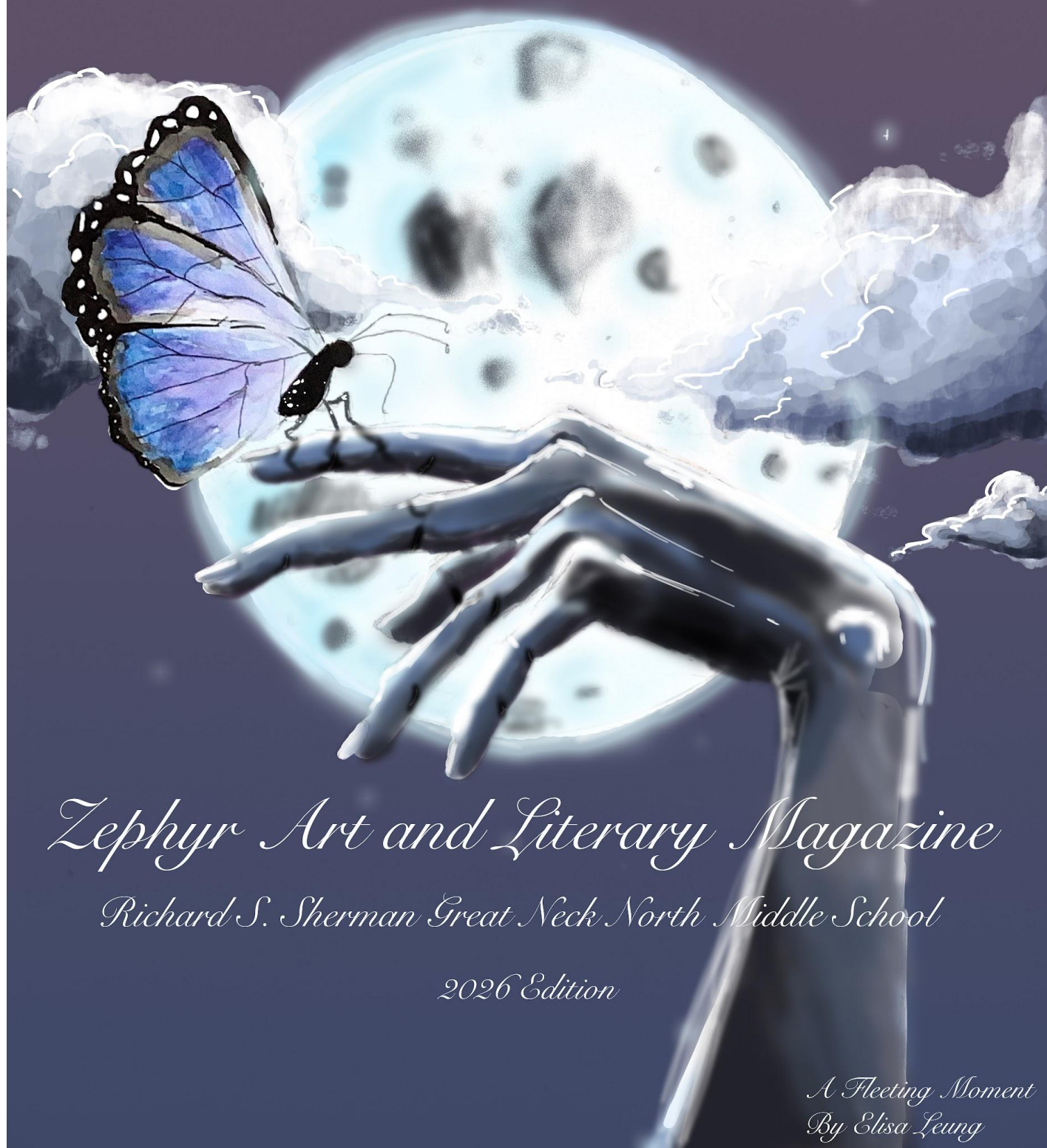


Once In A Blue Moon



Zephyr Art and Literary Magazine

Richard S. Sherman Great Neck North Middle School

2026 Edition

*A Fleeting Moment
By Elisa Leung*

ZEPHYR LITERARY MAGAZINE

A Magazine of Art and Literature
2025-2026 Edition

Richard S. Sherman
Great Neck North Middle School
77 Polo Road
Great Neck, New York 11023

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ZEPHYR LITERARY MAGAZINE

ADVISER

Marissa Dove

CONTRIBUTORS

Myrto Bezerianou	Skylar Hu	Abbigail Nadiiv
Chloe Chan	Isabella Kashani	Ronen Sadighpour
Linus Chen	Esther Keypour	Misha Segal
Jack David	Irene Kim	Joseph Sulimani
Ella Deng	Desun Kong	Ariel Torbati
Zoe DiRico	Vennjoy Kung	Gemma Vera
Hudson Enayatian	Yejun Kwon	Ningyi Xu
Emily Feng	Elisa Leung	Victor Yang
Noa Friedrich	Chloe Li	Athena Yeung
Maya Halpert	Rebecca Liu	Felicia You
Charlene Ho	Yvonne Liu	Scarlet Zhang
Olivia Hsu	Iris Mazur	Serena Zhao

SPECIAL THANKS

Kristin Kirleis, Art Chairperson

Keith Grier, Central Print Shop Operator

Zephyr's Philosophy

Great Neck North Middle School's literary magazine, *Zephyr*, provides students with the opportunity to share their poems, short stories, and graphic artwork with the school community. *Zephyr* is a unique way for students to express themselves, to demonstrate their talents, and to articulate their feelings through a creative outlet. This school-based publication is a student-run activity where students are encouraged to contribute not only as writers and artists, but as members of the editorial staff.

Explanation of Theme

"Once In A Blue Moon" was envisioned by the students of the *Zephyr* club. This famous idiom references occurrences that happen very rarely or almost never. The astronomical event of a "Blue Moon" occurs roughly once every 2.5 to 3 years, which explains the expression's origin.

Our members wanted to highlight stories where strange, unexpected, and even abnormal happenings come to exist. The poems and short stories found in this year's magazine incorporate fallen utopias, original fairy tales, supernatural legends, and an abundance of bizarre weather!

We hope that you enjoy experiencing some Blue Moons with us!

Some works in this magazine explore complex feelings and challenging moments through metaphor, fantasy, and creative storytelling. They reflect the real emotional landscape of our students and are presented with care and sensitivity. Where necessary, editorial adjustments were made to ensure that all pieces are appropriate for a middle school audience.

Table of Contents

Title of Piece:	Author/Artist:	Page Number:
A Fleeting Moment	Elisa Leung	Front Cover
Sometimes, You Can't Find the Moon – But It's Always There	Chloe Chan	Illustration, 7
Moonlit Horizon	Emily Feng	Illustration, 8
Moonlight	Isabella Kashani	Poem, 9
Rare Bloom	Ella Deng	Illustration, 10
Fleeting Yet Frequent	Noa Friedrich	Poem, 11
Out of the Blue	Skylar Hu	Illustration, 12
Blood Moons, Supermoons, New Moons, Blue Moons...	Victor Yang	Informational Article, 13
Writing Stories Under the Stars	Scarlet Zhang	Poem, 15
Midnight Landscape	Emily Feng	Poem, 15
Unusual	Desun Kong	Illustration, 16
Follow the Leader	Zoe DiRico	Short Story, 17
Aurora Lights	Vennjoy Kung	Illustration, 26
The Deal	Esther Keypour	Prose Poem, 27
Thriving Tree	Iris Mazur	Poem, 35

Table of Contents

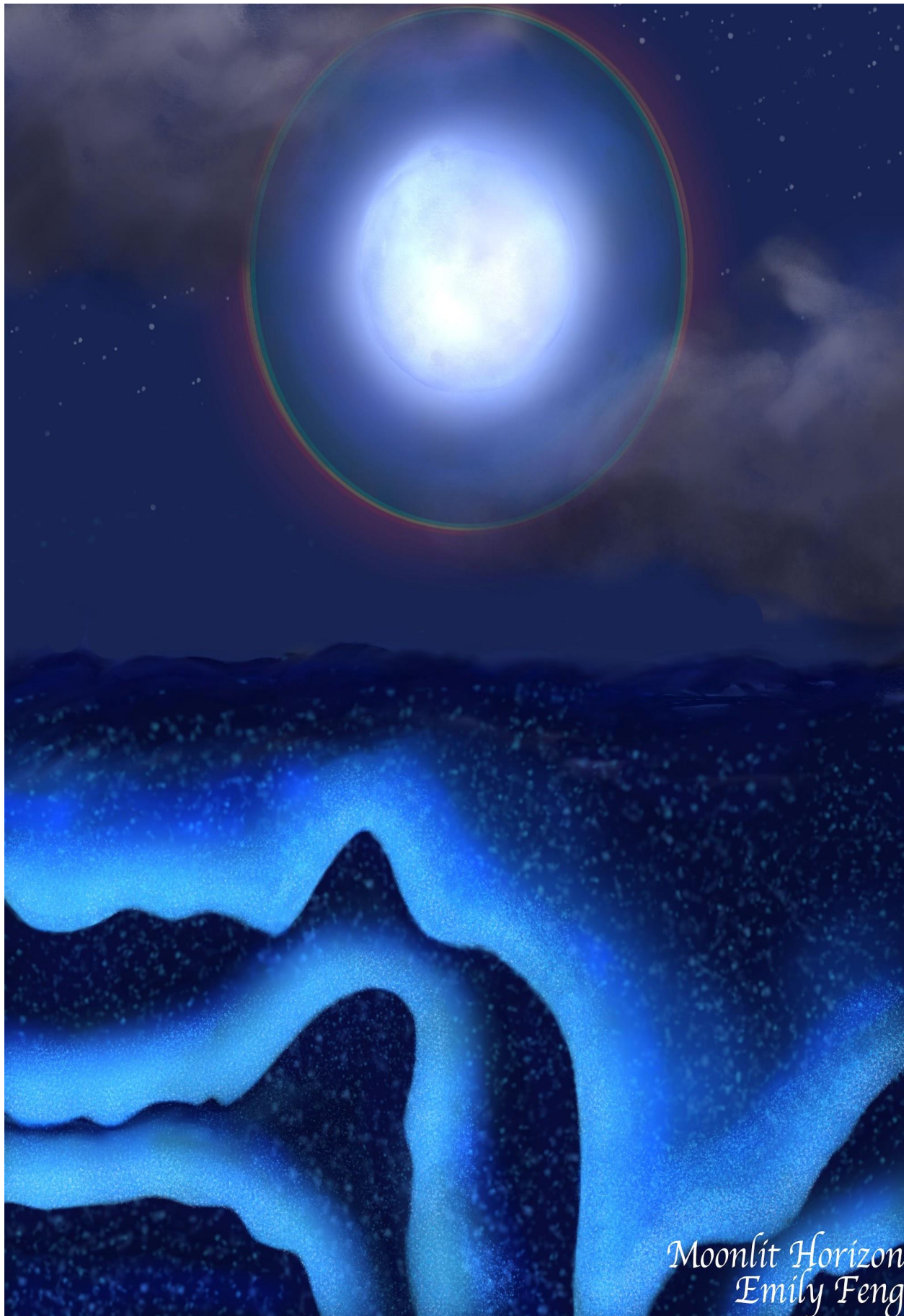
Title of Piece:	Author/Artist:	Page Number:
Books	Chloe Li	Poem, 35
Every Story Has a Blue Moon	Serena Zhao	Illustration, 36
The Necromancer	Maya Halpert	Short Story, 37
Bioluminescence	Charlene Ho	Illustration, 51
A Gift From God	Ronen Sadighpour	Illustration, 52
Maybe	Ella Deng	Poem, 53
Only This Once	Yejun Kwon	Illustration, 54
A Contrast Unparalleled	Isabella Kashani	Poem, 55
Summer	Joseph Sulimani	Poem, 55
Dreams Work	Misha Segal	Illustration, 56
If It Weren't for Them	Olivia Hsu	Short Story, 57
Choices	Ariel Torbati	Poem, 59
Once in a Lifetime	Scarlet Zhang	Illustration, 60
Actions Will Always Have Their Consequences	Gemma Vera	Short Story, 61
As Time Goes By	Irene Kim	Illustration, 70
The End of a New Beginning	Linus Chen	Poem, 71

Table of Contents

Title of Piece:	Author/Artist:	Page Number:
The Shot Seen Around the World	Yvonne Liu	Illustration, 72
Buzzer Beater	Jack David	Poem, 73
Midnight Moon's Fireflies	Athena Yeung	Illustration, 74
Nostalgia	Scarlet Zhang	Prose Poem, 75
Moonwatching	Rebecca Liu	Illustration, 76
Lost in the Woods	Isabella Kashani	Short Story, 77
Treasure Can Only Be Found...	Abbigail Nativ	Illustration, 79
Once in a Blue Moon	Gemma Vera	Illustration, 80
For Once	Maya Halpert	Poem, 81
A Blue Night	Myrto Bezerianou	Illustration, 82
Dear Stage	Scarlet Zhang	Poem, 83
Violet Hush	Ningyi Xu	Illustration, 84
How to Keep a Valuable Wonder	Scarlet Zhang	Poem, 85
Within the Moon Cycles	Felicia You	Illustration, 86
Solitude	Hudson Enayatian	Illustration, 87
Butterflies and Flowers	Chloe Li	Back Cover



**Sometimes, You Can't Find
The Moon—But It's Always There
By Chloe Chan**



Moonlit Horizon
Emily Feng

“Moonlight”
by Isabella Kashani

The moon shimmers down on you
Casting a glow right by your feet
Quietly, it creeps
Casting a warm smile
Over the dark blanket of night

You saunter home,
On a quiet journey
Walking through the silent night
Where the moon shines white,
Smiling sweetly at you

You look up at the moon once more,
Basking in its glory,
In its comforting embrace,
It glimmers
And shimmers
Almost winking at you
As you silently walk by



Rare Bloom
by Ella Deng

"Fleeting Yet Frequent"

by Noa Friedrich

They say the best things occur when you'd least expect
but last time I double checked
they happen everyday
and they never really stay

They pass unnoticed,
completely out of focus
Forgotten by all
treated like an old shawl

Still, life depends on the everyday miracles
and while such an oxymoron may seem satirical
What would you do if one day the sun didn't shine?
as if it simply had forgotten to rise

The phrase "once in a blue moon" to describe something rare
But what about the moon that rises nightly, always there?

A friend making you laugh after a hard test
Winning a competition and feeling the best
Going to a store, buying a cute new accessory
None of which are things that happen only once in a century

Fleeting moments of happiness
causing a life filled with joy and silliness
as common as the air we inhale
yet we depend on the idea that these moments won't bail
Perhaps not as special as a blue moon's eclipse
but they're the quiet magic we so often miss



“Blood Moons, Supermoons, New Moons, Blue Moons...”

by Victor Yang

You may have heard of a few terms that describe the Moon, including blood moon, supermoon, new moon, full moon, and blue moon (from this magazine’s theme)! A full moon is when the Moon is illuminated so that you see it as a full circle, but what are all these other terms?

As you probably know, the Moon orbits the Earth, and the Earth orbits the Sun. The Sun produces light, but the Moon does not. The Moon’s appearance is affected by light that reaches the Moon and then the Earth, and this light is affected by the constantly changing positions of the Sun, Earth, and Moon.

As the Sun shines, some sunlight reflects off the Moon to the Earth. We then see this light. If the Moon is between the Earth and the Sun, most of the light will be reflected back to the Sun, rather than to the Earth. Thus we will only see a small portion of the Moon. The Moon may also be completely invisible, which is a new moon.

If the Sun, Earth, and Moon are approximately aligned in a straight line in that order, most of the light from the Sun reaching the Moon will reflect off the Moon to the Earth. This results in a large portion of the Moon being visible; when the entire Moon is visible, it is a full moon.

The Moon takes approximately twenty-nine days to complete one orbit around the Earth. In each orbit there is one day where the Sun, Earth, and Moon are aligned enough to produce a full moon, and one day where there is a new moon. However, because the twenty-nine days are slightly shorter than a month, during some months there will be two full moons. In such a month, the second full moon is called a blue moon.

The Moon’s orbit is not a perfect circle. Instead, it is an ellipse, an oval-like shape. As such, the distance between the Earth and the Moon varies. The point in the Moon’s orbit closest to Earth is the perigee. When a full Moon happens on or near the perigee, the Moon will appear bigger and brighter than usual. This is a supermoon.

When light passes through Earth's atmosphere, it doesn't just pass right through. Instead, it can get deflected by particles in the atmosphere. This is called Rayleigh scattering and happens much more to higher-wavelength light than lower-wavelength light.

Sometimes during a full moon, the Moon is located such that any light from the Sun that reaches it must first pass through Earth's atmosphere. All light that passes through Earth's atmosphere is subject to Rayleigh scattering, so the light reaching the Moon has mostly lower wavelengths. Some of this reddish light is then reflected back to the Earth, so the Moon appears red. This is a blood moon.

Supermoons are relatively common; they happen three to four times a year. Blue moons happen approximately seven times every nineteen years. Blood moons occur more irregularly. At most, there are usually two blood moons per year. Overall, supermoons are more common than blue moons, but because Rayleigh scattering can only happen briefly, each blood moon is visible from only part of Earth's surface.

The below table shows the days on which the next three supermoons, blood moons, and blue moons will be visible from New York, starting from May 2026. Happy moon gazing!

Supermoons:	Blood Moons:	Blue Moons:
November 24, 2026	December 20, 2029	May 31, 2026
December 24, 2026	October 8, 2033	December 31, 2028
January 22, 2027	August 7, 2036	July 31, 2034

“Writing Stories Under the Stars”
by Scarlet Zhang

Can you see the light?
Is it very bright?
Are they glowing red?
Shouldn't they glow white?
The question is very clean,
May your answer not be right.
May you not ask others—
Nor any answers be just right.
The moon is very bright tonight,
You see the beams shine down.
Smell magic upon the air tonight,
The shimmers left behind.
For your life is not a camera.
Your life put down to write.

“Midnight Landscape”
by Emily Feng

The moon casts a
Humble glow onto the grass
Everything seems just a
Bit calmer than the
Loudness of the sun
Under the vast, dark sky
Engulfing the landscape
Many stars dotted all
Over the horizon
Oh, it shall be peaceful for
Now



Unusual
By Desun Kong

“Follow the Leader”

by Zoe DiRico

“Don’t disobey orders,” the announcements boomed over millions of people rushing to their placements. “Don’t take off your blindfold,” it continued. “And don’t resist.”

“Finally,” Roxie muttered.

The daily morning announcements were over. Roxie had to rush to her placement. She couldn’t be late for the third time this year. That would be the breaking point for the school. She would be sent to an “adaptation camp,” and she couldn’t do that. She couldn’t stand hearing them say over and over again the importance of compliance and decorum. Roxie couldn’t stand that word, “decorum.” It was so phony.

“Room 51, thank God,” Roxie sighed.

The room's location in the school changed every day to keep each student on edge. One day, Room 51 would be on the first floor, and the next on the eighth. Luckily enough for Roxie, it was only on the second floor today. She bounded into class so as to not waste a second.

“Don’t blink more than 500 times. Don’t speak unless spoken to. Don’t read. Don’t drink water outside. And as always, don’t take off your blindfold outside.” Mrs. Jones was done reading the daily rules. The blink rule was quite annoying, but at least there weren't as many rules as the day before.

“Take out your hearing chips; we will be listening to the learning material today,” Mrs. Jones announced over a silent classroom. Roxie put the chips into her ears and zoned out. There was no point in paying attention; it was the same information every day: *We must worship Stradlater. He is the greatest. He protects us all from evil. If you ever disobey him, you will be greatly punished.* Then they would talk about the almighty blindfolds: *The blindfolds were first manufactured fifty years ago in trial. They hide all discomfort and evil from the outside world. There’s no fear because the blindfolds protect. Take them off outside, and you will be killed. We do not want discomfort. We care too much about you.*

Roxie couldn’t stand that speech. She knew it was all bull. The whole reason for the blindfolds was to hide something from the outside world. Roxie was sure of it.

When she was younger, Roxie's grandmother told her of all the amazing things she would never get to see. There were trees that stayed green all year, and there were these things called clouds. They stayed in the sky and looked like big cotton balls. Roxie loved to think of what the outside world was like. She could dream about it for hours. Her whole room was filled with pictures of the sun, a big ball of light that illuminated the sky in the darkest of days, or at least what she thought the sun looked like. It was comforting for her.

Roxie was only a toddler when she first had the rules fully explained to her. She was told about how everyone in the world wore blindfolds outside because they protected the populace from evil lurking at every corner. There was no need to worry about danger when the people making life dangerous had a disadvantage. She was also told of the terrible crimes committed before the blindfolds were put into place. People would do horrid things to other humans, purely for the thrill of it. No one was safe. The worst part was that it was ordinary people. There was no true solution to the problem, because the evil ones were human, like anyone else. That is why the government says they created the blindfolds: to protect the world and its population.

Roxie agreed with that sentiment for the majority of her life, although deep down inside she longed to see the sun and stars. In fact, it wasn't until she was in middle school that she really started to question the world around her. It started simply—longing to see what the outside world looked like. Her grandmother's stories had stopped doing the trick for her years ago. Soon after, Roxie started to notice flaws in the rules she once found comforting.

One day she ran home after school, smiling from ear to ear with excitement, eager to tell her mother about how she had gotten a perfect score on her science test. But when she got home, her mother shushed her immediately. One of the rules that had been in place for Roxie's whole life was "No vanity." That meant Roxie couldn't talk about anything she had done even remotely well.

"You did as expected," her mother sternly said.

Roxie stormed up to her room and locked the door. She went to her bed and cried. She cried for hours on end, thinking about every little accomplishment she had suppressed before.

You see, on the exterior Roxie was rock solid. No one truly knew how soft and broken she was on the inside. Roxie would take a million punches or insults at school and show no emotion. But at home, Roxie would break down for hours in

silence. She couldn't be too loud or someone would know—know that she was hurt, or worse, know she was crying. Crying was another big no. If she was caught crying by the cameras, she would be sentenced to hours upon hours of brutal labor. Roxie could not do that ever again.

It was about five years ago to the day, and Roxie was ten years old. She had just come home from a long brutal day of school and rushed to her room, ready to explode at any minute. She walked into the room as usual, carefully closed the door, and hurried to her bed. Roxie hadn't known it at the time, but her mother was hidden inside of her closet. Her mother had been putting away laundry when she realized she could fit into that closet with room to spare. Her mother had been suspecting that Roxie was up to something for years. Now, by hiding inside of Roxie's room, she could finally see the truth.

Once she thought no one could see her, Roxie started to cry. She cried louder and stronger than ever before. She cried and cried and cried for what seemed like hours on end. There were no breaks, no quivers, just pure despair and sadness. Finally, Roxie calmed herself down, wiped her tears, and rushed downstairs in time for supper. On the dinner table, instead of ham or rice, there was a phone, front and center on the table. The video playing on the phone was something Roxie was sure to never forget: herself, crying. Her mother had caught her, on video, at her worst moment, and now Roxie was sure to pay. Roxie's first instinct was to cry again, but that was only going to make it all worse. Much, much worse.

"You're leaving first thing tomorrow," her mother said, more sternly than ever before. "I cannot have any of this nonsense occurring ever again under my roof."

Then she turned away and stormed off to her room, leaving Roxie alone with the video playing on repeat.

The next day, Roxie was woken at the crack of dawn and sent to camp. She worked for hours with no end in sight. Her hands started to callous, and her face started to sullen. It wasn't until a year of hard work that Roxie could leave. She didn't leave as she had entered, though. She was covered in small wounds and scars so deep nothing could heal them.

Now Roxie was off to her favorite class of the day, history class.

"Class, today we will learn about a sensitive but important topic: life before our divine world ruler, Stradlater." The teacher waited for approval, but no one could talk. "Sorry class, I forgot about the rule." She paused, then began again.

“Years ago, before you were born, there was a war. It was dreadful; I barely remember it myself, but the stories I have been told are truly horrific. The war was between different divided parts of the world that were called countries. The war was treacherous. Millions died and countries were left in pieces.”

God, if Roxie ever had to hear this story again, she'd be sure to tear out her ears.

“One day, in the midst of the chaos and horror, a savior arrived: Tom Stradlater, a man from the suburbs of a place called ‘Kansas.’ He had a goal, and a plan to reach that goal. He was going to unite the world. It started slowly, convincing small countries to unite and form allyships. Before long, the whole world united. The sounds of joy and excitement rang throughout the streets that were once filled with tears. Life was better, stronger. This joyous state only lasted so long before problems arose. The world needed a leader, someone to guide us and keep us safe. That was when our savior Stradlater arose once again. He selflessly took on the position with open arms and has embraced it ever since.”

Roxie was sure she was going to explode if she had to be in that classroom for any longer. Luckily enough for her, the bell rang before she did.

“Everyone, report to the auditorium; it's time for the best part of the day: Visitation!” The voice of the vice principal boomed over the whole school.

Her voice annoyed Roxie more than most voices; it was too cheery for her taste. It sounded much too forced. Visitation was a biannual assembly in which Stradlater came to the school to make sure it was doing what it was supposed to. He came in, talked for an hour, then left to examine the school and make sure it fit his protocol for how a school should function. Roxie absolutely despised Visitation days. She couldn't stand hearing Stradlater's voice up close.

When Roxie was finally ushered into the auditorium, she found a space close to the door. It was a procedure for her, in case something happened.

It took a few more minutes, but soon enough Roxie heard the voice of her vice principal again, “Thank you all for getting seated so quickly, although I would expect nothing less. Our special guest will be arriving in only three minutes, but before he gets here we must make sure every single person is prepared. We will have our staff circling every row to make sure every single blindfold is on perfectly. If you do not currently have one on, I would strongly advise you to hurry up and get it in place. If you are caught without one, it will be seen as an attempt to view Stradlater, and you will be punished greatly. Have a nice visit and goodbye.”

Although the auditorium was indoors, Stradlater required blindfolds to be worn in his presence. Roxie had tried to point out how odd that was, but she was always shushed before she could finish her thought.

No one was seen without their blindfold, so Visitation was able to begin. “Students of Area 180 High, may your Visitation commence! As you know, I am your divine ruler, Stradlater. I have heard many wonderful things about the accomplishments of all of you since the start of this year. I must say... I am quite disappointed.”

Gasps filled the auditorium; everyone's minds rushed to think of what they might have done wrong. “It seems to me that not a single person in this room has obeyed any of my laws. The laws that have been passed for the better of your neighbors’ lives. You have all lived in vanity, celebrating your accomplishments as though you deserved to. You celebrate yourselves more than you celebrate me. You thrive off of medals and glamour, pushing away me and my rules. I cannot allow that – you must understand. If you don't, it just proves my point more. That is why I will be tearing this school to shreds. Not only the school, though. That would be far too ineffective. Every person in this school will go as well.”

The room filled with shrieks of fear. Roxie herself started to hyperventilate. Her mind raced for a solution, but deep down inside she knew far too well that he wasn't playing around. This was truly Roxie's last day.

“In ten minutes, this school, and all you attending it, will be gone. Ten short, sweet minutes. There is no escape, no changing my mind. You did this to yourself, all of you. By the way, if I hear one more word out of any of you, you won't be the only ones suffering.” Stradlater demonically laughed.

“Ten minutes to live,” uttered Roxie.

Roxie's whole life was guided by this man, and now her death was going to be brought on by him, too. She never once had freedom, nor joy. She hated him. But more than anything, she hated herself for allowing someone to rule her life. She often thought about each way she wanted to rebel against Stradlater, but she had been too scared, postponing rebellion repeatedly until it was too late to do anything. Unless, it wasn't too late.

Stradlater was in the middle of a lively discussion with the principal of Area 180 High, when he heard a noise from the crowd.

“Look here Stradlater!” the voice of a girl echoed around the auditorium.

Furious, he turned around to see a girl, probably about 16 years old, holding a blindfold high above her head, waving it around like a flag. “It is inevitable that we are going to die, but I won't die peacefully. You took everything from me and the world. You are the reason for every tear hidden in shadows. You are a terrible, evil man, or whatever you are.”

With those words the girl opened a little door hidden off to the side, and ran outside.

“Get her!” he screamed.

Roxie finally got to see it: the sky she had dreamt of all her life. It wasn't quite as she had imagined it. In fact, it was the opposite of her dreams. It was burnt orange in color, with patches of light brown cloud-like objects. There was no sun, either. Everything was dark.

She stared in confusion at the sky until she heard the voice of her history teacher, “It's not at all like how I remembered it.”

Roxie turned around, and to her surprise, most of the student body was behind her, staring at the sky.

“I thought it was supposed to be the most beautiful blue imaginable,” one girl, who seemed to be in ninth grade, muttered.

Discussions started everywhere with the same question being raised: what happened to the sky? Roxie turned back around, ignoring the people behind her. She was sure that if she just kept looking, something would reveal itself. It had to.

Little did Roxie know that behind her, Stradlater approached out of the chaos. He pushed and shoved every person who was in his way of getting to the girl who revealed his biggest secret to the public.

Stradlater had thought long and hard for many years about what he would need to be the most powerful person in the world. He knew he could control people

easily. They were malleable and easy to break. The thing he wanted to control more than anything was the weather. He was certain that having control over the weather would finally make him truly all powerful. He wasn't quite sure how he would be able to get that control though.

He thought for hours upon hours about the topic, but every idea he had failed in trial. That is until one day he received a call in his office. A woman from Area 906 said that she believed she found a way to stop the drought her area had been experiencing at the time. Intrigued, Stradlater asked to hear more. She said that she created a machine that would suck up the clouds from areas experiencing high precipitation and move them to drier areas in need of water. She then continued to go on about the possible defects the machine could cause, but Stradlater didn't care. He was too busy imagining the awards and praise that would follow when he announced that he could control the weather. Stradlater immediately agreed to pay her any amount of money she asked for in return for the blueprints to the machine. Before long, millions of weather robots circled the blue skies overhead, picking up clouds as they moved along.

On the morning of the official announcement of Stradlater's new power, a problem arose. The sky was completely covered in a burnt orange haze. He immediately panicked, scared that it could come out that he was the cause. If it did his whole life would be in ruin. After a few minutes of pacing his office, Stradlater decided the only way he could actually have a possible chance at continuing his career, was to make sure no one could see the monstrosity he created.

That very day he came over the loudspeakers and made the announcement that would change the course of the world: "As of tonight, all residents of the world must wear a blindfold at all times outdoors."

Stradlater's fury only grew as he walked towards Roxie. She caused this, his downfall. When he reached her, he looked down at her. He didn't understand how she could do this to him: ruin the life he had built for himself. He couldn't let her get away with it; she had to die. He raised a small knife he carried in his pocket, but before he could bring it down, he felt a small kick to his back. He turned around to see a woman who seemed to be a teacher.

"Back off," she growled and kicked him to the ground.

Guards rushed to the woman to take her down, but it was too late. Stradlater hit the floor so hard that his head started to bleed out onto the pavement.

Roxie felt a liquid touching her feet and turned around. To her surprise, Stradlater was lying on the floor, bleeding profusely. A million thoughts and feelings swarmed her stomach and head. She hated this man with her whole heart, but she couldn't stand to see someone so hurt. On top of that, he was ruining her new shoes. She pushed those thoughts aside; instead, she wanted to think of a way she could do more, see more, and bring back some of the moments she had lost. Roxie knew far too well that her freedom would come to an end soon, but she also was sure that she could try to fix something, make some sort of lasting impact. She also knew that Stradlater being on the floor would slow down every guard around. They were all busy either dealing with Stradlater and getting him up, or restraining the woman who knocked him to the ground.

Roxie slipped out of the guard's vision and ran to the nearest building. She opened the door and immediately ran to the elevator. She knew that every building had an intercom on the highest floor.

In the elevator, she found the panel and searched for the highest number: 12. She went up and up until she landed at the top. It wasn't too hard to find where the intercom was held. She rushed into the room and, luckily enough for her, the secretary was out.

She found the intercom, and immediately spoke clearly into it, "Everyone stop whatever you are doing and give me your attention. My name is Roxie Hudson, and I attend Area 180 High. You must listen to me. Take off your blindfolds and look outside. Trust me. You have been brainwashed and taken advantage of, but you have the power to make a change and better our world. Stradlater has made you scared to disobey him, but you don't have to be scared. If we all work together, we can stop hi—"

Roxie had been so focused on giving the announcement that she didn't see a guard entering the room. He kicked her to the ground with his mallet and beat her until she couldn't breathe anymore. Roxie was gone, along with almost every one of her peers from school.

From then on, nothing was the same. Not everyone who had been in the office listened to Roxie that day, but the ones who did were more than enough. The people who listened to Roxie's words formed a rebellion that very same day. They spread Roxie's words everywhere they could reach, ignoring any consequences that

could come. It started small for them, slowly gaining support and followers. No one trusted them at first. It was extremely risky to go against Stradlater's order. Especially for a cause that was new and seemed completely powerless. But the rebellion kept fighting. They were determined to right the wrongs in the world, for themselves and for Roxie.

The rebellion started to pick up in speed immensely two months in, gaining between thirty and fifty followers per day across the globe. The reach of the rebellion began to rapidly increase, because all of the new followers spread Roxie's words.

By five months, things really started to change. Stradlater started to feel the pressure, realizing the complete control he once had was beginning to falter. Stradlater created new laws regarding the rebellion. Any person caught talking about Roxie or the rebellion would be forced into either an adaptation camp or prison. Those laws were powerless against the rebellion, though. They had already gained a greater following than anything ever seen before. There was no stopping them.

On the twentieth of February, exactly one year after the start of the rebellion, Stradlater surrendered. He had grown old and brittle over that year, losing the energy and power necessary to deal with such a rebellion.

Every street was filled with the sound of joy. People cried tears of happiness and relief: the nightmare was over.

They could feel, they could see, they could truly live. All because of one girl who wasn't afraid of causing trouble.



*Aurora Lights
Vennjoy Kung*

“The Deal”

by Esther Keypour

“There’s a deal you can make on a midnight walk alone
Look above, listen close, hear it fall from above
It will ask what you’d give and what you’d take in return.
I once went on such a walk.”

How long had it been since Nyx had first flown
to the old lady’s window, to call her his own?
A lone crow, once lost in the wide, empty sky,
was now a friend to the woman who never asked why.
Even a being with wings that guided it along could go so far.
Years had passed in a trance, so gentle, so slow,
She fed him, he brought trinkets, and their bond grew.
They’d meet at the dead of night, in the quietest hour,
and time stretched without a care, a soft, fleeting feeling.
But tonight, something stirred as the sun dipped in the distance,
And the pink sky faded to the indigo hue of a night sky.
The silver moon that had looked over the horizon felt different this night.
A strange, eerie glow lit the forest Nyx knew to avoid.
Nyx perched on a branch, his gaze now to the sky,
A full moon rising, a question nearby.
He forgot the old lady, and the food left behind,
His wings spread, and the night called to his mind.
Through the trees, he flew, the wind running through his feathered back,
A trail of silver light lit the path like a long ribbon.
A melody hummed of distant chirps, not warning, but soft.
Like lullabies sung in the trees.
And then, in the clearing, he saw a strange tree,
A glint in the crook,
A necklace.

It slipped from the branch, a jewel of bright light,
And Nyx followed it, gliding through the night.
He caught it like a token, between beak and wing,
A gift for the lady—oh, what would it bring?
Silver and crystal, the moon's glow shone,
A treasure to give, a secret to learn.
Nyx did not question the way the necklace came to him,
as if the forest itself had placed it in his path.
He thought little of chance,
less of coincidence,
now only of the old woman waiting in her quiet, wooden room.
Through tangled branches he flew once more,
wings cutting dusk into pieces,
carrying something small, shining—
a promise of food,
of company for them both.
He did not stop until the familiar windowsill met his claws,
until he stood where he always did, waiting.
The window rose slowly,
guided up by soft, old wrinkled hands—
time etched into every movement,
gentleness in every breath.
She welcomed him as she always had,
fingers brushing along his back,
a quiet language of touch neither needed to learn.

Then—
the offering.
He dropped the necklace into her waiting palm,
metal catching what little light the room could spare.
And only then did he notice—
a small charm,
cool and deliberate,
etched with letters:
N-A.

Someone's name, perhaps.
Someone's story.
But Nyx did not dwell on it.
It would not be the first time he carried the past in his beak—
and gave it away like it was nothing at all.
The old woman sighed,
a sound worn thin with years,
yet softened by something like relief.
Then came her laughter,
quiet, trembling,
like wind slipping through fragile glass.

“Oh, Nyx...” she whispered,
turning the charm between her fingers,
as though she had been expecting it all along.
The room grew still.
Too still.
The air shifted—
heavy, humming,
as if the forest itself had leaned in to listen.
Nyx tilted his head,
feathers ruffling at something unseen—
something changing.
Then—
pain,
sharp and sudden,
splitting through bone and breath alike.
His wings trembled,
his body folding inward,
unraveling, reshaping—
feathers melting into skin,
hollow bones growing heavy,
voice catching in a throat that had never held words before.

He fell to the floor—
not as a bird,
but as something new.
A boy.

A boy with wings still clinging to his back,
dark and trembling,
caught between sky and earth.
The old woman's voice faltered.
Nyx looked up—
truly looked, for the first time—
and saw her fading.
Not falling,
not breaking—
but withering.
Her form thinning like smoke,
edges dissolving into pale blue light that stretched toward the horizon.
Outside,
the moon had risen further—
vast,
now impossibly blue,
pulling at her like a tide.
“Don't be afraid,” she murmured,
though her voice was already distant,
woven into something larger than herself.
Nyx tried to speak—
but the word broke,
unfinished, unfamiliar.
Her smile lingered,
even as the rest of her did not.

“I made a deal,” she said softly,
as her hands became light,
as her light became sky.
“With a spirit that listens to lonely things.”
The blue moon pulsed—
once.
“For a life...
for a voice...
for hands that could hold more than trinkets.”
Her gaze found him—
clear, unwavering,
even as the world took her apart.
“You were never meant to stay a bird.”
Nyx reached for her—
new fingers grasping at fading light—
but she only smiled wider,
gentler,
already gone in pieces.
“In exchange...” she whispered,
her voice now the wind,
the glow,
the hush between heartbeats—
“I gave it mine.
And all I will take are the consequences.”

And then—
nothing remained but the blue moon
hanging heavy in the sky,
and a boy with wings, standing in a quiet room,
holding a necklace that no longer felt like someone else’s story.
Nyx opened his mouth—
a fragile, trembling thing,
and forced the air forward,
tried to shape it into something that could reach her.

A word—
any word—
but it broke apart before it could exist.
Then of course, nothing replied,
...

Nothing speaks to you in the night.
The room did not echo.
The wind did not carry her back.
The moon did not reply.
He tried again—
voice catching, cracking,
a sound half-born and already dying—
but there was no one left to hear it.
No soft hands.
No quiet laughter.
No window opening just for him.
Only absence.
Heavy,
complete,
unchanged by his need.
His wings shuddered,
folding close as if they, too, feared the space around him.
And slowly—
he sank to the floor,
to the silence,
to the weight of something he did not understand.
Long, inky black hair fell forward,
a curtain between him and a world that no longer felt like his.
His hands—
strange and unfamiliar,
too large, too human—
curled against the wood
as though it might steady him,
as though it might remember what he used to be.

But it did not.
Nothing did.
This body—
it did not fit him.
It hung on him like borrowed skin,
like a story told wrong,
like a life meant for someone else.
And there,
beneath the quiet gaze of a distant, bright blue moon,
Nyx sat—
alone once more,
with wings he did not understand,
a voice that would not come,
and a body that felt heavier now than it ever had before.
And as he sat there—
caught between breath and silence,
between what he was
and what he had become—
something slipped.

Softly.
Quietly.
Like a thread loosening
from the fabric of his mind.
He tried to hold onto her—
her voice,
her hands,
the way she said his name—
but it blurred.
Faded.
Drifted just beyond reach.
Her face—still there.
Her warmth—still there.
But her name...

Her name—
Nyx's breath hitched.
He searched for it,
clawing through memory with thoughts too new,
too fragile to hold anything steady.
It was right there—
he knew it was.
On the edge of sound,
on the tip of a voice that he still could not use.

A whisper—
“A...”
Just that.
Only that.
The rest dissolved like mist in morning light,
like she had pulled into something vast and unreachable.
Nyx lowered his head,
hair falling heavier now,
as if it, too, carried the weight of what he had lost.
An “A.”
A beginning without an ending.
A name he would never say,
never hear,
never be certain of again.
And beneath the blue-lit sky,
in a body that did not belong to him,
with wings that could not take him back—
Nyx sat in the quiet,
holding onto a single letter
like it was all that remained of the one who had given him everything.

“You won't hear me singin'
Now I'm taken, the night has me.
There's a deal that I made.
There's a deal that I made.”

“Thriving Tree”

by Iris Mazur

I am a thriving tree.
My leaves are my small problems.
They are what make me.
My leaves thrive and blossom.

I am a thriving tree.
My trunk stands tall and proud.
It is what makes me.
My trunk stands out from the crowd.

I am a thriving tree.
My roots are my history.
They are what make me.
My roots show my victory.

I am a thriving tree.
It is what makes me.

“Books”

by Chloe Li

I am a book,
filled with words,
describing me,
13 chapters,
representing my whole life,
titles along my spine,
showing who I am,
ink on pages,
unforgettable mistakes.
I am a book.



Every Story Has a Blue Moon
Serena Zhao

“The Necromancer”

by Maya Halpert

Part 1 - The Book

“Rise and shine, Emmy,” my mother says softly.

I blink groggily. Slowly, I can make out my room. There is light streaming through the window to the left of my bed where I lie. Dust motes float around in it.

My mom sighs melancholically, “Alright, sweetie, there’s breakfast in the kitchen whenever you’d like to go downstairs.” She smiles softly, then starts to walk towards the door.

I watch her go, then yawn. I don’t blame my mom for being so upset. After all, she’s still grieving.

I can hear my older brother Sam trying to talk to her when she gets downstairs, but I’m sure she doesn’t say much. It’s been like that for a few weeks now.

Right now, though, I need to focus. I quickly get dressed and grab the tattered old book out from under my bed, where it has remained hidden from my family overnight. It is covered in worn brown leather that feels cool to the touch, and there is nothing but the sketched outline of an owl on the front.

With the book in hand, I jump up onto my bed and sit down, crossing my legs. I gingerly open the book to the page that has been marked with a small piece of teal yarn, and begin to examine the scribbled ink writing. It’s a list of ingredients, and I only have three more items left.

The first four items were a maple leaf (we have a tree outside our house), a tear of sorrow (I’ve been crying a lot lately), a petal of a white chrysanthemum (I grow one in my room), and a dead fly (I found one in the living room). The next two are rosemary and bay leaf, which I’ve been stumped on where to find, because there aren’t any bushes or plants growing them near my house. As a matter of fact, I’m not even sure *what* those two ingredients grow on. Revisiting the list, though, I realize I know exactly where to get these things.

I jump off my bed and shove the weathered book into my backpack that has sat waiting on my nightstand. I have to be careful closing it though, because the top of the zipper broke off a couple years ago and it’s really sharp now. I once cut myself on it, and trust me, it hurt. Pulling the backpack on my arms, I practically run out of my room.

As I hurry down the stairs, I see Sam is writing something down in the living room. My mom is next to him, reading a book. I pause at the entrance to the living room.

“I’m going to...” I hesitate.

Both Sam and my mother look up. I really hope they’ll let me go.

Taking a deep breath, I continue. “I’m going to Charlotte’s botanical shop.”

My mother sighs, “Of course you are. Your grandmother used to love going there.” She sounds like she’s going to cry. “She was Charlotte’s teacher when she was a girl, and then when Charlotte inherited the shop from her mother, she would visit her. Charlotte gave her one of her favorite rings, and you know how much she liked to wear her rings.”

I nod. Gramma’s hand was always adorned in dozens of rings. You could barely see her finger.

My mother continues, “When Charlotte met James and they had Sadie, she brought you with her to see Sadie.” She looks at me in a funny sort of way, then continues, “That’s how you met her, you know?”

I nod slowly.

My mother then adds, “Your father will be back from the funeral home at two, and it’s ten now. You should be home well before then.”

“Okay,” I agree. I’m glad my mom is finally talking again.

From the look on his face, Sam looks glad, too. He does also look a bit suspicious, though.

“What are you going to do there, anyway?” he asks, furrowing his brow.

“Uh, you know,” I swallow, “Hang out with Sadie, talk to Charlotte. I’m sure they miss Gramma, too. I’ve got to look out for them. James didn’t really know Gramma that well, so I’m sure they’d like to talk about her with someone who really knew her.”

Sam doesn’t look convinced. “Have fun,” he mutters dryly, then goes back to writing whatever it was that he was writing.

I go over and hug my mom goodbye, then slide into my boots, open the door, and hurry outside and onto my waiting green bike.

My bike has got to be the best birthday present I ever received. Birthdays aren’t a huge deal in my family, so I usually get one or two small things. But two years ago, when I turned ten, Gramma decided it was time to get me a new bike. My parents weren’t even considering getting me a new bike, because for some

reason they thought my old, worn-down one was great. Gramma knew, though. She always knew. No one gets me like she did anymore.

Finally, I pedal into town. It's pretty empty, aside from a fox that stares at me as I pass by, which makes sense for a little after ten o'clock on a Saturday. I pass town hall, the library, the park, and Mr. Pontell's bakery before coming to a stop in front of a building that reads "Botanicals" in big white letters. I jump off my bike and lean it against the bike rack just outside the shop. When I push open the wooden doors and hear a faint jingle, the scents of hundreds of different plants fill my nostrils. It doesn't necessarily smell *bad*; it just smells like so many different things that it stops smelling like anything at all. The shop has plants on every shelf, every table, and shoved in every corner. The place is pretty much packed with plants. It's a miracle they manage to keep all the plants alive and still have room for new additions, but they make do. There is still space to walk around, but you have to be careful you don't trip on an unassuming plant. Pushing aside the branches of one particularly large tree in front of me, I can see Sadie looking tired at the checkout desk.

"Hey, Sadie," I say softly, not trying to startle her. It doesn't work.

"Oh!" she cries, startled. Even though she's got a few years on me, she gets scared way easier than I ever did. "Didn't see you there, Emmy." She smiles. "It's good to see you."

I smile too, because we're seeing each other somewhere that's not a funeral. I then jump over a few plants to stand in front of the desk.

"How are you guys holding up? Is Charlotte...okay?" She knows exactly what I'm talking about, because her smile falters.

"Well, you know how much Iris meant to her," Sadie starts. "She was her teacher, in more ways than one. She basically taught her everything she knows about...you know. My dad is trying to comfort her upstairs in the living room, but it's not really doing much."

I nod. Gramma was a really special person. Of course I know. I really want her back. Sadie looks a bit choked up, and I know that Gramma loved Sadie like she was a part of the family, too. Sadie always seemed like a sister to me, especially because of the way Gramma treated her. I know I don't have much time, but I need to comfort her somehow. I take her hand in mine.

"I miss her too, Sadie," I start.

She looks back up at me warmly.

“But right now, I actually need some plants.”

Sadie looks a bit suspicious and furrows her brow. She pulls her hand away from mine. “And can I ask...why?”

I stare blankly at her for a few seconds. “Preferably, no.”

Sadie crosses her arms, “What’s in your bag, Emmy? You’re not doing what I think you’re doing, are you?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Of course not!” I cry, ignoring the backpack question. If she opened it and saw the book and the ingredients, she would definitely not give me the plants. “I mean, if I’m not doing what you think I’m not doing, then yeah, I’m not doing that thing.”

Sadie squints at me, and I’m just glad she seems to be acting normally again. The soft-spoken Sadie of thirty seconds ago is gone, thankfully.

“Okay,” she whispers. “What plants would I *theoretically* be giving to you?”

I grin, “Rosemary and bay leaf, please!”

Sadie frowns, and I’m worried she won’t give them to me.

She sighs, “Here you go, Emmy,” as she pulls out what must be a few bay leaves and some rosemary from under the counter. “These are actually quite popular; you’re lucky we still have any left.”

I take them from her and shove them into my bag.

Sadie adds, “Free of charge, as per usual. You’re on the friends and family list.” She grins, then quickly goes back to a frown. “But I swear to God, Emmy Green, if you’re not responsible with these...” She closes her eyes. “We lost Iris only this month.”

She’s right, of course. Today is the last day of November, though. By far the worst month of my life.

“Well, I’ve got to go, Sadie,” I swallow. “Say hi to Charlotte and James for me, alright?”

Sadie nods, and I give her a quick hug before running out the door and hopping onto my bike.

By the time I get home, it’s only half past ten, which seems like a perfectly acceptable amount of time to have been gone. Outside my house, there’s the same fox I saw in town, and I stroke her luscious fur gently. I quickly glance inside to make sure my mom doesn’t see me and freak out.

As I rush inside and up the stairs into my room, Sam calls, “Why are you in such a hurry? What could you possibly be doing up there?”

I freeze. “Uh, nothing,” I call back, “Just sitting here.”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever. Why should I care?” he mutters, and I hear the typing of a keyboard resume.

I breathe out a sigh of relief, then dump out the contents of my bag and lay them out on my bedspread. There’s the book, of course, the maple leaf, my tear in a small glass jar, the petal, the dead fly, and now I add a bay leaf and a pointy rosemary leaf. I decide to move the items back into my bag for safekeeping and shove the bag under my bed for the meantime.

“Emmy, *what* are you doing?”

I look up and see Sam staring at me skeptically. My throat tightens. He can’t know. He’s not a witch. Gramma told me it would be really bad if non-witches learned that witchcraft was real. She said Mom is a witch, I guess she can sense this stuff, but that she refuses to believe in the existence of magic. Maybe she’ll believe in it once I bring Gramma back.

“Why would you put your bag under your bed? You know it’s just going to gather dust.”

Phew. So he didn’t really see anything, then.

He reaches under my bed to take out the bag. “What do you have in here, anyway?” He looks down at the bag suspiciously.

I snatch the bag away from him, then instantly regret it when I see his hand.

“Ow!” he yells.

I pulled it away too fast, and the big broken zipper cut a deep gash in his hand. It’s starting to well up with red.

“Oh my gosh, Sam, I’m so sorry.”

He glares at me. “Why do you always have to be so touchy about everything? I don’t even care what’s in your stupid backpack.”

The blood is really starting to fill the wound now.

“Well, maybe if you weren’t always asking so many questions about what I’m doing or where I’m going, this would never have happened! You’re my brother, not my parent,” I snap back.

He’s clutching the bleeding hand with his other hand. He winces, but not from the pain. “You wanna know why I ask so many questions, Emmy? Do you really wanna know?”

I’m actually not sure if I do, but I nod anyway.

“I knew Gramma was acting strange well before the MRI came back.”

I just stare at him. “You...knew?”

He sighs, “Yes, I knew. She was always throwing up, and her balance was off, so she needed help getting from place to place. She had trouble speaking, too, but I don’t think it was very noticeable to you. But she assured me she didn’t need to go to the doctor. I didn’t ask enough questions. I think she wanted to die at home. Of course, she didn’t get her wish.”

I nod. I understand what he’s saying. I guess he wants to make sure I don’t end up like Gramma. They said it would be too dangerous by the time she came in. The tumor was embedded in the brain stem, and surgery was unrealistic. Inoperable. That’s what they called it. It’s all bringing me back, back to November third, back to the day she first went to the hospital.

It started with a seizure. November third. The doctors in the hospital informed us that this actually was more common with low-grade tumors and could even mean the tumor was benign, if it was even a tumor at all, so we really had nothing to worry about. Sam immediately told the doctors about Gramma’s strange behaviors, much to her dislike. An MRI was scheduled, and sure enough, there was a tumor in her brain. Unfortunately, it was deeply embedded in the brain stem, and we were told that surgery would be extremely dangerous, and chemo might not do anything at all. ‘*Given Ms. Green’s age,*’ they said, ‘*it might make more sense to start end-of-life care than to try removing the tumor and make her life even shorter than it had to be.*’ Gramma agreed to this, and less than a week later, on November ninth, the doctors said she was on her deathbed. Luckily, “The Last Will and Testament of Iris Green” had already been written and finalized by some solemn-looking lawyer who had come in on November sixth.

November third. November sixth. November ninth.

November ninth was Gramma’s last day on Earth. I came into her room on that final day.

“Gramma?” I whispered softly to the frail woman lying on the sterile hospital bed. I barely recognized her.

“Is that Emmy?” she whispered back without opening her eyes.

“Yes, Gramma, it’s me,” I paused. “They said it’s your last day.” I waited for the answer I didn’t want to hear.

“It is, dearest.” Gramma chuckled softly. “I drew the ‘Death’ card from my tarot deck today. A bit on the nose, isn’t it?” Gramma stroked my face gently with a hand that had rings on every finger.

I couldn't seem to find it in me to laugh. "What will happen to Wilbur?" I asked.

I loved my grandmother's owl familiar almost as much as my own fox familiar, Kristy. The thought seemed to make my grandmother falter.

"Well," Gramma opened her eyes briefly, "He'll either simply fade away—" I noticed how she chose not to use the word die. "—or become a normal animal. No one really knows for certain."

I sighed, "Oh." I didn't know what else to say.

"Actually, I have something for you," Gramma said, a twinkle in her violet eyes.

I raised my eyebrows. I had no idea what this could be.

Gramma smiled her mischievous smile and handed me a leather bound book with a sketch of Wilbur on the front. Hands shaking, I opened to the first page and nearly dropped it when I read the title.

"Your Grimoire?" I was in shock. "But... I only know the witchcraft you've taught me!" I flipped to a random page in the middle; it was a spell for levitation. "I can't do this stuff!"

Gramma smiled bigger. "I knew you'd like it. Consider this a continuation of lessons from me. These are all spells and rituals I have performed myself, with instructions and ingredients and everything you'll need written inside." Gramma then added, "I've marked the most dangerous ones with yarn. You may want to wait to try them. Or you may not, it's up to you."

I was still in shock, but I was quickly realizing that this was going to be my favorite object in the world.

Part 2 — The Ritual

I decide to make up with Sam after remembering Gramma's time in the hospital. I apologize, he apologizes, and we finally get him a Band-Aid for his cut. It is a beautiful moment; tears are shed, blah, blah, blah, et cetera, et cetera.

Back to the ritual!

I usher him out of my room and open Gramma's Grimoire to the page with the necromancy spell.

Spell for Raising the Dead:

Please note, Necromancy is a very dangerous form of witchcraft and can lead to devastating catastrophes beyond your wildest imagination, especially if done by a young and inexperienced witch.

Hmm, a young and inexperienced witch? Certainly couldn't be me.

Furthermore, because necromancy is a form of black magic, it has a tendency to poison its user with malicious intent and corrupt their mind.

I don't think I need to worry about that. I'm only resurrecting my grandmother, after all, not a fallen tyrant or something.

I have only ever performed this spell on my dead cat, when I was eight years old, so it didn't need to be very strong. Results on humans may vary. But please perform this spell within the same month that the death occurred. If the death occurred on the last day of the month, I hope that day is today, and you must act immediately.

I bite my lip reading this. I already knew it had to be within the same month. I'm lucky I found this spell when I did, but I'm definitely pushing my luck doing it on the last day of the month. And also, she only performed this on her dead cat. The thought of Sadie pushes her way into my mind. She must've known this somehow. I'm sure Gramma shared her Grimoire with her, because Sadie's older than me. But what other choice do I have? I need my grandmother back, regardless of the consequences. I keep reading.

Required Ingredients:

1 chrysanthemum petal

1 rosemary leaf

1 bay leaf

1 dead fly

1 tear, as sorrowful as possible

1 maple leaf

Instructions:

Prepare by finding either the corpse you would like to bring back to this life or the grave of the deceased. (Additionally, this spell works on cremated remains, like my dead cat. Simply pour the completed mixture of ingredients into the jar with the ashes or the location where the ashes were spread, and the ashes will come together to form your loved one, in ash form. It is a tad bit odd for the first few weeks, but you will soon adjust to your new ashy cat...or human!) A cauldron is recommended, but never required. Any container to mix the ingredients will work just fine. This spell should be performed under the light of the moon.

There are more instructions, but I'll save those for later. For now, I need something to mix the ingredients in. I see the small glass bowl that my chrysanthemum plant got too big for a couple weeks ago and stash it into my bag. I look outside my window and see that the sun has begun to set. There's also a fox hanging onto my window sill for dear life by her dainty paws. It's Kristy, my familiar.

Kristy has always been following me around, ever since I was born. Gramma said she was looking in the window of the hospital when Mom gave birth to me. Scared some nurses half to death. Since that fateful day when I came onto this Earth, Kristy has been like my shadow. Always lurking around my birthday parties when I was little, scaring my friends and their moms. At my elementary school graduation, she freaked my teachers out. She finds it funny, the way they're all scared of her even though she's far away from them. I'm not sure how, but I hear her voice in my head. She sounds like the breeze before a storm, like waves crashing against the shore. It's hard to explain, but Gramma understood it. She said Wilbur sounded like tree bark.

Shaking my head as if to focus myself, I open my window and pull Kristy in.

"Thanks, Emmy Green." Kristy calls me by my full name, and I'm not sure why. I just call her Kristy.

"No problem, Kristy."

She prances around my room, then sees my grandmother's open Grimoire.

"Emmy Green..." She stops prancing. "You're not trying to raise the dead, are you?" She looks concerned.

There's no point in lying anymore. "Yeah, no, that's exactly what I'm trying to do."

She stares at me for a few seconds, and I shrug. *"Splendid!"* she cries. *"Dangerous witchcraft is my absolute favorite kind of witchcraft! There's so many ways it could go wrong..."* She sighs contentedly. *"I knew there was a reason I was meant to be your familiar."* She looks up at me.

Since she's a fox, there's really no way for her to show emotion in her face, but I can tell she's excited. This truly alarms me more than anything else that has happened to me all day. Kristy usually just seems along for the ride whenever I do witchcraft, which has usually been assisted by Gramma. Protection charms, cleansing spells, that type of thing. The closest I ever got to dangerous witchcraft was probably when I did a banishing ritual on our loud neighbor, and even then Kristy only seemed mildly interested. If Kristy is truly, deeply excited about a spell, that means I probably should not be doing it. But there is no way I'm not doing this. I have all the ingredients and I am bringing my Gramma back from the dead.

There's just one last thing I need to do.

I tell Kristy to wait in my room as I run downstairs. Mom and Sam are sitting in the living room, right where I left them.

"So..." I feel, strangely, choked up. I don't know what that ritual will do if it doesn't work, but I know I need to say goodbye first. I'm coming back, of course, but I just need to say goodbye. "I'm going to go out for a bit, okay?" I ask, covering a snuffle.

Mom looks up, "It's getting dark out, sweetheart." She looks out the window, where it has indeed become quite dark. "It's almost eight thirty. Where are you going?"

I pause, "I'm just taking a stroll." It's not a lie.

Mom seems hesitant to let me go, and Sam looks like he's about to say I shouldn't go, when Mom speaks up.

"Okay, Emmy. Stay safe out there," she smiles, "Don't forget your coat."

I don't tell her that I won't be needing one, but without a second thought I hug them both. Sam seems surprised but hugs me back.

"Well, goodbye," I say. I spin on my heel and run back up the stairs. Kristy is still in my room, waiting for me.

"Are you ready, Emmy Green? Personally, I can't wait."

I nod slowly, then touch my hand to her fur and am in her body. This is not something to be concerned about, trust me. A familiar can help in witchcraft, but the witch can also borrow their familiar's body for a while if they need to use it.

"Whew, that always feels a bit weird."

I still hear her voice, even though I'm in her body now. I just can't talk to her anymore. I adjust to being on all fours, grab my bag from off my bed with my teeth, and paw my way towards the window, which I left open while in my human form. I pull myself up so I can climb onto the windowsill. I see my backyard beneath me, and decide to jump down onto the grassy ground.

"Ouch!" I hear.

It hurts, but the sting quickly goes away and is replaced with adrenaline. I need to get to the graveyard. I break into a run, my bag still in my mouth.

By the time I get to the graveyard, night has completely set in. I push open the huge wrought iron gates with my head and the scent of roses and corpses fills my nostrils. Kristy has gone quiet. A large forest surrounds the graveyard. It's a legend in our town that ghosts live in it. I prowl along the rows of corpses until I get to the grave where Gramma lays. I know exactly where it is. I shiver as I remember the last time I was here. I read the grave:

Here Lies Iris Green

1952 - 2026

She Charmed Us All

I'm not really sure who chose the inscription. It sounds like something Gramma would say, but I know she was too weak in her final days to have picked an epitaph. I sniff as I let go of my bag with my mouth. I dump everything out with my paws and onto the dirt in front of the grave. I figure I'm ready to be a human again, so I bark to tell Kristy to let me out. It's weird, because I feel myself materializing in front of me and also fading out of fox form. Soon, I'm human again and Kristy is looking up at me.

"Let's get this done." I take a deep breath. It's time.

Kristy nods and the Grimoire floats up and flips open to the page with the spell. It drops back down. Kristy has many gifts that help me out when I do witchcraft, and telekinesis is one of them. I read the instructions.

Step 1) Mix the three leaves and the petal in your cauldron (or other container).

The leaves and the petal float into the glass bowl and I stir them around with my hand. I read the next step.

Step 2) Drizzle the tear onto the leaves and the petal and mix.

The cover on the tiny jar with my tear pops open and the tear floats into the air and sprinkles evenly onto the leaves.

Step 3) Crumble the dead fly between your fingers and sprinkle it into the mix.

“That’s gross,” I sigh.

“*I can do it for you if you’d like,*” Kristy offers, but I shake my head.

“No, it’s alright. Gramma specified crumbling it between your fingers, so that’s what I’ll do.”

Grimacing, I take the fly out of my bag and crumble it over the glass bowl. There’s still fly residue on my fingers when I finish.

“*Okayyy, what’s the next step, Emmy Green?*”

I look back down at the book.

Step 4) Pour the mixture onto the grave or corpse and chant three times, “Return from the dead, heal wounds that bled.”

I’m not really sure where Gramma got the chant from. It seems dark. Looking over at her, Kristy looks deeply focused. I place both my hands on the bowl, preparing to turn it over, when I hear a voice.

I look up. It’s Sadie. She’s standing in the forest surrounding the graveyard. She looks scared.

“EMMY!” she yells. Now, I’m getting scared. “Step away from the bowl. This spell works once in a blue moon. I can’t let you do this.”

I frown. “Why?” I call out to her. “What’s going to happen?”

She swallows hard. “It could kill you,” she finally blurts out.

Oh. I don’t really know how I feel about that.

“That’s not so bad. If I could bring Gramma back, that’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Sadie frowns, “No! Not only will it kill you, it will kill you in the most painful way possible. Gramma warned me about this, Emmy! One at a time, your organs will turn to stone. Then, your skin and your bones will turn to stone. But it starts inside.”

That does sound painful. I’d just end up dead, though. It wouldn’t really matter.

“And,” she adds, struggling to get the words out, “she told me you’ll wake up every dead person in the state.”

I want to interrupt her to say that’s not so terrible, but she senses this and continues.

“Not as humans, though. Gramma warned me they’ll be mindless creatures, made only to destroy and kill. But she knew I wouldn’t do anything stupid, so she trusted me. But you, Emmy...she’s never trusted you. And she liked you because of that.” A tear glides down her cheek, because she knows me and she knows that consequences don’t matter.

Next to me, Kristy nods knowingly, “*She speaks the truth.*”

“You’ll bring about the end of the world, Emmy. You’ll kill all of us.” Sadie is crying now. “Do you really want that?”

I look straight at her. “Of course not!” I yell.

She winces. “I don’t want anyone to die.” I avert my gaze. “But sometimes, people have to.”

With that, I dump the contents of the bowl onto the dirt and begin chanting. Sadie’s screaming at me that this is a mistake, but truly I couldn’t care less. I need my grandmother back.

“Return from the dead, heal wounds that bled; return from the dead, heal wounds that bled; return from the dead, heal wounds that bled.”

Suddenly, I feel happy tears well up in my eyes — it worked. The dirt in front of her tombstone is shaking, and suddenly, a hand reaches up through it. I could recognize that hand anywhere, with all those rings on her fingers.

Another hand comes up, and Gramma pulls herself through the ground. It’s her alright, with her long, wispy hair, her pale, aged skin, and the purple dress they buried her in.

I barely have time to even process the fact that my dead Gramma has just risen from the dead, and all because of my witchcraft and the help of her old Grimoire. There's only one thing to do — I run over to her and embrace her.

"Gramma, you have no idea how much I missed you," I manage to make out in between sobs of joy.

But something is wrong. Her arms stay lifeless at her sides. I look up at her face, only to find her eyes glazed over, not even looking in my direction. I recoil from her.

"Gramma...?" I whisper, but I know what happened.

It didn't work.

The spell didn't work.

This isn't my grandmother.

Upon having this realization, I see that the ground all around me is shaking. In the same fashion as the woman standing before me, every single dead person in this graveyard pulls themselves out of their grave, their eyes all similarly glazed over.

What have I done? I should have listened to Gramma's Grimoire. She said black magic corrupts the witch. But was it the black magic, or was it just me? God, did I really yell at Sadie? And to think that's the last conversation we'll ever have.

Once they're all up, they stumble maliciously in different directions like zombies, including the body that used to hold my grandmother.

Sadie was right. They're going to kill everyone.

Sadie is long gone. She must have run. I don't think she'll get very far, though.

Then, I feel it. My insides are turning to stone, just like Sadie said they would. Kristy fades away next to me, laughing heartily.

First my lungs freeze as I try gasping for air, but it's too late. My throat has frozen and now I try to move my arms, but I can't. My legs freeze and I hit my head on someone's gravestone before falling to the dirt, but it doesn't hurt because my head is stone and I can't really see the graveyard anymore. I think my heart just stopped and now it all fades to black.

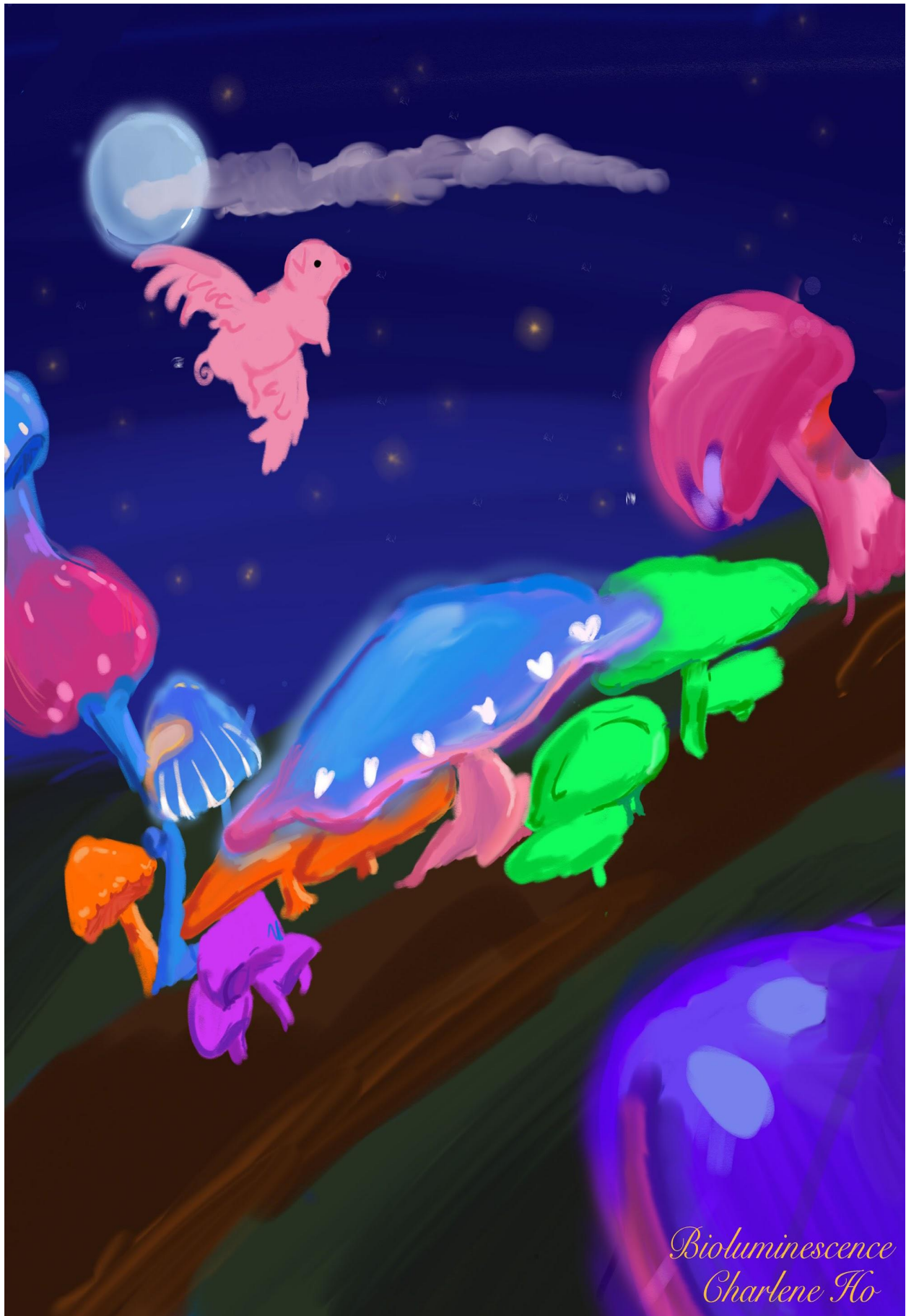
I must be dead.

Why couldn't I have just listened to Sadie? Why?

I thought I could do this, I thought I was special. But I'm not, and I couldn't. She tried to warn me. She said, she said the spell works once in a blue moon.

Tonight was cold. Tonight was indifferent.

And the moon was only white.



Bioluminescence
Charlene Ho



A GIFT FROM GOD
Ronen Sadighpour

“Maybe”
by Ella Deng

The streets are damp.
They're dark.
Almost unkind.

The wind hollers.
It cries.
The trees take pity.

The world seems to mock me.

Maybe in another lifetime.
Maybe in another timeline.
Maybe in another universe.

The moon shines regardless.
Like it's trying to reignite
The light that went out.

The world seems to mock me.
But
I listen.

Maybe this lifetime.
Maybe this timeline.
Maybe this universe.

Maybe it's enough.



Only This Once
by Yejun Kwon

“A Contrast Unparalleled”
by Isabella Kashani

Moonlight shines brightly
With a certain vivacity
A light shining through
A light shining forth
The darkness of night

Darkness embraces the sky
But then...
The moon puts itself on display
Creating a beautiful light
And a unique contrast
Yin and Yang
Light and Dark
Unlike any other

“Summer”
by Joseph Sulimani

I wake up every day
To skies, black and gray
Every month, I pray
That summer will come back
someday

When day comes, we'll feel it
Drinks get colder
Skin gets darker
Days get longer
Feels like we're free

And then it's gone
Just like that
Just when it seems to be good
It snaps right back
Back to dark skies, day after day



DREAMS WORK
MISHA SEGAL

“If It Weren’t for Them”

by Olivia Hsu

“Well...”

Just a few minutes before, I was tapping my pen against my notebook, barely awake.

My English teacher, Mr. Smith, was talking, his voice fading in and out like background noise, until I heard him say, "Think about your answer, and we'll talk about it later."

I was suddenly brought back to reality. The whole room was so silent that I could hear people breathing.

“Oh! I’m sorry, what was the question?” I asked, my face hot despite being in a cold classroom.

Mr. Smith sighed as he repeated it to me, “What do you think about the history of education for women?”

It was such a simple yet complicated question. *‘What do I think?’* I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, imagining myself as a woman in the late 19th and early 20th century.

An image was forming in my head. There’s a small house, its walls made of timber, its windows cracked and dusty. I stood in the corner and watched a girl about my age glance towards the door where a little boy, wearing a light blue uniform with a school bag, ran outside to meet a friend waiting for him. She was wearing a long skirt dropping to her ankles, her hands holding onto a rag as she cleaned the table where the little boy had just eaten breakfast. I took a step closer to her, each tile creaking as I passed. I looked at her eyes, which lingered on the doorway long after it closed. Then, she shifted her focus to wiping the wooden table again. The sound of approaching footsteps drew the girl’s attention. She looked up, and an elderly woman with her arms crossed told the girl to sweep the floors while she washed the dishes. The elderly woman, too, clenched a rag in her hand.

“But mother, why can’t I go to school?” the girl asked, voice trembling.

“You already know why, sweetie,” her mother replied, touching her daughter’s head. “It’s against the law. You just stay here with me and help provide for the family. It’s for the best.”

“But why can’t dad do it? Why does it have to be us?”

“He has work to do, you know that. Boys have different responsibilities, and what good can they do?” The mother looked at the door where the boy had already left, then back at her daughter. “You’re needed here, not out there.”

Her eyes welled up with tears, and finally, one small tear fell down her cheek. She continued sweeping, each sweep taking longer than the last.

When her mother wasn’t watching, she sneaked into her bedroom and lifted the mattress. Step by step, I followed her. There, hidden beneath it lay books for each subject. Math, English, history, science, it was all there. The girl grabbed the book on the topic of English and started to read. Even though she couldn’t go to school, she still found a way to educate herself. If she were caught, she would’ve been in big trouble, but that was the cost of knowledge for her.

The image faded out in my mind, and a new one started to form. Even though it was only in my head, the sounds and images were so vivid and loud. Men were shouting and women were chanting as they held their signs up and down. There was a huge crowd of women protesting for their right to education. Men threw trash at them and told them to leave, their voices arrogant and furious. Yet the women stood strong and kept walking. It was a peaceful protest, yet they weren’t being accepted. Why would anyone deny another person the right to learn?

As I stood there by the side of the street watching them go on, the answer came to my mind. The image dissolved, the shouting dimmed, and when I opened my eyes, I was back in my classroom. My notebook was open in front of me, my pen still tapping against it. Mr. Smith was walking around, asking people what they thought. I gulped and prepared an answer.

The history of education for women isn’t about intelligence or ability. Women weren’t denied education because they couldn’t learn. They were denied it because learning leads to independence and knowledge, which leads to change. For centuries, women created good trouble just by wanting more when they were told to stay home. They read in secret, questioned laws, and stood in the streets with courage. We all get to sit here today, in a classroom, and learn freely without hiding in shame. Laws that were broken for injustice, were so that better ones could be written. For hundreds of years, women were told to stay in the kitchen, to cook and clean. But, there are still many places around the world that don’t allow women to be educated. We need to speak up for them and give them their rights.

As John Lewis said, “When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something.”

And that’s exactly what women did. It is because of the good trouble women faced centuries ago, that we all gain power through knowledge.

“What do you think?” Mr. Smith asked, as he came towards my table.

“Well...”

“Choices”

by Ariel Torbati

Choices, choices...

One path leads to success
Another leads to failure
Sometimes choices are an ultimatum
Where you are the only bailer

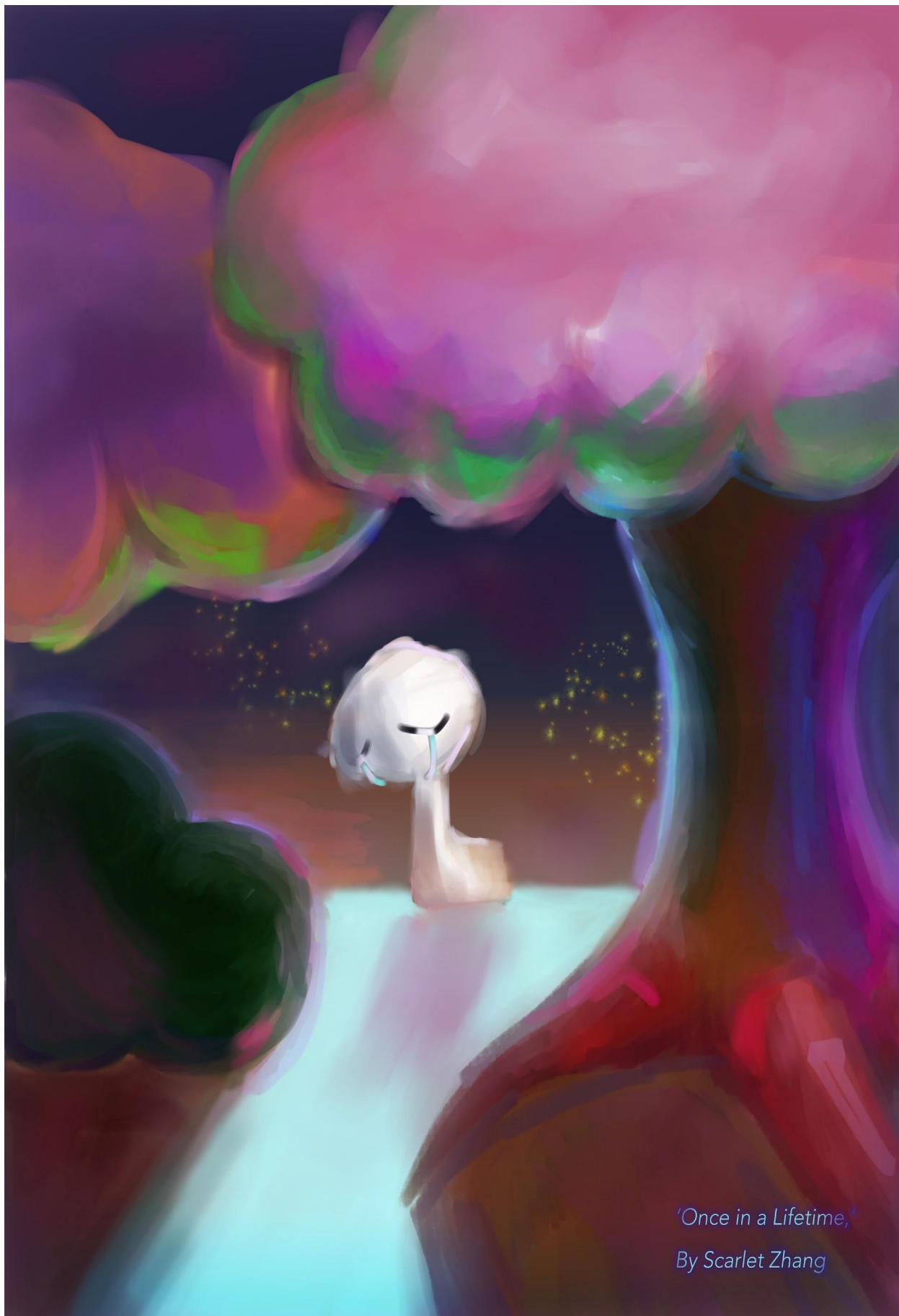
Choices, choices...

Can lead to overthinking for weeks
Where the brain takes to the highest of peaks

Choices, choices...

Small or big
Affects your life
No matter the cost
Hits harder than a knife

Choices, choices...



'Once in a Lifetime,'
By Scarlet Zhang

“Actions Will Always Have Their Consequences”

by Gemma Vera

My head is quite literally breaking into a million pieces, and I’m not entirely sure what caused that. Little threads of light peek into my eyes, even though it’s hard to even sit upright. I think I’m in a moving vehicle, but my ears are still ringing from whatever rock my head got slammed into. As I’m in the middle of thinking where the *heck* I am, a sharp turn to the right sends my body tumbling into a few objects on the other side of the vehicle. *Geez, are you people even licensed to drive?* Probably not. Cold metal on my wrists threatens a slice to my bones, uncomfortable, but livable. *Anything is livable if you’re brave enough.*

Okay Tessa, let’s put the pieces together, your hands are chained together; so are your feet. You’ve got some sort of sack over your head and tied at your neck, and to top it off, you’re in a vehicle that you did not consent to be in.

36...37...38...

The vehicle comes to a strong halt, knocking me over on my side. A sharp inhale escapes from my throat and the wind gets *knocked* straight out of my lungs. The commotion breaks me out of count. *19 minutes, 38 seconds.* My hearing heightens when the sound of boots shuffling outside seems to be coming closer.

“Før pigen indenfor til Andersen,” a muffled voice announced.

There was a girl in my elementary school that spoke Danish *all* the time. I still remember her accent clearly, so I guess it’s safe to assume I’m in Danish territory.

Click.

In only an instant, a frigid gust of wind fills up the space, sending piercing chills that fuse my bones together. A hand roughly grabs a hold of the chains around my ankles and proceeds to drag me out of the van, forcing me up to my feet. A frown tugs at the corners of my lips. I’m trying to relax my muscles since I know that I’ll have to endure the cold one way or another. Not just the cold, though. Whatever waits for me behind the doors to hell will shred me to pieces. I’m sure of it. Every imperfect step across the snow is rewarded by a sharp shove to my lower back by a cold metal stick. They don’t say it, but everything I do—good or bad—will result in *something*. Frosted chains delve into the skin in my ankles and I can’t help but hiss from the pain.

In what feels like an entire ice age later, the sack on my head gets roughly pulled off. *Maybe my head should've come off with it, it would be for the better.* I'm led into a giant white building, with multiple floors high above. It's currently night time, but the people here move like they never sleep.

"*Inside,*" a man with a thick Danish accent says, while directing me to a concrete cell, far down what seems to be marked as the east hall.

The cell smells like nothing in particular, but looks like something you'd have to live in to survive a damn zombie apocalypse. The moment I step in, the door slams shut behind me, leaving me caged with a tall, creepy blonde lady who looks like she'd gladly rip out my liver and *eat it*. Just by looking into her eyes, I know that something's up with her *and* everyone else trapped in here. There's an eerie feeling to her; she creeps me out a ton. My feet carefully take me to the corner of the cell, and there's a hot anger that starts to slowly solidify in my throat.

I then build up the courage to speak, "Where am I, and why am I here?"

This hardly comes off as a question and more of a demand. My voice does not falter, and I display no sign of weakness as my words fill the poisonous air between us.

She doesn't answer. In fact, she stares at me with no emotion for a couple of seconds before responding, "Put this on. You will be given training apparel tomorrow morning."

Her hand reaches out and some black clothing makes its way into my hands. *What the heck?* I seriously don't know *who* this lady thinks she is, but geez, she's getting on my nerves.

My brows furrow as I thoughtlessly reach for a response down my throat, "Answer the ques—"

I'm taken aback mid-sentence, when this creep takes two long steps towards me and slaps me *hard* across the face. In an utterly bewildered state. My mouth hangs open as my hand slowly reaches my stinging cheek. The copper taste of blood floods my mouth. Pennies stuff my cheeks, leaving me speechless for a minute or two. Slenderman must've had a rough childhood, because *yikes*.

"My name is Officer Andersen, and you are not to disrespect me."

The second Andersen finishes her sentence, I lunge at her in an attempt to land a punch to the side of her ribs, but she freaking *dodges* it. I'm not really thinking, primarily because I don't really know *what* to think, but also because at this moment, I am unable to think. As messy as I am, my body rolls over and hits a

wall, but I'm not done. She looks down at me with a facial expression that I can't quite comprehend, but I could care less since I'm in the middle of deciding where I'll strike next. A grunt escapes from me as I run up to her with an intended punch to the gut, but I fail once again. Instead, she pins me to the cold, dirty ground, and her stare cuts into my *soul*.

Andersen takes a sharp inhale, followed by words, "You do not want reinforcements to be contacted, Teresa." She looks at me dead in the eye and proceeds, "Here, you get punished for your actions, so I'd advise you to obey your superiors."

Who the hell ever made you superior?

"You'll do what we say either way, so might as well not get hurt in the process."

Her words seem to almost be colder than the concrete that I'm currently lying on. It only occurred to me after I made a questionable first impression on Auntie to not go ham on strangers. I let out a snort by even thinking about this goofy lady. Anyways, not only am I enraged by the audacity of this woman, but deep down I know that, if anything, I'm underreacting. Maybe I *should* be *terrified* of what's going to happen to me.

1 Year Later:

I'm getting ready in the changing room by the north hall. Today, I will complete my course. I've worked unmistakably hard for the past 12 months, perfecting my aim, speed, endurance, *anything*, you name it. After today, I was promised my first mission, which definitely brought a thrill to my bones. Before I came to The Center, I told myself I'd never kill anyone. But since then, I've learned that some people *deserve* to die. Our dear Regent, Beckett Nielsen, has founded an organization for gifted children, *like me*. One child selected from each continent would be trained to be heroes—to serve the justice that the world *needs*. There used to be only six children—since Antarctica wasn't colonized yet. Now, we call it the Republic of Antarctica, and the people there thrive as if it was America. We never got to know how our Regent selected us, but we sure were grateful. He wants to get rid of all the malicious people, and take the world under his wing to restore it. I am his top participant.

Here, I am *truly* valued for what I am, for what I was made for.

I proceed to grab my guns, along with a bullet belt that I swing over my body. The main door opens by just sensing me walking by. No one really ever spoke with me when I first arrived, but that was because I was new and uneducated. Now, I roam the halls, and silence represents respect.

All eyes on me.

When I complete all 7 rounds of different practices, everyone watching me from the bleachers stands up and cheers. I'm thankful for the support from the others, but what really intrigues me is what Our Regent has to say. It's only his vote that counts, so I don't display much of an interest in other members. My eyes glance over at the viewing tower to my right, and there he is, clapping for my victory as if I was the last gladiator left in the ring. To be fair, I never had any competition to begin with, so the ring was all mine from the start.

Our Regent is a tall and athletic man with small green eyes and rich black hair. He always wears the same black suit, along with the same black tie, and the same black shoes. I can tell that he's proud of me when he smiles at me just the *tiniest* bit. I walk toward the exit of the fields, just to be congratulated by Officer Andersen. She was the first member I got to meet, and I grew on her over time.

Walking through the east hall after training was arguably my favorite part of our routines. I always got congratulated and spoken to about my achievements. I came to a quiet stop right as I turned a corner. *Right.* My feet guide me towards the elevator, and then I find myself pushing the button to the eleventh floor. Nielsen granted me an upgrade from the small rooms on the second floor. The other participants didn't get what I did. I was promised luxury and other privileges in exchange for working harder than anyone else before, and I'd say it paid off. My actions have rewards now, and once I picked that up, obeying was only simple and done.

My new 'room' looked big enough to be a full sized *mansion*. It's neatly arranged, and its colors consist of black, grey, and...that's kind of it. *My favorite.* My eyes shift gently toward my bed, where a golden letter and a black file await me. Mindlessly, I reach for the letter and read the black script off the page.

Participant 01,

You have successfully completed the course assigned to you. Not only did you complete these tasks with no failure in any area, but six months before the rest

of your teammates. You have proven yourself superior to any other participant in our program, which earns you a higher ranking, and a very special first-mission. You are our most valuable asset.

BN

A rush of dopamine fills my soul and makes me *dangerously* excited for the next day. After reading the letter, I make my way over towards the balcony. My eyes gently pinch shut, and I tilt my head back, inhaling the fresh, Greenland air. Even since I was little, I would naturally gravitate towards attention, it's all I ever wished for when it was all I never got. I would work so hard in school, perfect scores danced across my papers, but still no one would recognize my worth. It's easier to continue than to stop, and it's too late to change my ways, anyway. I will cost myself perhaps *everything* because of this dumb flaw of mine. But when the top feels like your destiny, you grow a never-ending hunger that weakens your bones by the step. I take in one last deep breath, before returning to where the file lays. The letter in my hand replaces itself with the file that reads:

SUBJECT 01

AGE: 45 YEARS OLD

GENDER: MALE

NETWORTH: 138B USD

OCCUPATION: UNKNOWN

SUBJECT 02

AGE: 43 YEARS OLD

GENDER: FEMALE

NETWORTH: 146B USD

OCCUPATION: UNKNOWN

BOTH SUBJECTS WILL BE ASSASSINATED IN GRAND CENTRAL STATION, NEW YORK CITY, ON TRACK 206 AT 18:33 ON JANUARY 31, 2048. YOU ARE TO OBTAIN BOTH PHONES ALONG WITH BOTH WALLETS. OUR REGENT, BECKETT NIELSEN, WILL MEET YOU AT THE SCENE, ALONG WITH TWO OTHER SUPERVISORS.

YOUR GEAR CAN BE ACCESSED BY ROOM 17, WITH AN ACCESS CODE OF 29E80. WE AWAIT YOUR PRESENCE AT 04:00 TOMORROW MORNING.
GOOD LUCK.

The silence in the air became louder than gunshots, and after I read the file, I began to wonder why there wasn't any description of physical appearance.

Weird.

Minutes after, I join my fellow participants down at the dining hall to have our celebratory dinner. I walk down the main hallway and receive a few more congratulatory remarks regarding today. Out of the corner of my eye, Akin stands up and ushers toward me.

"Tessa, Tessa, we always knew you'd beat us to it," he grins while enveloping me into a tight hug. I hug him back, then when he lets go he says, "Come join us by the window; the others are waiting."

A warm, genuine laugh bubbled up and out of me, and I shook my head from side to side, "Alright, Alright."

As I then take a seat, Kaori raises a glass of orange juice and clears her throat, "To being the bestest team ever!"

Everyone else smiles and laughs and clinks their glasses together, but a small frown stains my face. *They're* a team, not *me*. I am my own team, I worked harder than all six participants *combined*, and they dare to call us a *team*. It's no secret that I am far more powerful than them, and whether it's a nice thing to say or not, I *am* better than them.

The next morning, I woke up a good 45 minutes before my gear was handed over to me. Andersen greets me as I walk down the dark halls. I wave back at her and give her a greeting of my own in return.

"Your transportation will pick you up in about twenty-five minutes at the south gate. Good luck, Teressa."

Chills ran down my spine, and the ring of her voice brought back our first memories from when I first stepped foot in the building. I only nod in return. As I make my walk away from her, I feel her hesitation to say something as she looks on, but chooses to remain silent.

11:52 (EST):

The jet landed, and now I am currently looking for my ride to my supplier. I was informed that a grey SUV would pick me up at terminal C...but I can't find one with my name displayed on a screen. Beads of sweat faintly form at my hairline, and small glimpses escape every few seconds to glance at the car that *seems* to be mine—but I'm not sure. The man in front of the car holds a tablet that reads 'HADLEY RICHARDS.' I suddenly remember who I'm supposed to be. My feet shuffle awkwardly towards the vehicle, as I spare my driver a quick look and an uncomfortable laugh. The door automatically swings open and I plop on the right window seat. When I mumble out a 'thank you,' he only responds with a grunt.

How rude.

As we drive to our destination, my mind doesn't let go of how, as of now, I'm not even *real*. It's actually quite shocking how one day I was just taken against my will and brought to another country, and then I decided to just live with it. I'm not so sure how to feel about that. Also, I am pretty sure that I've been reported as a missing person, so anyone who would recognize me would *immediately* turn me in. *Wouldn't look so good on my resume.* A nauseating feeling emerges from the depths of my stomach, and then I'm not so sure that I'll be able to even step out of the car.

Tessa, this needs to be done; you know this is one step closer to bringing humanity together; you can't back out now.

Well to be fair, I didn't really have a choice to start with.

I'm dropped off at the station, guns strapped to my thigh, and other instruments hidden along my clothing. A brutal headache hammers behind my eyes, and that snaps me in and out of focus. There's absolutely *no* room for mistakes, and even a wrong step could send me *straight* into the mouth of the train.

I can't do this. *You have to.*

I work my way down the first flight of stairs, but time seems to slow down. The air is too thick, and the only thing I am able to hear is the sound of my own heartbeat ringing throughout my head. The smell of rats and dirt fills my senses, but I shrug it off.

A small glitching sound emerges from my earpiece, "*Participant 01, at the track yet?*"

I give it a light tap to send a signal back, "About a minute away."

I'm not sure if Connor could tell, but I am *panicking*. I've got around 45 seconds to make it to the track. If I don't make it, then I screw up this whole mission, and who knows, maybe I'll be dead next. My feet shuffle down the stairs, I'm careful not to trip. What do you know? I end up making it 23 seconds early, but my limbs stiffen with horror when I arrive at the sight.

I could *feel* the color draining out of my skin.

My parents.

Suddenly, everything comes rushing back to me, every original thought I've ever had before was brought back. Everything that Nielsen ever told us suddenly becomes *so* fake to me. I could have sworn my mother and father were good people. I just never knew that they were hiding all of their money. A sharp signal pierces through my earpiece, snapping me out of my own thoughts. The three men monitoring me behind a pillar are watching. *Nielsen, Connor, and Arthur*. They then turn their big heads and point to my parents.

"*Well, what are you waiting for, dear?*" a sinister voice radiates.

"*I can't,*" somehow, I barely manage to croak out the words, and my voice shakes with a fear so visible you could see it from the other side of the station.

As soon as Connor receives my message, he freezes.

His hand reaches down to his waistband. He pulls out his gun, which points to where Simon and Carmen peacefully stand. My hands scramble to get a hold of my gun, and I've hardly got about half a second to make a decision when—

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Everything freezes.

The world stops spinning on its axis.

The ringing in my ears *doesn't* stop, and neither does the horror.

I killed them. Lifeless bodies fall back into the track. As if on cue, an incoming train obliterates their bones to dust, and turns their organs to mush.

Connor, Nielsen, and Arthur lay lifeless on the rails, all the blood already squeezed out of their big bellies. The sounds of the train coming to a halt could be engraved into my mind forever. A sound so mortifying, yet so empty when it's over. My gun lowers carefully into my holster, and I still can't make out a proper thought on what I just did. If I didn't kill them, the hesitation would have killed my *parents*, and that would have rotted me from the inside out.

Screams for the police fill the hall, but I stay frozen for a moment too long. Their necks crane over to catch a glimpse of the killer, when I make eye contact with them for merely half a second. But that's all it takes.

That's all it takes to recognize your own daughter.

I'm running out of whichever exit looks nearest, with absolutely no awareness of my surroundings whatsoever.

You're gonna get caught, Teressa.

I'm sobbing while running for my life, but I can't run forever. No one can. I slow down enough for a policeman to grab me and shove me into his car, and I give up.

In my dream, I sit on a beach in San Francisco, breathing in the salty mist that emerges from the west coast. My hair is let down loose, swaying with the currents of the wind. My fingers trace the intricate patterns of the rock I sit on, as I enjoy the silence. I think of how I'll never be forgiven, even in death, and how I'll always have someone else's blood on my hands. Nobody else seems to care about the truth that I gave, they just wouldn't understand my perspective. I guess it's hard to understand something you've never been through. *But I understand that.*

At the end of the day, *someone* was going to die, and I'm never going to be sorry for killing the right people. The world should be *thanking me* for saving them. I've learned that humans will never be grateful for anything done for them, clearly. I did what was truly correct, even if the world never realizes. God knows. Maybe he'll even spare me when I die.

That's silly Tessa.

A laugh so bitter, yet so soundless rattles my throat. In my dream, my vision clung to the two thick metallic chains locking my ankles together. The wind guides me towards the ocean, and the waves don't swallow me whole. Gravity seemed to carry me into them slowly, and let myself get sucked into the deep. The chains drag me down to the bottom of the ocean floor. At this point, surrender was inevitable. Each breath strained—not a breath at all, just water heightening in my lungs like sandbags. Even though I will never be freed from my sins, I find peace in being able to identify this truth—even if it's not in my favor.



As Time Goes By
Irene Kim

“The End of a New Beginning”

by Linus Chen

To three years of study
Then six again before
Together we started as one
Together shall we part
To the bright and dark future

Tearing at the sight of the monster of tomorrow
The beast of the next level, life, a new beginning
The end of joy, freedom, and nap time
The turning point of our lives
The pause of joy, freedom, and nap time

We step towards the reincarnation of suffering
Work after work, task after task
We watch as the falcon of a carefree life flutters away
We approach with care, the eagle of the future
We fly with grace, we fall with care

We cast a long shadow, to the past of which we leave
Welcoming the impending future
Which shall come and shall go
Warm in appearance, cold at touch
Work after work, task after task



The Shot Seen Around the World
by Yvonne Liu

“Buzzer Beater”

by Jack David

Ten seconds left on the clock
Pressure squeezing down on you
Hands are clenching
Heart is pounding

You take the ball to throw it in
The gym goes silent
Your mind goes blank
“Come on man!”
“Get your head in the game!”

You snap back in.
The inbounder throws you the ball.

“Three...two...one...”

Silence

Then...

Swish!



Midnight Moon's Fireflies
By Athena Yeung

“Nostalgia”

by Scarlet Zhang

Two friends once sat near a big tree.
The Dandy one said,
“Let’s sit out by the tree tonight,”
“The stars come out at night,”
“You and you and me and me, we all want to stay out at night.”
The Tired one whispered,
“Just the two of us?”

Little did they know, their promise went to others, too.
As they all enjoyed the presence of the tree,
As the grass swayed in the air conditioner.

The Bubbly one smiled, and looked at her best friend,
Quiet Melody, who also smiled back.
They laid down on the grass together,
The breeze grazing their skin.
The Gourd and the Luck played on the carpet with Pebble.

The Dandy one grinned, and turned to his best friend,
“When do you think we’ll be able to see the stars, Astro?”
The Tired one did not respond just yet.
“I don’t know, Dandy. I don’t know.”

But it is well known that this is how their story ends.
There, the forsaken Dandy still sits by the tree,
Waiting for Astro to wake up.



Moonwatching
by Rebecca Liu

“Lost in the Woods”

by Isabella Kashani

As I turned around, I made a horrifying discovery. I was lost. I knew I shouldn't have wandered away from the campgrounds, but I really wanted to take a picture of that stream. Junior photographers obviously need material constantly. It's like an unspoken requirement at this point. Since Mrs. Taylor gave us that photography assignment, I've tried to take pictures of whatever I can find. Though I haven't been very successful.

Attempt #1: Bugs On Flowers **Results:** Not good. Bee stings are painful.

Attempt #2: The Roamed Meadow **Results:** Nearly got skunk sprayed.

So, I decided to go with a safer approach. Counselor Jack and Counselor Jen said that we must stay on the pathway. They don't want any injured campers. Blah, blah, blah. But I was bored and, anyway, who cares? I'm almost 13. I can do stuff by myself, right? Right! Turns out...I was wrong. Again.

I found the brook halfway through the hike, glistening and shimmering a vibrant yet tranquil blue. It was perfect for Mrs. Taylor's assignment of "a couple of pictures of what you did this summer." She loved the photo shoot that I did of the palm trees last year. She even called my shots "masterful" and "lovely."

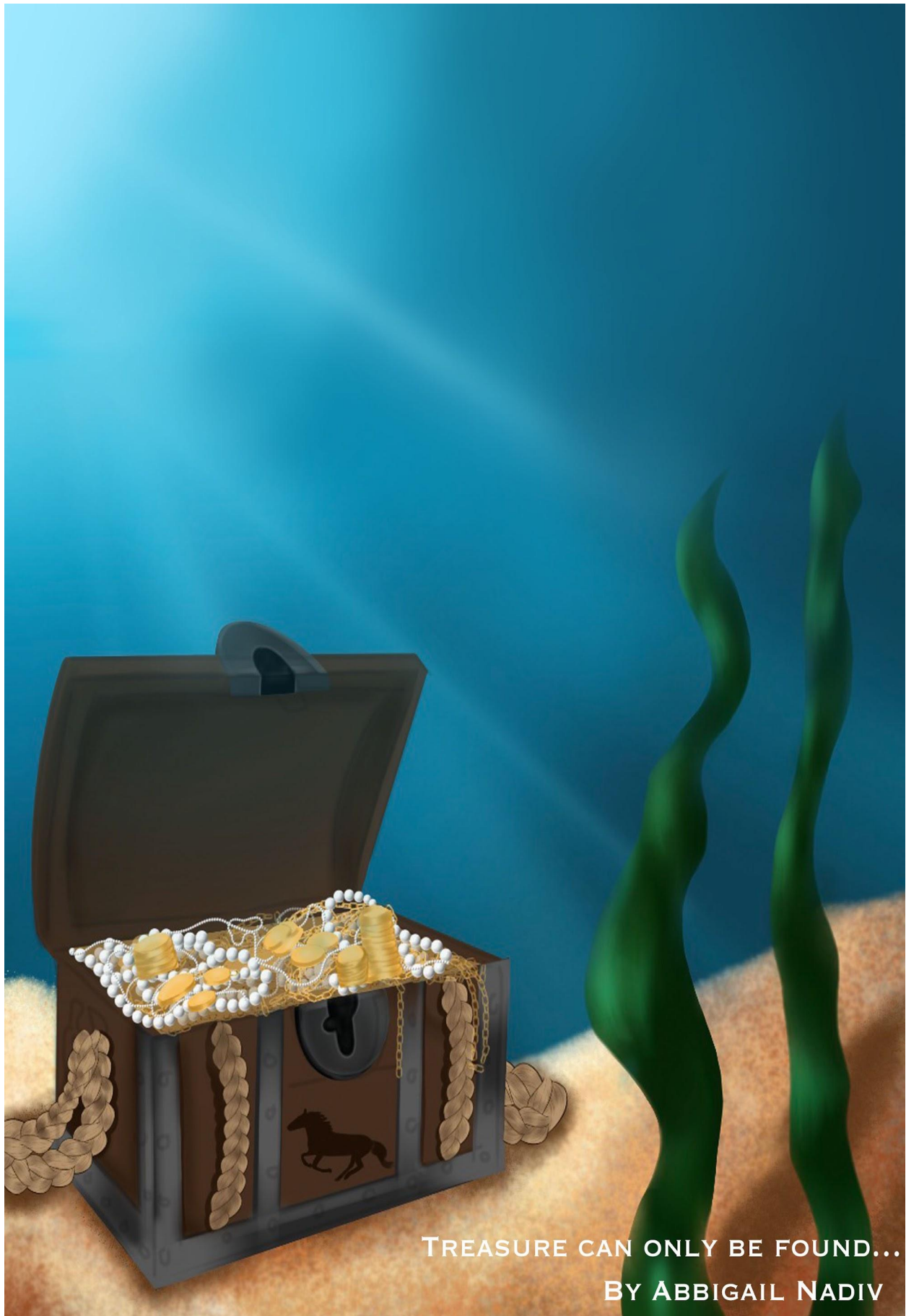
I hesitated when she asked me to take photographs of this summer, as well. I mean, I love photography, but all this pressure was a bit much. Anyway, I tried to find stuff that she would declare "masterful" or "a true marvel," whatever that means.

Panic now flooded through me, because I had no idea how to get back to camp and the cabins. I had already taken my pictures of the brook though, so that was one issue down. All that I had in my black backpack was three stale granola bars, a bottle of water, my flashlight, my glasses case, and some batteries for my camera. But those were only helpful to an extent.

An hour later, I was in deep trouble. I only had half of my water bottle left and a single stale granola bar. My brain began to panic and scream.

"What do I do? This is bad. This is bad. This is really, really bad."

All of a sudden, I heard a rustling from above me, moving through the trees.
“Who’s there?” I whispered, panicked.
I heard chatter, and then more walking sounds.
“Who are you? Show yourself!” I demanded.
All of a sudden, the trees pushed aside to reveal a shadow.
“Step into the light!” I demanded.
I looked around feverishly, holding up my flashlight in defense. All of a sudden, I heard a little voice squeak from beneath me.
“Hi,” it said.
I shrieked in alarm.
“Hi there, I’m Chip! Who are you?” stated the voice, gazing up at me with huge black eyes.
I was awestruck. “Um...I’m Callie,” I stammered.
Night was falling, and fast. I needed to find my way out.
“So, Chip,” I said, “Do you know how to get back to Camp Foliage? I’m kinda lost.”
“Camp Foliage, you say? Of course! Follow me,” he squeaked, then ran faster than any chipmunk I’ve ever seen.
We traveled down dirt roads for what seemed like an hour. Then we made a right, then a left, a left, a right, a left, a left, and then another right.
“Chip, can you slow down?” I asked him, amused at my little buddy.
“Slow down? What’s that?” he inquired.
I smiled and shook my head at his ridiculous remark. Another half an hour later, we finally arrived at a path that I recognized. Thank goodness, because I was famished.
All of a sudden, we heard a loud noise coming from above the dark green canopies.
Campers.
Finally, after years and years of being a ghost, I found my home away from home.



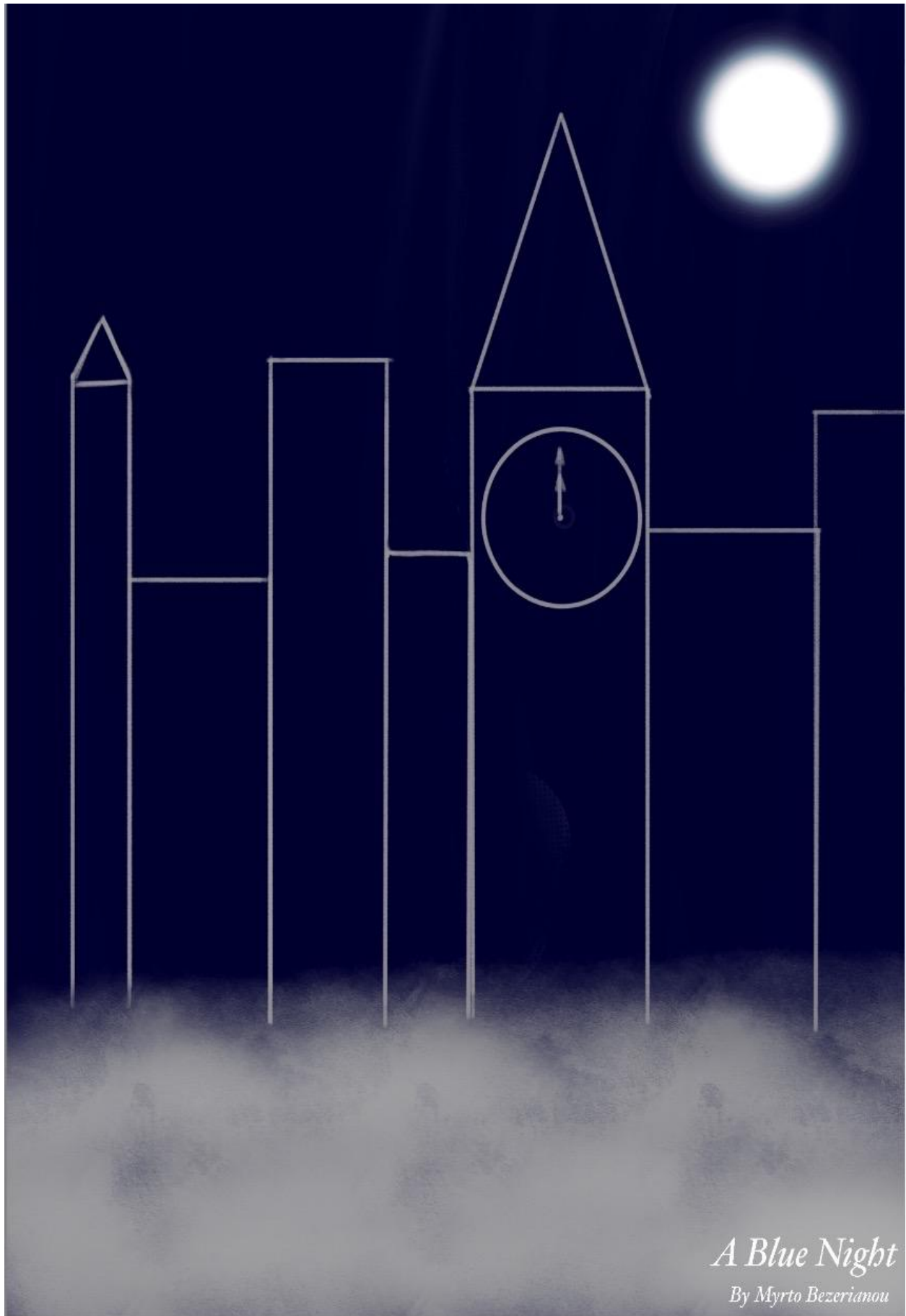
TREASURE CAN ONLY BE FOUND...
BY ABBIGAIL NADIV



“For Once”
by Maya Halpert

screams.
every day
in my head.
they are piercing
and shrill.
they hurt
my ears.
no one else
hears them.
just me.
they belong
to my twin brother.
he passed away.
it was an accident.
he was screaming.

my parents,
child psychologists,
doctors,
they don't know
what I mean
when I say I hear
screams.
I can hardly
speak.
he won't
let me.
but wait —
today
no screams.
he has stopped.
he will return.
but for now
no screams.
just silence,
for once.



“Dear Stage”
by Scarlet Zhang

Dear Stage,

We always sing together
we could be best friends forever
but just half of that time is very long.

And I still have other letters to write.

Maybe you are just a background character
because the best things in life can go away
but they build you up
because if you love something,
you’d learn to let it go.

I cannot let you go.

Do I love you?
Most likely—not anymore,
not as much as my pen.

- Actor 🎵



“How to Keep a Valuable Wonder”
by Scarlet Zhang

Every wonder that you see
You may keep it as you'd like.
Should you want to have it kept
You may not take it with you tight.
Nor shall you steal a piece of it
Because that is just not right.
But one way you can see it in the way you had before,
you can write the words you're feeling in the book just to your right.





Solitude
By Hudson Enayatian



BUTTERFLIES AND FLOWERS
Chloe Li