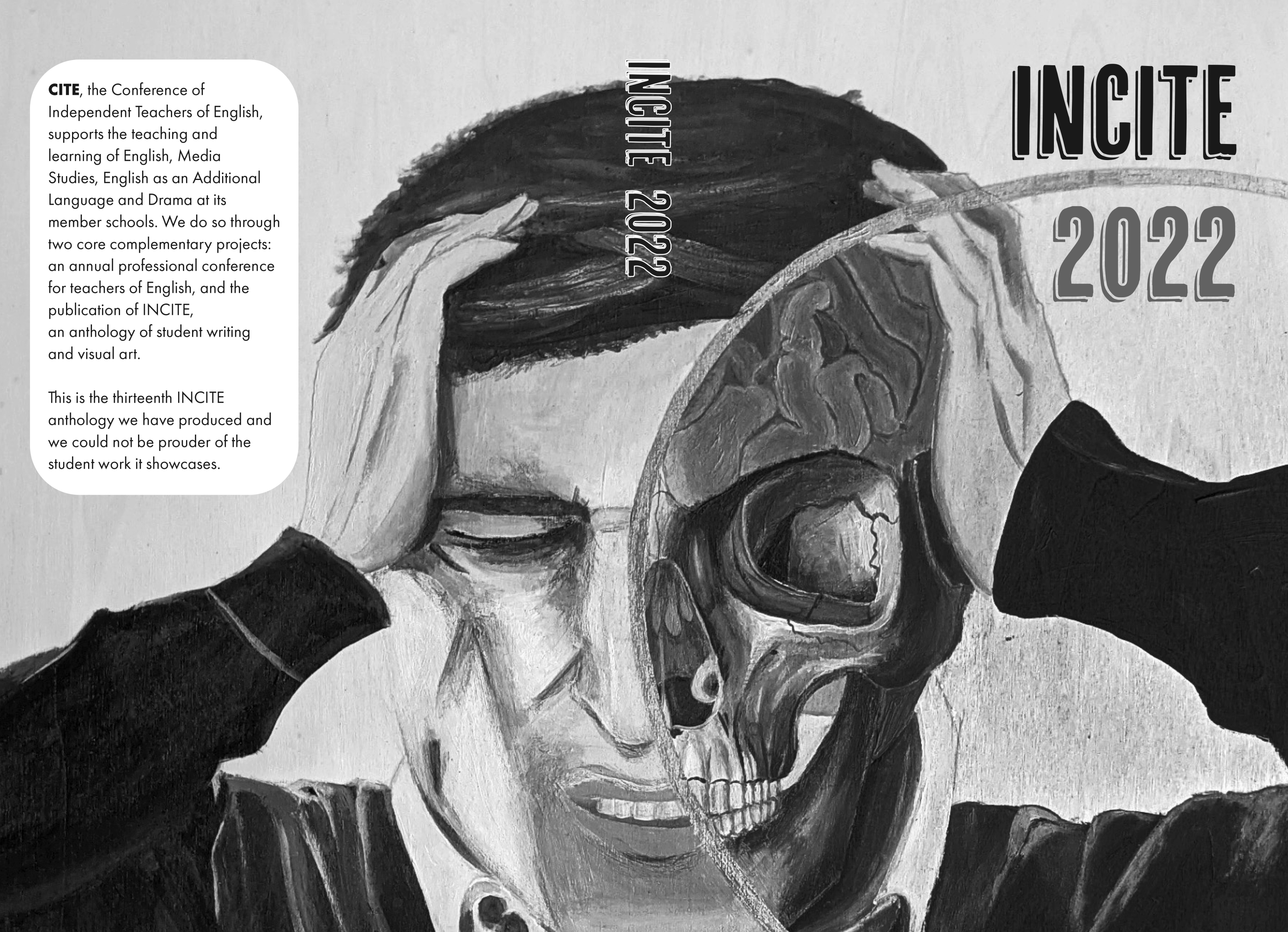


**CITE**, the Conference of Independent Teachers of English, supports the teaching and learning of English, Media Studies, English as an Additional Language and Drama at its member schools. We do so through two core complementary projects: an annual professional conference for teachers of English, and the publication of INCITE, an anthology of student writing and visual art.

This is the thirteenth INCITE anthology we have produced and we could not be prouder of the student work it showcases.

INCITE  
2022

INCITE  
2022





**Amy Stuart** is the #1 bestselling author of three novels — *Still Mine*, *Still Water* and *Still Here*. In 2012, Amy completed her MFA in Creative Writing through the University of British Columbia. She worked for many years as a high school educator with the bulk of her career spent teaching guidance and English in downtown alternative high schools.

In 2018, Amy founded Writerscape to support individuals, groups and corporations in improving their professional and creative writing skills. She is currently at work on her 4th novel.

## JUDGE'S PREFACE

Thrillers are a craft that require a unique set of writing chops. Their plot-heaviness necessitates a level of calculation and organization; they must be both perfectly sequenced and surprising. Add to that the need for vivid description and snappy dialogue, and we soon learn that thrillers are no easy feat for a writer to pull off.

It has been my profound delight to share in the stories, poems and photo essays in this year's Incite competition. While I was blown away by the diversity of plot and storylines, what linked every piece was the evocative language used as a sturdy building block, and then the precision of the delivery. I loved how brave and innovative these young storytellers were in choosing how to unfurl their stories for the reader. Some relied heavily on dialogue, others used setting to establish a creepy atmosphere, and yet others dove right into fast-moving, twisty plots. Frankly, my most difficult job as a reader was picking a winner from each batch of such beautifully assured submissions.

The act of writing may sometimes feel like a slog, but my hope always is that we, as writers, will choose to see it as a vessel for our imaginations, for our hopes and our worries, our dreams and even our nightmares. The thriller genre is particularly good at letting us writers run wild and free with our plots, and these days the world offers us much inspiration to that end. I truly hope this talented group continues to play with this genre and stretch its boundaries as they've done here. They are its future. I can't wait to read more.

Amy Stuart, 2022 InCITE Judge



# *A Message from the Conference of Independent Teachers of English*

St. Clement's School is honoured to host the 2022 CITE Conference for English teachers. This year's theme is "Prioritizing Student Voice and Choice." Building on the premise that increased student agency leads to greater student engagement, the conference offers teachers new ways to improve student commitment and enhance their critical and creative thinking.

Although we are meeting via zoom rather than in person this year (for the second and hopefully last time), the conference still offers a chance for English teachers from across the CIS Ontario community to come together and be inspired by each other. It's a great opportunity to learn about some of the progressive ideas and practices being employed by educators in colleague schools.



Another important aspect of the CITE organization is the annual InCITE Student Writing Competition. This contest, and the InCITE publication, gives CIS Ontario student writers and artists an opportunity to showcase their talents and efforts. For 2022, we asked students to submit "A Thriller." Our esteemed judge, Amy Stuart, author of *Still Mine*, devised an intriguing prompt: You arrive, in a small group, at a mysterious place, an abandoned

castle or cabin deep in the forest, perhaps, or a cave, or even an empty amusement park since reclaimed by nature. This place keeps secrets. You're about to uncover them. More than 30 impressive submissions from grade 7-12 students at 20 different CIS Ontario schools were received. We hope you enjoy reading the collection.

A special note of appreciation to Beth Boyden, Kevin Mercier, and Mike Farrell from the English Department at St. Clement's School for their help with the planning and delivery of the conference. Also, my deepest gratitude to the teachers who gave their precious time to host a workshop; your expertise is much appreciated. Thank you to my friends on the CITE Executive Team: co-chair Chris Jull, the calm organizer behind CITE who managed to keep our team on track; Ashley Domina, our Communications Coordinator; Chelsea Larock, Member; and Ellen Palmer, Chairperson Emeritus.

The CIS Ontario team must not be forgotten. Thank you to Sheri Little, Executive Assistant; Laryssa Tyson Lebar, Communications Manager; and Sarah Craig, Executive Director, for their assistance with the planning, communications, budgeting and registration. Finally, a huge thank you to Miranda Ly for putting together the beautiful INCITE book, which allows students to see their writing published—many for the first time!

Claire Pacaud | 2022 CITE Conference Chair, St. Clement's School





# INCITE [2022]

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## CITE EXECUTIVE

Co-Chair: Chris Jull, Crestwood Preparatory College

Co-Chair and Conference Chair: Claire Pacaud, St. Clement's School

Communications Coordinators: Ashley Domina & Sally Mastromonaco,  
Villanova College

Member : Chelsea Larock, Ashbury College

Chairperson Emeritus: Ellen Palmer, Appleby College

INCITE Publication: Miranda Ly, Crestwood Preparatory College

## THIS YEAR'S COVER

The INCITE 2022 cover features the artwork of Sharon Wang.

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## *The Forgotten*

The gates wide open,

**Inside the time had stopped.**

The fog is thicker, the light is swapped

With darkness...

**Dead silence except for alternating squeaks and groans.**

The Ferris wheel so powerful; but yet fragile,

Grey, colorless, and lifeless.

**Blotches of gold and blue shining through the rust,**

Horses standing silently awaiting their riders.

The air filled with dust, cobwebs and scary shadows.

**Abandoned ice-cream truck and a cotton candy stand.**

A creepy clown's face emerged in flashlight's beam.

The creaking of the swings sends chills down my spine.

**Collapsed buildings, weeds, and vines,**

Smashed windows all boarded up

As if what's inside is too horrible to see

**There is no sight of life except my group of three,**

Everything covered in dust and debris.

We tip-toe back, escape to the light and safety

**Afraid to wake it up from subdued rest,**

The crumbling remains of what once was filled with children's screams  
of happiness.

## *The Doll and the Labyrinth*

I quickly walked forward, trying to keep up with the rest of the kids. I tried not to panic as they walked into the forest. I looked around, recognizing the trees. I knew what was here.

“We should probably go back,” I said, my voice shaking, “for all we know there could be dangerous animals around here!”

“It’s going to be fine,” one of the kids called out. I wanted them to turn around, but I needed them to like me more.

“Unless something in the forest is associated with why you went missing for five years, then we don’t really care,” another kid called out. That was exactly why I wanted them to leave, but I couldn’t say it aloud. Thoughts filled my head—ones I couldn’t escape. My heart started beating faster and faster. I started to get dizzy, my feet barely able to hold me up.

“Hey are you okay?” a girl asked, tapping my shoulder. Suddenly, everything stopped. I wasn’t dizzy or tired anymore.

I was completely fine.

“Oh yeah” I said quietly. The girl grabbed my arm and pulled me back to the group.

I continued to walk with them, my mind still processing what had happened. That’s when I saw it. The cabin I had spent the last five years of my life in. Not by choice, though. The cabin was covered in vines,



with mud all around it.

“My mom needs me home for dinner,” I announced, hoping none of them would see the cabin.

“Alright, bye!” one of the kids called.

I started to walk away, trying my hardest not to look back. I felt the wind blowing against me, as if it was telling me to turn around.

As much as I wanted to turn around, I kept looking ahead. Suddenly, my legs wouldn’t move. A thick layer of moss covered both of my shoes.

“Please let me go,” I said anxiously, trying to walk forward.

I looked back at the kids, watching them walk into the cabin, one by one. I looked down at my feet then back at the kids again. I took a deep breath and sighed. I knew the forest wasn’t going to let me leave again—not without helping it.

After prying my feet loose, I approached the cabin slowly. There I was, walking back into the home I had spent so much time trying to leave, except this time, I was here somewhat by choice. I placed my hand on the doorknob. All the horrible memories flooded back into my mind. I shook my head, trying to get rid of them.

“It’s over. You know how to escape. It’ll be fine,” I reassured myself multiple times.

I slowly opened the door that I spent so many years trying to break open. A bright light filled my eyes, the same one that pulled me in years ago. A...?

I took a deep breath, not daring to open my eyes. The familiar musty smell engulfed me. I started to open my eyes, the familiar cry of a classmate filling my ears. I wanted to explain everything to them, but I knew that she would catch up to us. I looked around at the labyrinth surrounding us. I took in the familiar sight of the seemingly endless stone walls.

“Come on,” I said.

My classmates broke into questions.

“Where are we?”

“Do you know this place?”

“What’s going on?”

“Stop please,” I said, trying to hide my fear. I needed to be brave, though I couldn’t seem to stop my hands from digging into my scalp. “These are the only three things you need to know right now: First, never sing.

Second, if you see a toy, leave it, and last, if you hear singing... run.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on!” I broke into a sprint, hoping my classmates could keep up with me.

I tried to focus on the hammering footsteps behind me and not the obvious danger. If I let fear consume me, we would all be done for.

---

I stopped, out of breath, about fifteen minutes after I started running. I put my hands on my knees and closed my eyes. My classmates’ footsteps came to a sudden halt behind me. I took a couple of deep breaths and imagined what I’d be doing if I wasn’t back here. I shook my head, trying to focus again.

Something’s off—it’s too calm. The labyrinth hasn’t presented any dangers this entire time.

Then, I heard it: the soft hum of a nursery rhyme. My eyes flew open. She's near.

"Guys!" one of my classmates exclaimed. "It's a child!"

She ran up to the little girl. The same little girl that kept me trapped here for the last five years.

"No!" I screamed. "Run, Brianna! I can't get any closer!"

I knew the little girl wanted me more than she wanted Brianna. I could feel her frustration from here.

I escaped.

She failed to stop me, but she wanted me back.

"We have to help her," Brianna exclaimed, taking a knee before the little girl.

The little girl slowly removed the doll she had been hiding her face behind. I watched as everyone stared at her in horror. I stared again in shock. I had never truly seen the girl's face, either. There had always been some sort of toy covering it.

I watched, terrified, as Brianna's skin turned to porcelain. Her face froze in a state of pure terror. The child stroked Brianna's hair, delighted with her new toy.

'We need to run!' I thought, trying to remember how I managed to escape the first time.



My feet seemed to be stuck to the ground. I only snapped out of my state of shock when the child moved her gaze from her new toy over to us.

She wanted more.

“Run!” I shouted.

Everyone broke into a sprint. The child was close behind us.

“Take a left then a right!” I yelled, the adrenaline of the chase making the memories come back to me in full force. “The forest will help you!”

I stopped when I heard yet another scream. These people had nothing to do with this, yet all of their lives were being ruined because of mine. I stopped as the doll deliberately approached me. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, accepting my fate.

This place would be my home for a little while longer.

## *I'm Not Home*

Ever since I was little, I was terrified of the dark. That probably has to do with the horror movies my cousin played just to scare me. The dark isn't scary, it's the lurking creatures inside of it, but none of those movies prepared me for this.

I woke up to a painful sound of ringing in my ears, it echoed making me feel nauseous and uneasy. There I layed in a pile of leaves, unable to see my surroundings aside from towering trees above me and creepy sounds around me. "Where am I?" I whispered to myself.

I decided to attempt to call my parents. "Great!" I cried, "No service." As I explored deeper into the forest to look for a way home, I felt heavy eyes upon me, suffocatingly thick stares, a boisterous laugh came from behind a rigid tree.

"Makayla..." an eerie voice called my name, it got louder and louder, assaulting my ears. My entire body started to tremble, my throat dried, and I struggled to swallow my spit. I couldn't seem to concentrate. I saw a girl move to the side of an oak tree, her slim dark body haunted me. She had silky brown hair and eyes the colour of honey. She wore a creepy smile. She looked exactly like me? Who was this? I felt my heart vigorously pounding in my chest. I sprinted towards her, dodging the thin black branches but my hair got caught onto some of the sticks. In a blink of an eye, she disappeared into thin air. I crept around the tree and behind it, there was no one, not a single soul. I looked around for any indication of where she could have run off to, but the dense forest blocked my view from every direction. The cold air drove against my face, chilling my body to the core.

"She was just here," I said under my breath.

"I was just there too." Slowly my heart started to beat less rapidly,

and I felt a little more relaxed. Many questions went through my mind, ‘Why did she look like me?’ ‘What did she want from me?’ ‘Was I going to die?’ I allowed these feelings to subside for a moment and dragged myself to the oak tree, pressing my body against its trunk to keep the cold at bay. I curled up into a ball, looking down at the coal-coloured leaves, my eyes still wide open unable to fall asleep. Breathing was the only thing I could do to calm myself and focus. The excruciating silence killed me, my body was still trying to process what just happened; whatever was out there could tear me into pieces in seconds. A teenage girl, trapped in an infinite forest that felt like hell, unable to survive this nightmare. Maybe it was all a dream, maybe it was a hallucination, whatever it was, please someone help me escape.

Suddenly I heard a whisper,

“Follow me.” Its voice was soft, even inviting. My body couldn’t control itself, I found myself getting up. The air started to become dense, each and every leaf came off the ground spiralling into little tornadoes. The violet moonlight sky turned into a deep blood red colour.

The anonymous whisper got louder as I continued to walk, the ground felt like quicksand and my vision wasn’t clear. It felt as though hours had passed. Please tell me I’m dreaming, I repeated to myself. I paused to sit down, for a moment. As I rocked myself to calm down, I noticed a warm light between the trees in the distance, and my disposition immediately began to change. My body willingly moved towards it, mesmerised by it. The leaves spiralled around me once more as I slowly put my finger into the light. I closed my eyes and let my body fall into its opening. I opened my eyes to find myself in my bed. The morning sun peeked through my blinds. It looked similar but felt different, in a way I couldn’t describe. As I sat up, light-headed and nauseous, the room was spinning. I rubbed my eyes to pull my vision and thoughts together. Something was definitely wrong. Was I home?

“Makayla!” A high-pitched voice came from downstairs, making my name sound so unbearable.

“Coming Mum!” I annoyingly yelled from upstairs.

As I walked down the creaking steps, the comforting smell of cookies came from the oven. My mother was sitting down at the dining room table, smiling. I hugged her and started to tear up but I didn't get the warm feeling I normally do.

"What's wrong sweetheart?" Mum questioned as I sat down.

"I had this crazy dream, I met my doppelganger-" I explained. "Doppelganger you say... how," she paused for a moment, "peculiar." Her unsure tone made me question myself in that moment.

"You wouldn't be scared if you saw yourself, ANOTHER VERSION OF YOU?" I asked, trying to get the truth out of her.

"Why of course not dear, I see mine all the time," she cackled.

My eyes widened a bit and I found myself examining her from head to toe.

The door swung open, there stood my dad. But was it actually him? He did not greet me with my pet name nor did he make a dumb dad joke which was highly suspicious. In that moment, I realised I wasn't home. I needed to figure out how to get back...

"MAKAYLA! GET IN NOW WE'RE GONNA BE LATE," my parents yelled, interrupting my overwhelming thought.

I slowly slid myself into the car and buckled my seatbelt. It was dark and gloomy, no sight of cars, traffic, or pedestrians walking on the sidewalks, just fog hovering over us.

My "parents" decided not to turn on the radio, so I just focused on the road ahead, still trying to silence my concerning thoughts.

As we drove, I saw the girl who looked like me from my side window, moving alongside the car, almost floating. She was continuously saying my name, and her voice got louder piercing through the windows of the car. "MUM, DAD!" I screamed, playing along with their little game. My chest and face started to get hot, I couldn't feel anything aside from the thumping of my own heart. It felt like hours before they responded, "Yes honey?" My "father" asked. As I looked up again, I noticed the dense forest, the same trees, a similar feeling.

Thinking this was the only way out, I opened my car door, looking at the same intimidating trees. I took a deep breath, and sprinted into the forest.

“MAKAYLA WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?” My “mother” yelled from afar. It was too late.  
I’m going home.

I sprinted into the same spot where I was before, the same coal leaves, the same trunk where she stood, the same place where she ruined who I was forever.

“Makayla...” Her whispers were coming from behind me, I felt her cold hands aggressively grab my shoulder. I turned around. Ink was spilling from her eyeballs, dripping into her mouth. She once looked like me, now she looked like a monster. Her long fingernails twirled my hair, I could feel my instincts telling me to run. RUN FASTER THAN YOU EVER HAVE, I told myself. But for some reason I needed to know why she lured me here.

“W-what do you want?” I stammered.

“Why isn’t it obvious?” she smirked.

Her gooey ink dripped onto my face, it smelled like rust. She lifted my chin up with the tip of her nail creating a cut going down my throat.

I could see the fire in her eyes, I could see how much she wanted to be me. The leaves started to spiral again, and I could see the portal light behind her.

Her head tilted to the side making a cracking sound, she tried to grab me but I knew if she got a hold, my life would be over.

“YOU MONSTER!” I shouted, kicking her on the knee.

She looked at me with pitiful eyes and responded,

“I’m the monster, I’M THE MONSTER?” She leaned in closer, putting both her hands around my neck, the portal glowing more vivid the more she rambled.

“My entire life I have wanted to be you LITTLE MISS PERFECT, I have had to exist in the underworld and watch your life with envy, now I will take it for myself!”



I started to back up slowly, my body pressed against a tree trunk. I could feel tiny pieces of wood sliding into my skin. The portal grew brighter, and brighter.

“You’re finally mine now, I’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt.” She cackled. Her nail touched the middle of my forehead attempting to cut through my skin. I knew I had one chance, I bolted for the portal. Before I entered, I could hear her laughing but I had no idea why or what she had done. I woke up in my own bed and sprinted downstairs as if it were Christmas.

“DAD! MUM I’M HOME, I’M FINALLY HOME!” I cheered. I looked at the dining room table. There they were, hanging from the roof, dead.  
I’m home.

## *A Howl in the Wind*

Those blinking golden eyes glinted in the shadows, fogged with pain. The boy stiffened in his tracks. Icy snowflakes drifted onto its blood-soaked, disheveled fur that opened in deep gashes. Its bones jutted out in unnatural ways, and its ears were torn into ribbons. The boy cringed and averted his gaze. The scene was so grotesque, yet so painfully pitiful at the same time. Feeble whimpers escaped from its muzzle as he stepped cautiously towards the tangled mass of fur, transferring it gently onto the wooden surface of the sleigh. He carefully dragged it through the snow to the edge of the forest.

---

Rudy watched curiously as the canine licked its wounds gingerly, contemplating the breed. He had always wanted a dog, though his parents had had no interest in spending money on one. It had been a while since Rudy had brought the dog in, and it had already healed at a tremendous speed. Was it a Siberian, a Husky, or a German Shepherd? He couldn't quite tell because of the blend of rouge, gray, and hazel mixed into its coat. Either way, its eyes were like a swirling pool of gold, a handsome hound indeed. Rudy decided to name him Aki. He stood up to refill the dog bowl he bought specially for Aki and to get some canned tuna from the cabinet. Once he set the food down, Aki reluctantly approached and nibbled a bit of the kibble, which he seemed to be disgusted by, eyeing a shiny dark-colored feline that was distanced in the far corner. Every time Aki was in the room, Coco would hiss and attempt to slip away outside. She seemed to be wary of the new addition.

"Coco, come eat!" Rudy called with a hand outstretched with the tuna in an imploring manner.

The cat stubbornly refused and leaped through the pet flap outside

into the meadow. The dog stretched and laid down under the staircase. Rudy figured the two animals just weren't familiar with each other, which was understandable.

*"They'll get used to each other soon. I've seen cats playing with dogs before,"* Rudy thought to himself.

-----

The next morning, Rudy called them for breakfast like he normally did, which would usually be met with the excited jingling of Coco's collar bell. She would respond with instant attention, yowling insistently for tuna to be placed down. However, today was different; he was met with quiet.

"Coco probably went out to play," he reassured himself, "she'll be back later." But out of slight worry, he checked the backyard, folding the grass apart in hopes of uncovering her. There was no sign of her.

He went back inside to refill the dog bowl. However, the kibble in the bowl seemed barely touched. Rudy was worried; was the dog not eating enough? As if Aki could hear his thoughts, he walked over from under the stairs, curiously looking at Rudy. He seemed perfectly healthy, if not a little plump. Rudy sighed in relief.

Rudy waited and waited for the cat, but Coco never showed up. He was worried sick and did not pay much attention to Aki until a few days later, when he realized the dog had not come home in two days. At this point, the boy blamed himself for negligence and ventured into his backyard to the dark forest. Trudging through the dense snow, he called Aki's name until his throat was hoarse, yet not a single sound returned his desperate cries. It was pitch black and the only sound to be heard was his heaving breath, every breath a sharp pain like icicles were in the back of his throat. He was so exhausted that he forced himself to turn back home.

The next morning when he woke up, he rushed downstairs, hoping to be greeted by those golden eyes. But the house remained empty. He checked underneath the staircase where Aki usually slept but did not find the canine. Instead, he found a collar, the bronze bell dulled by the layer of dark red substance caking it. He picked it up and noticed some dark black fur sticking to the collar, dropping it in horror as he heard a howl in the wind.

## *Safehouse*

### KENDRICK

I feel the cool wind in my hair as I gallop through the forest on my horse, Bronte. I would probably enjoy it if I wasn't worried about the shouts and pounding of hooves approaching disturbingly fast behind me. I think back to when my father, the king, was alive and how I would never be in this predicament if he was here. With a sharp kick, Bronte speeds up and the roars fade into the distance. I arrive at the safehouse my father built for me in case something like this ever happened. What I would give to have him with me now.

### AUTUMN

"Run! Run!", is all I can hear in my mind through the screams and bombs exploding behind me. The forest is thick and dense with little chance of survival, but it's better than in the city.

I jump with ease over the fallen trees and duck under low branches. I've lost all feeling in my legs, but I keep running. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of brown, just barely blending in with the trees. I slow my pace as I squint at it through my glasses. It's a small cabin, about 200 years old, with ivy crawling up the walls. It's not perfect, but it's my only hope.

### KENDRICK

The safehouse is smaller than I remember, with wooden walls and a small wooden door to blend in with the surroundings. As I step inside, the smell of pine and cedar floods my nostrils. I run my hand along the smooth



silky drapes and plop down on the satin sofa. Now, I can safely get to the real reason I'm here. I pull my treasure, the book, out of the burlap bag and finger its ancient spine. I wonder how many hands have touched the leather cover.

It's crazy how many people risked their lives for this book, but this book isn't any ordinary book. This book is magic. It has the power to make a feast out of a single grain of rice or to turn a leaf into a sword. In fact, it's so powerful that it forced me - a 15-year-old boy - into hiding from evil officials who want to kill me.

## AUTUMN

My heart is racing as I slowly turn the doorknob, but it doesn't open. I try one more time with a bit more energy. Boom! The door slams open. I carefully step into the cottage and my jaw drops in awe. There is a queen-sized bed in the corner, with a carved wooden frame that only rich people can afford, and pillows as soft as clouds! I swear the table in the center of the room is made of gold!

My legs feel like jello as I collapse on the bed wishing I could fall into a deep sleep. But instead of hitting a soft feather mattress, I hit a hard pointy object. I tear up the sheets to find a small book. Upon further inspection, I notice that it's a diary with an old rusty lock. A puddle of guilt forms inside me as the lock smashes against the stone-cold floor.

## KENDRICK

I grab my quill and diary and light the lamp. My mind is racing from the events of the last 2 days. As soon as I touched my quill to the paper, words flow naturally.

*August 20, 1870*

*Dear Diary,*

*Honestly, I've been pushed way past my limits the last few days. It all started with the scream. The scream of my father, the king may he rest in peace, getting stabbed to death by his closest advisor. Then, with frantic urgency, being handed a book by my tutor and told we were going to escape together to a safehouse in the woods, and he would tell me the rest on the way. We grabbed 2 horses from the royal stables and fled to the trees, myself clueless about the events about to take place.*

*As we rode, my tutor told me about an evil plan taking place, and how some advisors and high officials wanted this magical book that could cure any spell or make ordinary objects come to life and do your bidding. However, they knew the king (may he rest in peace) would never give up the book, which was gifted to his great grandfather many years ago.*

## **AUTUMN**

*So they took it by force, and now that the king was dead, I was heir to the throne. It was now my duty to protect the book with my life.*

*Around 2 hours into our escapade, we were interrupted by flaming arrows heading our way at an alarming speed, followed by charging horsemen and the clashing sound of swords being drawn from their sheaths. My tutor told me that if I ever was in trouble and needed help, to chant the words "Liber magicus adiuva me quae so, haec vertere, fac respirare". Then he left me, with a warning to never use the book for selfish desires or personal gains, gallantly galloping away into the danger. A day later I made it to the safehouse, tired, alone and scared of what the future holds.*

*Sincerely, Prince Kendrick of Ondorno*

I close the diary, thoughts racing. I don't know how I'll be able to sleep tonight. Suddenly, I hear a rustle. I jump out of bed and take a defensive stance, hands tightened into fists in front of me. Did I forget to lock the door? Does the door even have a lock? Have the monsters found me? Out of the corner of my eye I see a flash of movement. The drapes.

## KENDRICK

It's been 13 days since I left the castle, and I'm dying to try out one of the spells! I've been surviving off bread, dried figs and water, and I don't think having some decent food is selfish. I open the book wide on the table and flip through its old, rustic pages until I come to a spell called 'Jucundum Cochlea'. Snail's Delight. It requires the paste of one crushed snail and a coal from the fire.

After collecting the ingredients, I spread the paste over the coal while chanting *Calculus, Cochlea, Pullum Pectus, Vada!* I watch as the coal starts to grow and turn the color of raw meat, as it slowly takes the form of a large chicken!

Before I could transfer it to the fire I hear shouts of excitement from outside, exclaiming "We got him now!" and "Finally, it will be ours!"

I throw the chicken in the fire and rack my brain for what to do. Then I remember. I start chanting. *Liber magicus adiuva me quaeso, haec vertere, fac respirare!* Nothing happens. I repeat it one more time, before throwing the book in the secret compartment in the table and stuffing the diary under my sheets, just as the door bangs open and an arrow buries itself in my thigh.

## AUTUMN

I yank the drapes away from the window, half expecting to see a werewolf baring its yellow fangs. But the drapes push me backward, yes, push me into the golden table! I sit there in shock as the bed, couch and chairs

awkwardly shuffle and squeak towards me, surrounding me! The lights start to flicker, and the shutters slam open and close so violently I thought they would pop off! The fire in the fireplace suddenly went out with a whoosh, leaving the whole room as silent as a graveyard. I whimper and whisper the chant from the diary, hoping it could save me.

Suddenly, the room explodes with light as I watch the golden table standing on its back legs lower into some sort of bow in front of me. The top of the table opens a crack, and light pours out of it. I step forward cautiously, not fully sure what was happening, and slowly open it the rest of the way to reveal a book. Could it be? The magic book from the diary?

## KENDRICK

The smell of rotting teeth and sweaty armpits is intoxicating, as I bump along on a horse with a burlap bag over my head. My hands and feet bound tightly, a strong grip around my neck.

I think my journey is coming to an end. I failed. At least my father isn't here to see it. All I can hope for, is that the magic book would find itself in good hands.

Without it, Ondorno it doomed.

## AUTUMN

I gingerly reach out for the book, and the table nods in affirmation. I breath in the musky smell of the old leather and pinch myself twice, just to be sure I'm not dreaming. I slowly flip the pages in delight. This could literally fix my world! It could make the monsters go away, and I could see my family again! I can't believe my luck! I stand there, still as a statue and imagine the possibilities.

## *Two Headless Geese*

There's a dead goose on this man's doorstep.

I'm in front of a hell a loaded mansion, starin' down at a pure white goose. It's starin' back at me. I suddenly realise its head is detached from the rest of its body, dried blood poolin' 'round it. Tapping the floor with my boot anxiously, I feel somethin' wet creep into the leather. I shift my gaze. The slimy white of an egg oozes from a pile o' the things - five o' em, I think. They're all smashed, jagged shells stickin' up't the sky. Only one's still aight.

I've dealt with some great deal'a cases before. Serial killers, drug lords, the mob. Never have I seen somethin' quite like this.

The others are looking mighty confused n' nervous, too. Benny-J's green eyes are reflectin' the pure white goose, dartin' back n' forth between the goose an' the man. The Gun's brow is creased, an' I know he's wonderin' why the dead goose wasn't a dead man, instead. The only one who don't look nervous is Grapefruit - he's our boss. And I know what you're thinkin'. What sorta nickname is Grapefruit? Far's I've heard, Grapefruit started off his criminal life by swipin' grapefruits off some peddler, and he's been just that ever since.

The man at the door waves his hand, silently ushering us into his mansion. With the light, I recognize who he is. Messer Yawnings' his name, and he's got most'a the state's - all but New Orleans' - infrastructure under his finger. Grapefruit n' Yawnings go off to some side room, leavin' us schmucks in the entryway. There's voices bein' raised, though I can't tell what they're sayin'. It all falls into deadly silence soon enough.



They then appear outta a hallway, an' Yawnings leads us to his parlour. He pours drinks from a real nice-lookin' bottle of brandy. I notice that his right pinky's missing. It ain't hard't tell, seeing as he ain't even tryna hide it. Benny-J leans in and whispers, "Run-in wit de Yakuza, I'm guessin'."

Benny-J came from the Luciano-Genovese Family, one of the Five Families over up there in New York n' Jersey, an' his "Noo Yawhk" accent's stronger than any other Yankee's I've ever met. "Yuh know. De Japanese mob?" I shrug. Benny-J's gaze turns to his drink, his green eyes dartin' back and forth.

Yawnings explains that some gang's left the goose n' eggs out on his porch when he didn't pay back some loans, and they've been smashin' an egg for each day. I don't like that, nah. There's only one egg outside still left unsmashed, an' it's barely an hour to midnight - tha's when he said the gang would strike.

It's sudden. Benny-J stiffens, his right hand tensed. Almost immediately after, Grapefruit goes rigid, and Benny-J leans over me, catchin' him by the shoulder. I hurry to help, and we prop Grapefruit back against his seat, but by then our boss ain't but dead weight. Both our gazes turn to Yawnings, but The Gun's way ahead of us. A pistol's already pointed straight at Yawnings' head, pressed against the guy's forehead. The Gun didn't earn his nickname for nothin'.

"Mais sha," The Gun mutters. He ain't usually one to talk much. "I think it's time fo' Plan B." Plan B, that means the rare 'bullet-in-brain' disease. Yawnings barely says a word before The Gun's pulling the trigger. Bang-n'-a-boom, now we've got two dead bodies on our hands. I'm stunned as you are, but 'pparently Benny-J's got a plan. A switchblade flashes, an', wouldn'tcha know it, the Yankee's slit both their throats. He pops the cork outta the

brandy bottle with that dagger, sniffs the liquid still inside, and smashes it 'gainst the table.

"Bittah awhmonds," he mutters, an' it takes a while to realise he means cyanide. "But why would Yawnin's try tuh poison us?" He's mutterin' to himself. "I wonder what else he's gawt hidin'..." Nothin' else said, he turns. Benny-J's got no shame, man, an' he announces he's gonna go search Yawnings' basement.

The Gun an' I are left wi' the two dead guys. Sometime later, I ain't sure, I glance to my watch: a quarter to midnight. Benny-J's been gone too long. I ain't the only sorry soul who's noticed, an' then The Gun's up n' gone.

Soon, I'm shaken outta my thoughts by loud thumping. Something crashes 'gainst a wall. A wooden beam creaks. Finally, a ringin' gunshot finishes it all off. Mais, that can't be good, is all that goes through my head before I'm headin' for where the sounds are comin' from: the basement.

I'm 'bout to turn a corner down the wooden stairs when a scraping sound freezes my blood. It's dark here. The light flickers, on-off. My pistol's pulled outta its grip, held straight in front of me. I turn the corner, and there's a limp form on the ground. A dark silhouette looms over it. The light flickers back on for nothin' more than a second, and its dim rays reflect off eerie, wolf-like green eyes that are trained right on me. Suddenly, the figure moves.

Years of training fly by, an' I panic. My finger slips. A bang, a crunch. I hear a sharp inhale, then panting, shallow breaths. We're silent for what might be a few minutes o' lifetimes.

Then, the light flickers back on.

The green eyes are gone, but tha's because they're facin' the floor. Benny-J's got one knee on the ground, left hand held up to his chest, loomin' over The Gun's dead body. Just a bit aways, there's some radio device strewn on the floor. Static buzzes from it.

The concrete's stained with blood, an' I think it's poolin' outta The Gun's neck, somewhere. As I follow the crimson trail, my gaze reaches the soakin'-red blade of a dagger. It's held tight in Benny-J's free hand.

"Greetin's, awwhfficer," Benny-J says weakly, accent growin' thicker, still not looking up. I freeze, even more confused - it ain't like I've got my badge pinned t' my suit o' anythin'. "I'm assumin' you're the one PD's said is de friendly one here." PD? It takes a mo' or so to realise he means the New York Police Department. Mais, that could only mean one thing.

"Greetin's back to ya, officer," I reply slowly. I ain't sure about this, not at all, but I reach out to help him up. Benny-J drops his dagger, and takes my hand with his own. As he stands, he stumbles. His green eyes are unfocused. It don't take a genius to see this man ain't alright. He proves that point by nearly collapsin' against me, and he coughs, frothy blood pourin' outta his mouth.

As we exchange history, he drops the hand that's pressed to his chest, an' I see the damage. A bullet wound goes straight through a lung. The pistol at my waist grows heavier by the second. Regret seizes me like a crawfish snare. It's when he reveals that he was supposed to assassinate us all, aside from one of us who was 'de friendly one', as he put it, that I notice there's a second wound through the shoulder. I remember the bang I'd first heard, an' grimace.

There ain't nothin' I can do for the poor guy aside from listen n' share. He's from Manhattan, an' was undercover with the Luciano-Genovese, like he said. When they allied with the New Orleans Mob, Benny-J got 4 transferred down here. I tell him the whole truth, that Imma LSP agent here in New Orleans, an' that I had no clue he was undercover at all. Tha' don't help with the guilt, tho'.

Soon enough, he's wheezin', an' choking sounds escape his throat. In a panic, he reaches out and grabs the radio, mutterin' somethin' like "over n' out, finally."

"I've kept ya too lawhng," he mumbles to me suddenly, urgency in his voice. "Get outta de house, fast as ya can." Tha's all he says before a series of coughs wrack his body, an' Benny-J's green gaze reflects the light no more. I'm stunned for a good while, then I scramble to my feet. The Yankee's proven he knew far more than anyone else here, so I listen. Besides, no one wants't stay too long in a house with three dead guys n' a headless goose.

One look back, an' then I'm gone, takin' the stairs by two. The smell of blood fading, I notice a new scent: smoke. It's sharp, an' getting stronger. That ain't a good sign. When I reach the front door, I fling it open an' step out onto the porch.

Something cracks under my boot. Slimy wetness creeps in once more. Too familiar. I check my watch. It's five after midnight.

## *A Window to Revenge*

Snakes crawled up Margarie's legs. In a matter of seconds, they got to her neck. Margarie was frozen in fear. As the snakes choked and bit her, she regretted bringing her family to this abandoned castle.

The voracious serpents enjoyed their meal as Lyla smiled while watching from another room.

The family of three arrived at their Uncle Barth's estate, hoping to spend a fun summer, but their hopes were ruined as soon as they saw the castle.

The concrete driveway was full of cracks from which weeds were growing, the windows of the castle were damaged, and vines were growing up the walls. This was an abandoned castle.

"Are we at the right place?" Gwen asked.

Ned sighed loudly, "We can't stay here."

"It's too late," Margarie sadly explained. "We already said we'd stay here, and we can't change our minds now. There's no way of contacting him fast enough, so we'll have to stay here."

"Let's look inside then, maybe it's not as bad as the outside," Ned proposed.

Ned was terribly wrong. The inside was worse than the outside.

As Margarie was looking around the castle, her eyes were filled with disbelief. Everything was in such an unkempt state.

She was so lost in dark thoughts that it took her a few seconds to realize that her husband had spoken.

“Sorry, what?”

“We can’t stay here, we’ll have to disappoint Barth,” said Ned.

She sighed loudly. “Yeah, let’s go now, it’s getting dark out and-”

Her words were cut out by a neat blow to her neck. An assailant had slipped behind her. Before her husband and daughter could react, they were taken out similarly.

Lyla laughed, “I only hire the best.”

When Margarie woke up, she was alone in a room devoid of light.

She made her way up from the ground. Margarie was about to call for her family when the snakes crept up her. She was the second of the Montgomery’s to die that night.

Gwen was in a small room. She looked around the room, and there were no exits. The room was empty except for a security camera, and an old tapestry. She took down the tapestry, thinking it might reveal a way out, but it did not. Gwen leaned against the wall in defeat. Suddenly, the wall flipped, and she was in a different room. Gwen frantically looked around and saw her dead mother’s corpse. Gwen shrieked in horror and dropped to her knees. She kept blinking hoping that the scene before her eyes would disappear, hoping that this was just a nightmare.



“Mom?! Wake up!! Please... I need you.”

Gwen sobbed while hugging her mother’s limp body.

“Don’t you think you’re being harsh to her? Her parents deserve this, but not her,” a man said with empathy.

“The whole family should pay for what I had to suffer. I’m being lenient on her by not killing her.” Lyla responded, “Also, I don’t pay you to ask questions.”

The man chuckled, “We’ve known each other for so long, but you still see me as a hitman. I guess nothing can be done about it. So, what’s your next move? Or am I not allowed to ask that either?”

“Next, you bring her up here,” Lyla replied, “Don’t do or say anything to irritate me further. Once you’ve completed this, leave.”

The man made his way through the castle. When he got to Gwen, he felt a pang of guilt.

Gwen suddenly turned around as she felt a presence in the room. The man was standing behind her, observing her, the pity in his eyes barely hidden.

“Who are you?” Gwen exclaimed.

“The name’s Zack. I’m the person who knocked y’all out. I’m supposed to bring you up.”

“Up where? Why should I follow you?”

“My boss. And you should follow me because you’ve got two options.

You can stay here with a corpse that's going to start rotting and no way out, or you can follow me."

With some difficulty, Gwen got up. She considered running away from Zack but quickly brushed off the idea. If Zack was able to knock three people out, what could he do to one person?

As they were making their way to Lyla, Zack explained the situation they were in.

"Now, as I'm sure you've noticed, there are "security" cameras everywhere. She's been watching your family."

"Why? And who's she?" Gwen asked.

"I'll get to that, so don't interrupt me anymore. We've got a limited amount of time before she's in earshot, so I'll give you the shorter explanation." Zack continued his monologue,

"Remember when your parent's business went bankrupt? Well, they probably told you the business burned down, and they couldn't recover it. The truth is..."

A cauldron of bats flew past the trio and drowned Zack's words. When the noise finally quieted, Zack was already finishing his sentence.

"... because of this, my boss wants to kill your whole family. I'm afraid we're too close to boss to keep talking"

Gwen wanted to ask what Zack had said, but it was too late. Zack hurriedly left. He did not want to be involved with whatever would happen next.

As Gwen entered the room, she immediately noticed her father, Ned, unconscious and tied to a pillar. She ran to him then noticed the third person in the room, Lyla.

“Hello child. It is my pleasure to meet you.” Lyla smiled in the most unsettling way possible.

Gwen froze in fear.

“Untie your father then go sit over there.” Lyla pointed to a spot next to the only opened window in the room.

Gwen complied, then got the courage to speak up.

“Why are you doing this to us? What could our family have done to deserve this?”

“Why?” Lyla laughed, “Your parents are the reason I’m now an orphan. I could’ve killed you, but instead, you will suffer what I had to suffer.”

Ned came to.

“Perfect timing.” Lyla exclaimed.

“Where am I? Mag and Gwen where are they?! My head hurts,” Ned groggily said.

“Dad!!” Gwen shouted. She got up but Lyla shot her a mean look, and she immediately sat down.

“Gwen! Thank God you’re safe. Where’s mom? What happened?” Ned said. He looked around the room. He first saw a massive screen showing

footage of each room in the castle. He turned around and saw Lyla. Ned gasped. His deceased past employees' daughter was in front of him. Ned did not know what to make of all that was happening.

"It's been a while, Ned. Last time we saw each other was two years ago, when you and Margarie committed arson, and didn't get caught.

You 'accidentally' burned your own business down. 'Coincidentally,' my parents were the only two in there, and the rest is history. Today I will finally get my revenge." Lyla enunciated these last words. Ned did not have time to say anything. With some effort, Lyla picked him up by the collar and went to throw him out the window.

Something snapped in Gwen. She punched Lyla in the face. Those three years in Judo would finally pay off. The punch caught Lyla off guard, and she dropped Ned. He quickly got up and they made their way to the door. Lyla kicked Ned in the groin, Ned doubled over. Gwen went to kick Lyla in the face, but she arched back. Lyla was very flexible. She quickly straightened, pushed Gwen away and yanked Ned back to the window. Ned stumbled forward but caught himself. Gwen grabbed Lyla and threw her over her shoulder. Lyla ended on her back and was winded.

"Get over here dad!! Hurry while she's still on the ground," Gwen exclaimed.

Ned rushed to Gwen, but Lyla got up and with one final kick, Ned was out the window.

Ned screeched the whole way down, then a loud thud was heard. Gwen could not bring herself to look out of the window.

Lyla and Gwen stared at each other for what seemed like forever.

The tension was broken by sirens.

Lyla was furious, “He called the cops on me! I’ll let you go but you cannot say a word about me to anybody. You’re dead if that happens. Understood?”

“Yes, of course,” Gwen said. She rushed out of the room. It took a long time, but she managed to retrieve Margarie then exit the castle.

When she got out, officers bombarded her with questions. Gwen answered every single question with as much detail as possible. The officers searched the castle. They were not able to find Lyla.

The paramedics retrieved Ned’s splattered body. A bloodied bone was sticking out of his leg and dirtied a paramedic’s clothing. As Gwen watched, she swore to herself she would get revenge, even if it meant going to jail.

## *Empty Tank*

Twigs crunched under our feet as Jocelyn, Nita, Sadie, and I walked towards the cabin Jocelyn had rented. It was a last-minute decision, made when we realized our car was going to run out of gas, and the sun was setting outside. It was springtime and the weather was still chilly. She rented it for only 20 dollars, which we were ecstatic about at the time. We neared the cabin, pushing through long, spindly branches. There, sitting in the clearing was a rickety log cabin. Dead vines grew over the door, which hung open widely, the hinges rusty and broken. Getting closer, I noticed odd rusty brown splotches on the wood near the window, which was intact, but grimy and cloudy. Through the window, peculiar shadows played tricks on my eyes. "Hell no!" Sadie said, as soon as she stumbled into the clearing, one broken heel in her hand. "No. I'm going back to the car. I can sleep there," she squeaked, slowly walking backward. Nita sighed. "We're literally out of gas. That means no heating. You'll freeze," Nita pulled Sadie back to us. "Now come on. Don't be a baby, what's the worst that could happen?"

She had no idea.

The cabin looked just as bad from the inside compared to the outside. In the first room, a small, squeaky mattress lay on the ground with a thin sheet laid on top. A gaping hole in the walls gave us a view of the thicket of trees surrounding the cabin. The tiny wooden table in the corner was rotting and covered in mildew. A broken knife was scattered around the room, the handle in one corner and the blade nowhere to be seen. A small broom was propped up in the corner.

The other room had one window, covered with dirty white curtains. The planks on the ground had gaps between them. A small armoire stood in the room, which a rat scampered out of when we opened it.

The rat scared Sadie out of the room and back into the main room. I stayed in the second room, standing in the doorway. I walked towards the window, cringing at each creak on the warped wooden floor.

Halfway there, a shadow flickered at the edge of my vision. I stopped, looking around the room for the shadow, but there was nothing there.

Looking around the room one more time, I went back to the main room, leaving the window covered. Nita was sitting on the mattress, grumbling angrily at her phone, which I assumed had no service. Jocelyn, ever the clean freak, was sweeping up all the dust bunnies from the floor with the broom.

Sadie whimpered near the hole in the wall, back pressed against the wall.

I sat next to Nita and nudged her. "Nice place, huh?" She cracked a small smile, still looking down at her phone. No service. Just like mine, and everybody else's.

Later that night, Sadie and Nita claimed the mattress, and Jocelyn and I slept on the recently cleaned floor, using the sheet underneath us. Sadie fell asleep right away, but the rest of us were wide awake. Outside, trees rustled and crickets chirped. In about an hour, Nita was asleep too, leaving only me and Jocelyn. Suddenly, a shrill scream pierced the relatively still quiet of the woods. Jocelyn bolted up, looking straight at me. I gulped, raising myself as well. We listened for another sound, but nothing came. "Some sort of animal, maybe?" I said tentatively, edging closer to Jocelyn. She nodded. Sadie mumbled in her sleep, something about food. Then, we heard the laughter. It started as a quiet giggle, echoing around the cabin. My eyes widened and I turned to Jocelyn. She sat as still and silent as a tomb, glancing around. The giggle intensified, getting louder until it was a full manic laugh. Continuous. Endless.

“It’s coming from the second room,” Jocelyn whispered. I rushed to stand up, shaking Sadie and Nita awake. They grumbled groggily until they heard the laughter. All of us ran out the door, set on getting out of there. A faint light came from the light outside the cabin door.

Then I saw her. The woman sat in the middle of the clearing, near the window in the second room. Her back was turned to us, and she was shaking, hands tearing at her face. And the laughter was coming from her. My breaths rose and fell, my heartbeat quickening. I was frozen in place, just like the rest of my friends. Sadie screamed. The woman turned. Her face was thin and bleeding from where her long, yellowed nails had torn through her skin. The rest of her skin was covered in a thin layer of blood as well. Her manic laugh continued, showing oddly white teeth. Her slender hands were drenched in blood, it dripped off of her fingers and onto her white dress which was already splattered dark red. In one hand, she held a knife whose tip was stained red. The woman tilted her head, her laughing coming to a stop. Her lips curled up into a wide smile, a deranged, disturbing smile that raised the hairs on the back of my neck and sent shivers down my spine. She opened her mouth slightly, and slowly inched forward on all fours. My feet were glued to the ground. I couldn’t move. I heard Sadie scream again, yelling my name, because the woman was going faster, staring straight at me. She left bloody handprints on the ground, the blood surprisingly visible in the dim light. And when she was a few feet away from me, she stood up and ran instead, raising her knife and bringing it down. I screamed, dodging the knife.

The woman snarled and turned to me again. But I was already running, with Jocelyn and Sadie following behind me. Sadie sobbed and screamed, but she didn’t look back. I didn’t either. All I needed to do was get out of there. Far, far away.



All of us ran in different directions onto the road, all crying scared tears. I didn't notice Nita was gone until we reached the pavement. The woman never came after us. We never saw Nita again. And I never set foot in another forest again.

## *Running with the Past*

### THE YOUNG GIRL

“Thank you so much for being part of this program, Cassie. I know Mrs. Sullivan will appreciate your time.” My teacher handed me the address of the senior that I was paired with for “Teens Bridging the Gap,” an organization that aims to connect teenagers with isolated seniors. I never wanted to join this program, but my mom filled in the form for me.

I got on a bus that would take me to Robin Street, where Mrs. Sullivan’s house was situated. I pressed my face to the window, watching the large and beautiful homes slowly disappear as smaller ones began taking their place. Finally, after what felt like forever, I arrived at an eerie-looking neighbourhood. Small cabins were lined up with barely any space between them. 016, here it is. This cabin seemed to be in the worst state. The wood was peeling, and the roof was missing half its shingles. I knocked on the door, and a short, white-haired woman appeared. She had pale skin lined with wrinkles.

“Who are you?” the woman demanded.

“Hi, I’m Cassie, your partner for the ‘Teens Bridging the Gap’ organization,” I stammered, shocked by her intimidating demeanour.

“I told them this was useless, and I’ll prove it. Come in,” she said.

The interior of the cabin matched its neglected exterior. There was a rotting, musty odour, and the carpets were stained with red wine. Only a photograph was kept in pristine condition. The glass was clean, and the dark frame was dust-free. I peered down to get a closer look at it. A smiling girl. Her sleek raven hair stopped at her waist, and her soft brown eyes shone. She was wearing a graduation cap and holding a diploma with “Mallory”

written on it. Mrs. Sullivan coughed, which drew my attention away from the photograph.

She sat down at a small folding table in the corner of an outdated kitchenette and motioned for me to sit. I followed obediently and stared down at my hands.

“How old are you?” she asked, her voice harsh.

“I’m fourteen,” I said, and then a pained expression painted itself across her face.

“Oh. Fourteen, you have your whole life ahead of you,” she said, her tone not quite matching her words.

“Yeah, I guess. But my mom makes it seem like I’m running out of time.”

“So your mother’s strict?”

I huffed out a laugh. “Well she’s strict with me, but according to some photos I found in the attic, she was a wild sorority sister back in college.”

This caught her attention, and her brows furrowed. “Which college did she go to?”

“Scholarson College.”

The pained expression appeared again, followed by an unnatural smile. “Well, I would love it if you brought those photos with you next time.” I was surprised that her demeanour changed so suddenly. I didn’t even think there would be a “next time.”

“Sure. Can we meet next week at the same time?”

“Yes, see you then.”

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I arrived at Mrs. Sullivan’s house the following week, carrying the leather photo album. I was excited to be a part of whatever Mrs. Sullivan had in mind. She opened the door before I had a chance to knock.

“Cassie, I see you brought the photos.”

She motioned for me to come inside.

“Hey, Mrs. Sullivan, I forgot to ask you last week but what’s your favourite activity? Maybe it’s something we can do together.”

“I like staying home,” she was ushering me to hand her the album. Who enjoys looking at photos of other people?

She caught my suspicious glance and sighed, “What about you?”

“Well, my mother and I like to do yoga on Gold Margin Beach during the evenings.”

“Hmm,” she pondered.

I placed the photo album on the table, opening it to the first page of my mother as a toddler, but she flipped right to one of my mother and her sorority sisters in college. Her hands started to tremble, and she excused herself. I didn’t notice anything wrong with the photo; it was just my mother and her trademark smile.

Ten agonizing minutes later, Mrs. Sullivan returned, holding two cups of tea.

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## THE MOTHER

I was surprised Cassie texted me that she would be staying later with Mrs. Sullivan. At first, she didn’t even want to go. I was doing my usual stretches on Gold Margin Beach, feeling glad she was becoming more outgoing. I looked up and saw an elderly woman attempting to drag a heavy chest across the sand.

“Hello, you look like you could use some help,” I said, not sure what she was doing.

“Oh, thank you. These are my husband’s ashes, along with some of his favourite items. He wanted me to release this chest into the water because he loved it here. Can you please help me drag the other end of the chest into the water?”

“Of course, I’m very sorry for your loss.”

She smiled gratefully at me as we pushed the chest further into the water. I've never heard of people including items with ashes, but I didn't want to bother her by asking.

"The tide is strong enough to carry the chest off," she said to me.

I nodded to her. It was as though she read my mind. I gave her a brief smile before getting back to my stretches.

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About half an hour later, I was wrapping up my yoga workout when I realized the woman was still on the beach. She was sitting on the sand and gazing into the water. She caught my eye and made her way over. Her gaze turned sour as she said, "You can go fetch your daughter now."

"Excuse me?"

"Cassie. She's in the chest."

I took a step back, wondering who this woman was. "Are you feeling well, ma'am? I know you're grieving, but..."

She let out a wicked laugh. "That's not my husband, dear. I'm not surprised you don't recognize me at all given how self absorbed you always were. Spoiled little rich girl."

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"My poor Mallory died at the hands of you monsters. Don't you remember that hazing ritual you started at Scholarson? The one that ended with my daughter lying helpless, buried in the sand! You girls all left her there to die and all your parents did was pay off authorities to make it go away," she screamed.

She grabbed me by my shoulders, looked me straight in the eyes, and yanked me towards her.

"It never went away for me. I lost my daughter that day and today, you've lost yours."

I twisted out of her grasp and ran into the water, my past chasing after me.

## *Castle of Greed*

When we arrived, feeling the spitting rain fall down on our faces and latching onto our exposed skin, I immediately knew something was wrong. Judging by Isla's expression, she knew it too. The two of us had our arms linked together, dressed in short sleeves and certainly not rain-attire.

"Where the hell did this come from?" Jack asked from behind them.

"Did," Harper grunted as she slid on the mud, crashing into Ben. "You check the goddamn weather?"

Just what we needed, rain, no doubt followed by a thunderstorm.

"Yes, because my first thought was to check the weather app," Jack held up his phone. "No WiFi in the woods people!"

"You should've checked it before."

Isla tensed beside me, goosebumps started to appear on both our arms.

"Enough," I interjected. "Let's just get to the castle."

"The prize your grandfather had better be worth it, dragging us out here even in his death." Jack shoved past me, grabbing Ben and continuing up the now-muddy hill.

"You mean ours!" I called back.

Why were my cousins complete morons?

"I'm just here for the loot. He lost the privilege to call me his grandson after he kicked us all out."

Harper hesitated before following them.

"He's right, you know." her voice barely a whisper.

All it took was one mention of the man who had changed in a matter of minutes. Years of the kindhearted man before he lost it. He just...gave up caring.

"I know."

Isla signed towards me.

*Go*

She hadn't spoken since the second grade; Just after our grandfather passed. I wasn't sure why. They were never really close. I remember her staying away from him, even before he changed.

I led her up the hill, joining my other cousins who were stepping inside the old castle. Our grandfather used to take us to these woods, but never allowed us inside the castle, until now. His will had dictated us to find five priceless objects hidden inside after we were thrown out given no reason why. I know Jack was hoping for the famous hunting set our grandfather kept under lock and key. Ben wanted his antique clock. Harper had her eye on the china tea set. Isla and I? We never thought we needed anything, but our grandfather knew us well. If anything, this was a chance to find out what he thought about us; Why he stopped caring.

Jack decided to take the lead, pushing open the heavy door. On the fireplace were five envelopes. No names. He tossed one to each of us.

I leaned towards the others, making sure they saw the same thing I did. A strange symbol. Together we had five of them.

"These were in his journal." Harper realized.

"How did you know? None of us were allowed to read the damn thing." Jack demanded. Harper looked to the ground at her shoes, a pink tinge appeared, either from the cold or embarrassment.

"I may have picked the lock."

Ben looked appalled, but Jack grinned. I was in disbelief. Harper was never one to break the rules before. Maybe I didn't know her as well as I thought.

"To the study. He said he kept the journal in one of the back rooms. Also threatened to lock me in my room if I ever went near it," Jack muttered. "First sign of change before he turned into a maniac."

We followed Jack down the hallway into the familiar wooden room. The change in air pressure should've alerted me. The doors closed

immediately. Lights went out and the windows shattered.

All I felt were stinging pricks along my arms and legs and the shrieks of my cousins. Warm liquid ran down my face. In the dark we were powerless. I felt as though my grandfather was back. The same nervousness and timidity I felt matched the same fateful day all those years ago.

The light suddenly turned on. Isla was by the switch. I surged forward, examining her hands and mine. The glass was mostly on the outside of our skin.

“Amy do something!” Jack yelled at me.

I rolled my eyes at his tone, despite the chaos around us.

Ben spoke up, still shaken.

“We’re almost in eighth grade. Just because Amy pays attention in science class doesn’t mean she’s some all-knowing medical student. Can’t you solve your own problems without barking orders at the rest of us?”

I was thankful but again surprised at how hostile he sounded. How had I not realized the changes in my cousins? Was I that focused on blocking out everything to do with our grandfather?

I carefully avoided the pieces of glass and examined the windows, knocking on a large solid piece still intact by the frame.

“Tempered glass.”

The others gave me a look to go on.

“No. It’s a good thing. When tempered glass shatters, the pieces are too small to sustain human injury.”

“What, we should be happy the murderer wasn’t trying to murder us yet?” Jack asked, rhetorically of course.

Harper looked taken aback.

“You think it’s a murderer? Tempered glass has been known to explode randomly.”

“How do you explain the lights?”

“There’s a thunderstorm!”

As if on queue, a strike of lightning could be seen in the distance.



Jack wiped off the glass and stood up, still holding his envelope, like the rest of us.

“The journal.” he hurriedly picked up a leather-bound book off the desk.

*Strange. I didn't remember seeing it earlier.*

The book fell from Jack's grasp after he'd flipped through a few pages. He rushed over to read each of our symbols again.

“What?” Harper asked.

“It says ‘I'm not sorry’ as clear as day.”

My heart dropped. I came to the castle looking for an answer, only to find he never cared in the first place, about any of us. Marching forward, I snatched the journal away and threw it out of the empty window frame, sticking up my middle finger for good measure.

“Should've never come here. It was obviously a trap just to stab us in the back again.” I said, turning back towards my cousins.

Isla was gone from the room. I opened my mouth to say something but shut it as soon as her face came into view. She...spoke.

“You were never supposed to change, Amy. You were the last. You were supposed to keep hanging on.”

I should've been more surprised or even proud of Isla for speaking once again, but I was still in a fit of anger. So were my other cousins.

“Yeah? Well, you should've been there with us instead of shutting up and staying quiet. When Jack almost died on that cliff in third grade, you did nothing. Or Ben when he was bullied. You let them beat him up, not even alerting anyone. When Harper got suspended for something she didn't do, you didn't even text any of us to let us know her side of the story. Or me...”

I trailed off. Realisation hitting me. It was never my grandfather I had to be worried about. Nor Jack or the kids who stole my lunch money. It was the person closest to all of us. The one we thought was grieving in her own way. When I looked at all the red flags it occurred to me.

“It was you.”

Isla smiled.

“And now, you’re all here with me. The game ends here. The fortune is mine and mine alone.”

The changes in my other cousins were all connected now. Isla had been provoking and changing them over the years without even speaking. Just a nudge here and there, and they were all eating out of the palm of her trained sign language hand.

She pulled out a pistol. Loaded or not, none of us wanted to find out. We ran. Ran as our lives depended on it. Isla, the mute, had pulled a gun on her family. Her blood. It was all because of greed. I understand it now. She was greedy for fortune, and I was greedy for my grandfather’s redemption.

“Faster!” Ben yelled through the forest, the trees muffling his sound.

We were split apart, each alone in the same woods we used to play in as innocent children who had a kind and loving grandfather. Nothing lasts forever.

A gunshot rang throughout the forest, but I didn’t dare to make a sound. I pressed myself against a tree and waited. I wondered who was dead, or if it was a warning shot. Laboured breathing caused me to jump back in fear, only seeing it was Ben. He motioned for me to follow him, and like an idiot, I did. We reached the clearing and finally saw my cousins lined up with their hands above their heads.

“Get down,” Isla pointed the gun towards me. “Final words?”

*Ironic indeed.*

A figure moved up ahead, looking somewhat familiar to all of us.

“Grandfather?”

A gunshot.

## *Void*

With every further step they took, they could feel the ground digging into the soles of their feet. Just two boys running on train tracks in the middle of nowhere.

Never moving.

Never changing.

Always running.

He turned to see his friend. To see his chestnut hair floating, blown up by the air. To see his lips bend and form that perfect smile.

To return it.

As his mouth began mirroring his friend's, he blinked. And suddenly there was nothing there.

The brilliant golden swirls that had existed in those eye sockets only a moment before had become black pits of nothingness.

The lips that had curved beautifully mere seconds previously now hung loosely. Lifeless.

“...Kaieden?” He breathed.

His eyes traced the body that had been so alive, so happy before. Starting from where the tips of his friend's toes were suspended just above the ground, his gaze climbed and jumped, carefully following each and every arc.

He observed the ankles that had twisted and turned smoothly when they had gone swimming in the ocean. He observed the knees that had bent elegantly when they played basketball together. He observed the well-sculpted masculine thighs that went taut when they raced going up the stairs.

He observed the scars on his friend's chest, two long curved lines that rested upon the bare chest. A physical reminder of how much his friend had to pay to feel comfortable in his own body. He observed the forehead on which sweat glistened and flower crowns lay.

His gaze continued to climb, submitting every little detail to his scrutiny. When he finally reached the edge of those fingertips that had gently carded through his hair previously, he noticed.

Those delicate wrists now had clear strings tied to them. Fishing line.

Then the arm started moving up and down. Back and forth.  
Waving. Mocking.

The body started moving. It was pulled backwards as it slowly floated away from him.

"Kaieden!" He started chasing it.

As he ran, twigs snapped under the weight of him. Bugs were crushed beneath his heels. Pebbles flew in every direction as his steps knocked them out of the way.

He leaned forward. Stretched his arm out. His fingertips brushed against the soft fabric of his friend's shirt and he tried to grasp it. Tried to bring him back. Pull him close.

His friend continued to drift away. He continued to pursue it.

Hours stretched forward and backward in time and became irrelevant as he continued to rush after his friend.

*No.*

A dark pit that hadn't been there before appeared out of nowhere. He watched, frozen in muted horror as his friend slowly descended into the unknown.

At first, it was of his own choice. Too startled to do anything, he stood and gaped at the empty hole. He tried to shake his head to clear everything out, but found that he was stuck.

He frantically tried to move his arms, to bend his legs, to curl his fingers. Nothing happened. He wouldn't budge one bit.

His eyes darted left and right in their cavities, desperately trying to make sense of the situation. After a moment, he saw.

There were elegant silky dark maroon ribbons attached to all of his limbs. Four strings tied gracefully around his wrists and ankles, with a small bow atop each. Almost like a puppet.

He began to be slowly pulled towards the emptiness that his friend had

disappeared into. He was conflicted as to what he should do, and played with the two options that he had in his mind.

Should he jerk violently in his bonds and resist in the hopes of freeing himself. Or should he allow himself to be moved with the chance that he could save his friend?

After a moment of deliberation, he hung his head and he decided to let himself be manipulated. Kaieden needed him.

He needed Kaieden.

He was gently lowered into the darkness. As his eyes adjusted, the ability to take in his surroundings better was granted to him.

He was confused by what he saw.

It was a circular chamber. And the damp stone walls were covered in people hung up with ropes. Their eyes were dead, like Kaieden's. Murky craters that all seemed to overflow with black ink.

They were all dressed up as different things. A policeman, a baker, a teacher, all people from normal everyday lives. That wasn't the weirdest part.

They all had Kaieden's face.

The ribbons attached to him began to pull. He was dragged into another room, equally as dark and potentially even more disturbing.

This room horrified him more than the last one. There were still people hung up on the walls. Normal, everyday people. And they all wore his face. His face.

He was surrounded by dozens of empty, hollow bodies that looked exactly like him.

His arms and legs were separated so that he was in the shape of a starfish as he was tugged toward the edges of the enclosure.

His back and head hit the solid rock with a thump. His fingers were splayed apart and he was able to feel the other bodies' fingertips.

They were all joined together, in a circle of sorts. Holding hands. Connected.

He took in a shuddering breath. So. What is this place? What am I?

The rope began to tighten around his wrists and ankles, stopping the flow of his blood. He was suddenly compelled to lift his head by some invisible force.

As he stared up into the obscurity, he saw something. No. Not something.

Someone.

He felt a cold tendril of fear crawl up his spine.

"...Hello?" It took a considerable amount of effort for him to keep the tremble out of his voice.

"I can see you, you know."

The figure froze. "You can see me?"

He shakily nodded his head.

“That-” She paused. “That can’t be right.”

“What can’t be right?”

She began mumbling to herself. “I didn’t write this. Did someone else write this? But I didn’t give anyone else access to my manuscript...”

Write? Manuscript?

He heard the rustling of papers. “No. That can’t be right.”  
He heard her murmur.

The pieces hit him so fast it felt like he was being shot by a machine gun.

He wasn’t real. He didn’t exist. He was a figment of someone’s imagination. A ready-made persona.

He shut his eyes and behind his eyelids, he could see the countless lives that he had lived before.

Sending his...son? Off to his first ballet recital. The Nutcracker.

Creating pastries day after day for the neighbourhood. Children pressing their faces up to the glass and flattening their palms against it so that they could see the freshly baked loaves of bread better.

Drinking a morning cup of coffee and having chocolate donuts to celebrate his first full year as a cop.



Staring into someone's mouth and picking apart their teeth as a dentist.  
Sitting in the cockpit, holding hands with this copilot, his husband.

Standing behind the countertop of a cashier, mindlessly scanning groceries day after day.

Scratching little lines and dots onto sheets of paper.  
Trying to compose a song.

Surfing through the water on a bright sunny day in the Maldives.

He blinked.

How many lives had he lived? How many times had his sense of self been brutally ripped away from him as quickly as it had been given?

"What-" He swallowed. "What about Kaieden?"

The woman looked taken aback. "Kaieden? He- he wasn't supposed to- You weren't supposed to be in the same story. Together."

He laughed. "Story? Is that all we are to you?  
Bedtime stories for your children?"

Her expression softened. One of her giant hands reached down into the dome to gently caress the side of his face and brush the hair out of his eyes.

"No. You are so much more than that. You are my creation. My life's work. You are my thoughts and ideas come to fruition."

He tried to turn away but he was well and truly stuck.

Her eyes glossed over with the overwhelming emotion that could never truly be described using words.

Could only be felt.

Her tears fell onto his face, big fat droplets of rain.

He writhed in his bonds, trying to get away from the onslaught of salty teardrops.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He wanted to ask why she felt the need to apologize but his attention was brought to the ropes on his limbs. They were tightening. Cutting off his circulation. Snapping his bones in half.

“I’m so sorry,” she sobbed.

He drowned.

He didn’t cry.

He didn’t grimace.

He couldn’t.

He wasn’t real.

None of it was.



*Sofia Girotti-Switzer*



*Sam Basek*





*Jacklyn Saddler*





*Bella Liu*





*Taylor Howell*









*Athena Leong*





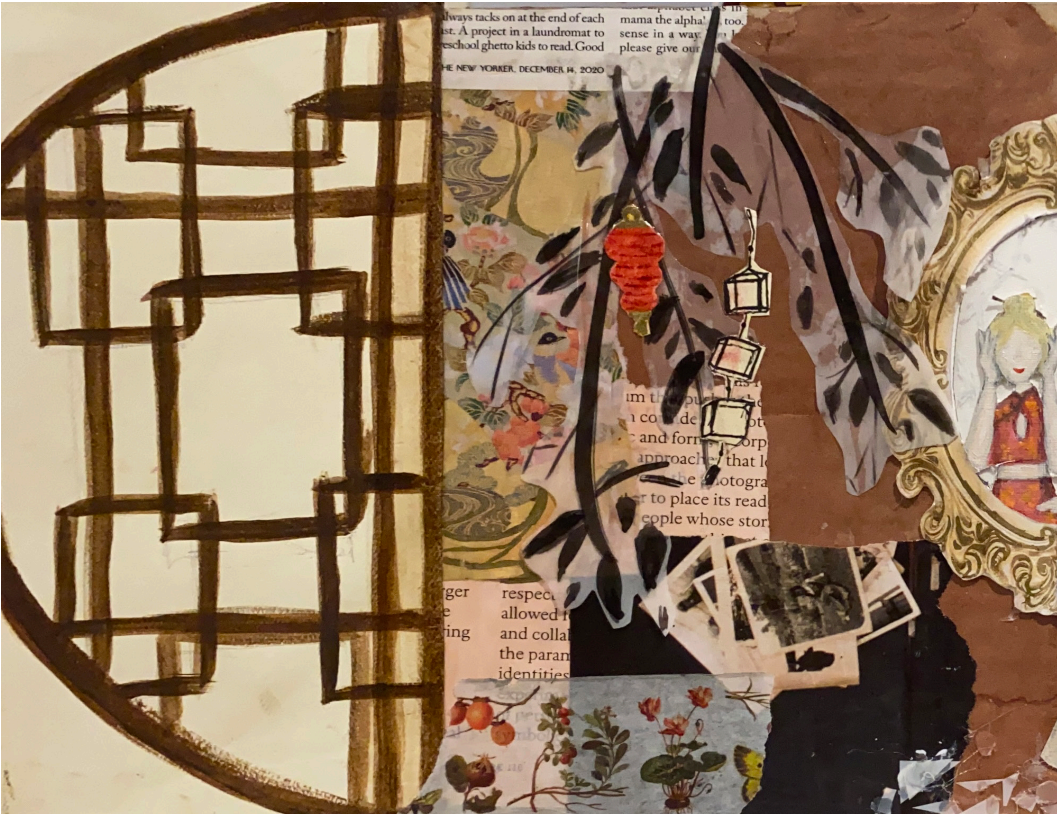
*Betty Liu*



*Nolan Kotler*











*Lauren Wan*



Tracy Han



Grace Sun



Ryan Su





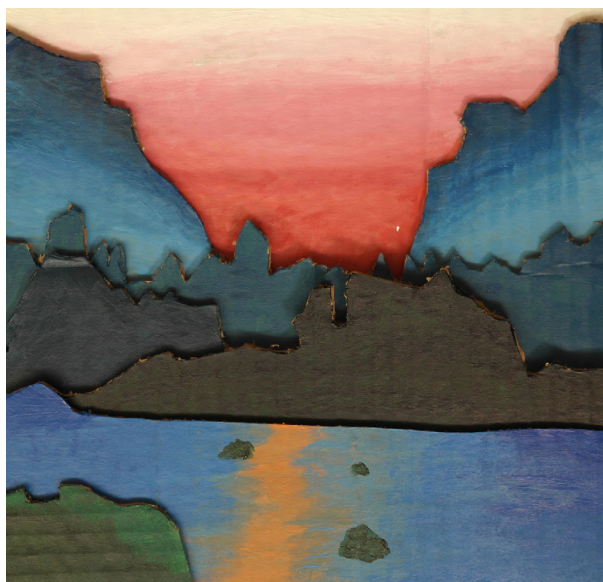
*Kaileigh Patience*



*Ella Okubasu*





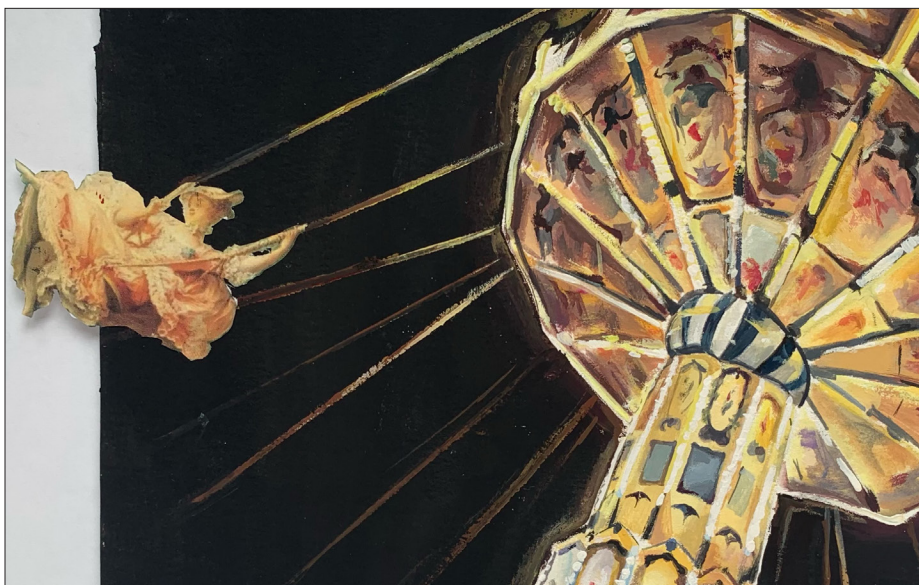


*Jessica Xiang*



*Eden Chang*

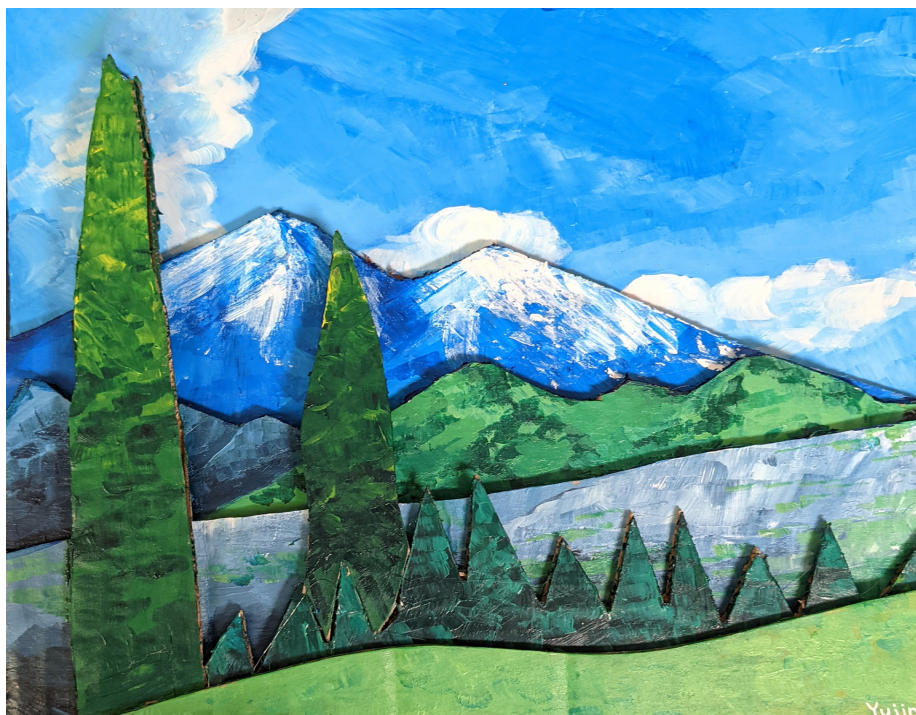




*Maddie Higgins*



*Zack Graff*



*Yujin Ge*

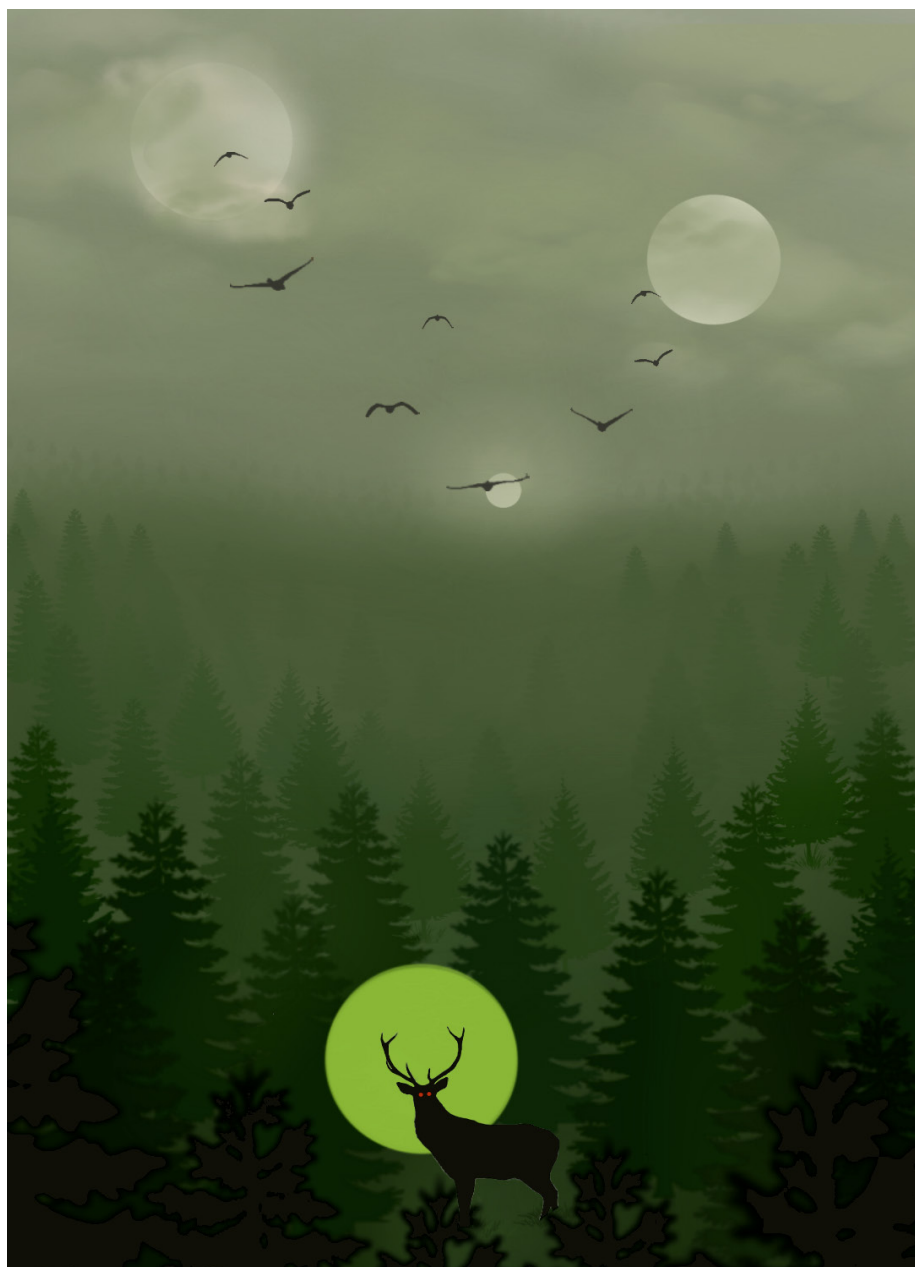


*Melody Farhang Nia*

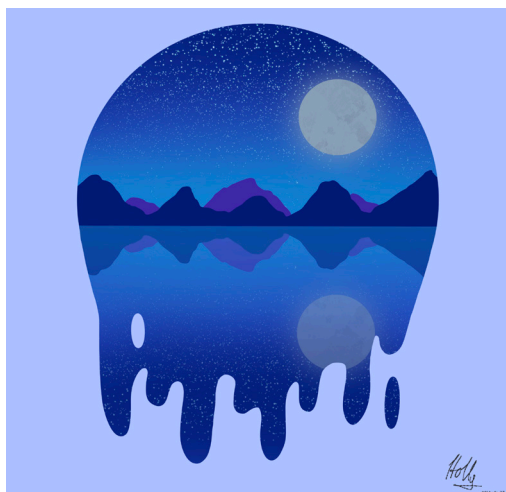




*Cecile Laredo Marcovitz*



*Rhon Feng*



*Holly Yates-Krull*



*Lisa Yin*



*Yujin Ge*



*Tristan Samarasekera*





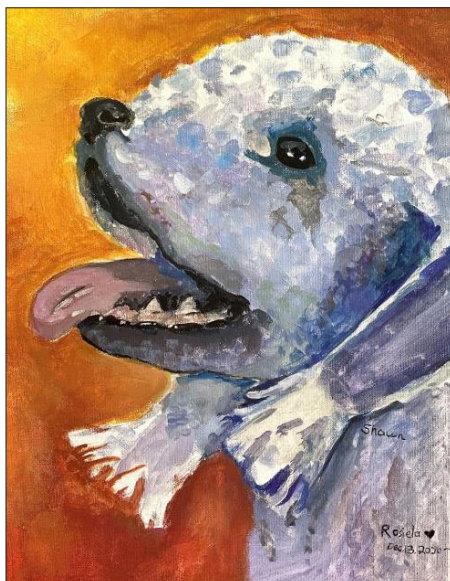
*Ellie Lock*





*Bella Lutchmansingh*





*Rosiela Chen*

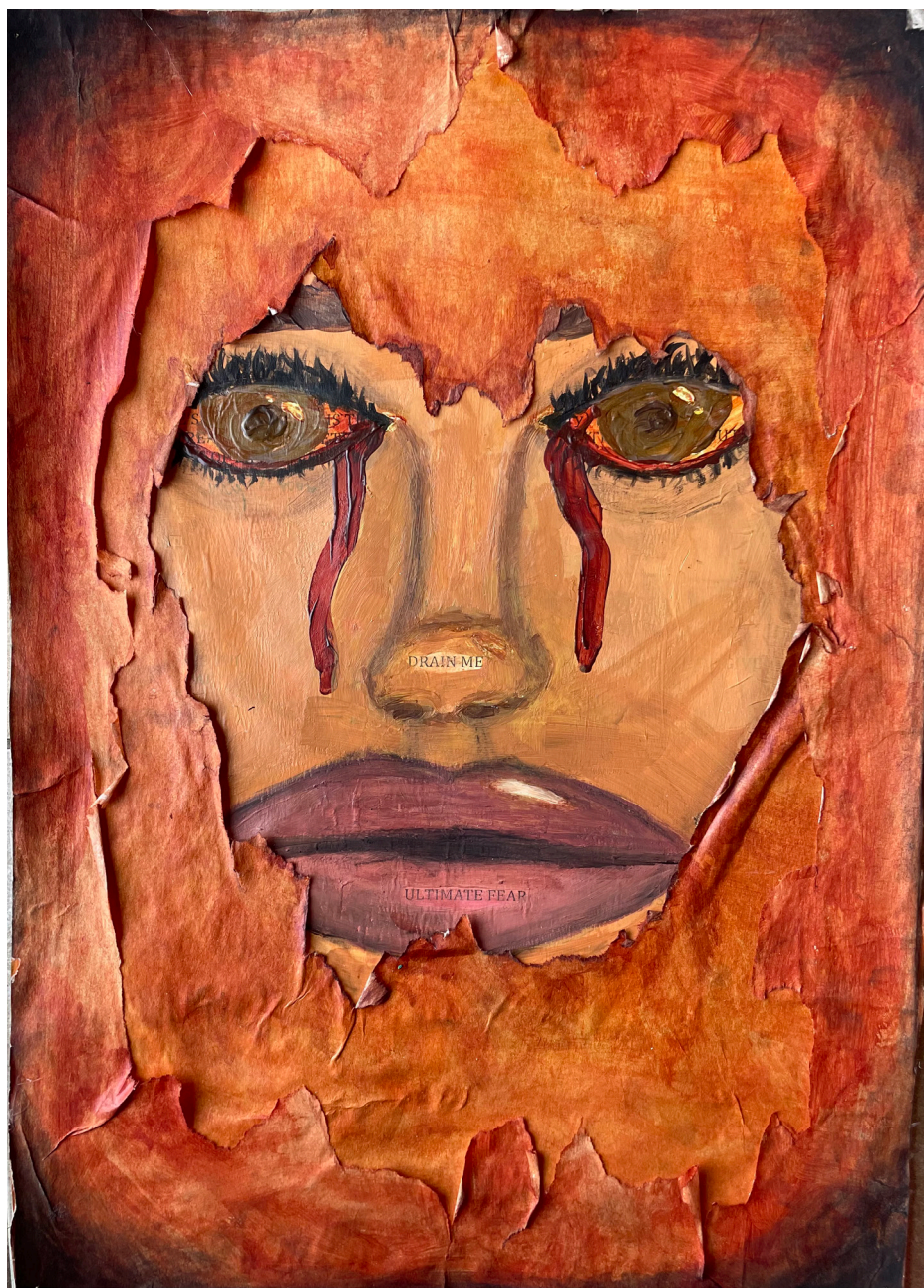


*Charles Cai*



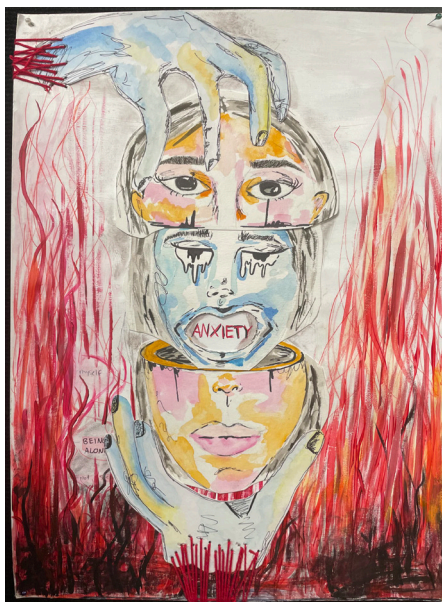
*Caroline Yan*





*Renata Acosta Moises*

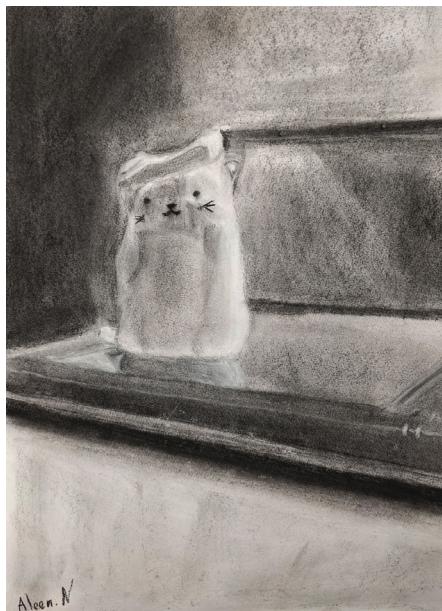




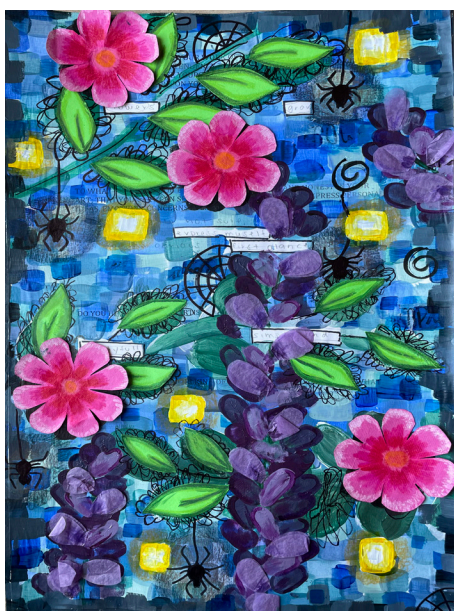
*Victoria Oswald*



*Sabrina Kiung*



*Aleen Nahknikian*



*Sabina Lopez Montes Bernot*





*Chase Chang*









Manli Yang

## *The House at the End of the Road*

The warm summer air was calming and made it nearly impossible for Oliver to stay awake as he drove in search of a place to stay for the night. Oliver and his friends, Mia and Blake, had been driving for hours when they took a wrong turn and ended up on a dark gravel road, surrounded by towering trees. They were officially lost and had no cell reception. The sky was dark and the only thing seen was a silhouette of a small house up ahead, dimly lit by the headlights of the car. It was almost three in the morning, Mia and Blake were fast asleep, and Oliver was fighting the urge to sleep as well. Barely awake, he drove right into a pothole, to which his friends woke with a sudden jump.

“What happened, Oliver?” Mia asked sleepily.

“Oh, great, you’re awake!” Oliver replied, “We’re here. Well, actually there is nowhere else to go.” The road had come to an abrupt end, and the only thing in sight was a single house, standing in a large field. “Perhaps we can stay here for the night?”

As they pulled up, a small light lit up the porch, and they noticed that the house was neatly kept. They walked up to the door and knocked. Immediately it opened and they stepped inside.

“Oh, hello, welcome!” Standing behind them was an average-sized, well-dressed woman in a perfectly tailored suit. It appeared as though she was expecting company.

“Why don’t you children come inside? You must be very tired,” said the woman, “You can stay the night. I already have a room prepared for you!”

They weren’t quite sure what she meant by this, as they had arrived upon this place unexpectedly but they weren’t about to ask any questions, as they were tired and lost, and needed a place to stay.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Mia said with a warm smile, “You’re very kind.”

“My pleasure!” the woman said. She offered them food and drinks, but all they wanted to do was sleep. Oliver yawned and asked if she could show them to their room. “Of course,” she said, “But one thing before you sleep, may I ask a favour?”

“Sure,” said Oliver, “What is it?”

“There’s a book in the basement, on a large quartz pedestal, and I would appreciate it if you could go and fetch it for me!” Although the woman appeared rather capable, she walked with a cane, so Oliver agreed to help.

As Oliver approached the basement stairs, he hesitated slightly, and then proceeded to continue down the steep stairs, while the woman showed Mia and Blake to their room. The climb down the stairs seemed to last forever, even though it was only a few steps. Oliver became very unsettled, as he was sure that he could hear something running in walls. When he finally arrived at the bottom, he saw a small door, which when opened, he had to crawl through. As he passed through the doorway, he arrived in a large hallway. A strange house, this is. He thought to himself. He walked down the hall and saw many peculiar objects. He finally reached the end of the hallway, where there was a large, glorious quartz pedestal, with the most beautiful book he had ever seen. It was encrusted with faded gold swirls, and on it were

very strange words, which he wasn't able to understand. It read, "Maledictio de Aldrich". He reached out to grab it, but was suddenly interrupted by a demanding voice.

*"Don't pick up that book."*

"What? Who's there?" Oliver asked.

Oliver heard movement and turned around to find a terrifying creature. It looked like a ghost. Its body was translucent and gave off a dim blue glow. By now, Oliver was more terrified than he had ever been in his life. Oliver's jaw slowly dropped and only a small squeak came out.

The creature spoke again. "I am the spectre of Sir Demetrius Bartholomew IV, trusted by the King Aegeus to protect the world from the woman you met upstairs. She is a Patroclus, a shapeshifting monster, who holds immense evil within and is capable of unimaginable destruction. You have stumbled upon this house and shall leave immediately.

Oliver finally gathered enough courage to speak. "Wait, what? You're protecting the world from that woman upstairs? But why?"

"That book you were about to retrieve is the Maledictio de Aldrich, the Curse of Aldrich. You see, that woman has been placed under a curse that prevents her, the Patroclus, from ever leaving this house and destroying everything and everyone, even Gods and Spectres. If the book is removed from the protective barrier and gets into her hands, the curse will be broken, and she will be free to leave this house and wreak havoc upon the world. No one will stand a chance against her. She is far too powerful."

"So if she touches the book, the curse will be reversed? Shouldn't it be kept somewhere else then, far away from her?"



“No. She is physically unable to touch the book while it is in the protective barrier. That is why she sent you to get it.”

“Wow. So, what do I do?”

“Gather your friends and leave immediately. She is just as dangerous in this house as she would be anywhere else”, and with that, the spectre dissolved into the darkness of the basement.

Oliver was terrified and headed for the hallway which led to the stairs when he began to feel a tingling in his fingers. Suddenly, his eyes locked on the *Maledictio de Aldrich*. He could not understand what was happening. Oliver was no longer able to control his body, and just like that, he had the book in his hands, away from its protective barrier. What had he done?

Removing the book must have alerted the woman because Oliver could hear her calling out to him in a gentle voice.

“Oliver? Oliver, are you coming?”

Without much thinking, Oliver knew that he had to do something. He knew that it would be up to him to save himself, his friends... and the world. He quickly tucked the book under his shirt and walked upstairs, trying his best to remain calm. As he reached the top, the woman was waiting for him excitedly. Oliver tried to avoid making eye contact with her as he tried to slip by, but the woman, the Patroclus, noticed that Oliver was behaving strangely. She turned to him and asked for the book, but this time her voice was cold and dark, and it boomed through the house.

“Hand me the *Maledictio de Aldrich*,” she demanded. Oliver refused and ran past the Patroclus, and just then she began to change forms.

The woman was no longer visible. All that was seen was a large, dark figure with tentacles instead of legs.

Oliver sprinted upstairs to the third floor where he found his friends still asleep. He shook them awake and yelled, “Guys! Hurry, get out! The woman is evil.”

He had no time to explain, but after hearing one roar from the Patroclus, Mia and Blake knew exactly what they needed to do. Escape! They ran towards the stairs, with Oliver clutching the book tightly. He knew that the Patroclus must never get her hands on it. As they approached the stairs, the Patroclus was already at the top. They were trapped. The only way out was the large window at the end of the hall.

“That way, guys,” Mia yelled, “Hurry!”

“What?!” screamed Blake, “The window?”

“We have no choice!” Mia yelled and was only barely heard over the roars of the Patroclus as it slowly climbed the staircase.

“Give me the *Maledictio de Aldrich*,” she roared, “And I will spare your lives!”

Oliver knew what that would mean for the rest of the world, and was prepared to do anything to avoid giving up the book. Blake picked up a large vase and threw it at the window, which shattered upon impact. Though they were terrified, they all dove through the window, with Oliver holding on to the book with all his might. As they began to fall, they were suddenly surrounded by a blue glow that slowly lowered them to the ground.

“Bartholomew!” he exclaimed. “You saved us!”

“And you saved the world”, he replied. “Now, I must get the *Maledictio de Aldrich* back in its rightful place, before it gets into the wrong hands.”

Demetrius floated downward and disappeared beneath the ground, carrying the book with him... By now the sun was rising and Oliver, Mia and Blake quickly got into their car and drove away along the same long gravel road in which they came only hours before. This time, Oliver sat in the back as a sense of relief came over them. Oliver drifted to sleep, but meanwhile, back at the house through the broken window, one tentacle stretched its way out just touching the ground.

## *Decay*

Heavy dust blanketed every surface of the building. Every wall, floor, and worn-down chair were thick with it. The wind whistling through the broken windows added a sinister chill to the already foreboding surroundings. The once pristine, albeit dreadfully named “Draven Insane Asylum”, was now a stale and derelict building plastered in mold like a loaf of bread, long forgotten in the deep recesses of the cold cellar.

Walking through the pitch-black halls of the abandoned insane asylum, Averie, Sofya, and Siara had nothing but their cell phone flashlights to break the darkness. The girls tried to ignore the scuttling of rodents in the halls and the permanent stink of mildew hanging in the air.

“Tell me again why we had to come to this creepy place in the middle of the night,” Averie complained.

“Can you imagine how cool our Instagram photos are going to look once we’re done taking pictures here?” Sofya replied. “Plus, I’m sick of Matthew always bragging about how he came here and didn’t get scared once. It’s getting old.”

Averie and Siara sighed simultaneously and the three girls continued their trepid exploration through the corridor, forcing themselves to peer into each of the crumbling rooms that were as numerous as they were ominous. Many were cluttered with overturned beds, their mattresses chewed and torn by the rats that haunted the asylum. Some rooms had dolls and paintings while others were virtually empty.

An unsettling clucking sound suddenly filled the hallway. Click-clock. Click-clock.

“Stop it Sofya,” Averie chastised, her voice shaky.

“That wasn’t me!” said Sofya, defensively.

“Stop lying! Who else could it have been?” Siara questioned.

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t m—” Before Sofya finished her sentence, the clucking started again, like an old, tired clock. Click-clock. Click-clock. Something rustled Averie’s hair as it breezed past her and she saw a shadow scamper down the hallway. Her heart skipped a beat.

“You saw that too, right?” Siara asked.

“Yes,” Averie and Sofya said in unison.

“It must’ve been some kind of animal.”

Unconvinced, the girls kept glancing behind their shoulder as they continued on their way with a hurried pace. Everyone was on high alert now, jumping at the slightest breeze and creak of the floor. They looked in every nook for potential threats as they headed towards the end of the hallway before finally coming upon the last room. The tightly closed door guarded whatever secrets were held within. With a deep breath, the girls each placed a shaky hand on the brass knob and turned it together. The door squealed open.

It looked the same as the other rooms, but the air felt thicker. The smell of decay oozed from within. It was so pungent that Siara coughed violently while Averie and Sofya quickly covered their nose with their shirt. Sofya panned the room with every bit of light her phone could muster. The girls gasped when it landed on the bed; an arm poked out from underneath. Sofya seized Averie before she could turn and flee. “We have to look under the bed,” Sofya whispered.

“Oh heck no,” Averie protested. “I’m getting out of here.”

“I drove us here. Do you want to wait outside in the dark? All alone?”

Rather than answering, Averie grabbed Siara’s hand as Sofya slowly crept towards the bed.

“We should all look at the same time.”

Their hearts were pounding, but Averie and Siara bravely let go of each other’s hand and cautiously moved to the side of the bed. Anxious for something sturdy and reliable to hold onto, Averie gripped the bed frame as she leaned down. The ice-cold metal beneath her palm was a warning to leave

everything alone; that she should not see what was underneath.

Sofya signaled when to look, “One, two, three.”

Before they had a chance to peer below, a piercing cackle froze all three in their places.

Then the door slammed shut furiously and they were immediately jolted back into action.

Averie raced to the door, but it wouldn’t budge. She jiggled the handle panickedly, pushing the door in her craze to get out. Nothing worked. “Guys!” she cried. “We’re locked in! What are we going to do!? What’s happening!?”

“Averie,” Siara whispered with tears streaming down her cheeks, her face pale.

Averie turned around to see that her friends were crouched, staring at what was underneath the bed. She hesitantly bent down to have a glimpse. Matthew’s face, contorted in a gruesome scream, stared back at her. She shrieked, her legs gave out as she dropped to the ground.

“It looks like he’s been dead for weeks,” Sofya said in shock.

“But if Matthew’s dead, how did I see him at school today?” Siara asked.

Something scraped along the tile floor as it skittered around them. Sofya frantically aimed the light in different directions trying to see what was making the noise, but it was too swift. As if trying to evade Sofya’s light, the unknown presence suddenly stopped and the sharp intake of breath from each girl was the only sound.

Just as she had lifted herself up, Averie felt a tap on her shoulder. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, willing her trembling hands to still. Siara and Sofya were across from her now so it couldn’t have been one of them.

Fear, as clear as crystal water, was etched into Siara’s face, but she managed to raise her arm and point at something behind Averie. Sofya’s flashlight burned Averie’s eyes as it illuminated the area. Slowly, she turned. Mere inches from Averie’s face stood a girl who’s wicked smile turned her



stomach inside-out and made her heart thunder like horses at the racetrack.

The girl had long, unruly hair that was so black it put the moonless night sky to shame. Her eyes were dark pits, windows to an even darker soul. The atmosphere around her buzzed with an eerie electricity as she started to sing, cackling between lyrics. While she appeared young, Averie sensed an ancient energy. The girl was not of this world.

“Who are you?” Sofya asked. Her tone was strong, but the flashlight shaking in her quivering hands gave her away.

“I should be asking you that, my dear,” she replied. Her voice was deafeningly shrill, and a mirror that hung on the wall and had unbelievably survived intact after all these years exploded in response.

“Please,” Averie whimpered. “We don’t want any trouble. Please let us go and we’ll never bother you again.”

“I am afraid I cannot do that,” the girl crooned. Then, she lunged at Averie, slamming her to the floor. Averie was powerless against her; she had the strength of a bear within the body of a child. Sofya snatched a chair from the corner of the room and smashed her with it from behind.

She howled, reeling on Sofya to attack her, but she was too late. Sofya leveled the chair upon the girl again, this time squarely against her head, knocking her out cold.

“Come on guys,” Siara cried. “We don’t know when she’ll wake up. We have to go! Now!”

“But what about the door? We’re locked in,” Averie reminded them. Siara turned the handle and the click of the door opening was the best sound the girls had ever heard. They all exhaled in momentary relief. Sofya grabbed her flashlight which had fallen to the ground. Before turning to leave, they stole a glance at the girl’s limp body. Sofya and Siara had just stepped through

the threshold of the doorway with Averie following close behind. Just one step away from the door, a set of bony fingers clamped down on Averie's shoulder and dragged her back into the nightmarish room. The door closed on a phantom wind, trapping her in.

"AVERIE!" Siara and Sofya screamed simultaneously from the hall. Siara tried the handle. Locked. Sofya called 9-1-1.

"Averie!" Siara shouted, pounding on the door in a frenzy to help her friend escape the nauseating room. "Hold on Averie! Help is on the way!" Siara and Sofya reluctantly left Averie and dashed down the hallway to meet the police back at the front of the building.

It felt like an eternity, but they finally heard the life-saving call of the sirens as the police neared the Draven Insane Asylum. The squad cars hadn't even come to a full stop before Sofya and Siara were upon them. All but yanking the officers from the closest car, the girls rushed them through the main doors and led them to that horrid room at the end of the long corridor. When they were just a few feet away, the door opened and Averie stepped out.

"Oh my gosh!" gasped Sofya as both girls ran to hug her.

"Hi guys," Averie whispered.

The girls peeked into the room. Everything—the torn furniture and Matthew's body—had disappeared.

Siara asked, "Averie, are you okay?"

"No. She's not."

## *Eyes of Silent Blood*

Anti-Asian Racism sees:

The Xuhao shop has aged and wrinkles now crawl down its body,  
The dwindling fine ink of Chinese characters running from the 过去(past),  
The sugared aroma that once danced in history,  
Spoiled into the sour 当前 (present),  
A town that was once buzzing with vitality,  
Is now whispering with 空白 (vacancy),  
The dainty windows crumbled into a thousand pieces,  
Through the frames of history where no stream of light has 开花 (broken)  
Every single wall is scraping off its skin,  
As the signs of shops are losing the colour of 生活 (life).

The world is an imperfect place waiting to crumble at its feet,  
The distorted cobble stoned path leading me into 虚无 (nothingness),  
Shivers climb up my arms as raw acrid air wounds my smelling,  
Staining the pavement is a pool of piercing crimson 血液 (blood).

*Pictures flicker before the lens of my eyes.*

Ignarus looks out:

The vast town is an open ocean of space,  
“Yellow” faces are muted,  
Racial slurs suffocating them,  
But my ears hear nothing but a melody,

The streets are civil and the shops are serene,  
My ears hear nothing but a melody,  
The virgin air dances in my lungs,  
My ears hear nothing but a melody.  
Shivers climb up my arms as the icy air whips through my hair,  
Staining the pavement is a beautiful deep colour of crimson paint.

*Until reality paints on the world's canvas.*

From his eyes:

"It's because of *you people*",  
It's because of *you people* that people are leaving my life,  
It's because of *you people* that businesses are failing,  
It's because of *you people* lives are on the streets,  
It's because of *you people* plastic coils around the blue ocean,  
It's because of *you people* society is tired,  
It's because of *you people* the world is hungry,  
It's because of *you people* the Earth is crying,  
"It's because of *you people*."

Dread drips down my heart.  
All it took was a bat,  
Beating every ounce of trust in humanity,  
Out of me.  
Before the words,  
"It's because of -",  
Could leave my lips.



Retribution?

0 years,

0 months,

0 weeks,

0 days.

Where is my justice?

*Reality* recognizes:

A heavy festering scent swarming the air,

Stinging eyes,

Stinging hearts,

Stinging souls,

Staining the pavement is a pool of piercing crimson 血液,

As it waltzes between the creases of pavement spelling,

文森特·钦

Vincent Chin.

## *The Doctor*

I stumbled upon the old building when I was walking in the forest with my dog Duke.

About an hour into the walk I saw the first sign.

‘TURN BACK,’ it read. It looked so weathered that I decided it must be old enough to be irrelevant. A couple minutes later I saw the next, even more eroded sign. ‘PRIVATE PROPERTY: TRESPASSERS WILL BE PERSECUTED’.

Again, I convinced myself that the sign was just old. These woods are empty.

I realised I was wrong when I saw the final sign that was too old to read. It was perched next to a set of dirty cobblestone stairs that had no place in the middle of a forest.

Ignoring all of the warnings and letting my curiosity get the best of me, I started to climb.

I climbed and climbed for almost an hour until I could see the edge of a structure peeking out over the top of the stairs. The building came into sight and I realized it was massive, at least four stories tall, falling apart and looking like not a single person had been there in centuries.

Having come this far I had to continue, so I did. Once I reached the final steps I looked up at the gargantuan building covered in grime and vegetation, debris strewn around, concealed in thick fog. To be honest, it looked like something out of a movie.

Knocking on the door did nothing, as I expected, and when I tried the rusty handle it wouldn’t budge. The broken shards of glass scratched me as I climbed through a window, the only way in.

But as soon as I took two steps, I heard something behind me. When I whipped around to look, I saw nothing there. A second later, out of nowhere, I heard the same noise behind me. I didn't even have a chance to turn around before I heard a large thud, pain exploded in the back of my head, and I crumpled to the ground unconscious.

I awoke in a bed, barely able to move. It felt like I was in a vat of mud. Cold, sluggish, and dark. Once I had regained control of my body I sat up, trying to see where I was. At that point, the gravity of the situation hit me. I've been kidnapped.

Deciding not to let that impair me I got out of the bed and looked around, and that's when I realized why I was so cold. For one, someone had taken all of my clothes and put me in a hospital gown, and secondly, there was a giant hole in the middle of the wall.

At that point, you can probably guess what I was thinking.

*What the hell?*

I scanned the rest of the room, trying to see anything of note.

Upon closer inspection of the bed I found out it was an ancient looking hospital bed, and I found that there were other beds hidden in the shadows of this surprisingly large, grimy, L-shaped room.

I turned the corner, expecting to see one or two more beds and a door a couple feet away, but was greeted by a room that must have been at least fifty feet long. There were more hospital beds and some old machines and medical supplies.

Walking slowly down the middle I started seeing things in the bed. It was too dark to see what they actually were, and I was too scared to go up close, but I could tell that they were misshapen, humanoid-ish figures. There was something terribly wrong with them.

Heavy footsteps started to shake the floor before I had a chance to explore the room further.

Unwilling to take any chances, I rushed as quietly as possible to the nearest empty bed and got under the rough blanket.

The thumping got continuously louder and louder until a moment later, I heard a creaky door opening and heavy breathing.

I decided to take a chance and opened my eyes the tiniest bit. I could barely make out the shape of a contorted, disfigured back that belonged to a creature who must be at least double my size. The... thing seemed to be doing something to a figure in one of the beds not too far away from me. Whatever it was was clanging and crackling, producing a horrible sound.

The creature moved around from bed to bed, making the clanging and crackling noises at some beds and haunting snapping and squishing sounds almost like ripping flesh and bones at others, breathing heavily and grunting the whole way through.

The creature went to the bed to my right, and I got a clear view of it's face. It looked as if it's face had melted off, then been through surgery to get it to look more normal. Some parts were sagging, it was covered in scars, the dark hair was thin and sparse, and everything about it was completely off. It was horrifying.

What was even more horrifying was what it was doing to the things in the beds. With the creature's headlamp illuminating the figure lying next to me, I could see it clearly out of the corner of my eyes. It was a blood spattered mannequin with a fake, plastic face and metal limbs. The disgusting part was that some of the limbs, such as a few of the fingers and part of the torso, were made out of human flesh. A disfigured, rotten, mannequin-human cross.

The creature was violently ripping the human fingers off, spraying droplets of blood everywhere and leaving the fingers lying on the blanket. It then jammed a plastic fake finger into the hole where the human one had just been and pushed and twisted until it stayed in.

The next bed the creature went to was across from the previous one, positioned in a spot where I could see it.

This horrid human-mannequin amalgamation was even more

dreadful than the last. It was mostly human. One of the arms along with bits of the chest and torso were still attached. The head was also there, the mouth messily sewn shut and the eyes closed. I couldn't stop myself from letting out a little gasp when the eyes opened and looked straight at me with a petrified, pleading look while the creature forcefully ripped off the arm and replaced it with a metal counterpart.

Big mistake.

I closed my eyes but I could still sense the creature turning to me, letting the human arm hit the floor with a thud. It slowly rambled over to me. I willed myself to be as still and silent as I have ever been in my entire life. But it wasn't enough.

"Still alive," the creature crooned in a rumbling scratchy voice.

"What a treat."

With no other options, I did the only thing I could think of. Run.

I leaped out of the bed and sprinted past the creature and out of the room, hoping it was too big and stiff to get me, but I could hear it stumbling after me. "The Doctor will catch you," it growled, referring to itself in the third person. "I *will* fix you. In the end, you'll thank the Doctor.

They always do."

I didn't stop to check behind me, I just kept on running. Through hallways lined with doors similar to the one I came out of, up and down stairs, even through a gaping hole in the floor. In the end, it wasn't enough. The creature cornered me in a dead end, the only option being to go through one of the doors.

It led to a room identical to the one I had just been in, so I dove under one of the beds into the only hiding place I could think of. The creature shuffled into the room, breathing even more heavily than before.

"You don't have to hide," it croaked. "I just want to help make you as perfect as possible."

With that dark and ill-boding threat the creature bent down onto it's



knees, bones popping and creaking, and crawled next to my hiding spot. I just closed my eyes, just giving up. It's over.

I felt warm breath on the side of my face, then the creature picking me up. I still remember what the creature snarled ominously as it lifted me: "You'll be *perfect*. You'll see."

I woke up the same way as before, except this time I was tightly strapped to the hospital bed. I immediately started struggling against the bonds but it was of no use. The creature heard my attempts and lurched forward out of the shadows of the room, a plastic leg in hand.

"Perfect," it hissed. "Just like the others."

And with that, the Doctor grabbed my leg and ripped it off, shoving the plastic one into the bleeding hole and paying no mind as I tried to scream through my sewn-shut mouth.

## *The Woods*

The moon luminates the ground and the wind breezes through the empty streets as it brings the whispers from the wood to the far ends of the street. Down there lies a small shack; the wind passes through the opened window and brushes off the curtains. It gently opens the creaking door, a few axes are hanging on the wall, some saws are scattered on the ground and a man lies on the bed in the middle of the room. He has a large brown beard with messy and crooked hair. The wind whirls around the room and brushes the man with the message from the wood. The man shivers as he slowly opens his dark, green eyes, reflecting from the dim light hanging above him.

The Woods Call for Him.

The man slowly moves his sore and tired body and follows the call. Under the night sky, the man enters the woods, the branches crunching under his clumsy footsteps. The leaves follow as the man marches forward, as if a thousand eyes were watching him, the man shivers and looks around, only to see the empty hollow that surround him.

The Woods Call Again.

The man continues walking to the trail towards the call, the echo becomes louder and louder as he journeys forward. Moonlight pierces through the heavy leaves and the man stands in the moonlight, in front of him lies a tree. Not just an ordinary tree, it's the origin of the forest, it's giant and tall, it's standing proud and menacingly, it's bigger than any tree everyone has ever seen, its roots connecting the entire forest. The light follows

the man as he walks up towards the tree. As the man gets closer to the tree, he discovers an object stuck in the tree, the moonlight slowly crawls on it. *It was an axe; it was his axe.*

The man finally realizes, but it's too late, the branches have already closed in around him. A roar follows with a scream; the woods are silent once again.

## *The Trespasser*

One minute of pure genuine love before my whole world collapses and everything in my horizon is absorbed into an enormous explosion of tears. I'm left in a universe of endless stars, alone.

The glimmering sun illuminates a warm golden aura surrounding my Dad's smooth and slightly dampened hair as it swiftly drifts through the biting wind that gradually increases its rage. The day churns greyer and greyer into a pool of waveless sea. That final image of him, one that will never leave my memory, is watching the once bright energy surrounding him flip like a light switch to a smoky ashen message to me, that this was the last second of my romantic childhood world in its finest virtue. The tides sharply rise up cutting our gentle quiet breaths into tense snippets of air. They harshly thrash against our neon orange raft creating a shared wind of ascending panic. The waves weaken our raft like each time a Jenga block is removed from the tower. Eventually the tower collapses and you restart but Jenga is just a game. The freezing air whirls into a charcoal mist of terror. The last Jenga block is painfully removed while my heart sinks to its deepest dimensions. I watch my Dad lose himself to the tide, looking for answers in his eyes, I somehow grab hold of a rock with the water washing away my infinite tears. I survive alone.

Throughout the past year I've felt everything from the highest points of stress, to the lowest points of excitement. Now every day feels like the bitter, vacant middle. I was once taught the concept of a romantic world in what appeared like any ordinary afternoon English class with the rolling hills of fatigue laying heavily over me. In my personal dictionary a romantic world is a term for the rosy, childhood lens I never realized I used to look through every day. The hard part is you'll never know that you were living in

a romantic world until you're not anymore. I remember the way my romantic world felt, I can sometimes even feel parts of it. Maybe I just need someone to spark the friction in my lighter and set my world on fire.

Today I'm sitting in my English class and although the light shines a little dimmer, the smell of friendships arising, youthfulness swirling, excitement building and fresh cinnamon apples still belongs. My Dad was one of the few people my brain painted a shining, yellow cloud around. My world has shifted from the sun to the moon, both are equally as beautiful but different. An electrifying current of hope flows through me today and in this English class I am determined to find something to light up my world with ecstatic sparks. I call my friend Abby, another irreplaceable yellow cloud in my imagination.

"Hey, you going to that party tonight?"

"Mmmm, I was thinking about it but I'm not sure, I'll go if you go. Ok?"

"You know what...Let's go!"

We laugh with a relaxed happiness about us. One that tells us that each of our own versions of yellow clouds are currently being painted in and around each other's comforting smiles as our favorite songs play. That feeling like you're in a cheesy 2000s movie standing on top of the world, breathing in the fresh air of the bright blue limitless sky. Yes, this is the feeling of laughing with your best friend. I have a new dazzling beam of light shine through me as excitement races through my veins. Abby texts me the location of the party and I see it's in a forest near my house, Westland Woods. It's a pretty big forest with a lot of ground to cover so I'm somewhat confused as to where exactly the party will be but Abby will know, she just knows stuff like that.

Countless wondrous thoughts flood my brain and I start to feel that same on top of the world feeling when Abby picks me up, and yes of course she knows where in these vast woods teenagers can be found on a Friday night. We giddily approach the party and step over numerous beer cups.



The fall leaves have begun fading into thin golden sheets of opportunity floating across the skyline. We inhale the scent of new beginnings, sweet soft air, glowing purple skies and surrounding sunsets sinking into the night. I feel a forgotten bliss I haven't felt in the past year and I feel the warm arms of the sunset wrap over me like I'm a present being prepared to be opened by the world. Some mindless boys from our school hand us a couple drinks of god knows what and we kick back in our nostalgic yet uncomfortable soccer chairs, absorbing the moment while our chair legs sink into the dewy leaves below us. The world feels bright and large until the memories of what you've lost have already found a way into your heart.

My whole world encloses and it feels like doors of hope are repeatedly slamming in my face until the only one I can open is the thought of my Dad. I start to feel the raft violently swaying as the tide shakes me into the unknown. The smell of fright strangles me. I abruptly rise to my feet and I breathe in and out. One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four...Everyone stares and for a split second it feels like they're the weird ones out of place. I urgently escape deeper into the forest hoping for answers the further I go. It all looks the same as the bristles roughly brush against my naked arms. The silence builds into a symphony of fear. Alarming thoughts intrude my mind as I cling to my sweater in the shivering night. The moon is my only light in the endless sea of trees. I start to hear noises hoping it may be my classmates yet I quickly conclude it's coyotes howling in the distance. I have no idea how far or how long I've been walking all I know is that I am LOST. My breath becomes unbearably loud as I tremble and quiver in my path. I do multiple 360's hoping for some direction or to spot somebody in sight but no one is to be seen or heard. My vision starts to blur. The feeling of the raft drifts into my emotions and I remember the feeling of something so great shattering into pieces within seconds. My breathing vigorously thickens, I pant and I gasp until my screeching cries for help reassign my lungs. I scream and yelp until my body defeats my heart and I uncontrollably fall. A glimpse of losing everything again invades my thoughts. I feel my heart plummet yet I don't

have enough energy and will to catch it as I descend into the damp fall leaves. I breathe unbelievably heavily until it fades into a dwindling helpless sob. Tears stream down my frozen, red face. I feel more and more powerless with each unanswered cry for help. I'm overcome by exhaustion and I slip into the night without a clue if I will ever see the morning light again.

The frosty air entrances me deeper into my sleep. I grasp the leaves in resentful pain as my head is scratched by the razor sharp sticks digging into me. Fearful I am waking in a vivid dream or worse, I open my swollen irritated hazel eyes to a group of teenagers far in the distance.

“ROSE! ROSE! ROSE!?” I can hear them searching anxiously. The morning light greets me buried under leaves and dirt, while the gleaming light of the forest urges me to scream once more. I let out a final cry filled with pain and relief. Abby races immediately to my side with her curly brown hair and warm eyes meeting my gaze. In disbelief I conclude that everything didn't crumble within seconds instead someone FINALLY heard me! The sun has floated back from the moon. Although my shaking body aches I have found my romantic world. I see the yellow clouds, the joy, the hope and most importantly I see happiness. My vision is crystal clear and I see the beautiful world surrounding me. I smile into Abby's safe eyes, knowing my Dad is watching over me.

## *Destined*

You first said ‘hi’ to me on February 14th, the same day Saturn’s atypical orbit was observed. February 14th – nine years ago it might have been called “Valentine’s Day” or “the day of love”; now, it is known as the day that commenced an endless reign of terror and chaos.

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Bloodshot eyes glued to the monitor screen, I clumsily grappled around for a cup of staled coffee. The moving neon dots on the screen glowed eerily, providing the only light source for the dimmed room. Stealing a glance at my watch, I made out the time — 4:15.

*I’ve been here all night... again.*

Everyone had been working nonstop ever since it was forecasted that Saturn, hurtling through space, would one day crash into and engulf Earth. We were doing everything in a desperate attempt to alter the course of our destiny; yet we were drowning in ceaseless waves of hopelessness. The endless tracking of particles in Saturn’s rings, the monitoring of the giant yellowish-brown sphere that hung half-haphazardly above our horizon... we were all sitting there, pens in hands, feverishly surveilling every single aspect of the Gas Giant that plummeted towards us while fantasizing of being our own saviors; all we really did was sit there silently, awaiting our doom.

The only hope left...

I shook my head, slightly woozy from being in the office for so long. Sighing, I pulled on my jacket and with one last glance at the screen, headed out.

\*\*\*

‘Miss Farenheit.’

Caught off-guard, I turned to find myself facing the building supervisor. I frowned, slightly confused, a strange throbbing pain in the back of my head.

‘I’ve been told to come here to thank you for your outstanding performance. Your report on 25143 Itokawa’s projectile and it’s calculated impact site saved millions of lives. As a token of thanks, we decided to present you with this.’

He smiled, rather bitterly, as he opened the bag he was carrying, rummaged in it for a few moments, then pulled out a piece of paper.

A ticket.

I caught my breath as the silver-embellished words flashed in the light: *Libertas: Of Hope and Ambition.*

Libertas, the specialized spacecraft, built with the combined efforts of top technicians from across the globe to transport ten thousand fortunate individuals out of Saturn’s path of destruction. It was the only path to survival. The only way out.

I stood there, long after he had gone, goggling at the piece of paper he had left in my hands. Blood pounded in my ears, everything around me was a blur. My head fogged up in a swirl of excitement and disbelief. I could barely speak. The ticket so many had dreamt of catching a glimpse of was now in my hand.

\*\*\*

I nearly ran into you in my daze as I clutched my Libertas ticket close to my heart, as if my life depended on it — which, of course, it did.

‘Sorry,’ I murmured.

You didn’t bother responding, instead your eyes widened in surprise as you caught sight of the piece of paper in my hand. ‘So, you’re boarding Libertas?’

I looked at you steadily; your mismatched eyes boring into mine. After a moment, I shrugged. ‘I haven’t thought it out yet.’

You raised your eyebrows doubtfully at me. 'If you say so.'

I glanced at the lopsided sphere hovering amidst the wisps of orange and clouds tinted pink. It seemed to be growing larger as I watched.

'It's scary, isn't it? Escaping in this spacecraft, wandering in the vastness of space. No one even knows where they'd go after escaping Saturn's gravitational field.'

'At least it would be better than witnessing living hell on earth as fault lines rupture, and gigantic tides drown Earth in a watery grave.'

There was a distant look in your eyes. 'Perhaps.'

\*\*\*

'Emrys, I... I don't know how to tell you this, but I got a ticket for Libertas.'

He didn't bother looking up. 'Okay.'

Silence.

Then after a few moments, with the comprehension of what I had just said, he turned to face me, lips parting in surprise. 'I see.'

He stood there, still, unmoving, and I knew that he, like me, was digesting the implication of this unanticipated turning point. 'I'm really happy for you sis,' he whispered. 'Really.'

I forced a smile that scorched my insides like a hot iron blade. 'Thanks.' My voice was barely audible. 'You'll always be with me. Always. I promise.'

'So...' He took a deep breath to steady himself. 'When are you leaving?'

'What are you talking about? I'm not going anywhere.'

He looked at me, calculatingly. 'You can't just abandon a chance to save yourself from a disastrous ending.'

'No, but I'm going to give the ticket to you, Emrys. You're the only person I have left and I swore to protect you. Go to the launch station tomorrow at ten, show them this; nothing can harm you from there.'

And with that, I placed the Libertas ticket carefully in his quivering hands. 'It's your only chance, for both of us.'

\*\*\*



I strolled through the labyrinth of hallways, making my way to the dimmed office and the monitor screen, no doubt already awaiting my arrival.

‘Cecilia.’

It was you again.

‘I see you’ve decided not to board Libertas after all.’ You looked at me, questioningly, a tint of confusion in your voice.

I nodded silently. Feeling the need for an explanation I blurted out. ‘I sent my brother instead.’

You swallowed; your gaze distant. ‘That’s a valiant sacrifice.’

‘No,’ I breathed. ‘He deserves a chance of survival more than I do.’ Then I sighed and awkwardly changed the subject. ‘The building’s under lockdown again, have you heard?’

‘Yeah, so is every building in this town. The volcanic activities are going crazy, magma chambers are erupting -- it’s an unbearable sight outside. Earthquakes, tsunamis, everything out of a horror sci-fi film. How are the asteroids going?’

‘I can’t keep track of them anymore. There are too many, too big, too deathly,’ I said, opening the morning newspaper and browsing the headlines.

You faked an expression of calmness. ‘It won’t be long before that day.’

Both of us knew what ‘that day’ meant.

I was about to respond, when I came across the words in bold print that made my blood freeze over: **Libertas: Unforeseen Flaw in Control System, Explosion Probable**

I gasped as the newspaper dropped from my limp grip.

This could not be.

It was impossible.

After all the bitter desires, all the hope, all my desperate yearning that Emrys would be saved... my world turned upside down, I felt suddenly nauseous. Tears streaming from my swollen eyes, I tore down the hallway. An insurmountable tide of misery and resentment enveloped me as I sprinted towards the doors.

I had to see this.

\*\*\*

I choked as a gust of toxic, dust-laden air met my lungs. There was only one thing in my mind as I ran blindly towards the horizon. My brother.

Libertas was only barely visible through the thick smog, a tiny rising speck against the daunting sphere that carved out Saturn. Libertas — once the sole survivor, now the first to perish.

It could be any second. The explosion —

A dark shadow came careening down from the sky, hurtling towards me at breakneck speed. I rolled to one side, coughing and shuddering. The object whizzed past me, grazing my upper arm. Warm, sticky liquid spread around the wound. I screamed, terrified -- a scream that shattered the world around me.

'Come on.' A hand grabbed my wrist, and I allowed myself to be dragged away.

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'Everything is ending,' I croaked.

'It's a miracle that meteorite didn't kill me.'

'It's a miracle Earth hasn't been engulfed yet,' you said, eyeing the skies dimmed with smoke. 'Though Earth isn't what it used to be anymore; it's a wasteland now, a land of horrors.'

'They predicted the collision would happen today. Exactly nine years from the day we discovered our doom. It's the day of chaos again.' My body shook with pain and fright.

'No,' you breathed. 'February 14th. Valentine's Day, remember?'

I smiled faintly. 'How can you say that? Everything has changed. There's no love anymore. There's only survival and death. This is the most horrible, nightmarish thing that has ever happened to anyone.'

'No. Destruction isn't the most horrific thing that this world has witnessed. The true nightmare is when hope evaporates and love freezes over and rationale gets torn apart.'

‘My brain hurts.’ I whispered.

‘Stop thinking. Close your eyes, maybe it will turn out that this whole ordeal is simply a dream.’

I said nothing, but wordlessly stared upwards into the sky, at the disappearing pinprick that marked Libertas. Perhaps it was about to explode but for now, as I stared into the distance, I thought I could still make out Emrys, on board, smiling and waving at me...or was that in my imagination?

## *I Should Not Come Here*

I'm beginning to suspect that we shouldn't've come here.  
But it's a little too late for me to leave, since I'm dying.

I should have known that this wasn't an ideal place to be at with only a couple of friends, if you could even call them friends.

Once arriving here, I saw someone walking upon the rarely used road. I was, of course, suspicious of this, as there are only trees upon trees and an abandoned manor in the center of them. I believed I was the only one at the manor at that time.

I silently kept a few feet behind this person, whom I could see nothing of but a weathered brown cloak. As they turned to cross into the forest, I didn't have enough time to hide; they saw me.

They did nothing when they saw me. I followed them into the woods, but after a few steps, they were gone. I didn't know if I strayed off their invisible path or if they were something supernatural.

All I knew was that I was lost.

Suddenly I heard footsteps behind me.

Quickly spinning around, I saw a girl about my age, with blonde hair and green eyes staring at me. She had the queerest look about her, an almost ethereal look, with her 19th century dress and searching gaze. Definitely a ghost of some sort; no sane person would wear such a dress in the early 21st century.

"Are you looking for something?"

"No, actually, I'm looking for *someone*."

"Who?"

"I'm sure I'll be able to find them as soon as I get out of this forest."  
Seeing the pained expression on her face, I was happy I didn't tell her who I

was looking for.

She followed me as I walked through the forest.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to get out of here, though? It’s an awfully big forest.” Her quiet, calm voice unnerved me.

“I know which general direction I came from.”

“I have to go the same way as you, so I might as well join you.”

Her frustration was visible now, slicing through her mellow façade.

I actually did eventually see the road. I expected abduction by now. On it, I saw Ivy, one of the invitees, driving towards me and the surely supernatural creature.

“Did you see anyone behind you?”

“No, but I think Ezra might be coming.”

She didn’t understand what I meant by the question.

Soon enough, he arrived. No one waited for Luna; I had only invited her out of politeness.

As I’m a fast walker, I reached the doors first and had the honor of opening them. The honor, though, was one you wanted at no cost. I was scared to see what would happen, but I was met with nothing but creaking.

Through the heavy metal doors was a vault-ceilinged checkerboard foyer. Two entwined staircases, one white and one black, took up the majority of the room. Broken windows lined the walls, blue wooden desks between them.

What was suspicious about the room, though, was the roses. Red roses sat atop the desks. They were neither withered nor fake, as you could still see dew upon them. Who, then, lived in this haggard place to change the roses in the vases?

The ghost was gone.

Our steps echoed across the room as Ezra and Ivy tried to open doors while I walked over to the blue tables and examined the roses. They **couldn’t**ve been fake.

Since none of the doors were unlocked, we ascended the stairs, Ezra



and I on the white one and Ivy on the black.

The stairs winded through a dark hole in the ceiling. After a minute of feeling our way around, Ezra started looking through his pockets for matches and I hit my head on what seemed to be the ceiling of the vertical tunnel. Ivy searched where I hit my head. She soon came across a brass doorknob.

She had opened the door after some difficulty, and eventually we fit ourselves up through the opening.

We came into a hallway that had a dark wooden floor. Its walls were gray and had brass candleholders and black doors. It was an overall homely place, despite the dripping ceiling. As with the foyer, though, there was something off. The candles were lit.

This wasn't an abandoned place. But who would choose to live so remotely, and how **could** they? I needed to know.

I shoved all my weight against the door closest to myself. This was a mistake, I realized as I fell through it; it was already unlocked.

Despite the scene I had barged in upon being a perfectly calm one, Ezra screamed. The girl that I had seen in the forest was talking to an old man who might have been her grandfather. He was dressed in the same fashion as the girl.

"Funny, you're exactly who I was telling my father about," the girl said, gesturing to the man I could hardly believe was her father.

"I don't believe we've met; I'm Pearl Cain, and this is my father."

"Ivy Pritchett. That's Ezra, and this is Floramae."

"How are you still living here in such a run-down place? The roof is missing in some places!" I pointed to a part of the ceiling where the rain from outside fell through a hole and into a bucket on the tile.

"How did you get here, may I ask?" the old man asked.

"We live nearby," Ivy said.

Pearl offered to show us the house, and we agreed.

That was our mistake.

She took us back down the stairs, as we were apparently in the servants'

quarter. How many people lived here if that was all for servants?

Once we were in the foyer again, she unlocked a door and led us through it.

“How many servants live here?”

“Only my father and I, since we work for Miss Ruth.”

“Does she own the house?”

“Yes, she inherited it when her father died.”

We went through multiple rooms of rich furnishings and painted ceilings, but the only room that had any significance was the one with Ruth.

“Frances, these two found a way into the manor.” Pearl’s tense gaze suggested a hidden meaning to those words.

That’s when I realized that Ezra was not with us.

It was just Frances, Ivy and I.

I followed Pearl and grabbed her wrist.

“Where’s Ezra!?”

“Who’s Ezra?”

I groaned and dropped her arm, running back to the last room we visited; a dining room.

I searched it, and found what I was looking for in a cabinet. Ezra’s body was stuffed in it. His clothes were stained with blood. Bloodshot eyes stared at me without seeing.

I had no idea what to do; I’d never seen a dead body before. But Ivy had. I rushed back to the room where I left her, only to find it empty. Was she dead too? I couldn’t bring myself to do anything but sit down and cry.

After a few minutes, I heard footsteps beside me. It was Ezra, just as living as he had been yesterday.

“D-Didn’t you just *die*?”

“Why would I have died?”

That’s when it all clicked – the avoiding questions, the huge age differences, the Victorianess, the death and resurrection of Ezra -- these spirits possessed the bodies of their victims.

Who was really standing in front of me, I still have no idea; I ran past them until I found myself back in the dining room.

Ezra's body was gone.

There was no time for Ivy.

I ran out of the house, but there I found Pearl.

With a knife.

"I always possess the body I leave the knife in," she smiled, "and Ivy's dead. Looks like she didn't think about leaving **you** behind."

There was a lump of bloodstained black clothes beside me. Ivy's pale face was stricken with an expression of horror. Her eyes stared up at me, unseeing, just like Ezra's. How could I let someone take her body and pretend that her life was nothing? How could I let that happen to Ezra? Or myself?

I couldn't.

I ran over and knelt down beside Ivy's body. I knew I couldn't carry her or drag her away. I had to make her inhospitable.

I had a second to rummage through her pockets for a lighter, a fork, wire, anything, when Pearl was on top of me, her knife inches away from my heart.

There was a dull pain.

The ground around me was slippery.

I felt faint.

I could vaguely make out Pearl sitting beside me.

I think she was smiling.

No one knew we were here.

Except Luna.

It was all up to her to find out what had happened.

There was only one thing I knew for sure:

*I should not have come here.*

## *Smoking With Friends*

Camilla's leaning against the storefront window of a foreclosed bakery of sorts – blinds drawn closed, the gentle cream-paint, chipped door with a plastic note of apology. She's smoking, and she hasn't smoked since her senior year of high school. But, now, she's taking long, slow drags and breathing out smoke and honeysuckle perfume like she's seventeen again; sitting with hair to her shoulders, loose neck ties hanging from crumpled, white dress shirts – untucked from plaid skirts and knee-high socks.

There's no one around for miles and miles, long stretches of land having been long abandoned in a rush – one white, high-heeled shoe left, muddied on the steps of the church and unkempt apartment buildings with half-opened drawers. There's snow covering the entire length of the street; uninterrupted snow tracks only for the skid of their car, and three coupling footsteps.

She looks up, skyward, notes the chemtrails, pulls her coat tighter around herself. It's supposed to be the coldest winter yet, Johnny had heard it on the radio last night. There's this teetering feeling of doom, rising up against the harsh breeze that bruises her cheeks blotchy red, and inlinkings itself to her hair, her clothes, her hands. They shake a little, her hands, bringing the cigarette up to her mouth again. Johnny's across from her, right in her peripheral, slouched over the open engine of the car.

*Johnny.* His name sounds like a plea now.

*Johnny, my Johnny and Oh my god, Johnny.*

In high school, Camilla and Johnny would ditch the others to smoke cigarettes in silence at the bottom of the small, unused music room stairwell. They'd hear violinists in the room right next door, bringing their bows up and down up and down like a seesaw over and over again – building and building like a horror track. The final girl, braced in blood, racing away from the killer and finding sanctum in that last closing shot – boom. *She made it*, she'd think, when the violins' crescent would come to a stop. *She made it*.

He shaved his head in college, bleached it, and left it that bleached yellow color for months and months, but now he's dyed it a soft, quiet green. Almost blue. She can't bear to look at him, so she doesn't.

Sloane, standing across from her in complete silence, has her back to him, but every so often when there's a particularly loud sound the car makes, she'll tense and screw her eyes shut, hands squeezing around her stomach and nails curling into her skin.

Sloane doesn't smoke; never has, Camilla knows this. She still offers her a cigarette anyways, and is not even mildly surprised when Sloane takes it and tilts her head forward – her body slumping away from the tree, almost sagging against the lighter. She coughs soon after, violently and inconsolably, but then they're plunged into complete silence (save for Johnny's mutterings and the loud clangs that come every few minutes) once more.

Sloane likes to wear this coat of hers (the ankle long gray coat that ties up at the waist, perfectly tailored down to the bristling cuffs that flap in the wind), and when she's focused, even if it's just on a particularly interesting conversation, she has to put her hair behind her ears and straighten it.



Right now, however, her hair covers almost the entirety of her face, save for the cigarette that every once in a while will puff from underneath the curtain.

Camilla's eyes flicker behind Sloane for a moment, sees Johnny take one brute, loud tug backwards, and braces herself.

A sickening crunch resounds against the otherwise empty town. Sloane gasps, and Camilla closes her eyes even further until she's seeing spots and swaying to comfort herself, pulling the sleeves of her black sweater from underneath the coat and out to cover her hands.

Sloane, unlike Johnny, has always been upfront about being dishonest, about having secrets. Sloane always liked Camilla best, she knew, when Camilla would talk in half truths and riddles. This is how Sloane was all the time, and it becomes more and more disheartening for Camilla to realize that Johnny has always been like this too, except he makes a show out of it. It's a joke, crude but funny – a slap on the wrist, a slap on the back, it's all the same to him.

Sloane starts crying. Camilla turns away.

Johnny never apologizes for anything, not by words. He'll tilt his head sideways, grin, and go: "You can't be mad at me forever, can you, Cam?" And, just like that, it's gone.

Camilla's hands are turning a concerning purple, and she's starting to feel the cold bite away at her legs – drafting in through the wide, open leg hem of her jeans and crawling upwards. There's something so wrong and all Camilla can hear (*--You have to forgive me, Camilla, Sloane, you have to. Please, Cam. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry--*) is the almost imperceptible feeling that takes residence just so on her stomach – like someone pressing

down and making her sick. Sick, sick, sick.

You can't not love Johnny; you meet him and you immediately fall in love. Unconditional love. This is what to mourn – the ability to love so simply and in such uncomplicated terms. Something for children and storytimes. Love is complicated, brutal, lethal. It's a sickness, really, it is. It festers and grows until there is no law or morality above it – it's no longer a feeling or a thought but its own entity, its own amateurish, debilitating, ailment that makes you vulnerable and sniffling. Sloane knows, she realized it the moment Johnny fell to the ground and *apologized*, but Sloane's always been the smart one.

They mourn it together: the ability to forgive by choice and not by need. Their eyes meet, and Sloane looks just about ready to wail – cheeks puffed up, eyes almost swollen shut in grief.

Camilla stumps out her cigarette on the nick of a splinter of the bakery door, fixes the sign that had tilted left from her weight, and stands up on uncertain feet.

Sloane doesn't move, doesn't breathe.

Camilla makes her way through the snow, stopping short of Johnny's reluctance to meet her gaze, and his hands – his hands, always his hands – leave colored marks on the snow. She can't quite look at them just yet.

"Johnny," she says, pauses, considers. "I can't be mad at you forever."

He looks up at her, then, slow and desperate, crawls his way over to her through the snow and wraps his arms around her legs like a child and cries.

She's never seen him cry.

Camilla looks up, notes the chemtrails, the snow, the smoke, and ignores the blotch of red on his sleeve.

## *Paid By Blood*

Under the sparse moonlight, the blood stain on the art studio's door could have been mistaken for a splash of paint. Elena and Leon, the two students from the studio, eye it apprehensively. Octavian, the instructor, is looking at the wall, as if searching for more stains. Celia, the detective, steps forward, takes a jacket out of her bag and holds it against the door.

"And this is all we have from the crime scene? Have you checked that the blood stains have the same DNA?"

"No, but we know the jacket belongs to Alex. He always wears that stupid thing," Leon drawls, accompanied by nods from Elena.

*What a pain of a murder case to solve*, Celia thought. No remains, no witnesses, nothing but a jacket that showed that the victim was Alex Wei, a painting student who, a week ago, came to the studio to pick up a painting and never returned home. Sighing, Celia reaches her hand out to open the door.

The moment the doorknob turns, a sharp pain tears through the back of her hand, and something clatters to the floor. Celia staggers and falls backwards, regaining her balance with her right hand. She lifts her left hand to her eyes. Blood is gushing out of a fresh wound on the back.

Elena fumbles through her bag and pulls out a first aid kit. Octavian takes out a roll of bandages, and wraps it around Celia's hand twice.

Celia thanks them, and with her right hand, picks up a tiny item

from the ground.

It is a paper-thin blade. Celia looks at the door again. Next to the doorknob, suspended with a zip tie, is a broken utility knife. She turns the doorknob, and the broken edge of the knife grazes the bandage on her hand.

Had Celia used her right hand to open the door, the blade would have cut clean into her wrist.

Celia holds the blade up to the utility knife, and everyone's eyes widen in shock at the matching set of jagged edges.

Elena was the first to speak, "Did whoever killed Alex do this? Is there another murderer?"

Leon spins towards her, and yells a string of accusations from *who else* and *why wouldn't they* to *are you really that dense*. Octavian rubs a hand over his face. Celia raises an eyebrow.

Still, despite the argument, Celia considers it clear that everyone has realised the same thing.

*Whoever had killed Alex is trying to kill them too.*

---

The hallway's narrow path at the studio's entrance is constricted further by toppled statues and canvases on the floor. The walls are lined with doors labelled "storage room" or "art studio" by plaques.

Celia rubs her temple with her hand, reminded of her short-lived days as an art student.



The passage soon opens into a large display hall. On its left is a door, labeled “stairway to attic”, and on its right is a window.

The window is completely shattered.

Celia walks towards the window, and everyone else follows. A hammer sits on the windowsill. She picks up the hammer, and turns to Octavian and the students.

“Where is this usually kept in the studio?”

Elena looks taken aback, “how- why do you think this is ours?”

Celia shoots a glance at her, and points with the hammer to the bare floor beneath the window, “If this window was broken from the outside, glass would be all over the floor.”

After a moment, Octavian answers, “it’s usually kept in the attic.”

---

“Are you alright, detective?” Octavian asks. Only he is with Celia, rummaging through the attic for more clues. Leon and Elena were still bickering in the studio when they went upstairs.

“If you’re asking about my hand, it feels fine now,” says Celia, “but if you are asking about me, I don’t have pleasant memories of places like this.”

She opens a toolbox on a shelf. Sure enough, the hammer-shaped space was left empty. Beside it was a wrench, some nails, and a recording device. Celia places the device in her coat pocket.

“You were an artist?”

“I used to study art,” she corrects him, “and I liked it until all us students started competing, obsessively, to be the best. It changed me in a way that terrified me. I remember smudging the paints and pencils, and blaming myself more than I ever did the teachers, who didn’t show me how to paint as a left-handed person.”

“That is unfortunate,” Octavian says, “ that your teachers were so inconsiderate.”

He pauses, “To be fair, it is rather rare. Probably unexpected. Would you have stayed if your teachers cared more?”

“There’s still the competition part.” Celia looks over to the wall to see two floor plans. In the first, rectangles mesh together into what seemed to be the floor plan of the entire studio. Celia studies the other one more closely. Some of the outlines were drawn with dashed lines, not continuous ones. Miscellaneous items were labeled, like the “flower pot” and “guest chair” by what seemed to be the entrance.

“Ah, that,” Octavian sighs, “is still around. Leon and Elena always try to one-up each other.

They’ll do anything to be the best. Alex tried to keep their competition in check, but it didn’t work. Leon gets mad at anything less than ideal, and Elena needs to hear from everyone that she’s the best. It’s natural.”

“Is it really natural, or are they just used to it?” Celia squints at the legend of the second floor plan. The dashed lines, apparently, indicate that a space was “hidden”.

“Whatever it is, I help them do their best.” Octavian replies tensely.

Celia closes her eyes, “I’m glad you try to make sure they’re happy. I hope you’re glad it wasn’t an actual artist’s hand who was injured,” Octavian laughs wryly, still facing away from Celia.

“You say,” Celia places the floor plan in her pocket, “that your students will do anything to be the best?”

She hears Octavian hum in agreement, and thinks to Leon brooding downstairs, and Elena flaunting her work to August, both knowing that their distraction could cost the truth behind Alex’s death.

“Could I learn more about that?”

Celia’s eyes meet Octavian’s, and she senses a gleam of understanding.

“My office is downstairs. The students are not allowed in. Meet me when you’re ready.”

---

Walking through the narrow hallway once more, Celia remembers that she was not told where the office was. She stops in front of the three largest doors, all of them ajar. She peers into the first one. A tall potted plant stands beside a desk, and beside it are two chairs, one rigid and unfamiliar beside the other’s cozy cushioning.

Celia takes her recording device, and presses the “on” button. She checks the floor plan from the attic, and takes one quiet step into the room, before dashing towards the right.

She makes it just as a statue collapses from the ceiling, and falls right in front of her. The hand of the statue breaks from the arm, revealing rot beneath the statue’s pearly white veneer.

The rot from a week-old body.

Celia's heart halts in her chest.

"Too bad you didn't stay an artist," she hears a voice from the desk. Octavian reclines on his chair, "you're certainly very observant. Or is that why you left?"

"What you said about competition—" Celia chokes out, and swallows. She recalls the knife on the door. The broken window. The students, trifling but still innocent. The instructor watching them all.

"Yes," Octavian breathes, "I killed Alex Wei."

The silence that follows is broken by a buzz from Celia's recording device. Octavian's laugh follows it.

"That's not going to do anything if you don't leave this room alive. It's bad enough that you'd discourage my students from being their best, but that you'd get me in trouble for helping them. Alex was in Elena and Leon's way, like you are in mine. He's quite the convenient still life, too."

Celia grits her teeth.

After being stifled by competition for years, she refuses to be killed for it.

As Octavian pulls another statue down from the ceiling, Celia dives for the space beneath the linoleum guest chair, narrowly dodging the desk. The chair, toppled by Celia's movement, hits Octavian's legs. His knees buckle and

the statue swerves with the rope as it falls to the floor.

The dust clears to reveal blood-stained rubble covering an unconscious Octavian. She presses her hand to his neck and feels his wavering pulse.

“Detective?” A voice from outside asks.

“Elena,” Celia replies, “you and Leon can leave. It’s getting late.”

Beneath her palm, Octavian’s blood blooms into a brilliant red spot on the canvas cloth, like the initial stroke of a painting.



## *Carnival of Laughter*

The gate swung open slowly with an ear-splitting screech, allowing full access to the carnival waiting behind it. Everyone cowered back, until someone, perhaps the most foolish of them all took a step forward.

“We’re gonna get thrown in jail. This counts as breaking and entering does it not?” Devya moved away from the gate. Neada’s laughs echoed through the empty carnival and he passed the threshold between the carnival and the rest of the world.

“Wow, a carnival at night. How scary.” Neada motioned for the rest of the group to walk into the carnival as well. Vail shrugged and crossed the threshold as well, pulling James with her. Devya and Tyler refused to cross.

“Don’t tell me you two are scared? What’s the worst that’ll happen? Killer clowns come to life?” Vail laughed, pressuring the two.

“Don’t be rude. Ty is scared of clowns, remember.” James whispered, and Vail just shrugged. Vail entwined her hand with James’s, and glanced at the carnival.

“Whatever. I’m gonna go. You two can stay here. All alone. In the dark. At night,” Vail emphasized each statement, which sent shivers down Devya’s spine.

“We won’t be alone. Neada’s still here.” Tyler pointed out. Devya looked around then shook her head. Neada had already left, abandoning them.

“Right...” Vail turned to James. “First one to the Ferris wheel wins.” James smirked and counted down from three and the two took off.

“No! The first rule in horror movies is to never split up. And what did everyone do? They split up! Because we all lack survival instincts!” She hadn’t noticed that, while pacing, she’d crossed the threshold. Tyler quickly walked over and shook her out of her reverie.

“There’s no going back now.” Tyler murmured. “We’ll stay together, I promise.” Devya nodded and the two set off in a random direction.

Unfortunately for Tyler, his statement held no value as this was a place of broken promises. The carnival creaked with laughter at the thought of the fates that awaited all five teenagers.

---

Neda had made it to the maze of mirrors, and walked inside. He looked around and saw warped images of himself. But what was strange, were that the mirrors reflected a twisted version of his past self.

“Nope. Devya and Ty were right, I’m leaving.” But when Neda turned to leave the way he came, there was no door, just another immovable mirror.

Neda tried to stay calm, as the mirrors disoriented him. He would not- he could not afford to break down in such a place. He needed to find the others and get out. That’s when he saw it.

He came face to face with an odd mirror. It looked clear, though he was being reflected, and slowly the reflection began to morph and twist. The final result made Neda’s heart nearly stop.

“Kris- you’re alive.” Neda’s voice was barely audible, but the reflection still heard him.

“Alive’ is a... loose term for it, but yes. You killed me.” The reflection accused. Neda sunk to his knees, whilst staring at the mirror.

“I’m sorry! It was an accident!” Neda protested, feeling helpless against Kris’s unwavering gaze. Kris then smiled in a manner that Neda wasn’t accustomed to seeing.

“You were the one who pushed me.” Kris pointed out and Neda let out a strangled sob.

“I never meant to! I swear! I’ll do anything to make it up to you!” Neda exclaimed.

“Take my hand.” Kris extended her hand through the mirror and to Neda. “Join me.”

Neda took Kris’s hand. Kris’s smile looked carved into her face and

her hands elongated into claws. Realization dawned on Neada a split second too late.

He was pulled into the mirror with a horrific cry, as the carnival claimed its first victim.

---

“I beat you! James? James?” Vail called out, concerned. Normally their races were very close. Vail decided to climb the Ferris wheel.

She approached the ride and, instead of turning on the ride, decided to climb the main structure.

“Now when James arrives, I can show him how slow he was.” Vail scoffed, beginning to scale the Ferris wheel.

The Ferris wheel groaned under her weight but didn’t fall, so Vail kept climbing. This was her first mistake.

The Ferris wheel was the heart of the carnival, and once it sensed the death of one, it wouldn’t be long before the rest followed suit.

No sooner than when Vail had reached the top she heard a scream. She assumed it was just Devya and Tyler being scared of their own shadows.

“Now where’s James?” Vail wondered and her eyes scanned over the carnival, not seeing anyone.

The Ferris wheel creaked with laughter beneath her, yet Vail didn’t notice until the laughter was too loud for her to think. Then, all at once, yet slowly, the Ferris wheel fell, taking

Vail along with it.

Vail screamed for help, but her screams were muffled by the crash of rubble, and suffocated.

Laughter claimed the second victim of the night.

---

James had been inexplicably drawn to a tent. He knew he was supposed to be racing Vail, but assumed a small detour wouldn’t hurt.

James first noticed a cotton candy machine in the center, and a stool beside it. The ground was slanted, and one wrong step could lead to a fall.

Ignoring the small shred of logic James possessed, he walked over to the cotton candy machine, and quickly googled how to turn one on. He followed all the instructions and turned it on, before standing on the stool.

While the machine was running, James heard his voice being called faintly. He turned around and looked over the tent again, "Vail? Is that you? This isn't funny." James realized it would have been impossible to hear a voice over the roar of the machine.

James came to another realization: cotton candy machines weren't supposed to be that loud. He turned to look at the machine, which had spinning blades and seemed impossibly deep.

He bent over for a closer look yet lost his balance and fell onto the blades. He screamed as he was slowly cut to bits, yet no one heard.

Eventually the blades stopped, and James's blood mixed with the white spun sugar of the machine, creating a perfect pink color.

A sweet treat claimed the life of the third victim.

---

Devya and Tyler stayed together. They had tried to walk across the threshold between the carnival and the outside world, but failed as there was a seemingly invisible wall separating the two worlds.

"Ty... I'm scared," Devya admitted, grabbing onto Tyler's hand as she heard a scream and Tyler also jumped.

"What was that?" Tyler asked, and Devya's lower lip began trembling.

"It sounded like Neda," She whispered, barely audible. There was a crash as the Ferris wheel tumbled down, and subsequently another scream... then silence.

"Vail was at the Ferris wheel, and- the last screams- it sounded like- like James." Devya explained.

An eerie chill that settled over the carnival.

"No. That would mean our friends are dead and they can't be dead. I have a presentation with James tomorrow and I'm versing Neda in a chess

game. Vail and I were supposed to go buy flowers and I needed her advice. Neada had a date tomorrow with my friend. He can't be dead."

Tyler rambled, running his fingers through his hair.

"Do you hear that?" Devya asked, sounding distant, walking towards something. "Hear what?" He asked, fear creeping into his voice.

"My grandma's talking. I can hear her voice and see her. I just need to let go." She turned towards.

"Devya. Your grandmother is dead. She died 2 years ago to this day." Tyler winced at the harsh tone.

"Of course I'll let go." Devya murmured and smiled, before collapsing onto the ground.

Tyler rushed over to Devya and felt for a pulse, but it was too late... she was dead. Love claimed the fourth victim.

Tyler screamed. He screamed until his voice was hoarse and the tears had run dry, while he clutched Devya's body. He wouldn't let her go even as she turned to smoke.

"No! Give her back!" Tyler screamed at the carnival. "Give them all back to me!"

The carnival laughed, and Tyler discerned a gravelly voice. "You will leave this carnival.

The mirror maze is haunted by your friend who was haunted by his reflection. Ferris wheels are romantic because your friend died, waiting for a love that would never arrive. Cotton candy's pristine pink comes from your friend's blood... and as for your last friend. Well, only fools fall in love." The carnival creaked "And most importantly, no one in reality will remember your friends."

Tyler felt the blood drain from his face and did the only thing he could do. He started running and didn't stop, leaving the carnival.

The abandoned carnival had claimed five victims that day, for what's the point of a body with no soul?

## *Frostbite*

I was scared the first time I saw it. It must have been three in the morning and I had one of the worst nightmares of my life. I don't remember what the nightmare was; I couldn't remember at the time either, all I know was that when I woke up my heart was beating faster than it ever had before and I was covered in a cold sweat. I think that's why it scared me so bad, you know, because I didn't know what I was scared of. I decided to go downstairs and make myself some hot chocolate to calm down.

I crept down the stairs as quietly as I could. There had been many times when my parents had been woken up in the night to me falling down the stairs. I do not have good coordination, unlike my sister who was an athlete since she could walk. She and my parents were away in the town over for her mid-season soccer game. At least if I were to fall I wouldn't wake them up. I got to the bottom of the stairs and a shiver ran right through me. It was the middle of summer, the middle of a *heatwave*, and I was shivering from the cold? I walked towards the kitchen door and I noticed that the closer I got, the colder everything became. I touched the doorknob and it was ice cold. Even in my tired state, I knew something was wrong, but I brushed it off... Stupid, I know but, I had just woken up from a nightmare and assumed my brain was playing tricks on me. I twisted the door knob and entered the kitchen. It was absolutely freezing; I couldn't remember a time I had felt cold like that. It was at that moment I saw it.



It must have been at least seven feet tall with ghostly pale skin and long, wispy, white hair. It had black horns protruding from its head that curled at the ends. It had three eyes that I could see, two of them were closed and one of them was wide open and pitch black. It had unnaturally long arms that went all the way to the floor and legs that were definitely on the wrong way round. It was wearing a flowy white dress with words that looked like ones I had seen in my little sister's Latin books. Its mouth turned upward when it saw me, and I saw its teeth. It had so many teeth. They were tiny and by the looks of them very sharp. I froze. It was like I couldn't move but it... Oh, *it* could move.

It started walking towards me and I just stood there frozen. The closer it got, the more my brain screamed at me to run, to go and hide under my covers, like that would do anything. I really hoped I was still dreaming, that this was a sick twisted nightmare and I would wake up and everything would be fine. If only I was that lucky. It reached me and started stroking my face with its thumb. My skin burned from the cold. This was most definitely not a dream. I tried to fight it, but I felt myself leaning into its touch. It burned but I couldn't stop myself. It felt like I was in a trance. Then it leaned back and picked me up by the waist, carrying me to the counter where it gently placed me down. It was like I weighed nothing to it. It started to walk away and I prayed that maybe it would just leave and forget about me but it walked over to the record player and put on an album. It was one of the albums I listened to when I was baking: soft piano music paired with the sounds of nature. It always made me feel like I was the main character in one of those feel-good movies.

The music began playing and it started walking back to me. Its eyes bore through me, it felt like it was looking directly into my very soul. Why didn't I run? I should have run when it turned its back, but I didn't. All I did

was sit there staring at it. Now I was going to die and I would never get to see my friends or my family ever again. I didn't want my friends to stare where I used to sit at lunch and wish I would appear, I didn't want my father to never be able to walk his little girl down the aisle and I didn't want my little sister to have to grow up without me there. Right by her side. I wouldn't let that happen. I couldn't let that happen. I needed to get away and quickly. If there is one thing I had learned from horror movies it's that when piano music starts playing you better start running.

I snapped out of the trance I had been in and started running. I ran through the kitchen door and heard it cry out. What I heard that night I'll never forget. It sounded like thousands of people screaming in unison, all in the most pain they had ever been in. The scream made me want to stop, to turn back, comfort it but I knew it was just a trick. No injured humans waited for me back in my kitchen. I started running faster trying to get out of the house, away from it. I heard it running after me, taking long strides, much longer than my own. I started panicking and when I panic I start wobbling and when I wobble, I topple. You can see where this is going. I tripped.

Of course I tripped, and of course it had to be at the worst possible time. My sister had been right, I really would be someone who would be the first to die in a horror movie. I don't want to die if that means she is going to be right. I struggled to get to my feet, my body felt like one big ice block. I managed to right myself and I turned around while simultaneously praying to every single god I could think of that it would not be there when I did. I turned around and came face to face with a creature that was very, very pissed off.

## *A Life For A Death*

The ringing was erratic and incessant, blurring every thought in my head just past comprehension. Pain built up behind my eyelids and I forced them open for relief but was instead met by an explosion of flashing lights. I shut them again, clutching my head. The coppery tang of blood scraped my tongue, forcing me back towards consciousness.

I groaned, propping myself back up. I ran my fingers across my face to check if everything was normal. My skin was sticky with something wet. When I pulled my hand away, ruby red glistened on the pads of my fingers. I used my sleeve to staunch the flow of blood coming out of my nose as I tried to regain my bearings.

“Aurelia!” a voice snapped through my head like a whip.

“Castor?!” my voice came out a squeak. I tried again, but my breath caught in my throat, choking me.

*Damn it*, I thought.

“Aurelia!” This time it sounded closer.

The thick smell of blood was making me dizzy. Every one of my limbs felt like lead. I wanted to flop back down and sleep forever.

The ground shook as footsteps drew closer. I heard harsh cussing as Castor knelt before me. His hands hovered awkwardly around my body before he tilted my chin up to assess the damage.

“What the hell happened?” he asked, sounding incredibly out of breath.

“I- I don’t know,” I stuttered.

His amber eyes glowed with fear and concern.

"C'mon," he said, tugging on my elbow. "We've got to go."

"Go?" I asked. "Go where?"

"Away. Far away. Before it catches up."

"It? What's it?" My head was still spinning.

His words were getting muddled in my head.

He opened his mouth, either to tell me off or reply, but was swiftly cut off by a high, endless wailing. A chill crept up my spine making the hair on my neck stand straight up.

"*That*," Castor said, darkly, pulling me to my feet. "Can you run?"

I took a step and stars exploded before my eyes. I would've completely fallen over if Castor hadn't steadied me with a hand at my elbow. Fear pierced my chest, making it hard to breathe. I was never going to get very far. Not like this.

And that's when I remembered.

I spun desperately to Castor, forgetting all about my sickness.

"Where's Percy?" I asked, urgently.

His eyes darkened. "We got separated. After that stupid dust cloud dumped us in this hellhole I've been alone."

"We need to find him," I urged.

"Well, we can't find him if we've been snapped into a billion pieces," he shot back.

The wail came again, this time higher and far more agonizing.

"It's getting closer. We need to move," Castor said. He surveyed me for a moment before picking me up and throwing me over his shoulder before breaking into a run.

"Castor!" I yelled.

"Thank me later, I'm saving your life," he snapped, jumping over a root.

My body bounced painfully with his jerky movements making my vision blurrier than it already was. I was trying desperately to piece together what had occurred and found that I couldn't. The wailing had gotten fainter,

but the chill remained, indicating that whatever was following us was still close.

To distract myself I gazed around at the forest, realizing for the first time that the trees weren't really trees at all. Rather they appeared to be large pillars of onyx glass stretching hundreds of thousands of feet above us. Exploding into abundant canopies of shimmering green and silver leaves that also appeared to have a glass-like quality. I imagined if anything were to hit them, the glass would shatter and it'd come raining down on us like a terrible, beautiful rainstorm.

Castor skidded to a stop in his tracks, dumping me down unceremoniously.

"What gives?" I mumbled, exhausted.

He nodded his head at the rickety wooden hut that appeared before us. "We should go in there."

"Why?" I asked, once more stalling the flow of blood with my sleeve.

"Because it puts a wall between us and that thing."

"I'm not sure a singular wall will do much."

"Better than nothing," he grumbled, using my elbow to pull me inside and then slam the door shut behind him.

A moment later I was smothered in a hug. I didn't even need to see his face. The fresh, minty tang told me all I needed to know.

"Percy!" I gasped, tightening my grip around him. "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay," he said. "Are you okay?" His delicate blue-grey eyes were weighted with pure worry.

"Oh, and what about you Castor, are you okay? Oh, I'm fine, thanks for asking," Castor muttered to himself.

"What happened?" Percy asked. "It was supposed to work."

"I know it was supposed to work; I don't know why it happened but some stupid thing is chasing me," Castor replied.

"Wait wait, what was supposed to work?" I interjected.

They ignored me. "Thing, what thing?" Percy asked.

Castor held up a hand to quiet him so the wailing could be heard through the thin wooden walls.

“Oh. That thing,” Percy said. “That puts a slight damper on our plan doesn’t it?”

“No we can still go as planned, we just need a diversion,” Castor said, worrying his bottom lip with his thumb. His brow was furrowed in concentration. A moment later his eyes brightened and he snapped his fingers. “Got it.” His gaze met Percy’s. “Okay I’ll lead it off in the opposite direction casting a scent trail. If the plan works it should take care of whatever this thing is, right?”

“Yeah, it should,” Percy agreed.

The wailing cut through the conversation, this time far louder.

Percy tensed. “It’s getting too close.”

Castor nodded. “I’ve got it.” His eyes lingered on the blue-eyed boy for a moment, something like regret in his eyes. Then he ruffled my hair and disappeared out the door.

The ringing in my ears had finally stopped and my head was nearly clear. Which meant I could finally properly assess what was happening.

“Percy-” I started.

He shushed me. “I understand you’ll have questions, Aurelia. And I promise everything will be explained in time. But right now I need your help. Do you trust me?”

Now all of my logic was telling me to say no. But I’d pledged a long time ago to trust Percy eternally.

He led me outside and over to a clearing where the strange not-trees were arranged in a perfect circle. He pulled a bag out of his pocket and handed it to me, folding my hands over it and squeezing gently.

“Salt,” he said. “Put it around the perimeter between each of the seven trees.”

As I did so I watched as he walked to the centre of the circle and closed his eyes, tilting his head back letting the wind ruffle through



his soft brown locks.

*"Morimur. Morimur. Salvum nos fac. Salvum nos fac.  
Vita ad mortem,"* he murmured.

I frowned. "What?"

"It's Latin." Castor's voice at my shoulder made me jump. His eyes were haunted and grim, brow soaked with sweat. "It means *we're dying. We're dying. Save us. Save us. A life for a death.*"

"Percy, what does that mean? What life?" I asked, urgently.

He stood up and walked over to me, taking my face in his hands. They were ice cold. "They need a death."

"No one's dying!" I exclaimed.

"Indeed," he agreed. "I'm already dead."

"W-what?" I spluttered. My gaze flew to Castor expecting surprise.

He gazed back at me in morbid understanding.

*"i numquam voluit vivere,"* he murmured.

Percy locked eyes with him. *"i numquam voluit vivere."*

An understanding exchanged between them and Percy released me.

"What is going on!" I yelled as he walked away from me and back towards the tree.

Castor moved behind me, casting his towering shadow. Percy stopped just before the tree shoulders squared and back perfectly straight.

*"Accipe me. Ego te liberabo onus tuum,"* he chanted.

"Take me. I free you of your burden," Castor translated, quietly.

I had no time to understand before the smooth bark twisted and melted, becoming a semi-solid mirror. Percy cast one last look over his shoulder and I watched his icy pupils fade gold. And then he stepped forward and was gone.

And the blackness returned and I lost my body and every memory was ripped away.

## *Faded Beauty – Photo Essay*

I was driving down a narrow and windy road when a neglected house captured the corner of my eye. Intrigued, I slowed down and pulled over to the side onto the gravel shoulder. The driveway to the house was overgrown with weeds, almost up to my waist that made me suspect that no one had lived in the house for ten years or more. I made my way through the tall grass on the front lawn, up to the front door and I peered through the only window that was not boarded up.

What I saw was so distinctive and unique, that instinctively, fuelled with curiosity, I intensely gazed in to see more. I crawled into the small window opening that seemed as though it was made specifically for me. Once inside, I took a brief moment to admire the silence, shake the dust off my clothes, and set up my camera. I have always been drawn to the mysterious and the unknown. Even as a young child, I was inquisitive about everything and anything and had a wild imagination, fantasizing about wonder. My love for the past is what made it so riveting to walk around this abandoned house, capturing photos. Something most people do not notice is the beauty of abandoned homes. I saw beauty in every shot that I took. For me, abandoned photography represents history and helps tell a specific story. Maybe the story is right in front of you or maybe it is ambiguous for a reason. The mystery is what appeals to my senses.

That night, I viewed my photos taken earlier. My curiosity piqued again so I looked deeper into the history of the abandoned house. To my surprise, the house was put up for sale in May 2007, and the owners up and left, taking nothing with them in December 2007. When I saw the home I photographed online and read the little information there was on it, I felt a sense of despair, almost like a sense of loss. A family used to live in the home that I so

casually walked around in. However, at the same time, I also felt a sense of respect that I was able to step into someone's world and get such an intimate view into someone's life. I touched the walls with multiple layers of paint, peeling away, and felt the humidity fill the dark room, allowing me to imagine what it might've been like to stand in that house many years prior.

What causes these homes to become dark and empty may remain a mystery. The genre of abandoned photography reminds us to look through the decay to find the story behind the walls. My hope is that my series of images will spark the curiosity of viewers to share this experience of wonder.









## *Rouge Anemone*

11:38 PM

*What are you doing here?*

“I wanted to find it.”

A light flicks on, illuminating the empty office. You had waited until the last of the teachers’ cars left the parking lot, then hid in the school’s auditorium, currently under renovation, until the building was completely abandoned. Slowly, you made your way to the school’s office. That had all been easy. The difficult task was ahead.

*You know this is a bad idea.*

“I’d appreciate a little more support.”

Two keys. One to open the door to the filing room, the other to open the filing cabinet itself. Two keys you are missing. Want to know what you’re not missing? A crowbar. A crowbar that was a little too easy to bring to school.

*This is a really bad idea.*

“Stop distracting me.” You grunt, struggling to break open the door.

“Most friends would be a little more supportive... when someone... is trying to prove...”

*We’re not friends.*

“Yes” the door breaks open, “we are!”

*We’ve been over this.*

The humming starts. Faint at first, gradually growing louder. It distracts you. You walk to the cabinet, dropping the crowbar and opening your backpack, pulling out a hammer and screwdriver. Shop ended up being a



very useful class.

“You would like shop.” You take out your phone, using it as a flashlight.

*Mr. Clark counts the tools. You know that. You made fun of him for his obsession with them. How did you get those past him?*

“Mr. Clark had to leave school unexpectedly today.” It takes a few wacks before the lock is broken enough to pry the drawer open.

*Why'd you say that like you killed Mr. Clark?*

“If he happened to get a call this morning that his daughter had an anaphylactic reaction at her elementary school, and happened to have to meet her at the hospital, that might have happened to make borrowing a few tools a little easier to get away with.”

*What did you do?*

“Thoughts to Melissa.” You start skimming through the files.  
“She seemed like such a sweet girl.”

*Listen to me. You should not be doing this. You are going to get hurt.*

“No.” You pick up a file, the file, pulling it out of the drawer and onto your lap. “I found it. I found you.”

*You know I'm not...*

### 7:56 AM

You wait outside the elementary school, trying to look natural. You watch as parents drop off their children, putting backpacks over their shoulders and wishing them a good day. Through the metal fence, you watch as Melissa's mother drops her off at the corner. You watch the mother walk away. Watch as Melissa starts skipping towards the school, water bottle swinging in hand. The same routine you've witnessed every morning for the past few months.

You walk towards Melissa, picking up your pace to meet her on the sidewalk, out of sight from teachers and parents.

You tell yourself that this child will be fine. Tell yourself that the end

goal is more important.

You *need* this.

You bump into Melissa. “I am so sorry.” Her water bottle falls to the ground, and you pick up her, the peanut oil covering your hands contaminating the lid. You hand it to Melissa, apologize again, and walk away.

### 9:04 AM

Mr. Clark picks up the phone, answering with a slightly grumpy, “Hello.” You keep working on your birdhouse, looking uninterested in Mr. Clark’s sudden scream and frantic tone. Uninterested as he quickly collects his coat and keys, explaining that something has come up, that he has to leave immediately, that everyone has to put down the tools until a substitute arrives. The class erupts in curiosity once Mr. Clark is out the door. In the commotion and chaos, you go over to the shelf, picking up a hammer and screwdriver.

Your birdhouse isn’t that good. But that’s not why you took shop.

### 1:34 PM

During your lunch, you go to the office. The temporary receptionist sits behind the front desk. The regular one, whom you befriended earlier this year, is on maternity leave. You tell this newcomer that someone’s car is blocking the entrance to the staff parking lot. She asks what the car looks like. You say that you can’t remember. Annoyed, the receptionist stands up, walking out the office to investigate. Now alone, you go behind the front desk, opening the top drawer and grabbing the extra key.

The receptionist will return, ready to tell you there is no car blocking the entrance to the staff parking lot, but you’ll already be gone.

4:56 PM

The security cameras have been painted over. Two months ago, you made a comment that the senior prank never works because it's always caught on camera; that the only way the graduating class could actually pull off something epic would be if the cameras were temporarily eliminated. This comment was heard by a group of seniors, who cared about their high school legacy more than anything else.

An announcement rang earlier that this action would not go without consequences. An announcement that also mentioned this would be resolved tomorrow.

You watch as the last of the teacher's car pulls out of the parking lot. You head to the auditorium.

11:46 PM

Rouge Anemone. You read the name on the file, opening it to reveal a picture of a girl inside, "I never forgot about you."

*You know I'm not real.*

You always had an active imagination. Growing up, you were creative, vividly imaginative. You lived in make believe. You and your best friend, Rouge, who no one else could see, conquered the world.

As you grew up, Rouge grew with you. The two of you are inseparable. Until one day, spring of last school year, Rouge said, *I think it's time that I go.* It broke you.

Once being praised for your imagination, you were now shamed for it. A freak, a schizophrenic, manic, all names you became familiar with. Rouge was all you had. Rouge never betrayed you. Now, she wanted to leave you, so you'd be left all alone. Rouge was never going to leave you.

And you were going to make sure of it.

So, when summer was over and school was back in session, you volunteered to help in the front office. You stapled papers, printed handouts and copied documents. Slowly, you gained the trust of the very pregnant receptionist. As she entered her final days before maternity leave, you offered to carry the files of new students to the file cabinet. Having earned her trust, she gave you the key. As you put the files in, you slipped in an extra one. One you had made with a stock photo and some fancy paper.

A student file for Rouge Anemone.

*You know I'm not real.*

You shake your head, smiling at the friend that you could no longer see. "Rouge Anemone."

*This has gone too far. We had a good time, but now this has become unhealthy. I am your subconscious. I am the voice you created. Everything I say, it's just you talking to yourself.*

"You are more than that to me. You are your own person. You're my best friend."

*You're insane.*

"Nothing is wrong with me!" You scream into the darkness. You try to regain your composure, which has been shaken by Rouge's cruel words. "Nothing is wrong with me. This file proves that. This file proves you." You hold up the file to the empty air.

*You know that it's fake. You are the one who concocted this entire plan, who planted the file of a student who does not go to this school, of a person who is not real. You are obsessed with something that is not real. It is destroying you.*

"You are real. It says so right here. I mean..."

*You need help.*

"...why would I spend so much time looking for someone that doesn't exist?"

## *The Omen of the Black Cat*

*We had been hiking for what felt like days now,  
But what was truly mere hours.  
And while the scenery around us had an indescribable beauty,  
Of towering mountains surrounding me,  
With lush, green trees and buttery yellow flowers,  
The beauty did not match the fear and hopelessness I felt, for we were  
lost  
In a maze of a seemingly endless forest trapping us.  
So when we saw what seemed to be a palace in the distance,  
We decided to seek shelter.*

*An abundance of overgrown ivies wrapped around  
And around the walls of the palace.  
It had succumbed to the forest, so much so  
That you could not tell the difference between the two.  
Still, we trudged forward, clamping down our fear,  
Before it could escape and suffocate us.  
As we walked closer and closer to the palace,  
We noticed a black cat sitting near the entrance, with startlingly yellow  
eyes.  
For two seconds that seemed to stretch on endlessly,  
The cat looked directly into my eyes,  
And bounded off, leaving a thick, suffocating blanket of  
Uncertainty - and fear.  
We approached a tall, black gate, which loomed over us.  
It looked to be years old, and seemed as though we were*

*It was taking us back in time. Before we could open the gate however,  
It swung open.*

*Behind the gate was a girl. Her age was hard to tell,  
For she looked  
Youthful, but at the same time,  
She looked as though she held the wisdom of centuries before.  
There was no easy way  
To describe her.  
She was beautiful, but beautiful in a way that seemed unreal,  
With translucent skin, and eyes,  
That looked as though they could  
See through your very soul.  
There was something both lovely and haunting about her appearance.  
She invited us in, with a warm smile that seemed to thaw our fear  
And we followed her,  
Like a moth drawn to a flame.*

*We ventured inside the palace,  
Where we saw a table, laid with a platter of assorted fruits and  
various meats,  
A supply that seemed to go on forever.  
As we ate, it seemed as though the food never went away.  
There were an abundance of mangoes, supple, and bright like the sun,  
And as we continued to eat, our worries began to wash away.  
We finally began to feel at ease.  
As I thanked the girl, she simply smiled, her eyes glowing  
against the candlelight.  
Despite everyone's cheerfulness,  
Something felt terribly wrong.*



*As night began to fall, I decided to explore the palace.  
While the outside looked dilapidated, there were exquisite paintings  
and tapestries,  
Woven with golden thread, all across the walls.  
In the far corner was a flash of light,  
Curiously I began to continue walking,  
My heart beating like a clock getting closer to the strike of 12.  
There was a massive throne room, and on a platform sat  
An impressive throne, fit only for a queen.  
Something felt terribly wrong.  
My heart began to thump against my chest, and my instincts told me to  
run.  
I turned around to go back to the dining room, when I saw it.  
The cat that we had seen before entering the palace.  
Here it was, once again,  
Looking at me.  
But this time, it seemed to be communicating, its eyes panicked,  
warning me,  
That something was terribly wrong.  
I started to run, as fast as my feet would take me, back to my friends.  
But when I entered, the room was dark and quiet.  
My friends were nowhere to be seen, their absence only  
fueling my terror.  
I looked behind me to see if the cat was still there, but it had  
disappeared too.  
I began to call out,  
My voice echoing off the walls of the palace,  
Filling it with only more emptiness.  
I peered around the corners of the room, when I saw her.  
The girl who guided us into the palace- she was crouched down,  
her head drooped.*

*I had not seen her at first, for she was in the shadows, out of sight.  
She slowly looked up at me.*

*Her tear-stained face sent chills down my spine.*

*“You have to run away,” she told me, her voice urgent.*

*What did she mean?*

*‘Run, before the old queen finds you. If she sees you, you will not be spared.’*

*That’s when a flood of fragmented memories came back to me,*

*Joining into place like puzzle pieces finally put together.*

*The throne room.*

*The feeling I was being watched.*

*So there was indeed someone else here, the “queen” the girl was talking about.*

*But as I looked back at the girl, I realized something worse.*

*Her face almost seemed to flicker in the darkness. The only thing that stayed the same,*

*Were her eyes. Her eyes looked almost exactly like those of the cat.*

*As I came upon this realization, I noticed her face started to flicker,  
like an old light bulb*

*That had reached the end of its time.*

*She began to clutch her face, and that’s when I saw the old queen  
she was describing.*

*The old queen... was her. The cat who had warned me,*

*Was her.*

*“You have to leave now.” She started to sob, as she began to convulse.  
I tried to back away, but my body seemed to be frozen.  
I watched in horror, as the girl I had known from earlier  
began to transform  
Into a horrifying image.*

*“It’s too late now,” the old queen snarled.  
I could do nothing but stare, as the world turned into darkness.*

## *Tallie*

Her feet pounded soft white snow in time with her thumping chest. “She’s here,” Rooney whispered, the thought, a searing poker in her sluggish brain. She looked up as she ran, her face shining in the light gifted by a thousand silver stars. They coldly illuminated the black pines that raced by her. Their bark, wet with snow, filled the forest with the rich scent of earth.

She was going to be here – Tallie, much too tall for a girl of 12, with her mess of auburn hair, of which Rooney had always been so jealous. She loved that it was nothing like the straight brown locks that hung defeatedly down Rooney’s back. Tallie, who left so suddenly. But Rooney knew: Tallie was not gone. The last month without her had been a sickening blur of quiet voices and pitiful looks, tears, screams, a black dress and blacker shoes, and most horrible, the doctors called to “chat” with Rooney. There are few things more anguishing than being believed a liar.

Worse, a lunatic. Rooney’s mouth tasted sour and metallic remembering the frightened visages as she pounded her father’s chest, screaming, “NO. NO. She is not gone! I know she isn’t and you know it too, and you’re lying. YOU ARE LYING.” Tallie, falling from a tree? Never. Much less their tree, with its hollow trunk, the perfect width for the two of them to

crouch, listening to ghostly sounds of the forest, and its memorized branches, spiraling evenly up towards the winter sky.

So Rooney was here. To find Tallie. Rooney’s hair whipped the air, as if surprised by her sudden stop. There it was: a boundless redwood with dark maroon bark that parted in a deep crack seven feet up the trunk, widening until it reached the forest floor. Mist always occupied the clearing, at the

center of which the tree sat. Here, in the empty night, shivering

in front of their refuge, Rooney could almost taste Tallie. Her shampoo that smelled of roasted nuts and caramel hung in the air; her jade eyes stared from every cluster of green needles; and her deep, strong voice hummed under the wind. “She’s here.” Rooney smiled. Of course; Tallie had hid here for the last month, waiting for Rooney to find her.

CRACK. Rooney froze, her thoughts interrupted by the sharp snap of a branch. A chill spread through her small body. An animal? Only wolves could bear these winter temperatures. Across the misty clearing, behind the big tree, a voice swore. A person. Rooney’s stomach dropped. She sprinted forward, leaping through the crack in the trunk, and landing with a thud on the dry ground inside the hollow redwood.

“Rooney,” said a deep, quiet voice. She whipped her head around, her eyes catching a glimpse of red hair, flicking through the darkness. Rooney had heard this voice all month. Tallie was calling her. Then last night, when she found the letter tucked under her pillow, the pillow that Rooney and

Tallie had shared so many nights, she had been sure. Tears were flowing smoothly now, accompanied by a pressure on Rooney’s chest, heavy, like those cylinders of lead in the physics lab at school. Her whole body was shaking. Footsteps outside the trunk grew louder, and the world seemed a cold and terrifying place, until Tallie arose from her thoughts, a light in the dark, like the tiny silver stars shining above.

Another crack echoed across the snow. Rooney tried in vain to quiet her breathing; her heaving chest wouldn’t slow. A person waded through the mist towards her, visible through the crack in the bark. It was a girl. Yes, it was a girl and she had long hair! And Rooney could smell the roasted nuts and caramel. She leapt to her feet, pain and warm blood dripping down her leg as a branch caught her delicate skin. Rooney shouted, tears in her eyes and snot dripping down her chin, “I knew it! I knew it! You’re here. You’re he—” but... No. No. She had seen the red hair and green eyes. But as the figure stomped towards her and grabbed her shoulders violently, it was

not Tallie.

“Rooney, what are you thinking! How could you just leave.” It was not a question, but an admonition. Sarah’s typical matter-of-fact anger nested in her dark eyes.

“She is gone, and you are out of your mind.” Anger seized Rooney at the calm with which her sister uttered this statement.

“You didn’t have to follow me!” Rooney was shaking wildly, punching and kicking her sister, but she could not twist free of her grip. Grief and anger and confusion were too overwhelming to think of anything but green eyes and red hair. Rooney could only cry and scream into the cold night. Sarah forced her to the ground and clamped a clammy hand over Rooney’s mouth. In silence, the forest was far more menacing. Muffled sounds of animals in

the night echoed between the black trees.

“We’re going to get in the car, Rooney.” When the girl didn’t answer, Sarah pursed her lips, took a quick breath, and spat, “What exactly did you think would happen if you came here? You think that she’s been hiding in your tree 27 days? I just don’t understand. I don’t....”

“A letter.”

Rooney responded restlessly, “I found a letter last night. From her. It said ‘I’ll be there, in the forest for you.’ Then I was sure. I knew you were all lying, because she’s not gone. And now I know now because she wrote this letter yesterday, not 27 days ago.” The words sounded childish out loud, as Sarah gave her a look of pity and disgust, and was it guilt?

How would Tallie have given Rooney the letter, and how was she surviving alone? Most pressing, why was she hiding? But Rooney pushed these questions away into the mist. “I don’t care,” she thought. “Let them think I’m crazy.” Tallie hated the word crazy. She once said, “Crazy is a word for a truth no one wants to believe,” light dancing in her fierce, jocose eyes.

A low growl snuck out of the forest, and Sarah pulled Rooney to a stand. “What was that?” Rooney didn’t respond. For her head was turned in



the opposite direction of Sarah's. Not towards the dark forest, but up towards the hollow tree's branches. Her hand touched her shoulder, where, a moment before, she had felt a firm tap. Rooney's chest broke, a feeling too important for words flushing through her veins. Tallie! In the tree, her green eyes shimmering. Her whole body was shimmering, Rooney noticed. And then Rooney was ascending, climbing, grasping a higher branch with every shallow breath.

"Tallie!" she cried through a cracked smile.

"Rooney! Rooney, what are you doing? We have to go; there's something in the trees."

Sarah's voice trembled. Realizing what Rooney had seen, her voice cracked as she bellowed up into the branches, "Rooney, please come down. Please. She's not up there! I don't... Rooney, you have to know... We should have told

you- I'm sorry..."

Rooney paused in her desperate ascent, as Sarah continued, "I gave you the letter. I didn't write it! She did. It- it was the letter she left. Beside her." Sarah was sobbing now, and shivering as more growls echoed across the snow. Rooney didn't understand. What was Sarah talking about now?

"Her mom found her. Next to three empty pill bottles. She- Rooney, I'm sorry. She took her life. She's dead. She's not here. Mom and dad didn't want to tell you, but I thought you should at least have the letter. I shouldn't have. I- now we're here and-"

Far away from Rooney, in a different world it seemed, many things happened at once. A terrible, grey creature bounded into the clearing. It leapt towards Sarah, claws and bloody maw inches from her open mouth, out of which came a piercing cry. Rooney's head whipped toward the ground, and a weight plummeted into her stomach, as when she missed the bottom step of the creaking staircase at Tallie's house. Her fist closed around cold air, which soon engulfed her whole numb body as she tipped backwards. Somewhere, far below, what sounded like an engine started and a car door

slammed. Branches scraped Rooney's palms until, with a jolt, her body abruptly slowed. She dangled five feet from the ground, her bleeding white hand slowly sliding from around a moist branch. Her mind was at once feverishly racing and perfectly, coolly still, like the frozen lake that stretched along the grey

horizon. As she turned her wide eyes up to the sky and stars and beautiful green trees, she saw Tallie's shimmering face, smiling at her. And she let go, closing her eyes slowly, falling backwards once more. The ground was hard. All went dark.

And then Rooney was speeding away, away from the silver stars, from the wolf and lies and madness.

## *Apartment 216*

Preliminary investigations into Rose Miller's death revealed nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, private investigator Mason Swank had no idea what he was doing entertaining the case at all. It wasn't as if the case was particularly complex. It was, in truth, the type of case he would have normally dismissed out of sheer disinterest. A suicide case was nothing worth investigating. But nonetheless he found himself outside apartment number 216.

Not more than an hour before had the phone rung in Mason's office. Already the sun was turning to a warm orange colour—signaling the end of a wholly uneventful work day. There had been no new cases.

Typical of a Saturday.

So the sound of the phone's ringtone was followed by a deep sigh. He reluctantly put down his cigar, picked up the phone, and answered with the monotonous tone he always used:

"Hello. Swank's Investigation Service."

His private eye instincts made Mason hold the phone far from his ear, anticipating the passionate outburst of either sorrow or anger from the other end.

"Hello? P.I. Swank? My wife's been killed! You need to come quick? Please hel—"

"Whoa. Calm down. Take a deep breath. Let's take this one step at a time." Mason's spiel never changed. Clients always needed to calm down at first. He sighed. "Name?"

"Rose Miller. My wif—"

Mason sighed again, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Your name, I mean."

“O-oh. Grithe. Sorry.”

Grithe and Rose Miller. Both were names Mason knew. He recalled them, vaguely, from a case he had covered a few years back. A wild goose chase of an illicit drug deal had led him down a rabbit hole of potential dealers. But eventually it had led him to the suburban home of the Millers. Three pounds of cocaine located in the attic. They pled guilty to its possession, but claimed they had no affiliation with it. Mason had believed them. They weren't the sort of people to give trouble a reason to find them. The jury had obviously believed that too. But as was customary, the Millers received a six-month sentence—cut short after just a month, when Mason tracked down the real dealers. They still sat in the state jail.

“Okay, Grithe. I'll call you back.”

Mason had hung up before Grithe had even tried to sneak in another word, and somewhat hurriedly contacted the local police department for their initial investigations. They had concluded that Rose Miller died from a gunshot wound to the head. A pistol had been found beside her corpse. The officers had found the door and windows to the bedroom locked upon arrival. There had been no eyewitness reports of anyone entering or leaving the apartment, save for descriptions of Grithe and Rose Miller themselves. All in all, it had been a very boring report to read. Absolutely nothing of note.

The investigator redialed Grithe's number, exasperated. “Look, what could it have been but a suicide?”

“I'm telling you, she was murdered. She wouldn't have committed suicide. I know that better than anyone.”

“I'm sorry, but the evidence doesn't point anywhere else. Look, it's getting late. Maybe the police department will be of better hel-”

“No! They won't. I know I'm right. And you have to help me. You're the only shot I got. I know you're good at what you do. Please.”

A little pad to his ego had been, surprisingly, all Mason had needed to be on-board with the case. In hindsight, he mused that it would probably

have been a poor idea to decline it. So after flashing his ID to the officers outside the apartment, he and Grithe found themselves inside the scene of the crime.

“Show me the body.”

Grithe led Mason from the landing to a short hallway with doors to three rooms. Only one was closed off. It took Grithe a moment to compose himself—he was tense. Mason could practically see it exuding from his body. But after an intense struggle, a shaky hand finally found its way to the doorknob. It swung open easily.

Both men peered into the bedroom. Neither dared enter. The scene before them fit the reports exactly. Rose Miller was crumpled on the ground, blood still oozing slowly from her skull. The pistol lay just outside her hand’s limp grasp. The windows closed and the latch locked. There was no sign of struggle. Even the bedsheets were still tidily tucked away on the corner of the bed. The crime scene was almost too idealistic. It was a perfect textbook suicide. It was practically identical to one Mason himself had studied. And that made him uneasy. He just couldn’t determine why. But he shrugged it off.

“I don’t think there’s much we can take from this.

It fits exactly what the reports said.”

“But I’m telling you, she’s been murdered! I don’t know by who or when, but Rose would never kill herself. Please, I’m telling you, I’m right.”

“Look, I’d love to believe you, but there’s just nothing here.”

Mason moved to close the door. Even after fifteen years, the stench and rot still rattled his thinking. “Look, when we get back to the office we can talk it over. There’s probably something we ca-”

His words came to an abrupt stop. The metal doorknob became chilly and slippery in his grasp. Grithe was right.

“Swank? Are you all right?”

Mason pretended to fumble with the knob. It was one of those which locked from inside the room quite easily, but was impossible to open from the outside without a key. An average bedroom doorknob.

“Grithe, you were the one to find the body, right?”

“What? Of course I was! Who else could it have been?”

“Alright. The door was locked, right? How’d you know she’d been killed?”

“I’ve got a key! God, Swank, I don’t know why you’re asking these—”

“But only you and Rose have these keys, no?”

Silence. Though outwardly calm, the investigator slowly felt fear crawl up his insides. His muscles tensed. He knew. But he hoped to God he was wrong.

“So just you two.”

More silence. And in that moment Mason made his move for the front door.

His gut was promptly met with Grithe’s knee. He gagged, but found his mouth clenched in an iron grip.

“P.I. Swank! Where are you going?”

Mason’s eyes strained upwards. He glimpsed the edges of a smile. He struggled more. But a swift strike to the back of his head sent stars sprawling. He tried to cry out. His mouth was still muffled. His body went limp—but his mind clinged to his final shred of consciousness.

“Faster than I expected. Not bad.”

Mason thought he saw Grithe sneer.

“You knew who I was, didn’t you? So you remember that court case. The one where we were innocent. Innocent, I tell you,” Grithe scoffed. “It meant nothing. We lost everything, Mason. Everything. No one wanted to know who we were after that. I didn’t care. We could’ve run away. Rebuilt. Started again. But Rose...you more than killed Rose.”

Another smack left Mason tasting blood.

“You destroyed her entire life in front of her eyes. You know what kind of woman she was? She was someone determined to change her own fate. And she had, until you came along. But there wasn’t a damned thing she could do.”



Grithe let Mason go. But the investigator had no strength left. He crumpled, and only a groan slipped past his lips. A soft groan.

“She got depressed, you know. She started taking pills, and got even more depressed ‘cus of them. And I couldn’t do a damned thing either.”

Grithe spat those last words.

“I cared for her for three years. I carried us on my back. But I didn’t know who she was anymore. She wasn’t even human. Have you ever lived with a drug addict? Heard the way they scream in the night after being stoned for hours? But of course not.”

Mason braced himself for something, but nothing came.

“She was worse than dead, Mason. It was merciful to kill her. And it’s all because of you.”

Grithe landed a sharp kick to Mason’s flank. His insides screamed with pain, but he just laid there. Still.

“It’s funny. You destroyed us without a second thought. And now you have the audacity to try and help me?

Why the hell would I even come to you?”

Mason could feel Grithe’s breath an inch away from his face.

“You’re a naïve fool, Mason. You should’ve seen this coming.”

Grithe drove his foot into Mason’s stomach. He rolled over in pain.

“No. You’re worse. You’re a monster. And monsters don’t belong with the rest of us.”

The next day, detective Stevens sighed deeply. Preliminary investigations into Mason Swank’s death revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

## *Three Strangers at the End of the World*

The sky was dark as Syphion climbed the last of the ruinous steps. His reflective shield was clutched tightly in his hand. His armor clanked and crunched with each step, its last oiling having been days previous. He shook the dull agony of stiffness from his fingers as he passed through the great dead city's gates.

Two shadows stood before him, below the tower that overlooked the great rotting corpse of Azyrven. The first and darkest of the shadows was a hulking man clad in plate, burned a dark, dark black: Godrik of Sunpyre, The Burned Son of Timir. Across from him, a smaller, though no less impressive, figure of Ramaro of Westerwyn, dressed in heavy layers of red, black, and white, an eternally smiling gold mask covering his face.

"Ah, another journeyman arrives that makes three of us fools come to dredge up redemption from this great corpse of a burg," Ramaro chuckled. "Thank God you're here. Godrik makes such poor company.

What is your name?"

"Syphion of Fafnor, The Mirror Knight."

"Ah Fafnor... I loved a woman from there once. Of course, if she saw me now, she would probably cut my heart out," Ramaro jested.

As Syphion approached, he found himself drawn to the gaze of Godrik. Past the grate of his greathelm he could see his eyes, red and dry brown things surrounded by crisped flesh and devoid of eyelids. All knew the story, but only the most foolish would not shudder at proof of it.

The three waited in silence another day, set about a smoldering campfire, and then a second. None spoke nor dared remove the veils which concealed their faces. Even Ramaro scarcely uttered a thing, and Godrik did nothing but fill the air with rasping breaths. Though the clouds made it difficult to tell dusk from dawn, it was the close of the third day when Syphion stood. No one else would come, a fact even Ramaro's grinning veneer seemed to falter before. Three faceless men had waited at the world's end more than long enough—too long, in fact.

For three days, they crossed through Azyrven, through its clogged stone arteries, its bloated labyrinthian bowels, its dust-ruined lungs where once hundreds of thousands had breathed new life into the city each day. Nothing but ash and the stench of entropy remained.

The journey was uneventful, their only traveling companion the clacking of steel against cobblestone and the groans of their metal joints.

At last, they came to the great rotted gates of a keep whose size made a man dizzy, its highest tower, stretching through the gray of the sky beyond the vision of mortals. The ancient wood squealed as Godrik pushed the gate open, a slam filling the city and rupturing eardrums as the doors stopped at last.

"Fear death like autumn snows, my brothers. It bears its false power only over the weak and hopeless. Be ye neither my fellow wary gentlemen, for the winter lies ahead," Ramaro muttered to himself.

The grand hall opened up before them as a great bottomless pit, only they would need walk this one rather than let it take them by its own way, and so they pressed on. Each ledge, each balcony carried an echo, a whisper, some musing of familiarity, but all had been lost in this garden of souls, a crypt of the forgotten. For hours they walked, hours and hours, echoing step after step guiding them onward. Light became a concept as novel as comfort.

At last, a single torch. It burned their eyes with its light, their lungs with its smoke, their noses with its stench. It was an old thing, bound before a door, ever seeming to flicker on its last ember, never quite managing to

gutter out. Behind it lay one final chamber.

Godrik was the first to march on, Syphion soon to follow, leaving only Ramaro to find pause before letting out a tight sigh and entering the last chamber as well.

A single figure remained in the room, a once great man, depleted to little more than a husk, his eyes sunken, his great warhammer laid across his lap, his pearlescent armor scabbed with rust. His ghostly eyes seemed to spark at their arrival, three strangers come at the world's end.

None shouted.

None spoke.

None so much as whispered as the ancient figure, head topped with a jet crown, seized up his hammer and with a blinding speed, set himself upon them.

Godrik was the first to be struck, the indomitable man but a child before the old king's might. The chamber shuddered under the weight of the blow. Seizing the instant, Ramaro put his mace to the enemy's shoulder, but he was slow, far too slow. The strike to follow would have killed the westerner were it not for his illusion, the body the king had attacked shattering into a thousand sparks as the true Ramaro struck out from behind a pillar at the king's leg.

The husk staggered for a moment, but Ramaro was not nearly strong enough to bring him down. The king spun and lifted his hammer high above his head, bringing it down with all his blighted strength.

Godrik caught the weapon with a sound like thunder, his armor and body groaning under the strain as he held back a power as old as the castle itself.

Syphion moved in, leaping to bury his sword into the king's neck, but he found himself battered back by a single hand, only his shield saving him as he crashed across the room, but the momentary distraction weakened the phantom's grip just enough that Godrik could throw the hammer off and conjure a lance of flame. It flew true, piercing the king's shoulder and igniting

his right side.

The ghoul barely reacted, sweeping Godrik aside as it crawled toward Ramaro on all fours, his cape setting the room a brilliant red and orange as it turned to ash. The many faced knight leapt aside as the thing smashed through a pillar while trying to charge him.

The castle grumbled in response.

The king emerged from the dust and rubble with a sword larger than any man, and swung. With a spray of blood and a stifled scream, Ramaro fell back clutching the sanguine stump of his right arm. Before the enemy could make a killing blow, however, he was overwhelmed by a blast of flame so great it brought light to an interior that had not seen the like for a thousand years.

The thing screamed as the fire consumed it, its armor melting into its flesh as it struggled to free itself from the agony. Godrik too screamed, the flame a grim reminder if the legends were to be believed.

The blaze was not enough.

The king pushed through it and seized Godrik, planting him firmly through a sharp chunk of rubble with a single, long, wasted arm. The knight died in an instant, a single heart-wrenching instant, and the king's eyes were upon Syphion.

Dashing out of the way of the king's extended arm, he heard a pillar crumble behind him, the crippled ceiling dropping a cavalcade of old stone atop the king in response.

Breaking free, the crown wearer leaped to seize the ledge of the newly made hole, swinging itself into the wall besides Syphion where it scrambled on all fours after him. Its armour was melted away, its cape and hair singed to a crisp. All that remained of the king was his ancient body, scarcely more than skin and bone now.

Syphion planted his back against a wall and as the beast charged at him, he drove his sword into its eye. Staggering back, it caught sight of its sword, clambering towards it. Seizing it by the handle, it lifted it to strike, but it froze. Sparks broke from it, and the blade's true form revealed itself.

An inversion of its initial appearance, the blade instead drove itself back, piercing the old king's chest and emerging through the other side where he had impaled himself.

The king slumped to the ground, and Syphion was left with only Ramaro. The masked knight chuckled faintly, his arm pouring crimson fluid like wine.

Syphion approached the crippled body of Ramaro, the smile of his false visage now not so wide.

The two stood in silence, their eyes looking into each other for an eternity.

Drawing his sword, Syphion drove it into the westerner's heart without a word.

And as the death chokes of the knight faded, Syphion was alone.



## *The Contortionist*

He was as ugly as the world around him. So in a way, he was beautiful, wasn't he?

The pale man sat beside the light orange flames and drank his bleached tea. The flames crackled and burned and screamed. But the pale man said nothing and did nothing about those screams, the screams that bounced off his walls and into his ears. He merely sat and waited. He waited for the moon to tell him she was ready.

In the window behind him there she hung, thin as the man was. The moon was bathed in a dull blue sky, like the false calm of a raging sea. It was a new birth, or the death of the moon. He couldn't quite remember. He rose to his feet, brushed off dust from his elaborate black jacket, turned to face the moon and walked to the window. Away from the clutter of his room, away from the clutter of his mind.

The moon, she was always so beautiful and so clean, thought the man, who touched his lips to the cold Herend teacup in his hands. The cups reminded him of the pale mother. It was always a gamble to see if he would find solace or nightmare in these cups. He tilted his head up slightly and drank. The tea was cold and so was his heart, his heart that fought to beat beat beat.

His bulging veins protruded from beneath his flesh like tendrils, made more apparent by the whiteness of his skin. Even monsters eventually grew old, he chuckled. And when monsters died, they were buried nameless.

He coughed, some of the pale tea splashed back into the Herend teacup, along with some thick crimson cider. He leaned towards the window; the pale moon smiled upon him. The moon never judged him; the moon

never laughed.

So he cherished her like she cherished him.

He reached his finger out to the window and felt the cool glass panes beneath his flesh. He traced the outline of the moon. Once, twice, three times. A ritual for good luck, a prayer for himself as he approached his end. He inched away from the window and moved back to his onyx sofa, which was a little too gaudy for his taste. His lungs filled with raspy breaths as he tried to close his eyes and remember. Faces, names, numbers, and favourite things. They were leaving him. The common enemy of man is old age, and he was not about to let it take him. Not without a final visit to the moon, to the place where she first spoke to him.

When he closed his eyes he didn't remember what his favourite soap smelled like. It was sweet, it was bitter. What does it matter now, he barely ever left the house. An enormous and overwhelming house as it were, but it was safe. He did not leave for a funeral, much less for a bar of soap.

When he closed his eyes he didn't remember his brother's phone number. A long series of digits. Useless, as he never answered after the oceans took him. They used to sit under the summer sun, they never knew it would be their last farewell.

When he closed his eyes he didn't remember his mother's face. Nor much of the lullaby she used to sing. A ghastly tune, unfit for the child that it was sung to.

The pale man opened his eyes, slowly. He seemed to remember a few lines, whispered in his mother's raspy voice which was now his own. "Ferry man, oh ferry man, carry this lad home. Ferry man, ferry man, where do dead men go?" He paused.

"Dead men go to hell", the pale man declared to the mountains and mountains of boxes and crates all around him, making the large room seem much more claustrophobic than it really was. They remained silent, as they ought to.

With the vigor of a man fifty years younger than he, the pale man

stood up and tossed his teacup to one side, shattering it into fragments. This was so often the action of his deceased mother. Slivers of screams and accusations, they haunted him. Muffled by the boxes, yes, but they did not help much. The startling crack sound echoed, then faded. Like a sudden wave, larger than the rest, crashing onto the shore. Like the anger of the pale mother, who lashed and struck at whatever she could. She broke many fine teacups before the ocean rocks broke her.

Then the pale man walked. Slowly, painfully, he inched towards the door. It was a curse and a blessing to know how you will die, he thought, touching his hand to the doorknob. It was slightly rusty, worn with age and now on it lay a thick layer of dust. During the process of opening the door, the pale man felt a sharp tinge in his back and grasped at the boxes to keep himself upright. He succeeded at the cost of knocking over one of the cardboard mountains.

Shrapnel of wood and bits of metals came from within the box. There was a jar of seashells, an item frame, a music box. They tumbled and fell lifelessly to the floor. Shattering, breaking, mixing. They were all items that the pale man held dear, once. But now, as he forced the door open, completely ignoring those once cherished items, they seemed nothing more than ashes from old flames. The only thing he held dear now was the moon.

The beautiful and ever-changing moon. Like the ocean tides, always changing, always the same.

He followed the path, the trail the three had walked when times were alright. When they were alive, and things were just fine. They would walk under the moon's pale light to the ocean's edge. And there they would stand, motionless. Looking out towards the sea. All was fine until mother fell herself in, or so everyone had thought she did. Into the ocean's edge and cracked her skull on the rocks.

The pale man gripped tightly onto the wooden fence that lined the path, seemingly ignorant to the wooden protrusions that felt their way into the flesh of his hand, drawing drops of blood. The sound of worn soles

dragging across the cement and raspy breathing were the only things that broke the vows of silence that night.

And finally, the pale man walked himself to the edge of the waters, hearing them splashing underneath. After mother's death, brother was never the same. Jumpy, paranoid. Afraid of the waves. The pale man called his brother to him and did to brother what he did to mother. This second time, he had the luxury to watch the ocean waves, bathed in the light of the pale full moon, swallow his brother whole.

The pale man smiled, it covered his gaunt face and sunken eyes. Then a coughing fit broke through and tore the smile in two. He coughed and coughed. Blood, bile, and tears spewed onto his hands. Several times, whilst dancing this pained dance, he too came near the ocean's edge. He huffed and huffed, puffing out pained breaths. Finally, after an agonizing eternity, he felt himself regain control of his body. He looked out to the waters, the beautiful, pale waters. They were finally allowing him in.

The pale man moved to the place where the fence protruded outwards, where mother fell. He felt the sharp wood pierce his fingers yet felt nothing but reassurance. The moon, he thought, she was inviting him in. He would be a fool to not answer.

The pale man braced himself and let her take him.

After a moment, there was nothing to brace for. His head hit the sharpest rock by the water's edge, and it kept going. It pushed out bits of pink that mingled with the sea foam, shards of crimson frolicked in the moon's radiant glow. The pale man was man no longer, but a vivid red. A colour befitting of his mangled corpse, impaled straight from head through torso, and the other rocks that broke his fall broke his body also. Twisted edges and incorrect curves. He was there, pierced. The moon gazed quietly at the man's body and, as if out of shame, hid herself behind a cover of clouds. It soon began to rain, and high tide swallowed him whole.

In a way, he was beautiful. Contorted, and beautiful. So in a way, the world tonight was beautiful too.

The crooked man,

Walked a crooked trail,

And on that trail he saw,

A crooked boy and a girl.

The crooked man,

On the crooked trail,

Threw the girl to the rocks,

And fed the boy to the foam.

## *The Imaginary Friend*

"Everyone has an imaginary friend right?" My best friend Penny burst out into laughter and she heard me ask my question.

"Ya maybe when I was seven" she replied. "Eloise you're almost twenty, you can't possibly still have an imaginary friend."

I sat back at the dinner table, puzzled by her answer wondering what she meant. *I still have an imaginary friend*, I thought to myself, *They're sitting at the other end of the table*. It was my twentieth birthday dinner and my two closest friends, Penny and Oliver surprised me with a cabin retreat. They drove me for four hours, blindfolded the entire way, to this cabin they rented far north. I was excited for the weekend; just the three of us (plus my friend), spending some quality time in nature, getting to know each other a little more personally.

The rest of the dinner I spent thinking about my interaction with Penny. Ever since I could remember he was always with me. He never spoke, never moved, just always looking over my shoulder. It didn't feel right to name him, so I always referred to him as "him", but deep down I knew he was my imaginary friend.

As we finished our dinner and cleaned up the kitchen, I heard scratching behind me. I spun around thinking it was him, but he was still at the dinner table not moving. *I must be hearing things*, I thought to myself as I cleaned and dried the dishes.



“We should go on a hike tomorrow morning to catch the sunrise,” said Oliver.

“Great idea,” said Penny. “If we’re waking up at five tomorrow, I’m going to bed now.”

“Night everyone!” said Oliver.

“Night” I replied. I trudged up the stairs, slowly as my eyelids became heavy. It had been a long day, and I was starting to hear things; I knew it was time to go to sleep. I opened my bedroom door, hearing more scratching behind me. I spun around again but it wasn’t him. He was already in my room, sitting in the corner like he always does, watching over me as I went to sleep. *I’m hearing things again*, I thought to myself. I asked him if he heard the scratching, but he just stared at me blankly with no emotion like he always did.

As I drifted off to sleep in bed, I replayed my interaction with Penny at the dinner table in my head. *How come she doesn’t have a friend? Maybe she’s embarrassed? Why would she be? We all have one right?* Or so I thought. The last thing I remember before falling asleep was a slight banging underneath me. It sounded like heavy rain, the drops banging on the windows, almost like they were trying to tell me something. It was probably just in my head, I reassured myself as I dozed off to sleep.

A couple of hours later, I was jolted awake to the sound of a shrill scream. *Am I dreaming? No this is definitely real life.* As I sprinted out of bed thinking Oliver was having another one of his night terrors, I tripped over a floorboard that must have come loose. *Hmm, I don’t remember that being there before.* It looked like someone had pushed it open from underneath.

*I'm going to leave a bad review on Airbnb, I thought to myself as I gradually stood up.*

I ran down the stairs hearing the deafening screams grow louder and louder until my ears felt like they were going to burst. I'd never heard a cry this loud or high-pitched in my life. I flung open Oliver's door, but to my surprise he was sound asleep, not a word coming out of his mouth. What about Penny? The screams were getting louder as I ran down the hallway, but Penny was also sound asleep, and the screams did not wake her up either. All of a sudden a more sinister thought crept into my mind. *What if it's him?* *No, it can't be, he's never made a sound before. Why now?* I rushed back upstairs, arriving at a dreadful sight.

My friend was on the floor convulsing uncontrollably and screaming at the top of his lungs. He was shaking so fast and hard, he looked inhuman. I screamed at him, pleading for him to stop as my ears couldn't take the sound much longer. He stopped. His body lay still, my ear ringing from the deafening, shrill screams. As I approached him he started jerking again, this time silently and pointing to the walls. All of a sudden he said, "The cabin. You're not alone anymore." His voice was deep and hoarse. His message took me aback. For twenty years he's followed me, but has never said a word always keeping to himself. *Why now does he choose to talk and what does he mean?*

"I don't understand what you mean. Who else is here beside Penny and Oliver?" He replied, "They're here, surrounding us on all sides." All of a sudden he stopped convulsing and went silent. I glanced around the room wondering what he could have meant by "They're surrounding us" but there was nobody else in my room. As I looked back at him he was back in his corner like nothing has ever happened, staring blankly ahead like he always does. *What did I just experience?*

*And more importantly WHAT DID HE MEAN?*

I sprinted back to bed, tripping over the same floorboard, I tripped over earlier. My head throbbed as my vision got blurry. I got back into bed, staring at him in the corner, going over what I had just experienced. All of a sudden it hit me like a train. *The cabin's walls*, I thought to myself. As soon as I thought this, I heard the scratching again, but this time louder. It seemed like it was coming from the wall right behind me. Tears started streaming down my face, as the scratching grew louder. I stood up on my bed, shaking from fear as I pulled back the wallpaper from where the sound seemed to be coming from. As I peeled back the paper, it revealed old boards and a putrid smell almost like mixed rotting eggs and dead fish, only making me cry harder. It was an old cabin meaning these walls were probably built at least a hundred years ago. There was no way I would be able to pull back these boards with my bare hands. I looked over at him, begging him to help but he was now sitting at the foot of my bed, with the same blank expression.

As I scanned the room for anything to help me with these boards, my eyes locked on the floorboard I tripped over earlier. The scratching was getting deafening, my tears blurred my vision and the stench clogged up my nose, but I was determined to find what was in these walls. I removed the floorboard, creating a hole just large enough to slip through. It was pitch black in the hole but I knew the smell and screaming were coming from down there, and my senses couldn't take it much longer.

I took a leap of faith jumping in the hole not knowing what lay beneath the floorboards. The fall was further than I thought: at least three metres down until I smacked the floor like concrete. It was overwhelming down there. The smell intensified until I couldn't stop gagging, and the screaming and scratching seemed to be right behind me. I slowly turned around, feeling something land on my shoulder. A sliver of light shone through the floorboard above illuminating the vilest image I'd ever laid my

eyes on. To my horror, Penny and Oliver's skeletons were hanging on the wall; her bony dead hand resting on my shoulder like she was reaching out for help. The image of my two dead friends was burned into my mind, making me sick to my stomach. As I pulled myself out of the floor as fast as possible, a thought crossed my mind. *Who did I just see in Penny and Oliver's beds if they were murdered and stuffed beneath the floor? And who murdered them?*

I ran to Penny's room, dizzy, out of breath and in shock from what I'd just witnessed. As the door crept open, I saw a creature just like him sitting on Penny's bed. "So this must be Penny's friend," I said out loud.

*Wait a minute. We all must have friends. Or are they really our friends? Did they do this to Penny and Oliver?* I spun around to see him along with another one walking towards me, their hands behind their backs. A smile crept upon his face as he lifted his fist high in the air. Maybe you're not a friend?

I don't think you're my imaginary friend anymore...

# *This Year's Winning Entries*

## *Grades 7 & 8*

1. "Castle of Greed" *Aryana Kapur, Toronto Montessori School*
2. "The Forgotten" *Leah Shenishevskaya, Country Day School*
3. "The Safehouse" *Willow Torgerson, Bishop Strachan School*

## *Grades 9 & 10*

1. "Smoking with Friends" *Anna Freitas, St. Clement's School*
2. "Eyes of Silent Blood" *Bryony Chan, Bishop Strachan School*
3. "Frostbite" *Theo James Brennan, Elmwood School*

## *Grades 11 & 12*

1. "Rouge Anemone" *Madelyn Tuns, Crestwood Preparatory College*
2. "The Contortionist" *Chara Qi, Appleby College*
3. "Faded Beauty - Photo Essay" *Ella Schoep, Trafalgar Castle School*

**Honourable Mention:** "Apartment 216" *William Wang,  
University of Toronto Schools*