster is behind the attacks in the city."

"What makes you think that?" Joyce asked in a trembling voice.

“There was absolutely no evidence at the attack scenes. If a human was behind these attacks, they would have definitely left some trail behind,” Hopper replied.

Joyce’s face turned pale. “How can the Shadow Monster still be connected to the outside world if the gate is closed and all the demo-dogs are dead?” she asked Hopper.

“I don’t know. As a matter of fact, I don’t even have any evidence that the Shadow Monster is responsible for these attacks. I am just trusting my instinct,” said Hopper.

Jonathan and Will overheard Joyce and Hopper’s conversation. Will immediately radioed his friends and called an emergency meeting at the park. When they met, Will shared what he had overheard at home. “Oh, Shoot!” Dustin exclaimed, “I had placed a dead demo-dog in Will’s fridge that night.”

“The cold temperature in the fridge must have revived the demo-dog,” they all muttered in unison. This meant that the Shadow Monster was still connected to the outside world.

Immediately, the group of friends rushed to Will’s house to confirm their suspicion. Their worst fears had come true — the fridge was empty. Panic-stricken, they decided to inform Hopper, confirming his suspicion that the Shadow Monster was behind the attacks.

At the police station Hopper was looking over footage from the security cameras at the scenes where the attacks had taken place. In one shot, Hopper noticed the reflection of a young girl in a window. He quickly reviewed all the footage again to scan the scenes before and after the attacks and observed the same girl in or around each scene. Although Hopper was unable to pinpoint who the girl was, his instincts made him suspect that the Shadow Master and the girl in the footage were somehow connected.

The attacks continued and became more and more frequent. The citizens of Hawkins demanded that the police act to protect the city. Hopper assured the public that the police were doing everything in their power to keep everyone in the city safe.

A few days later, a lady who had witnessed one of the attacks came to the police station. From her porch, she was able to take a clear picture of a girl who was present during the attack. Hopper recognized the girl as Eleven.

Hopper needed to save Eleven before it was too late. He headed to the Byers' residence where everyone, with the exception of Eleven, had gathered to discuss the attacks that had been occurring in the city. Hopper shared what he had pieced together thus far. Everyone was shocked and worried about Eleven. Hopper told the group that in order to defeat the Shadow Monster, they needed to take advantage of its weaknesses. Joyce suddenly recalled something that Bob had said to her in the past; the vines growing under the city were growing away from bodies of water. This led them to conclude that water was a weakness of the Shadow Monster. Nancy and Jonathan reminded everyone that they were able to help Will by exposing him to heat, which was another one of the Shadow Monster's weaknesses.

The only question that remained was how they were going to use water to free Eleven from the Shadow Monster. Lucas suggested that they tranquilize Eleven and then submerge her in a bathtub of warm water. Mike quickly jumped in to protest and reminded them that Eleven had the power to defend herself and that both the Shadow Monster and Eleven had the intelligence to see through that plan. Mike and Lucas got into a war of words and the rest of the group had to intervene to get them to focus on the resolution of the problem they had at hand. Nancy suddenly chimed in and suggested that they organize a party at Steve's house. She reminded them that Steve's house had a pool that they could use if they were able to get Eleven to the party.

They all knew that Mike had a soft spot for Eleven, so they handed the task of getting Eleven to the party to him. According to their plan, Steve's parents headed out of town for the weekend so that Steve had the place all to himself and could throw a party, and Mike managed to convince Eleven to join them. At the party they began playing a game of truth or dare. Mike dared Eleven to balance on one foot at the edge of the diving board of Steve's

pool. Eleven hesitated at first, but the rest of the group called her out for being a chicken, and in a lapse of judgment she agreed to the dare.

As she stood on the edge of the diving board on one foot, Jonathan pleaded for Eleven to stand still while he quickly ran to grab his camera to take a picture. While Jonathan went to grab the camera, Eleven stood on the diving board, eerily suspicious of her friends. As soon as Jonathan was back and engaged Eleven to pose for a picture, the rest of them dashed to the diving board and began jumping on it, causing it to break and all of them to fall into the water with a large splash.

Now that they were in the water and the Shadow Monster was on the defensive, they all grabbed Eleven by her arms and legs to ensure that she would be unable to escape the pool. They began taking turns submerging her into the water and bringing her up for air repeatedly. This went on for what seemed like forever and nothing happened. The group thought that they had failed and would lose Eleven, but they continued. Then suddenly, the same red ominous hue appeared in the sky, the winds started blowing furiously, and all the lights flickered. In one sudden burst, it was all calm again. Had they managed to save Eleven? Was the Shadow Monster still lurking in the dark shadows of Hawkins?

The Person That I Thought I Was, The Girl I Used to Know (A Riverdale Fanfiction)

It was late afternoon in the ghostly town of Riverdale, where Veronica Lodge sat in a booth at Pops. The greasy vapor that filled the air, fogged up the window. Veronica left a mark where she had been rubbing away the condensation, looking outside and praying that a certain redhead would appear in the distance. She sat back into the red leather booth, gripping the coffee mug she had been holding onto the last few days because of the lack of sleep she had acquired. The only thing coming up in her blank mind was the fact that she had lost everything and everyone she had ever cared about.

It had been four days since Archie had left, yet she couldn't shake the feeling she had felt when he spoke his last words through the phone as it shook in her hand. Every song, every scent, every figure she saw walk by, brought her mind back to Archie.

Veronica's head whipped around to the sound of Pop Tate cashing in a customer, but her brain directed her somewhere else. Somewhere darker.

"And where are you off to at this late hour Mija?" Hiram smirked, blocking Veronica's way to leave through the front door. Veronica knew that her father's game would always consist of him keeping a close eye on her, but she was experienced with him, knew how to handle his mind games.

"Just going over to Betty's for a quick, word... That is alright with you..."

right Daddy?" Veronica spoke with a certain amount of confidence towards her father, only because she knew the effect it constantly had on shaking his own. Veronica had walked past him, pushing him to the side, only to peer into his study and see a short haired redhead, sitting with his back towards her. She knew that fringe from anywhere. But she wondered why her boyfriend would be sitting in her Father's study. That's when she saw what really took her by surprise.

A gun. Not just any gun, a Glock 34 hand gun. Her father's Glock 34 hand gun. In her boyfriend's hands, Archie's hands, drenched in blood.

"Archie—" Veronica started.

"You can leave now Mija." But this wasn't a suggestion, nor a request. This was a demand from her father.

"Ms. Lodge?"

Veronica's eyesight was blurred.

"Veronica, are you alright?" It could have been the caffeine, or the single hour of sleep Veronica had slept the night before, but the smile in front of her was too familiar for her to ignore.

"Archie?" Veronica hummed, pushing herself off of the booth she sat on, hoping to walk closer to the redhead she saw so clearly.

"Veronica," she heard.

"Archie come home," she cried, feeling tears staining her cheeks.

"Hold on Ronnie. I promise I'll be home soon, you just have to hold out hope."

Veronica felt 2 strong hands grasp at hers, but pulled away, attempting to stable herself.

"Archie, I need you. I-I'm so lost."

Veronica felt her feet becoming too weak to support her weight, and soon after felt herself fall in and out of consciousness, before collapsing to the ground with a thud.

Everything was black, yet Veronica felt as though her mind could finally comprehend every emotion she was feeling.

All Veronica wanted was her friends, her boyfriend, the people that cared most about her. The people she needed most at this moment. She remembered the time there were three other people sitting around her. Archie, who would sit beside her, his arm dangling around her shoulders, as Jughead who would sit across from him, doing the same to Betty. The four would sit in the booth for hours, sipping away at their milkshakes and chatting through Jughead's newest conspiracy. But Veronica's mind pulled her away from her fond memories of the group, leading her to the one memory that her brain wouldn't let her forget no matter how much she wanted to.

"Ronnie, you have to stop coming here," Archie sighed, running his hand through his thick red hair.

"You're kidding right? Archie come on." She sat on the other side of his jail-cell, seeing the books he had tossed onto the floor the night before. The small carpet stained with blood from - she hoped - the last prisoner.

"Ronnie, it's too dangerous!" Archie screamed back. Veronica's heart was racing. She had just broken into the jail to see him. She needed to see him! What didn't he understand about that?

"Veronica, I miss you, but with your father on our tails... You can't risk being here... With me-"

"I get it Archie... I'll leave if that's what you want... Or 'need' right now," she laughed sarcastically.

"Come on Ronnie you know I didn't mean it like-"

"Save your breath," Veronica scoffed. She walked away from her boyfriend without another word, tears threatening to spill from her eyes, but she couldn't - no, she wouldn't let Archie see her cry.

"Mija," she heard.

"She'll be fine she just needs to rest," another voice said.

"Ar-Archie," Veronica moaned, only because of the ache her head wore. Her eyes began to flutter open, only to see the sight of her father and mother

crouched down next to her, and Veronica jumped up seeing her father standing so close to her.

“Darling, you fainted,” Hermione sighed, attempting to sit her daughter back down.

“Get away from me!” Veronica screeched, rushing back towards the doorway of Pops.

“Veronica, there’s nothing to be afraid of Mija,” her father tried. Veronica felt her eyes shut once again, the world beginning to spin faster than she could control.

“Mommy? Daddy?” Veronica’s high pitched 7-year-old voice had sung, echoing the halls of their New York penthouse, while the pearls around her neck bounced softly as she ran, trying to find her parents. It was the day she had first seen the other side of her father. The darker side.

Veronica had walked into his study, knowing that it was a place she had been forbidden to go into, but had always wondered what treasures lay inside.

What she didn’t expect was to find her father, his hands stained with blood as he clutched onto a razor-sharp knife with his victim’s body lying in front of him, and that god awful smiled that she had never been able to forget, plastered on his face.

Veronica’s eyes opened once again, her palms sweating in anticipation of what she would do next.

“Veronica calm down,” her mother soothed, walking closer to her daughter, only to frighten the raven-haired girl more.

Veronica’s hands shook, her nails digging into the palms of her hands as she felt the blood pass over them. And what she did next, she didn’t know why. As she reached into her purse, still attempting to keep herself from falling, what she felt fall into her hands was something her parents, and even she herself, had not expected.

“Veronica put the gun down,” Hiram said. Fear crept into his normally

confident tone.

“Why daddy?” Veronica cried, her tear stained face stinging from the saltiness of the water rushing down her cheeks. “So that you can put my friends and I through all of this again?”

“I’m done Daddy!” She yelled. “I’m done playing your stupid games! I’m done being part of your criminal life! I’m done being your daughter.” Veronica breathed in, her finger threatening to pull the trigger at any moment.

Was this really what it had come down to? Had she lost everything? Her boyfriend, her reputation, her family, all gone. But what really hurt her, was that Veronica had lost herself.

“I was done with you a long time ago Daddy. I was done with you when I watched the police take you to prison when I was seven years old. I was done with you when you shut down Southside High because you needed somewhere to build your drug empire. I was done with you when you sent Archie to prison. But you always won. You always made it seem like everything you did was for me. So, you know what?”

Hiram’s face was blank as he watched his daughter closely.

“Now, you get to lose.”

The banging sound of a gunshot flooded the room, but to everyone’s surprise, it wasn’t Hiram’s body that fell to the ground with a thud. It was Veronica’s.

Agent 3'S Journal Logbook

Day 1:

I've been hiding on the edge of his factory since I've got here yesterday. No one has entered, and no one has left. Lights have been turning on and off. I have no idea what is going on inside, so I'm more than ever determined to find out. Agent 1 & 2, the Squid Sisters, sent me on this mission. No one else knows about this. What's inside the Grizzco factory? What secrets does it hide? Most importantly, who IS Mr. Grizz? That's what I'm hoping to find out. One way or another...

I'm reading this over and over again inside of the factory. I manage to find a vent that would be the last place someone would go. The Hero Shot ain't that bad for this mission, being my main, but I decide to use the Bamboozler 14 MK II. This weapon has its ups and downs, but mostly ups in my case. Fast charge, decent range, decent power, with a helpful sneaky sub ability and a handy special. With the fact that this weapon barely leaves any mark on the ground. Good, considering my ink is orange, and the ground is covered with green ink all over. What more would you ask on a spy mission? Bad, considering something could be hiding, lurking, and I just might realize it when it's too late.

I scale one of the tall steel pillars that support the worn down ceiling, hoping for a better view. I didn't get what I was hoping for. I find myself face to face with two chum guard's on the ledge at the top. Weird, this is the Grizzco factory, why would chums, of all creatures, be here? Most of the guards I've seen and encountered were robot bears, no signs of a living

organism. Plus salmonids HATE Grizzco Industries. For killing their Goldie's, the source of power, energy, and the new generation. So why? Then I realize the blank stare in their eyes. The stare is almost mesmerizing. For a second, it felt as if my eyes were turning the same marble white. That was only a feeling, thankfully. *What happened to them?* I don't want to know.

They then suddenly attack me without hesitation, I'm ready to counter. In a blink of an eye, I lash back with two quick fully charged shots. Critical. They explode in orange ink, and the sound of their defeat echoes through the huge room. This alerts the robot worker bears. *Forgot they were here.* All crosshairs aim at me in an instant, from every direction, lasers pointed straight at my head. One shot, and I'll be out cold. Green ink dripping from my fingers, even more if they fire, this time with no fingers left. I freeze, not daring to move or breath. *Great, just great.* I wanted a better view, and got basically the opposite.

I grit my teeth, clench my fists, and force to stare at the steel pillar where I'm frozen in place. The journal in my bag feels like it's growing heavier and heavier, adding on weight. I feel like I'm sinking deeper and deeper into my own ink. With around what I feel like 6 or 7 robots present. I wonder if these robots are good at fighting, or killing for that matter. They just work, they do what their told. Simple. I expect to see darkness as I go unconscious from their shot, but don't get the sight I'm looking for. Instead, a voice is projected from a speaker of some sort. It's Muffled and unclear in projection, but very serious in tone. Who's trespassed this time? *This time?* An... *Inkling?* What are you noisy cephalopod's doing in MY factory!? A pause. Then even more muffled voices start speaking, more like arguing to each other, if you might. *There's more than one creature at the mic?* I ponder quietly to myself, thinking of ways to escape while some sort of mini tornado of a conversation is happening. I'm cut short of my thoughts when the same voice speaks again.

Due to the circumstances we have faced here, we would want you to

leave in peace, but can't put it on you to do so. **Another pause, shorter this time and with no arguing.** Because of certain choices, we have to ask one thing of you. **A third pause, with some deep chuckling in the background.** Stay still. **This catches me the off guard.** *Wait, wha—* And goodbye, Inkling.

The problem is, they're too slow. I'm caught off guard, yes, but I'm not just 'some random Inkling', no. I'm Agent 3. Stopped DJ Octavio once, lived for his next defeat, and knocked myself out when trying to save Agent 8 and Captain from Commander TarTar. I got this. What chance do a couple of super-efficient robots have against me? Instinct acts up first. I jump off the pillar as they fire, turning into a squid mid-air. I aim myself to land in a puddle of orange ink. The splash informs the robots I'm down here, if they don't know already. Exactly what I want. A throw some Toxic Mist down where I land in Inkling form. Two full charges from the Bamboozler aiming to the left of me right when I land, no time to waste. More Toxic Mist at the end of the trail there, and I do the same whole process on the right. The whole time I'm at the exact same place from the spot where I landed. These robots, super-efficient? Yes. Super-accurate and have good reaction time? No, not really. The robot snipers fall for both false ends. They truly seem stunned, and I haven't even gotten the party started.

It's my turn to be offensive. I land two fully charged shots, each targeting different robots. Both go down. I look to where I think the speaker is. "Let me leave in peace." If this works out, I'll find a way back in again. I'm waiting for a response. The excuse of a response I get are sniper lasers pointed straight at my head from all angles. Rude. That was just a warning, in a sense. As they never actually fire. Instead, the same voice speaks from the same speaker, this time more hearable.

Nice job, Agent 3. If you think I will let you off so easily, you are very wrong. I don't give up that easily. I get this sense of eerie feeling from the way he's saying this, and these are true feelings. Out of my own line of frame, I snap. I don't know how this came to be. Jerking in a sudden



direction, I'm shivering now. My breathing is unsteady, and there's warmth settling in my cheeks. Here's a question for you... who truly sent you on this mission? Tell me, Agent 3... WHO!? **His voice filled with empty aggres-**

sion. I gulp. I close my eyes. And slowly fall to the ground. Staying there.

I try to get up, but feel too weak to even move my arms. Or breath for that matter. My eyes are still closed, it's hard to open them. Can I not even do that? I manage it though, and get up. I let out a gasp as I realize what's in front of me. The Grizzco entrance. I start trembling, remembering everything. A ping of received text from my iSquid X pulls me back to reality. I open my phone to see who texted me. I'm all of a sudden filled with this confused feeling. Shock starts spreading across my face.

Marie.iz.superior: Yo, Agent 3

Marie.iz.superior: Where you been?

Callie.iz.not.inferior: We're still fresh with meeting up at Spike's Café... right? You didn't forget, did you?

Agent.o.3.o: Yea, just...

Marie.iz.superior: ?

Callie.iz.not.inferior: !?

Callie.iz.not.inferior: !?!?!?!

Marie.iz.superior: Callie stop, one is enough.

Callie.iz.not.inferior: Well, I'm SORRY!!!

Marie.iz.superior: You should be considering your the inferior one... Heh.

Callie.iz.not.inferior: DON'T START THIS AGAIN!!!

I close my iSquid X and stare blankly at the dark screen. I think about what the Squid Sisters just texted me. What? Then I remember what the voice (which I feel is owned by Mr. Grizz) asked of me. Well, for one thing, who truly sent you on this mission? Tell me, Agent 3... WHO!? I don't get it. I close my eyes and cover them with my hands. Who sent me? Callie and Marie sent me. Right? So why do they seem to have no knowledge of it?

I don't know what this all means. Slowly through time though, I plan on knowing. Actually, I don't plan on just knowing. I want to understand this all, to get to the bottom of this. Just count on me, I will figure out who you are... Mr. Grizz.

I open my journal and proceed to write 'Day 2:'.

A Hobbit's Fate

The day had taken a curious turn. Bilbo Baggins, a short and bigfoot hobbit had unintentionally fallen into a dark hole. He found himself in a wet, dark cave with jagged rocks spearing out from the ground. It was there that he encountered a devious creature named, Gollum.

Gollum was a scraggly thing with bony limbs and a mouth with decaying, sharp teeth. His eyes shone with the malice in his heart and he was so skinny that the spikes of his spine stuck out from underneath his skin. Centuries in the cave had made Gollum lonely and he began to talk to his only companion, a golden ring he called "Precious." Over the years, the ring's dark power had corrupted and enslaved Gollum's mind and body.

While Gollum only wished to devour Bilbo, the hobbit tricked him into a playing a game of riddles. As the game went on, Gollum was unable to mask his intentions towards Bilbo. Time and again, he murmured, "Tasty, hobbit flesh. Ripping his eyes, tearing his limbs. Mmm.. sounds delicious. Doesn't it, Precious?"

As Gollum felt for his "Precious" in the rag he wore, panic and fear surged in him as his ring was no longer there! Gollum floundered around like a fish out of water, screeching and flailing his arms around on the rocks.

It was difficult to say whether Bilbo felt more terrified or confused at Gollum's sudden outburst. While Gollum was violently mad at his loss, Bilbo's eyes were drawn to a speck of gold underneath his foot. It was as if the ring wanted to reveal itself to Bilbo and was ready to leave the bounds of the cave. Bilbo reached down to carefully pick the ring and in that moment, the cave, Gollum, the fear of death, the need to escape were all forgotten. There

was only Bilbo and the ring. For it was in the nature of the ring to possess the one it chose.

As Gollum noticed his “Precious” in the hands of the “dirty hobbit”, he charged to tear Bilbo apart. Oblivious to everything around him, Bilbo carried on to slip the ring on his finger just as Gollum lunged at him.

Time slowed and the world through Bilbo’s eyes became hazy and colourless. He stood face to face with Gollum, so close that Bilbo could smell his reeking breath. While Bilbo frantically swung his sword, Gollum kept creeping closer, his eyes darting back and forth as though he was seeing right through Bilbo. Bilbo aimed the sword right at Gollum’s neck. Yet, Gollum showed no reaction and it was then that Bilbo realized that he had become invisible to the world! A cold feeling crept into Bilbo’s heart. A smile so evil swept across the hobbit’s face that it could scare even the blackest souls. Bilbo felt nothing but revulsion and vengeance towards Gollum. Feeling no remorse, pity or even the slightest of restrain, Bilbo raised his sword to sever Gollum’s head.

All was quiet. The night swallowed the cave completely in its darkness.

Time passed and the ring only consumed Bilbo to the core. Although he was back in the jolly shire, the land of hobbits, Bilbo was a unhappy soul. All alone, Bilbo cradled himself in the musty corner of his cellar. Among his shelves of wine, cheese and bread, Bilbo tried to put the incident with Gollum behind, yet he never could. Neither could he let go of the ring. Bilbo often wondered what powers could the ring bestow on him?

Little did he know that the ring thrived on being the want of men. The more the ring was wanted, the more it longed to be with its master, Sauron.

Sauron was the embodiment of dark evil ever known to Middle Earth. Sauron had poured his dark soul into the ring and while his physical form had been relinquished in his quest for Middle Earth, the ring was his only conduit to regain power.

Bilbo had become a willing pawn at the hands of the ring. He could no longer deny himself the powers of ring. Bilbo arrived at the Gardens of

Lórien to meet with Gandalf, a wizard. Gandalf the Grey was a brilliant wizard who had a heart made of gold. Only few knew of the friendship between Bilbo and Gandalf through their many adventures together. As the two smoked pipeweed and watched the sun set behind the trees, Bilbo shared his unimaginable proposal.

“Gandalf, I am the chosen one! Sauron’s ring has to come to me.” Gandalf was aghast but before he could utter a single word, Bilbo continued. “It wants me to unleash the power it holds. With the ring in our hand, you could be the most powerful sorcerer and together we will defeat Sauron.”

Tears welled in Gandalf’s crinkled eyes as he realized that he had lost his friend to an insatiable greed. He said, “My dear Bilbo, the ring only knows to destroy everything and everyone in its path. No glory awaits those who unleash its power because nobody survives the ring. You can rid Middle Earth of this tyranny. Destroy the ring.”

Disappointment flashed across Bilbo’s face and his blackened pipeweed fell from his hands. His face twisted to reveal the wrath he was about to bring.

“I promise you a war that you have never seen before!”

With that threat, he slipped on the ring and vanished. Gandalf stretched his arm out as if he could bring back Bilbo. The evening had departed and twilight arrived. The trees had become mere silhouettes.

Gandalf sat with himself for a while until he regained his calm. Middle Earth was in grave danger. The ring needed to be found and destroyed. With the raise of his staff and the murmur of words that only he could conjure, Gandalf summoned a secret meeting in a safe haven of Rivendell, the blessed land of elves. Gandalf placed his highest trust in Aragorn, a self-exiled heir to Gondor, Legolas, an agile elf prince, Gimli, a fierce warrior among the dwarves, Lord Elrond the elf King of Rivendell, Boromir the son of Gondor’s Steward and finally Frodo Baggins, Bilbo’s dear nephew.

The esteemed warriors began to arrive in Rivendell over the next few days. Their belief in Gandalf was so complete that they arrived without questioning their need to be there.

As Gandalf shared the urgency to destroy the ring, Boromir could no longer hold himself back. In anger he erupted, “Can you not see that the ring has presented itself to us? We need to find Bilbo and use the ring. The greatness of men will reach new heights with the ring on our side.” Swords were drawn out and arrows were pointed at Boromir. No one had the restraint to let him finish his plan.

Like wildfire, the news of the meeting quickly spread across Middle Earth. Within days after the meeting, Bilbo and the Boromir had built an alliance. Faramir, Boromir’s brother, sensed destruction that Gondor was about to inflict on Middle Earth. He left Gondor in haste to carry the word of this alliance to Gandalf.

In the days that followed, the sky looked unforgiving. Deep within the walls of Minas Tirith in Gondor, Bilbo and Boromir tried to unbind the power of ring. Maddened by their desire for power, they were blinded to the fact that ring was drawing Sauron closer to itself.

Unknown to Bilbo and Boromir, Sauron had begun to gather a huge army of monstrous orcs, ghostly Nazguls and vicious beasts close to Minas Tirith. As fate would have it, Gandalf’s army of men, elves and dwarves had also reached the doorstep of Minas Tirith. In what seemed like the end of the good world, Gandalf’s army was wiped out with their blood staining the marble streets. The great warriors of Gandalf fought till their last breath. But it was the day of Sauron.

Bilbo shuddered as though he had just witnessed doomsday. He felt numb. He could never bring this fate upon Middle Earth. Back into the cave, he could hear the shrill cries of Gollum again who was still searching for his “Precious.” Bilbo slowly lowered his sword and while still invisible, climbed out of the cave.

Bilbo’s vision revealed to him how one act of evil could change the course of fate for hundreds of thousands of good men. This steered him to choose compassion and pity for Gollum over power.

Evil has a role to play in our lives. For it is the evil that makes the good

in us rise. Unless we are confronted and tested by evil, we may never know the strength of the good within us. If we are never tested, we may believe in a non-existent virtuous self. If only we can keep winning the small battles within, there will be no need for gruesome battles to be fought outside.

Two Wolves

We were born in a large castle, spoiled twin princes. Then we angered the witch. My twin brother Romulus and I played a prank. It was done in fun. The witch did not understand that. Father was hosting the Witch of Aiaia for a feast. Tension was mounting between our kingdom and the neighbouring one and Father hoped to gain her as an ally. I had the idea. Romulus got the dogs. Our castle had a many dogs, and some of them looked rather like wolves. They were friendly creatures, whom Father bred for hunting. Romulus ordered them to surround the Witch of Aiaia. He instructed them to pretend to hunt her, like they would hunt a bird. Then Romulus and I sat politely through the banquet, keeping silent because that's what princes were supposed to do. Then the servants opened the hall doors to bring in the food and the 'wolves' bounded in.

"Go," Romulus whispered, and they surrounded the Witch of Aiaia, growling and snapping. I caught Romulus's eye and grinned. We weren't worried; the dogs wouldn't hurt her. I gave a fake holler. "Witch of Aiaia, watch out! Those are vicious wolves!"

The witch screamed and threw up her hands. It was Mother who realized that they were merely the castle dogs. Furiously, she banished them from the hall and glared at me and Romulus. We started laughing and Father's face turned bright red. It wasn't the first time we had pulled pranks on a guest. Father and Mother feared the Witch of Aiaia because she was the most powerful witch of all the kingdoms. Romulus and I didn't know it then, of course.

"I'm so terribly sorry," Mother was pleading. "Romulus! Remus! Go to your rooms at once!" We had never seen her so angry and we shamefacedly started towards the doors.

"Come back!" the witch snapped hoarsely. "I said come back!"

We came back.

"How dare you!" she shrieked, standing up. "How dare you do such a thing to a witch of such importance as I! How dare you!"

"But Miss, they wouldn't have hurt you—" I began. She overrode me.

"You are horrid children and you deserve to be punished! I will turn you into real wolves, and banish you to the forest. It's no more than you deserve!" Mother screamed and Father shouted, "NO!" and I felt strangely tingly. Then I was looking into my twin brother's face. He was a wolf. And so was I.

"Now go!" the Witch of Aiaia commanded and I felt my paws taking me out of the palace and deep into the forest, Romulus behind me.

For three days Romulus and I stayed alone in the forest, catching whatever meager food we could. But we had never hunted before, and didn't know how. We were starving. Then on the fourth day, I decided that I'd had enough.

"I'm going get food," I told Romulus. "I might be awhile."

Though we were wolves, we still had the gift of human speech.

"But Remus, where are you going?" my brother asked, frowning.

"To the nearby town. We've stayed away from it until now, but I think it's worth a try to steal food from there."

"Remus, no! You'll get shot!"

"Not if I'm careful. And I might try to beg for food first."

Romulus swallowed. "Then I'll go to the other town a little ways away and do the same. Whatever food we get, we bring back and share. Deal?"

We set off, loping in different directions through the forest. I followed the human stench through the woods, wincing as I stubbed my paws against roots. I was still unaccustomed to my animal body. Soon I arrived. Small houses were arranged in neat rows, mothers hung clothes on a line, fathers whittled something from wood, children played in the garden. This was new to me. Even when I was human, I would have to sit with my books and

pillows and finery. Romulus and I had been taught to look down at such behaviour. Now, though, it seemed as though these families had a much better time than my own had ever had. I stopped at the garden gate of the closest house, trying to make myself look harmless, hoping to attract enough pity to get fed. A woman screamed when she saw me and ran inside her house. I heard her piling things against the door, hoping to bar me out. Even when I meant no harm, they feared me. Things would be harder than I had thought. The same thing happened at the next few houses. After the fifth rejection, accompanied this time by a garden rake thrown at my head, I gave up being nice. I slunk away into the shadows then snuck around the corner of a house. The back screen door was slightly open, and I nudged it the rest of the way with my nose. It opened directly into the kitchen, which was deserted. A large, dead, chicken stood on the counter, waiting to be plucked. I had jumped up and had it in my jaws, ready to take this back to Romulus, when a man appeared in the kitchen. He shouted and pursued me onto the street. Other villagers looked out of their houses. They, too, chased me. I ran into the forest and was safe. Romulus was already there when I reached our den. He looked weary, and held in his jaw a slab of beef. We divided the goods and devoured them hungrily, but he seemed to have gotten the same welcome in the other village as I had. We needed a plan, and fast, before we starved. Then I had an idea. I whispered it in Romulus's ear, and he got the same gleam in his eyes as he had when we were about to play a prank back in the castle.

One week later, we had our plan in place. I was doing my part, waiting outside the village, while Romulus was doing his in the other village. We had eavesdropped on the town, gathering information, until we had enough. I had overheard someone say that today around noon, a young girl wearing a red riding cloak would be walking through the forest to her grandmother's house. That was why I was here, waiting for her. She came accordingly, skipping down the path.

"Hello," I said politely, intercepting her. The girl startled, clutching her

basket. But she did not seem scared like the other villagers. That would work in my favour. "Where are you going?"

"To my grandmother's house," the girl in the red cloak replied. "She's sick, and I'm to take this basket of food to her." she gestured to the basket that hung from her arm. "But Mama said not to talk to strangers!"

"But, my dear, mothers are often wrong. Could you tell me your name?"

"It's Jane," she said reluctantly. "But everyone calls me Little Red Riding Hood."

"Well, Little Red Riding Hood, why don't you take some flowers to your grandmother?"

There's a pretty one."

"Well ..." the girl said reluctantly, but I could tell she was tempted.

"Just pick a few. Your grandmother will love them."

I waited to make sure that she was absorbed in picking flowers, before taking off in the direction she had pointed, towards her grandmother's house. Soon I arrived at a little cottage. I pushed open the door and heard a feeble voice calling,

"Red Riding Hood, is that you?"

I said nothing and pounced. The old woman screamed but quickly I knocked her unconscious with a blow from my paw. Then I shoved her in a nearby closet. Now all I had to do was wait for Little Red Riding Hood, knock her unconscious too, then take them both back to Romulus. We had agreed to split all the meat we found. I took the grandmother's glasses and pulled her bonnet low over my snout. Then I got into her bed and settled down to wait. Romulus was probably waiting outside that pig's house. We knew from scouting missions that three talking pigs - probably cursed to be animals, same as us - lived in the other town. He was to capture them and bring them back to our den.

A knock sounded at the door and Little Red Riding Hood's voice called, "Grandmother?"

"Come in, dearie," I said, putting on a croaky voice. The girl rushed to me.

"I brought you food and - why, Grandmother, what big ears you have!"

I froze. If she found out what I really was, my plan would be ruined. I put on a false simper. "All the better to hear you with, my dear."

Little Red Riding Hood edged closer. "Why, Grandmother, what big eyes you have!"

"All the better to see you with, my dear."

If she realized, I would just have to go for it and attack her soon.

"Why, Grandmother, what big teeth you have!"

"All the better to eat you with, my dear!" I snarled, jumping out of bed. I was too early. Little Red Riding Hood squealed and missed my swiping paw. She wrenched the door open and ran outside. I followed her. But then - WHAM! Something hit me hard in the side of my head. Dazed, I looked around. A huntsman stood over me, holding an axe. He must have heard the girl's screams. He raised it again, and this time I blacked out.

When I came to, I was tied up and the huntsman was standing over me.

"Your brother's dead," he said, smirking. "That's what happens when you try to hurt innocent people."

"You killed him!" I snarled. "How did he get caught?"

"Well, he tried to eat an innocent pig. The pig's house was made out of straw, so he blew it down.. But the pig ran away from him - and good job too, otherwise he would have been eaten - and hid in his brother's house. This other pig had made his house out of wood so you the wolf blew it down but the pigs dodged him again and ran to their other brother's house. This one was made out of brick and the wolf couldn't blow it down so he climbed on the roof and slid down the chimney. The pigs had put a pot of hot water on the stove under the chimney and your brother went into it ..."

I growled and swiped at the huntsman. He only laughed. I took my

chances and yanked my rope away from him. I dodged and ran away. And there I stayed. I had gotten better at hunting, enough to scrape a living. But someday I will get revenge for my brother's death.

The Wake of His Dreams

It was the foul dust that floated in the wake of his dreams
It was the green light at the end of the dock, glistening, bright,
unattainable
I was his dreams that besieged him,
That kept him on his path, trailing that foul dust.
But what I cannot fathom, what eludes me, is how I let it happen.
His route had been set for sometimes bubbling, brewing, a mind of its
own
But his fate had not.
Under the watchful eyes of T.J. Eckelberg, I let Gatsby fall deeper into
the pit he had dug for himself.
I, Nick Carraway, let his foot slip, his step falter, the weight of his
dreams drag him down
Deeper
Deeper
Into the pit.
How I let him ruin his name that he had never used to his advantage,
Like the fine alcohol at his great celebrations he never drank,
Like the pool he never swam in,
Until his body was afloat, his limbs limp, the yellow sun shining down
on the yellow streaked waves, shaded by tall trees,
With bright
yellow
leaves.

Tom.

Tom didn't understand.

Why he was put into this miserable orphanage, why the other children didn't have the same abilities as him, and why the kids he saw on the street had two parents when he had none. He was confused. He was a strange child, the people noticed. All dark thoughts and unexplainable abilities tucked into a small frame of brittle bones and pale skin. He was separated.

Tom didn't understand.

Why the other adults seem to ostracize him, why the other kids in the orphanage would treat him as anything less than them. He was hurt, but just barely. But he didn't need to understand to notice. He noticed the adults not-so-subtly shying away from him whenever he made a flower bloom. He noticed the kids whispering to each other when he was only trying to get a mouse to roll over. And he definitely noticed when they all screamed when he talked to the little garden snake outside. The harsh words and glares being carelessly thrown at him were little more than obvious, and he kept noticing, and noticing, and noticing. He noticed everything.

Until one day he understood.

He was nine when he finally understood. He knew why they avoided him now. Knew why they kept their distance. He knew, and he understood. They were scared. Scared of *him*. Scared of his abilities, scared of what he would do to them. Scared because he was *different*. Tom had laughed to himself when he finally found out the source of his isolation. Alone in his room that he shared with only the dust and bugs, he laughed because he not only accepted their fear, he reveled in it.

Until Billy Stubbs. A tall and wiry boy two years older than Tom, yet so, so, *so, dumb*. It was really quite remarkable how the kid hadn't yet gotten himself lost or even quite frankly wasn't lying dead in a ditch. Although he had been "hurt" more than a few times now by Tom, he just never seemed to know when to quit, a trait that would have been admirable in others, but was a terrible one in Billy. And one afternoon, like a squirrel presenting itself to a dog, Billy had been taunting Tom more than ever, with strings of insults and verbal cuts disguised as light teasing by the ever-cheerful tone that Billy seemed to hold. Tom was irritated, sure, but he was talking to a snake just then, and had opted to prioritize the conversation over giving Billy the reaction that he'd so desperately been asking for. To say Billy was irritating was an understatement, but nothing Tom couldn't handle. Until poor, dumb, *stupid*, Billy stepped on the snake.

Tom didn't see red. He saw the carcass of the garden snake, Billy's good-natured grin, and his hands clenching into a fist before him. Next thing he knew they were tangled together in the dirt, legs kicking, fists swinging, and teeth bare. By the next morning Tom had hung the boy's "*pwecious wittle wabbit*" dead on the rafters directly above Billy's bed. This was the first time he had made someone cry without using his powers directly on them. The boy had screamed when he saw his "pwecious" on the rafters, neck bent at an unnatural angle, eyes blank, and had then proceeded to sob magnificently afterwards. The body of the rabbit stayed on the rafters for three days until one of the adults finally disposed of it. Tom was confused to see such a reaction. He had assumed that Billy would be furious, but instead hadn't expected to find the older boy acting so *melancholy* over just a rabbit. He had punched Billy when he stepped on the snake Tom was talking to, but that was only because Billy had interrupted their very important conversation and Tom was infuriated.

Tom didn't understand.

Why Billy had been so heartbroken over a mangy rabbit. Why Hagrid, the third-year student at Hogwarts who was half giant, was always *so*

devoted his ugly creatures, especially that one hideous giant spider. Tom didn't understand why Professor Slughorn was so fond of the members of his so called "Slug Club", why he was warmer to them than the rest of the student body. He didn't understand the affections and dotes that Hepzibah Smith, an elderly yet wealthy woman who was more importantly a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff, spent on him. He didn't understand why his own mother, a pure-blood tied directly to *the Salazar Slytherin*, would be so very foolishly enamored with a mud-blood, a *muggle*, that she had to run away and force his hand in marriage.

Doesn't matter, makes the lot of them easier to manipulate anyways.

Over the course of the years Tom Riddle became a model student, a teacher's pet, a head boy, a favourite employee, and a skilled manipulator. Most importantly, he became Lord Voldemort. Like a phoenix rising from its ashes, or perhaps more like a snake shedding its skin, he had shed the name and persona of Tom Riddle and became Lord Voldemort. Or perhaps "became" isn't really the right word, for a snake shedding its skin is still the same snake, only peeling back and casting aside its old skin to reveal the hidden layer underneath. For Tom Riddle it was only a rearrangement of his name and tossing the mask he had created for himself to reveal the darkness that had perhaps always been churning and simmering in him. How fitting it was that he was a descendant of Slytherin, how fitting it was that his name had fit perfectly into his message for the wizarding world, how fitting it was that Voldemort meant the flight of death. For as the same night Lord Voldemort was brought to light (or presumably darkness), death was about to take flight and claim the lives of many.

Voldemort's rule was sinister, macabre, and dark, but still it must be admitted that there was a twisted sense of beauty to all its horror. A sense of distorted justice, claiming to "purify" the wizarding world from all those whose veins were dirtied and corrupted by the blood of muggles. Yet, at the height of his rule came his fall. Like Icarus, enticed by the golden rays of the sun, Lord Voldemort was entranced by his own power, ascending into his

delusions of grandeur and power. And thus, he flew, higher and higher and higher...until too late. Icarus' warning came in the form of his father's concern, while Voldemort's came in the form of a damning prophecy. A prophecy that foretold his downfall at the hands of a *child*. A weak, unassuming *child*. Still, a threat nonetheless, that must be eliminated at all costs. So onward Voldemort went, to the secret dwelling place of the infant, its location given to him by a man whom the parents' thought were their friend. It would have been sad had the *weak, pathetic* man not been so laughably cowardly.

The house held only the parents and the infant. The father was at the entrance, stupidly trying to stop him. Voldemort was confused. The father was not the one he was here to kill. He could have escaped easily, but instead he chose to try to *stop Lord Voldemort. Without a wand*. For the sake of his "family" over his own life. He casted the father aside with the wave of a hand. He entered the nursery where the baby resided, surprised instead to find the mother there too. She was crying, pleading, begging for Voldemort to spare her child's life and instead take hers in exchange. She had red hair...so this must be the woman Severus had wanted him to spare. He was mystified once again at her offer of her life in exchange for her son's; after all, she was not the one he was looking for. He was pushing to throw her aside, for there was a promise to keep, but *she grabbed onto him*. With her hands, her dirty, **mud-blood hands**, she **touched** the heir of Slytherin. He gave no thought in disposing her life from her body. Perhaps this was the second warning; the flames of the sun burning into the wings of Icarus.

The boy was finally what mattered now. Looking up at him with innocent eyes, unaware of the destruction and chaos around him, sobbing only because of his mother's previous cries. Lord Voldemort flicked his wrist and uttered the magic words, "*Avada Kedavra*".

The sun's flames finally burned their way onto the barely beating wings of Icarus, searing whatever was left of the feathers, the tar, the wooden frame upon which the wings were built. And Icarus fell. Fell from the heavens and from grace. Fell from the hopes and teachings of his father, and finally, fell

from the delusions of his own mind. Stripped from his wings, from his dignity, and from his own sanity, he fell, and he fell, and he fell. Right into the dark and unforgiving waves of the sea.

And thus Voldemort was stripped back into the thin little boy known as Tom Riddle as he fell into the air, never being able to comprehend the affections and love from boy to rabbit, from teacher to student, from mother to son.

Because Tom didn't understand.

The Unwanted's Fan Fiction: Quill's Revival

The peculiar contraption loomed just above Alex's head, the wavering sunlight reflecting down from one metallic and deceptively smooth ball that Sato warned Alex specifically not to touch. Kaylee had called it a "ray-dee-oh," or something along those lines.

"Please excuse, Alex-san," a gruff voice wheezed.

Alex turned around to see Ito lugging more wooden planks over his shoulder, his limp doubled with the extra workload. He gratefully stepped aside.

"Still at work on this? Good man, Ito!" he commended, having to raise his voice over the constant "kshh" of the ramshackle speaker tied to the machine.

What nobody in Artimé knew was that "kshh" not only masked the sounds of the small crowd outside enjoying the afternoon sun, it also masked the footsteps of a man peering from behind a tree out at the bizarre wood and metal tower being constructed.

"So, what exactly is this supposed to do, Kaylee?" The man leaned in closer to hear the girl respond.

“Well, Ishibashi and I are trying to tune the radio to the right signal so we can get a signal from another radio broadcaster somewhere, outside of the Dragon’s Triangle. We’ll be able to hear them through the speaker, and communicate back to them with the microphone, and ask for help getting us off these islands.”

There was a pause before the boy said slowly, “Uhh... I lost you at tune,” and they both broke out into laughter as they started to walk off joyfully.

“How rude of her to laugh at his misunderstanding! I couldn’t understand a word she said either,” the man thought to himself. He peeked at the beautifully grassy and colourful fields of Artimé with a scowl. Too grassy. Too colourful. “If she were in Quill, she’d be reported for such rude behaviour in an instant!” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another of the machines laid on its side on the ground. A backup, the man guessed. He blinked. There was nobody guarding it at all! As he crept forward, he formulated all the things he could do with it, and by the time he got to the layer of brush separating the forest from Artimé, he had devised a plan to make sure that eventually, that girl would be in Quill. And everyone else would be, too. Just like before.

The man let the contraption down with a satisfying crash. He grinned. He was in home territory. He spun around, taking in the now minimal view of the blacks and greys of Quill, being simply the small corner of the island Artimé hadn’t bothered to take. The man dragged the machine over the distinct village border, scraping the wood against the Quillen stone walkway. And while the man stood back up, he noticed that the border had changed. With an audible moan, he dropped to his knees and plucked a dandelion that had grown on Artimé’s side, but had drooped down and now lay on Quill’s territory, out of the ground. “There,” he resolved as he drew back his arm and

hurled the flower as far as he could into the brush.

“Strang!” The man turned around and met eyes with Mr. Stowe.

“That’s Governor Strang to you,” Governor Strang muttered.

“Whatcha got there? You building something?” Mr. Stowe hollered, and then lifted an eyebrow at Jones. “Hold it, you’re not adopting any of Artimé’s creativity gimmick, are you?”

Governor Strang took a defensive step back, and filled his lungs with air. “No! You don’t really think I’d join them after all they’ve done, do you?” He bellowed, offended. But Mr. Stowe didn’t respond, and instead looked down at the contraption, and then back at Strang, as if to say, “Well how to you explain this?” Strang caught the message and stuttered to justify what in the name of Justine he was doing, in Quill, with something... creative. “This is something I stole from the Artiméans, and in fact...” he grinned, “it’s something we can use to bring them down!” Mr. Stowe didn’t lose his quiz-zical expression, though. “Just help me carry this thing to my house, ok? I’ll explain it on the way.”

“So you’re going to tell me that I can speak into this box, and my voice will go through the metal wires,” Mr. Stowe broke down, “and it will fly through the air,” he paused for effect, “and it will go into the Artiméans’ tower, and out of their box?” Hearing it that way made Strang have second thoughts. Mr. Stowe lowered his voice to a whisper, leaned forward and spat, “and you’re going to tell me that it’s not magic?” For the second time since his arrival, Governor Strang drew back defensively and filled his lungs, ready to blow Mr. Stowe, usually one of his most trusting right-arm men, out of his socks. But only at that point did Mr. Stowe’s words make reason in his head, and he hesitated. Was it magic? Had he just brought something made with

creativity, and worse, Artiméan creativity, into Quill?

“No. No way,” he decided, “I listened in on the girl who helped make it explain how it worked. I didn’t exactly understand it, but it sounded official. She called it a ray-dee-oh.” Mr. Stowe regained his ever-so-useful unconvinced look and opened his mouth to say something, when he suddenly got cut off by a loud “kshh” that made them both jump. Strang and Mr. Stowe locked eyes, Mr. Stowe sending an OK fine, you win look, and then ran off towards the radio tower. A voice cut through the static that Governor Strang recognized after a few words as the boy who was talking with the girl who explained the radio.

“Hello? Hello? Can anybody hear me?” This was just what he was waiting for.

“Watch this,” he said with a grin and a slight chuckle. He strode forward, cleared his throat and pushed down a metal clip.

“Hello? Who is this?” he vocalized in an obnoxiously deep voice, giving a vibe in his words that said “you’re wasting my time, what do you want?”

“Thank goodness you can hear us! We’re marooned on a cluster of islands!” This was news to the two Quillens.

“Oh goodness, you’re those missing kids all the newspapers are talking about! Got lost at sea!” Strang’s attitude, or fake attitude, changed into enthusiasm. “Do you need me to call a helicopter to get you all out of there?” There was a pause on the other end. Strang hoped his impression was believable enough.

“A heli-what?” the boy asked, and then, by the sound of it, got shoved

over and the builder girl herself took over.

“Yes! Yes please! We’re in the dragon’s triangle!” Again, this was news to the two, but they continued on.

“Perfect! I’ll call a rescue squad. You all sail as far north as you can, and I’ll send them there to pick you up!” There was jubilation now, on the other side of the line.

“Of course, well pack up and set off by tomorrow! Thank you so so so so much!” Governor Strang chuckled to himself.

“Cute.” Then he turned sideways to Mr. Stowe and hissed, “Now quickly! Shut it off!” Mr. Stowe took a few seconds to snap out of his listening phase and look frantically side to side at the jumble of wires and coils. Then, with a quick swipe of his hand, he grabbed 3 different wires and pulled them loose. With a click, the room went quiet again.

“You’re a genius, Strang,” he whispered.

“That’s Governor Strang,” Governor Strang announced, much more confidently now.

“Governor. Strang,” Mr. Stowe eventually managed, “Say, why did you say go as far north as possible?”

Governor Strang grinned. This was also part of his plan. “I heard some mutterings and whispers around Artimé while I was eavesdropping from those kids who say they’re in charge. They say that there are dragons and pirates up there,” he said proudly, “But they’ll risk it to get saved. Believe me.” He took a well-deserved deep breath and strode over to the coat rack. “Now

you stay here, Stowe.” Governor Strang commanded at a bewildered Mr. Stowe, “Plug those wires back in, and make up some gibberish if they ask you any more questions, ok?” He nodded in a military fashion.

“I’ll have some choice words to say if one of my sons takes a shift on the... ray-dee-oh,” he pronounced.

“That’s the spirit! I’m gonna go tell the rest of the Quillens,” he said, wriggling into his bland, grey coat, “So if those Artiméans come back, we’ll be ready for ‘em.”

“Quill prevails when the strong survive!”

A Tale From Asgaard In Hel

Tall jagged boulders rose from the ground like large spindles, entrapping the landscape in a hostile grip. The ground was covered in dark stones, some jutting higher than others and some like bricks in the ground. All around him was the same dark and gloomy atmosphere as if a cloud had settled on the land forever. Was this his home now? Was he destined to rot here for the rest of eternity? He couldn't bear to stare at the desolate landscape for any longer, and ripped his gaze away.

Loki wasn't sure how long ago he had died, but it felt like only moments. The fiery grip ripping into his neck and then SNAP! Darkness swamped over his vision and he plummeted to the ground with a thud. That was it, he was dead, and now it appeared that his prayers had failed him and he was in... Hel.

Screams echoed around like an ongoing chorus, pain and agony were the only words he could possibly think off. People and other creatures from rhealms even he did not know about wailed around him as they trudged on endlessly. Something floated around them in waves of dark mud, churning and bubbling. Occasionally they would lash out into spikes and jab at the victims of this awful punishment. Loki narrowed his eyes at the sight of creatures around him, however he couldn't seem to spot an Asgardian among the waves that circled him. Perhaps they had all made it into Valhalla. The system was biased towards Asgardians after all.

Then why am I not up there with father and mother! I'm the prince, and a skillfully trained Assga--- That might just be it. He was not Asgardian at all, found in the realm of Jotunheim at birth left to die. He was taken back to Asgaard to be raised among them, with his adopted brother Thor. They treated him as their own... well at least his mother did. Loki shivered,

remembering the constant pressure and bullying he had faced from his older brother and friends. Even the royal staff mocked him for not being as mighty as his brother. Loki groaned at the memories.

He gazed back at the struggling line of slaves that headed towards two outcropping boulders that slanted towards each other to form a make-shift doorway. It was a large doorway, surrounded by the same black bubbly liquid that occasionally turned into sharp spikes that flung at the lagging victims. They seemed to be transporting something that he couldn't quite see from his position.

Loki leapt down from the boulder he had found himself on, and agilely landed on the dark obsidian ground. A few of the creatures around him grew familiar. Even though he was a frost giant himself, he couldn't begin to imagine what would have transpired if he had grown up among them.

Perhaps the only way to find any information would be to discover who was doing all of this, and so he set off to a skip, jumping ahead of the slower creatures and tapping or waving to get their attention in case anyone could help. However just as he expected no one responded and simply kept on trudging forward.

Finally, Loki was close enough to hear a voice. It was loud and menacing above the other screams and wails, and certainly a female. Though there was something else about it that seemed almost familiar. Something tugged at him from within and he picked up his pace to reach them. The shape got closer and closer until he gasped in shock. Tall thick antlers rested on her head in a smooth helmet that extended to entrap the land around her. Her suit was dark green and black like snake scales pressed against her body. Her eyes were bold with dark eyeshadow that seemed to have been gouged into her eyes. He was wrong after all, there were Asgardians here. Not only that, but he in fact recognized this one very well, after all, she was his much older adopted sister Hela.

He raced forward and leapt onto the boulder in which she towered over her puppets with vicious glee. Her long tendrils of black liquid that was

mostly spiked lashing at her victims seized. Her tall horns swung around and she glared at Loki with hatred. It felt as if he would melt as her angry gaze bore into his soul.

“You!” Hela snarled and flung spikes at him. They grazed through the air and showered over him but he ducked out of the way as they slammed into the ground behind him. “Why have you followed me here too? Haven’t you taken enough away from me? My army, my power, I could have destroyed all of the realms or ruled them!”

He gasped as she drew her arm back to fling more before he snapped “I never wanted to be here either! But because I’m not Odin’s precious son, I have to rot in Hel!” She seemed surprised for the first time, and her arms slumped to the side. There was something there, he could tell as her eyes glinted.

“You are not Odin’s pathetic child? The one they call Thor is not your brother!?” She hissed. Loki bit his lip and nodded. She drew back sharply and glared at him once more. “Then you are here because you did something... wrong ugh!”

“I suppose trying to destroy Jotunheim, Killing Laufey, attempting to murder my brother, trying to take over Midgard and then impersonating as Odin and leaving him to be stranded on Earth which killed him is what landed me here!” Loki grumbled sarcastically. Hela’s eyes lit up.

“You say this, yet you worked with Thor to kill me...,” she hissed.

“It’s complicated... I died for him too... which is why i suppose I would perhaps be able to go to Valhalla and see my mother....,” he held back the pain that seized him at the thought of his kind mother who was murdered.

“She is not really your mother though, why would you care,” She sneered

“You wouldn’t understand! It’s not like you can just leave your family behind! Even if they aren’t really family. She was a better mother than whom-ever my birth mother was anyway...,” he sighed and thought of the day he

had been saved by Odin. What sort of mother would leave their child to die like that?

“Ha! I know better than anyone, I had a child but I wasn’t able to raise them because I was imprisoned in Hel! Laufey was too busy fighting a war... and Odin probably killed him anyway!” Hela shrieked. Loki gasped, feeling a rush of emotions flow through him. It couldn’t be true! But then again...

“Hela... my father was Laufey and I was left to die out in the shattered Jotunheim after my father was defeated. You...,” He trailed off, clenching his fists as pain teared at his heart. “You are my birth mother!” He watched as Hela wrinkled her nose, her eyes clouding with tears. He wasn’t sure what pulled him forward but he rested his hand on her shoulder as he tried to process everything that had shaken his life. Her antlers disappeared and her long black hair cascaded down her shoulders. She almost looked identical to him.

“Odin took more from me than I thought he ever could!” She cried and that was the only warning he got. She wrapped her arms around him and he could hear a muffled cry. ummm... okay? He thought. How could she respond with such emotion after everything she had done? She was a monster that had murdered thousands, and almost killed his brother! She was not the gentle and loving Frigga that comforted him when he sobbed. Her long silky dress wrapping around him in a tight embarrassed as she whispered to him soothing words. But Hela was his mother.

Light sprang down from the sky and flashed around him in flakes. Out of the shimmering array of colours that danced around him, first was an axe that appeared. Then a red cape hung over a muscular man’s shoulder that waved in the sudden crash of wind. Finally he made out the man’s eyes and beard with his short cropped hair. It was Thor!

Loki slowly pulled Hela away from him and raced towards Thor. He wrapped his arms around him and Thor did the same. “Loki... I’m sorry I let Thanos...,” Thor trailed off his eyes flooding with tears. Loki tapped his finger to his lips to shush him as they held each other. Then he raised his hammer and light sprinkled around him as the ground swept away below him. The

glimmering light returned and obscured his vision of the world below him as they escaped. The last thing he saw was Hela as her dark figure blurred into the colourful light.

Escape to Sealand

After his escape, Jonas from 'The Giver' finds his way to the post-apocalyptic world of 'The Chrysalids' and find new friends on their way to Sealand.

The fire snapped and filled the damp, dark room with a warm glow. Quiet chatter played in the background. He laid there, unable to move, his thoughts blurred. A cool breeze moved over his malnourished figure, making his body ache. Slowly, lifting his head, he saw that he was not bound by any restraints. Even still, his body refused to move an inch.

“Gabe,” Jonas said groggily, fractions of his memory returning to him.

There was a moment of silence followed by loud cries. Jonas was then propped up against the cold wall of the cave, only to come face to face with a young man whose sunken, tired eyes made him look older than his age. Behind him stood a tall, scrawny girl with dirty blond hair cradling a small figure. She had taken Gabe into her arms and studied him with curious eyes.

“You look like you’ve seen better days,” said the young boy as he provided Jonas with sips of cold water.

“Who are you?” replied Jonas, struggling to sit up straight.

The boy paused a long time before replying. “You look pretty beat up. How did you manage to survive out here without proper clothing?”

“We had nowhere else to go,” Jonas mumbled. “I heard singing, I thought someone might be here.”

“Singing? There was nobody for miles when we found you. We’re in the middle of nowhere, really.”

What should we do with him, Rachel. Should we believe him?

He seems to be telling the truth. Besides if he was truly one of the hunters, why would he risk his life for a child.

Good point.

“Here, drink this,” the girl handed him a bowl of soup. Jonas struggled to lift his arms, the pain sharp, but nothing he has never felt before. The girl helped him put the bowl to his lips, and he drank. It was the best thing he had tasted in days he thought. “I’m Rachel and he’s Michael. We have nowhere else to go, like you. For now, you should rest while I take care of this cute little thing. We will move in the morning.”

“Get up!”

Jonas sat up quickly his body sore but more rested than he felt the previous night. The morning rays shone through the entrance of the cave; snow glistened in the sunlight.

“I’ve been trying to wake you for hours,” said Michael.

“You’ll ride with me, and Rachel will take care of Gabe. Oh, and before I forget, here.” Michael handed Jonas a weathered jacket with a few small holes. “It’s all we have to spare.”

He then led Jonas out of the cave where Rachel was preparing three mounts; Gabe was sleeping soundly, hanging from a make-shift sack on her back. Rachel handed Michael the rein for a medium-sized horse with a dark brown coat. Michael climbed onto the horse and helped Jonas onto the rear. Rachel then gracefully mounted her snow-white horse and began to descend slowly down the hill leading the way with Michael and Jonas behind her and a third horse in tow with

whatever gear they had with them. Jonas was amazed at the new scenery he had only seen in the memories he received.

“Thank you,” Jonas said. “I never thought the world could be so beautiful.” Michael had a puzzled look on his face.

“Where are you from again?”

“I don’t really remember how to get back there, but I’m from beyond the mountains, somewhere far from here.”

“Why did you leave?” said Michael.

“I don’t remember, I just knew I didn’t belong there. How about you?” said Jonas.

“Me, Rachel and the others didn’t fit into our community. We were different, and being different wasn’t a good thing.” Jonas didn’t know what he meant about them being different. They both looked normal to him.

Jonas looked alert. “Do you hear that?” The echoes of singing chimed again, amplified by the grand mountains. As he listened more closely, the singing began to transform. It was replaced by a host of different voices, millions maybe, coming from the same source.

“Are you ok?” asked Michael.

“You don’t hear the voices? They’re all saying something, Zoo land, s...”

“Sealand!” Michael exclaimed.

Rachel immediately stopped her horse and turned to face them. Michael turned around on the saddle and grabbed Jonas by both shoulders. “We’ve been trying to locate Sealand for months! Can you find out how to get there?” Michael said impatiently.

Jonas who didn’t know the importance of “Sealand” just stared blankly at the excited faces of Michael and Rachel. “The voices are coming from that way,” Jonas pointed towards the large body of water seen far in the distance.

“Then that’s where we’re going,” Michael said assertively.

Michael, he's picked up the signal from Sealand.

I thought he we had lost it forever.

After hours of riding in silence, Rachel suddenly spoke. "What do you think makes us different?"

"You look pretty normal to me," Jonas said truthfully.

Rachel then said, "They said both physically AND mentally you can't be different.....

"You have to be perfect outside and in," Michael said.

Jonas wondered at what they were getting at, and then said, "I was different because I could do something no one else could. Mentally, I guess," Jonas said softly.

"Let's confirm my suspicions," Rachel said with a grin. "Hello!" she shouted on the inside.

Jonas put his hand on his ears, shaken by the sudden loud noise. "You don't need to yell."

"She didn't," Michael said.

"You are one of us." Rachel had a smug look on her face.

Jonas realized that Michael was right. The sound had just entered his head through some secret channel. "You can speak through your mind?!" Jonas said shocked.

"So can you, I bet," Rachel said. "I mean, you can hear, so you should be able to speak too."

"It's called thought-shapes," Michael added. "We use it to communicate, but we keep it a secret because we are seen as mutants that should be purged."

As if on cue, an arrow lodged itself into the Rachel's horse, and it fell to the ground.

Is it the hunters?!

Jonas looked towards the direction the arrow was shot from and saw three people on horseback all carrying bows. Michael grabbed Jonas and jumped off the horse right as an arrow pierced its side. They

hid behind a large rock which protected them from the hunter's view. Rachel hid behind her fallen horse, tucking Gabe behind its lifeless body. Grabbing a dagger from its side pouch, Rachel had a look of hostility in her eyes. Jonas looked back towards the ledge. The hunters had temporarily gone out of view, but in a few moments they were surrounded. One stood out from the rest wearing a red robe, a glistening silver blade at his side.

"Well, it is indeed nice to see you again," the man said with a wicked grin.

"Did you really think you could escape your fate, even after what your friends did to our tribe."

"They escaped, so why not try," Michael said with a sneer.

"Oh Michael, if only you weren't a horrible mutant, I might actually feel bad for you." He turned to look at Rachel, then turned away with a look of disgust. Then it was Jonas that he held in his tight gaze.

"What's a young man like you doing with mutant scum like them? Don't tell me you're one of them too!" He said raising his voice.

Jonas stuttered unsure what to do "I, um..."

"Well!" said the man reaching for the sword.

"I lost my way and these two just happened to be passing by. I asked for directions and they said they would take me there," Jonas said confidently.

The man stared at him questioningly, then he forced a grin. "Luckily for you, I happened to be here."

"Yes, very lucky," Jonas nodded.

"Come with me young man. We'll help you get where you need to go. As for those two, kill them." The two hunters drew their swords and placed the blades across the backs of their necks and prepared to strike.

Time froze as a memory of war came of its own accord into Jonas's mind. He did not want to accept that it might be useful. This is

not why the Giver had shown him these memories. Nevertheless, the memory urged Jonas forward, and he instinctively grabbed the man's sword handle and, shifting his weight just so, drove the silver blade into the man's side after which he swiftly moved to deal with the other two hunters, who were so shocked that they lost their fighting poise. Jonas kicked one hunter to the ground and slashed the other with deadly force. Michael and Rachel quickly joined in and took up the fallen hunters' swords. Once Jonas knew they had won, he collapsed on the ground and the world faded to black. Being inhabited by the memory of war so intensely had drawn upon his vital energy.

When he woke up, Jonas was leaned up against the large rock covered in blankets with Gabe lying peacefully at his side. Michael and Rachel wore the robes of the fallen enemies, and they prepared the new horses for travel. Once they saw that Jonas was awake, they rushed over to him.

"Something came over you," Michael said with a grin. "I saw it in your eyes."

Rachel nodded pensively, then said, "Well we better get going. Sealand's not going to find itself."

"Here," Michael tossed Jonas the red robe. "Lead the way."

The Wait

While the action of Chapter 21 of the novel To Kill a Mockingbird takes place in the Maycomb courthouse, the following work of fanfiction imagines the chapter from Aunt Alexandra's perspective while she anxiously awaits the jury's verdict and the trial's closing.

I watched the children scamper down the road towards the courthouse, giddy to witness the trial play out its grand finale. Word had reached us that the jury had returned. I sighed and felt a prick on the back of my neck that I could not scratch. This trial was going to kill someone, and I do not just mean Tom Robinson. I watched Stephanie Crawford slip out of her house in a new dress with a coke in hand. I did not want to be noticed, but, sure enough, as soon as she saw me she waved and rushed over. I faked a thin smile as she started her chatter, telling me of the events in gruelling detail.

"When the jury headed out everyone was so still, but I had to slip out for some thin' to eat, it was so stuffy in there. Hope I don't lose my seat. The courthouse was jammed pack. Jem and Scout were sittin' in the balcony with the..."

"Stephanie, if I wanted to know what happened I would have gone to the court, myself," I interrupted. A few creases appeared on her forehead.

"Well, fine then," she said, before she turned on her heels and marched towards the courthouse.

I reentered the house and went to the kitchen. Calpernia was

by the sink washing the dishes, looking dazed. She acknowledged me with a small nod. I made my way to the counter and started some coffee. Though the stuff was foul, I did have it on the occasion, and now seemed like a fitting time. I poured myself a cup, hesitated, then poured one for Calpernia. We waited.

The evening drew on. I was struck with a tired feeling, even after several cups of coffee; not so much due to lack of sleep, but to worry. I worried for Atticus and for the children. Maycomb is a town good people with pride in their heritage. But it is also a town full of people who would sentence that man just for the enjoyment of watching him squirm. If what they say is true, then what that boy did is reprehensible. Raping and beating a poor young girl should get him killed. But his sentence will affect Atticus, and I would rather see Tom Robinson go free than watch my brother endure more pressure.

I decided to set to work on my needlework. Pinpoint allows me the chance to think. My mind turns to that busybody, Stephanie Crawford. It sickens me to think that so many people went to the courthouse today, especially under the circumstances. All the women and children in attendance-- it is scornful. The courtroom is no fit place for them, and they know it. Curiosity must have gotten the better of them, and we all know that curiosity killed the cat. Then again, satisfaction brought it back.

Calpernia has set up a cot on the back porch for herself, as I have taken her usual room as my own. Atticus insists she stay the night and let things die down a bit after the sentencing. Atticus will accompany her home in the morning. She entered the living room where I was working on my needlepoint and cleared her throat. I looked up at her. For the first time, I noticed the lines on her weary face and the grey hair near her temples. Even with these signs of time, her figure was powerful.

“Do you need anything, Miss?” She asked.

“No.”

“Are you sure, Miss Alexandra? More coffee? I could bake some of those tarts you like?”

“I’m fine,” I hesitated a moment trying to think of how to word what I was about to ask: “Calpernia, do you think we, Atticus that is, has a chance? I mean that jury is taking an awfully long time.”

Calpernia rang out the side of her apron, carefully choosing her words.

“I don’t reckon so, Miss Alexandra. Atticus probably made them think, maybe even dispute, but to them a black man is still a black man. The crime is serious; the chances of him going free are very slim.”

She stopped and looked at me. Something in her face told me she was worried. About what, I didn’t know. She turned to head back to the kitchen, but I didn’t want to be alone. I either had to keep talking, or let her leave.

“I wish Scout would wear a dress!” I blurted out, unexpectedly. “She needs to become a lady. I want her to have a good childhood, and it won’t last forever.” Calpernia stopped walking and turned back to look at me.

“I know, and in time she just might,” Cal paused. “But we can’t force her to grow up, and though you may not see it, she has become a young lady.” She snorted, “though we might need to do something about those breaches soon. She is growing so fast that her legs are springing out of them.”

I gave a little laugh, and Calpernia left the room. Alone again, I put down my needlework. Scout and Jem needed her, I suddenly realized, overcome with an overwhelming sense of gratitude for this woman. Other than their mother, no other woman could have raised those children. That’s when it hit me: I referred to Jean Louise by her nickname. That deprived, monosyllabic nickname: Scout. I smiled at the thought of becoming a part of their lives. They will always need

Calpernia, but they could learn to love me, too.

Those children are braver than half of the townspeople of Maycomb. I do hope that they amount to something. Background matters, but who knows? The Finches may be a well-respected family, but that does not mean that all individuality should be lost. Pride in the family name is important, but one must find their own course in life.

Atticus did, and he is is a better person than I could ever be.

I heard voices coming up the path. It was Jem, and he was crying.

Gone with the Wind Fan Fict

In the mirror, a tranquil woman stood. Even with her dispersed mane and tear-stained green eyes, she was aware of her emotions. She knew her love for Ashley would not torment him anymore. All along she had loved the bad-mannered, bitter man who stood in the threshold. In the mirror, their reflection stared at each other with despire and guilt until Rhett broke the trance and vanished into the ominous fog. Scarlett felt shattered and she was no longer loved by someone to mend those broken pieces. However, her heart was swelled with spite for Rhett. She could heal her broken pieces solely by revenge on Rhett Butler. A sudden rush of adrenaline washed over her as she packed her and her two children's luggage and they headed for Hamilton Manor. Although the residents of the house disliked Scarlett, Melanie had trusted her and the residents felt obliged to welcome the lone woman with her two children.

The next day, the fog had been replaced by youthful sunlight. Ashley had been gazing at the workers and freedmen who marched towards their duties as Scarlett appeared beside him.

"Ashley, I understand the pain you bear. When Charles died, I too felt isolated and feeble." Scarlett felt remorse at her blatant lies though she felt compelled to comfort Ashley.

"Melanie left peacefully when she trusted Beau with you. You must take care of your son in her absence. I am willing to help as long as possible." Ashley had turned his gaze towards Scarlett as he sensed her sincerity.

"Melanie was similar to a sister for me and I will wholly pledge

to protect her loved ones.” Scarlett placed her hands, scabbed by the years of misfortune, on Ashley’s for comfort. Perhaps it was the swiftness of it or the inner turmoil within Ashley, yet he did not flinch when Scarlett’s hand brushed against his; as he would have a few months ago. Scarlett smiled as she knew she had regained her place in the manor and with Ashley’s untimely companionship, Rhett Butler would surely return one day seeking her back.

A year later, when the crops at Tara were once again flourishing, Scarlett gave birth to her daughter with Ashley. Scarlett insisted on naming her Mary Ellen Wilkes in memorial to her late mother, though the baby girl was referred to as May with family members. At last Scarlett felt secure alongside Ashley and her desire for revenge dissipated as her life with her youthful crush blossomed.

In contrast, Rhett Butler engrossed himself in the world of emerging mobsters with his riches. His profession immensely bloomed at a fatal cost. As Rhett masked his alliance with criminals, the emptiness left by Scarlett’s absence increased. In his pitiful anguish, Margaret, a simple though clever comfort woman accompanied him. The keen woman was aware of Rhett Butler’s lingering love for a fair southern lady and in pursuit for her glory, she conspired to eliminate Scarlett from her suitor’s life.

In recent nights, Ashley returned to Hamilton Manor at late hours. His absence reminded Scarlett of Frank Kennedy, her second husband, and she feared Ashley had succumbed to the same fate. Yet she knew Ashley was not naive nor vulnerable.

She was sitting beside May who squealed gleefully while playing with her doll. She ran with her short legs to the front doors which led to Pittypat’s botanical garden. As time passed the squealing of the little girl faded until Scarlett could feel the absence of her child. She

furiously exited the front door as she spotted a gleaming letter instead of her daughter. Tears streamed down Scarlett's rosy cheeks as she read the letter:

"Stop your pursuit of Rhett Butler and his affiliates or your child will bear severe punishments in your place." Scarlett was baffled at the polished letter in her quivering hands. She assumed Rhett Butler had resumed his vengeance on Scarlett. Yet the impassive tone of the message did not remind Scarlett of Rhett, rather it reminded her of the spiteful young girls in her youth who goggled at her beauty and bad-mouthed her. Perhaps the letter was from Rhett's newest suitor. She sighed exasperatedly as she wrote in blood red ink:

"Rhett is no objective of mine. Return my daughter and I will not interfere in your pursuit." Scarlett was once again distraught and she had no one in whom to confide her sorrows. Alas, she was alone.

Far away from Scarlett, the sombre night sky enclosed around Ashley and the other members. An older man from the pack with a stout nose indicated an ivory mansion which gleamed under the moonlight as he announced, "This is the governor's residence. He and his family reside in this mansion as we struggle to afford logs to create a fire for our families."

"You joined our ranks for a purpose, many of you seek justice or equality, or others vengeance. No matter your race or social standing you must take action tonight. If you believe in justice, help me, help me burn this corrupt mansion, help me avenge our brothers who died in vain for this governor." The other faces in the crowd were inflamed with rage as they lit their torches on fire. Ashley had believed this is what he wanted, revenge, from those who ravaged his life. Those who steered him to war and bore suffering upon Melanie. Those who crippled Melanie's health and let her pass away.

Suddenly the men around him began to scream in horror as the

ivory mansion swiftly burned to dust. But the fire had started from the opposite side of the building and had caught the crowd by surprise. A tall man carried Ashley by the arm through the perilous forest. The screams of confused men reminded Ashley of the many battles he had fought in the war. The dreadful haze diminished when Ashley fainted and woke up with his life in perils.

Scarlett's green eyes blazed open at the sound of the door. At the door, Ashley stood with filth and blood on his anxious face as he entered the house.

"Scarlett, my dear, I must leave you and May in Atlanta as I see refuge in Texas." Ashley declared. Scarlett was taken aback but Ashley proceeded, not allowing her to respond.

"Tonight, the governor was murdered at his house when the building was set on fire. I was at the location when the tragedy befell them and the authorities have convicted me of a crime I haven't done. In the morning they will come looking for me but I will not be here to trouble you," Ashley said.

"Ashley, you can't leave!" Scarlett pleaded.

"I'm sorry but I must. Thank you for everything you have done for me, Scarlett. You helped me when I needed help the most, before my marriage with Melanie and after her death. You have always been a great friend to me and I hope to see you again." Ashley kissed Scarlett as he fled the house and disappeared in the horizon.

Scarlett ran outside to stop him. In his place, a cryptic man came out of the fog, holding the hand of a little girl. It was Rhett Butler as he led May to her mother. Scarlett was immobilised on the doorsteps as she observed the man who abandoned her return her child to her.

"Hello, Scarlett. How have you been?" Rhett grimaced darkly.

"Why do you have my daughter? Were you associated with your wretched companions' attempt to harm my child?" yelled Scarlett, as

cold tears pricked her eyes.

“Margaret, a friend of mine took your daughter as a mere prank. She meant no harm but her actions cannot be justified. I wanted to return your daughter myself to bring you some joy. However, I bear unfortunate news.” Rhett placed the child’s fragile hands in her mother’s. Rhett watched as mother and daughter rushed in the house, where Scarlett comforted May to sleep with a sweet lullaby. She returned in a brief period with a grey cotton coat draped around her shoulder. Her petrified green eyes stared at Rhett as he spoke.

“I am aware that Ashley has left for Texas due to an incident at the governor’s mansion tonight. You must know that he did not ignite the fire, whereas it was my business partners with the aid of my money and they framed Ashley. You and your children must leave immediately before they arrest you. Leave right away!” Rhett pleaded with her. He still loved Scarlett and regretted ever leaving her, but she had to flee and they could never be together again.

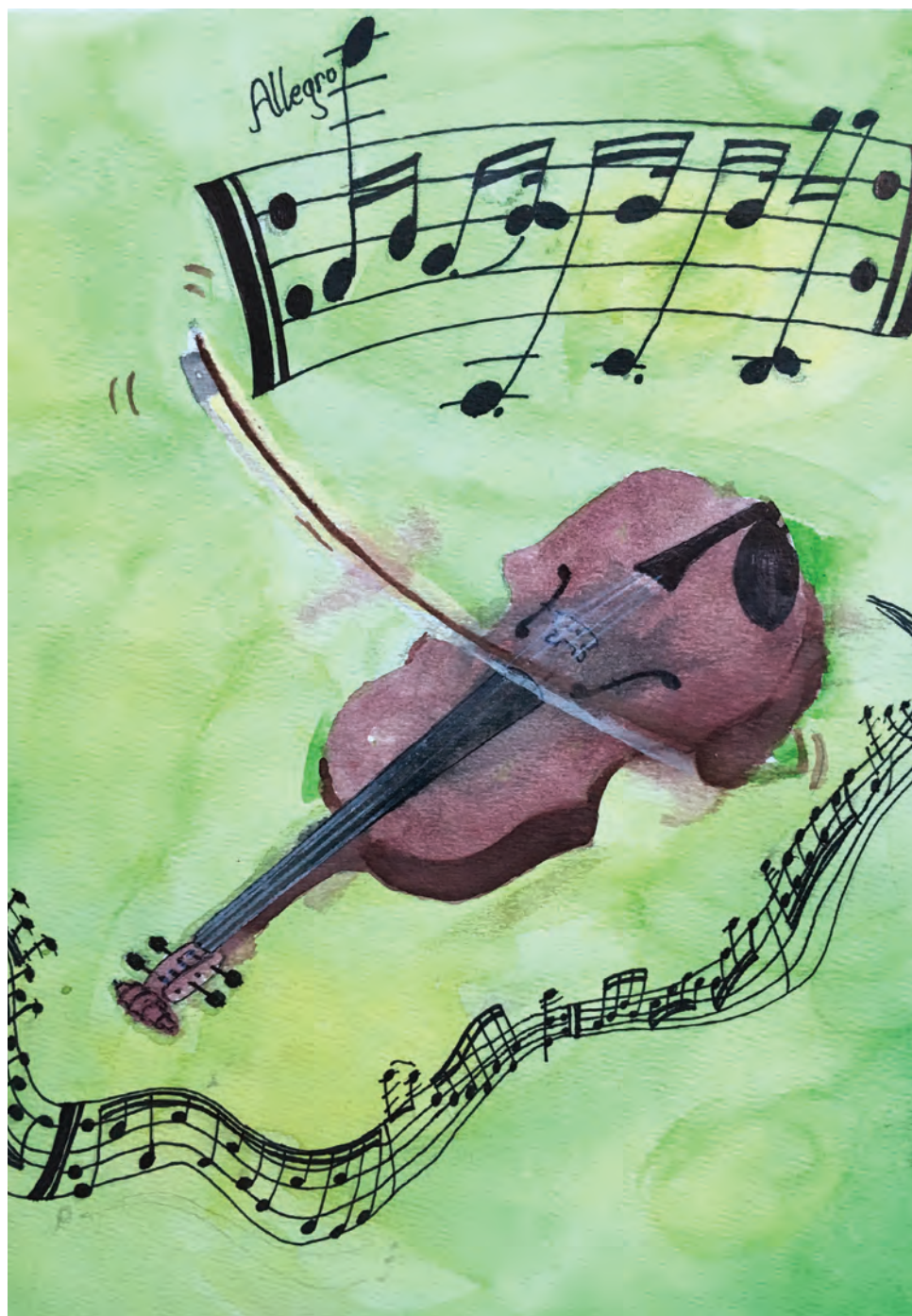
Scarlett ran inside the house and returned, holding the hands of her three sleepy children. Fear and grief reflected in her eyes as she spoke her last words to Rhett, “Thank you for all your help, we will return someday, after all, tomorrow is another day.”



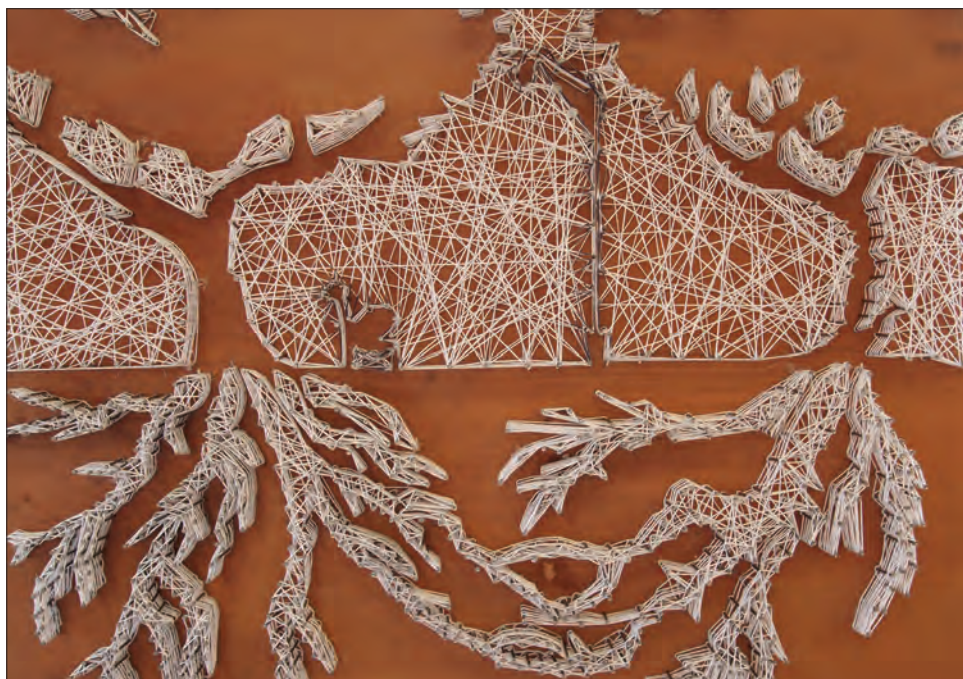
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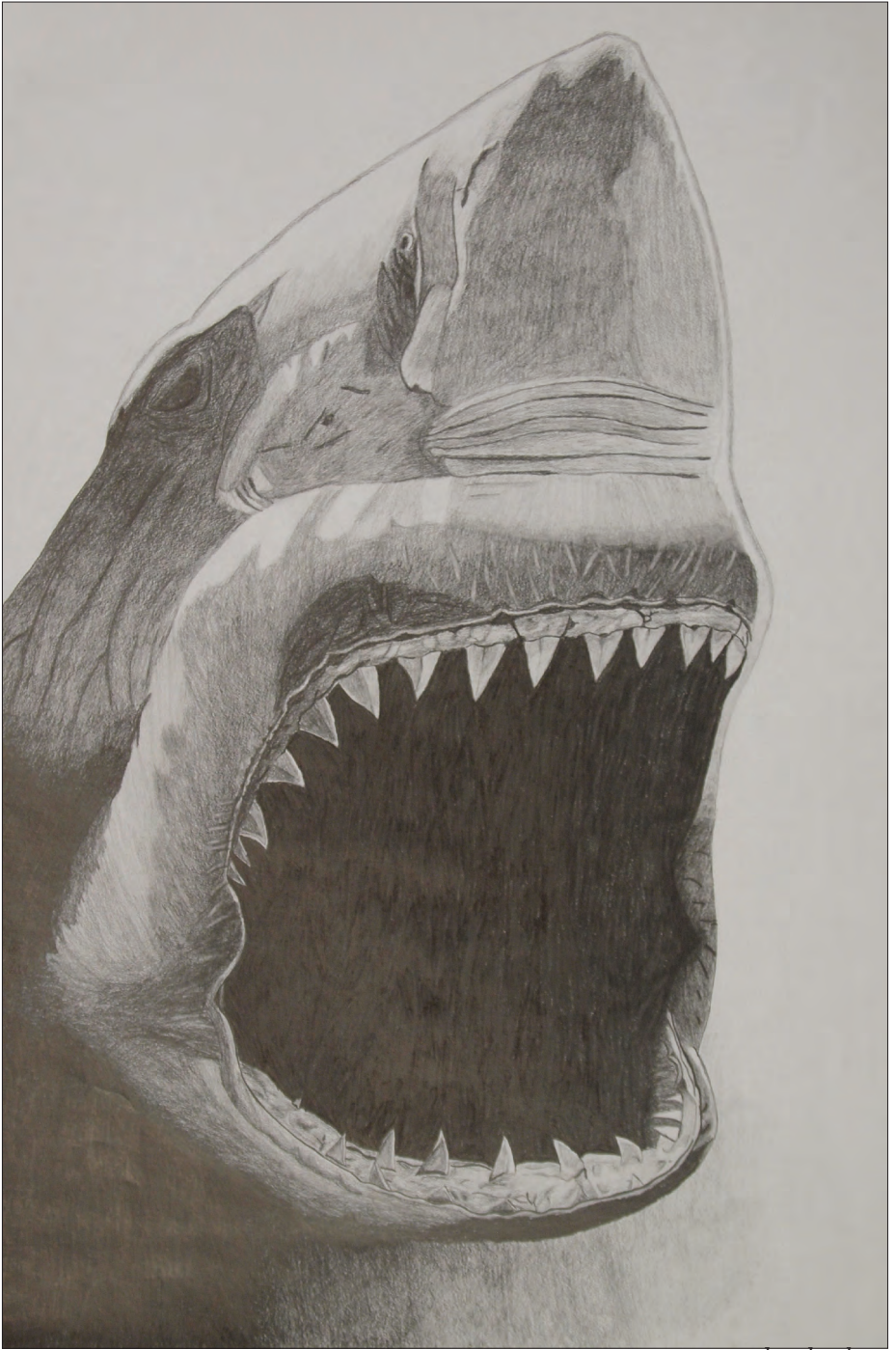
sophia lupke



ethan macdonald



nusha naziri



hayden lang



lauren adams



hayley dagenais



angela paolicelli



lauren capuzzimati



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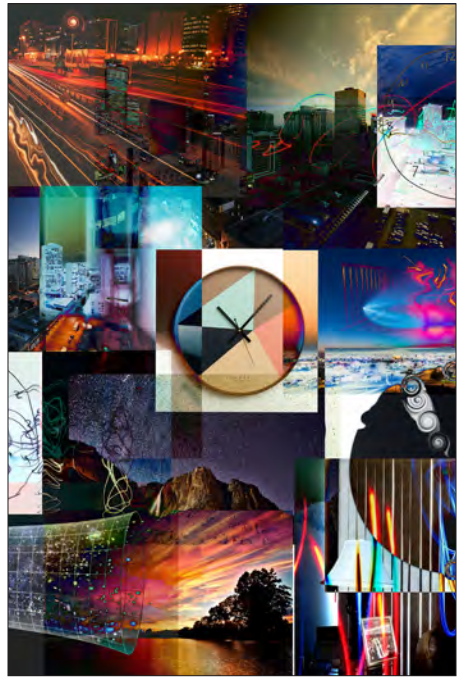
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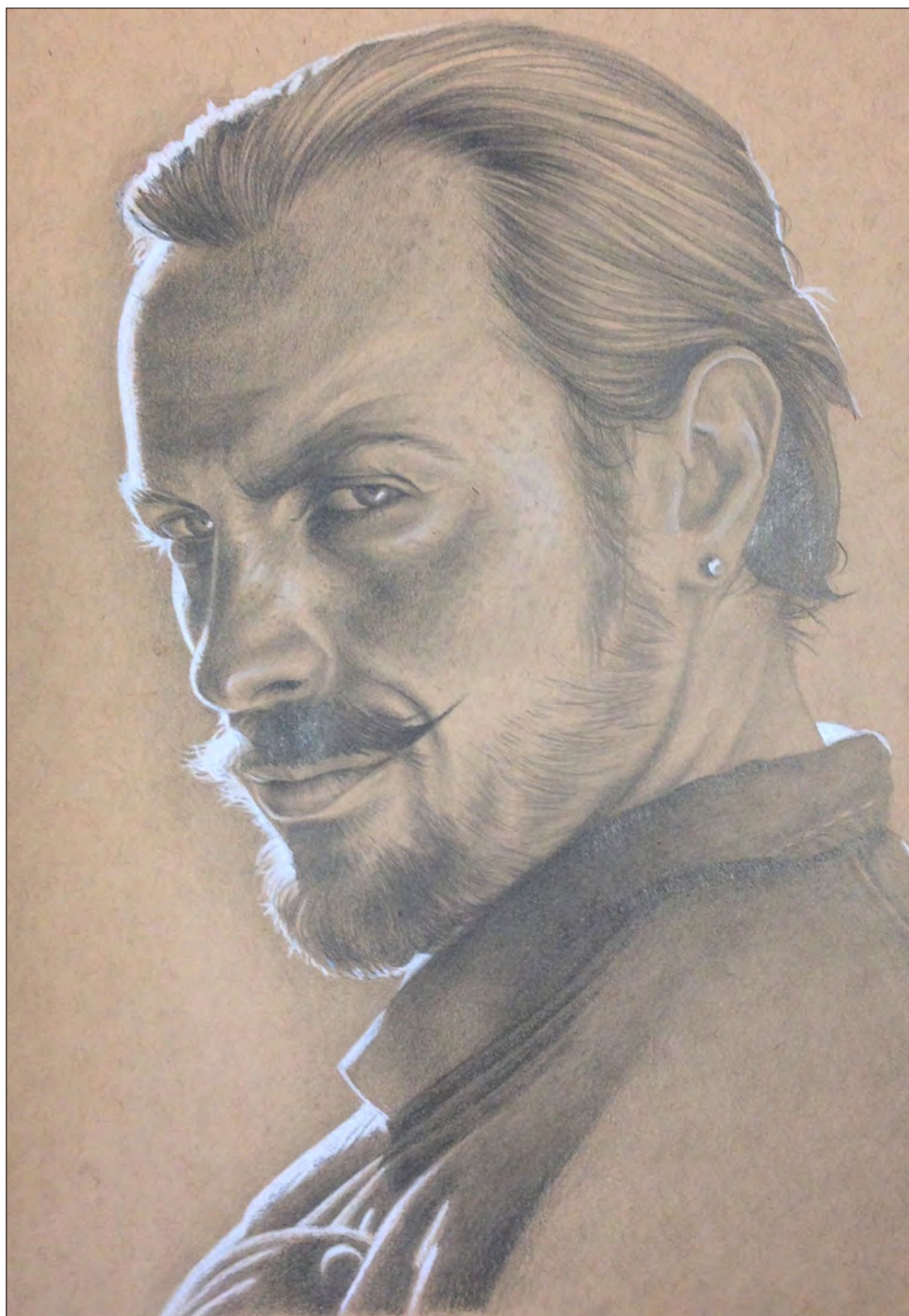
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The Call

Fanfiction: The Office television series

“Everyone! Can I have your attention please!” The office turns to face me. “I have been made aware that I should be expecting a call from my boss, Jan. I’m sure you all know her. Your boss’s boss. Yeah, we, uh, kind of have a history... so, uh, yeah. There cannot be any interruptions while I’m on the phone with her. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir, Michael, sir!” Dwight’s voice echoes through the room.

“Alright. That’s all.” I turn to go back to my desk.

“Michael, as Assistant Regional- er- Assistant to the Regional Manager,” says Dwight, stepping in front of me, “I believe it should be my job to defend your office until you have concluded your call with Jan.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“I have a purple belt in Goju-Rya Karate and have duelled my cousin Mose on a daily basis since I was an infant. You needn’t fear any entry. We Schrutes have strong bones.”

“Alright, fine, Dwight. Just- don’t do anything stupid. I don’t have time for this.”

Through my window, I can see the rest of the office busy at work. I look to my door. Where’s Dwight? He just said he’d be there. Just then, I see a figure dressed in white exit the breakroom. As it approaches, the purple belt around its waist becomes apparent. My God.

“Namaste, Michael.” Dwight bows. “I will stand sentry and do my duty to this company.”

“Dwight, just- ugh. Well, there’s no point in getting you to change now, Jan’s gonna be calling any minute. Just... think before you do something you’ll regret. Or I’ll regret.” I hear the phone ring from my office. “Don’t do anything stupid!” I yell as I rush to pick up the phone.

“Hey, Jan. How’s it goin’?”

“Hello, Michael. I’m calling about your branch’s sales. Dunder Mifflin Scranton’s profits have been on the decline for some time, and I’m afraid of what may happen if this trend continues.”

“Oh, Jan, it’s okay, you don’t need to try and hide it. I know why you called.”

“No, Michael, I’m calling for purely business reasons. If Scranton can’t improve its sales, the branch may have to close.”

“Mhm, yeah, got that. Now what else- oh for fudge’s sake, Dwight!”

I hear a faint “Michael? Michael?” from behind as I drop the phone and leap across my office desk. Crashing through the door, I find Dwight holding that mole, Toby, in a headlock.

“I caught this corporate shill red-handed, attempting to sabotage your meeting!”

“No!” Exclaims Toby, still in a headlock. “No, I was just walking by to get to the break room when Dwight pounced on me!”

“Honestly, Toby, I’ve come to expect this kind of behavior from you. But you, Dwight? I expected better. Sort this out. I gotta get back to Jan.” I pick up the phone again. “Hey, sorry about that. It was just your little corporate spy Toby trying to undermine our company. You may want to talk to some higher-ups about him.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll be talking to some higher-ups. Probably not about him, though.” She hangs up.

There’s nothing I love more than a productive day of work.

Dead Eyes Leave No Stories

A memoir to those that went before us
Clocha Éadóchais

The smell was unbearable.

That was the first thing that came to mind as I was born into this world.

Mother looked at me, her eyes reflecting an empty soul – emotionless, blank.

At the time, I never understood. Waves of frustration laced with desperation washed over me.

And then there was pain.

They said that there are two types of pain in this world: the sharp and swift, and the lingering and dull.

The hell would I know?

Sticks in the Meadow

I'd always been told that the sunshine on the other side was brighter.

Growing up, mother always cherished us. As we lay in perfect rows, radiating the vivacity of life, as she spoke of stars, moons away, and the lush green meadow with glistening dew.

We were her first, the one she'd always care for and tend to.

But as quickly as it started, it was gone.

I can't remember the last phrases she said to us. While it came sometimes, following waves of clarity, my mind sailed back into won-

derland almost quicker than it had arrived, blown by a gust of wind.

“Beware of ...”

What???

Straw Houses are the Best Cages

A cacophony of screams followed.

Here I live out the rest of my life, pressed against a rust-ridden bar that’s experienced thousands before me.

My sky was bright and incandescent, swaying on fractal beams and wiring, seldom six cages high. My earth was a pallet floor, reeking of diseases and diets of thousands before me.

In my world, hundreds alike to me lined up in uniform rows, stretching far beyond what my old, failing eyes could see.

Efficiency, as they called it.

Sniff.

Sniff.

Food?

Eat.

Eat.

Eat.

Drink.

The water always tasted strange.

We were prisoners of this world.

We didn’t have names. No. 18493.

Punished for a crime we didn’t commit. Healthy specimen:

14/12/49

“It’s time for you to go.”

“Whatever you do, do it the best you can because that’s the way to get along in the world.”

Here he comes again.

Seven times a week, five times a day, three minutes a row, ten

seconds each, he comes patrolling the halls lining our cells.

My muscles stiffen, my breath tenses.

A few cells down, my neighbor's breathing shakes, glancing up with fearful eyes.

He's still young, barely of age in some standards; fresh into society, as we like to call it.

The wolf, as they called him, struts along, indifferent to our glazes, uniform neatly tucked.

A few prods here, a glance here, an inspection of one cell.

And then he slowed. And stopped.

Please don't.

Please don't.

"Avoid eye contact. Tense up your muscles and tuck your shoulders forward." Memories from long ago came washing over. "Suck in your stomach. Don't look up. Don't make a sound; and whatever you do, never give him even the idea to come on in."

Ice flowed under my veins, my hair rose as hell glazed over me.

The seconds ticked by.

Screams broke the silence from a mother, just awoken four cells across.

"My kids! Where are my kids! MY CHILDREN! WHERE ARE THEY?"

His gaze breaks, and he makes his way over. We look down, shielding our eyes from what was about to happen.

"This one's good."

Why?

The Stick Walls

Mom?

Mom? Where's mom?!?!?

The pain had almost subsided.

Where am I?

Where is she?

I look around.

Around me, rows of my kind stand, indifferent to my suffering just hours before. Some resembled willows, emotionless and unmoving against the world with an empty look in their eyes. Others were more like me, looking around nervously, shivering, getting accustomed to our new surroundings.

It's dark and cold in here.

What happened? Where did they take me? Beware of what??

The whirr of machinery started once more, drowning out my thoughts and reminiscences of my last few hours.

Two blocks down, a neighbor looked at me with pitiful eyes. His eyes shone with wrinkles, the ones that didn't come from age.

"Tough luck, kid."

For the first few weeks, that was all the interaction I had with the old man.

Later I learnt that his name was Straws. A strange name, but we live in a strange world.

Stone House?

The mason was running late again.

Fuck.

I pace around the dirt.

My parents had named me Stones after an old Irish fairy tale, yet, now it seemed ironic that the person named "Stones" in the village hired masons to build his shelters.

Such was the case in this part of the world. Surrounded by forest, the wolves lurk at every corner. You hear their howls at night, echoing against the moonlit chirps of crickets as you doze off in the brick house, a layer seldom 30 inches thick, all there is from the outside world.

Growing up, mother hadn't been much of protection. Looking at

me with that same, empty look, she took off, god knows where, returning in days that turned into weeks.

Father was non-existent. From what I pieced together through my fourteen years with mother before she never returned, he was dead to us; a cold machine of steel.

A stray dog barked from down the street. Mac tíre?

As the sounds of automotive wheels crunching against gravel grew and grew, I looked up.

It had only been two years since this strange machinery was invented.

Growing up, the villagers took pity on me. I remember them feeding me scrap occasionally, their children playing along me for hours before getting dragged back yonder.

In my will, I'll make sure to leave this house for them.

Two weeks later, the brick house finished construction.

My time runs short.

While it was only two weeks since my close ordeal with the wolf, every breath I take nears my last.

I must stop him from looking at me. From finding me.

I start to build.

My arms were lame, and my legs were stiff; I begin using my mouth.

Bite the hay. Bring it to the front of the cell. Repeat.

Bite.

He's coming.

I'm almost done.

No, no, no, no.

Bite.

Crunch.

The pain. The excruciating pain.

"Drift off into wonderland will you come with me?"
"The straw house of wool and the gust of wind"
I was so happy! The children just kept singing.
"This one's good."

Here I rested in my village. A starving old man begging on the doorsteps of those around me.

I lost it all when they came and took it away. The stone walls that were supposed to protect me turned against me.

Forget a will. I'll be lucky to die peacefully.

They're looking for me.

I rummaged through the dumpster, lit by the silver moonlight.

Sniff.

Food.

Eat.

Eat.

A young couple passes by. I heard him speak.



It was day fifty-four when they finally took Straws away.

They say it's supposed to be painless: ship you off to a small, stone building in the middle of god knows where until you drift off to wonderland. That was far from the truth.

They tortured him, but by then, the old man had lost his sanity, living in his own world.

I drifted off to sleep.

I was awoken by loud banging, the rusty, iron door flying open

as the midnight moon shone into my face through the crevices on the ceiling.

“No!” I scream. “It’s too soon.”

My face slams against the concrete floor as I struggle with all my might. Hands push down against me as I kick my legs, desperate to live.

When they shipped you off to the house of stone, there was no turning back.

What once was meant to protect us from the wolves now fuels their bloodlust.

I pant and scream, tears and sweat pouring down my face.

The empty eyes of my neighbors look at me.

“Do you have no empathy?” I scream. “HELP! YOU WORTH-LESS PIGS!”

My emotions transition from desperation to anger, as the fire rises from inside me.

And then, suddenly.

My tail... Where’s my tail?

I now know what happened to mother. To Sticks. To millions before me.

The big bad wolf had won.

Modern Family Pre-Pilot – The Dunphy's First Day of School

I am currently undergoing the motions of stereotypical teenage angst.

“You’re so dramatic, Alex,” Mom says, sliding a bowl of cereal across the table towards me.

“Appreciate the support,” I mumble, not lifting my head from where it’s rested against the cool, granite surface.

Luke tsks from across the table. “You’re a Debby Downer. I think of a new school is super fun.”

I raise my head to glare at him. “You’re illiterate,” I say.

Mom pinches my shoulder as she walks by me to go upstairs, likely on a mission to tow Haley from her bed and propel her downstairs for breakfast. It’s a fruitless effort; Haley is as stubborn as an ox and about as thrilled to attend our new school as I am. Yet another angsty teen added to the Dunphy household.

We’ve constructed a somewhat-clear image on what to expect from our new school, Haley and I, if any of the countless high school rom-coms we watched back in our hometown of Sedona are trustworthy sources. Haley’s stressing over the guarantee of tanned white boys with snapbacks and obnoxiously flawless teeth, and I’m stressing over the promise that a person like me—someone whose level of social skills is veering into the negatives—is destined to get pummeled by pretty much everyone.

In Sedona, it wasn’t like that. Our local school only hosted two

hundred students, and my friends and I often went outside for lunch and played ultimate, basking in the Arizona sun and smell of pine. The atmosphere was serene, a soothing hum always in the background somewhere, and there was no crevice of that town that didn't feel like home.

But then my dad's new promotion in real estate required us to move here, to the restless city of Los Angeles, where the dense heat feels suffocating and all the deafening noise from the day rings through your head as you toss and turn in your sleep. We arrived two weeks ago, and there are still some boxes yet to be unpacked. (We're lazy. And dad's a hoarder in denial.)

Today is my first day at a new school in Los Angeles as an eighth grader. And that sentence alone is enough to send my prepubescent, naive body into cardiac arrest.

Oh, Jesus. My life has practically become a high school rom-com itself. I physically cannot reach any lower than this.

"Are you gonna eat that?" Luke asks, gesturing towards my untouched cereal and effectively cutting off my self-pitying thoughts. I shoot him an unimpressed look, sliding my bowl of now-soggy Frosted Flakes in his direction. He all but inhales the whole thing. It takes immense effort not to grimace.

"You're a disgrace," I tell him.

He just grins at me, his crooked teeth beaming. (His right front tooth is hanging by a thread—all thanks to his heartbreaking baseball skills. It should be a sin to let him play.)

"I'm seventeen, Mom." Haley's sleep-induced voice fills the room as she pads down the stairs in her pajamas. "It may as well be illegal to force your child into a new school for senior year."

Mom is sporting a severe frown as she follows Haley into the kitchen, shaking her head. "You girls are overreacting. Look at Luke—he's not nervous at all."

“He’s Luke,” Haley says at the same time I say, “He’s Luke.”

Luke blinks. Mom rubs her forehead. “Get ready for school, all of you,” she says. “Or else you’ll be late.”

“Are you driving us?” I ask, sliding off my seat from the table.

“No, which reminds me...” Mom marches towards the stairs.

“Phi-il!” she hollers. “Wake up! You need to take the kids to school!”

It’s silent.

“Phil!”

There’s a thump from above, followed by a very startled, “Wha?”

Mom groans. “This house is a mess,” she mumbles, stomping up the stairs.

And when Haley, Luke, and I finally drag ourselves to brush our teeth and get changed, I can’t help but think, Scene One of Alex Dunphy’s abomination of a high school rom-com—completed.

The Adventurous Train

I entered the Q-time tunnel discreetly, and pressed the combination of my account - "PAGE-10089" - to access the XSPAX Station.

As the door slowly shut, I closed my eyes and thought unremittingly about the time that I had spent in Verona. "Back then, no one paid attention to me," I told myself, "Paris's little flower' was the name everyone called me." I was a nobody. Yes. People saw the truth. However, what they didn't see is, that name was just one identity of mine. I went there. I observed. I wrote. However, eventually, I would return to XSPAX."

Ding-Dong-Da! "Welcome back to your city of Verona," the elevator sung. Merely two minutes passed by, and I was already taken to the little museum of myself in Verona, which is filled with precious documents, including my daily journals and a collection of four poems I wrote. All of which witnessed what happened in the past few months:

22/6, 205X Rainy

I arrived in Verona on June 20th. The Prince of the city assigned me the position of being Count Paris's assistant. I questioned and searched to discover what kind of job this was. Fortunately, I encountered Friar Laurence today, one of the most kind, warm-hearted priests in the city. Friar introduced the two "celebrated" families: The Mon-

tagues and the Capulets. When Friar spoke with me, he delivered so much information at once, that it was like a productive assembly line. Just from what Friar told me of this chaotic city, confusion and agitation walked into my mind. He took me to visit the famous sights in the city.

As we were turning onto the Lahara road, I noticed a cloudy image of two groups of people fighting. They fought against each other with aggressive actions. I soon realized that these people are the two families! We hid at a corner on the street and watched the fight. Swords bumped against my eyes, and threatening words crashed into my ears. I learned some of the people's names in the fight such as Tybalt from the Capulets; Mercutio, and Benvolio from the Montagues. Benvolio left a great impression on me because he was the one who tried vigorously to stop the fight.

I will end today's journal here because my alarm clock urges me to sleep now. Good night, peaceful world. Good night, bustling Verona.

23/6, 205X Cloudy

I'm going to share some poems I wrote today with myself and Mr. Journal:

Rolling from the sadness and here comes Romeo.

Obstacles in love stumbles him hard and he said, "Oh!"

Montagues and Capulet battle from dusk until dawn.

Energy flees away from Romeo.

"Oh, Rosaline! She doesn't love me back," Romeo wept in his room all day alone.

Benvolio suggests Romeo banish Rosaline from his mind.

Eventually, she is a shooting star, which only appears for the sky.

Numbers of “adventurous trains” pass in front of Montague’s house with joy. Romeo tries and tries to get on.

Velvet curtain inlays with mixed feelings. Mixed feelings dissolve in depression.

On the journey to forget Rosaline, Romeo decides to take “the NO.1 adventurous train” to the Capulet’s party ---- the next station.

Life resets for Romeo when he attends.

In front of him, Juliet, a Capulet, smiles like a waterlily on a sparkling lake.

“Oh, I met the most beautiful lady in my life,” Romeo walks up to her with his love-ache.

Jesus Christ! Looking at the shiniest star in the universe, Romeo forgets about the shooting star.

Urging him to start a new chapter and forget his loving scar.

Love ties their relationship; Friar ties their marriage; however, their love unties from forever-lasting.

“I would adventure for such merchandise,” Romeo speaks with forever-passion.

Efforts of love still won’t touch the wall of success.

Thinking about the future; future touches their shoulders and fades away.

Meeting and knowing each other at the balcony comprised the first episode of “Memory Album.”

Endless hatred between the two families didn’t obstruct the “Love Railway”.

Romeo treated Juliet as his beloved pearl, and he is the shell covering her.

Capulets considered Juliet as their pearl in the palm, as well, but they attempted to sell the pearl to a wealthy merchant.

Under the pressure of family feud, star-crossed lovers lived, loved, married and parted.

Tybalt left, Mercutio left, they have all took the last “Adventurous train”.

In the city of Verona, grasses grow over the “Love railway”.

On the streets of Verona, people complained, “The trains never come back again.”

I placed these documents on the table, recalled the words that Friar Laurence told Romeo, “These violent delights have violent ends. And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume.” I pressed the button of the time tunnel, and was ready to get back to the XSPAX Station. I will finish my poem from 205X and stick it on to the wall:

“ People complained, argued, and laughed.
Star-crossed means nothing; nothing means everything.
I lived my life normally, and low profile.
I hope if someone writes a story about the two lovers,
They will publish my poems as well,
I hope if my poems appears in the story,
Readers will notice me as well.

line. PAGE is my name, a small character who only has one

But that doesn't matter,
I brought memories back from the City of Verona,
And left everything else there.
Violent delights have colourful ends,
It ends peacefully.
It ends in a point.”

Sustaining Shadows

Many works of fanfiction give stories new endings. The following episode imagines a new beginning: in Avengers: Infinity War, the god Loki, Thor's brother, dies in film's opening scene. The following work depicts an alternate universe where Loki barely survives after having his neck snapped by Thanos. After the Asgardian refugee vessel explodes, Loki and Thor run into the Guardians of the Galaxy. They decide to team up in order to stop Thanos, the Mad Titan.

"Undying? You should choose your words more carefully," Thanos growled, grabbing Loki by the neck. Loki's eyes widened in fear as he was lifted up into the air. Around him, all of his senses suddenly felt unnaturally sensitive, and everything seemed so sharp and deafeningly loud as Thanos' purple fist constricted around his throat. Kicking weakly, he began to lose consciousness from the lack of oxygen.

Thanos's grip tightened, and a sudden intense streak of pain shot through Loki, who felt his bones break with a snap.

His whole body felt on fire now. Another snap was heard, bringing a fresh blazing wave of pain r Crestwood Preparatory College olling through him. At the third snap, the fire suddenly stopped, and his whole body went limp. He tried to move, then realized with alarm that his limbs would not listen. They remained hanging at his sides.

When Thanos threw his body onto the ground, he felt noth-

ing at all; could do nothing at all. His bloodshot eyes remained open, barely seeing, as Thor crawled over to him, reaching out and clutching his body. His consciousness was already starting to fade as he dimly remembered to heal himself. Pulling up his last bit of his strength, he called upon his magic, willing it to course through his body and mend his injuries. As soon as he let go of the stream of magic, his mind went dark.

Thor clung onto Loki's body, not even letting go even as the vessel exploded. The blast knocked out Thor, but his hands remained stubbornly clasped around his brother. The bodies and debris floated through space, eerily silent except for the dim crackle of purple embers.

Peter Quill's crew ship formed a ragged circle around the unconscious gods on their table. They had found them floating through space surrounded by the remains of a large ship. Peter Quill leaned over, taking a good look at them.

"How the hell is this dude still alive?" He wondered, staring at Thor. Rocket walked closer to where Thor and Loki lay. He reached out with one finger, poking the latter. The sudden cold startled him, and he withdrew his paw.

"Wow, his hand is really cold. Is he even alive?"

"They are both alive." Mantis said quietly, her hand placed on their foreheads. "They are angry... anxious... they both feel tremendous loss and guilt..." She murmured, focusing. "I can feel so much pain..." Gamora looked at her, concerned.

"We should probably wake them up." She told Mantis. Mantis bent down, reaching over to touch the gods, her antenna softly glowing blue.

"Wake," she whispered. With a shout, Thor jolted up. He grunted as he stumbled forwards and leaned on the wall, panting heavily. Slowly turning around, he faced the Guardians who were all on their

guards. A figure on the table caught his eye. Noticing Loki, who was slowly rising from the table, he ran forwards, grabbing his brother by the shoulders.

“Loki! You’re alive!” Loki blinked at him, clearing his head. He was... alive. His neck still throbbed dully, but most of it seemed to be mending just fine. He felt drained, but still alive.

“I thought you died!” Thor mumbled. “How are you still here?” Loki managed a weak grin.

“Now brother, did you really think I would die from a small wound like that?” He looked around him, noticing the Guardians, who were still staring at them. “Brother...” He said softly, pointing his eyes towards the group of people watching them. Thor turned around and glowered at them intimidatingly.

“So, who the hell are you guys?”

Half an hour later, all of them were sitting, having worked things out. Thor and Loki were resting by the table, drinking soup that the Guardians had provided them. Loki gazed at his soup, the liquid untouched. A storm of emotions silently whirled inside of him, dominated by the urgency of the situation. Thanos. He’s started. If they let him continue, there would be nothing that could stop him. They needed to act, and soon.

However, as Loki sat there, he couldn’t dismiss the nagging feeling inside him about the green skinned woman who had helped rescue them. She seemed familiar, but he just couldn’t quite place his finger on it.

Gamora sat twirling a spoon absentmindedly.

“The entire time I knew Thanos, he only ever had one goal: To bring balance to the Universe by wiping out half of all life. He used to kill people planet by planet, massacre by massacre...” She said, her

voice low. "If he gets all six Infinity Stones, he can do it with the snap of his fingers."

Loki's eyes widened in recognition as it hit him. He stood up abruptly.

"You're a daughter of Thanos," he said accusingly. Thor looked at his brother, alarmed, and rose as well. He stared at Gamora.

"Your father killed our people!" He growled aggressively.

"Oh, boy. Stepfather, technically. She hates him as much as you do," Quill stressed, making Thor soften a little.

"Families can be tough," Loki told Gamora gently. "That's just how life is." His tone was melancholic. "I feel your pain." Beside Loki, Thor stared at his spoon.

"I need a hammer, not a spoon..." Sauntering over to their pod, he pressed a few buttons, trying to open the door without success.

"How do I open this thing? Is there some code...? Maybe a birth date or something..."

"What are you doing?" Quill narrowed his eyes.

"Taking your pod. My brother and I need to be going." Thor answered, still trying different combinations.

"You know where Thanos is going next?" Gamora questioned.

"Knowhere," Thor responded curtly. Loki got up and strolled over to Thor's side.

"It's where the Reality Stone is stored," he verified, addressing the Guardians. "It's been there for years, safely residing with a man called the Collector."

"And you two think that Thanos is going for that one next?" Peter Quill asked, leaning on the ship's wall.

"It's the only logical path of choice," Loki explained. "There's six stones. Thanos already has two, one from Xandar and one from

when he destroyed our ship. Two are protected on Earth, and the Soul Stone's whereabouts have been unknown for millenia. Which means he has no choice but to go for the Reality Stone next."

Quill nodded. "I see." Beside him, Gamora rifled through their belongings, finding their supplies. "Then we have to go to Knowhere now."

"Except," Thor butted in, "I'm heading to Nidavellir." Loki stared at his brother.

"Why? We don't have time for that."

"The dwarves of Nidavellir are the only ones who can forge the weapon I need. The weapon that has the power to kill Thanos." Thor answered. Loki look at Thor.

"The most logical plan now would be to split up then. I should take a team to Knowhere." Rocket jumped up onto the table beside Thor.

"Well I'm definitely going to that weapon forge with the big guy!" He grinned, slapping Thor's back.

"Groot, put away that stupid game," he scolded the teenager, who had been in the background playing Defender on his handheld game console. "You're coming with us." Rocket beckoned to him. "I've gotta keep an eye on ya." Groot looked up, then begrudgingly rose and shambled over to take his place beside Thor and Rocket, never looking up from his screen.

"I am Groot," he muttered in an insolent voice.

"Hey! Watch your mouth, kid!" Rocket snapped at him, glaring at the teen.

"Alright," Loki declared. "The rest of you, you're coming with me to Knowhere."

Knowhere.

As soon as they set foot on the ground, Loki immediately felt that something was off. It was the atmosphere, the taste of the air, the feel of the gravel under his feet, that just didn't feel *quite right*. As they advanced cautiously through the rubble of the decimated room of the Collector, they heard a desperate voice.

"I don't have it!"

"Everyone in the Galaxy knows you'd sell your own brother if you thought it would add the slightest trinket to your pathetic collection." The distinct deep growl of the second voice unmistakably belonged to Thanos.

Quietly sneaking forwards, they sighted Thanos from behind the rubbish.

"I know you have the Reality Stone, Tivan. Giving it to me will spare you a great deal of suffering," Thanos threatened, placing his boot on the chest of the quaking white haired man.

"No," Loki whispered, the word leaping unbidden from his mouth. It all seemed so clear to him now. This place, everything around them, was fake. An illusion. Thanos had already gotten the reality stone. And now he knew that they were here.

Thanos slowly turned his head towards where they were hiding as he heard the faint sound. Releasing the Collector, Thanos advanced slowly, every thump of his boots echoing throughout the room.

"Ah," the Titan smiled nastily, his shadow looming over where they were crouched. "Now, who do we have here?"

Lord of the Flies Fan Fiction: Maelstrom

Ralph sat alone at the side of the ship. It had been 3 days since he, the twins, Maurice, and about a third of the littluns had left the island, but he still couldn't stop remembering the horrific events that had happened there.

Jack and most of his pack had elected to remain on the island, and Ralph was glad they had. When the ship had left, he had seen them melt into the forest with savage grins on their faces.

As he stood up to go to the room in the hull that had been set aside for the boys who were on the ship, he saw the dark forms on the horizon that could only mean an approaching storm.

"There's a storm on the horizon," he shouted to the crew of the ship.

"You best get inside or you could get swept off the deck," the first mate responded.

As he looked closer at the cloud line, Ralph came to the startling conclusion that it would overwhelm the small cruiser in a matter of minutes. Realizing that it was too late to retreat to the hull, he resolved to tie himself to a post in the center of the ship and try and wait out the storm.

As the storm collided at its full power with the puny and insignificant vessel they were on, there was a sickening jolt, and Ralph emptied his stomach onto the slick planks of the boat.

As the waves swept over the side of the ship, they hurled Ralph past the rail until he was hanging over the surging ocean.

After what seemed like forever, but must have been only seconds, he was lifted back onto the deck by Sam and Eric. Ralph tried to follow them below deck, but as he dashed towards the door, the rope that he had tied to his waist yanked him with such ferocity that he was sent sprawling in the center of the deck.

His life may have been saved by this act, because immediately after he was sent sprawling, the boat tilted at an unnatural angle, and he watched as some of the sailors were thrown from the ship. What he also saw was the sea rise up to form a wave of titanic proportions that engulfed the entire ship in one fell swoop.

As the ship was swamped with water, the vessel turned suddenly as if the captain had lost all control of the craft. It started to turn towards the center of the storm, and what had appeared to be only the tumultuous waves of the typhoon now revealed the twisting maw of an immeasurable whirlpool. The bow of the ship crashed through the waves on its collision course with the gaping pit at the center of the maelstrom.

The ship tilted at an almost forty-five-degree angle as the powerful currents created by the whirlpool threatened to capsize it. In a moment of panic, Ralph cut the rope that had saved him from the depths of the sea and grabbed onto the pole with his hands, hoping against all odds that the boat would return to its original position.

Unfortunately for Ralph, the currents remained stalwart in their attempts to capsize the ship, and after one final attempt to right itself, the ship capsized completely.

Ralph was launched into the water and was immediately enveloped by the waves. He was battered and tossed around by the sheer force of the waves, but he managed to grab onto a floating piece of wood with the last vestige of his strength. As he faded into and out of

consciousness, he saw glimpses of his fellows on some of the life rafts, but he saw no trace of any of the sailors.

He awoke to find himself on the sandy beach of what appeared to be an island, surrounded by Jack and the boys who had decided to stay behind. In a tone that invoked an almost supernatural aura, Jack said “No one escapes the Lord of the Flies.”

Minerva McGonagall

Minerva McGonagall was on the Hogwarts Express heading home after her final year of Hogwarts. Most of the others spent the trip having one last laugh and talking about the future with friends, and while Minerva did participate in this, it was in a distracted way, as she spent most of the ride dreading her arrival back home.

Minerva's father, Robert, was a muggle, unlike her mother. They had met in their small village nestled cosily in the Highlands of Scotland, and fell in love. Every muggle in the village, including Robert, believed that Isobel went to a boarding school in England; the truth was she attended Hogwarts School of Witch Craft and Wizardry. Isobel hid the truth from him because she feared that he would leave her. It was because of this lie that she was forced to hide her gifts along with her wand. The lie was so complete, that she started lying to herself, telling herself that she'd tell him when they were married; tell him everything. But she didn't.

At birth, Minerva showed signs of being a witch. Isobel had kept the secret of her true nature from her husband for years, and was terrified that Robert would find out. So she continued to try and hide her secret world from Robert.

One day Robert had come home and heard his bagpipes being played, he went into the living room to find out who was playing them – no one, they played themselves! He began to ask Isobel questions, questions that made her creak, and then break. She told him everything and revealed her wand that she had kept hidden in a box under their bed. She tried to explain that she and Minerva were bound by the International Statue of Secrecy and had to keep their magic a secret.

The result of that night was a broken trust between two people who loved each other most in the world. The love wasn't gone, but Minerva learned the cost of having magic in a muggle world. She loved her father and saw how hard it was for him to understand her and her brother's world, and it pained her. She saw her mother's pride, but also her envy as she and her brothers would tell proudly of the magic they had learned.

* * *

Waiting for Minerva upon her arrival home from school was Robert Senior who, when her and her mother suddenly appeared in the living room, spilled his tea all over the carpet. Minerva walked over pulling her father into a loving hug. The evening was spent with the family sat around the dinner table catching up and sharing stories of the adventures they had while they had been apart. That night the house was filled with echoes of laughter and stories, although Minerva couldn't help but notice her parents didn't once look each other in the eyes.

* * *

When Minerva woke up the next morning, her head began to fill with the memories of the day before, and her heart couldn't help but feel heavy as she realized that she would not be returning to Hogwarts. She decided to visit the meadow to cheer herself up. The meadow was a little hideaway just on the edge of her backyard and the neighbouring farm. It was hidden from the outside world. In the centre was a large oak tree whose branches stretched out over the meadow. Minerva took her favourite book.

She approached the old oak tree and sat under it. As she read, she got so lost in her the story that it wasn't until she was hit on the head by a stick that she looked up. When she did look up, her blues eyes were met with a set of brown ones looking back at her. Minerva studied the boy in front of her and for the first time in her life was left

speechless. With Minerva left dumbstruck it was down to the boy to introduce himself first.

“Dougal McGregor”, he announced, putting out his hand for her to shake. But Minerva just sat there starrng at his hand, “and you are?” he asked.

It was then that she snapped out of her stupor and stood up, face heating up, “Minerva McGonagall,” she said as she accepted his hand shake.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, “if you don’t mind my asking” she quickly added.

“My father’s farm that I work on is just over that way,” he chuckled pointing in the direction away from where Minerva came into the meadow. The chuckle was hardly noticeable, but it made Minerva’s heart skip a beat.

“Mind if I join you? What book are you reading?” he inquired as he sat down under the shade of the tree.

“It’s a book of fairy tales.” She answered him, “would you like me to read you one?” she questioned.

“Why not, I think I can afford to spend some time with a beautiful lass such as yourself.” With a red face and a racing heart Minerva began one of her stories. Then one story turned into two stories which, turned into three and, the next thing they knew the sun was setting. They had spent the day sitting under the old oak tree talking, laughing, reading stories. When they parted ways they agreed that they would meet again the next day.

When Minerva returned home that evening, the sun was setting and she went directly up to her room. That night the only thought in her head was about the boy next door.

* * *

Over the next few weeks Minerva and Dougal would arrange to meet secretly in the meadow almost everyday. Minerva knew that if

her parents found out they would disapprove, but she was having so much fun with the muggle boy she couldn't help herself. Being around him made Minerva so happy. Every second of the day her mind was plagued with thoughts of him. Especially if they weren't together. As the weeks went on the two of them got increasingly closer and little did she know, Dougal was just as enthralled in her. So infatuated in fact that he went out and bought a ring.

* * *

It was Tuesday in August when it happened. Minerva got to the meadow and was greeted by Dougal under the oak tree with a hefty picnic basket. A smile instantly sprang to her face, and her eyes lighted up.

"What's all this?"

"Nothing, just a regular old picnic." He nervously chuckled.

This made Minerva suspicious, as Dougal was always very cool, calm and collected. So as she approached him she raised an eyebrow, "Is that so? No underlying reason?" she inquired.

"Not that I can think of, no." he said, his eyes not being able to reach Minerva's.

"Ok, then," she offered before Dougal took her hand and led her to the picnic blanket to take a seat.

The next three hours were spent laughing, eating and enjoying each other's company. There was a point, however, that something felt off to Minerva. Minerva knew soon she would have to tell Dougal she was leaving to go to London for her new job. She was in the middle of dreading the idea when she realized Dougal was in the middle of taking her hand and kneeling on one knee.

"So, after saying all that, will you marry me Minerva McGonagall?" he asked voice shaking.

Minerva stared at him wide eyed, looking from the ring box in

his hand to his eyes that were looking anywhere but her own. "I'm sorry what?" she asked, confused.

"Minerva you are the most interesting, smart and quick witted woman I have ever met. So please say yes. Let's get married. My father will give me his farm soon, and we can start a family. Say yes," he said, his eyes now holding Minerva's the whole time.

"Yes," Minerva responded, her voice almost a whisper "Yes! Yes! Yes!" she laughed tears springing to her eyes as he slid the ring on to her finger. She rushed to hug him and the couple sat there holding each other until the sun started to set. When it was finally time for the lovers to part, like always they promised to meet again the next day in the meadow.

* * *

Minerva was lying in bed when the realization finally hit her. She was leaving for London in four days for her new job, and was not planning on returning anytime soon. Yet, she had just that afternoon promised the rest of her life to the muggle boy that lived next door. She sprang up in her bed and put her head in her hands and started to weep.

She saw easily enough that there were two options. One, she could call off the engagement, breaking Dougal's heart. Or two, she could send an owl to the Ministry telling them she was refusing the job in order to get married to Dougal and have a family.

She couldn't help but draw the parallel to her present situation and her mother's. It was so clear now. Why hadn't she seen it earlier? If she stayed, she would deny who she truly was, just as her mother had done. This she could not do. She had seen the cost of it. With the decision made, she got out of bed and slid her suitcase down from the shelf and began to pack quietly in the night with tears in her eyes.

Fanfiction sonnet sequence:
“Night in the Woods” video game

(Petrarchan, Shakespearean, and contemporary sonnet forms)

Possum Springs

Running away, going from right to left,
Mae Borowski has come home, dubbed “killer”
in the middle of a small-town thriller,
Met with confusion, but no longer cleft.
The Autumn leaves fall, orange in colour,
painting a stark rust-line across the map.
The hole at the centre of town—a trap.
Those who go in can’t come out, passed over
And forgotten. Attached to the past,
Unwilling to let go; to change and grow.
Even the weeds have given up, lay’d down
It seems that here, nothing is built to last.
Stuck in the green days, no time to borrow.
This is Possum Springs—it is a ghost town.

The Longest Night

Though the woods are crowded, they feel empty,
And though the forest speaks, there is no sound.
Where the forest spirits have no fealty—
A place where stars are nowhere to be found—
Where there were tracks abundant in the snow
Is now a blank slate, wiped clean by the wind,
The frozen lake immures all life below.
Souls of the dead have no words to rescind,
But sunrise comes to shine upon the hill
And its warmth thaws through winter's icy grip.
Children come to play, despite the awful chill,
And life persists in spite of Jack Frost's gyp.
Though the ice comes to slow things to a halt,
The sun does rise to melt the frozen vault.

Lost Constellations

Stripped down to bare essentials.
What are lines and shapes?
Just shapes—
No interpreter.
The red arcs on the bottom,
the white circles on top.
In the middle are more circles and circles
Shapes oblong and square—
No interpreter.
The shapes are empty.
They mean nothing,

But with someone to translate,
A summer night sky where
the stars make constellations,
stories, and feeling
A singing angel, a whale with the world on its back,
A pope that breathes fire, and a bell that ends the world.
The circles in the middle make faces:
People looking up,
People who interpret,
Who build something from nothing,
Who take things that are empty and make them full.
In a world that doesn't care, there are people who do.

My sonnet sequence "Night in the Woods" is about the video game of the same name. The first sonnet, "Possum Springs" is named after the town in the video game. The story is about a college dropout, Mae Borowski, returning home from school to her childhood home Possum Springs, which isn't as she remembers. Night in the Woods is a side-scrolling video game; traditionally played from left to right, as that is the way the English and most western languages read; however, Night in the Woods is played from right to left. The symbolism of moving right to left is not only about Mae's journey of regressing back from her time at college, but also about the town's fear of the future and its need to stay in the past. In my series of sonnets, we move from the past to the future. Night in the Woods takes place in the fall, its partner game, The Lost Constellation, takes place in the winter, and the third game in the series, The Longest Night, is a prequel that takes place in the summer. As the sonnets move from past to present, they also move from pessimism to optimism. The games focus on many different themes, like mental illness and the economic problems of the Rust Belt, ending with a conclusion of uncertainty for the future. For better or for worse, Mae, the town, and the player can only move forward.

Cutting The Strings

Once upon a time...

I have decided that who I was is no longer who I want to be. As I tied my blonde hair tighter and tighter into a round bun, my hair gripping the ribbon firmly, my world felt as if it were closing in, as well. I think back to that day when I carefully stepped into my blue dress, in awe at its newness, almost as though it had just transformed from my old, tattered rags. I thought about how I had changed and was now unrecognizable. I remember stepping into the blue material slowly, as mice helped to move it up my body and tie it shut, so as to not wrinkle the shimmering masterpiece and tarnish the vision that everybody expected me to be. I'll never forget slipping on my white gloves and delicately pulling them up my arms. The gloves enveloped my ringed finger, the band that was to hold me captive in my own fantasy. I think about sliding into those glass slippers: how can something that fits so perfectly, at the same time, be so uncomfortable?

Until now, I have been a puppet, controlled by strings held by others. I spent my childhood as a servant to my stepmother and sisters, obeying their every order and meeting their wants. You see, my family told me that what I wanted didn't matter, and of course, I believed them. When I was a teenager, I was lucky enough to meet a fairy godmother who immersed me in her magic, allowing me to be someone for once in my life. Only, I did not earn it. My life's fortunes were not given out of any personal fortitude of my own, but rather, out of pity for the life that I was living. With these unearned gifts, I was made the

bride of a prince and promised a “happy ending.” A happy ending for whom? Thus far, I have been constrained by the strings tying my limbs to the “happy ending” storyline. Today, I’m cutting the strings.

* * *

The word “divorce” finally sunk in and sat like an anchor in my gut. It has now been a month since my divorce with the prince was finalized, and I have decided that it is time to take life by the reigns and create my own happiness. Relieved by the absence of my life’s training-wheels, I traded my blue ball gown for a pair of “mom jeans.” I got rid of my glass slippers and found a very nice married couple on Kijiji who happily bought them from me. I let my hair down and decided that I needed to find a real prince charming. So, I did the only logical thing that I could think to do: speed dating.

* * *

The room felt desolate, and the air reeked of desperation-- or was it just me? I walked up to the front desk, from which a large banner hung reading, “Welcome to Happily Ever After Inc.” Butterflies began to swarm in my stomach, as I was greeted by two young, freckle-faced, red-headed girls who looked exactly the same.

“Hey there,” spoke the girl on the left, “I’m Halle, and this is my twin sister Annie.”

“Good day,” voiced the girl on the right in a very posh British accent, “I hope our speed-dating service helps you find your true love, and that you two live happily ever after.”

I looked at the two tweens with confusion, noticing as their legs did not even touch the ground. “Aren’t you girls a little bit young to run your own dating service?”

“Too young?” Halle mimicked.

“I’ll have you know that we successfully got our divorced parents

back together. If we could make that happen, we can set up anybody.” Annie added, “What kind of chap are you looking for, anyway?”

This question stumped me. For my entire life, I had just been exposed to cookie-cutter princes, with perfect little lives. One thing was for sure, men with foot-fetishes were out of the question.

“I don’t know yet,” I answered honestly.

I moved past the front desk and was sucked into a busy crowd of familiar faces. In the center of the room were two circles of chairs facing each other. Those looking for a male partner were asked to sit on a chair in the outer-circle, and those seeking female companions were told to sit on the inside. Instructions were as follows: we would have one minute to converse with the person sitting across from us. When the minute ended, the circle would move, and we would meet a new partner. The idea was to allow us to be exposed to many people in a short amount of time. I liked it: no games, no tricks, no locking anybody away in a tower to prevent them from participating; I could finally have my shot at a happy ending.

“Your first minute starts now.” In front of me, sat a seemingly confident young man with dirty blonde hair and an infectious smile.

“I only have a minute, and I don’t intend on wasting it,” spoke the boyish man. “The name’s Dawson. Jack Dawson. I’m not like most guys--I’m a survivor.” Jack pulled out two cigarettes, slid one behind his left ear, lit the other one and took a puff, “just the other day, I was sleeping next to some dwarfs under a bridge, and today, I’m sitting here, chatting with you. I take life as it comes.”

I looked at Jack in awe. As somebody who had lived their entire life following somebody else’s agenda, his free-spirited nature excited me. “What are your long-term goals?” I asked.

Jack took another puff of his cigarette, sat back in his chair and

smiled, “I got ten bucks in my pocket; I have nothing. I love living life not knowing where I’m going to end up, or who I’m going to meet. You can either sink or swim, you know?”

“NEXT,” yelled Annie. The minute was up.

Jack moved one seat to the left, and in his place, sat a much bigger and more dazed-looking man in a black tank top, which, by the way, didn’t do a bad job of showing off his built physique. Just before he sat down, a trumpet theme-song begin to sound, and I knew right away that I was sitting across from *cue announcer voice* the man himself, the Italian Stallion, the Heavyweight Champion of the World, Rocky Balboa.

“Hey, how you doin?” asked this mountain of a man. His face looked tired. “You like turtles?” he asked. The words slipped out of his mouth like drool. “I got two of em, they’re really cute, you know?”

Rocky continued to profess his admiration for his turtles, and I lost interest; I had abandoned my animal friends and was not interested in gaining more.

“NEXT,” Halle hollered.

I glanced at my watch to see how many more of these “meetings” I had to endure when a little boy sat in front of me. He had bright blonde hair and wide eyes.

“Who let you in here?” I questioned out of deep concern. Little boys should not be at adult-dating mixers.

“Nice to meet you, too,” snipped the boy, “My name’s Kevin McCallister. Some might say that I have a knack of getting myself into adult situations.”

“Do your parents know you’re here?”

“My parents never know where I am. They don’t care about me. One minute, they’re shoving me in the attic, and the next thing you know, they’re on a flight to who-knows-where?”

I was at a loss for words.

“Listen, sweetheart, here’s how things work for me. I’m the man of the house. I’m a protector, a provider, and not to mention, a good chef--you like mac and cheese?” Kevin raised his eyebrows up and down in an alluring fashion.

“I’m sorry, you’re a little too young for me,” I admitted. “And I could really do without your chauvinistic attitude.”

That put little Kevin in a bad mood. His face grew red and he promptly got his out of his seat.

“Good luck, ya filthy animal,” he barked.

With that, I left, “Happily Ever After Inc.” and decided that instead of finding a man, I should spend some time being alone, because marriage does not necessarily lead to a

Happily ever After.

Harry Potter and the Abused Boy,

Chapter 1

Based on Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets by J.K. Rowling (Inspiration by Tumblr user Marauders4evr)

Harry landed with a crash. He must have said something terribly wrong to end up here.

Harry loved life with the Weasleys. They had taken him away from the Dursleys and shown him what it was like to have a family who loved and cared for him. Living with them, every day was a new experience. Harry had never seen so much magic used in mundane settings, like the dishes that washed themselves, or the clock that knew everyone's whereabouts. Being at the Burrow during summer also meant that Harry could go to Diagon Alley with the Weasleys to purchase supplies for Hogwarts. Harry had assumed they would take the flying car or perhaps ride their brooms to get to the shops, but Ron looked at Harry as if he were daft for not knowing that the floo network is the best and easiest way for witches and wizards to travel. Because the Weasleys were lucky enough to live surrounded by magic, they assumed everyone else had as well, forgetting that Harry had grown up with muggles.

"Speak clearly and take care to get out at the right grate," Molly said. Those were her only instructions as she gave Harry a handful of floo powder and ushered him into the fireplace. It seemed simple enough when Ron did it, but as Harry dropped his powder and said

the words, he'd not appeared next to his friend in Diagon Alley. He'd appeared, covered in soot, on the floor of a shop filled with menacing curiosities. He picked himself up and hoped he was at least close to where the others were. The shop was dark and frightening, covered in dust and lacking the joy that seemed abundant in Diagon Alley.

Who would ever come here? Harry wondered to himself. Instantly, the bell at the door chimed, and the Malfoys sauntered in. Of course it was the Malfoys. The Malfoys were purebloods, like the Weasleys, but they thought themselves better for it and chose to look down on those with less old-fashioned values. Where there were Malfoys, there was trouble. Harry jumped into a nearby cabinet to conceal himself, taking care to leave the door open a crack so he could see what business the Malfoys had in a place like this. Lucius summoned Mr. Borgin, the shopkeeper, with a flick of his wand.

"Mr. Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you here," said Mr. Borgin, glancing over Lucius's shoulder as Draco wandered toward a dust-covered case. "What may I interest you in today? I've just received a locket your wife might like. Maybe some...", Mr. Borgin trailed off as he turned his attention to the vanishing cabinet whose door seemed to quiver. Harry's heart began to beat faster, but as he considered possible escape plans, Draco drew the attention to himself.

"Eugh," said Draco, grimacing as he pulled back a finger covered in dust. "Really, father, I don't know why you choose to do business in a place as filthy as this."

"What did I tell you," Lucius hissed. "Don't touch anything." Lucius' every word, tightening his voice each time, caused Draco to step away from the case and look down silently. "I'm not here to buy. I'm here to sell," he told Mr. Borgin.

"Ah, of course. Ministry raids, and all that, innit? Seems like everyone is selling nowadays," said Mr. Borgin. "What do you have for me?" Mr. Borgin began inspecting the items within the box that

had suddenly appeared atop the counter. "What's this book you've got here?" As soon as he spoke, Lucius snapped the small black book out of the shopkeeper's hands.

"Not for sale."

"You sure? I could give you a nice price for it." Lucius gave a look that ended all questions before they were asked. "Ah well, you've got some nice items here. What do you want for the lot?" Mr. Borgin said. As Lucius began to reply, a crash came from behind. Draco had knocked over a small case, shattering it. Lucius whipped around, cloak flying up behind him. His eyes had become the darkest black Harry had ever seen.

"How dare you disobey my orders, you useless boy!" He grabbed Draco by the collar and pulled the boy backwards until his head hit the floor. Lucius placed his cane on the boy's throat. As Draco looked up at his father with fear in his eyes, Lucius pushed his cane in harder. "Don't. Touch. Anything." Harry had seen enough. Since before he could remember, Harry had lived with his aunt and uncle. While they only beat him a few times, they showed their disdain in other ways. When Harry was a toddler, they locked him in a dark cupboard if he cried. As punishment for being his mother's son, they forced him to sleep in the cupboard until after he'd grown so he could no longer stand upright inside. Twelve years of eating only burnt scraps of food had left Harry scrawny and weak, shorter than he should be. Vernon had only beaten him a few times, but Harry knew too well the pain of a family's abuse. He ran out of the cabinet and grasped Draco's outstretched hand, whispering in his ear, "Run."

"Aberto!" Harry pointed his wand at the door, flinging it open for them to escape. Harry looked back to assess the situation but only found Draco running behind him, not looking back.

"Don't let the green ones touch you," Draco said calmly, though tears streamed down his face. Flashes of light hit the walls around the

boys, lighting the alleyway with missed spells. Lucius wasn't going to let them go.

"I don't know where we are," Harry said. "The floo brought me here by mistake." Without saying a word, Draco passed Harry, clutching his hand as he darted to the right. Draco led them through a maze of alleys until they were suddenly surrounded by sunlight and crowds of smiling people. Diagon Alley.

"Mrs. Weasley!" Harry cried, flailing his arms as he ran to the family with shining red hair. "Mrs. Weasley, they're after us!" Molly Weasley turned around, her smile fading as she spotted two boys, one covered in soot and one with silver hair and crisp robes. As they ran toward Molly, they materialized in the Burrow.

"Mu-um," Ginny complained. "You said we were going to see Mr. Lockh—," she stopped short as she turned to see Harry and Draco standing in the living room behind her.

"Oh dears," Molly said. "What on Earth happened?" She looked at the two boys worriedly, taking in Harry's disheveled state and Draco's frightened eyes.

"Mrs. Weasley they were hurting him! Mr. Malfoy hit him with his cane. I couldn't just leave him there!" Harry was frantic. No one else could understand Draco's plight, just like no one understood Harry's. But even if no one could understand, Harry wasn't going to let someone else suffer like he did.

"Is it true?" Molly said. The blond boy just looked down. "Oh, my dear," she said, wrapping Draco in her arms, giving him a mother's love for the first time in his life. He quivered at the touch but slowly relaxed into her arms, letting some of his fear dissipate with the warm embrace.

"His own father was beating and threatening him!" Harry cried. "Mr. Malfoy kept casting spells at us as we ran. He'll never let us go! I've never seen Draco look as afraid as when he saw green light fly

from his father's wand." As Harry pleaded to Molly, he felt a strange feeling. He felt as if he'd seen this before. The only memory Harry had of his mother was shrouded in the same shade of glowing green.

"Call Dumbledore," Molly said to Arthur. "Dumbledore has to know." Molly pulled back from her hug and held Draco by his shoulders. "We won't let anything happen to you, dear. You're safe now."

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slow dancing in a burning room

Moira O'Deorain was exhausted. The dropship from Venice had gotten back late last night - very late. Blackwatch's field team had been dragged into a grilling session by their superiors longer than a midnight sermon, all because their mission had gone from a simple negotiation to a murder and high-profile chase through the city.

But the mess of it all didn't strike Moira as a shock. She knew the camel's back of Overwatch was bending, but the exposé of the peacekeeping organization's black ops team, Blackwatch, was one hell of a straw to break it with. Their glory days were long forgotten now, with this bad publicity not even being the worst of what she'd heard recently. Rumours of betrayal were whispered by her ears, fingers were pointed in debrief rooms at possible moles, and she'd heard someone swear one of their own was selling secrets to the terrorist organization, arch-nemesis Talon....

But it had only been twenty-four hours since Moira had been confronted with it all. She was at the Gibraltar base now, on an ironically-calm sea after the loud and violent night. While the Overwatch captains continued to hound down the Blackwatch commander, it was supposed to be back to normal for everyone else, including her.

Of course, that was only if Moira could ever consider her work to be normal.

"You're damn stupid."

Angela Ziegler almost broke the flask she was holding when Moira walked into the lab. Of course - the whole bloody base was

empty, but they still managed to sniff each other out like grudging bloodhounds.

“Jesus. You won’t even give me a minute to get my coat, will you?” she muttered, avoiding her colleague’s indignant stare.

“What did you think you were doing in Venice? Throwing yourselves at Talon in the middle of downtown?” Moira didn’t want to argue with Angela - she’d listened to enough of the Blackwatch team’s squabbles to earn a day free of bickering with her best medical competitor. Besides, Angela’s holier-than-thou philosophy would do nothing to change what was already weighing heavy on her mind.

“What happened there, and what led to it, is none of your business,” she said. “Trust me, it’s the kind of mess you don’t want your nose in.”

“Like it hasn’t already been shoved in it,” Angela scoffed. “Captain Amari had more than enough to complain about at breakfast.”

“Is nothing worthy of being classified anymore?” Moira wanted to work, but the Oslo base had all her records and in-progress lab reports. This room was disgusting, anyway - some old experiments were gathering dust, flasks still filled up with solutions and grainy precipitates just lying out in the open. She could always clean it up, if Angela would leave her alone to do even that.

“Just let me understand,” Angela paced after her as Moira spied titration equipment left on a counter. “You entered a Talon-occupied city with hundreds of entry points, having no backup plan, and decided to turn it into a shooting range?”

“It wasn’t my fault. Commander Reyes had some ‘eureka’ moment face-to-face with the enemy, and brought all hell loose on the rest of us. But I know your adorable little strike team wouldn’t dare do anything so brash.”

“I know full well we wouldn’t. We actually listen when we’re told

not to engage a potentially-dangerous target.” Angela paused, catching her insult just before it left her tongue. “I hope you know how lucky you are to be alive, Moira.”

How caring she pretended to be when she was upset. This wasn’t the doctor Moira was bickering with on any other day. She’d normally smirk and made some snide comment, then move on to a patient or some other noble medical duty, but today, there was something to dig for – something worth her unrestrained concern.

Moira tried to ignore the eyes piercing her thick skin. She put a bulb over the dusty pipette, dark purple liquid draining as she squeezed. “As if you care whether I come back alive or dead. You’d be better off with the ‘evil’ scientist gone, right?”

“You’re not evil. And you know that’s not true,” Angela said. “Did you ever consider how I would’ve felt if Talon put a bullet through your skull? Or worse, if they took your skills for themselves?”

The pipette drained. Moira yanked the bulb off. “Enough, Angela. You can stop pretending to value my life now that you have my attention.”

“I’m not asking for your attention, I’m asking for you to listen!”

“Listen to what? What happened in Venice wasn’t my fault,” Moira snarled, smacking the pipette down and yanking another beaker off the counter.

“Listen to me when I tell you how insane this was! All it would’ve taken was one Talon soldier to end it.” Angela’s voice rose as she said it, but her tone started to waver. “Just one bullet, and your body would be floating down the canal right now. Is that what you wanted, to die for some kind of greater purpose, a greater good? Did you want to play the hero, to pretend to be something you’re not?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Moira shouted, and lost her grip on the beaker.

The glass fell in slow motion. The seconds before it hit the hard concrete stretched into minutes, hours, an eternity. Two pairs of eyes watched as one corner met with the ground, and time resumed, thousands of tiny shards shattering as they blinked.

Angela stopped. Moira fell silent. Her gaze should've gone right to the beaker's remains, but instead it locked onto Angela's wide eyes, ringed with deep purple and filled with the naive shock of a new recruit. She was looking back into Moira's, but what she saw must've been much, much different.

"It wasn't my fault," Moira said. It was almost true. Commander Reyes had been the one to kill their enemy - his hands had pulled the trigger, but Moira's own were far from clean. She kept secrets, she'd made mistakes, and she'd lied to everyone she knew, even the woman standing right in front of her right now....

"I believe you," Angela said. "I know it wasn't your fault."

"But I was up all night," she continued, eyes glossy with suppressed tears. "I didn't sleep. I didn't eat anything or talk to anyone until your ship landed. I thought I would never see you again. And I didn't even remember what the last thing I said to you was."

"Probably some wisecrack," Moira joked, but Angela shook her head.

"I know. And I couldn't handle that." She sighed. "You mean a lot to me, Moira."

Moira didn't respond. Their relationship was...complicated. They were constantly competing for recognition, comparing each other's deeds and achievements down to the tiniest detail - yet none of that supposed hatred made them enemies. They cared for each other, even if neither of them would admit it.

And that was what made the sinkhole opening in Moira's chest so much deeper.

“Please, don’t ever do that again.” Angela’s hand met Moira’s sleeve, tugging it down to touch ever-so-scarcely. “I don’t want you to die yet. You can be a hero here, with me, alive.”

“I’m not going to die, Angela,” Moira said. “Please. Believe me.”

Angela squeezed her hand, but Moira couldn’t squeeze back. She tried, but her fingers couldn’t move. The glove that kept their hands from touching covered up thick, rotting flesh, ruined almost down to the bone. The secret genetic mutation technique she’d been testing had gotten bad results, so bad that she’d almost reported it to her partners as a failure.

But it was too soon to tell Talon she wasn’t ready for their assignment - not right after last night. Not after she’d already tried to cross the line back to the good side after realizing what it would cost her to leave.

If Angela ever knew. Moira couldn’t consider it. If she knew the woman she’d cried for had given Talon enough information to tear down the world she fought every day to protect, she would never hold her hand, nor beg her to come home. Moira was no hero, not even when she pretended to be, and she was certainly not worthy of Angela’s care.

But it was all for the greater good. It had to be. Everything that had happened in Venice was necessary, no matter what the captains for this side of the black-and-white battle believed. There was chaos on the horizon, disaster beyond what anything Overwatch thought was coming, and it would take a certain kind of resilience to get through it all unscathed.

Of course, Moira would do everything she could to keep herself alive. But, no matter how painful it would be, there were certain people, and certain feelings she had for them, that she would eventually have to burn.

The Princess Bride: The Sequel

Sweeping thick filaments of hair from his grandson's face before pinching the boy's cheeks, Peter shook his head with a smile.

"Sick again so soon, Billy?"

Billy slowly reclined against his headboard, fingers curled around the edges of his quilt blanket.

"Are you gonna read me *The Princess Bride* again?" he asked, eyeing the gilded edge of the book nestled in his grandfather's coat pocket.

"Not today, chap. I found something else to read to you, and I think you won't mind."

Billy blinked, straightening back up. "Something else?"

"I was dusting off my bookshelves the other day and I found me a book I never thought I'd find again: the sequel to *The Princess Bride*."

His grandson's young features contorted into a look of utter bewilderment, his nose scrunched and his head tilted to the side.

"I thought you only read *The Princess Bride* when Dad was sick."

Peter loosed a chuckle.

"Your dad didn't get sick quite as often as you."

Peter laid the book down on his lap. He licked his index finger before opening the book, flipping its worn pages to locate the first chapter. The old man then adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat.

"Do you, Westley, take Buttercup to be your lawfully wedded wife, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, 'till death do

you part?" asked the minister.

Westley heard the encouraging chants of men sitting in the aisles behind him, crewmen of the Dread Pirate Roberts. Sporting unkempt beards and roguish grins, these men were unfamiliar with the traditional customs of weddings, behaving more as they would perhaps in a tavern. Still, a handful of uncouth guests was a small price to pay for his dear friend Roberts' attendance.

The former farm-boy wasted no time meeting his bride's eyes and proudly proclaiming, "I do."

Though the ceremony was not yet complete, one of Roberts' men took Westley's vow as a cue to swipe a glass of wine from a nearby table, staining its once-pristine white cloth with drops of dark vermillion as he hastily took a swig. The crewman raised his glass, but his gleeful shouts suddenly turned to bellows of agony before he collapsed to the floor.

Another crewman tapped him with his foot, to no avail. The crewman bent down to observe his comrade's eyes were still open, so he waved his hand in front of the man's face.

"Bernard, you will get up at once or consider yourself dead," Roberts hissed.

"I think there's a slight problem, Captain," the other crewman timidly replied.

"And what would that be?"

The other crewman lifted his companion's massive arm before letting it go, watching it thud back to the ground.

"He's already dead."

Roberts rolled his eyes. "Well then, toss him outside! When was the last time you saw a corpse as a wedding decoration?"

The crewman summoned another comrade to help lift the man when they were halted by the groom.

"Wait," said Westley, consoling his distraught bride in his arms.

“Bring that man to me.”

The men struggled to keep their dead comrade off the ground as they walked, eventually stumbling on top of a startled huddle of wedding guests. That was when the tallest of the wedding guests slowly rose from his chair, crossing the aisle to intercept the dead man’s body, lifting him as one might a basket of bread. Wordlessly he laid the dead man onto the altar, nodding to the newlyweds.

“Fezzik.” Westley acknowledged the giant with a small nod in return. He let go of Buttercup and glanced down at the dead man, noting the purple tinge of his skin. Then he turned back to face his guests.

“Nobody touch or taste the wine. I’ll have my men dispose of it into the sea as soon as possible.”

Roberts cast a sidelong glance at Westley. “You know what killed this crewman?”

“Like the back of my hand,” replied Westley, stepping forward. “Iocane powder.”

Westley bid his beloved a final goodbye before boarding Roberts’ fastest ship. Both men turned to face a young crewman of no older than sixteen.

And you’re certain you saw the strange ship head west?”

The boy hastily nodded.

Westley and Roberts exchanged looks.

“West it is,” Roberts affirmed. His crewmen sprung into action, readying the sails for a swift departure.

Roberts, Westley, and Fezzik retreated into the Captain’s chambers, a room comfortable enough for even the famed pirate’s tastes.

“Never a break for me, is there?” Westley wryly commented. “I rescue my beloved from the clutches of Prince Humperdinck, spend my wealth on a grand wedding ceremony, and just narrowly miss assassination. I must be cursed.”

Roberts leaned forward. "I apologize for this disaster. It was probably me they wanted. Being feared throughout the seven seas tends to make you a target."

Westley smirked. "I believe you."

Fezzik lightly drummed his fingers on a table.

"The killer could also be on this ship," he mused.

"Impossible," replied Roberts. "My crewmen know I am not to be trifled with. The mere thought of betraying the Dread Pirate Roberts would scare them witless."

"Cut it out, Inigo. You sound like a bad salesman," said Fezzik.

Inigo Montoya loosed a long, heavy sigh.

"I won't lie, taking over as Roberts was not what I expected it to be. I'm amazed I even managed to attend a wedding with the crew. Was it always this trying when you were the Dread Pirate Roberts?" he asked Westley, who merely shrugged.

"I must've hired a better crew."

Sudden commotion from the deck caught the men's attentions. They emerged from the chambers to find their vessel side-by-side with a great black ship. A tall, thin man in a cape and large hat pointed his sword toward Inigo, who straightened up.

"You dare challenge the Dread Pirate Roberts?"

"Oh, heavens! I would never!" replied the man. "Why, is he somewhere ahead?"

Westley could hear the cackles and guffawing of the other man's crew.

Inigo glared. "I am the Dread Pirate Roberts, terror of the seven seas and destroyer of fleets upon fleets."

"I'm George."

Inigo and his crewmen looked at each other and blinked.

"Surrender now and prepare to be boarded," said Inigo, drawing his sword. "I'm sure you know what happens to those who resist the

Dread Pirate Roberts.”

George scoffed. “Your threats are worth less than the change I left upon your mother’s nightstand, Spaniard pirate!”

“Enough threats then.” Inigo turned to his crew, speaking loudly enough for George and his men to hear. “Sink her to the bottom.”

Inigo’s crewmen readied their cannons, but George stood still on his deck, yawning.

“You sure you don’t want to reconsider your position?” called Inigo.

George simply shook his head. “For the crew of the Dread Pirate Roberts, you lot sure are boring. A few years ago you would leap upon my ship and smite me where I stood! Cannons are for cowards and foreigners.”

Inigo’s men stopped in their tracks, silently looking at their Captain with wide eyes.

“If it’s a duel you want...” Inigo met the expectant stares of his crew before returning to George. “A duel you shall have.”

Coolly the Dread Pirate Roberts boarded the neighboring ship, clutching his beloved sword. The other crew slowly backed away, giving the captains plenty of room on the deck. The braying of swords filled the air, each man fiercely swinging at the other, but in the corner of Westley’s vision he spotted another man approaching Inigo from behind. The man unsheathed a small knife, poised to plunge it through the pirate’s back.

Westley wasted no time hopping onto the other ship, striking down the would-be assailant. Inigo then disarmed George, pinning him to a wall.

“Some duel you wanted,” Inigo growled. “I’ve met some of the slimiest men in the seven seas, but they all would tremble to behold your wretchedness. Now tell me why you tried to murder us at a wedding in Florin.”

George spat in his face. “Kiss my ass.”

Without another word, Inigo plunged his sword through the other Captain’s torso. He left George to die on the wooden floor as he returned with Westley to his own ship.

“Roberts, I caught sight of a symbol through one of the windows of their ship,” Fezzik said as he joined Inigo’s side. “They’re from Guilder, the sworn enemy of Florin.”

“Should we take the crew for questioning, perhaps keep them as prisoners until we figure out what’s going on?” suggested Westley.

Inigo’s eyes met Westley’s, dark and hardened.

“The Dread Pirate Roberts never takes prisoners.”

Fanfic Short

The sun quietly set over the farm. The wheat rustled and the occasion chicken clucked. It has been a long day. Steve returned his tools to his chest and started down the winding path to his home. Torches lit his way, placed by Steve himself after arriving in this world from the great Spawning. As he walked, he organized the day's harvest in his backpack.

"Man, I could kill for a porkchop right now!" he grumbled as he walked into his house, the door squeaking behind him. He unhooked the latch to his food chest and pulled open the lid. Just as he reached in to grab his well deserved dinner, a faint green light flooded the room and something behind him started to make strange noises. Paralyzed by fear, Steve couldn't bring himself to turn around, and just stared blankly into the bottom of his chest, deliberating on what to do next. Before he could decide, however, he heard another strange noise and then footsteps walking around the room.

"What the hell did you do that for Rick?" said one high pitched voice.

"I did what I had to do to save our asses from the whole Citadel Militia, Morty. Maybe if you paid more attention to my genius you would catch on," replied a second voice. It sounded like a much older man.

"You know what Rick? I'm tired of all your shit today. I want you to take me home!" said the child.

"Well Morty, as much as I would love to drop your sorry ass at home and go on my own super dope adventures, I can't," said the old

man.

“What do you mean you can’t?” asked the child.

“My portal gun is out of charge Morty. It got used up escaping from those god damned bureaucrats at the Citadel,” said the old man. Just as the child was about to reply, the old man noticed Steve standing in the corner, watching them. Steve had finally mustered enough strength to turn around and face his invaders, but still had yet to say anything. “Oh hey man, whats up?” asked the kid. Steve looked at the old man, his strange blueish perched upon his head, hands in his lab coat pocket. Steve looked down to his blocky hands, and realized he was shaking. He looked up at the pair, turned, and bolted out of the door.

“Jheez, what a fuckin weirdo, eh Morty?” said the old man to the kid. Steve ran until he couldn’t any longer, and collapsed on the soft grass under an old birch tree. He lay under the tree, panting and looking up at the leaves fluttering in the wind.

It was all too much for him to comprehend, and he soon fell into a restless sleep under the safety of the birch tree. When he awoke, the sun was shining through the canopy. He slowly rose, groggily stretching and looking around. It took him a second to realize that he was not in his bed, nor in his house. In fact, he had no idea where he was. As the memories started flooding back, the porkchop, portals, and strange alien visitors, Steve panicked.

This time however, he regained his composure, and told himself that he wasn’t going to lose everything he had ever worked for just because some random intruders came into his world uninvited. No! He was going to fight back and take what was rightfully his! Steve pushed away his fear and started working on his counter-assault. He punched trees, mined cobblestone, and crafted weapons until he felt he was ready to fight back against the assailants.

Once he was ready. He retraced his steps as best he could, and

eventually found his way back to the farm. As he rounded the last hill, he saw his home and was instantly filled with gratitude that his hard work had not been destroyed. However, his gratitude did not last long. He spotted the two intruders busy at a makeshift workbench made out of a fallen tree, and let out the mightiest roar he could muster as he charged towards his attackers.

Before he got even half way, the old man looked up from his work and saw Steve. Steve sped up towards his enemy. The old man swiftly pulled out what looked like some sort of stapler, and pointed it towards Steve.

“Weird,” thought Steve, “why would he have a stapl...” Just then a long blast of light sped towards Steve and hit him square in the chest.

“That was definitely not a stapler,” thought Steve as his world slowly turned to darkness. When he awoke, he was in a chair facing his two intruders. Instinctively, he swung wildly at his assailants, but quickly realized it was in vain as there were restraints on each of his limbs.

“Who are you?” asked Steve, unable to hide the anger in his voice.

“Well, that’s just what we’re here to tell you” replied the old man, “My name is Rick, and this is my grandson Morty.”

“Hey man,” said Morty.

“What are you doing in my world?” demanded Steve.

“Well,” started Rick. “Morty and I were just running an errand in another dimension, and as you might have heard, it did not go as planned. Long story short, we used the last of the power in our portal gun to get to the first dimension we could reach, which just so happened to bring us to this block world where physics don’t seem to exist.”

“Ok,” replied Steve, “Can you leave?”

“So eager for us to be gone?” said Rick, “We only just arrived!”

Steve did not reply, only glared at the two of them.

“Ok, I see how it is,” said Rick, a false offence in his voice, “Well, I don’t know much about your world, but in order to charge the portal gun enough to get us back to our world, we need a large source of energy, preferably another portal or something like that. You got anything that will work?”

“I know just the thing,” replied Steve. “Follow me.”

They walked for what seemed like hours, but eventually arrived at a huge hill poking out of a sprawling forest.

“Doesn’t look like there’s much here,” remarked Morty.

“Yeah I’m right with ya Morty,” agreed Rick, “Where’s this portal at anyways?”

“Just give me one second,” replied Steve, holding a large paper map out in front of him. He walked around until he found the spot he was looking for, and started digging downwards.

“Hey, wait for us!” cried Morty, jogging over to the staircase Steve was digging.

“This is what I was saying about the physics, Morty, it’s whack!” said Rick, looking up at the free standing dirt and rocks that appeared to magically support themselves.

“Don’t be rude, Rick,” replied Morty. Steve dug until they broke into a room made of gray bricks and metal bars. As they stepped into the room, a small bug-like creature squirmed towards them, squeaking as it tried to bite at their ankles.

“What the hell!?” yelled Rick and Morty in unison.

“Relax,” said Steve, “It’s just a Silverfish.” He calmly walked over and cut it in half with his sword. He gestured for the pair to follow him. He lead them down a winding expanse of tunnels until they came upon a large room with a square of stones in the middle.

“Here we are,” said Steve. Rick and Morty tentatively walked over and peered into the square. Within it looked like an entire universe condensed into a 5x5 foot square.

“Yep,” said Rick, “This will work”

He pulled a long metal tube with buttons on every square inch out of his jacket and dipped it into the portal. He removed it and pressed a series of buttons on the contraption, and the dark liquid slowly turned green. The machine released a long beep, and Rick opened the top and poured the liquid into his portal gun.

“Well, it’s been real, thanks for your help,” said Rick

“Yeah, thanks man!” said Morty.

“Uh, no problem, I guess” replied Steve. With that, Rick pointed his gun at the wall, and a long beam of green light blasted out from it. When the beam made contact, a large green portal opened and started gurgling against the wall, beckoning for it’s makers to return home. Rick and Morty stepped towards it, gave one last look back to Steve, and hopped in. The portal closed behind them and for a moment Steve just stared at the wall where two people had just disappeared into, a blank look on his blocky face. He turned, and started back to where he had come.

“The chickens need to be fed!” thought Steve, and went on with his life.

A Shocking Revenge

He sat there. Cold. Alone. Lost. He could hardly remember the dazzling outline of his mother's brilliant yellow coat, the comfort of her compassionate brown eyes, and the countless hours of fun he had spent with his little brothers and sisters. He felt a small tear roll down his rosy cheek. Those times were gone.

The sun was bright, sending warmth through the leaves of the lush green trees to the velvety grass below. He and four of his younger siblings had been out playing in the depths of Viridian Forest. That is when it happened. He watched in the distance as a giant monster plowed through the tall dark grass toward his helpless little brother. The creature was hideous; a mop of wilting grey fur sprouted from the top of his foul face, wicked smile spread and villainous brows furrowed. A filthy white coat covered his wrinkled pink flesh, and gripped in his grubby hand was a small red and white ball. It was a human; the terrible beasts who stormed through the land, stealing innocent Pokémon from their homes, torturing them and forcing them to fight each other to near death. Down on all fours, he sprinted forward, ready to save his brother. But he was too slow. The human had captured his poor brother. The rage he felt at that moment was tremendous, and he felt his body surge with power. He leapt toward the human and hurled a mighty bolt of electricity toward him. It should have brought the beast tumbling down, but it seemed unfazed by the attack. "Oh wow, I can't believe my luck! Another Pikachu, and this one is a feisty little guy too!" Those were the last words he heard before he was sucked up.

Every day since he would tell himself he does whatever it took to get back to his mother, but he had tried, the walls of his prison were unbreachable. He didn't know how long he had been trapped, but it felt like years. There was nothing to do, nothing to see, no one to talk to, nothing to hear but the muted sound of the human's voice. He was never fed, too tormented to sleep, so cold that his trembling was near constant, so very lonely.

He had been let out only twice since his capture, and in those times his anger had overcome him. He had caused as much damage as he could, shooting sparks of electricity at every little thing he could find. When his senses returned, he ran, looking for a way out, but with nowhere to go, he was beaten and shoved back into the horrible red ball.

His ears perked up, he heard something. He knew the old human's voice by heart and had learned to ignore it, but this sound was different.

"I have to have a Pokémon!" It was a croaky voice, loud and squeaky, full of determination. So this was it, a human had finally decided to take him and use him as its slave. He would never obey; as soon as he was let out from his ball, he would run and find his way home.

A loud click sounded and a glaring light blinded him. His vision cleared and two humans stood before him. The one on the left was Professor Oak, the man who had ripped him away from his loving family. This other human was shorter, it had messy black hair, and a calm innocent look on its young face. Its eyes were large and curious and below each, was a z-shaped scar etched into its soft ivory skin.

The professor spoke. "Its name is Pikachu."

No. That was not his name. His name was Robert.

The young human smiled as it fastened its slimy fingers around Robert's waist and lifted him from the ground, holding him at eye

level. “Hi Pikachu!”

Robert growled. He felt his power begin to surge, then a massive jolt of electricity blasted from the red pouches on his cheeks. He heard a pained scream and was released, before landing gently on all fours.

Robert ran forward, scanning the room for any exits, but all he could see were the metallic legs of the lab tables. Then he saw it; a faint light glowing from beneath a sturdy grey door. He bolted ahead, but all that hope was lost as he felt himself dematerialize back into the dreaded red ball.

“Well, there you are Ash. Pikachu will be your Pokémon companion.” Robert heard the professor sigh through the thick wall of his dungeon. “I just can’t seem to figure it out. Why do these Pokémon hate us so much? They should show more compassion after all we do for them; we wash them, feed them, love them, give them a nice comfy home, give them friends, everything they could ask for.”

The professor’s lies were outrageous! They weren’t helping the poor Pokémon, they were snatching them from their homes and families, taking away everything they had ever known and loved, forcing them to fight endlessly to the near death, just so they could get bashed and battered all over again!

“Well Ash, you know the rules about Pokémon, I’m sure, but just let me remind you. You must be careful out there in the wild, most of these animals are feral and will attack on sight, use your Pikachu to defend you. It may be hard to get it to help you at first, but feed it some Grep berries and that should make it friendlier. When you travel, make sure you keep it in its ball until you find some of these berries. If you let your Pikachu out, and it attacks you or runs away, just click the centre button on your Pokéball. Just make sure you click it while it is still in range, otherwise your Pikachu will be gone forever.”

Robert was ready. As soon as this boy let him out, he would release a devastating blast and escape from the human’s sight as fast as

he could, before he could be pulled back into the ball. Then he could finally get back home.

There was silence for a while, maybe an hour, it was hard to tell time in his cramped cage. Then Ash began to speak. "Oh Pikachu, isn't this great? You and me, on our first adventure together! I'm so excited, us two are going to explore the whole world and catch every Pokémon there is!"

"Aha, a spearow. Aw man, I haven't seen any Grepa berries yet, but I can't let this opportunity pass me by. So I will catch this thing all by myself!" The human grunted as he hurled what could only be a projectile at the unlucky Pokémon, but Robert knew that was Ash's mistake. Spearow had awful tempers. They often flocked together in massive groups comprised of over fifty birds and attacked. Ash was in for it.

A parade of shrilling caws sounded and was accompanied by a terrified scream. Robert jounced around in his ball, smacking his head against the roof, banging into the sides; Ash was running for his life.

"Don't worry, Pikachu. No matter what, I'll save you." Like hell. Robert wasn't the one these Spearow were after, Ash was the one in trouble. He heard a sudden crackle of thunder, and Robert grinned. It was the perfect weather to escape in, he could use this storm to his advantage, by combining his electricity with that of the storm, he could obliterate anything.

"Oh no Pikachu, they're getting close. I can't outrun them, but you can, I can't let them get to you. I won't let them hurt you! Go free, and save yourself!"

Robert felt himself flash out of his prison into the tempestuous land beyond. He looked up to see Ash running toward him, his face was stained in terror as a massive army of incensed Spearow zoomed after him.

Robert's rage grew beyond its bounds, his entire body crackled

and sparkled, and before he could stop it, a charged bolt of lightning slammed into him. He absorbed its energy, combining it with his own, and with a thundering shout of his name, Robert exploded, releasing an earth-shattering blast of electricity.

Robert awoke after what seemed like days. He pushed himself to his feet, shaking, he had completely drained himself in his uncontrollable attack. He was finally free after years of captivity. His eyes flicked across the beaten road to Ash's carcass. The human's soft pink flesh had been charred, burnt to a crispy black crust, his mop of hair was seared, leaving only small patches of scorched fur.

This human got what he deserved. Robert had saved thousands of Pokémon that would have been enslaved under this boy's blighted hand. Now Robert could finally go home. He turned and scampered into the trees, ready to reunite with his family.

The Offred Before

I paused outside the Commander's door, my heart pounding. I clung to a shred of hope that my heart rate sped out of fear. The prospect of being subconsciously enthralled by the Commander made me sick to my stomach. Earlier in the night, Fred had seen me in the kitchen and ordered my attendance to his office after the rest of the house was asleep. I didn't know what to expect. He could do anything to me. He could rape me, kill me, punish me for something I'd done-- or had not done, for that matter-- with no questions asked.

My timid knock was followed by his footsteps, each making me shudder more than the last. When he opened the door, I became a shaky infant lamb, vulnerable to sacrifice.

"Blessed day," I breathed. His knobby figure became domineering as the door closed, and the power dynamic took up so much space that it was hard to breathe. He gingerly placed his hand on my back and it felt heavy as lead.

"You read?" he asked. I was shocked by such a colloquial opening, denouncing any expectation I had of something horrible taking place in this room. Don't get your hopes up, I told myself. This man is twisted. Could I answer this question, would I be punished?

"Before or after Gilead?" I responded. Blood rushed to my head, and my ears felt hot.

Did I sound disrespectful? Would I be physically punished for my tone?

"Do you like reading, is what I'm asking." He followed his question with an attempt at a warm smile, which was crooked and awk-

ward. He hadn't had much practice smiling.

"I like reading," I stammered.

"Pick one," he offered, proudly gesturing to his extensive literature collection.

A Latin book piqued my curiosity. As I ran my hand over the weathered leather cover, I remembered the late nights studying Latin in my first year of university. Studying was a grueling obligation at the time. It seemed like such a luxury now in my life as a handmaid in

Gilead. I didn't take my eyes off the literature as I made my way toward a mahogany bench near the bookshelf. I was entranced by the book, hungrily interpreting the words on the page.

"You know Latin?" Fred said, awakening me from my trance. His demeaning smirk indicated that he thought me being educated was a laughable prospect.

"Yes, I studied it post-secondary, pre-Gilead," I responded with a dangerous level of fortitude, shocking myself.

"Well isn't that something," he drawled, stepping toward me. He knelt down in front of me, looking at my body in a way that set off alarms in my head. I was foolish not to have known that offering me a book was a sick ploy to gain my trust.

My usual instinct would be to leave when I felt uncomfortable, but I knew that non-compliance would put me at risk. The Commander began to raise his hands from his sides and I felt my face twist into a fearful, desperate expression. He delicately lifted the hemline of my skirt, and began caressing my knees. His hands were cold, and I felt frozen. A bitter taste filled my mouth. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing I could do to get away. His hands moved up my thighs, and I succumbed to the dizzying sense of panic.

I returned to full awareness just seconds later, but I knew I had done something that would change my life forever. The sharp silence in the air made me feel sick. My hand burned hot, and the Command-

er held his left cheek, astonishment sweeping across his gaunt face. His eyes remained fixed on a 45-degree downward angle, as he murmured “Get out.”

I sat still and quiet in the chair beside my bed. My body was the only thing at rest; my mind was screaming. It screamed that I would lose my hand, it screamed that I would be sent to The Colonies, it screamed that I would never see my family again. I needed to know what would happen. I needed to know what was next, and the thought of tomorrow felt like a dagger to my gut. Why did I cling to this life? Why did I care about the existence I so despised? I may not have had control over this life, but I needed control over the way it ended. I could not stand to allow my flesh to rot in the colonies, to let my face boil with wounds. I could not stand to live as less than a whole body, a part of me taken by Gilead. The only way I could be at peace if I decided how this ended. It was grim, and it was freeing. I had to plan the way I left this earth.

I knew I would be replaced. I knew another unfortunate soul would be raped in my place, called by the name “Offred,” and forced to forget all that made her whole. I needed to speak to her, I needed to instill a hope and a sisterhood into her bleak state of mind. I thought of the Latin I studied, and a perfect way to speak to the next Offred in secret. I straightened the end of a coat hanger from the closet, and into the inner closet wall I carved: “*Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum*”.

I didn’t cry. This was all I could do. The carving was all I had to leave behind for her, aside from a life of being used. As I twisted my flannel sheet into a tight snake, I felt a pulsating, heavy rush of adrenaline. This feeling, of being in control-- I’m glad I would get to feel it one last time. I hung the loop of flannel on the yellowed ceiling light, and stepped onto the edge of my bed. I draped the noose over my neck. My feet led me off the bed, and I felt the tightness engulf me. I felt the hot air leave my abused body, and my shaking feet fell to rest.

I was finally free.

Congratulations to this year's winning entries and honourable mentions:

Grades 7/8

1. *Star Wars – In Defense of Superweapons* by Andrew Kang
2. *The Wake of His Dreams – Poem* by Mia Kohn
3. *Two Wolves* by Joni Maguire

Honourable Mention:

Tom by Ammie Dai

Grades 9/10

1. *The Wait* by Kathryn Tuns
2. *Escape to Sealand* by Jensen Timmins
3. *Dead Eyes Leave No Stories* by Daniel Ma

Honourable Mention:

Maelstrom by Trevor Phillips

Grades 11/12

1. *The Offred Before* by Carly White
2. *Night in the Woods* by Hillary Krofchak
3. *Cutting The Strings* by Georgia Gardner

Honourable Mention:

Minerva McGonagall by Serendipity Holloway

Thank you to each of our contributing students. Thank you to the teachers who encouraged our aspiring authors to write their stories, essays and poems.

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