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**HUPE**

**in**

**Story**

**Land**

**DIGITAL ALMANAC**





**NATIONAL SHORT  
STORY WRITING  
COMPETITION**

**HUPE**  
**in**  
**Story**  
**Land**

# Dear readers,

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Welcome to the latest edition of our Digital Almanac – HUPE in Storyland. In this edition, we present a compilation of stories that emerged within our short story competition - HUPE in Storyland. This collection is a reflection of the talent, creativity, and hard work of both students - authors and their teacher mentors.

The stories in this almanac cover a wide range of topics and styles and we are delighted to give young writers the opportunity to have their voices heard. Each story is special in its originality, and each represents a glimpse into a young mind's world. Together these stories make a collage of imagination bits, fantasy, and humor pieces intertwined with various storytelling styles.

We congratulate all the participants for their remarkable efforts and thank everyone who made this competition a success. We hope these stories inspire, entertain, and leave an impression on you, just as they did on us.

Enjoy the journey through these delightful stories.

Your HUPE team

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**PRIMARY**

**SCHOOL**

**5<sup>TH</sup> AND 6<sup>TH</sup> GRADE**

author: Katarina Švić  
mentor: Ana Radolović  
institution: OŠ Svetvinčenat

## THE PRESIDENT'S CAT

---



I'm sure you've all heard of the White House. It is a house of the president of the USA. Lot of people don't know, but the president had a cat. It was a beautiful cat, but really insidious. The cat had imperious manner and acted superior. The president loved the cat, but he was unaware of what the cat was thinking. One day something strange happened. The cat was asleep under the window on a small chair. Suddenly... *boom* and the glass broke. The cat was surprised. A fox jumped into the room.

The cat shouted, "Hey! What are you doing in my room? This is my house!"

The fox didn't react. It just grabbed the cat and stuffed it in a bag. It jumped through the window, and drove away on a bike. The fox was driving and driving until it arrived to the woods near a lake. There was a dog, he was laying down. The fox took the cat out from the bag.

The cat was puzzled and asked timidly, "Who are you?! What am I doing here?"

The fox didn't react and took the cat to the dog.

"I brought her Sir!" the fox said. In that moment, the dog woke up. The dog was really big. He was black, and seemed serious.

"So, you are that president's cat?" the dog asked.

"Yes, I am. What do you want from me?" the cat wanted to know. The fox was confused why the dog wanted to see the cat.

"Because it is the president's cat. It can help us." the dog replied.

"What do you want from me?" the cat asked again.

The dog said nervously, "We need help. We want to rescue all street animals. The president will introduce a new law. All animals without owners on the street will be taken to the animal shelter." the cat was horrified by his statement.

"He won't if we stop him!" the cat said confidently. And the mission *White House* started. But they needed a plan. "Ok, that law will be introduced in five days. It's written in the president's laptop. The one with you as a screen saver." the dog said to the cat. And they started. They jumped on a bike and rushed away. They arrived to the house.

"How will we go in?" the fox asked.

“The land is under the fence. We can dig our way in.” the cat explained.

That was easy because the dog was a professional digger. They got in. It was, in fact, easy to get inside the house because, if you remember, when the cat was kidnapped the fox left a hole in the glass window. But the problem was how to go into the president’s office. They decided that the cat alone should go, so there won’t be any suspicion and it won’t look unusual. But don’t worry, the dog and the fox had a plan too. They went through the ventilation system. And they were happy to arrive to the office, well the cat did. The dog and the fox fell into the toilet.

“How will we get out?” the fox gasped.

Well the dog had a plan now too. “We will jump on the washbasin and then back inside the ventilation.” the dog reassured the fox.

The dog went first. It was easy for him because he was big. The fox was smaller so it was a little bit harder for the fox. The fox was afraid but jumped bravely with closed eyes and waited for the fall. But it didn’t fall. The dog caught its tail and helped it climb up. They finally came to the office. The cat was waiting for them. However, there was a security guard next to the cat.

“Catch them!” exclaimed the cat.

“What are we going to do now?!” the fox screamed.

“I’ll distract them and you go change the law.” the dog said.

The dog distracted the security guard but not the cat too. The fox took the laptop but in that moment the cat came.

“You won’t do this!” the cat bellowed.

“But I need to if I want to save all of us. Are you not sorry for all those animals? If you live well, it does not mean that all animals live well.” the fox noted sadly.

“Yes, you are right. I will help you.” The cat was overwhelmed.

“Come on, faster! I can’t anymore!” exclaimed the dog.

The fox and the cat hurried together and deleted the law, and wrote a new one:

“No more leaving or killing animals on the street. They all need our protection and a home.”

In the meantime, the dog was caught, but started growling. The security guard got scared and let the dog go. The dog ran as fast as he could and managed to escape.

“Come on, hurry before they catch you too. Go!” shouted the cat to the fox.

The fox jumped through the window and followed the dog. The cat returned to its small chair under the broken window, feeling all mighty and proud.

author: Petra Vojvodić

mentor: Nataša Bebić Bačan

institution: OŠ Župa dubrovačka, Mlini

# PATIENCE

---



... changed my life. If it weren't for ..., everything would be different. You will find out who he is once you read this story.

It was another starry night. The sky was full of shiny, mesmerizing orbs that looked like tiny gleaming sparkles. The Moon was beautiful as well, but the stars were my favourite. It was like there were a hundred times as many that night. The fun fact is I got my name after a constellation called Lyra.

Space truly is astonishing! Just think about an infinite amount of galaxies and black holes. If the stars look this little from our perspective, how big is infinite? How huge is Space? If it is endless, is it possible that all the answers to our questions are out there? That was the main question I was trying to answer. I wanted to explore the secrets of Space. I wanted us humans to know everything.

I was just a high schooler back then. Staring at the sky every night and daydreaming was silly of me. I should have spent more time at home, but my parents constantly arguing was annoying. They worked late hours, and they were nervous 24/7. Letting out their anger on each other was childish. I wished I could stay outside forever. I had no one to spend my free time or have a sleepover with. People found me weird and annoying for thinking about serious topics and being so mature. However, why was I to blame when it was such a big question to humanity?

I wished I had a companion, though - life got lonely. It was something I was trying to change. I wanted someone who could understand my passion for learning about Space.

My family was a stranger to me. We barely talked - only when I asked them if I could borrow their car to get to my special place - a cliff above the sea. I used to bring lots of tools and books, so I kept them in boxes and bags in the boot.

The cliff was a perfect spot for my nerdy hobbies. I would sit on a picnic blanket and spread out the materials I used for my research. There, I could see the things I wanted to explore using my telescope. Plus, it was unpolluted, pure nature! Gorgeous, blooming flowers smelled great; they spread fairytale vibes under the moonlight. I could see a winding river from there as well. Seeing it flow slowly was calming



to me. It ran into the sea near the empty beach. All I could see on the beach was used scuba diving gear and equipment in front of a small wooden cabin. Although I found the cabin interesting, I never had enough time to explore it. I was planning something else at the time. It was risky since I had no experience with that type of stuff. The stuff was - flying in a space rocket. Yes, out of all the things teenagers enjoy - partying, dating, and so on I wanted to fly in a rocket.

What else was I supposed to do in my free time? Busy parents, no friends... I searched for rocket stations near me, and to my surprise, one was not that far from the cliff. I immediately drove over there. It was easy to find, but they had high security, which could be the problem. I found my way to the rocket, though. At least, I thought of that part of the plan well. The food and equipment I needed were already inside. I quickly put on the spacesuit and started the engine without having any idea what I was doing. I was guessing using my common sense and logic and what I learned from the many books I have read. This adventure might have gotten me and my parents in jail, but at least I would have company there.

After I flew high up in the sky, about five Eiffel towers high up, the rocket started to lose height because I pressed the wrong button. Luckily, it fell into the deep sea below the cliff. I didn't get severely injured. I only hit my head, but I almost drowned. A young diver took me out of the sea and brought me to the beach cabin, where he performed a lifesaving technique called CPR and saved my life. As I woke up from unconsciousness, I thanked him with all my heart, and then, I saw his beautiful eyes that looked like hazel-coloured clinozoisite crystals.

"You look so young, my dear," he said, with a gentle, soothing voice and a slightly confused look. "What were you doing with that rocket? Oh my God, did you steal it? Gorgeous AND criminal! My type of girl," he tried to charm me. His name was Clyde. He seemed sweet and handsome, and it worked - I instantly fell in love. Everything felt good!

Someone reported the space rocket stealing, but Clyde and I found our way to solve the problem so I didn't end up locked behind bars.

Clyde does a lot for me - he understands me, gives me advice, and, most importantly - loves me. I may not have found the answer to the most crucial question, but I got a lot of other answers.

"My dear, there is time for everything. Be patient! Live your girlhood freely and leave thinking about your career for later." Clyde taught me a valuable life lesson. With him around, I enjoyed my high school life more than ever. We hung out every day and had no worries except studying. Later, we achieved our career goals of

becoming a professional diver and an astronaut. I am glad he taught me how to be patient. God knows what would have happened if I continued being as stubborn and impatient as before.

author: Barbara Burić

mentor: Anna Maria Popović

institution: Osnovna škola Ivana Kukuljevića Belišće

# THE SPECIAL CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE

---



Once upon a time, in a little town down the hill, there lived a teenage girl. Her name was Katy. Katy was a 13-year-old girl who really loved any type of adventure. She really liked going anywhere with her parents, but this year things were different... Katy's mom had to move out because grandma was ill. But that didn't stop Katy from feeling special like she's always been. It was the 23rd of December, Katy was so happy thinking about what she was gonna get for Christmas. Her biggest dream was to get a pet like a dog or a cat. But something went wrong. On the 24th of December Katy couldn't sleep. There was already something under the Christmas tree. When she decided to take a look, she was disturbed. Instead of usual presents, there was a little man holding her gift. Looking at the little man, confused and upset, Katy grabbed it. After looking at it she yelled „It's... a Gingerbread Man!“ She thought it would be the best just to put it back down. She started going back to sleep. But... what was that noise? She looked under the Christmas tree again and screamed: „It's alive!“ After she shouted, the Gingerbread Man yelled: „Put me down!“ Katy was so horrified. But she got mad seeing that he was trying to steal her present. The Gingerbread Man ran away and hid under Katy's bed. At first, Katy didn't realize that she was not holding him anymore. Hiding under the bed, the grinning Gingerbread Man was planning to run away through the open window. Katy tried to catch him. Not even thinking, she started going after him. She was telling herself: „I need to get him, that's my present!“ After following the Gingerbread Man for a while, they got into a mysterious forest. That forest was not like any other forest. It was beautiful with lots of decorations and Christmas lights. Looking at all of this Katy accidentally ran across a wooden house. When she took a better look, it was not just one house, it was a whole city full of Gingerbread Men, Santa's dwarfs, and even Santa was there! It looked fantastic! She even noticed a teenage boy there. Tom was the boy whose present also got stolen by the Gingerbread Man. Tom was looking for him and came to the same place. The place was decorated like the best cookie in the whole world.

Tom was also 13 years old. He accidentally terrified Katy but apologized for it after they told each other what happened. They realized they had the same problem with the Gingerbread Man. Mad and nervous, they decided to go into that city. It was actually a factory but it really looked like a big city. When the Gingerbread Man saw them walking towards Santa, he got really scared of what Santa is gonna tell him or if he is gonna kick him out of the factory for stealing their presents. When Katy and Tom came to Santa, he was at first really shocked how they even got in there because the factory was a secret. But when Katy and Tom told Santa what happened, Santa apologized because he didn't know who did it. Sadly, Katy and Tom decided that it's the best to go out of the factory, when... that very same Gingerbread Man ran in front of them! They started running after him again, and caught him. Tom said: „I'm really glad we got you, because you can't do anything else but tell Santa the truth!“. Scared, the Gingerbread Man said he is sorry and told them that he will bring their presents back. But Katy and Tom wouldn't listen thinking that he was lying again. Santa didn't get mad but he got disappointed with the Gingerbread Man because what he did was not even okay. The Gingerbread Man understood Santa and promised never to do that again. It was the 25th of December, the Gingerbread Man did what he promised: he gave them their presents back. And there was nothing better than knowing that Katy and Tom got a lot of love in their families for Christmas. And the thing that made Katy cry was that her Mom was back with her grandma healthy. Oh, and we can't forget about Tom, he did not only get a lot of love but he was so excited when he realized that... he got a puppy! Katy and Tom started hanging out every single day. Katy was glad that Tom got a puppy even though she wanted a dog. But she was happy knowing that her mom is back home and that her grandma is feeling much better. What a different and special Christmas adventure!

author: Zoja Ličinić

mentor: Ana Katruša

institution: OŠ kralja Tomislava Našice

## A LETTER FOR SANTA

---

Dear Santa Claus, I'm writing this letter to wish you a merry Christmas. I want a new...

I started my letter for Santa with this sentence and stopped at my second one. I didn't know what I wanted for Christmas. Then, my grandma came in the living room and asked me what I was doing. I know that she is old and clever, but I also know that she is sometimes boring and weird. I said, *I'm writing a letter for Santa Claus*, and she told me that I shouldn't write a letter for Santa, but the little Jesus. Then, she told me the story about Mary and angel Gabriel, Joseph, and three kings, and king Herod who didn't want little Jesus for the king, and the little stable or a cave, and the shepherds and their sheep... She didn't want to stop talking. I told her that I know the whole story, but she said that we need to give little Jesus a present because it's almost his birthday. I was a bit tired, so I went to bed.

Next day it was the day before Christmas Eve, so mum asked me what I wanted for Christmas. I had no idea what I wanted, so she asked me to decide fast before the stores close. *You know, some children in USA make a list of wishes for Santa, and when Christmas comes, they put an x on present they want to get, and then next year, they can wish for what they didn't get. Maybe you should make one?* Mum said. I think this is a good idea. I thought about it a bit and made a list:

1. NEW PLAYSTATION
2. NEW MOBILE PHONE (MY OLD ONE IS SOOOOOOOOO OLD)
3. NEW SHIRT
4. NEW TRAINERS
5. NEW TEASET
6. NEW COMPUTER
7. NEW MAGIC PIANO TILES GAME VERSION
8. NEW HEADPHONES
9. NEW ROOM
10. NEW DOLL
11. NEW ...

*MOOOOMYYYY! I shouted. Come and see what I have written.*

*Mom came, saw my list, and almost fell down because she was wearing high heels. What have you just written?! She asked. There are twenty wishes!!! That is enough for ten years! I said: But there is one more wish. I want a birth in a castle! Mom was confused. A birth in a castle? You can't have that. Then I said: I want Jesus to be born in a castle! It's not for me, it's for little Jesus! He was born in the stable, and he's a king. I never heard that king was born in a stable! I want this because his birthday is soon, and this is my present for him!*

author: Mia Ilić

mentor: Ajrin Floričić

institution: OŠ Vladimira Nazora Potpićan

## A LITTLE PUPPY

---

Steph was short for Stephanie. She was a little girl with curly brown hair and sparkling brown eyes. She was short and skinny and so in love with puppies. All the dogs in the neighbourhood were her friends and she played with them a lot. Steph did not have a puppy, but always wanted one.

But to get a puppy, she needed money. So, she asked her older sister, Tiffany, to do her chores for some money. She had to clean her room, take out the garbage, and clean the toilet. Tiffany was not excited about her chores, so she was so happy that Steph wanted to do them. Steph did all the chores for weeks until she had enough money for a little puppy.

Steph was so cheerful when her dad told her that she could ride her bike to the adoption centre and adopt a little puppy of her own. When she arrived, there were so many puppies to choose from. After 30 minutes, she finally chose one. When she got home, everyone was surprised that it was a girl because she loved boy puppies more.

Steph named her Rocxy Max Smith. She noticed that Rocxy was different from other dogs. She did not do anything except sleep, eat and repeat. After some time, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, it was Steph's 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, so as a birthday present, she got another dog and named it Snowy. Snowy was a Husky, and she noticed that Rocxy was different from Snowy. Snowy was more athletic than Rocxy so she took Rocxy to the vet, and they said that Rocky was going to have baby puppies. That's why Rocxy was so slow and tired all the time. When Steph heard that Rocxy was having puppies on the same day as her birthday, she was so happy. But Steph was sad that Rocxy wasn't so little anymore.

Rocxy gave birth to six little puppies. Steph named them Ruby, Olive, Cornelius, Xia and Yyle. They were very weird names because she used every letter from Rocxy. Except for one boy, who was named Valentin. He was different because he had a heart-shaped patch on his back. Because of that, he was different.

Steph didn't care that Valentin was different from other puppies, but it mattered to the puppies. The puppies bullied Valentin because he was smaller and different. But Steph loved them all the same. One day they went to the dog park and Valentin

was the smallest one there, but that did not matter to Steph, so she helped him make friends. At first, nobody wanted to be Valentin's friend, so Valentin was sad, but then he made a best friend named Jerry. Jerry told his friends that Valentin was a great puppy. So, Valentin made a lot of friends, and he was so happy.

Valentin was so happy and excited that although he was different, it didn't matter to some people. It's okay to be different; just be yourself, and you will make a lot of friends who will like you as you are.



author: Luka Ivaštinović

mentor: Sandra Barešić

institution: Osnovna škola Rajić

## A STORY ABOUT THE MAGICAL WORLD

---

A long time ago, there lived a king in a big palace, but he was not just any king, he was the king of the magical world and imagination. His helpers were wizards, witches, unicorns and various creatures. As cheerful and colourful as it sounds, there are always enemies here. They live in a world of darkness and fear. Here is the main devil, who sings and howls strange screaming sounds and who seeks his victims. One day, a unicorn was walking in a colourful park and eating grass, but a devil appeared out of nowhere. Wherever the demon stopped, the grass would grow darker and the storm would get closer. The king saw this, so he came out of the palace to see what was happening. The devil was psycho as usual, so he started singing while laughing: "Oh, I could throw you in a lake or feed you a poisonous birthday cake. I don't know if I'll miss you when you're gone. Oh, I could bury you alive, but you could crawl away with a knife and take me while I sleep, so I can't decide whether you will live or die. Oh, you will go to heaven. No wonder why my heart feels dead, cold, hard, and petrified inside; let's go for a ride!"

Then the devil tried to grab the king into the world of darkness. The unicorn stabbed the devil in the hand with its horn. After the devil flew away from the world of magic and fantasy, the king returned to his chair and twirled his scarf as he thought, "So he wants to expand his evil world? That's a bit bad. How is a king supposed to win a war against a strong maniac? But I don't want to appear scared. I have to fight. Luck must decide."

The king was ready. Two weeks later, the devil returned. A storm was approaching. The king had a vision that he would win the war fairly and happily.

"Will the little king win?" said the devil. The king just kept silent and looked at the devil. "ATTACK!" said the devil, and ten small, dark-red unicorns flew up to the king. The king had no idea what to do, so he grabbed his sword as fast as he could and fought off the red unicorns. Fire was burning in the devil's eyes. It was the king's turn. "ATTACK," said the king. One of his wizards threw three potion bottles, but

the devil only dodged two of them; one hit him in the leg. The potion spilled on his leg, and he felt that his leg was burning. "OUCH!" said the devil. "Bahahahaha!" Laughed the king. "My turn!" The devil said it angrily. Two of his evil creatures shoot fire from a magic wand. The fire was small. The king easily turned the fire down by blowing into it. "I HAVE ENOUGH OF YOU!" screamed the devil. He picked up two curved swords from the ground and descended from his world.

The devil placed the points of the swords on the surface of the world of imagination and magic and threw them away from him. On the tracks where they creaked, flames appeared from them. Only the devil and the king were imprisoned inside. There was neither an exit nor an entrance. "Just you and me. No little losers of yours to help you," said the devil. The king felt fear, but he was not ready to lose. "Let the game begin," says the king. The king runs, jumps, and spins while still in the air, and he kicks the devil in the head. The devil fell, but he did not give up. "WOUAHAH-HAHAHAHAH!" laughed the devil angrily. The devil put his two swords together and made a big one that started spinning very fast. After a few seconds, the devil thrusts a great sword into the ground. "Ready?" said the devil. "Ready." The king said it with no fear.

They started running into each other. They struck swords and continued. "I WILL DESTROY YOU!" They both shouted. Their creatures just looked at everything through the flames. The king got angry. The flames around them are slowly disappearing. If it disappears completely, they will disappear. Let's get this over with, loser." Says the king.

They started hitting each other with swords. The devil cut the king in the hand. A drop of blood fell through the ground. The king was afraid. "I just love the smell of fear," said the devil happily. "Ugh," said the king while thinking he would lose. King threw his sword, and it stabbed the devil right in the heart. He died and fell into the imaginary world. Everyone was fine and happy and lived a lovely life. None of the other people in this crazy story died in pain. Just from old age.

author: Tina Glušac

mentor: Marija Jukić

institution: Osnovna škola Ivane Brlić Mažuranić, Koška

## ABBY JANEWAY

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In one little town named Magicville, one strange girl was dreaming a very unusual dream. She dreamt that one very evil person named Alberta would destroy the magic world on her eighteenth birthday, which is on 18th October.

The girl's name is Abby Janeway, and she has one big problem that is both her blessing and curse: she is a pure magically gifted person. This is her problem because some people are half magically gifted, and most are not magically gifted.

Next morning, Abby is supposed to start a magic school named Taylor Greenwood's Magic School. She woke up and started panicking, then texted her best friend Hailey. At that moment, Abby's mom Lizzia comes to her room to wake her up, only to find Abby awake. She then tells her to get ready for school and then go to the kitchen and eat her breakfast. After catching her breath for a second and collecting her thoughts for a minute, Abby went to refresh her face in the bathroom. Upon entering the said bathroom, she could see the same face she sees every morning, the same long brown hair as well as the same eyes looking back at her in the mirror. When Abby goes to the kitchen and sees that she is having bacon and mashed potatoes for breakfast, she immediately sits down. During breakfast Hailey texts her back saying that it was only her unreal dream that will never come true, and after all, she needs to wait four more years. Hailey Newhouse has been Abby's friend since kindergarten and is her complete opposite having short blonde hair. Before leaving, Abby takes a map to make a list of paths which she could take to get to school, as there were many. She decides on the shortest one and rushes out.

After an hour, Abby arrives at school where she sees a lot of very scared parents. She asks Hailey what happened, and she tells her that some person named Alfreda Klogenwell is a new teacher and that she is the most evil witch or what they know to be impurely magical person. People can become impurely magical when they wish for bad things or do bad things to others so they could get their magical powers, after which they get cast out from the town. Nobody knows what Alfreda did to get her powers or where she was from, but Abby knew something was not right.

Years passed and Abby learned all the spells. On her seventeenth birthday, Miss

Klogenwell started acting weird, her long blonde hair became red, her eyes looked very evil, as if filled with fire... That same day, Abby found a notebook that was half pink and half purple, had sprinkles all over, and "ALBERTA'S, DON'T TOUCH" was written on the top of it. Abby grabs the notebook and shows it to Hailey, making her speechless. They decide to give it to the headmaster Jamiens Crevey. When they arrived, Crevey said to them: "Hello Hailey and Abby! I know both of your fathers and mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, cousins... I even know your nephews!" To this Hailey and Abby look at each other confused. "And do you need something?", he asks.

Abby starts telling him about her dream and the notebook, Crevey looks surprised and says: "Girls, just stay away from troubles!!!!". A year has passed by and surprisingly Abby and Hailey did what Crevey said, but decided, after a year of waiting, to steal the notebook. One silent winter night, they sneak out to the headmaster's office and steal it successfully. On their way back, they had to hide in the watcher's office for an hour, but they were not aware that their lives would change forever that same night. They find out that Alfreda is actually Alberta from Abby's dream and that her evil plan was written in the notebook, because of which the students were learning all the bad spells and potions. Tomorrow morning, they tell their plan to other students and they all fill the halls with their magic wands preparing to save the whole school and the great magic world they live in... After a long moment of silence, everybody heard a big crash and Alfreda's laugh. She angrily said: "I AM GOING TO END YOU ALL!!!" And at that second the guardians of their school or the watchers said some magic words to tie her up and took her to the hidden dungeons of the school. All the students were relieved, but Hailey was curious about the magic words and asked Abby if she knew what they said. Abby said she is curious about it too, but she kept it hidden that she knew exactly what it meant.

School year ended and everybody went back home to some other adventures.

author: Marta Ostović  
mentor: Pamela Grozdanić  
institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

## ANELIA

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Anelia is a forty-one-year old Ukrainian from Kyiv. Anelia is blonde, but her eyes are as brown as chestnuts. She is short. Anelia is very kind and loves helping people. Her favourite things are walking her dog Loki, singing Ukrainian songs and reading books. She worked in a library and now she works in a bookshop. Her favourite book is “Next to a river”, written by Jeff Munnis. She always admired the author for finding beauty in nature even though his childhood wasn’t as nearly as beautiful. Anelia has family of four members: her daughter Adellina, her son Armin and her husband Nazar. When Russia attacked her country, Nazar joined the Ukrainian army.

One day she was ready to take her children to kindergarten, but when they came out of the house, the Russian planes bombed their house. She was in shock. Her home collapsed. After that terrible event she decided to move to Rijeka, a small town in Croatia. Unfortunately, Nazar couldn’t go with them. They needed him in the war against Russia. When they came to Croatia they struggled to find a place to live. After a few days of searching they found a flat for a really low price. Anelia called the owner of the flat and asked if he could let her buy it. He said that he would come to the city in five minutes. He came to the city and they agreed that he would sell her an apartment. She moved to the flat with her children and her dog Loki. The flat was small, it had only three rooms and the window was looking at the garage door. But she didn’t care. She was lucky to be with her children with a roof over her head.

A few days later, Anelia found a job in a bookshop. She had a good grasp of finding and recommending books because it was very similar to her old job in Ukraine. Anelia loved working there. Retelling stories other people wrote to customers made her forget about the war for a few moments. She felt like she was in a bubble that was waiting to burst as soon as she walked out of the bookshop. And it did. Anelia turned on the TV and saw shocking videos and photos of the war in Ukraine from the city where her husband was fighting against the Russians. She was going out of her mind with worry because she didn’t have any information about her husband. She couldn’t stop herself from crying.

One day, Adellina and Armin saw her curled up in an armchair as she was sobbing. They asked her why she was crying. She came up with a silly excuse and told them that she needed to put eye drops in her eyes. The next day when she came to the bookshop everyone was talking about Ukraine. Her bubble burst again, and she lost her happy place. She almost started crying again but she held back her tears. After work she took a walk in the city and found a place where no one could see her tears. In this secluded place she didn't have to be brave so she let her tears fall freely down her cheeks. When she came back home, Anelia couldn't even turn on the TV because she knew there would be pictures and videos about the war in Ukraine on all TV programmes.

Days went on and she still didn't hear anything about Nazar. One day she found the strength to turn on the TV again. This time there were no videos with bombs. Instead, she saw images of some soldiers getting back to their families. A little later that day she got a letter. The letter was from the army and her hands were shaking while she was opening the envelope. What if her husband was dead? Somehow, she made herself open the envelope and read the news. It said that her husband was coming back. Anelia read the letter more than once just to make sure that she wasn't dreaming. Her eyes got teary again, but these were tears of joy. Anelia told her children that Nazar was coming back. They were over the moon when they heard the news. Nazar came back on November 11<sup>th</sup>. They were so excited. Anelia's heart was beating so loud. She never felt so happy before. They were finally united and they enjoyed being together while exploring the city and eating pizza.

But their luck didn't last long. The situation in Ukraine was not getting better and they were worried about Anelia's parents because they didn't want to come to Croatia. Nazar found a job soon and both Anelia and Nazar had to work. It was really hard to pretend that everything was fine but they had to be strong for their children.

One day, Anelia's parents- Karmina and Erdem, called and told her that they were finally coming to Croatia. Their hometown was almost destroyed and Russian attacks were getting even worse.

Soon, her parents came and stayed in Anelia's apartment. From that moment on, the whole family had lunch together every day and spent their evenings walking by the sea and eating ice cream. Even though she wasn't in her hometown, Anelia finally felt like she was at home- happy and surrounded with people she loved the most. Just like Jeff Munnis managed to find something to admire in his difficult childhood, she realized that her family is the beauty she needed to make the destruction of her hometown less tragic.

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mentor: Alenka Taslak

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## ANOTHER FAMILY

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One day the family was packing their stuff so they could go skiing. They had a dog, but they would spend all day doing their stuff and never had time for the dog. The dog was sad every day because he could not have life like other dogs. Night was coming so he went to sleep. When he woke up all he saw was an empty house, but he remembered something. He remembered that the family had gone skiing. He did not know that it was far away from where he was, so he went for a walk hoping to find his family. The dog was walking and walking until night had fallen. In front of him was a huge forest and he heard noises, so he went to explore. He was hoping that his family was in the forest. After a long time of walking and exploring, he realized that he was lost. He was barking for help, he hoped that someone would hear him and come to help, but there were no responses, he was lying on the cold floor covered in mud and leaves. In the morning he heard barking and he got excited because he was not alone. He was exploring and exploring until he found a female dog and the puppies, and they became friends. The dog was helping to raise the little puppies, he would play with them and keep them safe. But then one day he realized that he was in love with the mom of the puppies, so he was there for them every moment. But then he woke up one day and he was alone. He was worried but not for a long time, they showed up with food. In the forest, it was getting cold, so they went further. After hours and hours of walking, they finally went out of the forest. As they were walking, they found the farm and they barked out of excitement. The owners got outside and thought that dogs were sweet, and they wanted to keep them. From that moment dogs had their best life. Their owners played with them every day. They were living their best life. Until one day. The day that the farmers got a big dog who was not friendly at all, it was a German shepherd. They were scared and were living in fear all day long. They were freaking out, and farmers would not play anymore with them because the German shepherd got jealous. The dogs were getting sad. One day they were in the biggest kind of fear because the owner got drunk and kicked them out. They were out in the middle of the night full of storms, but they were lucky. They found a little abandoned doghouse. They lived there for a few weeks, because it was

cold, and they were not able to go anywhere else where it was warm. One day they heard somebody walking next to the forest and they started barking. It was a man who walked to them and was very sad to see them in that condition. He grabbed all of them and carried them to the car. He was driving for 2 hours to his home on a nice farm. He left them at his house and went to the pet store to buy supplies for the dogs. After he got everything, they needed, he went back home. The dogs were happy to see him. He fed them. And they were happy and sleepy. They fell asleep next to the fireplace. The owner was also tired, so he went to sleep. The next morning, he woke up and saw that the puppies were sick, so he went to the vet. The vet had sad news for him. The puppies won't live long. The man was sad for the puppies. After they went home, he spent all his time with puppies. When the older dogs found out they stopped eating out of sadness. The owner started to worry. But he went to the vet again to see if there was any type of cure. He said that there was, but it would take a lot of money for the operation. So, the man said that he would do anything just that the puppies would be okay. He started an action for puppies, he put their pictures and wrote that help is needed. It started fast, money was sent to the owner. He was getting really happy, but he didn't know if he would raise enough money before the puppies died. But he was persistent. And it was worth it, he raised enough, and the puppies were cured. He was happy, older dogs started eating. They celebrated, they got presents and dessert and they were very happy. One day the real owners that had left the dog were back for him. But the dog would not go, he barked, and the new owner was not letting him go. The first owner even called the police. After a few moments, the police showed up and wanted to know what the problem was. The old owner said that the new owner had stolen his dog. But when the cop asked the owner if that was true, he said NO. Cops said that he was going to the station to check cameras in that street. When they arrived at the station, they checked the cameras, and the police were shocked at what they saw. They saw that the family had gone skiing and left the dog. Then the dog left home and went into the woods. After that, the dog left the woods with a female dog and puppies. Police said that it was fair for the new owner to keep the dog, but they also tried something else. They put the dog in the middle, the old owner was on one side and the new owner was on the other side. The dog had to pick one, and he picked the new owner happily.



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mentor: Tatjana Kristek

institution: OŠ Vladimira Becića, Osijek

## AT THE BORDER

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It's been 264 days.

264 days after the world went to shit.

My family, my friends, all gone.

I should've gone insane by now, but I keep hoping that somewhere, somehow there are others like me, survivors.

My thoughts were interrupted by a quick beeping sound coming from the microwave. Breakfast's ready. I open the tiny door of my microwave and enjoy my hot chocolate, which is, most likely the last hot chocolate in my city. Food is quite scarce now and soon I'll have to venture outside, out to them.

The dead, zombies, crawlers, whatever you call them, they lurk outside waiting for a nice breakfast, me. But I have no choice, either I'll die of starvation or from the zombies outside.

I swiftly grab my beaten-up coat and my gun. I hope it's loaded. It's been so long since I went outside. Cautiously, I open the rusted door of, well, whoever used to own this house. I'm lucky. There are no zombies outside today, at least I hope so.

Crunch, crunch, I hear the leaves. Something's here. I point my gun in the direction of the sound, and, just as I'm about to fire it I hear the thing speak "Don't shoot me, man. I ain't a zombie!" The thing, which I presume is a human, walks out from behind a tree. "Who the hell are you?", I ask, still pointing my gun at his face. Just because he isn't a zombie doesn't mean he isn't dangerous. "Dude, chill. My name's Dan, nice to meet you, I guess..." Dan looks at me, and points to my gun, his hand shaking. "I don't want any trouble just, just put the gun down." Reluctantly, I agree. "Fine, but don't try anything. I'm Laura, by the way." I lower my gun; I haven't seen another human in so long. "So, what are you doing here, Dan?" I stare at him, waiting for an answer. "Well, I'm trying to get to the refugee camp at the border." I look at him, puzzled "What refugee camp?" Dan looks at me the same way. "How do you not know? It's almost constantly on the radio." "Well, I have a radio, but I only know how to play music on it." Dan shrugs. "Well, that explains why you haven't heard of it. It's like a haven with military protection, food, water, shelter, everything humans

need to survive.” Dan explains, “You sure you aren’t messing with me?” I still don’t trust him. It all sounds too good to be true. “Dude, I promise you. It’s real.” “Well then where is it? You can’t just say at the border. That’s literally like, a thousand miles of possible locations.” Dan tells me, now a bit more frustrated. “Vancouver.” I don’t know what to do. It sounds perfect, but what if he’s lying? What if he’s trying to kill me or steal my stuff?

I need to try. If I die, I die.

“Can I go with you? I have a car you know.” “All right. I think it’s a 10-hour drive at most.” “I’ll drive and you check the map, so we don’t get lost.” I explain to Dan. “Hell no, I’m driving” “It’s my car!” I yell at him. “It ain’t gonna be anymore.” Dan looks at me before pulling out a gun, I never should’ve trusted him. “Now give me the keys!” Dan takes a step towards me. I quickly take a step back.

What do I do?

Then it hits me, I still have my gun. “Fine, just leave me alone, all right?” He takes a few steps towards me. “Well, give me the keys!” I reach into my pocket, and instead of the keys, I take out my gun. Dan looks shocked and before he has time to react, I pull the trigger.

Boom!

Dan looks at the gunshot wound in his chest, then at me, then he’s on the ground.

Don’t trust other people.

My only rule and I broke it.

But still, the refugee camp sounds tempting.

Before I have time to think about it, I jump in my car, and begin my drive to Vancouver.

I have a map I took from Dan and I have my car, but most importantly, I have hope.

It’s been 5 hours of a nice, peaceful, and most importantly, uneventful drive. Until, I notice something, something off. I stop my car and turn my head towards the tree line. I see human-like shapes.

Zombies.

I turn around to put my car into drive, but then, I hear a scream. A cry for help, and before I can pinpoint the location of the sound, I see a woman running towards me, banging on the doors of my car, at least a dozen zombies chasing after her. “Please, help me, help they’re coming they’re-“ I turn on the radio to full volume. And, I drive off.

I’m sorry.

I keep the volume on full to drown out my thoughts. *Surfin'USA* is playing.

And it will play for the remaining 4 hours of the trip.

Thankfully I see no more humans or zombies. It's peaceful again.

I keep driving until, finally, I see a sign. VANCOUVER. And next to it is a giant mansion with words spray painted on it. "Refugee camp."

I did it.

I get out of my car and walk up to the mansion. It's beautiful.

I knock on the door, but it isn't locked.

Dan lied.

This place is abandoned, left to rot like all the other buildings in the apocalypse.

I hear a growl.

Shit!

This place isn't abandoned, it's infested. I turn around and sprint towards the exit only to find two zombies blocking it.

I'm going to die here.

I close my eyes as a horde of zombies comes out from all directions and swarms me.

Goodbye.

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 mentor: Anita Baranašić  
 institution: OŠ Sesevetska Sela

## BUTTERFLY KINGDOM

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Long, long ago, there was a kingdom where two princess lived. Princess Bella and younger sister Lucinda -

When they grow up , Bella give birth to a beautiful little girl named Anabella. Her sister was not very happy , she was always jealous of her older sister, because she was the first by blood to be a queen.

On the day of coronation, Princess Lucinda kidnapped the little princess Anabella, and send her far far away from kingdom..When Queen Bella was going to the ball to celebrate her coronation, the wheel on the cart broke, because Princess Lucinda paid the coachman to sabotage Bella to arrive to ball.

Unfortunately Queen Bella got killed. Immediately on that day, the coronation of the princess Lucinda was also held.

20 years later, poor Anabella does not know that she was actually meant to be a princess. Now she cleans hole the house of her evil foster mother. One day everything was going as normal while Anabella was washing the windows , a clumsy fairy flew in through the window. As soon as she saw her, she knew that she was the daughter of Queen Bella. Anabela was scared.

FAIRY : you don't need to be afraid. I'm your fairy godmother.

ANABELA: I don't have a fairy godmother.

FAIRY : but you are the daughter of Queen Bella, I am sure in that

ANABELA: What you talking about? and who is Queen Bella, I've never heard of her.

FAIRY : now I will remind you a little about your past.

Fairy create a cloud and show Anabella all about past of the kingdom before Queen Bella's death, how she was happy when she had Anabele, how she play with her in they room. Bela was well known all around kingdom and everyone love her. But Lucinda was bad from the day she was born and always try to sabotages Bella. But she never won , except after so many years of planning , she make that evil plan, to kill Bella , and send Anabele far away. After Bella die, Lucinda take over crown and change all about life in kingdom .Few years later she take one girl that she steal

from local farmer, because she dont want allowed no one to take over crown even when she is dead.

Her , let say ,, daughter Kajra , need to take over crown in few days.. no one know that she is not real royal blood.

FAIRY : So you are the only one who can save our kingdom and put back all that your mother want to make of him. Come on, hurry up, we have to stop the coronation of Lucinda's daughter Kajre.

ANABELLA: Please, wait a minute, I can't just run away and stop the coronation .What will my foster mother say? And how you are so sure that I am that princess?

FAIRY : Because of that necklase around your neck.. dont tell me you dont have it..have a beautiful butterfly and picture of your mother and i know it is all ready disappear by the years.

ANABELLA How you know about this ??? yes I have it it is only thing what keep me going in this bad world.

FAIRY: of course i know about it, i drop in your crib when they send you away..

Anabella cry in that moment , hug little fairy and say,,

ANABELLA : Yes lets go and save my kingdom and my mother name.

FAIRY: We will go tonight soon dark will fall...

The evening came, AnabeLLa and the fairy was ready to start they journy , but the fairy warned AnabeLLa that the forest was enchanted ...

FAIRY : dont be scare becasue , when they will see and fill that you are queen Bella dauther , they will be your guardians and friends,,

How they walk and resarch the forest suddenly something make noice.. KRC KRC... hihihih

ANABELLA: fairy! fairy! do you hear what that cracked?

FAIRY : I don't know

Fairy and Anabella wondered what it was and suddenly an adorable squirrel jumped out.

SQUIRREL : hello, I'm Chipo,,

ANABELLA laugh because she never hear squirrel talking..

ANABELA: what , are you talking ?

FAIRY: yes, how do you talk?

SQUIRREL: I don't know? And where do you go trow this strange forest ?

FAIRY : We going to stop the coronation from Kajra. Because this is the daughter of Queen BeLLa, she is real princess of kingdom..

SQUIRREL. Really.Can I go to please? I am so bored here this days..

ANABELLA: Yes, of course

After long nights and days walking, they finally arrived in the kingdom.

On the day of the coronation, Anabela l was trying to enter the palace and was suddenly caught by the queen's guard and taken to Queen Lucinda.

Lucinda when she see her , she knew that she was her niece .She knew one more thing that everything is in danger .

LUCINDA: dear girl , how you find the way back here?? And do you know who Am I?

ANABELLA : Yes i know my evil unty ... and i know what you did to my mum and me ...so you dont have a heart ???

LUCINDA : HAHAH heart , what is heart ? dont care what you think or anyone,, You just didnt have to come today,, not good day ... so now i need to make sure that you dont spoiled my day,,

GUARDSSSS take this girl to basement she try to kll mee...aaaa.. i sould do the same manyyy years ago ..AHAHAHAHA

ANABELLA : FAIRYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY..... CHIPPPPOOO...they take meeeeeee awayyyy..!!!.

FAIRY: i will save you!!

When fary try to kick guards on they head,, other guard put fairy in one big vase .. and put her in one of the rooms ...

Guard lock Anabella in cold basement..

Chip scared watch everything what was going on and he run back to the forest for help.

He go straight to Mother Butterfly, even no one know excatly were she was , but his woring and need to help Anabele, just keep him going..

He finally get there,, pure little one , almost left with no air, try to explain what was going on..

Mother Butterfly make plan,,activate everyone and everythng and they start to move to castle.

In castle coronation start ..Lucinda was so happy , everything was gong by plan...

In the basement , trough little hole in the wall, lttle butterfly come in ,,and wisper in Anabella ear ,, ,,,...you are not alone and lets go make you a queen ,,“

The doors open, and Anabella run up to the ball room..to stop coronation.

ANABELA : stop!! She is not true blood of the Queen ... I am, my mother is Queen Bela.

LUCINDA : that's not true.. dont listen to this lttle farmer girl..AREST HERRR...

FAIRY : why doesn't the crown light up if your daughter is a real queen??

Lucinda grabbed the crown, push Kajra and started to run.

But Chip the squirrel jumped up and took the crown.

He put on the Anabella head , and crown start to glow ...she is real queen.  
woooow...

In that moment ,, a hundreds of butterfly start to curcle around her and make a shape of her mother Bella... and she touch her face and tell her :

„ i tell you , you was never alone and you will never be“... Mother Butterfly was queen Bella all along.

Kingdom was again happy and full of joy with best queen ever.

If you asking what happend to Lucinda .. well Lucinda .. fairy take care od her .. haha they put her in one big , lets say not comfortable bubble, that she can not leave never again and only thing she can work is on dirt and land...

Anabellas fairy godmother followed her through many more adventures and of course Chipo..

Butterfly was always by her side...

And you know how the story ends... they all live happily ever after.

author: Iris Lučić Andrijanić

mentor: Sandra Barešić

institution: Osnovna škola Rajić

## CHALLENGE

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Once upon a time, there was a group of teenagers who went to the cemetery. That was a challenge where you had to clean gravestones. In two hours, you had to clean as many as you could and the record was nineteen. The group decided to do it because it was very popular and Amy said, "I will go first." After a short discussion, they agreed that Amy would go first, Dave second, John third and Emily would go at the end. When the time for the challenge came everybody was ready. Well, not everybody, Emily was worried and scared and she knew she couldn't do it.

It was getting dark and it was her turn. Everything seemed fine at first, she was scared but she didn't want to quit. Suddenly her friends who were just behind her disappeared. She started to walk and she heard a noise. Something fell and when she looked in that direction she saw her own body. All of the sudden her body couldn't move. She didn't know what to do. She was too afraid to scream. And then she saw familiar eyes in the dark. "James is that you? What are you doing here?" she asked. She was happy to see him but confused. Her brother James replied, "I don't know." Emily told him everything that happened that day and she asked him "Am I really dead? Am I a ghost now?" James tried to calm her down with his answer "No, but if you want to go back you will have to do something I think." Emily was even more worried "How? What? James you are here for a long time and you still don't know." James looked a bit sad and then he said "We are one of a kind but only one of us can go back." They both remain silent, Emily could see sadness on his face and he could see fear on hers. James said "I guess you aren't ready for this, it is not your turn yet."

After that Emily woke up in the hospital. Her friend and her parents were next to her. She was happy to see them but still confused and worried. Her story was all over the news and surprisingly nobody dared to do such challenges ever again.



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mentor: Iva Šimić

institution: OŠ „Ivan Goran Kovačić“, Slavonski Brod

## DEADLY DETAIL

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“HANA!!!“. ”Are you shoplifting?”. “No, dad .” Hana says sadly. “Don’t lie, HANA!“. “ I’m not .”. “You are lying. I found this in your ROOM!!!“. They were men’s gray underpants. “Phew” Hana says and covers her nose because the underpants smelled. “Now go to your room, tomorrow you will return everything“. Now Hana was crying in her room.

“Honey, I think that now that her mother is dead, we should hand her over to the social welfare office.” Says her evil stepmother.

Tomorrow all day Hana spent returning things to stores that she didn’t steal. Her legs were already hurting and she reached the last shop. It’s a shop that was selling portraits. She told herself tiredly ”This is last store.“. She entered and immediately felt something odd about this place. The store was strange, all the walls were black and the person working at the cash register was weird. He was a young man with something white on his face like flour and he had strange red hair that was very greasy, he was dressed like a court madwoman. “Well, I guess that’s how artists look these days,” she mutters. “What was that?“. “Did you say something, dear?” How did he behave, thought Hana, he snapping his fingers with his torso bent and his legs standing straight. He bends down to me and I to his nose. “I stole something from you.“ Hana says, but not with shame. Her legs hurt and she doesn’t care anymore, she wants to go home as soon as possible. “YOU STOLE SOMETHING FROM US!!!” And he pulled her by the hand and brought her to a room where only employees are allowed. He opened the door and took her to a room. It was a it was a black dark basement with one light bulb and a chair. “SIT THERE.“ Terrified, she sits down and thinks that the basement is scary. ”NOW YOU’RE GOING UP WITH ME! I’M GOING TO TAKE YOUR PICTURE AND YOU’RE GOING TO THE WALL OF SHAME!!!” They climb up. “Wait, I’m going to get my camera and now look at the wall of shame.” Hana starts to look and hears him come, but when she turned her head, she read the name Jack. “Smile”, says the employee sarcastically. He takes a picture of her. She quickly reads the name JACK EVANS - the boy who disappeared 3 months ago in the same clothes as in the picture when he was last seen.

Hana seemed to see a ghost when she read his name. "Sorry dear, about that basement, here's a candy", says the employee. Hana takes the candy and eats it in front of him." I'm going to work. "And everything went black. Slowly, everything started to gain color, but for a short time. Hana woke up, but she didn't know where she was. She quickly realized she was in the BASEMENT. She started to run to the door but it was locked. She was terrified, she didn't know what to do, she sat down by the wall and began to cry. She looked to the left and saw the message. "Hit the gray brick." And she does it. BOOM!!! "AAAAAAAAAA" Hana screamed because she was falling into another world. BOOM!

She fell into the water. She turned around, saw the forest and the castle. She couldn't believe it. "AUUUU" wolves growled, they started running towards her. In a panic, Hana starts running towards the castle. She ran to the castle, but it was locked and the wolves were getting closer and closer, she didn't know where she would hide. She grabs the stone and breaks the window and enters the castle. She enters the room with covered statues Curiously pulls the covers that were covering them and SCREAMS. They were the statues of children who disappeared. Suddenly she hears a horde of footsteps. Those were the footsteps of the guards. They were coming to catch her. Just as the guards entered the room and...

Someone pulls Hana into another room. Hana tries to see who it is and he puts his hand over her mouth. After a few minutes, the footsteps of the guards left the room. Hana looked at who it was and saw that it was a young man with glasses. His hair was brown and he was dressed like a fisherman. Before Hana can say anything, he says, "I'm with you. My name is Finnick. I am the one who disappeared 6 months ago." "We must defeat the queen to survive, but I need help. Do you want to help?" "Yes!" answers Hana. "Follow me and be careful. I have a plan, but it's dangerous. Hold this, it is the poison we will use to poison the queen. Listen, now we are going to the kitchen. There is an opening to the queen's mirror and we have to poison the queen's food and we will hide in her mirror. But we have to distract the guards, so here's a stone to break the window." They passed through the hall and entered the kitchen. Hana throws a rock and all the guards go to check what's going on. They put the poison in the food but BOOM!!! The queen petrified Finnick - his whole body except his glasses. Hana quickly took his glasses, dipped them in food and jumped on the queen. She sticks the glasses in queen neck, she slowly begins to die, but before she dies Hana sees who the queen is. The queen was her mother. In tears, she asks her mother why she did that, and her mother says "I love you." Hana wakes up at the police station. She got an award for saving the missing children. She gave nothing to her family. 20 years later she married Finnick.

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## DREAM TO REALITY

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There was a girl named Rachel. She hated Christmas and everything about it: decorations, lights, presents... She thought people made too much deal of it. For her, it was a day like any other and she simply wanted it to be over as soon as possible.

It all started when she was a little girl and for Christmas wished a beautiful doll all her friends had. But, when she woke up on Christmas day, the doll wasn't under the tree, just some stupid chocolate candies. What a disappointment! Her parents tried to explain that Christmas isn't about the presents, but nothing helped. She has been angry at Christmas since.

Many years later, it was Christmas Eve, and Rachel was home alone. She heard a strange noise coming from the bathroom. She entered the bathroom to check it out, but suddenly it all went black.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself in her old house, in front of the Christmas tree. She saw herself, only smaller, looking at the tree and admiring its beauty. For this little girl, everything was possible. Then she remembered... It was the night when she stopped believing in Christmas. Her greatest wish hadn't come true. Rachel was very sad and upset remembering this.

Suddenly, something caught her attention. Her parents were sitting at the kitchen table and talking so quiet, she could hardly hear them. She came closer and tried to hear their conversation. It was about money and how to pay the bills. Her father has just got fired and her parents were devastated. They had so many plans for Christmas, including presents for their only daughter, Rachel. They knew she wanted a doll almost everyone had at that time, but they also realized they can't afford it anymore. This was so hard for them – looking at their daughter full of expectation and hope, knowing they can't make her wish come true. But there was still something they could do. Rachel's dad took a chocolate he was saving for a long time to share with his family on Christmas and said: "Let's make candies! We'll make them in the shape of heart and give it to Rachel. She is our biggest love and our hearts belong to her. I think she'll love it." Rachel's mum agreed and they started making heart shapes, melting chocolate and making candies. They have worked all night to make them

perfect for their daughter. They wrapped them up and put under the Christmas tree, excited to see Rachel's reaction in the morning.

The morning came, and Rachel watched small image of herself disappointed standing in front of the tree. She hadn't even looked at the candies her parents tried so hard to make. Tears were running from both Rachel's eyes. But, this time, not for the same reason. "Christmas is not about the presents. Now I understand. There are much more important things than Christmas presents. Family, love, understanding. How could I be so stupid?!"

Suddenly, Rachel woke up. She was lying on the bathroom's floor. What has just happened? Was it a dream? Somehow, it didn't matter. Some things were clearer in her heart than before. She took her coat and rushed outside. Her parents lived nearby, and she suddenly wanted to see them as soon as possible. Of course, there was only one thing she needed. Chocolate candies! She stopped at the first shop and bought some in the shape of heart.

When she came to her parents' house, they were so happy. It was first Christmas Eve in a long time they were all together. Rachel gave them candies. Her parents looked at each other and smiled. Everything was just right. Rachel never felt so warm and loved. She has finally realized that everything she has ever wanted was always here. And Christmas became her favourite holiday, once again.

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## FRIENDS TRIP

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Me and my friends Lana and Lara go to school together every day. One day in school we got an agreement for an excursion. We will go to Pula for five days and as well all fifth graders go. I am so happy we are going to Pula in two days. When I got home, I went to pack for the trip. I woke up for school. Me and my friends went to school together. The teacher told us when we go on the trip to be good.

I woke up for the trip and I went to school. We travelled for 6 hours. I slept the whole way. When we came to Pula, we were very happy. When we got to the hotel, we went to our rooms. Girls and boys planted in different rooms, which is cool. We ate pizza for dinner. We went to sleep at 10 o'clock.

We woke up at 8 o'clock, we went to the zoo. We saw a giraffe, 2 lions, 4 snakes, 8 pigs and 6 tigers. After that, we went for a walk in the park. We walked for 1 hour, and we went to the shop. I bought a notebook, pencils, 2 highlighters, and clothes. We went back to the hotel, and we played games. We slept until 10 o'clock. After breakfast, we went to the swimming pool. We went back to the hotel in the afternoon.

At night, my friend Petar came into the girls' room, and he asked my friend Magdalena if she wanted to be his girlfriend and Magdalena said yes. I was proud of her. The next day we went home. When I got home, I told my parents how it was in Pula. The next day I went to school. It was a little boring. I was so tired. I slept for 4 hours, and I went to school. It was nice to finally see the teachers and the class teacher. One day my mom said we're going to Germany to see my aunt and cousin. We were leaving in 5 days. Until then, I had two tests in math and history. I studied math and history for four hours in total. The next day I took a math test, and I knew everything, and I think I will get a good grade. I told my mom and dad that the test was easy, and they said it was going to be what it was going to be.

I was packing for a trip to Germany, and it turned out that me and my friend were going to the same place. She was going to take Petar with her, but that was okay. We left at 4:00 in the morning. I woke up at 3 in the morning and put my things on the bus. We had a long journey. It was a little boring on the way, but it didn't matter when

we got to Germany at my aunt's house. We sat down at the table, and we ate soup. After that, my mom and I went to the store and bought some juices and some pots. It turned out that we were going to be in Germany for 2 more days. My cousin was also at my aunt's place, and we talked a little and socialized. I prepared for the trip to Croatia. Everyone drank coffee and I drank water, and we packed things on the bus, and we went to Croatia. It was another long journey. I fell fast asleep on the bus. When we came back, I had to study again.

When I woke up, I spent some time on my phone, so when I changed my clothes, we went to Grandma and my cousins. My mom told me that Gradman had a present waiting for me. When we arrived, I saw the license plate on a car that was parked in front of my grandma's house. I covered my eyes when I saw who it was. I started crying because it was my best friend. He lives far away. It was Ilija. I was so happy I met him. My cousins were a little shy, but they started talking with Ilija. They had a wonderful time together.

The next day when I woke up, I went with Ilija and Ivan to the city for a walk and we went for a pizza. When we got home, we watched movies. It was fun, but Ilija had to pack because he was leaving for school the next day. I was sad but he'd still come this year. After all, I had to do homework, study, and go to school. When I got to school, I told my friends what happened. After class, I went to my aunt's house to greet her. When I got home, I got ready for bed and went to sleep. When I woke up around 3 o'clock, I stayed in bed for a while. Then I got up. I only ate lunch and dinner and that's all. The next day when I came to school, I was happy because of the holidays. Me and my friends talked the whole time, well not really during class but ok. The holidays were just one day away. I planned to rest every day.

On the last day of the holiday, I'll have time to learn a lot of things. I still have time to think about the places where we can go on trips.

author: Marija Musa  
mentor: Marija Matijaš  
institution: OŠ Vrbani

## FROM THE STREET TO THE PALACE

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A girl named Margot lived in England with her parents. They lived in a nice house in London. When Margot was seven years old, she had a family tragedy. One rainy night some evil people came to her house and robbed them. Things got worse because one of the robbers killed her mother. The funeral was very sad, and things got very bad for her and her father after that. Her father lost his job, and they became almost homeless. There was no home and happy time for Margot, she and her father William stayed in one small room, at the end of the lonely street near the London City. She had a hard time in school because several of her classmates made fun of her because she was poor and did not have many things to show. She had to help her father to sell vegetables at the local green market.

Years passed and she grew into a pretty girl. When she was twelve years old, His Majesty Prince George came to the green market where Margot and her father were selling fresh vegetables. Many people surrounded prince George and wanted to meet him. Margot did not particularly care about him, but the prince stopped by their stand and liked the vegetables and decided to buy everything from them. Things got more interesting, and the prince started to come almost every day to buy the potatoes from Margot. His majesty liked something else rather than the potatoes, Margot. She was a tall girl with a nice, long brown hair and beautiful face and smile. Prince George was two years older than her, but he started to like her a lot. He found out her name and age.

One Sunday afternoon, on a beautiful English spring day prince George was with his mother Queen Charlotte. He could not stop to talk about the potatoes from the green market and the girl that sells them. He told his mother how nice she was, and he also said how bad he felt that she had to work with her father just to survive. Queen Charlotte sensed that he liked the commoner. On a separate occasion, she spoke with one of her advisors about this. Sir Thomas, her advisor, suggested her majesty to visit the green market next Saturday. It would be nice for her to see her people, and the newspaper will write nice articles about it.

Next Saturday came, and the royal family came to the green market to visit the

people. It was very busy there. There were many policemen and journalists there. The policemen were yelling something trying to keep everything in order. The journalist took the statements and photographs with their cameras. The Queen and her son George finally stopped by the vegetable stand where Margot and her father were selling the potatoes. Prince told his mother that was a girl that he liked. Queen Charlotte stopped by the stand and briefly spoke to Margot and her father. She praised their potatoes and thanked them for keeping her son happy and well fed. The journalist took some photos, and the next day the photo of Margot and Queen became the front-page news. Margot became an instant celebrity, the kids in school were no longer making fun of her.

Meanwhile, the Queen returned to her royal palace. Things went back to normal for her, but one thing kept bothering her. That girl...she looked so familiar. She called Sir Thomas one day for the famous tea at five o'clock. She started to talk about Margot and how familiar she looked, like her mother Queen Mary. Almost identical to her mother, the face and smile. Sir Thomas was one of the oldest and most trusted advisors. He was an old English gentleman that respected the royal family and monarchy. He also knew many royal secrets that he kept to himself. He was one of the few persons at this Earth that knew Queen Charlotte's dark secret.

When Queen Charlotte was young princess, she visited Greece. It was a summertime and she enjoyed nice weather and beautiful Mediterranean scenery. She met a nice Greek pilot while she was in Athens. She fell in love, and they had a passionate relationship that summer. The summer ended, and Charlotte returned to England with a souvenir from Greece. She was pregnant! The royal family and the advisors kept that a secret. Queen gave birth to a baby girl that was soon put into an orphanage. That is the royal way of taking care of problems. The Queen was so sad that she got married many years later.

Sir Thomas called one of his close friends, Sir Arthur, to help and asked him to check more on this matter. Sir Arthur contacted the head of the secret service to check Margot and her father closely. On one rainy night he met with Sir Arthur secretly and told him about Margot. She was a daughter of a baby girl that the queen had with the Greek pilot, and she was killed by the robbers. Sir Arthur had a dilemma about the right thing to do. Should they remove Margot and her father or tell the Queen? He decided to tell the Queen about everything one afternoon while they were having a tea together. The Queen broke down in tears, something that she does not usually do. They decided to take Margot and father into the royal palace. Margot was out of herself and could not believe this. Prince George was her first cousin, and



she was a royal. No one will laugh at her anymore. She had a nice room, and she wore beautiful dresses. The royal family sent her to a nice private boarding school while her father started working in a nice office. Her life changed upside down. For much, much better. From now in, people called her Lady Margot, and she became the blue blood and a close friend to her cousin, prince George, a man who would be a king on day.

All thank to potatoes and Sir Thomas.....

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## GALACTIC SISTERS

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One day five galactic sisters appeared from the space. Ellen, Bella, Arya, Kaii, and Izar had their magical powers: Stardust, Potions, Water, Nature, and Time. This is their story.

It was morning. Arya woke up. "It is time for me to subdue all my enemies and get the whole reign. ", she said selfishly. She started making potions, adding all kinds of plants, and poison.

Izar asked her for a glass of water. She brought a potion. One of the sisters saw and heard everything. When Arya gave Izar the potion, Ellen threw the glass out of her hand. Everyone was confused. The evil sister said: „Don't worry, everything is ok, she didn't sleep well...

Suddenly, she started to attack them! They had to fight against their sister. Ellen was throwing all kinds of potions at her, but Arya just threw water on them. Bella captured her. "Hurry up! Ellen threw her last potion to knock her out. Bella captured her with lianas.

"It looks like Ellen accidentally gave me the potion to be stronger!", she said and broke through with her icy blades. She captured them with water bubbles and sent Bella to Mercury where she couldn't survive. Ellen managed to break the bubble and knock out Arya.

She quickly grabbed her broom and flew to Mercury. When she returned, she gave Arya the potion that can make you forget all the terrible things. Bella and Arya woke up like nothing happened. She hugged all of them.

She was going for a walk with Ellen, but suddenly, her memories came back, and she told Ellen: "Let's take a walk to the Island of Death." Bella was following them. Arya wanted to push Ellen, but Bella quickly told Kaii to freeze the time. She saved Ellen. Everything was normal again. But there was a problem. Ellen gave Arya a weak potion and Arya started to remember things. She tried to escape, but it didn't take long for Bella to capture her again.

One morning when everything was normal again, they got a letter from their parents: "Dear daughters, we will die soon. You will inherit the kingdom and the castle. We love you so much.

Greetings from your parents.”

The sisters were sad. Arya and her evil friend Doris came for revenge. Bella greeted Doris: “Oh, hello! Our names are Ellen, Izar, and Kaii and I’m Bella!”, Bella said: “I am Bella, I have the power of nature.” Ellen: “I am Ellen, I have the power to make potions.” Izar: “I am Izar, I have the power of stardust.” Kaii: “I am Kaii, I have the power of time.” Doris replied: Nice names!”

When they became friends, Doris made an ambush! It was a sunny day, the sisters were enjoying the day, but Doris was behaving strangely. And Ellen saw that Doris was behaving strangely. She spied on her. Ellen followed her every step. Doris started making poisonous potions and she put them in their drinks. They all passed out. Ellen managed to escape and went to live in the woods. Doris noticed it. Doris changed shape from her to Ellen, she “shapeshifted” with her powers. Ellen hid quickly so Doris could not see her. She started to collect wood and other materials. Her house was completed after a while. She was collecting food, so she could survive. She was going to the hunt, too. She found streams of water.

Everything was nice until something terrible happened. When Ellen was coming home, she saw the house was on fire! And she could assume only one thing - that Doris found her! She took her bow and arrows, and she was walking around, so Doris wouldn’t ambush her. She transformed into Bella so she could throw lianas. She captured Ellen! But, Ellen escaped, and she threw poison on Doris. Doris lost all her powers. But she did not give up! She took Ellen’s bow and started shooting her. She knew how to use the bow. Since Ellen had powers, she could fly, so it wasn’t very easy to shoot her. Doris found a hole in the tree, big enough for her to hide in. She aimed at Ellen from that hole. She wanted to hit her, but Ellen suddenly disappeared. She shot the arrow through the hole before she realized that Ellen disappeared. The arrow darted through the branches. Ellen was cunning, and she knew that Doris was hiding in the hole. She came to the tree. She easily flew to the hollow, and finally, Doris fired the last arrow, hitting Ellen! Elen escaped quickly and she was going to the Island of Death. She freed the sisters. Sisters were fighting the strongest they could! Bella was throwing plants and lianas, Izar was using her space powers, Ellen was throwing potions, and Kaii was not there because she froze time and ran away. Three sisters were fighting against one evil. Arya knocked them down with the waves of water! They were fighting, until Bella remembered the plan! She quickly told the sisters the plan.

Bella suddenly said, “We are giving up!”. Arya was confused. “Aren’t you the famous Galactic sisters who always win the evil?” Izar answered her: “This time we are

giving up! You surpassed us! You are stronger!” In a moment Arya stopped using her powers, Izar threw lightning at her! Arya was much damaged. Bella captured her with lianas when she was still down. Ellen lifted her with her powers. And together, they made the darkest magic. Ellen asked: “Do you have any last words?” Arya answered: “Yes, I do have...It’s not done yet! I will come back, and I will finish you! Hahahaha!”

The sisters put a spell on her with their darkest magic! They defeated her, and now, they are living happily ever after!

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mentor: Lidija Šaravanja

institution: OŠ Vladimir Nazor, Čepin

## GOD'S WILL

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Once Upon a Time there was an old man from Asia, named Ayaan. He is 83 years old. He had no friends, no wife and no family. He lived in an old home and next to his home there was a poor garden. He had some seed packets and planted them in the dirt. There were 3 rose seeds, 5 violet seeds and 9 sunflower seeds. The garden was quite ugly. All the other gardens in the town were stunningly pretty, but nothing was blooming in Ayaan's garden. People wanted it gone, so they began signing a petition. Five days after the petition was signed, people started coming, and when they approached it, it suddenly started growing. All the flowers were different, all the roses, violets and sunflowers were not the same. After a week it looked like the flowers will continue growing to the sky. People from all over Asia started coming to see the garden. But the only one who really cared for the flowers was Ayaan. God saw how much Ayaan loved his flowers and decided to reward him for that. He talked to him in his sleep and said in the end, "Oh, and before you leave, I have one more thing to say: don't look at other people and think they are better than you. Just look at yourself. No one is perfect, and no one is without problems. We are all different in some ways. Now you can peacefully wake up and be happy with your family. Ayaan was so close to crying. God gave him a box with 3 seeds: 1 money seed, 1 life seed and the last 1 was a surprise seed. God said, "Don't put it in the dirt, put it in a drink and drink it wisely. It may have some side effects, but you will be okay, I can promise you that. In his home he was thinking how many side effects a little seed can have and if he will make it to be 100 years old. When a year passed Ayaan was 84 and really sick. He made himself a cup of tea. In a few minutes he became energetic like a 3-year-old, fast like a 5-year-old, smart like a 10-year-old and tall like a 15-year-old. He was so happy and thankful to God, he said: Thank you my Savor, thank you my giver, thank you my God for my seeds. The seed lasted for 1 week and 3 days. He made more tea and put the money seed in the tea. He got a 1000 pennies every day for one month. He was smart, so he put the pennies to use. He helped many families. It was his 100 birthday. Everyone in Asia came to celebrate he was super happy, he called God and asked if he can help. God told him "Tell me, tell your savor, tell your

giver, tell your God.” Ayaan told him that he knows that God loves all people, but he asked him: God why do you care for me so much? God told him, “I care for you the same as I care for every person on this planet. I gave you the seeds because you cared for your garden. Tell everyone that I love every person on this planet the same. Take care, my Ayaan.” A week later he made some tea and put the surprize seed in the tea. He was quite scared, but he drank it slowly anyway. In a few days he noticed that people enjoyed listening to him, especially the young. So he kept talking about love, life, care for other people. He taught people to help everyone on this planet and that God loved them. Young people loved the teacher and listened to him. They were happy because it was God’s will to love them all.

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mentor: Jasna Kuzmanović

institution: Osnovna škola Ivane Brlić Mažuranić Koška

## HOW I BURNED MY HANDS (SECOND-DEGREE BURN)

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This is a story about how I burnt my hand so badly that it was a second-degree burn. Back in October (or November, I can't remember) 2022 when it was Friday, I was at home chilling when I accidentally fell asleep on a chair beside a sofa and I fell from the chair while I was asleep and I somehow had consciousness while my eyes were closed (it's complicated) and my hands were trying to grab the nearest object it could find. Unfortunately, my hands grabbed the furnace so that I can stand up or have balance, and somehow my hands were on the furnace for about half a minute or longer. When my body decided to remove the hands from the furnace, it was too late. I suddenly woke up and I was on the floor sitting, but I was confused about what happened. When I looked at my hands I saw them in a catastrophic state and when I realised my hands were burnt, I suddenly started feeling pain. I was in so much pain and agony that I started crying. My dad then woke up and realised what had happened. He told me to put my hands in the salt (knew it or not, salt actually helped me with the second-degree burn). He told me to lay in the bed and he covered me with a blanket and told me to keep my hands outside the blanket. My hands were half red half normal. I stayed the whole weekend at home and when I came to school everyone looked shocked. I told all my teachers about the situation and they said that I can just sit and listen, but I didn't have to write anything because my right hand was burnt so badly I couldn't grab anything even a pencil and hold it. The idea was fine with me and all I did was sit, watch and listen to what the teachers were teaching us about. The first two weeks my hands looked like a catastrophic place. There was a trace of blood, something like bubbles that I wasn't allowed to poke them that contained lymph (a type of liquid inside my hands) etc... So basically they looked like an inside of a dumpster. They looked like that for about a month or two until they started to heal. Few months later and they looked like new. To this day I remember about the incident and there's a mark or two on my hands that remind me of it. I am not traumatised, but I remember how badly it hurt.

author: Vid Bažon

mentor: Ana Radolović

institution: OŠ Svetvinčenat

## JUST ONE GLASS OF WINE

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One day, two friends, David and Ivan wanted to hang out. They agreed that Ivan should come to David's grandpa's place because David was at his grandpa's at that moment.

When Ivan came to David's grandpa, they laughed and joked a little. After some time, Grandpa suddenly went out. The boys were curious about grandpa's whereabouts, but they didn't look for him. When Grandpa came back with a bottle of wine and three glasses, the boys were really surprised and asked him what he was going to do with that wine. Grandpa answered, "Well, we'll drink. What did you think, that we would give it to the cows to drink?" The boys immediately burst into laughter. While the boys were laughing, grandpa poured wine into their glasses. As soon as the boys saw that there was wine in their glass, they asked him, "Grandpa, we don't want to drink wine, why did you pour us wine?"

"While you are in my house, you must taste the wine, otherwise you fly out of my house and you are not allowed to come back." In the end, the boys were forced to drink wine. After drinking the entire bottle of wine, the boys fell asleep.

The next evening, they decided to hang out at grandpa's place again. They waited for grandpa to fall asleep because they had a brilliant idea. The idea was to take the keys from grandpa's car and go fooling around in the fields and forest roads. When the boys managed to get the keys, they first went to get two more friends, Kristian and Adam. They all went to Kristian's house together to get another car, so they can drive together and have fun. When they got another car, they went drifting in a field. While they were drifting, they suddenly noticed that on the side of the road, the police were patrolling. As soon as everyone saw them, they started to drive away in a group with their cars. They contacted each other via mobile phones while they were driving. After some time, the situation escalated significantly.

The boys had to cross the highway so they started speeding, otherwise the police would have caught them. At one point they realized that they had exceeded the speed of 150 km/h, they immediately started driving away from the police as if they were in a movie. At the first turn, the boys almost killed themselves, because they



went drifting under the manual. It was raining so they skidded a lot, and that's why they almost killed themselves, but it was very funny to them after a few bends on the local roads. They switched to the highway again and exceeded speeds of 170 km/h, and at one point the boys burst out laughing and hit the road signs and flew 300 meters away from those signs. The drivers who saw everything were in great shock and immediately called an ambulance, and the police were already there because they were chasing them. Kristian and Adam had already escaped from the police a long time ago.

The police informed the firefighters about the terrible traffic accident. When the firefighters pulled out the boys from the car and took their documents, they were shocked to see that the boys were only 15 years old. When they called their parents from the hospital to inform them that the boys died in a terrible traffic accident, the parents desperately came to the hospital to hear the details of the accident. The parents were told that the car in which the boys died belonged to grandfather. As soon as they finished talking to the paramedics, they went to tell grandpa that the boys died in his car. The grandfather had a heart attack and died on the spot. Grandpa, Ivan and David were buried next to each other in the same cemetery and they all had a funeral on the same day...

After two hours of sleep David woke up and had to calm down for 10 minutes. His heart was pounding. When he came to his senses he tried to understand what happened. After a few minutes David said "Oh, it's all good. Luckily, this was just a dream..."

author: Petra Alat Miković

mentor: Valentina Ćosić

institution: OŠ Sesvetska Sela

## LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND

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It was a normal day in New York. A hot summer day.

My family and me, we live in a house. My mom Ivana, my dad Goran, my brother and me wanted to go on vacation. Mom rented a house on a beach on some strange island. The house was beautiful. It was great, until... We went on the beach. It was a long sandy beach. I saw a very very big boat heading towards us. Everyone thought it would stop... but it didn't. It crashed on the beach. It was very scary! Nobody was hurt, so it was fine but strange. A few days later we didn't have any signal or internet. We couldn't use our electronics. It just said that there was an error. It was very strange! In one moment on my mum's phone there were some messages. One message said there were hackers who do all that. It goes weirder to weirder from now on. It was night, my brother and me were upstairs sleeping because it was 3am. My mom and dad were still up in the kitchen. It was a loud knock and there was some man named George and his daughter Lana. They said that the house was their so we let them in for a night. My mom didn't like it very much. In the morning I ran outside and saw 100 deers! It was like they tried to say something! Meanwhile, George went to the neighbours and my dad went to the market. George didn't find the neighbours he found dead people and a crashed plane. It was like in a movie, very bad movie! Dad also didn't find the market, he got lost. He couldn't go on google maps because there wasn't any signal. When George saw dead people, in that moment another plane crashed on the same spot. He survived but barely. My dad tried to go home and he saw a random women panicking. She was yelling but in spanish so he couldn't understand her and then he drove away. He looked at the sky and saw a plane dropping at least 10 000 red papers. Then something very bad hapend. It was very loud high pitched noise. Very hurtful! It was like...

Stay tuned for the rest!:)

author: Cvita Talajić

mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

## LOVED ONES NEVER TRULY DIE

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This is a story about a faraway land in the underground of the Byzantine Empire. It was a land of peace. There lived a young girl named Teresa. She was a very kind person and pretty curious as well... Everyone there loved her. She and her people lived in a land with an endless forest. Creatures that none of us, humans, could imagine. Flowers of all kinds. It was like our world, but people there respected nature, animals and all living beings. There the Sun always shined, but we all know that one day the Sun will go down.

One day Teresa was sitting on a branch. Her long black hair flew with the wind. Her emerald green eyes were closed as she listened to the magical birdsong. Suddenly it was interrupted by the parade of "The big victory?" She didn't know what it was about. Then she saw her father, the chief, leading the parade. She got off the branch and slid down the hill the tree was on. She went to her father and asked:

"Dad, what is all this about?"

Her father was shocked: "Teresa, get out of the way!"

When Teresa got out of the way, she was left there, confused.

Later on, as they sat down for dinner, she asked: "Daddy, what was this parade about?"

Her parents looked at each other, looking worried. "Honey don't, she's only 13..." said her mother.

"It was about our victory against the Byzantine", her father replied.

"Byzantine?" asked Teresa in confusion. "How come I've never seen this before?"

"Because we celebrate it every thirteen years since that's how long the war lasted", said her father.

Teresa didn't ask more because she noticed her father frowning while he was talking about it. But despite her not asking any more questions, she still had plenty of them: What was it? Where was it? Teresa was concerned for her father so she went up to him and hugged him tightly. He hugged her back. In the back of her head, there was still a little voice which kept saying: *I gotta find that Byzantine!*

The next day she woke up extra early, hoping to be up before her father. *Darn it!*

When she went into their backyard, she saw her father awake and talking to someone. She decided that she would have to be sneaky if she wanted to get out of the backyard without her father noticing. KRAKKK! She stepped on a stick, making a loud sound. She panicked and hid behind a large bush, gasping for air and hoping that her father hadn't heard it. Suddenly something touched her shoulder and she jumped in terror, "AAAAAH!"

"Relax, honey, it's me. What are you doing here so early?" It was her father!

"Dad... I was just playing Spy!" said Teresa, thinking *What a lame excuse, what am I, nine?*

"Go back to sleep, will you?" said her father.

She had no choice but to go back to her room. There she thought: *What if I go out the window?* And that's what she did. She jumped out and started running. She ran and ran. After a long run, she managed to get to a valley which looked nothing like their valleys. Their valleys were green, with big flowers and tall grass with the weirdest trees but this one... it was all gray, there were no flowers or trees and the grass was all dead. She walked through it and watched it, horrified. Suddenly she stepped on a big stone and the ground started shaking. In the blink of an eye, there stood a portal with small purple flashes of lightning and a big purple square in the middle. It was bordered with black diamonds. She looked at it in awe and touched the shining square. She then fainted and all she could see were big round hypnotizing circles in all kinds of colors.

The next thing she knew, she was in the same valley she had been in before. Thinking it was something fake, she went toward her house but found herself on a crowded street which looked nothing like her street at home. Then all of a sudden there came a handsome young man. His hair, which was long and blond, fell perfectly into his grass-green eyes and he had the body of a Greek god.

"Are you lost?" asked the guy.

She gazed into his deep green eyes and muttered: "Yes, my Romeo..."

"What?" he asked.

"Yeah, I am, do you mind showing me around?" Teresa asked.

He showed her around and introduced himself as Haro. They ended up having a great time. Weeks passed and with time they fell in love. They of course had to do it in secret because of those times' rules, and they dated for a long time. Until Haro started being absent every now and then. One day Teresa asked him why he was absent so often and he revealed that he had been going to military training because there was going to be a war in a week's time. She ran off in disbelief.

The day of the war finally came and Teresa decided to follow Haro to the field. The moment she got there, she hid behind a rock and cried as she heard the bloody screams. When they stopped, she looked for Haro but found him nearly dead. She ran up to him in tears. He told her not to cry because loved ones never truly die. When she came back to her world, she was never happy again. After a couple of weeks, she was sitting on the same branch as always, when suddenly she heard a familiar voice - it was Haro's! He was talking like in the old days. Months went by and Haro still kept showing up and right then and there Teresa understood what he meant when he said that *loved ones never truly die...*

author: TONI FARKAŠ

mentor: Suzana Tolić

institution: OŠ Cvjetno, Osijek

## MAGNETIC LOVE

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In one classroom there was a little yellow magnet called Aaron. He spent his whole days on the whiteboard while the teachers were explaining their lessons. During the night he drew beautiful and funny drawings for children to see when they come to the classroom in the morning. Aaron really wished to have someone to keep him company, and not just those two cheeky sponges that kept erasing his drawings. One day Aaron even drew a door on the whiteboard in hope that a girl magnet would appear in front of his drawn door. Aaron waited and waited for that to happen...

And then one morning during a math lesson, the teacher was teaching, and the window was open, and suddenly the wind blew in a beautiful pink magnet girl named Autumn and she appeared in front of Aaron's drawn door. Aaron welcomed her into his drawn house and Autumn explained to him how she flew in there. She also told him that she would stay there with him. Aaron was very happy and they really liked spending time together and then it was time for them to get married. Aaron and Autumn organized a wedding and they even invited those two cheeky sponges. There was a lot of celebration and everyone was happy and so Aaron and Autumn lived happily ever after on the whiteboard in the classroom. The End!

author: Luka Bertić

mentor: Nataša Ćoraš

institution: OŠ fra Bernardina Tome Leakovića, Bošnjaci

## MY HOLIDAYS

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I love holidays. They are a great time when you can be with your family and friends. Holidays are a nice break from our usual routine.

Even though in holidays we relax and have a great time, in holidays we get really tired. My family has a Christmas dinner at our house. We must clean the house before and after the dinner. It's not just an ordinary cleaning. The house needs to be the cleanest it has ever been. I don't do a lot of cleaning, but my parents do. I just must clean my room. My room is mostly not very messy. When the dinner comes, we all gather and eat. After eating, me and my cousins go to my room to talk and play video games a little bit. I think holidays are a mix of happiness and tiredness. After Christmas I just got few days to rest because of the New Year. This year some of my friends came to my house to celebrate the New Year. Eight days into the year 2024 I had to go to school.

I like summer more than winter. In the summer weather is very nice and most of the time I can play outside.

Winter is cold and a little bit boring. That is just my opinion. Before the New Year you just hear a lot of firecrackers and I don't like firecrackers. I also don't like school very much. I have good grades in school, but I don't really like it. I am going to be real, almost every kid doesn't like school. Weekends are such a relaxation. I can be with my friends, play video games as much as I want and more. When Monday comes, it goes all over again. That is why I talk about the holidays. We don't have school and we don't have any obligations. As I mentioned I just must clean my room.

Holidays are great and tiring. We just must enjoy them as much as we can. Happy holidays!

author: Ivan Pejin

mentor: Pamela Grozdanić

institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

## MY TRIP TO GERMANY

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I couldn't wait for the winter break, a two-week period of uninterrupted fun without school. My friends and I have already planned all kinds of activities to do and yes, all of them involve computer and Playstation. The moment the bell rang on Friday I ran back home to find all the video games I hadn't opened so far. I was so excited!

But, a few moments later, I heard my mum talking on the phone: "Yes, of course he will come to visit you in Germany. You can't do everything on your own...planning such a big dinner takes time. Talk to you soon! Bye!"

Germany??! I couldn't believe it. Was I really supposed to go to Germany for winter holidays? My mum entered the room looking too cheerful. She told me all about the trip to Germany. My grandmother and I had to go there to help my aunt prepare the dinner for New Year's Eve. Luckily, my friend was also going with us, but still, nine days in Germany seemed a lot. What if there were no video games?

I opened my suitcase and started packing while sadly looking at my unopened video games on my desk...A few hours later I was standing with my grandmother and my friend at Zagreb Airport. We flew around for an hour and a half. The flight went smoothly. At the airport in Germany my aunt and nieces were already there, waiting for us. After seeing their smiles full of joy, I forgot about my video games for a moment. It was really nice to see them after a long time. We got into the car and put our luggage in the trunk. The ride to their house was three hours long and I thought it would be boring. What can you do for three hours? If only I could play my video games...But we all started talking about their last visit to Croatia and funny anecdotes when we were helping my nieces learn to swim. Three hours of riding in the car just flew by.

When we came to the house, the rest of the family were really excited. They could not wait to see us. We got the luggage, and they showed us our rooms, rooms with no computers or video games, just like I thought. I was in a room with my cousin and my friend. My friend is my cousin's niece, so... that means we are all family? Anyway, I couldn't sleep the first night. I was trying to think of something fun to do instead of playing video games, but nothing came up.



After a long night, I woke up, and got ready for a visit to Leer, a city really close to us, only twenty minutes away. There, I met some of my cousin's friends. They knew a lot of jokes in English so I couldn't stop laughing. Everywhere I looked I saw Christmas lights shining. Well, that's something you can't see in a video game so I stopped and took a photo to show my friends in Croatia.

We also visited shops so we could buy lots of stuff for our friends and family. Each of us had twenty euros. I bought myself a notebook and nice pens for my cousin. I had two euros left, which I spent on street food. I enjoyed my meal while walking around the city, which seemed massive. After the whole day in Leer we had twenty minutes left before our aunt picked us up. We were just standing in silence until one of us saw a playground. Soon, we started chasing one another and before we knew it, we noticed our aunt waving from her car. Spending time with them was really fun. Surprisingly, it was even better than playing video games.

After a very busy day, I prepared myself for a very boring evening with my family on a New Years' Eve, but I was pleasantly surprised at how it all ended. I imagined myself cooking and cleaning quietly all day, but instead, my cousin, nieces, my friend and I were making pancakes with my aunt and listening to some music. My aunt tried to sound just like Mariah Carey, which made us all laugh. We continued dancing and singing in the evening and they even let me try an eggnog. It was awesome.

At midnight, we admired the fireworks: the whole city was shining and it looked like a famous painter used his best colours to paint the dark sky...it was magnificent. I went to sleep around one in the morning thinking how lucky I was to spend the evening with my family.

I spent the rest of my winter break playing hide-and-seek with my cousin, nieces and my friend in the playground and other outdoor games my cousin and nieces usually play when it's not raining. I had the time of my life jumping ropes and making up rhymes. We also decided to visit Leer again because we had such a great time in that local capital on the Ems River. Since I spent all my euros, I could only admire the Christmas decorations in the city. I took a lot of pictures to show my mum because she always decorates our house with baubles, tinsels and Christmas lights. I spent my evenings talking with my family and making all kinds of food while singing Christmas songs. Video games were the last thing on my mind.

The next day we boarded the plane at twelve o'clock. When we landed, I saw my parents standing and waiting for us. I missed them so much!

A day before school, some of my friends came to my house. I told them about my trip to Germany and even showed them the pictures. They were amazed. I asked them what they were doing during the winter break. "Oh, well...we only played video games," they said.

author: Ella Jamnić

mentor: Tatjana Kristek

institution: OŠ Vladimira Becića Osijek, Osijek

## NAOMI ENDO'S ENCOUNTERS WITH DEMONS

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I am Naomi Endo. I moved to Tokyo recently, and now I'm visiting my family in Osaka. My parents moved into a new apartment I helped them pay for, because of my new job. It's smaller than our old one, so they don't have space for me.

Later...

I got to Osaka, and I walked into the Airbnb-rented apartment and as I was taking off my shoes I was greeted by the owner. A woman with short brown hair and brown eyes "Hi! I'm Aoi and I'm the owner, nice to meet you," she said with a smile on her face. "I'm Naomi, nice to meet you Aoi-San," I replied. (-San at the end of someone's name is a sign of respect in Japan). There's something strange about her. She seemed suspicious, she hadn't done anything...yet. She showed me to the room I'd be sleeping in. There was a locked old door to the right. "Don't mind that door over. There's nothing behind it," Aoi-San reassured me.

I fell asleep almost immediately. I was woken up by a loud thud followed by heavy footsteps. I got up and walked out of the room shaking. What if someone broke in? Is Aoi-San okay? I walked out of the room and saw that old door open. I peeked in and saw a woman with pale skin, blood-red eyes and long black hair standing in the center of the room. She was holding a Noh theater mask that looked like Aoi-San's face was painted on it. (Noh theatre is a major form of Japanese dance-drama.)

She started turning around and I ducked out of the way so that she wouldn't notice me. I heard footsteps, ran to my room, and locked the door. I was frantically picking up my phone and trying to call the police, but my phone was out of battery. I hid under the covers of the bed and hoped she wouldn't notice someone was inside. Suddenly I heard the door unlock, someone opened it and walked in. I couldn't move. Fear overwhelmed me. Someone walked in and sat on the chair close to the bed and whispered: "If Hori-Sama heard about this, he would kill me." Who is that? I thought to myself. I managed to fall asleep after that somehow. (-Sama at the end of someone's name is a sign of a lot of respect for that person in Japan.)

While I was on the phone with my brother, I told him about the “dream” I had. He believes that all dreams have meaning and he told me it freaked him out. I told him he was being irrational, and it was nothing to worry about. I was freaked out by it too, but I wanted to convince myself that it’s not terrifying...

I got to my parents’ apartment. I knocked on the door and my mum opened it, and she greeted me warmly. I walked into the house and took off my shoes. I walked into the living room and said hello to my dad and my brother Kai. We sat down to eat, and I told my family about the place I was staying at and the dream I had had. I knew my parents were concerned but they didn’t say anything. We ate together and my mom gave me some leftovers.

I came back to the Airbnb apartment and Aoi-San was drinking coffee. She greeted me, and I put my leftovers in my room as a midnight snack (midnight ramen always tastes the best). I went back out and Aoi-San said “You remind me of someone I used to know...” “Really? May I ask who that person is?”, I replied. “Well... She is already dead... But you two are similar!”, she said. “Sorry for your loss...”, I replied. “Well, that was 4 years ago.”, she spoke.

I went to the bathroom and noticed a door I hadn’t before. I opened it and inside was a notebook. I flipped through it, and it was all written neatly in old Japanese. I noticed the most recent date was yesterday. Then I started reading the first entry and I could barely understand it. But, it was something along the lines of... the death of a certain person... and was signed ‘Aguri’. The next entry was about an Airbnb host called Aoi. That is the owner of this Airbnb! It talked about disguising as a human ‘it only works if you are a demon’... Aguri is a demon and the one disguising as Aoi-San?! This couldn’t be true...it also talked about a blood curse that controls the person affected by it, and causes cuts on their body due to the invisible strings they’re being controlled by... I ran to the bedroom and called Kai and my dad to come over because it’s an emergency. I ran to grab salt, which is effective against demons. Aguri immediately stood up as if by invisible strings and I heard a deep voice say in a faint whisper; “You know too much, time to die human,” and Aguri, who was clearly in pain said “No! Agh! Don’t make me kill another human, please! Just let her go Hori-Sama, I will do anything you ask of me!”, she screamed. “Listen, human! I must do this! The only way to stop him is to kill me! He will die too because of the agreement of the curse!”, she said as she screamed out in pain while the blood was staining her sleeves. I threw some salt at her, and her skin started melting off. She tried fighting the curse but didn’t succeed. She threw a knife and it landed on the wall near my head. Just then my brother ran in and helped me fight her. I took the knife out of the

wall and stabbed her in the stomach. She fell to the floor and whispered “Well done, I will now be free from the curse...” as she died...her body turned to dust... I guess I’ll sleep on the floor of my parents’ apartment.

author: Leona Lukež

mentor: Ajrin Floričić

institution: OŠ Vladimira Nazora Potpićan

## NEW YEAR HOLIDAYS

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Hi everyone! My name is Leona. I'm 11 years old.

Today, on the 20th of December 2023, I will tell you how I imagine the New Year holidays. There are 5 days left until Christmas. The first semester passed too quickly, if someone asks me.

But enough chatting; let's talk about our New Year's holidays. My Christmas tree is standing next to my sofa, waiting for its little ones. I imagine Christmas morning like this every year: waking up and running to see my presents, and in the afternoon, I plan to go to my extended family (grandparents and cousins) to get more presents and to treat ourselves. Everything went by very quickly; I don't even have the feeling that Christmas is in 5 days and the New Year is in 11 days. For Christmas, I would like my family to be happy and healthy together, and as for gifts, I would like make-up; that's my wish. I'm really looking forward to Christmas because of the presents, ha-ha!

Also, let me tell you what the New Year looks like in my house every year. My dad buys a packet of 300 firecrackers, and we are all awake until midnight. When midnight strikes, everything is visible in the sky, everything is shining, and fireworks surround us. It is so wonderful. For the New Year 2024, it seems to me that it will be as good as this one, of course, but everyone is counting on the possibility that it will be better. As for school, I hope that the second semester will pass as quickly as the first, but still, let's have fun and learn a lot more.

On New Year's holidays, I plan to rest and celebrate. Unfortunately, I also have to read and hang out with my family. As I already said, I'm really looking forward to Christmas so that we can welcome Christmas morning with presents and breakfast with the family and cousins at their grandparents.

Today is the twenty-first of the twelfth and twenty-third of the Year. Tomorrow is "Friday" already, and we don't have to wake up at 6 in the morning anymore; we can sleep until 10. What luck!

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The day has come when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. The mass ended, and we headed home and got ready to go to my grandparents and my cousins' house. For Christmas, I got a book and a gift card from "DM." I love Christmas very much, but this Christmas was very strange; almost no one had the feeling that it was Christmas, but it was fine. The New Year is in two days. This year really went by very quickly, but it was still a very nice year. A few days before the New Year, I had a very bad feeling, and I was a little sad for the poor dogs. I had seen on some videos how dogs shake because of firecrackers, so I was sad for them, but I guess they will be fine for 10 minutes of throwing fireworks.

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That day has come: New Year's Eve, December 31, 2023, the last day of 2023.

In our village, there was a small celebration of the New Year. Half of the village came; it was a lot of fun. There was eating and drinking, and even for small children, it was full of fun, but since it started to rain, we had to hide in a garage from our neighbors, so we didn't manage to jump around much, but at least we ate a lot and played. At midnight, there were fireworks. The whole sky was lit up, and it was beautiful and quite noisy. I started feeling sleepy, and I was quite tired, but I decided to stay when we launched the fireworks. Ours had 50 rockets, which is an incredible number. This is where my story ends. I was happy to write this, and I would like to wish everyone who will read my story a little belated merry and blessed Christmas and a happy New Year 2024.

May 2024 be 100 times better than 2023, and good luck in the new year.

author: Eva Crnković

mentor: Kristina Pavličević

institution: OŠ „Dobriša Cesarić“ Požega

## ONCE AND FOREVER

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I still remember when I was 3rd grade. I can't remember clearly but, I can still remember. It was a big change for me, because I was starting the music school. That meant I would meet new friends, and so I did.

I met, I met the most beautiful person you could see. And so did he. He met me, and, I met him. And whatever we both felt about us, no matter if we felt like we just met our soulmate or we met the most annoying person of our lives, we, we just didn't talk about it. You see, he had such brown eyes, brown as chocolate, a smile shining as brightly as the Sun and a funny, friendly soul that can never break someone's heart. I heard that he thought that I was pretty, but, one part of me believed it and the other one did not.

And just like that, a year after year, day after day, and a minute after minute, the time was passing by. 5th grade was also a big change, but, I like it. Now I am in the same class with him. A few days later, my biggest dream came true. A trip to the prettiest city on the Adriatic coast. Opatija. A trip with my 3 best friends, in a 5 star hotel. It was just like a dream. My bestie Mia and I, we had a long long drive... But, once we got to our hotel room, we had NO WORDS left. The room was so pretty, so fancy, I will never ever be in a hotel room like that, ever again. So, we came to the hotel, but, at the same time, we needed to go to the contest. We were faster than ever putting our dresses on. Once we did, it was our turn to show the judges who we were. And we did.

But let's forget about details, this is what I wanted to tell you. One of those friends was him. I can tell we were both excited about this trip. We both planned something. The best thing of all happened in the evening. Very, very late evening. At about 21:30, we all, with our professors, went to a restaurant. We could not afford the hotel dinner. This dinner wasn't only a dinner. We all became better friends, and, we became closer. We wanted a pyjama party. Once we asked our professors how late we could stay up, they told us we could stay up as long as we want. After the dinner we came back to the hotel. The party was in my and my bestie Mia's room. Our favourite game is truth or dare, so, we played it.

Once it was his turn, he picked dare. The dare was that he should kiss me on the cheek and I kiss him back. You don't know me, but, you know, I am really, really, really shy. I mean, yes he kissed me, but, I just couldn't kiss him. The time was passing by and it was already about 23:30.

I was soooo shy and I just couldn't kiss him, but after time, and time, and time, and a bit more time...

Mua! - I, I kissed him.

On, on the cheek. I really did! I, I couldn't believe it. It was, so, so, so romantic and, I just can't find the right word. Just by writing this or just by thinking of it, I am shaking, I am shaking a lot. It's, it's the magic of love. Love is something so strong that can break anything. Time was just passing by and it was midnight. 5 minutes after midnight. 10 minutes after midnight. We were all tired and we were about to go to sleep. Our professors came a bit after we fell asleep. It was a really romantic night and we all needed a rest.

It was 7:05. Mia and I woke up and we were about to go and have the delicious hotel breakfast. We waited for about half an hour for him and Lucy, my second best friend. We ate breakfast and we discovered Opatija, we had a lot of fun, and, it was time to go home. We came home and I was really tired. I went to bed, fell asleep and, the second day it was school.

I woke up and I realised, this was just a dream. It was just a dream but, it was just like it was real. I was a bit disappointed but, it is okay. I realized how love can change my life. It did, it really did. I would never say that, but, love is just like an adventure. You never know what is next. Love is beautiful just like the bright shining Sun, or like red roses, but it can be sad like a rainy day. It can be cute like a cat, or sweet like chocolate, but, it can be sour. Not every love is real love, but some of them are. If you know, you know. I will just start to believe more, and more, and even more, until the right moment happens. Who knows, maybe, maybe, maybe I will find someone next, or I will stay with him, or I will just give up. Who knows, who knows...

As I said, I can still remember when I was 3rd grade, I cannot remember clearly, but, I can still remember. It was a big change for me. Now, I am 5th grade. It is also a big change, but I just like it. I forget everything bad, every little thing that is bad. Everything sad, I also forget. Now, I am happier then ever with all the pretty friends I have. I cannot wait for more and more adventures that I will see and do. But for now, my only wish is that this feeling stays with me, once and forever.



author: Ivan Leko

mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

## ONE LAST BLINK

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There was once a young boy named Chris. He used to see weird things before going to bed. His parents told him those creatures weren't real. He believed it and ignored his hallucinations. Even if he did ignore them, he still didn't get much sleep and was bothered by their presence. He repeated this process every day hoping that his hallucinations would disappear. Every day he would go to bed conscious of what would happen in a few minutes.

On September 19, 1990, it was Chris's ninth birthday. He was joyful and energetic. His mom, dad, grandpas, grandmas, aunts, uncles and cousins were there. Everyone was having fun – playing, singing, eating, talking, etc. Everything was normal until Chris got a weird-looking toy. It resembled some kind of a monster. It had the head of a wolf and the body of a human. At least, that's what he thought. Actually, it was the ancient Egyptian god Anubis.

Anubis is the guide to the underworld in Egyptian mythology, so that was certainly a sign Chris ignored. Chris was happy throughout the party and at the end, he felt a tingle in his body. Something was wrong. He started to nervously rub his fingers. His mom eventually noticed it, but she didn't say anything.

At exactly 11:43 p.m. Chris went to sleep and, of course, the hallucinations were back. But this time something was different. The creatures weren't just floating around, but attacking him, and every time he blinked, they would disappear and reappear. He was blinking rapidly, until he closed his eyes. He tried to open them, but couldn't. All he could hear was "Tyler! Tyler!" and then he heard an unfamiliar voice say "Awaken."

He immediately opened his eyes and heard a three-year-old boy say his name. It was his little brother. There was no Chris, there were no hallucinations, and there was no birthday. There was just a teen named Tyler sleeping in a hospital bed in a coma.

author: Karla Paljug

mentor: Senka Javorović

institution: OŠ "Ljubo Babić", Jastrebarsko

## PRINCESS DOTTIE'S ADVENTURE

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Behind the seven mountains and behind the seven seas lived a little princess named Dottie. Dottie lived at home all day long with her two dogs in her huge castle. That big castle was over 200 years old. Her castle had 3 floors and 68 rooms. Princess Dottie had 12 maids who cleaned her castle every day, and she had 5 cooks that cook for her every meal of the day. Dottie's parents were on some kind of royal trip and every month they sent her long letters. Dottie has been ruling the town she lives in ever since.

A very big storm came one day. A big dragon appeared as well and destroyed Dottie's entire town Jaskograd with its fire. After that storm Dottie immediately came down from her stairs to see how the people in town were and what has happened. Everyone was angry because that dragon destroyed their houses. Dottie did not know what to do. She was also angry and sad. After few minutes a witch came to Dottie and gave her a strange map. The witch told to her: "If you want to save your town, you have to travel around the world and find a special powder that can save your town. You have to go through every country that is on the map."

Dottie made a plan to travel around the world to save her town. She had a white unicorn for travelling. After 2,3 hours she got tired and decided to go for a sleep. But where? Maybe in a little sweet house in front of her. Dottie knocked on the door and an old woman opened. She was an old lady with gray hair and big blue eyes.

She asked: "Who are you, what do you need?"

She said: "I am a princess from your town. I am going on a very long trip, and I am tired, may I sleep for one night in your house?"

The old lady says: "Of course, please enter, I will make you a bed and fine dinner."

In the morning Dottie went on her journey. After a few hours, she arrived at her first destination Canada. There was very cold. Canada is very beautiful, with big forest and a lot of snow. It does not stop snowing. Dottie arrived at her second destination - Atlantic Ocean.

They flew through the Atlantic Ocean, it was a very great adventure. She saw big fishes and weals. The Atlantic Ocean is great. After some time, Dottie came to warm

South America. People in South America like to dance Samba. They are very happy and funny.

When Dottie passed South America, it was time to fly away to next destination - Australia. Dottie arrived, but bad luck met her. She was walking through rain forest, and suddenly, an animal jumped out of the bush. She was very scared, thought it was some big scary kangaroo, but it was a small koala.

“Hi, wellcome to Australia!”, koala says. Dottie was in shock.

“How can you talk as humans?“, asks Dottie.

“Well, we animals can talk too. This is a magical forest where even the animal can talk.“, replied koala.

That was so awesome.

After visiting Austraila Dottie and her unicorn flew to Japan. A very misterious place, full of castles and temples, but the powder wasn't there and she was very far away from the last spot.

“Africa is my last destination and the powder must be there!“, says Dottie.

In Africa, children were playing, but Dottie was travelling to find the powder.

Children looked at Dottie and they asked her: “ Who are you?“

“I'm Dottie, and I'm looking for a powder.”

The child said: “My grandad knows the story about the powder, he can help you.“

The grandad said: “Indians sent the powder to Alaska. Go there“.

So the unicorn and Dottie flew to Alaska because they only had two hours to save Jaskograd. Deep down in the sea, she saw big blue light and when she started to dive in something started to choke her. She screams: “Help, hurry ...!“

Mum entered the room and said Dottie: “ Dottie!! It was just a bad dream, a nightmare. Now, get up, you have to go to school dear.”

author: Mila Srzić

mentor: Ana Polombito Karamatić

institution: OŠ oca Petra Perice, Makarska

## PROJECT OF CYBERPUNK: AI WORLD

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This story, unlike many others, is set in the future. Sadly, there still aren't any flying cars, but AI has come so far that it's almost impossible to tell the difference between the two. One human girl stood out though. She was gifted and could tell the difference between the humans and AI. Her name was Nyx.

After her parents were tragically murdered by an AI developer, Nyx set out on a journey to find more humans to bring an end to the overpopulation of AI. She travelled for days and nights. She was losing all hope, and slowly, her sanity, too. Until one day, a very kind boy offered her help. He was about two to three years older than her. His name was Blitz. He was gifted. He could tell the difference between humans and AI just like Nyx. He began gathering gifted people years ago and he managed to gather and recruit hundreds of people from all over the world. All of them worked together at getting rid of AI. Blitz recruited Nyx to help them in their journey to save humanity. The team was large. They were dispatched across the entire globe while Blitz and Nyx went on local missions together, forming a close bond.

After ages of hard work, everything worked out. Once humanity overthrew AI, Blitz confessed his feelings for Nyx. They finally found peace after years of suffering and agony under the pressure of AI. Blitz and Nyx lived their life to the fullest, surrounded by friends from the team.

After all, they did forget about a small, maybe not so small detail. The woman who started the AI disaster and killed half of humanity was still somewhere out there. She was called Kashu, and she was working on new, upgraded versions of her failed experiments. Kashu might make a comeback soon, but we'll never know when...

author: Magdalena Frigan  
mentor: Anita Baranašić  
institution: OŠ Sesevetska Sela

# QUEEN OF MAGIC LOVE

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## 1. chapter

### THIS IS ME

Helo my name is Ela Sears. I am thirteen years old. I live in New York with my mum Olivia, my dad Aleksander and my brothers Marcus and Theo. I am the youngest in the family, mum is thirty nine , she gived birth to Theo at the age twenty one.

My parents were High school swetharts in the grade 8.th, sometimes I wonder if they ever get boerd of each others. But it doesn't matter, most important is that they love each others, right?

I love my family more than anything, yes Theo can be pain in the head but I love him to. Oh, I frogot to tell you my dad is fourty he was twenty three when mum gived birth to Theo. Marcus is sixteen,he's annoying but sweet. Theo is sweet overprocetive, sweet brother. There is just one thing you need to know, we're full of magic and magical creatures.

## 2.chapter

### MAGICAL LOVE

As you know we have powers, and not only us everyone in the world. Exept me, kids usually get powers at the age six to ten. But i haven't got mine yet. My mum has magical powers wich are elements and mind controling, dad has teleporting, invisibility and mind controling. Theo powers are something like dad's wich are flying, mind controling and teleporting. Marcus got mind reading and turning into animals. In the school is not the greatest, I get bulied a lot for not having powers. I get called many names like,,powerless freak". But at least my brothers are with me. Now you know everything let me introduce you into the chaos.

One boring day in school , we got a new guy his name was Sebastian Hante. Every girl was drooling over him, beacuse his brown messy hair and dark green eyes. I can't like he was pretty cute, in the hallway boys were talking how is he one of strongest royalities in the world. At the lunch he sat next to me, and I don't know why I was

blushing very hard. In a few minutes we were talking like some besties, but of course since I was talking to a boy Theo and Marcus had to put their nose in the conversation. They sat next to us and started talking like I wasn't even there. Eventually it was time for class. When I came home me and my best friend Emily were talking for an hour and half about my crush Sebastian or as Emily called him „Butter” because my heart melts when I see him. Honestly if my brothers knew all of this gossip i would be dead as pancake.

It was time for dinner, I was very quiet on the table because Butter. When I was done eating I went to sleep. Next day in school we got told that Prom is next Friday. We were pretty excited but I was hoping for Sebastian to ask me out. On Wednesday i went shopping with my mum for a dress, we were looking for a red dress not long but not also very short. When we found it and came home i tried it on and as you're guessing Theo said „no” Marcus said „in your dreams yes,now no”. It was great because mum threw a slipper at them. Next day at school we got new boy if i remember correct his name was Alex Vivani.

We started talking in class he was pretty nice guy, let's forget part where we got detention for talking in class. I invited him for a dinner at my house, my mum was over the moon because she thought he was my boyfriend, even dad and other two boys didn't like the idea. Dad and Alex were pretty chill because they both liked basketball team New York Lakers, mum liked him to cause he helped in the kitchen. Only that they don't know that I like Butter. On the day of the Prom we got bad news and good news bad once were that Prom is canceling because principal is sick, and good news we're Prom is in two weeks. The end wasn't so bad i still have chance to dance with Butter. In the cafeteria all eyes were on me Sebastian came behind me and asked me if I wanna be his love of life, without hesitation I kissed him. There were only smiles on my classmates faces, but the death stare of Theo made me freeze for a minute. But I didn't care less. When I came back home those two idiots started telling mum and dad that I have a boyfriend. Mum was happy but dad told me that am too young and that boring stuff. Facts there forgetting that are very important are I am turning fourteen in three days and Marcus is always with his girlfriend Anna. It was the day i finally turned fourteen I got a lot of presents and birthday cards of course am gonna have birthday party, not many people my brothers and Marcus girlfriend, Emily, Alex and Butter. When everyone came we decided to play Truth or Dare, everything was going nicely until Alex or like Sebastian calls him „Punchbag” he asked me to go in the kitchen with him. I was honestly relieved when i heard door bell ringing. When I opened the door there was a box, when i opened the box there was a

magic wand and paper that said „learn some magic tricks powerless freak”. I was in a shock i never knew Bella my bully would go this harsh. Theo was ready to kill her, Emily was just staring with Marcus and my Butter just hugged me and I started slowly crying up. Party was done everyone went home, I was devastated but it was the true I don't have powers.

The next day at school Bella and her minions were laughing at me all day long. To cheer me up, Butter asked me out for a Prom and me and Emily went for Boba. When I came back home Alex asked me if I wanna go to park with him I didn't know what to answer because Sebastian thought something is off with him. Since was Thursday and tomorrow was Prom I told him that I will come, I mean what the baddest would happen?

I told Sebastian and mum that am going to park with Alex, Butter was not very happy but mum in other side was chill with it. When I came to park I saw Bella my biggest bully in the world kissing with Alex my friend, I was confused and shocked. When Alex walked over to me and teleported me to some basement, I was tied to chair with some crystal ball in front of me. When Alex came to me he started laughing like some maniac, then he explained to me how he was pretending to be my friend just to get my powers. In a moment I didn't know what was he talking about, until he started talking that am one of strongest queens in university. Then he placed magic crystal ball on me and started saying some magic words or whatsome. More time was going more pain I felt going to my body. In a minute first think I knew Butter and my brothers were fighting like wild cats with Alex. Marcus untied me and Theo throw me a phone to call mum. She wasn't picking up, so we had to do this alone. Everything was going smoothly until Alex's gang came, and boys were pinned on the ground. I never thought Vivani would do this was I this foolish to not know fake and real friends. The time he was holding them more i felt my blood boiling, when he placed a knife on Sebastian throat I just lost it. Something in me was different, everything was spinning so fast and...

I was correctly a queen I went into attacking Alex I was mad like fire and I just punched that stupid Punchbag. Police came in a minute, they arrested Alex and his gang. Mum and dad came fastest they could, everyone was in shock to see me as queen, not any queen they saw me as queen of magic love which means when someone hurts my love one's I transforme. If someone told me am a queen i would tell him to prank someone else. If you're wondering what happened to Bella, well they found her and arrested her with her boyfriend. Everything was going nicely, I had beautiful friends and family, of courses and a boyfriend.

### 3.chapter MAGICAL END

Fifteen years later, me and Sebastian got married we had two kids Luke who is five and Emma whose two and half. Marcus got married to Anna they have one kid Ivan who is nine. Emily got married to her childhoode friend Max they had one kid Mariah who is turning three in few days. Even Theo got married to who Emily's cousin Hana they had two kids Ron who is seven and Lexi who is eleven this month. Me and Sebastian rule our kingdom together and everything is perfect. Mum and dad are still together, right now they in Hawai's. And Emily did told Sebastian his little nickname wich he somehow love.

Finally kids fell asleep, I litteratly told them my life story.

Love is strongest magic in the world.



author: Lucija Grubišić  
mentor: Marija Matijaš  
institution: OŠ Vrbani

## SCARLETT'S DIARY

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Hi! I am Scarlett. I am a 17 year old teenager with long dark brown hair and hazel eyes. I am going to high school and I am in my third year right now. This is a story about how I moved to another school and became popular.

My brother, my parents and I had to move from Los Angeles to New York because of my mom's new job. I really loved my old school and I was so sad and angry when mum told me that we are moving. I had lots of friends and I am an introverted person so the fact that we were moving wasn't the best. One day we just packed our things and left our house.

When we came to our new house, I was a bit disappointed, because it looked very old. But that wasn't the worst part. Well, I am an excellent student and because my family is poor I got a scholarship. And yes, I didn't know I was about to go to a private high school so I was all scared on my first day. When I got to my new school, I knew that my first day won't be a dream. First of all, the kids in school were very rich. Second, the school just looked too fancy and "fake". When I came to the class everyone was looking at me like I was an alien. I heard some girls whispering things like "She looks so poor!" or "Is she okay?". The teacher just said that I am a new student and told me to sit wherever I want. That was actually a good start because I didn't need to introduce myself.

I sat right next to a girl with long black hair and green eyes. She was nice, talkative and she told me that her name was Emma. After class she showed me the school and we became friends. The first day like that was good for introverted person like me. I even made a friend. Emma was always nice and she helped me with homework and essays. I found out I was Emma's only friend too. Everyday we were sitting in canteen eating lunch and talking. I was so happy that I had Emma for friend that I didn't care about rumors or anything.

I didn't mention it before, but I was writing everything that happened to me in my diary. My professors and my parents told me that I have a talent for writing stories. One day I invited Emma to my house. Of course, she came. When she came we rushed to my room. It was great. We talked and laughed so much that Emma almost

started crying. At the time she was there I needed to go to the bathroom. That going to the bathroom changed my entire life. This part Emma told me later at school but I am going to tell you now. So, while I was in the bathroom, Emma saw my diary. She is a very curious person so she started reading it. She was so amazed by my stories that when I came out of the bathroom she told me that I should publish my stories. At first I was mad that she touched my diary, but I knew that she couldn't resist her curiosity. But I was in shock when she told me that I should publish my stories. I told her that I would never do that because I'm too scared. She just rolled her eyes and told me that she won't give up that easily. She would never give up and I knew that.

Next day in school I saw her talking to other popular kids and I couldn't believe my eyes because she never talked to them before and even told me that she hates them. When I asked her why did she talk to them she told me that it is nothing personal and that I shouldn't worry so much. At that time I thought that she probably just needed to ask them something but she started hanging out with them and talking to them very often. I would always ask her about what was she doing and she would just laugh at me telling me to take it easy. She probably thought that I have trust issues. I was a little bit suspicious about what is going on because she was very often on computer and talking with some of our other classmates looking at me. I was so sad because I was losing my first and only friend in this cruel school.

After a month I was sitting alone in the canteen while she was busy talking behind my back with other popular kids. After months I came home crying because of what Emma did. I never thought that she would be fake friend. She seemed nice at first but now I realized the truth.

One day I came to school and everyone was looking at me and whispering. I was thinking that was probably something that Emma and her "friends" have told them. But then I heard that they were whispering things like "She has the best stories ever" or "I love her stories I'm so sorry that I talked behind her back". Everyone was so nice to me than I thought that I was dreaming. Then I saw Emma with the biggest smile in the world that I have ever seen in my life. I rushed to her and asked her what was going on. She told me that she will tell me everything in library because it was too loud. When we came in the library I had hundred questions. She told me that she didn't give up on my stories and because she isn't good with social media she asked popular kids to help her. Because I didn't want to publish my stories she needed to do everything secretly. One day when I wasn't at home she rushed to my house and told my mother that she left a book in my room so she asked if she could go get it. She went to my room and took photos of my stories. She showed the photos to pop-

ular kids and send the photos to them so they can poste them on internet. My stories got thousands of views and everybody loved them. That explained staring. I was in shock after this news but then I started smiling and I was actually happy.

She asked me if I was mad at her, but I told her that I'm grateful. With that stories I became popular and started making more and more friends.

Emma is still my best friend and I become more extroverted by time. I was writing more stories and posting them on internet. Emma was helping me in posting the stories. I actually started loving my new school and new friends. Even if I didn't believe that every story ends good before, now I do.

The end

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mentor: Iva Šimić

institution: OŠ „Ivan Goran Kovačić”, Slavonski Brod

## SECRET ISLAND

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It's the last day of school and only a few moments until the last school bell. „It finally rang!” said Maddie, grabbed her bag and rushed home. „Honey, how was school?”-asked Mollie, Maddie's mom. „It was great!”-Maddie said and ran upstairs to her room. She was excited because she got accepted in an acting group. She just needed to finish her poster. She went into the attic to find something interesting to write about. Upstairs, she her grandfather's box filled with supplies for survival in the wild. She found a dusty book which was filled with some amazing and weird creatures. She opened a page and found a picture of an island. She tried to find it but it wasn't on the map of the world. She knew she was missing something. She picked the box up and brought it to her room. She started reading about the mysterious island. „Maddie, wake up!”-Maddie's mom came to wake her up.-„It's Saturday.“ „I'm awake!”-says Maddie.-„Could you give me a few moments please?” „Of course!”-Mollie said and went downstairs. Maddie took the box and found a map. It was the map of the world, just it had something different. She spotted the mysterious island. She opened the book and saw that the page was shining. She gently touched it. The Light started growing. When she was able to open her eyes, she was holding the box in her hands in the middle of the forest! -Where am I?”-asked Maddie. She stood up and looked around. „I found the island!”-screamed Maddie. Moments after, a big bird looking creature flew directly into the water. -„These creatures are amazing. An animal that looks kind of like a bird can fly and dive here!” -says Maddie.-„This world is beautiful, but I need to find a way out of here.“ She took the backpack she found inside the box and took the supplies out. She kept reading the book. One page said that there is a shelter marked on the map. She grabbed her backpack and took the map out of it. „This is going to be very difficult. I'm glad our Geography teacher taught us how to read the map.”-Maddie says happily. „Fiju, fiju, who is here?”-said a voice coming out of the tree. -„Who is it?”- Maddie asked with fear in her voice. Out of the tree comes out a big leopard bird cat. -„Welcome to the Mild wood! What is your name and why are you here?”-asked the creature. -„Uhm, hello my name is Maddie and I was brought here by a book.”-she answered. -„My name is Leo and I am the

protector of the entrance to the Mild wood. There were some humans here trying to end this beautiful life, so we deleted the island from their universe to live in peace. There was only one good human but he had to go back to his world.“-said Leo. – „Maybe that was my grandpa. This were his stuff that I found in our attic.“-Maddie says. – „Are you the guardian’s granddaughter?“-asked Leo amazed. – „I might be“-she said. – „Then I will stay with you this whole adventure. You are probably wondering how to get out. There is one mountain here. If we climb to the top we could activate the old elevator to get to the Exit book.“-explained Leo.- „There are four crystals we need to find and put together into one big crystal that needs to be placed on the top of the Gastollouseter mountain! It was broken by an evil man but he isn’t here anymore. Our beautiful creatures broke his teleporter leaving the book as the only way to get here.“ – „I guess there is no other choice, lead the way!“-she said and gave him the map. They started the adventure, but they came to a problem. – „How are we gonna get to the other side of the cliff?“-asked Maddie. – „I have an idea.“ He started to sing a song. Birds approached them and flew over the cliff with them in their claws. „The first crystal should be here somewhere... He only left these riddles to solve if we want to leave: Between or underneath you shall look where’s the leaf.“ „Hmm... Between... I don’t think it’s here, I think it’s down there“-says Maddie pointing at the cliff. She took a rope from her grandfather’s backpack and started climbing down. When they arrived, they started searching for leaves but there was something odd. „Leo, look!“ On the wall there was a drawing of a giant leaf. „I think you should press it“-says Leo. Maddie starts touching the wall and it started to disappear slowly. The wall was hiding a huge room in which Maddie spotted a crystal. „Look at that. It’s so... beautiful“-Maddie says. Leo enters the room but the floor started falling apart. „I can’t take the crystal. You have to take it and hurry, this lava is starting to fill the room!“ She is sweating but she grabs it and jumps but not far enough. She nearly falls in the lava but Leo lets her step on him and then on the floor. „Leo! You are a life saver!“-says Maddie. „I might be, but you are the saver of this island.“ They came to their next clue. This is the second riddle: Blue from the inside, gold from the outside, crystal is there where the circles meet.“- says Leo. „I know! When the birds took us over the cliff one part was shaped in circles. If we let the water out the sand will look blue, if we don’t, it will be gold! The second crystal is there. We need to open the dam! We will see where the circles meet!“-says Maddie. They ran towards the dam. „This is bigger then I thought!“-she says. „Maddie, you might be able to use this.“-he hands Maddie a purple strawberry. „I invented the strawberry powers. They last a few hours. This purple one will give you strength. You

might be able to take some wood and break the dam!“ She eats a strawberry. They go to the woods and Maddie pulls out a whole tree from earth. „Woah! I’m super strong!“ Maddie takes the tree and starts hitting the dam. She almost fell because the strawberry stopped working but she managed to break it. Leo can’t find Maddie. „Oh, no! Water must have taken Maddie!“-he says. He flies down, but moments later he is gone as well. „I have the second crystal!“- she says. „Where are we?“- he says in fear. „At the place where circles meet.“ „How do we get out?“-he asks. They started searching for the exit and found a tunnel which led to the jungle. Animals told them they should read the third riddle. „Well, here it is: Its up and down, left and right, if you can catch it its time.“-Leo says. A strange little bird shows up. It goes up and down, left and right. „We need to catch it!“-Maddie yells. They started running after it between the bushes, through the branches, over the trees. It was way too high to catch it, but Maddie was smart. She created a trap to catch it. They finally got it in the middle of the night. „Alright only one more to go!“-Leo says. Both Maddie and Leo were tired and fell asleep. Maggie woke up in horror. „Leo!! My backpack... it’s gone!!! The crystals are in it!“-Maddie screams. But Leo isn’t here. „Hello...“- she hears. „Hi?“ „Maddie, you have been played. I’m your grandpa. You can’t see me, but listen... Leo isn’t who he says he is. His name is Leonardo and he is the one who wanted to ruin this. Get the crystals back because he will destroy them. The crystals are the ones that are keeping this island alive. Save my land Maddie... your land... land...“- the echo goes on. Luckily Leonardo dropped the last riddle. „She reads it: Search no longer here cause the last crystal is where it has to be...“-she reads. „Hmm where it has to be... The mountain! I need to hurry!“ She starts running, but then comes up with a plan. She took some wood and recreated a trap like the one for the bird, only bigger. She leaves the last riddle on the floor. „Now we wait...“As she expected, Leonardo came back. He takes the riddle. She pulls the trap and it falls down. She grabbed the backpack that he left on the floor to pick up the riddle. Maddie starts running but Leonardo spotted her. She is climbing up the mountain with her last hopes to get out. „You won’t get away with this you little...“- were Leonardo’s last words she ever heard after placing the crystals back and coming back in her warm room. „Honey, are you coming?!“-she hears Mollie’s voice. It was like time stopped. She was on the island for two days but in the real world no time has passed. „Coming, mom!“

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## SPACE ADVENTURE

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Once there lived a little girl. Her name was Lili and she was 15 years old. Her biggest dream was to travel into space. Every night she looked at the stars and studied the planets with a telescope. Her most beautiful and favorite planet was Saturn.

Her 16th birthday was coming up soon. Her only birthday wish was to get a spaceship to travel into space. When her birthday came, she got a present from her parents. The gift included a ticket for the spaceship ride. She was very happy then. She took the map and immediately went to the spaceship. She entered the ship and came to space at the speed of light. First she came to the moon where she met an alien Mulan who had 4 eyes and 16 legs. Mulan was her tour guide. They tried various space dishes on the moon. The most popular space dish is Mjeceobilka, and the most popular juice was Svemironac. When they ate then they go shooting stars. They went to catch the stars, and when they caught it, they made a wish and released it, so that their wish would come true. When they finished touring the moon, they went to the planet Mars. On Mars, they watched space fairies flying all over Mars. Then they went to see the bear animals. Little bears were known for being able to fly but without wings. They were magical. Then they left Mars and headed for Mercury. Aliens who were the first people lived on Mercury, but an evil witch cast a spell on them, so they fled into space. The aliens did not want to communicate at first, but when Lili showed kindness to them they quickly became friends. The aliens showed them how to live in space. It was perfectly normal for Mulan, but it was very strange for Lili. The aliens said they don't shower but bathe in space dust and get clean right away. Mulan heard that Lila's favorite planet was Saturn, so she took her there. Lili was delighted then. On Saturn, they entered the space car and took a ride on the famous rings of Saturn. On the rings were crystals that were later taken by Lili and Mulan. Mulan took 3 crystals and Lili took 2 crystals. Lili went to Mulan's for a warm space drink to take a break from sightseeing. Before she left Mulan gave her a space phone so they could talk whenever they wanted.

Lili came to Earth. She was very happy to realize her biggest dream. Every day she told her parents and friends about her journey into space. After a few days, she saw

that it was written in the newspaper that she was the first person who managed to visit the most planets in the universe. When she grew up, she became an astronaut and every day she went to her friend Mulan's for a hot drink.



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## SPACE TRAVEL REMASTERED

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At the beginning of 2050 there was a rich family Thomas. Jack Davis Thomas, the main character of story is 11 years old and has black hair. That's why his classmates call him Black Jack. His dad Peter William Thomas works in NASA, so that's why 19'o clock is best for Jack, it's because that is when dad and mom's work ends. His mom Georgina is a scientist, and she invented a time machine and super rocket. One day at 19'o clock dad come back to home and tell that they had discovered a new planet, for now a bit unknown. He said that they named it Mystic. Dad showed his son through his telescope that planet. It was so big, bigger than Jupiter, the color is of chewing gum with blue spots. "We don't know does it has live on it, but it looks cool." said dad. Next day while his grandparents were babysitting him, he saw an unused rocket that his mom invented. She said that the rocket was unfinished and not done yet, but Jack checked it anyway. His 5 year old sister Lucy spotted him and said "What are you doing here, Jack? Are we going to play Hide and Seek?". "I just want to check this cool rocket. Look at this cool babe!" said Jack. "You know what, I want to fly through spaces and see the universe." said gurgling Lucy. "Well, we need to ask mom to go there. Also, mom said that this is unfinished and the rocket might stop somewhere in the universe." Jack said seriously. "Also, I don't want to get lost in space, I need to go to the school tomorrow." continues Jack. "But Jack, you forgot that tomorrow is the first day of easter holidays. We can go to explore the universe." said Lucy. "Okay, but we need to ask mom for this. She will get nervous if we go to space without her permission.". Days have passed, and mom and dad were gone. "What happened to them" they inquired. Four days after the start of the easter holiday they found out that their dad died in an accident and mom was kidnapped. They immediately called the police and mom was back to the home.

"I feel bad for my son" said grandmother. "Me too." said Lucy. "He was so genius husband. I can't believe what happened to him." said mom. "Without him we won't know about new planets." said Jack sadly. "Um, mom, Jack and I planned to use that secret rocket in room. Can we?" said little Lucy. "For what?" said mom. "To explore the universe!" said Lucy. "Ok but listen to me carefully. There is not much fuel, so

Jack, go take the fuel. It is in mine and dad's bedroom in the small room. And when you are in space, open the small tablet in the middle of the control panel. I will be on the screen to guide you. I need some things for my potion of heal so listen to me. Don't get lost in space. Also, take the spacesuits. They are in dad's closet in dad's and mine's bedroom. Also, be incredibly careful. A lot of danger is in the space.". "Ok mom, we will listen to you.". Jack and Lucy went to the rocket, they tied the knock and the trip started. Jack turned on the small tablet; "Jack, can you hear me?" "Yes, I can hear you" "So, first, do you know how to drive?" "Well, yes." "So, your first destination is the Moon and then Mars." "Ok mom.". Those children drive in a rocket and then they stopped to the Moon. When they arrived, they weared space suits and explored the Moon. "So now you are in Boon, the main city of Moon" said mom. ". "Hang on, Moon is inhabited?!" said Jack confused. "Well, your dad has maked some big cities in Moon. Didn't you know that?" said his mom. "Oh. Well, what we need to take there?" "The crystal red emerald, rarest and only specie of gems in the Moon." "What is it like?" "Red color shines red glow, like the emerald.". Jack and Lucy found that gem and they picked it up.". "Now we need to go to Mars" "Remember, orange-black dust." "Ok.". "(3 days and 30 minutes later) Ok, now we found the dust. Is this dust you're talking about?" "No, not orange dust! Orange-black dust!". "Ok. (1 hour later) Is this dust you're talking about?" "Yes, it is". Jack puts the dust in the bottle of milk that he dranked yesterday. Now, you need to go to Jupiter and Uranus. I think it will take 12 days (about 1 week 5 days) to Jupiter and Uranus.". "From Jupiter take the red water (it is underneath the Jupiter's spot.) and from Uranus the turquoise ice.". "Ok, mom, we will get it". "(5 days later) Ok mom, we are in Jupiter's caves. Is this water you need?" "Yes, you will need 3 bottles of red water. And you can drink. I dranked it once and it tasted like the smoothie.". "(2 minutes later) You're right! It tasted like the strawberry smoothie!" "(7 days later) Mom, it is cold in Uranus, Lucy and I are freezing! I think I found turquoise ice!". "Yes, you found the turquoise ice."

"For the last mission you will need to go to the Mystic. You will need a notebook and a pencil to describe the world." "Ok mom.". "(1 year later) Ok mom, now we arrived to our city". "Good, are you in front of our house?" "Yes, we are" "Good! I missed you.!" . Everyone was in the living rooms. After mom maked the potion, she did something. Jack recognized the voice. It's dad. But how? That's a secret. Dad still works at NASA. What about planet? Nobody knows.

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## STUCK INSIDE

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“God bless you, Ralph Baer, my one and only saviour!” I thought as I googled: “Who invented video games?” These days, video games seem to be my only escape.

My name is Vanessa. I’m a thirteen-year-old girl who has just officially become a teenager. I’m an introvert, an emotional person, and a bit shy. That’s the biggest reason why I don’t have any friends. I want to have loving and caring friends who will always support me.

Being lonely is not the only problem I have to deal with now. There are my parents who fight all the time. My mom is good and supportive. She is always ready to give advice. And my dad... Although he has some anger issues, he is still a pretty chatty person. I am an only child, so all of their problems suddenly become my fault.

“Enough! I’ve had enough of your fights! DON’T even bother yourselves to go upstairs and call me for a ‘family’ lunch,” I yelled. I felt guilty for saying that, but I went upstairs to my room anyway, slammed the door, turned on my laptop, and broke away from reality.

“Oh, what’s this game about? Find a book or never leave? Sounds fun! I must try it out,” I thought happily. I continued to play that video game every day after school.

Then, one day, something strange happened. I woke up in a bright room with only three beds. I saw two girls lying in beds so still that I thought they might be dead.

“Uh, hello? Who are you two?” I asked quietly.

One of the girls woke up faster than I avoid eye contact in public. “Where am I? Who are you?” she cried.

“Calm down! Firstly, let me introduce myself! I’m Vanessa, and I’m thirteen.”

“Oh... I’m Martha, and I’m fifteen,” she replied.

“Don’t tell me I’m stuck with two little kids! No. It’s just a dream. Calm down!” said the third girl nervously.

“Who are you calling a kid? And, also, who are you?” Martha and I reacted at the same time.

“I’m Mila. I’m eighteen,” she introduced herself.

"I like your name," I said with a smile.

"Thanks, kid!" she friendly replied. Her calling me a kid was even more annoying than my parents' fights.

"So, where exactly are we, again?" Martha asked.

"Uh! I have no idea," I sounded worried.

"The last thing I remember is playing a video game," Martha said.

"Me too!" Mila and I confirmed.

"Wait, so that means...Oh, my God! We are... WE GOT STUCK INSIDE THE GAME!" I said, and I immediately got panicky.

As soon as Martha heard this, she started yelling and screaming for help, but no one was around.

"Yeah, right! Stuck inside the game." Mila said and looked at me like I was not being serious. "You're joking! Right? RIGHT?!" she asked me in fear.

"I-I'm being serious," I said.

Mila didn't say anything. She started crying.

"We... We have to win this game to return home." I said, trying to comfort both. They nodded silently.

Suddenly, a random black door appeared before us, and we entered the empty, huge room filled with books. The library, made of gold, looked just like the one in the video game. We wandered around and searched for the book necessary to finish our task and escape.

"I hope my friends and siblings aren't worried about me." Martha started.

"Same here!" said Mila.

"Oh, you guys have friends?" I whispered as my eyes started watering.

"Yeah, who doesn't!? Wait, you have no friends?" Mila sounded confused. I nodded sadly and started crying.

"Hey, don't worry, you will make friends soon!" Martha said.

"It's not so easy when you're this shy," I said.

Martha didn't respond. I turned around to Mila, but she wasn't there. She called us from another room. There, we started to look for another specified book.

"Vanessa, I can be your friend if you want. I'd love to make another person happy," Martha said gently.

"Best friend! And same here!" Mila said with a big smile. "We will be an awesome bunch with the best humour! I don't want to see my bestie cry," she added with a heartwarming laugh.

We found the second book and then the third one, too. Only the fourth one was missing, the hardest one to locate.

“Where is it? Ugh!” said Martha impatiently. “I think it’s this one!” As she pulled out the book, an arrow spiked her arm. It was a trap!

“Martha? Are you okay?” Mila and I screamed in shock.

“I’m sorry, guys...” Martha squealed in pain and disappeared.

“MARTHA! NO!” Mila and I gasped and started weeping. Then, we heard footsteps, and we hid behind a dusty bookshelf.

“Hi, kids! Want to borrow a book or two? Or maybe never leave?” the evil librarian giggled.

While hiding, Mila and I noticed many books in different colours around us. “What happened to Martha? Did she die? Um, Mila? MILA, NO!” I panicked and started screaming. The evil librarian heard me and appeared in front of us.

“GRAB THE GREEN BOOK! GRAB IT FAST!” Mila yelled when the librarian turned her into a book. I grabbed the green book as fast as possible, and now the librarian turned into an old book that fell on the floor. I fiercely ripped it off. I looked around and found Mila’s jacket on the floor. I couldn’t find the book anywhere. I grabbed Mila’s jacket - the only thing left of her and ran through the black door.

The next thing I remember was seeing my laptop and Mila’s jacket in my room. My parents weren’t around. I was glad because I didn’t feel like explaining what I’d just gone through. Or, maybe, they would love to hear that I have finally made some friends. Have I? What if none of this was real? What if all of it was just a dream? I guess we’ll never know.

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## SUMMER ADVENTURE

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My summer adventure was exciting, a little bit dangerous, and experience that I will never forget. Everything started right when school ended, it was around 1st of July. Me and my cousin were extremely bored, and weather outside was horrible, it was really hot, that was the hottest day of the whole summer. So, we decided to eat an ice cream, that idea didn't turn out as we expected it to be, because we just wanted ice cream. At that time, we were visiting our grandma, and she always had ice cream, you know how grandmas are they just want you to eat, and to not be hungry.

It was around 7 p.m. when we got our ice cream, and while we were eating our ice creams, we saw our grandpa. At that time sun wasn't that strong and the temperature has decreased. Because me and my cousin David were just lying in grandma's house entire day, we decided to go on a little walk at my father's weekend house. David asked our grandfather can he drive us to my father's weekend house which is near the river Sava. And he said that he will happily do it just to get us out of the house. So, he drove us to that place. When we arrived, we realised that we left our phones at my grandma's house, but even if we carried our phones, we wouldn't have any signal, because that weekend house is far away from the city. David told me that we can explore nature around us. And I told him that we don't know what animals are hiding in that forest, and that we could get attacked by some wild animal. Even if I had my doubts we still went on that walk. That huge forest is following the river flow. As we were walking, we talked about our school year, and when we stopped talking, we heard a strange noise. David told me that he wants to see what animal made that sound. I told him that I don't want to do it because we were alone in a big forest and the sun is going down in an hour, and I wasn't sure that we can go back to the weekend house in just an hour. But David convinced me to do it. That strange sound was coming from even stranger direction. We continued talking about our school year and everything that happened when that strange sound stopped and everything suddenly became silent, birds tweet stopped, and we were really scared. I told David that we should go back to the weekend house, and he agreed because it was getting dark. When we came back, we saw my father there and he told us that he was also in

the forest but he was hunting, and he didn't know about which sound are we talking about, as my cousin was describing the sound to my father I heard that sound again. But this time it was louder, and I felt like that animal was close to me, so I was scared. But I still wanted to find out what that sound was. That sound was coming from a beach, when I saw that beach, I called my father and David because I couldn't believe it. When they came down to the beach they were also shocked. The beach was totally destroyed, all trees broke and fell down, we were confused, we didn't know what happened, my father told us that he thinks that right now the best thing to do is to just go back to the weekend house and come back tomorrow. We did that and we came back tomorrow. Next day we came much earlier than yesterday. My father brought a shovel, so we can clean the beach. As we were cleaning the beach, we heard it again. And this time it was coming from the weekend house, we were really excited to finally find out what that sound is. When we arrived, we saw our dog As, he got lost yesterday, and he was just trying to find us, but he couldn't get out of the forest because it was getting dark. At least we think that it was like that, As always goes with us to the weekend house, so he knows where it is. But we know that he wasn't the one who destroyed the beach, and we still didn't know who destroyed the beach. My father told us that as went hunting with him, but he went in other direction and got lost, and that is why my father didn't hear the sound. As loves hunting, so my father thinks that he saw a bird or a rabbit, and he wanted to catch it. But destroyed beach was still a big mystery, we know that as can't do that alone, and we think that he wouldn't do it because he loves to play at that beach.

My father loves forest and nature, and he sees even tiny details, so while we were investigating the beach, he noticed traces of a lot of animals but mostly wild boars and dogs. We followed traces and found a pack of wild boars and some dogs. My cousin and I were shocked. My father was a little bit surprised because wild boars and dogs don't usually hang out together. But it is not something that can't happen. We cleaned the beach, and my father called his friends who are also hunters, and they moved wild boars in the forest, and they returned the dogs to their owners, their owners were also very concerned, and he didn't know how they got into the forest. When we came home David and I told everything to my mother, she was a little bit angry because we didn't invite her to clean the beach with us, but she was also excited to hear our story. And this is how a simple ice cream can bring you to a very exciting adventure.

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## TEENAGE SPIRIT

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Hello, everybody! Let me introduce myself! I'm Sarah, a 13-year-old girl. I have blonde hair, and I like the colour purple. Now everything about my family. My mom's name is Gabriella. She is 47 years old. She is the fun killer (no offense mom), but for real. Then we have my dad. His name is John. He is 50 years old. I think he is the funniest in our house. My younger sister's name is Rosie. She is 6 and SO annoying. Ugh. My least favorite is my older sister. Her name is Piper. She is 16, and really spoiled. All the things she buys are expensive. Ew. Her enemy is her twin (my brother) Luke. He always has the messiest room. He is also 16. He is obsessed with Prime. But Prime isn't that good, trust me! We have a dog named Cooper. A German Shepherd. He is so big! We also have a cat. Her name is Daisy. She is a white cat. We live in New York City. This summer we are going to Florida. Yay! I'm so excited. Right now it's 7 p.m. Tomorrow, we are going to the airport and we are going to fly to Florida!

Should I pack today? I will because tomorrow we have to be at the airport at 6 a.m., and I'm not the type to wake up at 3 a.m. to pack my things. I mean, why would I torture myself like that? I can pack my things now, and I'll do it! Three months ago, my mom bought me a purple suitcase with palm trees on it. It's so beautiful! Okay, back to packing. I'm going to pack my crop tops, my T-shirts, my shorts, my underwear, my sunglasses... (30 minutes later) Finally! I'm over with packing! Oops! My mom just yelled that dinner is over. Mmmm... It smells like churros! Yummy! Okay, now when I'm full I can go shower. Wait, wait, wait... Is that my favorite shampoo?! Piper took it!

"Hey Piper!" I yelled. "Why did you take my shampoo?!"

"Why not?" She yelled back.

I said that it's mine and took it from her. She just rolled her eyes and said "Ok, I don't care."

After 1 hour I was ready to watch Netflix, but I saw a notification from TikTok. OH MY GOD! I jumped out of my bed. I got 10k followers! Finally! I was so happy! I got in bed after my little dance break. It was already 9 p.m. I fell asleep.

My parents woke me up at 5 a.m. I rushed to my closet and picked a pretty outfit.



We all hurried up because we had about half an hour till the airport. We finally came to the airport. At 7 a.m. we were already in the plane. My window is so good! I can see everything. We got in the air. Oh my gosh... The view is so cool! We are so high! After 20 minutes, I got my headphones out of my backpack. I played Taylor Swift on Spotify. When we finally came there, I was so happy! We were getting out of the plane when my mom took my phone and paused the song.

“Hey!” I yelled.

“No more phones today!” she said.

“Ugh, okay!” I said back.

We were driving to our apartment. We unlocked it and inside of it was a surprise. Our cousins! Great! I totally forgot they live here. My older cousin is 18 now. His name is Mark. Then we have Bridgette. She is 13, just like me. She surfs. And my little cousin Lucy. She is 4. Now I’ve got to spend my whole summer with them! But it’s okay because Bridgette and me are very good friends. Bridgette and me came to her room and my jaw fell to the floor. Her room is the prettiest I’ve ever seen! It’s so pink and purple and blue!

After a few days she wanted me to meet her friends. I was like “Sure!” so we walked to the beach together. When we got there I saw a boy. OH MY GOSH. He is the cutest boy I’ve ever seen. He is so handsome. He has curly hair, freckles, dark brown eyes. I was about to faint. After 10 days I learned how to surf. Oh yeah, and me and that boy got closer. We held our hands and walked to the beach every day. His name is Ethan. He is 14. This summer was so great! It’s just sad that we are going to need to leave Florida in one month. But who cares. We will be back next summer. Goodbye!

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# THE ADVENTURE OF LARRY GODSON

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## Chapter one: A strange portal

The Scottish cartographer and writer Larry Godson was enjoying his winter in his small, wooden hut. One day, after Larry was searching for his shovel to do some gardening, he discovered a strange purple portal. Of course, Larry was curious what was inside the portal, so he decided to gather his important stuff: travel book, pencil case and many more to go on this adventure. Sit back and relax because the adventure is long...

## Chapter two: The start

When Larry entered the strange purple portal, he was instantly grabbed by great speed in the portal teleportation system. Larry was traveling at astonishing speed for about 3 days. After a lack of hydration and food, Larry finally fell from the portal. He, whilst tired, looked around himself just to see he's lying on the most beautiful grass he's seen. A big forest with river going through it. A field with miles and miles of barley. Something he could only imagine. After 10 minutes of laying down and enjoying his view, one brown and hairy looking creature that had a little snowy mountain and a tree on his head approached Larry. Larry, after seeing this creature by the name Cogohr, almost immediately flinched and started running but Cogohr stopped him from running. Cogohr explained to him that he is friendly and won't harm anyone unless he needs to save him or his friends. Larry finds that very interesting but not very important so he decided to continue on his journey, but quickly Cogohr said to Larry that every single living creature is and will be in danger from Peatruto's army (Peatruto was a creature that was also a king). Cogohr offered Larry to be his best friend and asked him if he wants to defeat Peatruto once and for all. With no hesitation Larry Godson accepted Cogohr's offer. And by not knowing at all, Larry would be a part of a best army group anyone has ever seen.

### Chapter three: The creation of the “best” army

Once Larry and Cogohr were best friends, Cogohr introduced Larry his friends:

1. Sammacho - a tall white creature that has pitch black holes in his body. If you throw any object the size of one of his holes at him, that object will come out of a different hole.

2. Gorro - a blue creature that can take any shape.

3. Laguha - a verry tall and gigantic mountain-like creature with a stuttering problem.

4. Doppasad - a small green creature that can fly at a high speed and can camouflage him and his friends.

-But-bu-but C-Co-Cogohr! – yelled Laguha.

-I-It tak-takes man-y ye-year-years to t-tra-train! – said Laguha, and then Cogohr replied:

-Listen... we all know that if we fail, we are gone forever. So of course, for our own sake, we need to train for years. That is the only thing that can help us to defeat Peatruton. –

After Cogohr’s speech, it was already dark, so everyone decided that the best idea was to make their home there. After some really hard work, the house, which was actually an earthen house, was not only keeping them safe from rain, but it also had a secret door, and the inside was what only kings and queens can afford. The next day was the first day of the training and their routine was waking up in the 4 Kazas (6 o’clock in the Great Britain) and working till 9 Kazas (11 o’clock in the Great Britain).

### After 12 years of work...

-That’s it?!- said Larry.

-Yes, look at us. Everyone is powerful and strong. There is nothing more to do, we just need to prepare our stuff and our plan, so we can attack Peatruton! – said Cogohr.

The next day everyone was woken up by Cogohr with all of their things packed due to Sammacho’s friendly attitude. As they were leaving their house, Larry said: - We cannot get separated far away. We need to defeat Peatruto like a team, not like enemies. – Doppasad kicked Larry’s left leg and jokingly shouted: - Was that motivational?!-.

### Chapter four: The war against Peatruto and Peatruto’s army

After having a hard time looking for the secret temple, and finally founding it, they created a plan:

-Laguha will come running last and he will try to crush everything around him, except for the army.

-Gorro will turn into a line, and he will go through a hole Cogohr created that leads to the temple.

- Sammacho will carry Larry on his head and would throw him in one hole and he'll exit through a hole that is exactly on the Sammacho's chest, hoping's that Larry would attack the army like a bowling ball.

- Cogohr will be holding Doppasad's legs while Doppasad will release really cold water on the Peatruto's army.

-And on the count of three! – said Cogohr.

-three, two, one! GO! –

And the war begun...

As the Gorro started attacking, Sammacho started throwing liato (a really spicy pepper) that caused most of the army to lose the control of their equipment. Larry was perfectly thrown by Sammacho.

-Come on!! We can do it!! – said Larry and instead of defeating the army, he lured the army into a hut next to the temple.

Doppasad released really cold water. But he accidently realised it on Cogohr.

-Aaaaaa!!!! – screamed Cogohr for help.

Seeing this Larry jumped and.... saved Cogohr!

-T-Thank you! – said Cogohr, but Larry silenced Cogohr and told him to start fighting.

After destroying everything Peatruto was the last thing. But Sammacho had a big brain and great vision and he saw that Peatruto had a red mark that needed to be pressed, so he told it to Larry and threw Larry on the Peatruto's red mark. As he pushed it, Peatruto became really small and started to fumble while running away.

And that is how the new life was created...

author: Dora Štimac

mentor: Tamara Pleše

institution: Osnovna škola Ivanke Trohar, Fužine

## THE BOY WHO SPEAKS WITH ANIMALS

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A long time ago there was a little boy named John. He was different from other children. His parents thought he had some kind of disorder. They meant it because he wouldn't hang out on the playground with other children. John was only with animals, especially with his dog Ruby. Everything he was doing, he was doing it with some animal. Sometimes John would even bring wild animal home. One time he brings home a hedgehog. John grew up, now he is a teenager. He began got in into bad company. His mom and dad were worried about him. They tell him to stop hanging out with them. John wouldn't listen until his friend group kicked him out of their group. He was sad all the time now, but Ruby always made him smile. Ruby and John had been together since John was little. So, now John didn't have any other friends than Ruby. He was with her every second of the day, just like when he was little. He talked to her and shared his secrets as if Ruby was a human. One day John was alone at home with Ruby. He was eating breakfast and he heard something. It was strange to him because he was home alone. Suddenly, Ruby came to the room, and she started talking to him. John realized that he could talk to animals. Ruby told him that she was talking to him the whole time, but he couldn't understand. John was full of joy when he found out he can talk to animals. He didn't tell anyone about his "superpower". The time passed by, and John got old. He was a grandfather now. Until now he didn't tell anyone he could talk to animals. But he had a grandson, and he told him about it. When the grandson tried to talk to an animal, he succeeded. He promised his grandfather John that he wouldn't tell anyone about it. So that continued from generation to generation.

author: Sara Zupčić

mentor: Katija Tefik - Baćac

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## THE DIARY

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There was a little girl named Emma. She loved to write stories and wanted to be a writer. One day on her 9th birthday her parents got her a diary to write stories and paragraphs in. Every day she would write: „ Dear diary... „

The diary was full of stories, secrets and letters. One day she brought her diary to school and lost it. Everything was in the diary like secrets, stories and much more. She was really worried that someone had found it and read all her writings. She cried because the diary was her everything and she didn't want to buy a new one because she thought it wasn't going to be useful. She was in 7th grade and didn't know what to do. The next day she went to school and tried to find the diary but she didn't succeed. Then she went on and on for days but just couldn't find it. But then one day when she went to school she found her diary in pieces and all her secrets and stories stuck to the lockers. Emma couldn't believe it. She thought now everyone will know about her and her family. She was so ashamed and so sad that she ran home in tears. She got home and her parents looked at her and asked what was wrong. Emma told them what happened. „Do you know about the diary that you gave me on my 9th birthday?“ Her parents looked at her and started laughing and asked: „ Do you still have the same diary that we gave you 4 years ago?“. Emma looked at them and said- „Of course I have. But I lost it in school the other day and today when I got there it was torn into pieces. All my secrets and stories were stuck to the walls and the lockers so everyone could see. But that isn't the worst part. The worst part is that I don't know who found the diary and stuck the pages everywhere!“ Her parents called the principal and talked about the situation. The principal said that they will try to find who did it. They were in the hunt for several days but just couldn't find out who did it. They asked every student in the school and at the end there were three suspects left. Emma's best friends Sarah, John and Daniel. But something was off about Sarah. „ I think that Sarah did it „-the principal said. Emma was in shock that the principal accused Sarah for stealing and leaking Emmas secrets. Emma said: „Why would Sarah do such a thing? She is my best friend!“ But then Emma realized that something was off about Sarah but she also realized that something was off about John too. She said

to her mum :“Why Sarah and John? They are my best friends! We know each other for ages. They are like family to me! I don't really think that they did something like that to me!“ But she was wrong. Then they found out who did it. It was Sarah, John and Daniel! Emma was really sad when she found out who did it, but now they need to find out why they did that to the diary and Emma. The principal and Emma were on a another hunt, but this time not who did that to the diary. Now it is a hunt for why they did that. To Emma and not the diary! So they were asking Sarah, John and Daniel again and also some other students. They didn't find out anything at first, and for the next couple of weeks. Then several weeks passed but nothing again. Then they went on and on for another several weeks, and finally they found out why they did that. They were jelaous because Emma was good at school, in sport, in singing, making music, playing the guitar and the piano. So they stole the diary, read it and as there were so many good things, they just decided to tear it up and stick all the stories and secrets on the lockers. Emma was devastated when she heard about that and didn't know what to do. Should I forgive them, should I forget them? She didn't know what to do. She asked her parents, they said to forgive them. She asked her grandma, she said to do what she wants, but they did a horrible thing so she said to forgive them and teach them everything she knows- like playing the guitar and the piano and etc. That is what she did. Every day they would meet up at Emma's house. Because there were three of them they made a schedule: on Monday Emma would tech Sarah how to play the piano. On Tuesday Emma would teach Daniel how to play soccer and basketball. On Wednesday and Thursday they were free so no one had nothing. On Friday Emma would do maths and science with John and Sarah.

A year later it was Emma's 14th birthday. She had a little party at her house. Of course Sarah, John and Daniel were invited. All three bought one special gift for Emma. It was the same exact diary. She was so happy and she cried. „This is the best birthday present I had ever gotten“ – Emma said. The diary was so special for her that she already started stories about her best friends Sarah, John and Daniel. The last secret she wrote in her diary was „Get yourself Sarah, John and Daniel.“

author: Elena Topolovac

mentor: Sandra Barešić

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## THE ENIGMA VIRUS

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On May 7<sup>th</sup> 2037, a man by the name of William Smith came into the Cascade Medical Center, claiming he had intense pain in his stomach. The doctors immediately noticed something about William's appearance; his arms had an unnatural hint of green. The doctors, intrigued by this phenomenon, took William to take blood samples. After William took the blood samples, the doctors sent them to Dr. Marcella Pierson, a well-respected scientist in Cascade City. After Dr. Pierson conducted some research, she found a new unknown pathogen. The doctors immediately isolated William in a specialized medical facility so that they could further test him. Over the next 5 days, they took MRIs and X-rays to better understand the unknown pathogen in William's body; however, his condition only got worse. His whole body was covered in neon green spots, and his heart rate was slowly but surely slowing down. William also started saying that the world was "going to end soon" and "to make the cure for this disease as soon as possible." The doctors thought that the things William was talking about were bizarre but did not question them too much. Dr. Pierson tried to understand the pathogen, but due to them talking with William about the things he ate or drank, the only thing that stood out was the Emerald River water. William claimed that he went fishing with his friends, and he drank the water from the Emerald River as a dare from his friends. Dr. Pierson suspected that the river had to do something with the pathogen in William's body. Dr. Pierson took a couple of samples and found out that her suspicions were true. In the samples she took, there were dozens of small parasites. Dr. Pierson named the pathogen "the Enigma virus." After 10 days of William's first visit, William's condition got worse every minute; the neon green spots were now dark green and falling off William's body. His heartbeat was slowing down, and the doctors needed to put him on the pacemaker just to regulate his heartbeat. William kept saying how the world is ending and that they need to find a cure for the Enigma virus as soon as possible. He also started saying that "he can feel them scratching his skull," which highly disturbed the doctors. The doctors kept running tests on William, as they were requested by Dr. Pierson to run more MRIs and X-rays. 15 days have passed since William's first visit to the



doctor. He looked like a completely different person; most of his skin was covered in neon green spots, his eyes were neon green instead of brown, and his hair was slowly falling off. Dr. Pierson was trying to find the cure for the Enigma virus. As she was trying to find the cure, more and more patients have been showing up to the Cascade Medical Center with the same symptoms: the same hint of the unnatural green on the arms, as well as the same intense pain in the stomach. The doctors and nurses did not know what to do with the patients as there was no cure yet. The only thing they could do was put them in a specialized medical facility and hope for the best. Dr. Pierson kept trying to cure the Enigma virus, but there was no progress. The only thing Dr. Pierson was able to find out was that if you want to stop the Enigma virus from spreading, you need to boil the water from the Emerald River before drinking it. 20 more people after William visited the doctor with the same symptoms. William has sadly passed away due to the Enigma virus. The thing that disturbed the doctors the most is that on William's autopsy, two tumors were found. One on the skull and the other on his spine. After further research, the same pathogens that were in the Emerald River were found in the tumors. Dr. Pierson has come to the conclusion that the Enigma virus slowly turns itself into tumors. Dr. Pierson announced that the Enigma virus is only fatal if you drink from the Emerald River and if you don't boil the water. Dr. Pierson also said that you should boil everything before you drink it, as it kills the pathogen. A couple days after Dr. Pierson's announcement, even more people came in with the same symptoms, and Dr. Pierson still had no cure. The only thing that could be done was to try to slow down the process of the Enigma virus. The doctors did their best to at least try and save the patients, but without success. 30 days have passed since the first victim of the Enigma virus, and at least 20 more patients were put in quarantine. The virus kept spreading. There still weren't any leads to the cure of the Enigma virus, and it didn't seem like it was close. After the media discovered the Enigma virus, scientists all over the world wanted to help Dr. Pierson in the research for the cure. Dr. Pierson gladly accepted the help, and with the help of other skilled scientists, the cure for the Enigma virus was slowly being discovered. Finally, after 45 days, the cure for the Enigma virus was found. Any patients that were in the lower stage of the Enigma virus were saved; however, the patients in the higher stage were still hopeless. Sadly, the cure for the higher stages of the Enigma virus was not found. The victims of the higher stages sadly passed away. Everybody in Cascade City got the vaccine for the Enigma virus, and after a while, there were no traces of it in Cascade City. If Dr. Pierson hadn't found the cure for the Enigma virus, the whole world could have been in danger, but thankfully, with the help of other skilled and well-respected scientists, they saved humanity from extinction.

author: Bruna Benco  
mentor: Marija Matijaš  
institution: OŠ Vrbanj

## THE ESCAPE

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In another universe there is a planet like earth. Some people would say it's the same, but it's not. People were grouped by their blood type. Every year the rich people would test 18-year-old people who are poor and group them by their blood type. Those groups of 18-year-olds would fight in an arena until 1 group was left. For the winning group there was a huge award.

A day before the testing Brooklyn was trying to calm her sick mum down. Her mum was scared that Brooklyn wouldn't make it. She calmed her down and went to sleep. In the morning she was getting ready to go to the testing. She was saying her goodbyes to her mum and her pets. On the walk to the town hall where the testing where she saw a boy being pulled out of his house by the guards because she didn't want to go to the testing. That made Brooklyn feel unsettled.

When she arrived at the town hall, they tested her right away. When everyone was tested, they announced the results. Brooklyn started to tear up. She has the rarest blood type. That meant that in her group there will be only a few people. That group never won the fights. She was waiting to see how much people will be in her group. In her group there was only 4 people. She felt crushed. In other groups there were hundreds of people. In the most common one there were 300 people. A couple hours later her group was on a train to the arena where the fights were supposed to be. It was a 2-day drive. When she entered the train, she met the people she is in the group with. The first person she saw was a pretty, blonde girl. She introduced herself in a miserable tone: 'Hi, I'm Isabella but you can call me Isa.' Brooklyn said in the same tone: 'Hello I'm Brooklyn, nice to meet you.' they sat at one of the booths of the train when a tall boy entered. He said to them: 'Hi I'm Tristan. What're your names?' He seemed kind of happy for some reason. They introduced themselves. He sits with them. Isa asks him: 'Why do you seem so unbothered by the fights?' He answers in a whisper: 'I have a plan for escaping but I'm going to tell you guys when the last person arrives. And right when he was saying that a curly haired boy entered. He looked so scared. He seemed so familiar to Brooklyn. Then it all clicked. It was the boy she saw being pulled out of his house on her way to the town hall. Then she

asked him what his name was. He said: 'I'm Travis.' and sat with them. Tristan told them the plan. He was quiet because the guards were surrounding them. After that everyone went to sleep. Brooklyn couldn't sleep because she was overthinking the plan. She was scared as much as she was glad that she is escaping. Soon it was the morning. They all met at the same booth that they were in last night. They were having breakfast. Tristan was secretly packing some food from breakfast. Breakfast was over and they were getting ready to escape. While everyone was preparing, a group of journalists came in the train. They wanted to interview them because they had the rarest blood group. Their plan got ruined because they couldn't runaway while hundreds of cameras were in their faces. They had to think of a new plan since by the time the journalists would leave, they would already be at the arena. Tristan was distracting the journalists while the other three ran away. They jumped out of a window and landed in a forest. They were running as fast as they could because they knew that everyone would see that their missing. Brooklyn was thinking about a plan to save Tristan. 'How much time do we have?' she asked Isa. 'Not enough.' She said in a scared voice. Travis said: 'There isn't time for overthinking we must go to the arena to save Tristan before it's too late.' They were running through the woods. They got close to the arena but not too close. The train that Tristan was in got to the arena and they saw him. They had to save him, but they didn't know how. At that moment Brooklyn got an idea. They will climb up the side of the arena and they will put the rope on the other side so that Tristan can climb up it. After climbing up they had to get Tristan to climb that rope without the other teams noticing. They were so happy when Tristan noticed them, and he already knew what he had to do. He started climbing but the other teams noticed him. They started climbing right behind him. When he got to the top Isa cut off the rope and the other teams with it. Their escape was successful! Or not.... They were running through the woods when they heard stomping on the ground. There were hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers. They surrounded them. In that moment Brooklyn remembered that her mum had given her a lighter when leaving. She threw the lighter on a huge tree and the forest started to burn. That was the moment when they started running as fast as they could. They finally reached their homes.

All four of them decided to run away to the forest and build their own village. They travelled for days without stopping when they finally reached the place where they were happy. They found a cure for Brooklyn's mum, and they lived a happy life.

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mentor: Senka Javorović

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## THE FIRE QUEEN

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In one village in the northern part of the UK lives one girl. She has got long brown hair and gray eyes. Her name is Jennifer. Jennifer isn't short but she isn't tall either. Her parents work hard and they are tired every day. Jennifer has got three brothers and three sisters. Having seven children is really expensive for the year 1900. The family name is Finley. The Finleys have got very small house, they live in a cottage. Jennifer sisters' names are Anne, Emily, Janet and Amy, but Amy disappeared when she was five years. Her brothers' names are Elliot, John and Andrew. Her parents names' are Charles and Charlotte.

One day Jennifer says: "We are so poor. I must do something because we are hungry and we are freezing. I should work to get some more money!", and she goes outside. She comes to the church and starts to pray: "Oh, God I know that I must do something to help my family but I don't know what. Can you help me?", and the God replies: "Go to the East where you will find one big castle. In that castle lives one queen, the Fire Queen. She burns villages. One girl is locked in her castle. If you get her free, you and your family will be safe and happy forever." Jennifer just says: "Oh" because she never spoke with the God before.

When she comes back home, she starts to pack. She packs one family photography, some water and some food. She kisses her brothers and sisters and says: "Goodbye to you all!", and starts travelling to the East. The God watches her and the way that she chooses.

In the meantime in her house. "Where is Jennifer, John?", asks her mother. "I don't know, she just kissed me and said 'goodbye'", answers John. "Hey, mommy! Are you looking for Jennifer? If you do, here is the letter that she wrote. Look here!", says Anne, the youngest kid in the family. Mom starts to read the letter.

In the meantime on Jennifer's way. "Dear God, I am freezing! I can't do it!" But then, in front of her appears one big fire castle. "That must be it!", says Jennifer and then she feels warm. Inside the castle everything is on fire. "What do you want here?", someone asks. Jennifer turns around, she doesn't know where that sound comes from. "I ask you something!", says that strange voice.

“I’m here because I need the Fire Queen!”, says Jennifer. “I am the Fire Queen! What do you want?”

“I must get the locked girl free.”, says Jennifer.

“I don’t know for any locked girl.”, says the queen. She has got long red hair, red eyes, red dress and her skin is also red. “Go away!”, says the queen and Jennifer walks out.

But then Jennifer remembers something. When the queen gets inside, Jennifer remembers something. She makes a lot of snowballs. Jennifer rings the bell. The Queen opens, but when she sees snowballs, she starts to fly. Fortunately, Jennifer is faster and she starts her attack. Red queen’s dress was the fire shield. When you throw a snowball into that shield, a hole appears. After some snowballs, the locked girl falls from her shield. The shield falls down.

“Amy, is that you?”, asks Jennifer. And the girl hugs Jennifer. That girl is her lost sister Amy! God shows them the way and they come home really fast. Now their house is big and the Finleys are rich. Just as God says. But the most important thing is they are happy because they are complete.

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mentor: Sandra Brcko

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## THE IMPOSSIBLE MISSION

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Our story begins in a small town in New York. It was a rainy, stormy day when all this happened. A young girl named Paris was looking through her window. She didn't have anything better to do on this grey day. She was looking and looking, hoping to see something interesting, until she did. She saw a small old watch just outside her house. Of course, she quickly ran down to pick it up. Little did she know that this was no ordinary watch. It was a dangerous one. After she picked it up, it started glowing, it just shined so brightly that you needed to close your eyes. Then it started blinking. Paris got scared, she started to panic. The glowing stopped for a second and BAM! Paris was floating through a glowing tunnel. At the end of the tunnel, Paris was not in New York anymore. She was in a weird, dusty, old town. She shouted for help but it seemed like no one was there. Paris started walking through this old town. She walked and walked and all of a sudden an old woman appeared...

The woman greeted Paris. Paris explained what happened when she touched the watch and asked what she needed to do to return to her world. In the beginning, Paris didn't trust the woman, I mean, how could she trust a woman she had just met? The old woman explained that she needed to complete the impossible mission to go back to her world.

"The impossible mission?" Paris asked. "If it's impossible how am I supposed to complete it?"

The old woman replied: "Well that is up to you, young lady" and she faded away.

After she faded away, Paris received a weird envelope. After she opened it, a weird map popped out. Paris was so confused and scared. She didn't even know where she was. The woman didn't give her a lot of information about this mission, but she wanted to go back to her normal life. In the end, Paris decided to follow the mission!

On the map, it said: *to get to this place you must find the animal leader and gain its trust, then through the passage and there you are!* Geography and Science weren't Paris's favourite subjects. But she really wanted to get back to her world, so she decided to think hard and try to remember.

She kept telling herself: “The animal leader, the animal leader... who or what could that be?”

Paris eventually remembered that it was a lion. DUHH! But how was that supposed to help Paris with the *impossible mission*? Well, she thought of an idea that could be right, but how could she be sure? Only if she tried, so that is what she was going to do. Paris loved taking risks, everyone called her a risktaker. We all know that lions live in certain types of forests. She looked around and, in the distance, she saw trees. Well, that must be a forest then. That’s where her journey would begin. After some time, she finally came to the forest...

As Paris was walking through the forest, she was getting more and more scared. She had no idea how she was supposed to find the animal leader if it was even the lion and gain his trust. As she continued walking, she suddenly heard a roar. She knew it was coming from the lion. She couldn’t quite see where he was, but she followed the roaring sound. At last, she saw a beautiful lion standing on a rock in the distance. She started to slowly approach him. After she saw that he wasn’t so dangerous, she started explaining what she needed to do and how he was involved. He told Paris that he would help her only if she helped him with something first. The thing she needed to help him with was to find his lost cub. The lion led Paris to the place where the cub was last seen, and she started looking around. She was walking for hours and was feeling tired but she was too determined to stop. At last, she found the lost little cub and returned him safely to the lion. The lion was so grateful.

He told Paris: “You have gained my trust!”

The lion gave Paris a special ring and said: “Just put it on and see what happens, goodbye!”

Paris immediately put the ring on and there she was the old woman again. She asked Paris if she would like to stay there or go back to her world. In the end, Paris had to go back to her world, where all her friends and family were, but she would always remember this magical place!

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mentor: Senka Javorović

institution: OŠ Ljubo Babić, Jastrebarsko

## THE MAGIC BOOK

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Once there was a book that was used by the mightiest wizard in the world. In that book there were all kinds of magic and also a lot of potion recipes. The book was made 1000 years ago and was passed down from generation to generation. The wizard lived in a big tower in the viking village. He lived for 100 years. Now that tower is abandoned. The legend says that every 50 years at midnight, only one person can go in the tower.

Near the tower lived a little boy with his family. His name was Luca. Luca had no siblings. He was the wizard's great-grandson and he wanted to be wizard just like his great-grandpa. Luca did not know what would happen to him the following day. Luca's mom woke him up at 11 pm and told him he had to hide. The war had started and he only had time to hide. She also told him that his father had gone to war and would not be back for a long time. Luca remembered the legend about the tower and decided to hide there. As he ran there, he saw that the whole village was on fire. When he went inside, he had to climb the stairs. He came upstairs and found a book. He flipped through it. He also saw a magic orb that sees everything. He looked into the magic orb and saw his father getting killed. Luca cried for a very long time. But he remembered that he had seen a potion in the book that could revive someone who had died. He found the recipe and the ingredients he needed for the potion were:

wolf's tail

lightning in a bottle

dragon's eye

Luca knew there was only one dragon. The strongest dragon of all. Luca also found a recipe for the lightning in a bottle. Then he started with the wolf's tail. So Luca decided to go hunting for wolves. He took a small knife with him. But he remembered that if he went out he could not come back. He also took the book with him because he couldn't go back in the tower. It was evening, Luca went for wolves hunting. He found an old wolf. But it wasn't just an ordinary wolf, it was a flying wolf. Luca had read a book about them so he knew this wolf could talk. Luca asked him if he knew



of any wolf to cut off his tail. The wolf replied that he knew one who lived 30 minutes walk to the north. Even the flying wolf went with Luca. Luca headed north and saw a small wolf. The flying wolf told him that it was a shape-shifting wolf and that it was best to cut off its tail while it was still small. As soon as Luca approached him, he turned into a big, terrible, wolf. Luca quickly cut off his tail and quickly tried to escape. At the same time, the wolf ran after him and was much faster than Luca. The flying wolf quickly said Luca to mount him. Luca rode it and it flew away. It was a very scary event. Next, Luca should get the lightning in a bottle. He read in the book that he needed the bottle and the lightning to be in the same place at the same time. He waited for the storm and the storm appeared. He was so lucky that lightning immediately entered the bottle. Luca didn't expect that he would get that lightning in a bottle so fast. And there was only one ingredient left, dragon's eye. The dragon was tamed by the opponents with whom this village was at war. The flying wolf said that he could no longer help, so he flew away. Luca was terrified. He didn't know how to get that dragon's eye. He was thinking all night. The next day, opponents came with a dragon to destroy the whole village. And so Luca came up with a plan. He took a bow and an arrow, and shot the dragon from ambush. Of course, it didn't work. He saw more warriors die. He thought this would never work. But something unexpected happened. The flying wolf came back. He told him he would try to help. The wolf tried to kill the dragon, but unfortunately, he died trying. It wasn't easy for Luca now, when he died, some kind of loud sound was heard. A lot of flying wolves have come to take revenge. They killed the dragon and left. Everyone looked at the wolves, everyone was confused. The dragon fell to the floor, the opponents ran away. Luca had enough time to take the dragon's eye. He ran to the dragon, took the eye and ran away. He didn't remember that he didn't know how to make a potion. He tried to return to the tower, but only after 50 years. It seemed he had won, but not yet. He needed a big cauldron. He found it and mixed all the ingredients. Now he just had to wait. The potion was ready. But he could not find his father's body. He didn't know he had a magic orb with him. He saw his father's body in the dragon. He had to enter the dragon and than spill the potion on his father's body. But if even one drop were to fall on the dragon, the dragon would revive. Luca entered the dragon's mouth. Luca was so careful, but he failed and the father and the dragon revived. They ran out of the dragon's mouth before it belched fire. The dragon realized that Luca had revived him so he didn't kill him. The dragon flew far away. He accidentally revived the flying wolf. The flying wolf thanked him. Luca was overjoyed.

Luca continued to live completely normally, but also with a pet flying wolf, and there was never a war in that village again.

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## THE MAGICAL KINGDOM

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Once upon a time, there was a kingdom far, far away...

It was not a normal kingdom like the others, it was a magical kingdom! The kingdom was called Adria. In Adria lived fairies, elves, unicorns and giant bugs. Queen Sri was the ruler of Adria, she was a light fairy. Everyone loved her as much as she loved them. There were many jobs the other fairies had, like: farming, protecting, cleaning and much more. But that was not a problem for the fairies because they had fun doing their jobs. There was one fairy named Orinthia. She was the only fairy who did not have an element. You see, every fairy gets her element at the age of 5, but in Orinthia's case she did not get one. Because of her not having an element other creatures made fun of her. And on her birthday something bad happened.

The War started between Adria and Azazel. Azazel was a kingdom too, but not like Adria. The Queen Skadi ruled Azazel. The kingdom was known to be the opposite of Adria. Adria was the kingdom of good, peace and most importantly the kingdom of light, while Azazel was the kingdom of evil, war and darkness. But why, you might ask.

Well, Skadi and Sri were sisters and when they were young, they were best friends. But when they turned 25, their parents could not rule anymore so they had to choose between Skadi or Sri to rule Adria. It was hard for them to choose but they chose Sri to rule Adria. Skadi was so furious that she ran out of Adria to rule her own kingdom. She decided to make her kingdom just like Adria, but darker. Skadi wanted to take revenge on her sister, but she did not know how. After a lot of thinking, she decided to make Azazel smaller than Adria, but stronger. After a lot of work, she finally had a fairy army bigger than Adria's. On this day, fifteen years ago, Skadi sent a letter to Sri. In the letter was a note and, in the note, said: "Dear sister Sri, we have not talked in a while. How are you? Did your, or should I say, my kingdom miss me? I hope it did because on this day fifteen years from now your kingdom will be mine. At 7:30 am I will "visit" your kingdom. Be prepared because I will come with my army and kick you out of it so I can rule it, whether you like it or not.... Your sister, Skadi".

And that is why that war started. Everyone was fighting for their lives, using their magical powers to stop Skadi's army. After hours of fighting, Sri said: "THAT'S ENOUGH SKADI, LEAVE ME AND MY KINGDOM ALONE!". "Do not worry sister", said Skadi, "I will leave you and your kingdom alone for a few months. My army needs to rest from this fighting."

The next day, Adria was quiet, no one talked, and no creature made a sound. While Sri was scared and did not know what to do. Her housekeepers tried to calm her down, but they could not. While with Orinthia, she decided to visit Queen Sri and keep her company. She knocked on the castle doors and waited for the housekeepers to open the doors. The housekeepers sent Orinthia to the queen. Orinthia wanted to talk with the queen about something, not about the war, but her situation with her element. "Hello Orinthia", said the queen, "what brings you here?". "I am here to talk with you about something I want to know about. The queen thought Orinthia wanted to talk about the war. But she was wrong. "Why don't I have an element, my queen?", asked Orinthia. "I do not know Orinthia.", said the queen sadly. "But my queen", said Orinthia, "other creatures are making fun of me! I want it to stop! You must know why! If I had an element, they would not make fun of me!", said Orinthia angrily. "If you want to know, travel to the North cave. There, you will find the mind fairy. She knows everything. Why don't dark fairies like light fairies and other questionable things. Spoke the queen. She can answer all your questions.", replies the Queen.

Orinthia left the castle to pack her things and leave for the North cave. After a lot of travelling, she finally came to the North cave, she spoke with the mind fairy, and asked her about her element. The mind fairy explained Orinthia that she would get her element at the right time.

After a few months, the day finally came, the day of the war. While everyone was running around, Winslet, Fiamma, Eartha and Aura wanted to talk with Orinthia. They told her that she should hide because she would not be needed. Fiamma walked back to her house with her friends. Orinthia was full of rage, she wanted to prove to Fiamma that she's not useless. After a few hours of waiting, the time came. The Queen Skadi walked up to her sister Queen Sri. They looked at each other for a few seconds and then ran to their armies. Everyone was running and fighting for their lives, while Orinthia was hiding and thinking how she could help others. She saw Queen Skadi wanting to hurt Sri. Orinthia rushed to save the Queen Sri. She stood in front of Sri and then, Orinthia got her powers! She made Skadi disappear. After a few days, the Queen Sri decided to give her crown to Orinthia.

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## THE MAGICAL MILL

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On a beautiful sunny day two sisters, Jessica and Paula, went for a walk. Jessica loves nature very much and wanted to become a scientist when she grew up and Paula is a math lover. Jessica is older so her parents told her to take her sister for a walk with her, not knowing what was waiting for them.

Jessica wanted to go the longer and lighter part, because whenever they went with their parents they went that way and nothing happened to them. Paula wanted to go the shorter and darker way. Jessica agreed and off they went. Everything was going well until at one point they heard sounds coming from darkness in the forest. They decided to follow the sound until they came so close to it. They turned around and sound was getting clearer, but they couldn't figure out exactly where it was coming from. They found a small house after few minutes. At first view, it looked like a magic house with mill. They could only read about magic in books and listen stories their grandmothers and mother told them about. The mill was turning slowly and they thought that was because it was old. That mill was completely different from others mills. Water hasn't flown on the mill. The letters have flown from the mill instead. The mill was colourful and behind it there was a pink pair of unicorns. They decided to go closer to see more clearly. Jessica has read words from letters that came from mill. She found out she was very good this year and the mill would give her a golden fish. Then she realized that she was surrounded by animals. There were purple elephants, blue giraffes, green rhinos and red snakes. She also saw fairies, princesses with mermaid's tails and mermaids with legs. There were also crystals that shone so brightly that the poor little girl's eyes hurt. Then, heavy rain started from the sky and it created a big vortex that started to move everything around the girls. The vortex began to pull everything from the magical world into it, but the girls miraculously remained standing firmly on the ground. They watched the whole magic world disappear. When they thought that everything from magic world would disappear and that they would never see the magical world, the vortex disappeared and sun started shining.

In that moment, Jessica woke up. She was very sad because it was just a dream and because that magical world does not exist. She immediately went to her parents and told them about her magical dream. Everyone knew that Jessica had vivid imagination and everyone was happy to listen to that magical dream over and over again.

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## THE METALLICA STORY

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In 1978 a man named Lars got his first drum kit by his grandma, but Lars did not want to be a drummer wanted to be like his dad a professional tennis player but due to his constant leg pain the club had to kick him out and he was devastated. Until he remembered drum kit in his basement and writhed on the news LOOKING FOR GUITARISTS AND BASSIST TO JOIN MY BAND. Then after 3 months a guy named James saw the poster and was interested in joining a band and they made a deal together and started playing popular songs like Smoke on the Water and many more. One day when Lars was with his friends and they were thinking of random names for the band until a friend suggested Metallica and Metallica was born. Then another guy joined the band, and his name was Dave. After that they started practicing until a bassist named Cliff also joined the band. And the band was completed with 2 guitarists James Hetfield, Dave Mustaine, bassist Cliff Bruton and last was a drummer Lars Ulrich. When the band was formed in 1981, they proceeded to make their first album called Kill em All. The first song was born the Jump in the Fire made all by Dave Mustaine. Then Metallica proceeded to make rest of the album songs. They made Hit the Lights ,Phantom Lord, The Four Horsemen ,Anesthesia Pulling Teeth, No Remorse, Motorbreath ,Whiplash, and Seek and Destroy. After Kill em All album in 1983 they started being top band in Los Angeles. 10 million albums of Kill em all were sold in a year. In December 14 sadly Dave Mustaine left the band and 10 years later he made a rival band named Megadeth. After Mustaine left Metallica Kirk Hammet joined the band and already made a song called Creeping Death and the album Ride the Lightning was born. They proceeded to make 7 more songs for the album such as Fight Fire With Fire, From Whom the Bells Tolls, Trapped Under the Ice ,Creeping Death, Ride the Lightning, Fade to Black, Escape, The Call of Ktulu. Bassist Cliff Bruton than got his first and sadly last grammy. The album was so popular that even Americas president Ronald Reagan liked it. Around 23 million copies of that album were sold. In 1986 Metallica released Master of puppets which had the first song lasting more than 7 minutes. The songs were Battery, The Thing That Should Not be, Disposable Heroes, Orion, Master of Puppets, Welcome Home,

Leper Messiah, Damage INC. The song Master of Puppets was really popular that it was featured in a show called Stranger things in 2022. Sadly on march 1986 Metallica was going on a tour until something really bad happened the bus crashed and the half of the bus was torn of and guess who was at the crashed half it was Cliff Burton. No one ever thought that would happen the band was ruined or so they thought until the Saviour Jason Newstead saved one of the biggest band of Los Angeles and they proceeded to go on tours and the band was saved. After the "POSER" era my favorite album was created And Justice for All... witch featured Blackened, Eye of the Beholder, The Shortest Straw, To Live is to Die, Harvester of Sorrow, One, Dyers Eye and And justice for All... . the song One is talking .

about a solider that lost hands, legs, face, eyes and could only think, move and talk in morse code because his dad was always learning him. After the And justice for all ... . Metallica did not have any albums until 1991. It was called Black album or self titled because many thought it was their first album. The songs were Enter Sandman, Holier Than Thou, Wherever I May Roam, Through The Never, Sad But True, Nothing Else Matters, Don't Tread on me and Of Wolf And a Man. When Metallica was going to Soviet Union they made one of the largest concerts in world there were around 3.4 million people. 5 Years later they made another album called Load. The songs were 2x4, Bleeding Me, King Nothing , Until it Sleeps, Cure, The House Jack Built, Hero of The Day and Mama Said. This album was not like others because Metallica fans did not like that they used this album to torture prisoners. A year after they released a sequel to Load Reload. The song were Better Than u, Slither, Devil's Dance, Fuel, The Memory Remains, and FiXXXer. Not many people liked the album. In the middle of making Reload Sadly Lars lost 60% of his hearing. After every practice when he was going to sleep he could not sleep because he heard the tv and when he was going to turn it off he realized the tv was not even on that's how it got bad. But no matter the hearing damage and not wearing any ear protector he is still most loved and most hated drummer still playing in one of the best thrash metal bands in the world. After Jason Newstead got tired of Metallica he sadly left and then their fan joined them as bass his name was Robert Trulio and he joined on December 4 1997 and proceeded to play for the band. Lars Ulrich 2000 won his ninth grammy first in 1987,1988,1989, 1990, 1991 , 1994 ,1997, 1999 and in 2000 witch is really shocking almost a year after year and he has the most grammy's in Metallica. In 2003 they released their first album being manly drums. It's called St. Anger. The songs were Frantic, St'Anger, Invisible Kid, Sweet Amber , Purify , Shoot me Again and Some Kind of Monster. The album was a tie because people loved it and hated

it at the same time it sold 5 million copies. 5 Years later they released album called Death Magnetic. The songs were That Was Just Your life , Unforgiven III , My Apocalypse , All Nightmare , The Judas Kiss , Cyanide and The end of the line. 8 Years after they released album called Hardwired... to self destruct . The songs were Hardwired, Now That we're Dead , Am I Savage , Confusion , Atlas RISE! and Halo on Fire. And we get to the latest album called 72 Seasons the last album Metallica made for now. The song were 72 Seasons, Screaming Suicide , You Must Burn! , Shadow Follow , Cashing light and Sleep walk my life away. Metallica has most Grammys from every bandmate 27 total. They are third most popular band in history of metal and rock right after AC/DC and Queen. This band is really good and I want them to make more music.



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## THE PARALLEL ADVENTURE

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Once in the future, in the Year 2300 there are two best friends, and their names are Vivian and Miles. They are 14 years old, and they live in New York. They were best friends since they were two years old. They were inseparable ever since. They told each other everything, like secrets. Vivian liked girly things like makeup and skincare, but she liked playing video games more than everything, like Miles but he also liked spending time with Vivian and playing with Vivian's makeup and skincare, but that's not all. They fitted together well because they liked a lot of common things.

In their time there were invented flying cars, self-making food, but what they liked the most is astronomy. Vivian knew everything about it because her dad was an astronaut. Since she was a child, she loved astronomy. But unfortunately, her dad died in the space before two years, so she continued learning more about astronomy for him and because she loved it. Miles also loves it, so they learn together.

But before her father died, he was on Mars and brought her a weird stone but he didn't tell her what it is so she told Miles a few days ago and they started to scrutinize it, but they couldn't figure it out. One night when they had a sleepover, they were looking at the stone and Miles accidentally pushed hidden button on a stone and a big flash happened, and then they fell asleep. Next day they woke up but separated. They were in different bodies, and they weren't in New York anymore, they were in Paris in France. They were in a parallel universe. Vivian realized that stone is for travelling through universes. She was in a bedroom that looked mostly like hers even though she was in France, while Miles woke up confused in a mansion. But this universe was unique, in this universe two 14-year-olds are chosen to protect the city. But they have to keep their identities a secret, because two 14-year-olds are chosen to be the villains, which also have to protect their identities. They are chosen by their personalities. When they are chosen, they immediately feel the element power they got. To transform they just had to say the name of their element and to detransform they had to say any word except their element. They are the heroes and the villains their entire life, and after they die, the new ones are chosen. In a fight, villain starts making chaos and starts a fight. Fight ends when both teams are too tired to fight. To

repair the damage the heroes had to say their element at the end of the fight. To defeat the villain, heroes got to overpower the villains and take their element, but that isn't easy and never happened before. The four elements are: ice, fire, air and water, ice and fire are for heroes, and air and water for the villains, because villains stole two elements from heroes in the past. Element can't be chosen by the hero or villain. Vivian and Miles travelled through universes on a day when the new heroes and the villains are chosen. Vivian found some information about it in her parallel room while looking for the stone from Mars, like Miles in his, so they knew something about in this unique universe. Suddenly, they felt their element, they were the chosen heroes because Vivian felt the element of ice, and Miles element of fire.

And two villains were chosen, Lily, who felt the element of air, and James, who felt the element of water, are two random kids with evil personalities. The next day, the villains showed up, the Whirlgirl (Lily) and the Aquater (James) and started making chaos. Vivian quickly transformed into Ladycrystal, but Miles had strict parents in this universe, so he barely made it to their first fight. His superhero name was Flameman. They didn't know each other when transformed but they made a pretty good team. Ladycrystal used the power of ice to stop Whirlgirl blowing them away and she created a giant ice wall while Flameman used power of fire for villains to not get close to them. Aquater used power of water to turn the fire off, but ice wall still protected them. Villains got tired and ended the fight and heroes repaired everything. Vivian and Miles were worried for each other because they didn't know Paris as a town. When they got to school, it turned out they were going to the same school. They were surprised and had a little talk. They were glad for each other that they were okay, but it was confusing how is Miles so rich in this universe, because he was living in a mansion, had an expensive car and also very strict parents. And Vivian's parents owned a store, and her parents weren't strict as Miles's. They didn't tell each other who they were, even though they shared everything. There were no attacks that day, but next day villains started attacking around the Eiffel Tower, so heroes fastly transformed and got there. Whirlgirl destroyed all the trees around there, but heroes noticed that villains have shields coming from their arm, so they checked their arm and saw a button, but not 3D one. They tapped the button and shield activated just when Aquater attacked them with water. Ladycrystal made ice on the floor where villains where standing, so they fell every time they got up and Flameman created fire in front of them. Villains gave up and heroes repaired everything. For next few days there were no attacks because villains were thinking how to trap the heroes so they can win. After a few days Aquater showed up and heroes saw him and transformed.

But Aquater didn't attack them, so heroes started following him. Everything was going to their evil plan. Aquater entered an abandoned building where Whirlgirl was waiting for him. Heroes entered the building and villains trapped them. They told them this was the last decisive fight. And then they started fighting. Ladycrystal was fighting Whirlgirl and Flameman was fighting Aquater. And at one moment heroes overpowered the villains and took their element. Villains detransformed but none of heroes knew who they are. With their element Ladycrystal had elements of ice and air, and Flameman of fire and water. They decided to reveal identities and when they detransformed, they were in shock. They hugged each other and got home. Miles found the stone and clicked the hidden button and travelled back to their universe. That was an adventure to remember.

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# THE QUEST FOR GOOD PRINCESS LEA AND THE ENCHANTED VILLAGE

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Once upon a time, in a magical kingdom far, far away, there lived a brave princess named Lea. She had a heart full of happiness and a spirit that spread like fairy's wings. Lea's kingdom was known for its magical forests, sparkling rivers, and mystical creatures.

One day, as Lea was exploring the woods, she tripped upon a hidden village, she was wondering where she was. She found out that she was in a goblin village. The goblins were playful and tricky, but Lea saw the good in everyone. She decided to be friends with them and learn about their unique, mysterious, and wonderful world.

As Lea spent more time with the goblins, she finds out that they were under a curse by an evil witch. The witch had stolen the magical diamond. The diamond kept the goblin's village unique and peaceful, but one goblin named Marco Larco told her that if she wants to save the goblin village, she needs to say the evil witch's name, her name is Mrs. Olivia Lee James, then she will drop the diamond on the floor. Ready to help her little friends, Lea has gotten on a quest to find the stolen diamond. On her journey, Lea meets friendly fairies who guided her through spooky forests and helped her overcome different traps. With their magical powers they gave Lea all types of abilities like talking to animals and plants. That made Lea's journey even more magical.

As Lea got deeper into the evil's witch's cave, she has challenges to face, so with that she will help her little new friends. She has met weird creatures, but now, she needs to face all those challenges. She finds the evil witch, but then she remembers that her friend Marco Larco the Goblin said to her that if she wants to get that diamond, that she needs to say the evil witch's name. She founded the evil witch, the evil witch looked horrible, she had a giant nose, burnt black hair, green skin, and a very scary smile. And then princess Lea said the evil witch's name...MRS. OLIVIA LEE

JAMES! The diamond fell on the ground, the princess quickly took the diamond, and she ran away as fast as she could...She gets back in the Goblin Village, from her purse she gets out the diamond. They place it on the throne and then...The curse is gone!

Everybody was so happy, they all danced together. Princess Lea was not just known for her beauty; she was also known for her goodness. The goblins and fairies called her a hero! The princess Lea has gotten a title "THE QUEEN", And everyone was happy and cheerful!

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## THE STORY ABOUT SANTA

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We all know about Santa Claus, right? But how did he even get to that position? How can he deliver so many gifts in just one night, and what is even his story? Well, if you don't know, I will tell you now.

Many years ago, when Santa was little he was not so happy. He was the only child with beard but not regular one, it was white one just like his hair. He was getting bullied for that but he was still a good child. Santa didn't had a dad and his mom didn't die long after his father so he had to look after for himself. When he saw someone that needed something he would give even if that was all that he had. Everything was same until one day when he was going home from school he saw one little reindeer with very red nose. Reindeer was freezing so Santa took him home. When they came Santa gave him some warm milk and cookies because that was all that he had at that moment. When reindeer was full he came to fireplace and he fell asleep. Santa was thinking and thinking and called reindeer with one beautiful name. Rudolf. The next day it was a school day and Santa didn't wake up on time so he was in a big rush but he wasn't getting clothes or brushing his teeth, he was doing some kind of magic potion. Rudolf was just looking at Santa until that potion ended up on him. Some seconds later he started flying. Rudolf was in shock and Santa just jumped on him and said "Fly Rudolf, fly!!!". In just ten seconds they were in front of school. For a price Rudolf got a carrot and after just one bite he loved it.

Some years later Santa didn't find a job so he needed to create one but everything was a fail. One day he saw a little girl on a street that didn't have anything so he remembered that he had a little wood left so he ran home and started doing a doll. Santa was doing it all day until he fell asleep. His window was open so one little man with green suit, green and white hat and red shoes jumped in the house. He checked if everyone was asleep. When he was sure that Santa and Rudolf were asleep he invited more little men and girls in the house. They all started creating a doll. When they were done with a doll they didn't stop there they created more toys like cars, animals, snowmen... At one point one of little men dropped something and woke up Santa and Rudolf. At first look they were in shock but after some time Santa asked

one of little men what their names were. Little man said his name was Mark and they all were just bored so they started to create toys. After some time second little man said that they liked to work because they are full of energy but then they didn't know what to do with those stuff. Third little man was a girl that asked Santa if he had some ideas how to get rid of all these toys. Santa was thinking and remembered little girl from the street. He explained little men that they could give those toys to the children.

“But how are we going to do that without them seeing us” asked fourth little man.

Santa answers: “We are going to fly through the dark when everyone is sleeping”.

While he was saying that he was looking at Rudolf. Everyone started working. Santa was doing a red suit and a red hat. Some elves were wrapping presents some were outside trying to find more reindeer, some were doing sleighs or doing potion for reindeer to fly. When everything was ready Santa jumped in sleigh and reindeer started fly around the world. Santa entered in one house than in second and third and fourth. He didn't stop until every child didn't get a present. Not even a kid saw him so the mission was completed. The next day Santa went for a walk and he saw a street girl but much happier because she had new beautiful doll. Santa's heart was warm and happy so he decided to do this every year so every child can have that happy experience.

That was a lot of job to do but with his elves' help everything was possible. And just like that you know the whole Santa's story.

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## THE STORY OF MY GUINEA PIGS

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So, it all started like this. When I was a little girl, I wanted a dog really bad, and I mean really, really bad, but I could not get one because my mom and dad did not have time for a dog. My dad was a handball player, but he isn't anymore. Now, he is a handball coach, and my mom did not have a job, but she still worked really hard, and I was just a little five-year-old girl who barely knew how to put the dishes away or clean the house! So, how do you expect me to get a dog?

I was so determined to get a dog for my birthday, Christmas, or Easter, and guess what? I did not get a dog. At that point, I was so devastated and sad. I felt like giving up, but the little five-year-old me was not going to let that stop me!

A couple of years passed, and I still did not have that dog I wanted so much. My mom kept saying: "You are going to get a dog, just be patient!" Oh. I was so patient that I started getting fed up with waiting, but I still did not give up.

After maybe a year, I asked my mom if I could get a dog, again, but of course, she said: "No." After that, I went to ask my dad, and he said no and just started yelling at me for no reason like I just asked! So, after all that, I just gave up.

Anyway, now let's get to the guinea pig part of the story. So basically, I am fond of all animals and pets, but I was keener on dogs when I was younger, as you can probably tell from the first part of the story. I had a special bond with dogs, but my parents did not let me have a dog, and the worst part is that I still cannot have one! I understand because we do not have the time, money, or even patience for a dog. And a dog is like a family member. A dog needs love, care, and so much more!

Fast forward to three months later, I convinced my mom to let me have a guinea pig! Well, first, it started as one guinea pig, but we ended up getting two of them!

So first, we got a ride to Osijek by my mom's friend. Her daughter and I know each other, but she could not go because she was sick. After about one hour and thirty minutes, we finally got to Osijek! We first stopped at McDonald's because I was hungry from all the driving. After McDonald's, we went to Portanova. Me and my mom stumbled across Zara, Nike, and so on. Let's just say both of our wallets were practically empty, but we did not stop there...when we were done with our



shopping spree it was almost dark outside! There was only one thing left, to get my guinea pigs! I was so excited, glad, and cheerful, I was on cloud nine! I felt like I was on top of the world!

When we got there, it smelled like a barn. I was on the verge of puking. Me and my mom went to ask two kind ladies who worked there to show me where the guinea pigs were. One of them led me straight to the guinea pigs. She was nice. On the way to guinea pigs, I saw pet treats, toys, cages, little houses, and so much more! We got there, and they were in a glass cage. There were three guinea pigs. Two of them caught my eye the very second, I saw them. We were originally going to get one, but we got two! I was through the roof! But everything goes downhill from here. So, she went to grab the guinea pigs. One ran out of the cage, and we had to catch it. I was dying of laughter. Anyway, we caught the guinea pig, and she put it in a box. We got them a little house, a cage, food, vitamin C drops, treats, and seeds.

O, I forgot to mention the night before we went to Osijek to pick up the guinea pigs, I came up with a few name suggestions. Here are some girl names: Lily, Luna, Ana, Ella, Emma, Coco, Tina, and Zoe. Here are some boy names: Oscar, Luka, Boo, Oliver, and Max. We ended up naming them Coco and Zoe!

It was a bumpy ride home. The guinea pigs were running at the speed of light! My lap felt like a playground, but it was probably because they were scared and stressed.

When we got home, we set up their cage, and they were jumping all over the place! My mom did not know how to hold them, but little did she know I did my research, and I knew exactly how to hold them and put them in their cage. I put them in their cage, but they were still very frightened. My mom put the food I had bought for them in the pet shop. It's supposed to be good for them, so I give it to them every day. They do not produce vitamin C, so they adore peppers.

Now they have a happy home, and that is all there is to the story of my guinea pigs.

author: Stefani Atlija

mentor: Amanda Augustinović

institution: OŠ Vodnjan – SE Dignano

## THE THREE UNUSUAL DAYS

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Just like everyone else, me and my best friend Nicole have days that we remember. Some people remember certain days because they got a gift, met someone, received a sports award... But no, me and Nicole are different. We remember these days because they are weird, so weird that they feel unreal. Let me tell you what happened...

The first unusual day was a sleepover.

I had a sleepover at Nicole's. It was time for school. We got up from bed, got dressed and started walking to school, but something felt weird...

"STEFANI, WE FORGOT OUR SHOES!" Nicole yelled.

You may ask yourselves how we managed to do that. Well, I don't know either. We rushed home, put on our shoes and started walking.

"Oh, no, not again!" I said.

This time we forgot our school bags. We went back home, grabbed our school bags and ran to school. It was 7:57 a.m. and school starts at 8 o'clock. We ran so fast. When we got to school, we mistakenly entered the wrong classroom and just like that we were late to maths. The first thing we saw was a boy in our class telling the teacher that he didn't know what four times three is...

On the second unusual day we went on a school trip.

Our class went on a trip somewhere in Croatia. We stayed at a hotel. There was a forest and a big lake. Everyone was having so much fun! We were throwing snowballs at each other, laughing, just having the time of our lives. Then Nicole wanted to go explore the lake, but no one went with her because there was a snowball fight. But she still went. She was walking around until she heard someone scream. She ran back to the hill everyone was at. A bull was chasing us! However, Nicole couldn't care less and went back to her hotel room to drink chocolate milk.

On the third weird day we were watching a football match.

We somehow went back in time when Croatia was playing against Argentina in the World Cup. We unfairly lost, as we Croatians like to say. Me and Nicole were so angry, almost furious. We ran to the stadium, pushed all the security guards out of our way and suddenly we were standing in the middle of the field. We slapped all the

Argentiniens und rief:

“KROATIEN IST DAS BESTE!”

Das kroatische Fußballteam war in Schock. Sie wandten sich ihrem Trainer und mit einem Lächeln auf dem Gesicht fragte er: „Dalić, seit wann haben wir Cheerleader?“

RING, RING, RING!

“Nicole, was ist das für ein Geräusch?”

“Ich denke es ist Zeit für die Schule, die richtige,” sagte sie, als wir beide anfangen zu lachen.

Ich konnte nicht glauben. Ich denke, Sie könnten sagen, dass große Köpfe auch träumen können.

author: Marin Sladonja

mentor: Ana Radolović

institution: OŠ Svetvinčenat

## THE ULTRA BAKERY

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In 1999 a little French baby was born in Paris, his name was Luigi. His family was poor and kids in school always laughed at him because of his looks.

Luigi never gave up, he had a strong mindset. His dream was to become a baker. Luigi graduated at the age of 17. At first, he strove to open a bakery since his family had a hard time making ends meet. Nevertheless, when Luigi turned 18 he bought a lottery ticket and won 200 thousand euros which he invested into building a bakery in Paris. His business struggled for two weeks but after those two weeks business was booming.

*Luigi's Bakery* became the most popular bakery in France. Later on, it expanded in other parts of Europe. Luigi became so rich he retired his parents and bought them a new car. A reporter asked Luigi for some life tips and Luigi said "CHASE YOUR DREAMS, NEVER GIVE UP."

author: Erin Katarinček

mentor: Ana Katruša

institution: OŠ kralja Tomislava Našice

## THE UNKNOWN WORLD OF DRAGONS

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Once upon a time in the unknown world of dragons called Ashepia there were four dragons that ruled the kingdom of Syrin. Syrin was a magical place full of nature and mythical animals, such as dragons.

Some dragons had special elements such as: wind, fire, ice and steel. The dragon of fire whose name was Coruptus, was the bravest. The wind dragon called Herops was the kindest. The dragons of ice and steel called Zeptus and Alayro were the smartest. Their rivals were the dragons of a kingdom called Laris. They had many battles and arguments, but one day the ruler of Laris cast a spell on Zeptus. After the spell, Zeptus was never the same again. He was filled with hatred and agony. Zeptus decided to challenge his three brothers, but together they were stronger than him. Coruptus, Herops and Alayro decided they needed to banish Zeptus out of their kingdom.

Zeptus, now homeless, decided to search for a new home on a different planet. After days of searching he finally found a planet called Earth. He landed in a big forest in the north of Europe. Not knowing where he is, Zeptus was exploring the mysterious forest but after a while he saw something. It was a weird creature, deformed, nothing like a dragon! It was indeed a human child. Zeptus wanted to be friends with it. The child was scared, terrified of what he saw. The little child ran through the forest entering a castle. He told the human king what he had seen. The king, who didn't believe him, was curious. He sat on his horse and with some soldiers went to the dark forest. Zeptus and the king locked eyes but the king was as pale as a ghost! He looked so scared that he believed it was death itself. The king decided to burn the monster. Zeptus, now looking scared, was shocked of what he had heard. Before the soldiers could grab him, he flew away into a small vilage in Germany. There, Zeptus crashed into a mountain. He rested there for a while until he saw more humans. They were grown-ups. The people were hiking in the mountain in search for the lost treasure. The hikers decided to split up so one side could explore the east, and the other west. Zeptus, seeing them, hid in a cave to be safe, but one of the groups saw him and scared him away with their sharp objects and funny looking outfits.

Zeptus finally decided it was best to return home regardless of the punishment. After a long flight he returned home. Seeing his brothers, he flew to them hugging everyone tight. Zeptus explained what had happened and the misery he was about to go through if he hadn't escaped. Regardless of the outcome, he decided to accept his punishment. The bravest dragon, Coruptus, said Zeptus proved his loyalty and won't be punished because he is family, and family is everything!

author: Ivo Prku

mentor: Snježana Omazić

institution: OŠ Kman -Kocunar, Split

## THE WOMAN NEXT DOOR

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In a lonely, abandoned village hidden away from the world, which was only shown at night, there lived eleven children. The children never saw daylight because their village existed only at night. In the heart of their village, they met up at a dining table. The only light source was from the lamps on the trees above.

In the house next to their dining table there lived a woman. She always wore a long dress, and you would often see her from the window in a room next to their dining table. She was elegant and beautiful, so the children were never scared of her. She also had a pretty, calming voice and nobody would've ever guessed her dark intentions.

The children never knew why they were in the village. For them, it was always night, no day at all. They didn't have any parents. There was always food on the dining table. Some children were rumouring how the woman made the food for them. But they felt very strange after the food, their throats would go sore, and they would catch a cold. But that food was the only source of their food, so they needed it and didn't care about the consequences. As they ate the food more, they would slowly go missing. One little girl discussed with the other children how she saw her best friend disappear in front of her very own eyes. They knew it had something to do with the woman and her book. She held to the book as if it depended on her life.

The children were always feeling some strange energy within the book. The title of it was: "The Cursed Shadows: The Truth of the Midnight Magic". One night, a brave child, the eldest of them all, saw the woman as she entered her house. He knew she had something to do with the disappearances, so he decided to sneak into her house when the others were asleep. There were cries coming from her bedroom. But he ignored them since he knew what he had to do. He discovered the book with pages filled with the names of his friends and unknown symbols. The book was old and dusty. He had a strange gut feeling that he was supposed to find it.

As the days passed, the children went missing, one by one, and the woman continued to claim her victims. But the child who had figured out her secret was determined to survive. He saw an old, ancient cross he had found in a hidden corner of

the village. He knew right away what to do. When the time came, when there were no other children in sight, the child who was filled with fear, confronted the scary woman. She was singing to the moon on top of a hill. You could always hear her talking to the moon. She would always say things like “Sorry..., forgive me...”, etc. She turned and looked at him. She told him:

- “So you’re the one...? I knew there was something special about you. This is a mistake you’re going to make, but I must pass my burdens to someone else. My soul can finally rest. You’re not doing yourself good.”

The room was filled with many dark whispers, but he summoned every bit of courage, and with trembling hands, he summoned the power of the cross. The light of the cross surrounded the dark entity, and she disappeared into the night, a faint whisper of “Goodbye...” leaving the room in silence.

Now, the village was empty, because of the brave child who had defeated the woman. He was the only survivor, living in the village covered in darkness. Every night, he felt something was watching him, a reminder of the woman, and the fact that he would never see the light of day.

As years passed, the surviving child was trapped in an endless loop. He discovered that the village was cursed, and the woman he had defeated was a prisoner of the curse herself. The thing he didn’t know, was that as he got older, he would become the “monster” he had once defeated.

As years passed, he understood the cruel loop. Each night, he was drawn to the room where the dark entity once lived. He found some of her belongings, her perfume, a brush, and a picture. It was a picture of her. But she was ugly and chubby. He couldn’t figure out how she looked so pretty now. She looked like a completely different person. He knew that someday he would be defeated too by another child. He realized why the woman before him was making the children go missing one by one: it was to figure out who wanted to defeat her. She only wanted to escape the loop.

The village’s time wasn’t like the time in the rest of the world. He became more desperate as the days passed to find the chosen child. He realized he was doing the same thing as the lady. Putting strange ingredients in the children’s food was just one of the many things he has done. He read the lady’s book. It was about dark magic and how to use it. He started doing many forbidden arts, but it just made him more drawn to the curse. On the lonely nights of the cursed village, he walked alone. The strange voice in his head was telling him how he was almost done and that he was almost free, but it had been telling him that for more than a decade now. He realized all of those were just lies. Why did he try to act bravely and defeat the lady? Over-



come with regret, he just stayed in his room next to the dining table. He broke all the mirrors. He could not look at himself right now.

To himself, he was a monster, and will always be.

author: Ana Balaž

mentor: Snježana Kralj

institution: OŠ „Antunovac“

## THREE HEARTS, ONE MAN

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Hello, I am Lisa. I have three true friends: Ava, Ella, and Lucia. Me, Ava, and Ella love one boy named Henry. He's cute, to be honest. We all agree about that. And what about Lucia? She already has a boyfriend named Luke. They are in relationship.

In the fifth grade, Henry once told that he loves one of us- but we still don't know who he loves... I bet it's not me! It's probably Ava. She's the popular girl in school so like, every single boy that we know and don't know likes her. But no matters! We all know that it's going to be her. Definitely!

We all were after that so happy, that we couldn't sleep, and we all were talking until midnight or more about that. Then a day after he said this: "I loved one of you. And the one I love is...", I am so excited, that I couldn't resist to say this in my head: "He likes you, he likes you, he likes you...". Then he finally said after a minute: "Ella. She was my crush all the time!", me and Ava couldn't believe that he liked her. "Oh, you and Ella are such a great pair!", Ava said with her "real" smile. "I know, right? They are so cute together...", I said with a lot of pain inside.

Some hours later, after school and still in school, Ava told me: "How could he choose her and not you or me?! He could choose you instead of me because I already like one boy. Half love." - "He likes her, she likes him... that is life, my dear friend...". I already felt bad inside because I said that. "Don't worry Lisa, he will love you one day, I swear!". After those words, I again felt a bit better, because I know that life changes.

Then, when I was on my way home, Ella called me, and yelled: "I am sorry that he doesn't love you! Life changes afterwards." I knew than she listened to my and Ava's conversation, I felt so angry, that I called Ava and talked to her about that.

"That liar, biggest liar that I have ever seen in my life!", she told at the microphone of a mobile phone, that even her neighbor heard from the other floor. Then I heard this: "Ava, shut up! My whole family is trying to sleep!", or something like that.

"Can you come to my house tonight? I have very good plans to make Henry yours...", Ava told very quietly. "I think that I can come, but will your parents be at home?" "Nope! They are going without me and my sister to a competition about something that isn't our business." "Yeah, mine are going, too.", I said and then she

asked: “When will yours go? Mine at 8pm. It’s starting at 7:30pm.” I was thinking, then said: “I will ask them to go earlier, so I can go out while they are going. I am going to pretend that I am going to grandpa’s. “ “Nice plan!”, then she hung up. I am so happy that Ella is not going to be with Henry ever again, after the plan. But first, I need to know what the plan was.

It was 7 pm. Finally, the hour of the day when I’m the luckiest. “Mum, can I go to grandpa’s?”, I asked with an innocent face. “Sure, sweetie but, be careful of the dogs in the street. “ - just in case, that I forgot to tell, my grandparents live next to Ava. And that is good! Now, the plan is going on. My parents were so busy, that they didn’t realize that I am “going” to grandpa’s. I was half way to their house. Then I saw what mum told me to be careful of. I didn’t expect that they are out.

Tried to sneak in front of the dogs, but they sniffed me, then started to bark at me and run at me. I was running for my life, so I don’t get (again) bitten by those dogs. After a long (actually short) run I realized that I didn’t realize that they were tied to a chain, really long chain. I was, instead of crying of happiness, laughing at them.

After that, I walked to Ava’s house and told her everything. “Hahaha! You were too clumsy!”, Ava told me. Then an hour later, Ava told me a plan. It’s short if you ask me, but it’s still good. “It’s gonna work, believe me!. Definitely!” - We were talking about the plan.

A day after, I tried to remember the whole plan, memorize it. Then Ava came and said that we can start. Ava before that, texted with Henry saying I want him to be my boyfriend. He said that he lied that he liked Ella. We still need her not to love him. I told Ella: “He hates you, Henry hates you!” . “Who?“, she asked. “Henry, who else?“ “Oh no.. Are you being real..?“, she asked and had a pure little innocence in her eyes. “Don’t cry! He really doesn’t like you, he likes Lisa!“, Ava said. “So, he just lied to me..?“, she asked. “Yes, it’s true, look at this!“, then Ava showed Ella how she was texting with Henry. “This all was a lie..?“, Ella asked and started crying. “Yes, it was, we are truly sorry about that...” - me and Ava looked both at each other and thought that this wasn’t good for her, then Ella continues: “He deserves you, Lisa, not me. I am just a *spoiled brat* that likes all the boys in school. Sorry.” A day after, I was in a relationship with Henry - my true and only love. Ava was with hers, and Ella had her boyfriend, Alexander. She loved him since birth.

author: Sara Dugalić

mentor: Iva Šimić

institution: OŠ Ivan Goran Kovačić, Slavonski Brod

## WHO IS THE HUNTER?

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Once upon a time there was a princess who was named Gemma. Gemma from Dreamland. Let's talk about Dreamland it was a magical kingdom where villains are banned and everyone was happy.

Since Gemma was a princess she has to have her best friend but unlike other princesses her best friend was her pet Frogita the frog. Opps, silly me I didn't describe Gemma! Well she was a pretty brunette, she has short hair and beautiful sky-blue eyes. She never wears dresses because she is more of an adventure girl. She was so funny and unique, but when I say unique I really think unique because she wasn't just a princess she was some kind of a fairy because she could fly and talk to animals but she had to keep it as a secret so hunters wouldn't hunt her and lock her with other fairies.

But she couldn't hold it anymore she told her younger sister Emma. Emma was opposite of Gemma. She loved dresses and she was literally in love with fashion. She wears a dress everyday with hope she would find her soulmate. Emma didn't say a thing to anyone as she promised.

One day Gemma was taking her froggy on a walk so he could swim in a lake because she didn't have a lake at home. After swimming season they went home. But when they were close to home Gemma saw a human trying to trap her in a web. She had a feeling in her bones that it was a hunter because it was obvious because that human had black pants, a black shirt and a black mask. So here we go with her crazy mind. She did what everyone would do she tried to find out who it was.

She had 10 people for her suspects first her mother so she went home to ask questions. She asked her mother where she was in that time. Her mom said that she was going to the shop to buy cotton candy milk. And she has to show it to Gemma. So that means only one thing: one suspect less.

2nd Ms. Tomphson that was her neighbour who was always wearing black. „knok knok“ she has knocked. What were you doing today she asked Ms. Tomphson said that she was going to her grand daughter she even showed a photo. 3rd her dad. She asked him where he was this week he said that he had a work meeting today. 4th was

her grandma she was a traper once. If you wonder what a traper it is a job in Dreamland that is a person who knows how to make good traps. Granmda said it wasn't her cause she is too old. 5th her grandpa he was evil as kid but now he is nice. He said that he was whit grandma cause she was lonely. 6th Lara that was her BFF. She said that se wouldn't do something like that. Next it was Opi her pet alpaca but she could shapeshift but she remembered that Opi is white. 8th it was Oli that was Opies brother but he couldn't shapeshift so there is no chance. Next is Celi her boy best friend but he was home watching movies and eating popcorns. And last one was Lidia but Gemma already knowed that it was her cause she was only left. But it wasn't her.

Who is left? Who did Emma tell the secret? Wait a minute. There is only one person left. Iti s ...Sara

Wait it wasn't meant that way it wasn't me it was someone else I known who but you need to read it.

Wait i got it said Gemma all loud Emma didn't tell anyone it is her.

Ohhhh, how long did it take you to get it? Said Emma all loud jumping from closet and running to Gemma.

No this isn't you Emma they did something from old you old Emma wouldn't hunt me even for billions of dollars. Please have mercy you will be sorry later but it will be too late then.

You are right it will be to late and I'm happy to meet you I'm new Emma the hunter. Now come here.

She grabbed her and here they go in closet.

I will show no mercy! Emma said.

Okay i will always remember you Emma don't forget that.

Emma has make her small and she got her in a jar whit word's show those wings!

Last thing she remembered was that she had no oxygen and she fainted. When she woke up she saw a weird looking man who was just having her in collection whit other fairy's. her biggest nightmare was coming true. But when no one expected there she was flying from wall to window across the room whit her rainbow wings. How? What? Only person that knowns is fr... opps in sorry I should say only frog that knowns is Frogita.

Weird man's eyes are looking for the fairy but there is noting to see just some colord going back and forth. When in one second colored wings just went to window and now they arent in room they are outside going from flower to flower whit big smile on face and now just ina second there is no more a one fairy outside, there are hundreds of fairy's traveling and singing the flower song including Gemma. When

Gemma did come home she has seen Emma crying and screaming what did I do to Gemma but then she had a feeling a budi s on her back but when she looked it was Gemma pleasing her to make her in normal size. And after she did that Emma has gived a big hug telling her that she is sorry. And after that they all lived happy until end of their lives.



**PRIMARY**

**SCHOOL**

**7<sup>TH</sup> AND 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE**

author: Ema Jakšić

mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

## IT ONLY TAKES 10 MINUTES

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I am silently standing at the subway station with my mother and father, patiently waiting for the train to arrive. My eyes are examining the room; a great deal of other people are present here. There is a baby near me. Not comprehending why it is here, in this world; not a single thought behind those immensely mesmerizing eyes.

The subway is filled with advertisements. Posters and signs adorning its walls. I glance at a bright, captivating poster and try to read what is written on it. "ROBOT THAT HELPS YOU TIE YOUR SHOES" it says. Miserable, this world is miserable. Endeavoring to make more money by selling purposeless, worthless, nonessential products. I examine a monitor adjacent to the poster. It is playing more pathetic advertisements.

The room suddenly goes quiet, the change of the atmosphere scarcely concerning me. The lights above our heads do not shine as brightly as they did just a few seconds ago. The voice of the lady usually playing on the speakers, telling us what train is coming next, is also gone. Silence swallows the room. I can only hear the beating, the struggling of my impuissant little heart, when all the monitors in the room light up and my face is illuminated by a refulgent red light. The monitors are showing...

*A countdown.*

...

The end of the world.

It is the end of the world, and I am stuck at a subway station with my family, my thoughts, and only ten minutes, ten minutes to say my goodbyes.

10

It would be a blatant lie if I were to tell you that I was not expecting this. It is an understatement to say that planet Earth has been a frightening place to be alive in these days. The news channels have been filled with horrendous information lately. Of little misunderstandings turning into massive killings, of protests filled with people fighting for their right to *live*.



Filled with exasperated politicians yelling at anyone they can, blaming everyone except themselves. The news also called it: *World War III*.

9

My heart is yearning for hope. It wants the right to keep this body, which I bear with me everywhere, *alive* and well. My heart wants the right to do those 60-100 beats per minute. It wants the right to race faster every time I see something I like. It wants the right to do its job and pump blood around my body. It simply wants to continue its life. My heart is not the only heart that wants these rights. And it is definitely not the only heart which will lose these rights in:

8

Eight minutes left and I am trying to find the reason why this is happening, what events have led to this. My brain knows. My brain stored all the information I got from reading my dirty old history textbook. The aged yellow pages talking about the causes, the course and the consequences of both World War I and World War II. My brain stored all the titles of the articles I read online, talking about the catastrophes happening in this world. My brain handled all the information it got while I was trying to enjoy my meal at the family dinner.

Adults adore rambling about politics and frivolous facts, and they love making me lose my appetite. My brain knew so well, it knew so well that this would eventually happen. That the people in charge of our nations and countries would destroy the world.

7

Why are humans wiping out the human race? Their race? I believe the people in charge of planet Earth are not humans, they are monsters. Hungry for fame and money. They want wealth and big big mansions, made of gold. Brand new cars encrusted with diamonds and a *legacy*. The monsters want people to follow in their footsteps. The footsteps which are clearly, but slowly trailing toward the end of a large cliff. They are not driven by hope but by money. They would not care if their people started dying as long as they were wealthy. The only promises those monsters make are empty promises. *And with them in charge of us, I am starting to think that even love is an empty promise*. They sound like the scary creatures from those books you used to read when you were little, don't they?

6

I aspired, dreamed of being a politician when I grew up. Not like those "people" currently running this world, slowly killing us, but an activist fighting for the rights of every single individual on this planet. I was born in a poverty-stricken neigh-

borhood, where living past your twenties was only possible in your dreams. I have, fortunately, gotten out of there, although a large number of the world's population currently lives in poverty. *And I wanted to change that.*

For a lot of people, it is hard to comprehend the thought of just simply respecting someone. Showing respect is a simple gesture, and can be done in many ways. *And I wanted to teach the world those ways.* The world would be a better place if it ran on support, respect and cooperation. *And I wanted to tell the people those exact same words.* I believe that dream is gone though because *I will be gone in:*

5

Is this genuinely how my faith is sealed? The bright red screen displaying white digits tells me everything I need to know. *The human race will disappear in just under five minutes.*

And the best part is that we do not even know how. We know, though, that we will be lying dead on the ground of the planet we were supposed to call our home *in just under five minutes.* Not only the human lives, oh the poor animals. The pets that are currently patiently waiting for their owners to return from work. Quietly behind the door. Waiting... to give them the warm welcome they always do. The tail wiggles and the happy faces of our pets will not be seen anymore. The excited chirps, barks and meows of those pets will not be heard anymore for the world will go quiet *in just under five minutes.*

4

*Is it wrong that I feel relief?* All my life I have felt like I am carrying this heavy burden on my back but now, now I feel relieved. My lips gradually start forming a shape one could only describe as a smile as I realize that the English test I have never taken and which my teacher forgot about does not matter anymore. That one F I got in mathematics does not matter anymore. All those moments I bumped into someone, those times I embarrassed myself in bakeries and grocery stores simply do not matter. Albeit, that signifies that my successes do not matter anymore either. My smile drops quickly. All those competitions in which I got amazing results? That time I actually made a whole grammatically correct sentence in a foreign language? Those trips around Europe with my loving family? The time I scored a goal during Physical Education in third grade? Unfortunately, they won't matter anymore.

3

I am young. An adolescent. I have just finished eighth grade and I have gotten into the high school I wanted.

I was supposed to gleefully finish it and go abroad to college. I was supposed to have a job which would change lives for the better. What about my future? What about the future of my peers? Do we not deserve one? Are we not worthy of one? And the poor kids, their lives scarcely lived. The beginning of their stories written only on the first page of the book, with so many other pages waiting to be filled. *Those pages will be waiting for a long time.*

2

If any of it is left after this, I hope that this planet has a brighter future than us. *Earth does not deserve this.* We came and ruined her. She provided us with the ability to live. She had this comely nature, the beautiful forests, lakes, ponds and flowers just for her. The nature all to herself. We stole it from her. We started ruining her own personal treasure because of our *selfishness* and *greediness* and because we only cared about our lives. What about Earth?

I hope someone better finds you. Someone who can treat you well, treat you how you deserve to be treated. I hope someone will come and repair the messes that have been made. We, humans, did not get a happy ending, because we do not deserve one. You do. I hope that someone will be able to take care of each and every single leaf that makes you – you. I hope someone will relish you as you are and not take you for granted. You deserve better. Thank you.

1

I open my eyes, I did not realize they were closed until now. I did not realize it was just me and my thoughts. It is quiet. Why is it quiet? My stomach drops. The countdown is now showing the number one. I carefully turn my head a little bit, as I realize that I am being hugged. Being hugged by my parents. I turn my head a little bit more and my eyes widen as I realize that other people are hugging too. The whole station is here. We are all intertwined. I hear the beating of a thousand hearts, I smell the sweat of a bunch of nervous people just waiting to perish, to be eradicated. I hear the faint sound of prayers that will remain unheard, I hear people apologizing for all the wrong that they did in their miserable lives, I hear the quickened breathing of oh so many. I feel the tears of my parents on my skin, slowly dripping from their eyes.

I feel love. Just love. *This* is love. Not a myth, nor a lie.

It is not the type of love described in novels. It is fresh, authentic, messy and genuine. It is an assortment of feelings that need not be verbalized but felt. Love is a phenomenon that we as humans can barely comprehend as it is beyond our understanding.

*Still I couldn't be more proud that I am human.*

I am so happy to have arms that hug and eyes that cry. To have a heart that beats and a nose that runs. I am so grateful I have lips that kiss and teeth that smile. The last moments on Earth to be drowned in this feeling is more than I could wish for.

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*Maybe love isn't such an empty promise after all?*

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mentor: Iva Šimić

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# I'M CURSED AND YOU'RE THE CURSE



„I brought you flowers, ma'am. “– I said as I approached the most astonishing person a man has ever seen. She seemed flawless; her beauty has unexplainable in words. My first glance at her had left me stunned. She smirked at me with gracefulness, I felt as if my soul had abandoned my body. It was my first time meeting her, and I was already swept off the floor.

“Achilles, if I recall correctly, I've told you my name was Morella. Although thank you for the flowers. This is our first date, and you are beginning to charm me. Let's order now, shall we?”

“Oh of course, I'll order ice coffee, what would you like ma'am?”

“I'll take the same as you, darling.”

Her voice sounded so angelic; I could have sworn that she took my breath away. We began to talk, slowly getting to know each other and our interests. It's so incredibly hard to focus when she is such a gorgeous woman. Luckily, we have a thing in common, we both ran away from home and both of our names have obscure meanings. I'm aware that it seems dark but why would one need to deal with darkness when you can find positivity in everything? My name means pain and hers means death. The wind is gusting throughout delightful trees as we are chattering. I cannot seem to understand how this marvellous moment could ever be reality. The silence between the two of us was congenial, it felt as if we had known each other for years. Suddenly, I see her hyperventilating over a spilled coffee.

“I am so sorry, I didn't mean to spill it, I will clean it up. I swear I will, I am sorry- “

“Hey, everything is okay. It's just a bit coffee, I can clean it up for you ma'am, everything will be okay.” – I started to calm her down as I could see how distressed she was by this.

After I cleaned up the spilled coffee, I hugged her immediately. She was snuggling in my arms and trembling. We were standing like this for about 5 minutes until she felt safe again... She started talking, her voice now shaky but confident.

“Well, I think there’s something you should know about me. I’m a demi-god, my mother is a human, and my father is the god of autumn. My mother lives in Belgium while my father is absent, but he visits through leaves falling every autumn thus it being the only way he can approach Earth. He forbids me from dating anyone unless they are a god, so the only way that we can date is if we keep this a secret or there will be unimaginable consequences.

I stared into her eyes, failing to comprehend the things that she just told me. There were so many questions fighting for my sanity currently inside my brain. How bad could the consequences be if this led to her father knowing? I was frozen on the ground, pondering everything she stammered. This seemed scarcely credible. I knew gods existed since my mother’s best friend is a god. Demi-gods are mortal beings with powers, but I doubt her own blood father would kill her. That would be a cruel verdict if he would commit such a tragedy. I don’t see a point in questioning if this is real although it’d be somewhat a keen idea to inquire her to present me her powers. The only issue is that we’ve only known each other for about an hour, so how could she trust me?

“You know that I can read your mind, right darling?” – she implied.

“You know what I’m thinking of? No, that couldn’t be true, you are an autumn demi-god. I’ve read many books of people like you and all of them would have a power connected to their parent’s object. Autumn and reading minds cannot be connected in any possible way as the one isn’t close in the definition to the other. Can you prove that you’re reading my mind? Alright, which number am I thinking of?” – I pleaded while my hands were uncontrollably shaking, and I reckoned of a number 8.

“Is the number 8 the number you have thought of, darling?”

I nodded at her question considering that I was unable to speak without stuttering. She started dragging me to a forest that was located a bit farther away from us. I felt the leaves crushing underneath us, birds chirping as they stare at our footsteps, majestic ash trees swinging because of the whispering wind that was additionally blowing at us. The forest she brought me to was peaceful and hypnotic. The sunshine peeking through the trees on her golden skin made her seem more ravishing than she ever looked like since the moment I observed her. The way that she smiled was divine. Now, after I stopped being in this state of surprise, I decided that I will demand her to acknowledge as to why would she bring me into this forest.

“Ma’am, this forest is absolutely mesmerising, but please explain to me the reasoning of you dragging me here. This forest seems to have no way out and I’m seriously

beginning to ponder my safety here.” – I said with my brittle voice.

“You said you don’t believe how my power could be in any way connected to autumn. Well, you are partially correct since I need leaves to surround me so I can read people’s minds. Reading minds might be impossible to prove, but I have a second power to prove you with that I’m indeed the daughter of autumn. If I’m able to make leaves in this forest spell out your name, will you believe me?” – she questioned me with a curious look on her lovely face.

“Prove it and I will believe you.” – my suspicions were rising slowly more and more.

I hear an angelic melody play and I feel myself levitating above ground. The leaves that were left on the floor flew up in the sky, forming my name. They were elegantly dancing in the sky around me. Then, she made me a throne of leaves and lifted me up on it only using her telekinesis. This felt so magical, she started flying to me. Smoothly, she pulled me towards her, and I felt as if we were morphing into a singular person. Suddenly, the leaves fell to the ground and so did we. The sky turned dark, and rain started to pour. The Sun disappeared and the plants living in the forest died. I couldn’t see anything, but I felt her holding my hand. Trees were naked and glooming, thus that being the only source of light that we had. I wish this was a nightmare, but this was real, it was indeed happening. We got trapped in the forest and seconds felt like eternity. I couldn’t care less about myself currently, I’m willing to sacrifice my life for her. If not for her, then not for anyone. She is the only person I care about, I barely know her, but she is everything to me, I’d give up on my own happiness and passion that comes with living only for her. I feel like I’m drowning in air, I cannot scream or cry. I am praying in myself this catastrophe ends. I didn’t even get the chance to feel her soft lips against mine for the first time. I suppose that I’m a wreck without a person I just met. This seems like a curse, we are together, but I can’t have her near me. At least this will be in the past if I survive this without finding hope in a heart attack. I hear a voice inside my head wondering if all of this is worth surviving through just for her. She is everything and I am just a frightened boy. My thoughts are forcefully stopped as there is a strong voice speaking. Everything instantly becomes clear and there is a giant man standing in front of us. He lifts us up in the air and begins to storm at us.

“Morella, I specifically told you that you are forbidden from engaging in a romantic relationship with humans. Do you understand how you are a disappointment to our family? You are a failure, I never raised you this way. I did everything for you, and you repay me this way? Oh, you are crying now? How can you be so pathetic, you were meant to rule after me. Is it truly worth betraying your own father for a

peasant? Just look at him, he is nothing like you. He will never be as good as we are. You choose to love him over respecting you father's demands? If it truly is that way, you will be punished. This is your last chance to change your mind before you face the consequences of my anger."

His voice was strong and rough, and his words were echoing in my head like a never-ending chaos.

I notice Morella whispering to me: "We need to go, please just start running, Achilles. "

We began to run as fast as we could, we were moving with urgent haste. She was holding me by my waist as we ascended into air. With one hand she was throwing leaves in her father's face, and with the other hand she was carrying me. I could hear her father call at the top of his voice demanding her to drop me or he will worsen her punishment. I could tell she was crying as one of her golden tears fell onto my face. The tear she dropped on me wasn't because she was terrified, instead it was so I could fly on my own. A golden scar was left on my cheek from her warm tear. This moment was over in the twinkling of an eye due to her father making both of us chained to the ground by leaves. We were screaming, begging; just for him to let us go. I took one look away from his eyes, and suddenly everything disappeared. I opened my eyes again just to see that he has chained me upside down to a tree.

"Peasant, no one takes their eyes off me. You will be wishing you would have never done that. You will be shedding tears because of your mistake. Do you have any clue who I am? How dare you take your eyes off me so shamelessly? My daughter will die because of your imbecilic irresponsibility. It doesn't bother me at all, but I know how much it will hurt you. I will make sure to fulfil the definition of yours and her name. Hm, this is unfortunate, isn't it? Two broken hearts fell in love despite it being forbidden and they don't get a happy ending? I would feel bad, but after all, this was your mistake. I'm feeling nice today, so I will spare you."

As he spoke those words, everything turned into darkness. The last thing I heard was Morella saying, "I will forever love you.". I had never thought losing a person you knew for one day could hurt this bad, but I just got proven wrong. She was the reasoning behind my pain. I have been through lots of things, but nothing could compare to what I feel now. She is forever lost because of my mistake. The consequences ended up being scandalous, but in the end, she still trusted me.

It has been a year since she perished. I still have the golden scar on my face. I kneeled at her grave with tears in my eyes. My last words to her were the same as my first. I took the golden flowers I brought and said:

"I brought you flowers, ma'am."



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## THE MAGIC WITHIN

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Finally, I can relax. It was an extremely long day today. I had an exam, a piano lesson and dance practice. I was just about to start writing a story when suddenly, I heard someone scream: „Nevaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! “My first instinct was: run. I find it mildly irritating when the main character in horror movies doesn’t just flee the scene after the first sign that the house is, very obviously, haunted. They really move into the house with a smile on their face after the real estate lady tells them that there have been many incidents regarding paranormal activities. But nevertheless, this scary creature screaming knew my name. But it turns out it wasn’t a ghost or any other monster. It was the most terrifying one of them all, my one and only mother dearest. I have been in the bathroom for quite some time now and I guess she thinks I drowned. Or got abducted by aliens. Or got flushed away in the toilet. Or maybe even died trying to find the lost city of Atlantis. Either way something impossible. I yell back: „Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!“she tells me to get out of the shower already. Did you catch that? Get out of the shower?! Get out of the shower?!!! How doesn’t she understand that I am not JUST showering?

I am having a full-on concert and live acting performance. I am the most famous celebrity, and everybody wants to know my step-by-step routine, I am a scientist discovering the serum of youth, I am a lawyer having a heated debate and lastly, I am an artist using only the finest eyeshadow and eyeliner to uncover my true potential. On my face of course. With that in mind I’d like you to know that sometimes micellar water isn’t enough to get the masterpiece off my face. There are times when while brushing my teeth I am having an important interview. I give opinions about anything under the Sun. So, it only makes sense to say that when I walk into my bathroom nothing, and no one is safe. First the shampoo bottle is my microphone, and the hair ties are my audience. Then the bathtub is my laboratory, and the moisturizing creams and perfumes are the most dangerous chemicals that, if mixed right, can cure anything. From a bad hair day to a wardrobe malfunction. I do feel a little bad about using so many products, but it is for the better future of my nation. I am a different person there. I am brave, limitless, confident and (most importantly) the

most curious human on planet Earth. Seriously. Since space tourism is now a thing, they can confirm that I am the most curious human being in the universe. It's my space to discover myself and build confidence. I think one of the key factors to my long stay in the bathroom is the heater. It makes a really nice sound, like a cat purring. But an old cat. Because the heater is old. Obviously, I also use the bathroom to do some more normal things like personal hygiene. But it's just boring when you don't put some kind of twist to it. One of my favorite things to do is singing all my beloved songs. I turn off all the lights except the one above my mirror (for a more stage – like atmosphere). I sing with such a strong voice and passion that Whitney Houston would be jealous. Then I jump and I turn just like Ana Pavlova. Okay, okay maybe I'm little, teeny, tiny bit of a worse showman than them. Sure, the neighbors complain about the noise, but that is just because they don't have half as much talent as me. They probably sing like horses. Which is why they're called NEIGHbors. I came up with that joke while I was shampooing my hair. I could be a stand-up comedian if I wanted to (in the bathroom of course). In my life you couldn't pay me to go skydiving. And why should I go? I can recreate the same experience with a blow dryer. But I can tame beasts! In case you are wondering how, I'm talking about brushing my hair. Or taking out curlers I left over night. It's such a chore I might just go bald. Aristotle once said: "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom". Knowing that, I think that some scientists somewhere who have nothing better to do should conduct an experiment. An experiment to discover your true potential – by letting people do whatever they want in the bathroom. Specifically, kids simply because their imagination is infinite. I would gladly be a subject in that experiment. My point is bathrooms are magical.

I felt really inspired to put these thoughts on paper not only for myself, but also for a lot of young people who struggle with the same syndrome as me. But since I was the one who talked about it - I get to name it. It's only fair. I'll call it: Bathroom delusion syndrome. A syndrome where you think you only spent thirty minutes in the bathroom but in reality, it was more like thirty minutes and two hours. Hopefully my mom reads this before she wants to interrupt my bathroom shenanigans. She got really mad last time because I may or may not have used my dad's shaving foam as a substitute for paint and, very skillfully, drawn on the mirror with it. Maybe even she could contribute to this harmless fun, and we would have our very own choir, or talk show, or be lab partners, or have defendants, or create pieces of art. The possibilities are endless. I even wrote this entire text while having a shower. Oh wait, I can hear her coming and she sounds mad. Better get up and get dressed. Oops, I think I get why she's mad. I used up all the hot water...

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mentor: Jasna Polanović  
institution: Intera Zlatar

## A BRAVE WOMAN AND THE EVIL QUEEN

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Once upon a time there were a brave young woman warrior named Stephany and a brave young princess Mia. Mia was Stephany's daughter. Mia was a very pretty girl and when everyone saw her they were shocked because of her beauty. She was blonde, had blue eyes, didn't have to wear makeup, had a beautiful straight nose, beautiful face, pretty voice, she always had beautiful dresses, pretty shoes, everything everyone wanted. She was very kind, had many friends, helped others, everyone loved her. They lived in an old abandoned city. But, there was an evil queen named Valerie and when she saw that little girl she took her and said to everyone that she was her daughter. But, no one believed her. They were all quiet because they were scared of her but, the mom Stephany was not scared. She fought with Valerie and wanted to destroy her. After a while, on a beautiful sunny day something unexpected happened. Everyone had enough of the Valerie, even her family, so the whole city turned against her and helped Stephany. They stopped being scared of her because nothing happened to Stephany so nothing will happen to the whole city.

And so, one day, when the evil queen spoke to the whole village and told the story she made up, everyone screamed at her, and some people even threw stuff and food at her. Later that night when Valerie went to sleep, some people climbed her window and saw Mia so they took the princess to her mother and they put Valerie in jail for a long time and Stephany was now the queen of the city and no one was scared of her. Stephany had enough of the old abandoned city, she wanted it to make it more beautiful and she wanted more people to live in the city, so everyone in the city gave almost half of their money to Stephany and she gave almost all of her money to make city more beautiful.

When they had enough money to buy some new decorations and all that stuff, Stephany bought a plane ticket to Paris and went to buy decorations and other things to make the city more beautiful. While she was in Paris, everyone cleaned the town and invited their families to live here. Many families got there but didn't actually

want to live there. They just gave some more money and helped them clean the town and gave them some ideas of what they should do to impress people from other cities. When Stephanie was back she was proud of them all. They went to decorate the town and turned it to the city they were proud of. Families from other cities made an ad about the beautiful city and how they should visit it. People saw this ad and went to visit it. It was so beautiful and many people wanted to live there. When Valerie heard about this she was very jealous and wanted to destroy Stephany and the city. She tried to escape from jail but couldn't.

One night when everyone was asleep she escaped. The police officers were shocked and informed everyone that she was missing. Everyone was worried and helped police officers to find her. She was pretending to be a normal person so no one could notice her. One night she sneaked in and she burned whole city. Everyone was scared and terrified, little kids started screaming and crying but no one was hurt and everyone survived. Police officers noticed her, and she went to jail in another continent and she was supposed to be in jail forever. Everyone was sad because the city was ruined, and they needed to earn more money to buy all that stuff again and many people left the city and they informed everyone in their family that the city they lived in was really bad and to never go there. The people who stayed in the city were angry and disappointed. Stephany said that they can't live here anymore because it was dangerous, and they didn't have enough money to rebuild it. They needed to go live somewhere else, so they left the city abandoned until someone else rebuilds it, but they accidentally left some interesting data about the city.

100 years later some people accidentally discovered this town and found interesting data about the town, so they wanted it to rebuild but in better version and some wanted it to be an open air museum. They began to fight for it so they posted the town on social media and asked people if it would be better to rebuild the town or to turn it to an open-air museum. The video became so popular they even ended up in the news and all over the internet. There were thousands of comments and most people voted it to be an open-air museum because it would be terrible to destroy that beautiful town and they already have many new cities. People were on the mission to find as many old things as possible. Even some strangers helped them. They could not find all stuff, so some old people gave them their own things they had from their grandparents to help them rebuild this town again. There was not much stuff left so they had to go buy or make a copy so it could represent that old abandoned city. A year later they were finally done with rebuilding it and they opened the museum and filmed it and posted in on social media and it even made it up to news again. So

many people heard of that so they went to see it. Tickets were not expensive and there were many visitors. The visitors were from different countries and they also posted the museum on social media. In six months that museum became the most popular museum in the country and there were hundreds of people coming everyday so they needed more workers and that wasn't a problem for them. They got workers in a day. The museum ended up being the most popular open-air museum in the world and nobody even dared to destroy it and many people were taking care of it every day!

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## A FAMILIAR STRANGER

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The voices in her head were so loud she could barely tell what was real and what wasn't. The only thing she knew was that she needed to stop it from happening. She was in the school lab about to do an experiment. **"How did this happen?"** she thought, **"How did I lose control?"** Then it hit her. Erica. Everything made perfect sense now.

It all started yesterday. Until that moment she had lived an ordinary life with ordinary friends that went to an ordinary school doing ordinary things, until one day something extraordinary happened.

Sarah was waiting for her friend on what seemed to be another ordinary day until she spotted Erica with someone else. Sarah caught up to them.

"Hey Erica, who's this?"

Erica looked at her confused.

"And who are you?" Erica asked.

"What do you mean? I'm Sarah, your best friend."

"No, I am Sarah." the stranger said, "now leave, creep!"

Sarah was confused. She headed to school by herself. When she got there, everybody looked at her as if she were a new student. Sarah ignored them.

When she got to her class, the teacher asked her whether she was the new exchange student. Sarah shook her head and replied, "I'm Sarah. You have been teaching me for 2 years. You should have learned that by now". The teacher looked at her with a puzzled expression on her face. She noted that Sarah must be in the wrong class. This perplexed Sarah. How could the teacher not know who she was? Sarah decided to go on with her day. Something strange seemed to be happening, but this could all just be in her head. On the way home she spotted her friend, Erica, as well as her clone. Sarah ran up to them.

"Hahaha, look, Erica! It's the creep again." the clone exclaimed. Sarah came up to the clone and grabbed her by the collar.

"What did you do to my friend?" Sarah asked, tightening the grip around the collar.

“What are you talking about?” replied the clone in a shaky voice. Her face portrayed fear, confusion, sadness... as well as... recognition? Suddenly, Erica pulled Sarah away from the clone. Sarah pushed Erica away. “WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?” Sarah was now screaming at Erica. She was unable to control herself “HOW CAN YOU NOT RECOGNISE ME! WE’VE KNOWN EACHOTHER SINCE WE WERE SEVEN!” Sarah fell to the ground. She felt trickles of tears running down her face.

“I just... I don’t understand...” Sarah thought.

“Erica, you go I’ll catch up with you in a minute,” said the clone.

Erica left and the clone came closer to Sarah, who was still on the ground, looking down at the pavement. Millions of thoughts were racing through her head.

“You really don’t know who I am, do you?” asked the clone. Sarah shook her head now, still staring at the ground.

“What I am going to say may sound odd, but you must stay calm and believe me. I am you. I come from the future, and I am here to protect you from something dangerous.” She continued.

“Dangerous? What do you mean dangerous?” Sarah asked looking up at her clone.

“I can’t tell you exactly, but let’s just say you had an accident.”

“An accident?”

“You and Erica are supposed to be in a group science project tomorrow, right? I came here to stop that from happening.”

“Stop what from happening?”

“I can’t tell you.” the clone replied looking away, “Just stay at home tomorrow and everything will be fine.”

“Is that a threat?” Sarah asked, tightening her fists.

“No, a warning” the clone said. She turned around and ran back to Erica. Sarah remained seated on the ground completely baffled. After a few moments, she took a deep breath, got up and walked home.

As soon as Sarah came home, she entered her room, put her stuff away and got ready for bed. She was now all alone with her thoughts. Pushing them away seemed useless because they would always come back. Finally, she managed to fall asleep.

The next morning Sarah knew exactly what she needed to do. She had to get to school before her clone did. And so, she got dressed, kissed her parents goodbye and went off.

Sarah waited for Erica at their meeting spot for five minutes before her friend arrived.

“Hi Erica!” Sarah greeted her friend with a wide smile on her face.

“Sarah? Is that you?” Erica asked unsurely.

“Of course! Who else could it be?”

“You seem different...”

“Different? Haha, you must be imagining it.” Sarah replied quickly.

“Hm, I guess. Let’s go...” Erica said, but her tone sounded as if she didn’t believe her.

They started walking towards school when suddenly the clone appeared in front of them.

“Hi Erica, who’s this?” the clone asked while giving Sarah a nasty look.

“I’m Sarah. And who are you?” Sarah asked the clone.

“No, *I’m* Sarah” the clone replied through her teeth.

“Erica, how about we get away from this creep?”

They left the clone all alone and confused.

When they reached the school, everything seemed normal. They headed to their Chemistry class. Erica and Sarah sat together like usual.

“Good morning class. I hope you have your lab coats and safety goggles ready because we are going to do an experiment.” The teacher started, “You will work in pairs. Your pair is your desk mate.”

Erica and Sarah looked astatic. “Something’s not right.” Sarah thought, “Didn’t that clone of mine from the future warn me that something terrible was going to happen?”

Suddenly, the door opened, and someone entered the lab. It was the clone.

“YOU” the clone locked eyes with Sarah and disappeared.

“What is going on?” Sarah thought, “Where *are* you?” Sarah asked, confused.

“*I am inside your mind.*” The clone replied.

Suddenly, Sarah felt as if somebody had grabbed her vocal cords. She tried to say something, but she couldn’t.

“What are you doing to me?” Sarah asked the clone in her head.

“*Isn’t it obvious? I can control you.*” The clone answered.

Sarah was speechless. Her head hurt. Every word the clone said felt like a vibration going through her head.

“Sarah, are you paying attention?” the teacher asked, but Sarah was unable to answer. She tried to open her mouth but couldn’t. The only thing she was able to do was stare blankly at the teacher. “*Don’t you dare mention me*” the clone threatened.

“I won’t. Please let go of my jaw so I can talk.”



“Fine.”

“Yes, I am.” Sarah finally managed to respond.

“Good.” the teacher said.

“Ok I think we should mix these two elements to-“

“NO DON’T DO IT” Sarah said out loud. Once again, she couldn’t control her body. The clone was in control again.

“What? Why?” Erica asked.

“Just don’t. Please trust me.” the clone said with a shaky voice.

“You’re acting strange. Are you alright?”

“Yes, I am fine! Just promise me you won’t mix those elements” Sarah begged. She could feel fear and despair the clone was feeling.

“Ok, fine! I promise” Erica replied.

Finally, when Sarah could move again, she raised her hand.

“Miss,” she said “may I go to the bathroom?”

Sarah was looking at her expression in the mirror when suddenly a sound of a loud explosion could be heard through the halls. Without thinking, Sarah ran back to the classroom and saw Erica laying on the floor unconscious. The desk next to her was on fire. All the students were now in the hallway and the Chemistry teacher was lying on the floor, lifeless. Sarah felt panic build up inside her. She ran up to Erica, who was unconscious and tried to pick her up, but then dropped her unwillingly. “*Oh, no. I am not letting you help her.*” A stinging pain went through her head causing Sarah to fall to the ground.

“Why are you doing this” Sarah asked the clone in her mind.

“*Because if I don’t, you will do far more damage than good.*”

“What are you saying?”

“*If I tell you, they will hunt me down and try to kill me. And because we are the same person, that means you will die too. Do you understand?*” the clone replied. Sarah could feel the clone’s despair.

“Yes, but who’s they?”

“*I can’t tell you.*”

“Fine, but is there anything that you can tell me?” Sarah asked.

“*What I can tell you is that Erica is not who you think she is.*”

Suddenly, Erica started to cough.

“Erica, thank god you’re awake!” Sarah exclaimed and went to help her get up.

“What just happened?” Erica asked, slowly getting up.

“I am not sure. Here, let me help you.”

“No!” Erica snapped.

“What?” Sarah was confused. Why would Erica refuse her help?

*“Listen to me. That right there is NOT Erica. You have to trust me.”*

“Sorry, I don’t know what got over me,” Erica apologized “I didn’t mean to say that.”

The clone started to feel anxious.

*“If you don’t do as I say, I will start controlling all your actions until it’s over. Will you listen to me?”*

“Fine, explain yourself.”

*“So, you know I am from the future, right?”*

“Yeah?”

*“Well, Erica is too.”*

“What?” Sarah yelled aloud.

“What?” Erica asked.

“Oh, uhm, nothing” Sarah shook her head.

Erica was skeptical, but she decided to ignore that feeling and trust her friend.

*“This is going to fail.”* The clone said with a tired voice.

“What do you mean?” Sarah asked.

*“We have to go back.”* As soon as the clone said that Sarah felt dizzy, and everything went blurry. Sarah quickly regained her senses when the teacher asked: “Sarah, are you paying attention?”

“Yes!” Sarah said abruptly.

“Good! Now, let’s continue with the experiment.”

“Ok, how about we mix these two elements tog- “

“No!” Sarah interrupted Erica, “Don’t do it!”

Erica didn’t listen to her and went to mix the two elements together. Sarah took the bottle containing one of the elements and threw it to the ground.

“Sarah Miller! What on earth do you think you’re doing!” The teacher yelled. Sarah stayed silent, afraid of what might happen next.

“You cannot complete your experiment now! Both of you are getting an F and as for you Sarah, you’re getting a detention.

The bell rang and the teacher dismissed the students. Sarah left the building and sat down on a bench in front of the school. When she looked up, she saw the clone standing in front of her, “Seems like my job here is done.”

“Wait, where are you going?” Sarah asked the clone.

“I have to go back to the present time, or well, the future.” the clone answered. She

pulled out what seemed like an old-fashioned pocket watch, turned the rotor, and wound the watch.

“Oh, and one last thing before I go” said the clone turning to Sarah, “Don’t tell anyone about this. They will think you’re crazy. Goodbye now, and good luck with your detention.”

With that, the clone was gone, and Sarah was all alone. Suddenly, she spotted Erica waving at what seemed like nothing. She ran up to her.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked.

“Saying goodbye to my future self, just like you.” Erica answered.

“Let’s just pretend none of this ever happened, alright?” Sarah asked.

Erica nodded her head. They said their goodbyes and went home.

Back in her bedroom, Sarah was alone with her thoughts again. What a weird day this was. The fact that she wasn’t allowed to tell anyone about what had just happened infuriated her. She felt so angry that she took a pillow and started screaming in it. After a moment her anger vanished, and tears started to roll down her cheeks. Seeing her future-self leave left Sarah feeling empty inside, as if she had lost a part of herself. She cried for hours until she eventually cried herself to sleep.

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mentor: Jelena Marijanović

institution: Oš kneza Mislava, Kaštel Sućurac

## A GIRL WHO HAS IT ALL

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A girl who has everything would be the best description of 17-year-old Jasmine Wood. Although many would describe her as that girl, she was far from that. I would describe her as a straight line, and Jasmine was definitely not that, she was a curve, although many did not notice it. The definition of a saying “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” The first time I met her, I felt like I knew her whole story - the daughter of a wealthy ambassador, excellent grades, taking private lessons on some boring musical instrument since she was little, captain of the volleyball team, lots of friends, and she...kind, but still mean at the same time. That was what everyone would think when they saw her. And that was really more or less true.

The first meeting with Jasmine was the beginning of high school. Not even such big turning point in her life caused her the slightest stress - she marched through the corridors as if she owned them. She had several friends from before, but they weren’t the ones who gave her self-confidence, it was instilled in her since childhood. I would have probably always looked at her as such because, in the end, we all bring prejudice whether we want to or not, if my best friend hadn’t been so hungry, hungry to feel important, to feel the admiration and envy of passers-by, maybe even to such an extent that they feel some kind of fear.. Awe, that’s the word.

Margaret and I had known each other all our lives, and yet it was as if I had never met her. Can we ever truly know someone? Jasmine seemed untouchable and cut off from the real world, as if it was impossible to approach her, like some kind of protected species, an endemic, but that was not the case - in just a few weeks of polite greeting and forced conversations, Margaret achieved quite solid communication with her and broke her wall. Then there was the exchange of numbers, then the school project with her and the first semester barely passed and they already had inside jokes, jumped on each other in the halls, went out... I didn’t say anything, I pretended that everything was as before, not because I didn’t feel close enough to Margaret or was uncomfortable, I just didn’t see the point, so what if she was obsessed with Jasmine?! It’s normal; she wants to be nice to everyone... I knew it wasn’t because of that, but I kept making excuses, maybe I was hoping that she herself

would see that she was leaving me out and realize that a friendship of 15 years means more to her than the momentary feeling of popularity she would get every time she talked to Jasmine. And so I moved away from her, little by little, I don't even know when it happened, but I already stopped hanging out with her like before.

Margaret has a soul, we all have it deep inside, so she silenced her remorse with occasional invitations to hang out. I would agree too. I knew that otherwise she would ask me what was wrong, but how could I give her an answer when what was wrong was exactly the fact that she didn't see it. On those days, I would realize that for Jasmine, Margaret was just an incidental party person, while Jasmine was Margaret's everything. I watch too many movies to tell Margaret what's going on, in 99 out of 100 scenarios it ends with Margaret driving me out of her life and ruining her own life along the way, for the plot. I decided to enjoy those three hours a week spent with Margaret and even with Jasmine without thinking about Jasmine's life and questions about her perfection - but I couldn't.

And so the first year passed, the first year of high school, and Jasmine still remained perfect in everyone's eyes. The summer looked much like the rest of the year - every now and then Margaret would invite me to hang out with them. That's how I met Jasmine's boyfriend, Jake. We were at the beach bar; of course Margaret didn't inform me that there would be so many of us. Now, here come the complications... Hot summer night, loud music, dancing, people, Mark never more perfect - and that's how we hooked up.

At first, it was very strange, but then we started dating even though we didn't want to tell anyone about us. One evening we went out, came to the coast, the sea has never been more wonderful, the sound of music from a nearby club in the background. I felt the sand on my feet, the best feeling ever. Moon. Stars. Mark went to get the drinks. I heard the sound of the engine. Ah, how I hate these crazy people on motorbikes, can they drive normally!? I turn to make sure no one is going to run off the road and I see at least 10 or so gang members driving. Then I see beautiful blonde locks, then a recognizable Louis Vuitton bag and, no, there was no doubt, it was Jasmine! But how did she end up here?! Since when can she ride a motorbike?! She's probably the last person I'd think of as part of some sort of motorbike cult...!?

School started, the first semester flew by, I still haven't mentioned anything about Jasmine to anyone. I mean, you never know, maybe it's just that my eyesight was bad, but I knew I was fooling myself... Margaret has been strange lately too - I first noticed it when I heard Jasmine ask her out this afternoon, Margaret told her she had to visit her grandmother. Jasmine doesn't know her like I do, so she doesn't know that her

grandmother lives in France, but why would Margaret lie to Jasmine? Why wouldn't she want to go out with her? I thought she might have realized that her friendship with Jasmine wasn't that great, or rather I hoped, but, as happens with all my hopes, this one also fell flat because it couldn't be said that she avoided Jasmine, at school she didn't hang out with her any less than before... I decided to forget about it.

Since we moved to a new apartment, I've spent every evening at the window, partly because the view is really beautiful, and partly because standing there makes me feel like the main character of some movie (mostly the latter). So, this evening I continued my routine of making hot cocoa and looking for a good, preferably crime book. After only about 10 pages, I gave up reading and indulged in TikTok, which I probably would have been on until morning if my beautiful mom hadn't turned off the Internet. Jeej.. What should I do now? I decided to just look out the window in the main character way – and there was a beautiful scene to look at! Margaret walking out of her building holding hands with some guy (who looked like a junkie btw). Well, at least now it's clear why she didn't want to go outside with Jasmine. How long has that been going on?! I decided to forget about it again.

Word somehow got around the school that Jasmine was cheating on Jake. But apparently it was just a gossip because Margaret told me they haven't broken up. Despite this, Jasmine seemed quite distracted lately. A few days ago I saw her arguing with her dad in front of the school and then she just ran away. I think a tear ran down her face - that was the first time I saw Jasmine without her smiling face.

Years have passed, nothing has changed yet, or at least I didn't know it was changing. That's how graduation came - the big moment we've been waiting for since the first day of elementary school. Prom was a big deal to everyone. Everyone showed up dressed up and well-groomed. I didn't understand all the hype about it - probably because I went with a guy I couldn't stand (yes, Mark and I broke up a year ago). I spent most of the time on the roof hiding from my irritating date. I would appear from time to time in the hall for a new round of cakes and have to avoid him. If anything, at least the view was perfect, much better than the one from my window – admittedly, also terrible when I looked down and saw how high I was. I heard a commotion and realized that someone was coming upstairs. Oh God, I hope it's not a drunk Harry, I don't have the nerve for him! Fortunately, it wasn't him, but I was surprised when I saw Jasmine and Margaret out of all the people - I guess they enjoyed this evening the most, they should be dancing down in the Hall I guess... Thank God I was standing on the stairs above them so they couldn't see me because I wasn't in the mood for them.

“Either you leave him or I will tell everything to your father!” This was the first time I heard Margaret not talking to Jasmine in a sweet tone. It took me a while to process that MARGARET JUST BLACKMAILED JASMINE??!! Okay, I obviously don’t know about a lot of things...

“Who do you think you are?! Thomas and I have known each other for a long time ago, we were supposed to go to Spain together after graduation. Escape from everything. But you had to screw everything up, didn’t you?” - I couldn’t recognize what prevailed more in Jasmine’s speech, anger or sadness.

“Yes, yes, yes... if he loved you, he would definitely get involved with me... Accept it for once, not everyone loves you! What would your father say if he found out that his sweetheart was planning to run off to Spain with a boy I doubt your father would adore. And that you’ve been flirting with him for years behind his back. You’re cheating on Jake, whom your father supports so much... And I don’t think he’d be thrilled with the fact that you’re riding around town on a motorbike.” I have never seen Margaret so smug.

And then it happened. The moment Jasmine exploded. A moment she will regret for the rest of her life. Margaret was on the edge, Jasmine right next to her. Jasmine’s hands flew towards Margaret and pushed her away hard. I screamed. Margaret was falling and it seemed as if the buildings around her were swallowing her. Jasmine screamed, she was in such shock that she didn’t even notice me. She was shaking, fell to the floor, panicky looked at her hands. It didn’t take long for the police to arrive. It also didn’t take much investigation to find out who was to blame, Jasmine surrendered immediately.

There is no need to talk about the general disaster that followed. Newspapers wrote, father gave statements to the media - he was devastated, it was discussed for months and all that was heard from the mouths of passers-by was Jasmine Wood.

Jasmine loved Thomas (the guy that caused all of this), Margaret thought that he was just a temporary thing for her that she planned to have, because she always gets everything she wants, but it wasn’t like that. She really hoped to run away with him, far away... Away from her father who had become crankier since mom died, away from a bunch of fake friends, away from a perfect, peaceful life... That one moment of anger, that she’ll regret for the rest of her life, ruined picture of a person she was before, all perfection from before. Moral decisions and actions have consequences that we can’t escape, because: “Every man has the right to freedom, but freedom comes with responsibility - Dostojevski.

author: Josip Škarica

mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

## A PECULIAR NIGHT AT THE CAMP

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A freezing wind was blowing through the campsite as my younger brother and I were examining the step-by-step guide on how to make a tent. Suddenly, the instructions flew out of my hand. My brother and I started chasing the paper as it was flying all around the campsite – through the woods, across the playground and the football field – when the wind instantly stopped. We were confused as to why the wind had stopped. Still, we decided to pick the paper up before the wind started again. As I bent down to pick up the paper, I saw a pair of boots right in front of me. I lifted my eyes and saw the man handing me the paper. I took the paper and he silently walked away. *Where did he come from*, I thought to myself. *I've never seen him here before*. My brother and I went back to finish setting up the tent.

“And that is the final piece,” I said to my brother when we were done. It was already getting dark. “You go wash up and brush your teeth while I set up the bed.” By the time I finished, John had not returned yet. I went looking for him. *What is taking him so long*, I thought to myself. It was getting dark, and I tripped over some roots on my way. “Ahh heck,” I mumbled to myself. I got up and continued walking toward the restrooms. There I saw a man setting up his tent. I continued my way to the restroom when my brother walked right past me.

“Hey,” I said.

He stopped and said, “Wow, sorry, I didn’t see you there”.

I said, “I’m going to brush my teeth and take a shower. You can go to the tent and wait for me there.”

He said, “OK, I’ll see you there.”

When I was done with the bathroom, I started going back to the tent. Soon after, I again ran into the man who’d given me the paper earlier. “Hi, I’m Richard. Thanks for helping me with the paper,” I said.

“No problem,” he said. “Don’t worry about it. I’m James by the way.”

“Are you traveling alone?” I asked.

“I just came here a few hours ago for the first time, yes. Just me and my dog Susie, she’s a labrador,” he said.



“What brings you here?” I asked him.

“I am in desperate need of a vacation,” he said and smiled. There was sadness in his eyes.

“Well, it was a pleasure meeting you,” I said as I started walking away.

“Wait, before you go,” said James, “did you see anything strange around here?”

“No-oh,” I said, “why are you asking?”

“No reason at all,” he said and walked away. The whole conversation was confusing and made me think but after a while I brushed it off and resumed walking towards our tent.

When I got there, John was getting ready for the night. “You took your time in the bathroom, didn’t you?” I said.

“I met a strange guy there; he started asking me questions,” he said.

“What kind of questions?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, “something about seeing some strange people or something like that.”

“Okay, it’s probably nothing,” I said. “Have you finished making our beds?”

“Almost finished. It’s not easy in this tight space, you know.”

“Jesus, John! I could have done it three times already!” I yelled.

“Gee, Richard, why are you always so nervous?! I’ll do it, fine. Go and make yourself a cup of coffee.”

“Whatever,” I said and went to the other side and sat under the tree. I sipped hot black coffee and thought about the things that had happened today. *Some days are strange*, I said to myself. John finished setting up our tent eventually and we went to bed.

We were woken up by shots fired in the middle of the night. Startled, we got up and ran out to the clearing in front of the tents. Lots of other campers were already there. Everybody was asking what was going on.

“Everybody, please calm down. Everything is all right, there is nothing to worry about,” said the man who’d stepped into the middle of the central plateau. In the light of campfires, I recognized James, my friend from earlier that night.

“We had a villain in this community,” he said, “somebody we’ve been looking for for a long time. It took some time, but we finally got him. My name is James Hollyfield, and I am the US martial in charge of this investigation. I thank you for your patience and understanding. Now please go back to bed.”

Reluctantly, everybody returned to their tents. John and I did the same. I went to bed, but I couldn’t fall asleep, the events of the night still spinning in my head and

keeping me awake. Finally, I switched off the light and turned onto my side, trying to sleep, but to no avail. I was tossing and turning and finally decided that it was no use. I stepped out into the clearing in front of the tent lit by the moonlight. There were no clouds, but the stars were barely visible. I stood there and watched the sky while the night's events continued going through my head.

"You can't sleep either," said a familiar voice.

Startled, I turned around just to see the same two sad eyes looking at me.

"Hi, James," I said, "lots of things were happening tonight so I couldn't sleep."

"Some days are like that," replied James.

"James, what happened to that bad guy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there were shots fired and you were talking about that villain, and we never saw anybody. You said we don't have to worry about anything. But if we didn't see anything, why did you have to say that?"

"You are a smart man, Richard, you do understand that we can't tell you everything. People love to feel safe and they don't want to know the ugly details. In this case, we had an escaped convict, a dangerous person who needed to be confined as soon as possible before he hurt innocent civilians. He made his way into this community, where we managed to track him down. It was dangerous because of lots of civilians around. We were lucky and cornered him in the showers, but when we asked him to surrender, he refused."

"He refused... poor guy," I said.

"Yes..." said James, "there is justice and there is justice. Well, Richard, it was nice meeting you, have fun on the rest of your trip. Susie and I will be heading back to Arizona."

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mentor: Kristina Legović

institution: Osnovna škola Finida, Poreč

## AMERICA'S MOST VALUED RUBY

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On the 28th of July 1949 at precisely 4 p.m., a little girl was born in the state of Texas to parents Claudia and Robert. They thought long and hard about the perfect name for their new baby and finally decided on Ruby. Ruby was the name of her grandmother, who was born on the same day. Additionally, ruby is also a gem associated with the astrological sign she was born in - Leo.

Ruby was an enthusiastic child whose curiosity peaked at every unknown object. She was particularly interested in this big black square box that sat in the middle of their living room. Sometimes it would shine in black and white and people would appear on it. Television was her interest ever since her mother showed her girls in luscious flowy dresses dancing. Since that moment Ruby knew what she wanted to become, and she was going to chase that dream until she succeeded. Failure wasn't a word in her vocabulary. She was ready to do anything, and to give up anything, for a taste of that life.

The night after Ruby's 16th birthday, she was reading the birthday cards she got from family and friends. They all followed the same pattern; dear Ruby, we love you very much, and so on. But one card stood out. Written on it was: „Remember me when you are standing under the spotlight.“ And that wasn't the only thing that person got her. In the envelope, along with the card, was something else - two tickets to The Ed Sullivan Show. „January 6th 1957, The Ed Sullivan Show featuring... Elvis Presley?“ she read the information on the tickets, being too starstruck to process what she had just been gifted.

„Elvis Presley!?! I'm seeing Elvis live?“ Ruby exclaimed in surprise, „I'm going to see Elvis!“ Ruby was beyond excited. Whoever has sent her this clearly knows her best. She couldn't wait to tell her parents, her friends... maybe even everyone in the small town.

Even though the event was almost half of the year in the future, she counted down every day. She decided to tell her parents immediately. After delivering the news to her mother. Ruby was surprised by her mother's lack of excitement. „I'm not staying on this farm!“ she told her mother in a non-intended raised voice.

She didn't mean to raise her voice at her mother, but she was in disbelief with her reaction. What does she mean Ruby can't go to that show? She has the tickets already! Ruby and her mother argued some more, which ended the moment Ruby stormed off to her room. She was heartbroken, to say the least. Why didn't her mother understand how important this was?

In the evening of the same day Ruby was getting ready for bed, but before that she had to say her prayers. She kneeled in front of her bed and began praying. „Please, Lord, make me the biggest star the world has ever known.“

Ruby, who had to give up her academic future to help her parents on the farm, was just going to feed the animals in the early morning. Each animal in the stable had their own name, and even as much as Ruby didn't like doing her duties, she talked to the animals like they were her closest friends. „Watch this, Lizzie.“ Ruby said as she climbed on top of the pile of hay and began dancing just like the girls would dance on television, even pretending to have her own dress which she spun in. Lizzie, the cow, simply ate the hay she was given and didn't pay much attention to Ruby performing on what would be her food the next day.

In the next few months, Ruby didn't mention the upcoming show she already decided to attend. Her parents would get upset or wouldn't respond at all, and that confused Ruby. One evening she was caught by her mother in her room trying on her mother's old dresses. „What do you think you're doing? Take that off, for goodness sake, and stop embarrassing me...“ her mother said tiredly and closed the door. Ruby was left feeling lonely, like no one was there by her side to understand her. She put all the dresses back into her mother's closet and shamefully walked out of her room. After that day she couldn't stop thinking about one dress in particular. It was velvet red, with rose patterns, reaching right above her knees. She thought it was perfect to wear to such an event. Ruby smirked to herself, feeling like it was all smooth sailing.

On the morning of January 6th Ruby woke up earlier than usual, the excitement never leaving her body. But she made sure not to act too suspicious, so her parents won't figure out she's plotting to go out against their orders. That day, without any needed reminders from her mother, she did every single task she could think of. Dust the shelves, wash the dishes, hang the clothes, feed the animals, mop the floor – you name it. Her mother thought it was a special day for her daughter to be acting like this, she thought Ruby finally took responsibility. Oh, if only that was the reason she was being productive. The early afternoon came by and Ruby couldn't wait anymore. She started to get ready in secret, being as quiet as possible. She couldn't resist to hum some songs along the way, quietly singing „Diamonds are a girl's best friend“

by Marilyn Monroe while putting on her favourite pair of diamond earrings she got from her grandmother.

The clock struck 6 in the afternoon. Ruby carefully opened her bedroom window and climbed out of it. She tried not to mess up her dress. After checking to see if she had all she needed in her handbag; the tickets, lipstick, tissues, money, and a small mirror, she was ready to go and have the night of her life. She met up with a friend of hers whom also shared a love for Elvis' music on the train station. Their destination was just an hour and a half away. On the way, they caught up with each other's lives, discussing various topics. Ruby looked out of the train window and to her surprise, they arrived at that moment. The girls came out of the train looking like two little girls lost in a big town. After a short walk, they looked at the building Elvis was going to perform in starstruck. Making their way through the large crowd at the entrance, they finally got in. The adrenaline rush was at an all-time high. They were somewhere in the middle of the audience, but close enough to see the star of the night. The lights turned off and silence remained still until one light pointed at the man on the stage: Elvis Presley. Everyone in the crowd cheered him on, this show had been talked about for days on end. What made Ruby love this even more were the dancers that performed the opening choreography for the show. This was all Ruby had ever dreamt of. Her hopes lit up - maybe there was a bigger chance for her to become successful than she thought.

The show went on. Ruby couldn't believe she was seeing one of the most influential people of the century perform right in front of her. The flow of his tracks changed a little, with him starting to sing more gospel type of music. The audience gave him confused looks when he started singing „Peace In The Valley“ but then he explained his reasons, saying „No, I told my momma I was going to do 'Peace In The Valley' for her, and I'm going to do it“. After he sang, the crowd cheered even louder, louder than ever before on that night's show.

When the show ended, Ruby knew she definitely wanted to do that. The very next thing she found herself doing is applying as a backup dancer in the nearest theatre. That show gave her all the confidence and motivation she could ever have. She took the train back home, hoping her parents didn't suspected a single thing. Her hopes were answered, just as she hoped, her parents didn't catch her. She came back through the same window of her bedroom which she left open, quickly changing out of the clothes she was in and into her nightgown. She wanted to go down to say good night to her parents, but she was simply just too tired. Ruby fell asleep the second her head hit her pillow.

The next week, Ruby was home alone when the phone rang. She answered it and after about forty seconds she sat it down while smiling like a loon. Why, you may be asking? She got accepted as a backup dancer. Ruby has just been told her first big gig was going to be at the mayor's 60th birthday celebration. Ruby felt like she had hit the jackpot.

The gig she danced at went tremendously well and got her lots of attention. Afterwards she danced at many more places and events. More and more people, theatres and even agencies were reaching out to her. The offers sounded very appealing to Ruby and it was hard not to get lured in by any of them. After carefully thinking it through, Ruby decided to sign up with an agency that could also get her to star in an upcoming Hollywood blockbuster. The only thing that made her upset about the situation was that she pushed her parents wishes aside with her decisions and now they didn't want to be in contact with her, which made her question her career aspirations. But Ruby decided to pursue her dreams.

#### SEVEN YEARS LATER

Ruby was a household name. Everybody knew her. Everybody was jealous of her success. They all wanted to be like her. She was famous for her charm and how entertaining her acts were. She was everywhere, doing everything. And every time they announced her presence with the words:

„Please, welcome, America's most valued Ruby!“

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mentor: Valentina Capanec

institution: I. osnovna škola Bjelovar

## BLUE FLOWERS

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“Hey, kid. It’s time to wake up.” That’s the first thing I hear every morning. Jason, my big brother, is extremely worried about me, so he’s by my side every minute of the day. He’s trying to hide it, but I can see in his eyes that he thinks something is wrong with me. I know there is, and it seems that everyone at school knows too. Since first grade, I have been beat up dozens of times and I get insulted on a daily basis. I’ve grown numb to it, though. In lower grades, they only bullied me because I was quiet and, well...weird looking. I’m really pale and I have black hair. I’m also tall but fairly skinny and I constantly look tired. You could describe me as a kid from a horror movie. My classmates started calling me Corpse Boy around fourth grade. I thought that was the worst thing they’d ever do. I was wrong. In sixth grade, I had some sort of breakdown. I tried making up reasons for it, trying to pretend it didn’t even happen or just closing myself off from everyone, but nothing ever worked. For about a week, I’d be fine and then I’d randomly start sobbing and pushing everyone who tried to calm me down away. I’d grip on my shirt, pulling it away from my skin in hopes of making breathing easier, even though I knew that wasn’t how it worked. The kids around me just laughed a sick and twisted, almost evil laugh. After around six of those incidents, my mom took me to a psychiatrist. He showed me a few ink paintings and asked me what I saw, he analyzed my sleep schedule and asked me some questions, which I can’t really remember. I wasn’t even paying much attention; I was mostly sugar coating my answers. In the end, he prescribed me pills that I should take every night before sleep. Often, I forget about them, so Jason always reminds me before he goes to his room.

This morning, I thought it’d be different. Maybe a fresh start. Starting high school means starting over, making new friends and maybe even letting go of old habits. Full of hope, I put on my shoes and walked to school with Jason. He told me all about his own first day of high school. He was four years older than me, so he was already done with high school. I’m honestly a bit confused why he isn’t off to college yet. That didn’t bother me, though. I enjoy his company a lot. I don’t think I’d be able to survive without him. After every single breakdown I had, he’d hug me and tell me it

will be alright until I calmed down. Often, I feel like a burden to him. He takes time out of his day because his little brother can't function normally without talking to him. He had to let go of playing video games or reading, so he could help me with homework or my own hobbies, which by the way, aren't that interesting. I read and go on walks. In about ten minutes, we reached the school gates. Jason looked at me and smiled, which I found unusual. He knew I was scared out of my mind, yet he smiled like nothing was wrong. "You've got this, kid." He said as he shook me by the shoulders. "Just be brave, Nico." Jason added to his little pep talk before he turned around and left me all alone again. School finished at 3 o'clock. I came home and sat at the dining table frowning. My mom asked me what was wrong, but I brushed her off with my hand. I hate talking with her about my problems and feelings, so I went upstairs to tell Jason. I entered his room and sat on his bed, where he was lazily reading a book. I threw my schoolbag on his floor and dust flew up from the carpet. I figured I should remind him vacuums exist after I tell him about school. Gulping and swallowing bitter tears, I complained that the bullying is even worse, which was pathetic since it was only the first day. All the other kids stared at me weirdly and whenever they came close to me, they became alert and nervous. They acted like I'll begin clawing at them and ripping them apart if they showed me they acknowledge my existence. In addition to that, someone threw a sandwich at me, snickering and explaining to me that 'normal' people usually have food to survive. He said I should try that instead of living off of misery, which 'didn't serve my looks well'. They acted like I wasn't a fifteen-year-old kid too. Instead, they treated me like some sort of unidentified entity they should be afraid of and avoid. By the end of my rant, I was sobbing and gripping onto Jason's bedsheets. He sighed and shook his head, telling me I was brave and an incredible little brother. He said the other kids are missing out on the chance of having a great friend, which I heavily doubted. Who would want a creepy, closed off, miserable friend? After a few minutes, Jason spoke up, pity evident in his voice. He said he has to go finish up something at his friend's house. I nodded and let him go, since I knew they were working on Chris's new porch because he recently bought his own house. Jason disappeared out the door and I stayed on his bed, crying. Soon enough, my mom walked in with a sad expression and pulled me out of Jason's room. "Not again, Nico. You keep doing that." She said, probably freaked out by me crying all the time. I got ready for bed, but this time I remembered to take my pills without Jason reminding me. After that, every day of the week was the same. I'd come home crying, storming up to Jason's room and telling him all the names the kids at school called me. It got worse every day. On Thursday, I slammed my hand



into Jason's shelf, scattering all his things and the dust on them to the floor. Thankfully, Jason didn't get angry. He stared at me worriedly and politely asked me to pick his things off the floor because he can't. I figured he was in a hurry to go to Chris's house. He left and I started cleaning up the mess I made, when my mom stormed in and yelled at me, making me cry again. "Why would you touch Jason's things when he's gone?" I didn't really understand why she was so angry about it, when Jason was alright with it. I brushed it off, she was probably just angry from work.

I was on thin ice all my life, but on Friday, that ice finally succumbed to my problems and I fell right through it into a deep, dark hole. I was fairly good at swimming, but I couldn't swim back out of the hole even in a hundred years. At school, we were talking about mummies, and a guy decided it would be hilarious to ask me if my parents found me in a tomb. Everyone laughed. I was used to being laughed at. I really was. But this was something else. I was beginning to think that maybe I was just insane and the kids were behaving normally. But I strongly doubted that, because if anyone here was insane it would be them. Did they just see me as a punching bag, or a stray dog they can punch around whenever they please? I don't think that I was even a stray dog to them, because some people had mercy and sympathy for them. No one ever had mercy or sympathy for me. I didn't even realize that I was shaking, breathing rapidly and sobbing. My vision became blurry and my chest hurt so bad I thought it would explode. The laughter sounded distant and the professor approached me, trying to hold me down. Without thinking, I pushed him and he slammed into the wall behind him. Next thing I knew, I was in the principal's office, where I couldn't calm down so they sent me to the psychiatrist's office. My mom was already there. The psychiatrist just calmed me down as best as she could, after which my mom drove me to the other psychiatrist in the hospital. He said it was getting worse, as if nobody had realized that. I wished he would stop just stating the obvious and calling it observing. I also wished he would finally tell me what that 'it' that was making me act like this was. It was as if I had some invisible illness that was embracing me into a fatal hug. I zoned out in hopes of making the anger and anguish die down, but I was quickly snapped out of it by my mom calling my name. She explained that I'd have to take those pills every morning and evening now, because my dose has increased. We came home and I went to Jason's room, but he wasn't there. He was probably staying at Chris's house to work on the porch. I finished some assignments I had and took my pills before going to sleep. The next day, I woke up by myself and took the pills again. It was Saturday, so I just sat in my room reading a book. It was strangely silent. My mom worked on Saturdays, and Jason wasn't home

so I was completely alone. Pretty soon it was night time, and I went to sleep alone again, because Jason didn't come home. He didn't come home on Sunday either, so when my mom came home from the store I went down and asked her where Jason was. She stared at me blankly. I became extremely confused when she said I was being dense and inconsiderate by asking that. She had tears in her eyes. I asked her what she meant, and my vision went blurry when she answered.

"Nico you know very well that Jason isn't here and he never will be again! It's been years since that truck slammed into him! You've got to let go of that, Nico!"

When she finished talking, I stared at her in shock. At first, I thought she was completely insane, but then a small switch flipped inside my brain. The truck. The last day of sixth grade. The accident. The funeral.

Jason was dead, and I chose to ignore it. I fell to my knees and started sobbing again. Jason wasn't at Chris's house. He didn't forget vacuums existed. He didn't forget about going to college. He was dead. All the memories flooded in. The first breakdown I had in school was the day after Jason died. I remembered his funeral. The blue flowers I left on his grave. My mom's sobs and the priest's words. The last four years, Jason was dead and I didn't even realize it, or rather, I just didn't accept it. I blacked out as the last thing I thought of was the last time Jason smiled at me. It wasn't this Thursday. It was four years ago. I woke up in my bed with my mom next to me. I needed a few hours to come back to my senses, but the first thing I did after getting up was visiting the graveyard. Taking small, anxious steps, holding some blue flowers, I arrived in front of a stone block in the ground with Jason's tough but gentle face on it. Sure enough, to my absolute despair, it said Jason Yorke, July 1st, 1994 – June 21st, 2014. The day my whole life went downhill, slowly crumbling until the very second I placed the blue flowers onto the green grass and finally accepted I was now an only child.

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## COLD TALES

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Writing a story is a difficult job and I think there is no point in making up new plots and new characters. The best stories have already been told and safely stored in the past. Here is one of my favourite tales.

Iron is a material that we come across almost every day. It is very useful with a lot of good properties that make it an essential material for most products. Alongside coal it is widely considered the most useful ore for humans. Many civilizations in the past competed for it and treated it as a valuable resource that they needed to store and save for themselves. This is still true today. But there is one civilization that progressed past the need of iron, and successfully replaced it. A long time ago, in the early Medieval Ages, a tribe resided in the cold and harsh North tundra. Survival there was a hard challenge, but they seemed to be thriving. They practised hunting, while also foraging for mushrooms and other plants. Agriculture was a part of life too, as they cultivated blueberries and cabbage. With no competition in the barren tundra, the tribe grew and developed rapidly, turning into a civilization. With so many people, a new question arose, how to find a material to make things out of. And that is when they came across ice. It seemed perfect, it was easy to get, it was malleable and at the frigid weather of the North tundra it was quite strong and did not melt.

Soon, they started making everything out of ice, axes out of ice for chopping wood, shovels out of ice for digging up snow, even swords out of ice for battles. They would collect water from the nearby streams, and pour it into casts, after which the water would freeze in the insane cold of the tundra they called home. They would then polish their things with sand from the river. This might seem crazy at first, that you can make tools out of ice, but you must know that in such freezing conditions ice is not that far from metal. To them, ice melting seemed just as absurd as expecting our keys on the table to melt into liquid metal. For that reason, they started making ice tablets, to carve letters in them, and use it as we use paper today, to write on and read from. A lot of their documentations were text-carved in ice. As they developed further, other civilizations caught wind of the thriving cold civilization that used ice instead of metal. One of those civilizations were Mongols. Hungry for battle and

conquest, their leader Tolui ordered an invasion of the North tundra and an attack on the cold civilization. As he was preparing his army for the invasion thinking it would be a breeze, one of the members of the cold civilization, Cameron, heard of Tolui's plan and was determined to stop him. He quickly got down to work, spreading the word about a scary invasion coming their way. He made a lot of ice swords, and by the time he was done, he mastered the art of making swords out of ice. He assembled an army of his own and distributed the swords among his soldiers. He said his final goodbye to his people and marched his army to the borders. He patiently waited with his soldiers for the Mongols to arrive. And then it happened. He saw thousands of men on horses armed with sharp spears storming his way. He prepared for the clash and hoped for the best. The Mongols started attacking and the battle began. He fought with his army using his ice sword, trying not to get pierced. Eventually, after a long battle the cold civilization emerged victorious. Cameron proved to be a great leader, and after he returned to his people, they were relieved and happy. After the victory he got proclaimed the king of his people and they built him a giant castle out of ice. It took them years to finish it, they would pour water into big casts to create giant ice blocks for the castle. After his castle was built, he was thankful to his people, and moved into it. Life was great in the cold civilization, the people were happy and felt safe after the victory which proved the strength and courage of the army that was protecting them, the civilization expanded its borders and grew even more. It entered a sort of golden age when productivity and economy were at its best. They also had a lot of new discoveries and inventions. I guess you could say that the civilization peaked here.

But there was trouble coming their way. The nearby Vikings just lost their king in a battle, and his son took over the throne. He did not really like the cold civilization and saw them as barbaric fools that needed to be dealt with, overlooking the fact that his own kingdom was barbaric. He decided to launch a surprise attack on the cold civilization. When his army arrived, the cold civilization was completely unprepared and surprised. The Viking army pillaged and demolished countless villages showing no mercy. Despite that, the cold civilization quickly assembled an army and defeated the Vikings. When Cameron heard about that he was furious and did not let that slide. He quickly prepared for a counterattack to get even with the Vikings. But it did not go as expected. After the Vikings attacked the cold civilization they foresaw a retaliation, so they already had a part of the army stay home. When the cold army arrived, even with their best ice swords, they severely underperformed. Cameron did not want to give up until he got adequate revenge. For years, the two civilizations fought back and forth. Despite that, the cold civilization was still doing well. They

still had a great economy, and they were still a pain in the neck to anybody who tried to conquer the North tundra. Over the years the cold civilization weakened a bit, but they were still fine. Other civilizations, especially the European ones, discovered a new way of doing everything. It involved using coal to turn gears. It was well known as the industrial revolution. Soon, everything was replaced with new inventions. But the cold civilization still used an old way of doing things, they did not need fancy machines to do their work. Around that time, Europeans started colonizing less developed civilizations for their own benefits. One of those less fortunate civilizations was the cold civilization. They did not even know about the technological breakthrough happening in Europe. And soon, the colonists decided to invade the North tundra. They started preparing their soldiers, now armed with gunpowder shotguns. By the time the cold civilization found out, it was too late. The colonists were already at the borders. The king of the cold civilization sent his army, and they were still using ice swords, to the borders. The colonists were shocked to see swords made from ice. The cold army was prepared to show them the power of their ice swords, but when the first soldier swung his sword, it turned out that the sword was blunt and did no damage to the enemy. The colonists stood there laughing, thinking it was a joke. To their surprise, the cold army found out the reason why their swords could not slice. The sharp part of the blade had melted off. They never saw that happen in their life. "How can ice just melt?" they thought to themselves. The truth was that the bane of the cold civilization was there, the climate change. Due to Europeans releasing carbon dioxide, the temperature spiked. That was the end of the cold civilization as they got colonized by the Europeans and most of the ice tablets that used to store valuable information about the cold civilization's culture just melted down. And the giant castle made of ice also melted, and since it was in a valley, it left a lake behind.

And here we are today, the climate change is worse than ever. Now, you might be wondering how I am able to tell the tale of the cold civilization if all their texts were ruined. Well, some of them were preserved. In the heart of the North tundra, temperatures are so low that something called permafrost occurs. Some members of the cold civilization placed their ice tablets containing valuable text in the area with permafrost. But there are still a lot of texts about this civilization which need to be read, and there is a problem. The permafrost is not going to stick around for much longer. The climate change is getting exponentially worse. We might soon lose all information about the cold civilization. Luckily, there is a team of archaeologists searching for information about the cold civilization. Let us hope they are successful in their mission, as it would truly be a shame to let the history of such an interesting civilization just melt away forever, never to be seen again.

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## FALSE LOVE ALARM

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“Finally! The day finally arrived!”, I said aloud. I waited so long for this exciting class trip to Italy. I quickly got out of the bed and started getting ready. My mum was already downstairs waiting to drive me off to school. I already packed my things 3 days ago. Usually when we go to class trips, we go to places in my country but this time we will travel for a long time. The plan is to go to city Florence and before our trip I already searched everything about it. When it comes to trips I am the first one to be ready, that probably explains why I am the first one to be in front of the school at 5 a.m. As time passed, my classmates started coming one by one. Soon it was 5:45 and that meant it was time to go. I said goodbye to my mother and got on the bus. I sat next to my friend while our two other friends sat across from us. Time passed as we chatted but with time I felt tired. As I was sitting comfortable in my seat, slowly, sleep took over me. I woke up to find out we were almost there, which meant I almost slept through whole ride. I mean... it explains itself since I did not close my eyes not even more than a second at night. I opened my eyes to find everyone just looking concerned. Only my friend, who sat across me, was sitting relaxed and was scrolling through her phone. “Lucija...what is going on? Why is everyone so anxious?”, I asked her. “The bus broke down. We will probably stay in Verona for a night or two.”, she replied calmly. After a few minutes of silence, the bus driver came and informed us about the bus situation. He showed us the hotel just a few minutes away from there so we picked out things and went there. They almost didn’t let us in since there was other school already checked in. After a while we got into our rooms. The only thing we knew was that that other school was from Germany. We unpacked our things but not all since we would be there for a few days only. My friends and I got an idea to go down to the main hall and maybe make some new friends. When we left our room, I was the first one to bump into someone. I almost fell down but my friends caught me. “Hey! Watch where are you go-?”, I shouted. “My bed.”, he murmured and continued to walk to I guess his room. I stared at his back with disbelief. “My gosh. So rude for nothing.” But something, I didn’t expect, happened. I needed to sit at the table next to him for dinner that evening.

After a short walk with girls, we went back to our room and started getting ready for dinner. I curled my hair a bit and wore a long summer dress. It was already 6pm and we needed to go down to the main hall. I went to my table and Mr. Rude sat next to me. Surprisingly, he was dressed nice and had this beautiful smile. I quickly looked away. "I know we did not start on good terms, but wanna start over?" I again looked at him, confused and surprised. I turned my body towards him. "I'm Ivana. You?" "I'm Finn. I wanted to say sorry about earlier. I was in a hurry." I looked at his beautiful blue eyes. I guess I was trying to find out if he was lying. He indeed wasn't, but for a moment I caught myself just admiring him. I cannot deny it, he was a beautiful boy. "It's rude to stare you know?", he said with a grin. "Yes, sorry...", I said with a smile. „Where are you from?", he asked, and with that we started talking about everything. I realised he was just like me, but a male version. After dinner, we went for a walk by the seashore. After a while, it was time to go in our rooms. By the time I was in bed, the only thing I could think about was him and his shining personality. When I woke up I went to the bathroom, took a shower, did my usual skincare and brushed my teeth. My friends were already out, probably. I changed out of my pyjamas and got into shorts and an oversized T-shirt. When I got out of our room, I was greeted by Finn. "Good morning sleepy head. You overslept and missed the breakfast.", he said with a light chuckle. "I know, I know. I wasn't really hungry either way.", I said and shook my head. "My class is going to aquapark today so I wanted to see if yours are going, too?", he asked. "Well... I need to see with my professor. I think we are going to our final destination today. Remember? I'm here just because our bus broke down." I laughed a bit. At that moment, when he wanted to say something, Lucija came up to me. "We need to pack; the bus is fixed. We are going in Florence!!!" she said and ran away into our room. I looked at Finn with an apologetic smile and said goodbye. It was one-time thing, right? We packed our things and got on the bus. Once we came to Florence, we went to our hotel and unpacked things for good. I couldn't help but to think about him. As time passed I slowly forgot about it all. I was making memories with my best friends and life never felt better.

Time passed quickly and soon we needed to go back home. I was sitting on my bed, packing. I was scrolling through my phone, looking at pictures from the trip. I was sad, it all needed to come to an end. You know how they say... good things always come to an end. I finished with packing and we got on the bus. After that trip, Finn came to my mind a couple of times, but soon all those thoughts went away. The summer break began and I felt like a new person. Surrounded by people I love, I felt happier than ever.



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## FIRST PHONE

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Let me introduce the main character, Mary Smith a 9 year old girl who lives in London, in a family of five. It's the 3rd of December, 2019 today, Mary's ninth birthday. Mary woke up all excited, and immediately ran down the stairs to see her birthday present. She had no idea what it was. Her mother stopped her and said: "Wait, sweetie, you should have your eyes closed; we have a big surprise for you." Mary was all excited. She opened her eyes and saw the present – it was a phone. Mary was so happy because she was the only one who hadn't had a phone yet. She thanked her parents and went upstairs to activate her phone. Of course, she downloaded a lot of social media: TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat... If only she knew what it would cause...

Mary was a happy girl before she got her first phone, but then suddenly after a month something changed, something wasn't right with her. Her parents didn't care about her actions on her social media platforms because they thought that she was responsible enough to be on her phone by herself. They made a big mistake.

Mary wanted to become popular. She used to post her photos on Instagram and videos of her dancing on TikTok. She started getting hateful comments. They were about her looks, the way she dances, or stuff like that. She was all confused, and of course, sad. Mary would never open up to someone, so she didn't do it that time either. She continued posting her videos, but she was also very insecure about her looks.

Then, one day, someone she did not know wrote her a comment about how beautiful she was. She was happy, so she replied to that person. He said his name was Jack, he was 10 years old. They started texting and became friends very quickly. They shared some habits and interests, so they had topics to talk about. They texted each other for a few weeks, then one day Jack asked Mary for her phone number. She gave it to him. She thought: "What can go wrong, it's just a phone number, right?". They began talking on video calls. But only Mary had her camera on, because his camera was broken. She was naive and she trusted him. They used to talk every single day on video calls.

So, one day, Jack asked Mary if she wanted to be his girlfriend. She said yes, and



she thought that she found the love of her life. She told her best friend Leah about Jack and how they met. Leah was worried for Mary because she suspected that something was wrong with Jack. Mary was confused because she thought that Leah would be happy with her. Leah wanted to tell Mary's parents about the relationship between Mary and Jack. Sadly, she kept it to herself because Mary told her that there's nothing to be worried about. So, she just tried to ignore her suspicions and to trust Mary.

Mary and Jack continued talking, and texting. One day Mary suddenly stopped texting and replying to Jack. Her phone was taken away because she had bad grades at school. Jack didn't know what was going on and felt betrayed, so he wanted to get back at her. So he posted her bad-looking pictures on every social media and wrote some bad words next to the pictures. The pictures came to Mary's parents. They were shocked. They unlocked her phone to take a look at what she had done on it. They found the chat with Jack. He was suspicious to her parents, so they went to her room to talk to her about him. They also decided to call the police and check on Jack.

When Mary's mother got to Mary's room, Mary wasn't there. They looked up the whole house, but she was nowhere to be found. Her parents started panicking and they searched up the whole neighborhood too. Police arrived about one hour after they called them. The police officer George got through Mary's phone, and he found some information about Jack. Jack's real name is Zachary Kushner, and he is 39 years old. He used to talk with plenty of little girls. When the police officer said that to Mary's parents they were in shock and started crying, and they were crazy with worry. They felt such guilt because they didn't know anything about her social media life. And then police officer realized something: Zachary Kushner was a man police searched for so long. He was in prison because he used to kidnap young children, but he escaped from prison in the early 2010s. The police officer immediately got into his car and asked for help to find Zachary. Over 100 police officers were searching for both Zachary and Mary, and they couldn't find them anywhere.

After a nine hour search, there was no sign of them. Ten hours into the search, the main officer got a phone call from an old man, Frederic Diggory, who told them that he saw Zachary and Mary in the woods near his house. Police arrived at that place and searched for them. They were looking for clues all around. After 17 hours of their search, they found Mary. She was okay, but severely distressed. But Zachary escaped. Mary couldn't remember anything because she was sedated. The police continued searching for Zachary. And they finally found him; he was hiding in the utility hole. He was arrested for kidnapping and faking his ID. He got a prison sentence of 19 years. Everyone was happy because this story ended up happily, but some stories don't end up like this one.

So, listen up, both kids and parents, think twice about your actions on the Internet; it can be a disaster. Never talk to unknown people, even if they seem nice. You don't want to end up like Mary, do you?

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 institution: OŠ Brezovica

## GUARDIANS OF THE FOREST

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In a night full of stars without a single cloud in the sky, a girl was sitting on a wooden bench. While she was looking at the stars, she felt that someone or something was watching her. She decided to ignore the feeling and return home. The feeling did not go away and the fear only increased. When she got into her apartment she felt protected, but that “something” was still with her. That night she had a very strange dream. She was walking through the nearby forest. It was very dark with no moonlight and no stars. The only light was in the distance, and as she got closer the light grew stronger. A few steps from the light, a pair of large yellow eyes appeared from behind a bush. Those were not the bloodthirsty eyes of some beast, those eyes were frightened and gentle.

- What are you? – asked the girl full of curiosity.

Slowly and cautiously a creature that she had never seen before came out of the bushes. It looked like a fox but it was blue!

-Don't be scared of me. My name is Abigail and I need your help. – said the blue fox.

-My help? About what? And...why me? – A thousand questions ran through her head and not a single answer.

Then she realized that she hadn't introduced herself and Abigail probably didn't know her name. –Oh, sorry. You probably don't know my name. I am Ava.

Abigail made a sound like a laugh. –I know your name silly, otherwise I wouldn't have asked you for help. I need someone I can trust. Anyway, here's the thing. A portal has appeared in the forest and strange black creatures are coming out and I don't know how to stop them!

-Wait a second, how can I help you if you don't know how?

-I will give you something that will help you, Abigail said playfully. – Your new powers.

In that moment Ava woke up in her bed with one thought in her mind “It was just a crazy dream.” She got out of her bed and realized how bad of a headache she had. When she tried to take some pills from the bedside cabinet she saw a big white paw

instead of a hand. She screamed. She knew she had to find Abigail and the first place that came to her mind was the forest. Her paws flew above the ground and Ava found herself in the forest within a few seconds. She saw Abigail in the distance waiting for her. As she was approaching her, she heard the rustling of bushes and leaves around her. Ava felt scared because she didn't know what it was; after all, it could be the sounds of creatures that Abigail told her about.

-Disgusting – she mutters to herself in a low voice.

-I was waiting for you.

Ava jumped when she saw Abigail standing next to her.

-Let me show you the portal.

Ava wanted to ask Abigail several questions before jumping into action –Wait, Abigail! Why do you care so much about the forest?

Abigail paused for a second then turned to Ava. –I'm the guardian of this forest. And now you are too. As a guardian I have special powers. For example: I can run faster than other foxes, I glow in dark and I can control the weather.

Ava was surprised by Abigail's powers and she respected her even more now. Ava didn't know what her powers were but she was sure that one day she would be able to control them.

As they walked towards the portal Ava noticed that she could hear better than usual. Every rustle of leaves was now so loud, perhaps even too loud. Ava warned Abigail with the tip of her fluffy tail and she just nodded as a sign that she noticed the rustling too. After a few steps Abigail suddenly stopped. At first Ava was confused, but she didn't have time to think because black creatures, the size of an average dog, started crawling out of the bushes. Claws ready to fight, Abigail jumped on one of them and bit its leg. Ava had no choice but to do the same. She threw herself at the nearest one and knocked it to the ground. Letting out a yowl of pain the creature turned towards her, its tiny eyes were furious. Freeing itself, it threw Ava aside and in an instant was above her ready to strike. Ava kicked it in the stomach with her hind legs which sent it flying, and as it landed with a thud Ava ripped its belly with her claws. Before Ava could see if Abigail needed help one of the creatures jumped on her knocking her to the ground and Ava's head hit the ground. Ava felt weak and helpless. For a moment she thought she was done and closed her eyes ready for a punch, but the punch didn't come. She didn't even feel creature's weight on her. When she opened her eyes she saw a red tiger fighting two creatures with ease. Then she remembered Abigail and quickly looked for her. Not so far from her Abigail was struggling to fight two creatures so Ava rushed over to her. She leaped on one of

them and bit his leg hard. He let out a yowl of pain and ran off and other creatures followed him. At the end of the fight Ava was exhausted. She turned to the tiger who was walking towards them.

-Hi. My name is Jacob and I just had to say, you were great back there. – the tiger said with respect.

-Thank you for the compliment and for saving my head as well. – Ava said to the tiger then turned to Abigail – You didn't tell me there are more guardians in the forest!

-Well I didn't know either... – Ava didn't know why Abigail looked annoyed. Jacob was hire to help. Or so she thought...

-I think we should stick together in case those black ones come again. – Jacob said while his eyes were scanning the place for danger.

-I agree. By the way, do you know how to stop them? – Ava was curios if Jacob knew anything about that.

-Well... the portal is in the wall of a cave. I think we should be able to destroy it if we put a spell on it.

-I know a spell that might help. – added Abigail – But we need to get in there. Let's go, we don't have much time.

After some time they came across a stream and Ava realized how thirsty she was.

– Can we drink some water? My throat is dry as a desert!

When Ava bent her head toward the stream she saw herself in animal form for the first time. She had golden ears and a muzzle. Her eyes were of light blue color resembling a clear sky and she looked like a wolf.

-Hurry up Ava! We have to go. – She heard Abigail calling her.

-I'm coming! – Ava quickly lapped some water and ran to others. After a few minutes they reached the cave Jacob mentioned earlier. It was so dark inside but thanks to Abigail they had some light. The portal was big, much bigger then Ava expected it to be. Seconds later black creatures came out of it.

-Here's the plan. You and Jacob distract them while I put the spell on the portal. Got it? – Abigail said to Ava.

Ava and Jacob nodded and ran in different directions and Abigail ran straight to the portal. Ava lunged at one of them and clawed its back. It let out a cry but before Ava could continue with her attack another one jumped on her. She found herself on the cold hard ground face to face with that black monster. Before it could bit her, she clawed its belly with her hind legs and pushed him away from her with front legs. It landed with a thud and ran away. Suddenly Ava felt sharp teeth in her hind leg

and she let out a yowl. She turned furiously to her attacker. With unsheathed claws Ava scratched his cheek hard and knocked it to the ground. A second after, one of the creatures let out such a terrible scream that Ava thought her ears will explode. She turned her head toward the portal and saw that it had huge cracks. Abigail was standing next to it looking happy. “ That must be the spell she was talking about!” Ava thought. She looked around and saw that all the creatures were looking at the portal with horror in their eyes. They started running into the portal and after a few seconds it exploded. Ava, Jacob and Abigail just stared at each other in shock. “ Did we just win? ” Ava wondered...

-We won! – Jacob shouted – We did it!

The three of them celebrated and several hours after they said goodbye.

-We’ll meet again, right? – Jacob suddenly asked.

-Sure! I mean we need to protect the forest together. – Ava responded. She couldn’t wait to see what tomorrow would bring to her, the guardian of the forest...

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mentor: Katija Tefik - Baćac

institution: OŠ "Ivo Lola Ribar" Labin

## HENRY'S KEY

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In an old town somewhere far away in Norway, lived a woman named Mary. Mary was like all the other women in her village, but she differed in one thing, happiness. Women in her village were always happy and socialized with their families, went on trips, picnics and enjoyed together, but unfortunately Mary had no one to enjoy with. It wasn't always like that, she had a dear husband who would do anything for her, but unfortunately he died a long time ago in a fire. Years have passed since that happened, so she learned how to live alone and be an independent woman. Before her husband Henry passed away, he gave her a strange key that he bought with the money he barely got. The key was supposed to be her birthday present. Henry gave it to her before he died but unfortunately she lost it. Mary had always wondered what was so special about that key, and she was about to find out.

One day Mary was cleaning her house and found a box, on her attic, that she never noticed was there before. She wanted to open it but it was locked. Mary didn't have anything to open it with, so she just left it on the attic. After cleaning the house, Mary decided to relax and take a bubble bath. She just wanted to sit down, read her book and enjoy the evening. Mary filled the bathtub and fell asleep immediately after getting in because she was exhausted. After waking up, she was all sweaty and the house was pitch black. The water was full of blood and Mary couldn't figure out where all the blood came from. She immediately got out of the bathtub and checked if it was hers but saw that it was not. The blood was dripping from the ceiling above and then she realized that it was coming from the attic. Mary immediately put on her clothes and headed upstairs. When she got there, blood was dripping from the box she had found earlier but could not unlock. Mary knew that she had to unlock it somehow but didn't know how. She tried opening it with a hairpin, screwdriver, she even smashed it with a hammer but it didn't work. If the box was in the house, there must also be a key. So she told herself that she would start looking for it the next morning. Mary was tired from thinking and immediately fell asleep. After laying down something woke her up in the middle of the night. There was a figure of a man standing in front of the bedroom door, calling her to go to the attic with him.

Mary got up from the bed and followed him to the attic where the strange box was. That figure was holding a key in his hand, it was a strange shaped key. He unlocked the box with it and everything inside was black, as if there was no end. A black figure entered the box and suddenly everything began to collapse. Mary woke up and realized that it was all a dream, but still it seemed to her as if she had already seen that key somewhere. In the morning, she was curious to open the box. Would it be the same thing inside or just another one of her silly dreams? Mary looked for the key everywhere, but she couldn't find it. She was already tired from everything, but when passing by the kitchen table, she noticed a key on it, the same as the one from her dream. Now she remembered that when Henry gave her the key he said "It will only appear when you need it the most". Since she could never find it, means that she didn't need it until now. Mary immediately ran to the attic and took the key with her. When she got to the box she put the key inside and unlocked it. It was like in her dream, pitch black in the box but still it seemed as if you could fully fit in it. Since Mary didn't want to go into the box, she threw a small piece of paper to see if it would stay on the surface or sink deep inside. The piece of paper didn't even touch the box and already disappeared in that blackness. Whatever she threw inside it would disappear. So she decided to lock the box and not touch it again. As she was about to lock it, Henry's key fell inside. That wasn't good, but she couldn't do anything to bring it back so Mary closed the box and left it on the attic. After that, her boring life continued, at least that's what she thought. Exactly 5 days have passed since Henry's key fell into the box. Mary was sitting on her armchair in the living room watching television when someone rang her doorbell. She wondered who could be knocking on her door so late so she went to open it. Mary saw her dead husband standing right in front of her. No doubt, it was him. From head to toe it was him. Mary thought she was dreaming because she was sure he had died in the fire that day but she was looking at him and could not believe her eyes. Mary was shocked when she heard Henry's voice shaking and asking if he could come in. Letting him in, still thinking it was a dream, he sat down on the armchair. He stared at the television and sat like that without saying anything. Mary asked him if he wanted something to drink but Henry just kept quiet, whatever she asked him he wouldn't answer. After an hour, Henry was repeating the same word over and over again, just saying "key, key, key..." and he wouldn't stop. Mary still couldn't believe her husband was back, because he wasn't, it just wasn't him. He looked the same, but in his soul something was just different. She let him stay on the couch while she went to her room and decided to search the Internet for boxes like hers. Mary even went to look at her family albums and found the



box in the picture where Henry's grandmother was. His grandmother was moved to the hospital so the doctors could take care of her because of her sickness. Mary decided to visit her and ask if she knew anything about that box. Mary headed to the hospital and as soon as she arrived she started asking Grandma questions. Mary told her everything about Henry and about the box, but grandmother said that all around the world, there exists mysterious boxes that are gates to other dimensions. Every box has her own dimension and the one that Mary has is a dimension from which lost demons return to Earth looking like people who have died. Mary had to hide the box somewhere where no one could find it and close Henry inside of it. Mary didn't want to close him because this way she had at least a little hope that he was alive, he was hers everything, but what has to be done, has to be done. Right after that, she rushed home and saw that Henry was not there on the couch. She panicked because she didn't know where he was, so went up to the attic. Henry was standing over the box and repeated the same words again, almost as if he was hypnotised. Mary needed to react quickly so she started running towards Henry and pushed him into the box. He disappeared in a second, as if he was never there. She remembered that Henry's grandmother had said that she has to get rid of the box somewhere where no one would ever find it.

She took the car keys and put the box in her car then immediately headed towards the sea. When Mary arrived, she took her dad's little boat and took the box with her. While sailing for hours, she sailed so far that there was no land around her. Mary took the box and threw it deep into the ocean then came back happy to have solved it all. She took a shower, sat on the couch and watched TV. Mary was happy that everything was over, but didn't know that while she was resting, another mysterious key appeared on her bedside cabinet.

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mentor: Ružica Lušić

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## I AM SO CONFUSED

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Where is she?

I've asked myself while looking through the classroom. I knew that she was shy but she needs to come in the classroom. Even though it is hard. For me it was even harder. I've started school six days after moving to the town. Neither did I know the town or people or language. Kids here aren't even remotely friendly as they are in Balkans. I felt like I didn't fit here. I still don't feel like it. Kids aren't mean and they don't gossip but it is a small town so everyone knows everything about everyone. Minutes went by and she wasn't coming. We were all waiting. She was late. Teacher was late. Where is everybody? I was hoping that she would come because I needed her, I needed friends. Then the teacher came in. After the teacher she came in. She was completely opposite of my picture of her in my head. I imagined her as someone who was insecure, depressed, confused, as someone who wasn't confident. Someone who was a loser. Someone like me. When she introduced herself I was left speechless. She spoke English fluently even though she didn't learn it in school, her grandma taught her. In school she was learning French, German and she knew some Croatian. Maybe I can speak with her. She was from Italy. She is so pretty. She has blue eyes and dark curly hair. Her name was Fabiola. Maria, her mother doesn't live with them because she is in army and she is on mission. Abramo, her father is a pharmacist. She has three brothers and a sister. To me Fabiola was interesting, unique, but nothing like me. She seems friendly, kind and calm. After the welcome, we went immediately to work. Other students, including Fabiola, were so talkative yet none of them talked with me. I was hoping that Fabiola would be my best friend, but she didn't even want to talk to me. Everybody talked with her and they all became friends. They accepted her so quickly. To this day they still haven't accepted me. We go in the same class for three and a half years and they talked to me maybe for seventeen minutes in total when they needed homework and other projects. It isn't fair. For some people life is hard, for the others it's a piece of cake. I don't know Fabiola's life story and I bet it's perfect. Mine was perfect too until we moved here, in UK because of my sister. Now she lives in a hospital and is waiting for bone marrow. Doctors said that here treat-

ments are better. My dad got a job and we moved. My family was happier in Croatia, we lived together in one house. Now my mother is with my sister, Martina in hospital. My mother doesn't want to admit that she is exhausted. I would like to take over Martina's pain and sadness. She is getting better but that takes too long if you ask me. Everything was better in Croatia. People were better. My friends from school were better. I felt more secure with them. We lost contact a few months after moving. It could be worse. Music helps. School orchestra is fine. There we also have a new student. He plays violin like me. He is my partner, we sit together. I don't know his name yet. He is really good. He finished music school. It would be nice if he could show me some things that I have problems with. I have finished four grades of music school. I didn't manage to finish all six grades because we moved. I miss my teacher. It is very hard playing without someone to show you your mistakes and how to fix them.

In school I talked to Fabiola. After our small talk my thoughts about her changed. Orchestra became more fun to me. Fabiola turned out to be an excellent student but nobody asked her for homework. That was weird to me. Weeks went by as usual and then out of a blue dad called me to pick up my younger sister. We needed to hop on a bus and come to the hospital because doctor Anderson had new news. When we got to the hospital we were all sitting by Martina and waiting for the news. Doctor Anderson came in the room with smile on his face, he always has it, but this one was different. He talked slowly so that everyone could understand him. The news were fantastic, Martina will have operation in two days. We were all happy. I saw that Martina was smiling and she haven't smiled since she got in the hospital, she looked beautiful with the smile on her face. We ordered pizza to celebrate. Later that night, at home I decided that I will start riding. There is, not so close, but not so far from us, equestrian center run by Mr. Smith. In the morning I told dad my decision. He neither loved nor hated it. Only thing he told me was to have fun. I took my bike and started cycling. It took me thirty-four minutes from home to the center. Horses were beautiful but the place looked vintage and deserted. I thought there was no one. Then I heard someone sweeping with a broom. I didn't know what should I do. I came all the way to just look at the horse then got scared and then left. No, not at all. I had to meet that someone. I think that it is Mr. Smith. Before I found solution, that someone came to me. Actually, that someone was Antonio, new boy from orchestra. He was confused why was I here but he greeted me anyway. I was also confused why was he here. Someone had to start conversation, this time it was me. I asked him what is he doing here and why is he sweeping. He explained to me that his grandparents know Mr. Smith, and Mr. Smith needs someone to clean and

feed horses, basically to take care of the equestrian center with him. Antonio's grandparents informed him about Mr. Smith search. Then Antonio applied. Since then he works at the equestrian center. When I asked him why would he want to do that, he said that he loves horses and needs money. I had the feeling that he wanted to change the subject of the conversation, so he asked me what was I doing here. I explained him what I decided last night. After a few seconds I was on a horse. Walking next to me he explained his story to me. His dad worked in a pharmacy for eight years, he was really enjoying being in pharmacy surrounded by different medicines. After giving birth to his youngest sister Bella his mother left them. Her departure broke his dad. He started selling medicines as drugs just so they can survive. Eventually that sale dragged him into addiction. His eldest brother ended up in the mafia. Then his mother remarried and officially gave them up. His dad ended up in a rehab. While he was recovering from drugs, Antonio and his siblings ended up with Antonio's grandparents. When his dad recovered, they sold house and moved. To this day Antonio is scared what will happen because his dad started drinking. He saves for rainy days. That is the reason why he works here. He also told me that his sister sometimes steals his money. And then he just shut up. I was too stunned to speak. I felt some guilt and explained everything about my sister. He was then too stunned to speak. I forgot about the time and it was already dark, I had to go to the hospital because tomorrow is the surgery.

In Martina's room was weird atmosphere. Dad suddenly went on a work trip. After wishing happy surgery I went home. In my head were many thoughts. At the end my life is great. Next day at the orchestra Antonio asked me to keep what he told me between us. Of course I didn't even mean to say anything. I asked for help with my vibrato on my violin. It sounded too broad and ugly. He agreed to help. We went to his house and he showed me some exercises. One of them was with the wall. I needed to lean violin against the wall and then practice like that. It helped a lot. It was really fun. We talked about my sisters surgery and I left. My sister's surgery went fine, they had some complications but now she's good. When I got home my dad called me to tell me where he was really at. He was in Croatia. He wasn't on a work trip. My aunt and grandpa ended up in a car accident. They didn't make it. Funeral is done, he is getting home tomorrow. And ended call. It was a big surprise and I didn't know what should I do. To tell the rest of the family or not? I tried calling back my dad but he didn't pick it up. I feel asleep in tears. I didn't go to the school because I felt so much sadness.

The next day in school everybody was asking me why I wasn't in the school, and is it truth that I have cancer and why did I punch Fabiola. I never miss school and they never ask me anything. I was so confused. Something felt off. I asked them, where did they get that information from? Fabiola told them that information. I wasn't sure why was she making that up. I was so pissed of. Why would I punch her? I wanted to ask her about lies she spread in school but I couldn't find her. Teacher came and called me, he told me that I have to go to the principal's office. There was Fabiola covered in bruises and scares. Nothing was clear to me. Fabiola told her story, the story was fictional. She said that I was raiding horses alone and she wanted to ride, I didn't let her ride and then I punched her. I was taken aback by that story. Then I told them when was I raiding horses, about my sister and her leukemia. Fabiola then started crying and yelling how I was lying. The principal was on her side because she really looked really hurt. An investigation will start so they found out the truth. I was confused because I didn't hurt her but someone did and it's bad. The principal told us to go home. Tomorrow will be a meeting with the parents.

My dad didn't come yet so I went to Antonio's house to get my bow because I left it there. In front of his house was police. There was also Fabiola. I was shocked. They were siblings. Her life wasn't perfect. Her mother left them. Her father is an alcoholic who punched her and now what. She lied about everything. What is happening? Police handcuffed their dad. They were all crying. Policeman told me to go home. I was so confused. Are they going to a foster home? What is happening? Who was I supposed to call? What am I supposed to do? I am confused on another level. I went to Mr. Smith but he had a heart attack. After a few days in front of Antonio and Fabiola's house was a for sale sign. I am so confused. Months went by and don't know anything about it.

Where is he?

Where is she?

author: Sofija Močinić

mentor: Ajrin Floričić

institution: OŠ Vladimira Nazora, Potpićan

## I'LL BE WATCHING

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Two months ago, I was in the kitchen making myself some coffee before work. I took a sip as I walked towards the door, when I noticed Lynn, my wife, peeking at me from around the corner. I could only see her eyes and a strand of her long dark hair; the rest of her body was hidden. I nearly spilled my coffee when I saw her.

“Geeze, Lynn,” I said, wiping a few drops of coffee from my pants. “You scared the soul out of me.”

She immediately popped out of view like a little kid that had been caught. I heard her scurry off towards the living room, and by the time I reached the front door, she was gone. I shouted that I loved her as I shut the door, and I could hear her laughing. By the time I got home, she was her normal self. We didn’t bring it up again.

The next incident happened three days later. It was around 2 am and I had woken up to get a drink. I was standing in the kitchen when I felt like I was being watched.

I looked down at the floor and saw Lynn’s smiling face staring back. She was peeking at me from the other side of the kitchen island, with wide unblinking eyes. I screamed. At the sound of my scream, Lynn scuttled backwards out of my view, her hands and feet smacking the floor as she hurried out of the kitchen on all fours. I didn’t run after her. I just stood there frozen in shock, wondering what had possessed her to do that.

Eventually, I went back upstairs. When I got to our bedroom, Lynn was asleep. Or at least pretending to be. I stood there for a while, watching her to be sure she really was asleep.

The next morning, I decided to ask her about it.

“What was that about last night?”

She frowned, shaking her head like she had no clue what I was referring to.

“You were peeking at me again. From over there.” I said, pointing to the spot where she was.

She followed my gaze, and when she looked back at me, she burst out laughing.

“You creep me out sometimes, you know that?” I spoke.

“You creep me out all the time. So, I guess we’re even.” She replied.

I kept thinking about how creepy it was seeing her grinning from behind the island like that and hearing the sounds her hands made as she crawled away. I told myself she was just trying to be silly.

Soon I started seeing her peeking at me more often. I didn't understand why she was doing it, but it clearly made her happy. I just hoped she would tire of the game quickly.

Lynn didn't peek at me for the next two weeks. We were watching a show one night and I jokingly said that I hadn't seen her peeking at me lately. She looked up at me with a small smile and said, "Maybe I've just gotten better at it."

For the next few days, I couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said. Was she still peeking at me when I wasn't looking and if so, what was she getting out of this? I started to feel paranoid, constantly checking whether she was watching me.

Then a few days ago things got much worse....

Around 9 pm I hopped in the shower and as I was washing myself, I felt like I was being watched. I slowly opened my eyes and almost had a heart attack.

Lynn was peeking from behind the shower curtain, her head stretched into the shower, leaving just her body outside. Her mouth hung open in a grin, eyes wide and red, as if she hadn't blinked in a while. I screamed. She didn't move nor did her smile falter. She looked completely deranged.

After what felt like forever, she slowly pulled her head back out of the shower, and I watched her figure through the curtain as she moved towards the bathroom door.

A second later the bathroom door slammed shut, I jumped out of the shower to lock the door and stayed inside the bathroom for over an hour pacing, stopping to listen at the door every few minutes trying to hear her.

Suddenly I heard a faint moan, so I pressed my ear against the door. I couldn't hear anything, but I envisioned Lynn standing on the other side, giggling at her joke.

I was beyond outraged for being made to feel scared in my own house. All for what? Some joke?

"This is getting really annoying." I snapped waiting for her to apologize. Instead, I heard silence.

I decided I wasn't going to spend the night hiding in my bathroom, so I got down on my knees and looked under the door. I half expected to see Lynn peeking back at me but thankfully I didn't. I stood up and as I was about to yank the door open, I heard another moan, but this time I was able to tell where it was coming from. I turned around to the closet door and locked eyes with Lynn who was peeking out from the slight gap.

Her eyes were still wide and her mouth still hanging open in the most grotesque smile ever. Her body trembling with delight, as if she couldn't contain her excitement.

Somehow, I was able to pull the bathroom door open and I ran as fast as I could straight to my car. I could hear her laughter behind me. Still in my boxers and with my hair damp, I drove to my brother's house. He was surprised to see me but told me to stay as long as I needed and lent me some clothes. I told him Lynn and I had a fight, but I didn't want to talk about it.

I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. Knowing she'd been in there with me the entire time made my skin crawl. Chris ended up giving me a sleeping pill, so I was able to get a little rest.

In the morning I contemplated calling her when that familiar feeling came over me. I was being watched. I could see her staring through the window with that same gaping smile. I didn't know how long she'd been there, but something told me she'd been there quite a while. I jumped up from the couch.

"Lynn! Are you crazy? Just go home!" I shouted.

She didn't move, and her expression never changed.

Chris called my name and I turned to see him hurrying down the steps. When I turned back to the window Lynn was gone.

I called out of work that day. I didn't want to face Lynn as I was really starting to believe something was irreversibly wrong with her. By noon I figured I was ready to confront her.

I stayed with Chris for another night. When I woke up yesterday thankfully, I didn't see Lynn's face watching me through the window.

At lunch, I had a long conversation with Chris where I tried to explain everything to him, but he was skeptical.

"I saw her this morning" he paused for a moment, "she seemed tired and miserable and not at all as you described her"

I didn't answer so he left.

I sat for a while trying to figure out what to do next. I didn't want to go home, but I had to. Hadn't I sworn an oath to love her through sickness and health?

I had to get her help, but I didn't know where to start. I didn't want to call the police, and besides, what would I tell them? That my wife was being creepy?

I drove to my house this morning. The front door was ajar, and for a split second, I thought I'd see her staring through the gap. I pushed the door open and was immediately hit with the stench of rot. I moved through each room, checking any place where she might hide. She wasn't downstairs.



On my way upstairs my shoes crunched over pieces of glass, and I noticed that one of my wedding portraits had been smashed. I climbed the rest of the steps and checked the spare bedroom and the bathroom, but they looked completely untouched.

She wasn't there so I went into our bedroom to pack some clean clothes for myself. When I opened the closet, I came across the source of the smell. On the closet floor were at least a dozen small eyeballs, all laid out in pairs. I hurriedly grabbed my clothing and was ready to leave when I felt it. I was being watched. I turned around and finally saw what I had missed. Under the bed, on her side, watching me with excitement, with those same wide eyes and huge smile was Lynn. Everything in me told me to run, but I couldn't. This was my wife. No matter how deranged, I had to help her.

"Honey. I just want to help, can you let me do that?" I asked. I had taken a few steps forward, approaching her like a dangerous animal.

A tiny hiccup escaped her wide-open mouth and I had to resist the urge to run. Her shoulders were starting to quiver, and her eyes grew as large as saucers.

I crouched down so I could see her better, and I immediately saw the blood. Her hands were covered in it. They trembled more the closer I got, as if she was barely able to contain herself.

"Lynn. Are you hurt?" I said. She bobbed her head again, her bloody fingers moving occasionally grazing her chin, leaving smears of blood on her skin.

I scooted closer and reached out to her. The excited hiccupping sounds got louder, and her hands shook, fingers flexing. It was then that I could see the blood oozing from in between her fingers.

"Oh my God, Lynn. You're bleeding." I said. Instinctively I reached out to take her hand, but before I could even touch her, her hand sprang out towards me. A sharp pain shot through my arm, and I fell back. My arm burned, and I could see the blood dripping down onto the carpet.

I looked back at her in shock and saw her grinning madly, her fingers clutching a large shard of glass.

I got to my feet and began walking backwards down the hall, afraid to take my eyes off her.

Lynn started scooting fast out from under the bed, soon she had crawled out completely, the glass shard still in her fist. Her face was twisted in rage. Her whole body was tense. Blood ran down her fingers and onto the floor.

Lynn bobbed her head, stretching her mouth open so wide that her chin seemed to touch her chest. "I only want to help" I said. She slowly lifted the glass and then

she started sprinting towards me, grinning with utter excitement. My body took over and I flew down the stairs skipping two or three steps at a time. I made it to the front door before I felt her leap onto my back, wrapping her arms around my neck. I shook her off me, knocking her to the floor. I felt pain in my back, but I tore open the front door and bolted to my car. I drove straight to the ER. The police went to the house to search, but of course Lynn wasn't there.

I drove to a motel an hour away; I didn't want to go back to my house. This is where I've been for the last 4 hours. I thought maybe the police would find her and get her the help she needed.

But now I'm not so sure. Because I just got a text from an unknown number.

Just three words:

"I found You."

author: Petra Tešija  
mentor: Ana Šapina  
institution: OŠ Brezovica

## IN MEMORY OF

---

Losing someone we hold dear often leaves an unforgettable mark on our hearts and such is the case with my brother Ante. In his 16 short years of life, Ante demonstrated phenomenal strength, intelligence, and a unique spirit that set him apart from his peers. Despite dealing with the challenges of cancer and lung disease, he faced life with grace and strength that left a lasting outcome on all those who were blessed to know him.

Ante's existence was defined by difficulty, yet he welcomed each day with a quiet spirit that left an unforgettable mark on all who knew him. A life shadowed by illness could have produced anger, but Ante's spirit spread out a rare warmth and acceptance. He never complained about the hand he was dealt, never grieved the limitations that set him apart from his peers. Instead, he embraced the uniqueness of his journey, turning difficulty into a source of strength. Unable to partake in the games of childhood, he found comfort in the pages of his cherished books. While other children reveled in the friendship of sports fields, Ante navigated the terrain of his imagination, crafting worlds and stories that outshined the boundaries of his physical limitations. His love for learning became his hideaway, a sanctuary that allowed him to soar beyond the boundaries of his fragile body. History, in particular, became his anchor—a subject that not only fascinated him but also served as a source of inspiration. The stories of battles fought and won mirrored his inner struggles, transforming his room into a haven of knowledge and strength. Ante's conversations carried the weight of wisdom far beyond his years. His sharp intellect and insatiable curiosity allowed him to engage with adults on various topics. He spoke not from a place of arrogance but from a genuine thirst for knowledge. A friend, a colleague who has always been his own, including the first day of the freshman year in high school when students introduced themselves to each other in class. Always poetic and rebellious he said: "I am Ante Tešija, a wanderer, a wandering shadow, a blowing wind, ordinary dust on Earth." They all looked at each other in amazement and wondered what he wanted to tell them. Only a little later during the teaching

of other subjects, mostly Croatian, English and History students realized that their friend was extremely well-read, smart and very intelligent.

From Ante's introduction essay, it is not difficult to see how special, different, and yet simple he was. He was afraid that he would not do and achieve everything he set out to do, and how much he had achieved in his 16 years and how many lessons he had left us all as a legacy. Ante was above all a good friend. And now it's really not a cliché that is used when someone leaves us. When someone did not understand something about the schoolwork, he always helped, as much as he could, especially in History. For him, friendship also meant brutal honesty. We may not have liked his views and criticism, but we know that he was well-intentioned and consistent in everything. What Ante particularly stood out for was his general knowledge, he read a lot, he used some professional terms that we had not heard of or we had heard them for the first time with him, and the fact that no one but him understood them made them for us somewhat funny. He was very interested in politics, law and history. In the first grade of high school he also went to the county competition in History. He was full of interesting stories from the past, be it about a cow disease on an island or something related to relatively recent history such as world wars. He also loved literature, especially foreign literature. Ever since the first grade of high school, whenever students had the so-called readers' persuasions from the Croatian language, they were more afraid of Ante's reaction than the professor's because he would always have some remark or inevitable critical review of their presentations. After class during the break, he talked to his teacher about David Attenborough's documentary when, as the teacher says, he showed not only his excellent knowledge of the English language but also his philosophical side. We all learned that for Ante, the question "How are you?" doesn't exist. If we even asked him how he was, he would mostly ignore us or just look at us with those big, deep eyes of his. Ante didn't lack a dose of humor either. Students remember one time when they were with him in a Croatian reading group, he sent them so much material that no one but him could manage. And when they were done with the task, he wrote to them somewhat nostalgically at the end: "Ladies and gentlemen, the hour has struck. Our task is done. Just like summer, a great novel or a great vacation, all good things come to an end. Who knows, maybe we'll get together again in another group, and until then it was my honour."

With the burden of illness from birth, he was full of life energy like few others. As if that illness was not a burden for him, but an additional motivation to go beyond his limits, to progress... He loved life and fought. Sometimes he was ironic, he didn't

let himself be swayed, he stayed in his opinion just as he stayed in the fight against the disease. With first, and then the other. Ante invested an incredible amount of effort to come to school regularly, none of us even know how much he suffered in order to participate in an everyday activity that for the rest of us is ordinary and sometimes tiring. Every day was a victory for him. When we experience an illness, we are happy when it passes and when we are ourselves again. Unfortunately, Ante's illnesses did not go away. The evil one became stronger and stronger. Our fighter got tired and could not go on. His undefeatable spirit collapsed. It just didn't work out any further. As he faced the complicatedness of his existence, Ante appeared not as a victim of circumstance but as a fighter. His strength spoke volumes about the depth of his character, outshining the limitations set by his health. In the quiet aftermath of his passing, I find relief in the knowledge that Ante, the fighter, is now at peace. His struggles, a chapter in the story of his life, have given way to a peacefulness that dodged him in his earthly journey. The weight of oxygen tanks and the hum of medical equipment have been replaced by the gentle rustle of peace—an eternal calm. The lessons he gave, the strength he demonstrated, and the love he spread out continue to echo through the corridors of our shared memories. In every chapter of his life, from the laughter-filled moments to the silent struggles. His journey, though short, was filled with moments that illuminated the darkest corners of our lives. Ante's love for learning was not confined to the pages of history books; it extended to the lessons life presented. His openness to experiences, his curiosity about the world, and his ability to find joy regardless of difficulties became a profound education for those privileged to witness his journey. In honouring his memory, we strive to carry forward these lessons, allowing them to shape our perspectives and actions. Ante was not just a brother, he was a beacon that guided me through life's uncertainties with his unwavering courage and optimism. Though he may no longer walk beside us, his spirit stays in echoes of shared conversations, the pages of well-worn books, and the unbeatable strength that he shared with those who were privileged to know him. Ante's legacy lasts not in the echoes of medical machinery or the walls of a hospital room but in the strength of his soul, the wisdom in the books he cherished, and the dreams that live on in the hearts of those who loved him. I find solace in the realization that though gone Ante's light will forever shine in the stories, the peace, and the quiet he so deeply cherished.

author: Lea Brebrić  
mentor: Ana Šapina  
institution: OŠ Brezovica

## IN THE END

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People always say that in the world, there always needs someone with power to keep it in line. Everyone thinks that if they have power, they will be able to control the fate of this world, or at least, the fate of their country. I can say from first-hand experience it's not true. When something is bound to happen, it will. Fate doesn't listen to presidents, or the government. The power figures we know are there to look rich and act smart, but when it's time to do something, they send someone else to do it. Just so they don't get their hands dirty. Since the responsibility of protecting the human race from the infected has fallen on our shoulders, nothing has changed. The government still lies. The virus keeps spreading. And people keep losing their loved ones.

I woke up pretty late this morning. I checked my phone. 8am. Practice was at 6 sharp. Which means I royally messed up. I left my phone on silent the entire night. I also had 14 missed calls from some of my teammates. The base was awfully quiet. Usually, there'd be people walking in the hallways. Soldiers going about their day. I sighed, got up and quickly put my cargo pants and uniform on. I had to prepare myself for some kind of punishment... If I stay quiet and accept it, my superiors might let me go with "a slap on the wrist". I shoved my phone into one of the pockets on my cargos and opened the door. Before I even managed to step outside, a tall figure showed up in front of me and a pair of large pair of hands roughly pushed me back.

*"Luka... Listen, be quiet, okay?"*

*"What's going o-"*

I was cut off by him pressing his had onto my mouth. We met in high school, yet he somehow always managed to catch me off guard. He quickly shut the door and locked it. He seemed anxious, which was weird, as he was usually pretty calm.

*"The virus... it's in our base... most of us got infected. No one knows how it happened. Like... Overnight. Literally. I tried calling you, but you didn't answer..."*

*"Yeah, I... left my phone on silent... Sir... I apolo-"*

*"Don't call me Sir. And don't apologize. If you did go out there, I suppose you would've probably gotten infected as well."*

I stayed silent to let his words sink in... most of the base. Got infected. Overnight. Literally overnight. I didn't even realize I was staring off until he started moving around the room, grabbing everything that we might need. A med kit and a sandwich were all he found. Though he quickly put the sandwich down. He probably realized it could be infected too. "Come on. We'll take Ford from our garage and get out of here. And... Hopefully survive." I nodded, following him as he left the room. Once we were out in the hallway, we saw a few of our infected teammates. They were a lot like the zombies in the movies, except... Well, they looked normal. Just acted... rabid, I guess. I took a pack of gums out of my pocket and offered it to Michael.

"You know you're not allowed to have stuff like that during training, right?" But he did take one. I shrugged, taking one as well.

"If nobody knows, it's allowed."

"Tell that to our captain."

He nudged me with a quiet chuckle. A small smile crept on my face as well. After a bit more of sneaking through a few rooms, we made it to the garage. And found a rusty old Ford GPW. I wasn't sure if it was fixed or not. Hopefully it was.

I got into the driver's seat; Michael next to me.

"You think this old thing is fixed?" He asked me, checking his seatbelt to see if it would break.

"I surely hope it is."

I managed to find the keys somewhere in the backseat. There were a few rifles and some ammunition too. Lucky us. After finally managing to start the car, I started driving. It was all fun and games until Michael spoke.

"I guess I'm a passenger princess now, huh?" Was this guy serious?

"Passenger prince, actually." I had to give him some kind of a reply, no? He didn't say anything back after that. Just chuckled.

After a long drive, and a long silence, he pointed out an abandoned building next to the road. But when it was time to stop, I discovered that the brakes weren't working. "Michael...? Uh, the brakes aren't really working..." I whispered, trying desperately to stop the car. That's when an idea came to my mind. "Get in the back, quickly. I'll crash into a tree with the passenger side..."

"Luka, I really, really... dislike you." He unbuckled his belt, got in the back behind me and fastened his seatbelt again. And when I saw a good tree to crash in, it felt like less than a second. I was pretty confident my seatbelt wouldn't break. I was so wrong.

When the impact came, it broke, and my head slammed against the steering wheel. The airbag didn't come out either. I guess the car wasn't fixed after all. If I had to be honest; I was surprised to stay conscious. Michael, though? He practically sprinted out of the car and opened the door on my side.

*"Luka, you better be-"*

*"I'm fineee..."* I cut him off. I wasn't fine. I couldn't even look at him. I kept my head on the steering wheel. My nose was probably bleeding. It felt broken in 20 different places if that was even possible.

I lifted my head up and slowly pushed myself out of the car, almost face-planting the second I tried to walk. Michael caught me.

*"You don't look fine to me, buddy."* He lifted me up slightly, putting my arm over his shoulder to help me walk. Looks like that hit on the head was a bit worse than I initially thought. I wanted to lighten the mood a bit.

*"So, you do like me?"*

*"I like you alive."*

*"As if you weren't panicking about me being okay around... Two minutes ago."*

*"Hmpf."*

He led me into the building, but by that time I could already walk on my own. A bit slower than usual, but still. We discovered that this building used to be a prison. Walking through a hallway, in between a lot of cells, I noticed a relatively good-looking one. It even had a clean bed. Well, at least the sheets were white, I didn't know if it was actually clean. I gave him a nudge. *"Aye, I found you a room, Lt."* Noticing that I sounded drunk and tired, I stopped speaking. *"You hit your head a bit too hard, Sergeant."* Michael chuckled, leading me forward. After finding a clear spot, which was fairly covered, he sat me down and put out two bedrolls. I haven't even noticed he had them until now...

After that, I don't remember much. I know that Michael went hunting and caught a deer and that he sent me to get some water from a nearby stream. I also remember laying in the bedroll later, at night, looking up at the sky. At the stars. Remembering the times when I was a clueless kid who didn't have to worry about anything. Now? The entire future depends on the performance of soldiers across the world who were not infected. Said future doesn't seem too bright either. Listening to the radio, judging from the rapidly accelerating numbers of the infected people, we aren't as sharp as before the apocalypse. We can't control this anymore. It's taking a turn where it's too hard to control. We even have the virus in our base. The News are telling people we have everything



under wraps. This was everything except that. What were they thinking? An entire apocalypse being born from what was supposed to be a war, using something more destructive than a nuclear weapon could ever be. A virus. An infection. Innocents are suffering and nobody could do anything about it. Not me, not Michael. And definitely not the government or the president.

If this continues, we're all going to die in the end.

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mentor: Ružica Lušić

institution: Osnovna škola Ivana Kozarca, Županja

## KUSTURA, RAOS AND WOOLF

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Summer. Hvar Island. Dad stepped on a sea urchin again. 14 years of summer vacation, 14 less sea urchins in the Adriatic Sea. Mom and me, standing in the town's square and waiting for dad to go into the small pharmacy. The Sun is burning our skin, time is still, every person, movement, action around us seems to be in slow motion. Before I could even react, my mom took me to the nearest café, ordering a lemonade for me. Numerous tables surrounded me, each one of them empty. Soon after that, a young man approached the table next to me. His hair was tied, and he had a cigarette, which he put out as soon as he sat down. He ordered a beer and didn't seem to mind the world around him. To me, he looked familiar. His tattoo...I've seen it somewhere. He lit another cigarette, drank a little bit of his beer, then he turned to me asking me a question: "Do you believe in elves"? I turn to him and say; "Occasionally". He seemed a little taken aback, like we were playing some sort of game and I had said the wrong answer. He added: "You can't occasionally believe in elves! Do you believe in them, yes or no?". Wow, he's really worked up over this, I thought. So, I responded: "Well, yes." and he seemed pleased. A smile appeared on his face as he leaned in a little closer. "Did you know that every time you pick a four-leaf clover, an elf is born?" he remarked, an obvious tone of joy lacing his voice. I smiled back and nodded. Now he seemed surprised. Did he expect me not to know? Is this a fact that not that many people would know? "How do you know that?" he asked, his tone seeming genuinely curious. With a slightly smug expression on my face, and a considerably proud tone I responded: "I read that in the picture book by Slaven Kustura". He was gleaming with joy, his face lit up, and I have rarely seen someone look so proud. He put his cigarette out and added: "Trust me, for as long as you believe in magic, it exists. Somewhere, in someone". It didn't take a genius to realize he was the book's author. So, it didn't take me long to realize that. I wanted to tell him something else, perhaps spark conversation beyond this small bit, but before I could even say anything, a grumpy looking man sat down at another table near me. He had a moustache and a knitted beanie. I thought that was strange. A knitted beanie? During sweltering heat? Seriously? I couldn't dwell on it too long because it wasn't

my business, but I thought it was strange. He looked sort of nervous, like something bugged him. Honestly, I would be bugged too if I wore a knitted beanie in the middle of summer. He threw his newspaper on the table and ordered a coffee. Immediately, he demanded his coffee be made better than the last time he was here, because he won't drink "garbage". Upon reading his newspaper, he complained, mumbling to himself. He looked at me and spoke with a tone of clear annoyance: "Lies, lies and nothing but lies. I'll ask for a refund on these newspapers, and the coffee too. It isn't much better anyway". Even after that short angry rant, he smiled and asked: "Do you happen to be an 8th grader?" "Yes, why?" I added. What a random question to ask a person you just met for the first time ever. "And have you been on your senior trip?" he asked. I nodded, trying to come off as polite as possible, not exactly knowing how to act in this situation. He chuckled a little before speaking, his tone calmer now: "You see, it's not easy growing up. Your entire life is ahead of you, and you must fight to make it all worthwhile. So, start on time, begin your fight for your life early and make your life worth living. The transition from childhood to adulthood is hard and demanding. I didn't want to grow up, so mentally, I stayed a child. Good luck and remember me on September 22nd". Concluding his little monologue, he left, and I watched him slowly fade away. It was only then that I realized the man I've been talking to this entire time was Predrag Raos, author of the novel "September 22nd". Good Lord. Not even getting to drink half my lemonade, a tall woman took a seat at the table next to me. She wore a long white dress and that wasn't the only thing differentiating her from the others. Her hair was carelessly tied up and she had a beauty that you'd see in old renaissance period portraits of royalty. She was pale and she looked unreal, like a being from another planet. Her quiet nature, the sort of shy aura she had, it all made her stand out. The waiter came to ask her for her order, what she wanted to drink, and he was met with silence. Not even the slightest gaze at him, like he was invisible. So, he left and after a moment she turned to me and spoke: "It's really lovely out here". Wow, she can talk? As rude as it sounded, she truly seemed like she was unable to speak. Everything about her came off that way. I just nodded, what was I supposed to say? Everything I would have said would have just been a dead end. So, I started a conversation. "Where are you from?" I asked. Her British accent was unmistakable. It sounded different than many accents I've heard, it was posh in a way I haven't commonly heard. "From the past." she added. What? Can somebody check up on this woman? She didn't seem entirely present. I didn't know what to say, I really wanted to keep up the conversation for some strange reason, but I didn't know what to ask her. So, I asked the most random question I could muster

up: “Are you tired”? I cringed internally. But what else was I supposed to ask? This woman wasn’t giving me much to work with and I truly couldn’t just make her give me something to ask her. Nonetheless, she responded: “Yes, very much so. I’ve been up, writing letters the entire night”. I had to pause for a moment. Did she just say she was writing letters? I’m starting to believe she might be from the past. “Sorry, did you say you’ve been writing letters?” I added curiously. She looked sort of taken aback, like she wasn’t expecting this question. “Why yes. I was writing to...a friend. She’s away in Persia.” her voice slightly trailed off as she spoke. She seemed like she was hiding something; I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I nodded, not knowing what to say again. It was quite awkward, though she seemed to be in her own world. She spoke before me, her voice unusually calm: “You must invest in different things in a friendship. Time, love, attention, respect...my friend Vita deserves that from me.” she spoke. Something about her seemed like she was hiding something, but who was I to ask her anything? I wouldn’t pry. Tracing back to her words, my breath caught in my chest. Vita. That name was familiar. Before I could even react, the woman was gone. That woman was Virginia Woolf, my favorite writer of all time. No, that couldn’t have been her. Virginia Woolf is long gone, it’s impossible that she would be out on an average day. So how could I ever explain what had just happened? Three authors of books I loved and enjoyed, all in the span of what couldn’t be longer than ten minutes. Oh Lord...was the sleep deprivation getting to me? I knew it probably wasn’t smart to stay up until 3 a.m. each night. After a few moments of self-enlightenment, I felt my eyes open. Quite literally. The world around me was not in slow motion, people were buzzing and the cafe I was in was not empty. Nothing was empty for that matter. In front of me were my parents, having a conversation and there was a lemonade in front of me. I must have fallen asleep for a few minutes and luckily nobody noticed. Oh well, now I have nothing to brag about.

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mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

## LEAVING IT IN THE PAST

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Evelynn set the table with fancy and expensive utensils, waiting for Rafael to arrive from work. Today is a special day for them. Evie hopes Rafael remembers why. It is their 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

For the past hour, Evie has been relighting the candles and rearranging the red roses and yellow daffodils patiently, waiting for her partner to arrive.

She remembers a time when Rafael would give her flowers every day like it was the most important day ever. She smiles sadly at the memory.

‘He will be here any minute now, it’s just traffic. He would never forget our anniversary.’ Evie thought to herself with an air of melancholic sadness.

Finally, after three hours of waiting, Rafael returns home with flushed cheeks. He barely even glances at Evelynn and sits at the opposite side of the table from where Evie sits. He starts devouring his food like someone who hasn’t eaten in weeks, while Evelynn barely touches her food. She always had a problem eating big portions of food. It was Rafael who always helped her finish her meal while holding her hand for comfort. He never complained about it until a few months ago.

Small talk never really worked for them, but that doesn’t mean Evelynn doesn’t try. She asks about his day at work, and he mumbles something incoherent, like always. In a way, she thinks he wishes not to talk to her, even though they’ve been together for four years now. Rafael finishes his meal, gets up, and takes his book about poetry on the way to their bedroom.

Evelynn sighs deeply and starts clearing the table and washing the dishes. While cleaning Rafael’s plate, she starts thinking. Once upon a time, long before her love became unrequited, Rafael would kiss her at the doorstep and talk about his day with an arm around her waist and a smile on his face. None of that happens anymore. She doesn’t remember the last time they laughed together. Actually, she doesn’t remember the last time she laughed. Every day before Rafael got home, Evelynn would wait by the doorstep like an excited child on Christmas. She would wear her best dress and set the table perfectly just for him to barely even notice it. He would be typing constantly on his phone and Evelynn would be reminded of all the messages that she sent that were left on delivered.

At night, when she is supposed to be asleep, she would weep for the love she once had but lost. Evelynn would turn around in their bed which was divided by an imaginary line, look at Rafael and think back to their childhood years. How does he not see the impact he has on Evelynn's life? How much she loves and cares about him. She loves him so much it hurts. She would do anything for him. Deep down she knows he doesn't truly love her. Not anymore at least; he tolerates her. Like most of the things she does. She bakes Rafael's favorite blueberry pie and he still doesn't thank her for her efforts. She knows her kind of love is special. That her love should be celebrated, for that kind of devotion and passion is hard to find nowadays. Rafael is just so much wiser and more sophisticated than Evelynn. How could she not be so madly in love with him from the deepest, most intimate parts of her heart?

While he is out in the world making friends, having the time of his life, where is Evelynn? She used to be the center of his world, the only person that would be able to make blood rush into his cheeks just by having that beautiful, happy smile of hers on her face. Now, she is just a person on the sidelines, watching his life like on a TV screen, begging for a few moments in it.

Where is the man who would delicately cover Evelynn's body in blankets like it was the most invaluable thing in the universe? The man who would look at her with such adoration and fondness when he assumed nobody was looking? Evelynn made sure to make him feel important and confident enough so that he was able to stand up for himself. She is the reason why he is so successful. She is the reason why he is so loved by everyone he meets.

Rafael probably assumes that Evelynn is happy in this kind of relationship. That she's content with being ignored every day. He doesn't know just how much influence Evelynn has on his private and social life. She cleans the house while he's gone; she makes sure there is a meal waiting for him every afternoon; she even puts in a good word every time she has a chat with his coworkers. Rafael couldn't possibly know how much his life would fall apart without Evelynn holding it together. What would Rafael do if she just... left? He wouldn't be able to stop her because he wouldn't even care. Evelynn would finally be able to pursue her dream of becoming a famous writer without anyone holding her back.

Evelynn decides then and there that if Rafael doesn't change his behavior towards her, she will leave. Move to another city. She never really wanted to stay in Manchester forever; only Rafael was able to make her stay. Well, he wasn't able to do even that. Besides, she always thought that Cagliari, a city in Italy, was the perfect place to start writing a novel. She'll just have to wait and see.

A day passes by. Rafael's behavior doesn't change. Evie decides to drop a few hints to him that she is going to leave soon. He doesn't notice. Three days go by; he doesn't notice. Evelynn starts packing her bags and books a flight to get away as soon as possible. Five days go by; nothing's changed. Seven days. Time is up.

Evelynn wakes up, gets dressed, and goes to the kitchen to make herself some breakfast. She makes an omelet and some pomegranate tea to help soothe her nerves. She hears her boyfriend of four years coming down the stairs, so she turns around and waits for him. Rafael sees Evie staring at him with almost no emotion. "Why are you just standing there? Did you make me breakfast? I have to get to work." He says passing her by to get to the kitchen.

"Why do you never tell me about your day anymore? And why don't I hear from your boss anymore?" Evelynn asks while lightly sipping her tea.

"What-"

She cuts him off by saying: "I'm leaving, and I'm going somewhere where you will not be able to find me. I wish you good luck for the rest of your life. Please, don't ever contact me again."

She turns on her heel and swiftly makes her way to the door but is stopped by Rafael's urgent exclamation: "Wait! Where are you going? Where is this coming from? Listen, why don't we sit down and have a cup of tea; talk this out, yeah? Like normal adults."

Evelynn eyes him while slowly sitting down at the kitchen counter. "Alright, let's start again. „Why do you never even bother to tell me about your day? Why do you never invite me to your job events as your plus one? Why don't you ever hug me anymore? Why do you keep ignoring me?"

Rafael sits on the chair opposite of her, pours himself a cup of tea and starts talking: "I don't ignore you Evelynn. I never did. I don't tell you about my day because it's always the same. I figured you'd get bored of hearing about it."

"Alright, that doesn't mean I don't like to listen to you talk and, by the way, you stopped doing that as well; talking to me I mean. Continue." She tells him, looking like she's on the verge of tears.

"I don't invite you to my business events because you always told me you didn't like them, so I thought I shouldn't bother even asking anymore."

Evie looks away for a moment and her voice trembles as she quietly mutters: "Yeah, but the thought matters. Continue."

Rafael looks at her like he's about to say something else but shakes his head. "I show you affection all the time, for God's sake you're making up something that's not

there. Stop playing the victim and make me some pancakes. You're stressing me out and it's not even 8 in the morning!" His voice gradually rises.

Evelynn chuckles in disbelief, stands up and says: "You don't care about me anymore, do you? You don't love me anymore. Did you find someone better than me? Is it that redhead that always stares at you with those wonderstruck eyes? Is it the girl that always takes away your attention the second she walks past you?" Her voice cracks as she holds back tears. Yet she still looks at him waiting for an answer.

"... " Rafael looks away guiltily.

Evelynn slowly turns away from him as tears spill down her face. She gets the urge to hurt him and curse him to Saturn but she restrains herself, for she does not have the time to deal with unintelligent men. Her taxi is waiting. She really thought she could fix her relationship, how naive of her.

"Goodbye, Rafalel." She says and walks away. She doesn't look back. She doesn't look back at the house that hurt her just as much as the man in it. She gets ready to start her new life in a new city far away from this horrid town that made her cry over the life she wished she could have. She will now have this life somewhere else. She finally gets to enjoy her life to its fullest as she has always dreamed of, in Italy, writing a bestselling novel.



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mentor: Sandra Brcko

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## LOST IN THE FARLAND

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One night an eight-year-old boy called Ethan was getting ready for bed. Thunder struck on the main road. Ethan was scared and jumped into his bed. The next evening he was getting ready for bed again but this time there was no thunder which is rare for Finland. Almost every day there are storms with a lot of thunder strikes in Finland. He could now finally sleep in peace, or could he?

He closed his eyes and he was imagining a lot of new animals that did not exist. He was exploring the world of imagination until it felt like it was actually real because he could touch and feel stuff. Places he saw were places from real life, such as forests, swamps and a village. He felt like it was autumn because the leaves were coloured. Ethan saw a village, so he rushed to it. He entered the village and saw real-life animals. In no time it got dark and from the sky, a deep voice said: "Ethan!"

He looked up in fear but saw nothing. Then there was the voice again: "Tomorrow, I will see you again!"

Ethan entered the house, saw a bed and thought of an idea. If he fell asleep, he would wake up to his real life. The next day Ethan woke up to a rainy day and noticed that he was still in this dream. He was sad and hungry. He started looking around to find some useful things. There were gardens with food like carrots, cabbages, apples, bananas and radishes.

He was excited to eat the food but after washing it, the food looked a bit funky. The colour was not correct or it was off. Still, he was too hungry, so he just tried the food and it was surprisingly good. He continued exploring this world and saw dragons, snakes, spiders and some creatures that he didn't recognize. Some of the creatures looked friendly while others were scary and dangerous.

In the swamp, there was a shiny light. He rushed over to see it but when he got there, there was no sign of it, the light just disappeared. Ethan was so confused that he thought that either he was hallucinating or going crazy. After exploring the swamp without succeeding to find something useful or interesting, Ethan saw the light once again. This time it was floating and moving around the village. He again rushed to the village only to see nothing. He decided to take a break in his house.

Before the night fell, he was getting cold, so he went to get three branches in the forest nearby. When he grabbed his first branch, he saw a dungeon. Scarily he entered it. In the dungeon, there were a lot of paths to go, and Ethan noticed a chest with supplies in one of them. In the chest, there was an axe, a spear, a shield and some healthy food. Ethan could not be happier. Once in his village again, he ate a fresh apple, feeling very happy but tired. He went to sleep.

In the night he heard yelling outside of the house. He quickly went to check and there was a big army of skeletons. Ethan geared up and engaged in a fight with skeletons immediately, slowly taking them down one by one. Skeletons were not so smart. Although skeletons were swinging swords, Ethan blocked each of their swings with his shield. After the skeletons were defeated, the same loud voice said: "Wave two."

Ethan got ready for the second battle, but this time there were zombies with armour and scary weapons. The zombies were smarter than the skeletons but once again Ethan was victorious.

The deep voice appeared again and said: "Wave three, the final wave."

In this last wave, there were zombies, skeletons and dragons. Ethan saw the light that was shining earlier and got an idea! He will reflect the light into the dragons' eyes using his shield to scare and confuse them. That is exactly what he did and the dragons flew away.

The zombies started to communicate among themselves, to form a plan but some zombies weren't too happy with the final plan. An internal fight among zombies started. As a result of that internal fight many of them were killed by their own teammates. That helped Ethan as he only had to deal with the rest of the zombies who were still alive. Ethan won but this last fight left him with some heavy scars. The pain was getting worse so he closed his eyes and hoped for the best. All of a sudden he heard a voice say "Ethan it's time for school, better get moving." Ethan realised that he was in his regular world with his family and he couldn't be happier.

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mentor: Danijela Banović

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## LOVE - A SPECTRUM

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I often feel sad when people say that love hurts. It does, I'm not denying it, it's just sad seeing people describe it that way when it doesn't just hurt. Not realizing the complexity of such a niche pain is not their fault. Their fault is not talking enough about the beauty of it. The beauty of a smile that you can't force to leave your face no matter how hard you try, or of thinking about a person so much they enter your dreams as an omen of your love for them. I believe that the beauty of love can be found even in a simple act such as bringing someone a glass of water. Love is simplicity at its core, but we as humans need to have a complex understanding of love, so it can feel complete, so we don't get bored. Maybe that need for more is our greatest sin or maybe it's what makes us humans. And even though we have loved for centuries we still don't know love as it was intended to be and we may never will. I am most fascinated by the fact that we have compared love with our hearts for centuries. Maybe that comparison comes so naturally to us because of the tight feeling we get in our chests when we love. I like to think of our heart as a vessel of love. As an open wound. In order to feel love we have to give or receive it and there needs to be a continuous blood flow going in and out of the wound, which is of course painful. We need to learn to accept that pain, to let it seep through us, to feel it completely. To love is to accept love in its entirety, the pain and the beauty. If you look for it you would see love everywhere and in everything because everything is about love, and when it isn't it's about the absence of it. Instead of complaining about the fact that we can feel love's excruciating pain we should be happy that we can experience both sides of the spectrum. Because if you can't experience one side the other has no value to you. It's important to cherish love and how we see it, to show future generation what is love and how to express it. It's important to write love letters instead of texts, to not be afraid of your emotions, to love with your chest and to feel everything fully even when that feeling is a painful one. No love is ever wasted it always comes back to you, just maybe not in a way that you expect. Maybe it is better that way, sometimes you think you know from whom you want to receive love, but you really don't, life has heard conversations you haven't. We as humans are far too small to understand what

life has in store for us and why, but we don't need to understand everything. We don't need to understand why the sun rises every day without fail, we just need to know that it does and that no matter of how bad your day was the sun will still present itself in front of you to see you wake up. In order to love each other we first need to love ourselves. "If you spend your time chasing butterflies, they'll fly away. But if you spend your time building a beautiful garden, the butterflies will come to you. And if they don't come, you still have your garden." I think about that quote a lot and how it has impacted my life. A year ago I couldn't bear to look in the mirror, ashamed of what's on the other side, now I look in every mirror I see because my body isn't just how it looks it has its purpose. It is home to a life; a life I am incredibly grateful to have. Loving yourself is very important, you cannot love others if you don't love yourself. To love yourself, amongst other things, means to have respect for yourself. I know it's hard sometimes, maybe you see a photo of a boy you can't get over or you think about how nice he was before but you need to keep yourself together, respect yourself, you deserve better. But don't feel foolish because of it, loving someone is never a waste. Love can be found in late nights when you are sitting on the edge of your bed crying and wondering if someone somewhere in that moment feels the same. Of course they do, and they are thinking the exact same thought. When you see someone so happy it makes you laugh even if you're at your worst remember that you are both feeling the same thing, just a little bit differently. You are never alone, you never were and you never will be. You don't have to listen to me about this, I am only young and I haven't felt love like some of you probably did, but I sure have felt some of it. While writing this I experienced both sides of love, from smiling about friendship to crying about a boy that doesn't have a care in the world, especially not for me. In that time, I learned a lot about love and how it flows throughout our lives. I would advise you to do the same, observe love for a day, a month or even a year it will change your perspective on not only love but life itself. It can also help you know yourself better, and when you know yourself you know life. Love is so incredibly complex, but so are we. If you feel helpless and like you're chasing love constantly remember that love is inside you and you don't have to chase it. Even better you are love. Everything you do is out of love in a way, so you don't have to chase it, you just have to look for it.

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 mentor: Amela Ojdanić  
 institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

## MAELOCH - THE SHADOW

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*“Tristan, go to bed... Tristan, where are you?”* I will always remember those words my mother said to me on that fateful night. I was just 7 when it happened, and it was all because of Him. Let us do a recap, shall we? It was a normal day and, as I have said, I was 7. It was 4 July 2017. My mother put me in bed, it was around 8 o'clock. I closed my eyes not thinking about anything at first, but then I heard whispers. Thinking it was my older brother I opened my eyes, that was the worst decision in my life. As I looked around the room, trying to find out where those whispers were coming from, something caught my eye. It was a tall shadowy figure watching me with those big white eyes. Now that you know what happened, I will tell you what the problem is. Since last year I have been writing about my days with him, but in that 'diary' the page from yesterday is missing. Thank God I have it saved on my phone. It goes like this:

*4 July 2027*

*“Today has been 10 years from that fateful night, it started out as whispers which sounded like an unknown language, at least, that is what I remember. Now there is a full conversation in my head between him and an unknown entity. I could not focus, so I have dropped from high school. My therapist thinks the problem is only in my head, but I know what I am seeing is real... At least I hope so. Today has also been 5 years since my whole family disappeared, and I know it is all because of him. I started wondering if he has a name, but I think I have found it. It is Maeloch. I will look for an explanation later.”*

And I found the explanation, but why did I even ask myself that question? Even I do not know why. I think I am losing my mind because of him. I finally found the courage to get close to him. As he controlled my thoughts, my room, my whole life, I decided to fight back. Maybe it was a stupid move to fight back against the occupier, a primal instinct of my youthful mind. As I got close to him a shiver ran down my spine. I felt like I was floating, leaving this known world for something more sinister. I stepped back, snapping back to reality. The shadow looked at me with a grin on its face. I realized that it was more than just a provocation, it was a sign of relief.

I assumed he got angry since the conversations in my head stopped; there was just whispering again. I felt relieved. But believe me, it was much worse. Those whisperers were as soft as the breeze during summer night. I felt something was off. But by the time I figured it out, the shadow spread to the entire room; it was no longer confined to the corner of my room. It wanted to manifest itself in front of me as a witness. It felt like it fed itself on my anger, sadness, and the darkness in my room, becoming more and more menacing and terrifying.

Those whispers that kept me up at night turned into cries for help. It was like it all came from another world. I found myself giving up on science which I loved so much and embracing the supernatural instead. The cries became louder and louder. The grin on its face became larger because it could read my fears, doubts, and insecurities like an open book. As the shadow grew it tightened its grip on my life, like a predator watching its pray going insane. I could no longer comprehend it. The line between dreams and reality became barely noticeable. But I no longer had any dreams, just nightmares. I begged it to stop but it never did, every day I could feel the consequences of the previous night. Maeloch wanted my attention and he got all.

At first, the shadow was only visible during the night but now, it followed me during the day, even in my dreams. It was no longer trapped in the corner of my room. Every time I saw a shadow, I was paranoid that Maeloch was going to jump out of it and throw me into an abyss of his dark and cold kingdom. Screams now turned into clear, unmistakable words but now Maeloch did not speak to the entity, he spoke to me. Every night he spoke about long-lost memories, long-lost times and an inevitable fate waiting for me. It always spoke in the language only I could understand but I never wanted to listen to his stories. With every passing day I felt like it nested into my mind.

*“If this is because I fought back, I will surrender”*, I kept saying to myself. I know he heard me, but he never cared about it. He no longer wanted to observe, he wanted to become a part of me, a part of my dreams. Because of that my nights became longer, more intense. I wanted never ever to sleep again but every night my eyelids would feel heavier and heavier telling me to go to sleep, but it was difficult to tell if it was my wish or his wish.

I always felt like a puppet manipulated by the invisible strings of the shadow even during the day light. My actions were no longer my choices. I decided to go to church on Sunday asking the priest for help, but he just brushed me off like nothing. I felt that Maeloch was in control of everyone and everything. His grip became stronger, more sinister and menacing. There was no way to defeat him. Every day I tried tell-

ing someone the truth. My attempts were met with disbelief. Maeloch and I became companions, day and night he was there, ready to ruin my life. I felt he started to manifest physically. In the middle of the night, I felt his icy fingers all over my skin. I started to freak out when in broad daylight I felt his breath on my neck. I wanted to find a solution to finally get rid of him. I never believed in rituals but since Maeloch appeared in my life, I believed in everything, so I went to the nearest library and got a book on rituals. Shockingly, I found Maeloch's name and after reading his description I did what the ritual told me to. I felt like I was on fire after saying the words described in the ritual.

The next day I woke up in hospital. "You were very lucky!" continued the nurse "that your neighbours heard you and called 911." The nurse went out of the room but behind her was Maeloch with that same grin. For the first time ever, I saw his face. He was me. I could not scream nor cry. He just sat next to me and pulled out a cigarette. "You can smoke now", he said but right after that he jumped through the window. I rushed to the window, there was nothing outside but a big shadow on the floor. I went back to my bed, but lo and behold, my mom, dad, and my bother walked straight through the door wishing me a happy birthday. I am 18 now and what a better gift than to finally feel free after 10 years.

author: Elena Šuvarić

mentor: Dubravka Zebec

institution: Osnovna škola Josip Kozarac Josipovac Punitovčki

## MY FUTURE

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I believe that we all had fantasized about our future inspired by fairy tales, but over time, as we grow up, we come to realize that life is far from a fairy tale. Life is full of challenges and you have to fight to overcome them. As a child, I dreamt of being a singer, a doctor, a dancer, a policewoman and a teacher, but my opinion has changed.

I can't be a singer when I don't have a beautiful singing voice. I can't be a doctor when I'm afraid of needles and can barely look at blood. I can't be a dancer when I don't know how to dance. I can't be a policewoman when I'm also afraid of my own shadow. These were merely childhood dreams.

At fourteen, I feel mature enough to decide my path. I have wanted to be a teacher since the first grade. My career choices have changed over the years. Last year, I said that I wanted to be a Croatian language teacher, but I still don't know because I don't want to go to the university for five years. While Croatian remains my favourite subject, I'm contemplating a three-year program in pedagogy.

I have wanted to live in Germany for three years now, but my family doesn't want to. I go there and spend my summers there with my dad. The people there are friendly, nice, smiling, the city is enchanting, and I adore their language and culture. I hope life leads me to Germany one day.

Five years ago, I met the guy I'm with now. We have been in a relationship for five months and I feel special with him. He is the best thing that happened in my life. He is my psychologist, I confide in him; he will always listen to me, he is always there for me. We have many things in common; for example our fathers attended the same class among other connections. We both really want to be together in the future, to get married.

I have a passion for travel, and my dream is to explore the world. First, I would like to travel to Paris, the city of love, and I would like my boyfriend to propose to me there in front of the Eiffel Tower. After Paris, I would like to visit Istanbul, a beautiful city. Despite never having been on a plane, I recognize overcoming this fear is essential.



I aim to read more and spend more time in nature. I like to read, but often I can't bring myself to pick up a book and read; I'd rather look at my cell phone. I spend a lot of time on my mobile phone, so I want to spend more time in nature. Stress affects me every day. It is my constant companion; many times I feel the need to tell my parents that I need a psychologist, but I'm afraid. I'm afraid they'll ask me the reason, I'm afraid to admit to them how I really feel. Many questions are running through my head.

I want to be a parent and a teacher with whom children can talk about everything without me judging them. I have changed, but not for the better. I think that society and the environment have a bad influence on me. I love my friends, but it's like some of them have changed me. I want the old me back, I'm trying, but I'm not succeeding. Occasionally, the idea of escaping to the other side of the world appeals to me.

My parents oppose moving to Germany, but they don't know how unhappy I am here. We have a lot of tests and oral exams at school, we have so many useless subjects and we learn things that we will never need. The teachers actually give us the most stress, they are not aware that we need to study fifteen subjects. We need a break. I envision being a teacher who fosters a stress-free learning environment. I understand that we are all different and some people are interested in something that others are not. I want to be a teacher who everyone will remember for being good, warm, and always approachable.

I love children, I always look after my cousins. I can even envision working as a kindergarten teacher. Children with their honesty and clear desires, bring immense joy. Children are truly a wonderful creatures who brighten our lives. I have always dreamed of having three children, but first a boy so that he could take care of his younger sister. Now, I am especially grateful to my parents for raising me well and providing me with everything I need.

I love my parents very much and I don't know how to express gratitude for everything. Dad works in Germany to support our needs; to provide me, my younger sister and our mum with everything we need. I know it's hard for him there all by himself, but he still does it for all of us. Every time he comes home for his well deserved annual holiday, Christmas or Easter holiday, I jump into his arms. I can't describe the feeling and warmth in his embrace. He is my hero and he is the best dad in the world. My mom takes care of my sister and me every day. She cooks, prepares meals, irons, cleans, takes care of us... She's always smiling and seems happy, but I know she's not. I want to help her, but I don't know how. Every day I try to put a smile on her face. I have the best mom in the world. I will probably move to Poreč at the

age of eighteen, but it will be difficult for me to separate from my parents. It would be a real challenge. My parents and my sister are everything in the world to me. Life is unpredictable, that's why we should always show love to our parents. I don't have to have a luxurious life and be materially rich. It is important to me that I am with my family and that I am surrounded by people who mean a lot to me.

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mentor: Tamara Pleše

institution: Osnovna škola Ivanke Trohar, Fužine

## MY LAST SUMMER

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Hi, my name is Noah and I am 15 years old. I moved to a new city and also to a new school two weeks ago because my dad found a better job here. Also, we bought a house that is closer to the sea and I finally don't need to share my room with my 8 year old brother. I feel awesome here because it's more quiet and relaxed city. If we're speaking about school, I haven't made friends yet, because I want to learn more about city and atmosphere here. One day, I was walking through the school hallway, when one girl bumped into me. „I am so sorry!“ she said nicely and smiled. „It's ok.“, I said that and continued my walk to the class. She was so pretty. She had most beautiful hazel eyes I have ever seen and even more beautiful light brown hair. And that smile was so gorgeous. I realized I forgot to ask her what her name was, so I ran back to her and asked: „What's your name?“. „It's Annabelle, but everyone calls me Anna“, she said with a smile and left. It's been three weeks since that happened and I still haven't seen her in the hallway. I also made some friends and we all formed a friend group. Their names are Tyler, Lucas and Liam and they are awesome friends, we have much things in common. I wanted to know more about Anna so I asked them: „Guys, do you know a girl here named Annabelle?“. While Tyler was thinking, Liam said: „I think she goes to 8th grade. A year younger than us.“. That's awesome, now I know where to find her during breaks. „Wait, you have a crush on her?“ Lucas asked with interest. „Yeah,“ I said and decided to tell them the whole story, „three weeks ago she accidentally bumped into me and when I looked at her, and well, what can I say? It was love at first sight.“, I said honestly. Four months have passed and I have amazing news! Anna and I have been together for two months! It started with seeing each other more often in the hallway, then we started hanging out and on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February I asked her if she wants to be my girlfriend. She agreed and told me that she also had a crush on me since she bumped into me in the hallway the other day. Everyone would stare at us when we walked down the hallway. School ended and summer holidays have started. I prefer summer over winter. It's better weather and you have more time to hang out with your friends. Anna and I decided that we are going to hang out every day, no matter what. We decided that one week we are going

to the beach, one week we'll go on the night walks, the week after we planed a small trip and one week we are going to have sleepovers. Our parents agreed with those ideas. Highlight of this summer was my first kiss with Anna. That day we were on the beach. It was a beautiful sunny but hot day (the temperature was over 35 degrees Celsius). Just a perfect day to spend on the beach. Anna and I brought some of our closest friends. She brought her „besties“ Evelyn, Chiara and Amelia, like she says, and I brought Tyler, Lucas and Liam. We got to the beach at 7:30 in the morning, set up our towels and put all our stuff down. We were one of the first people that came on the beach this early. We were swimming and diving in the sea. We all brought some food so we could have a lunch, although there was a restaurant nearby. It was such a great atmosphere there. We also played some games like *Uno* and volleyball, but we also painted some pictures with acrylic paint because the girls wanted, but it was really interesting and something new. I painted a sunset on the beach and everyone said that my painting was the most beautiful. Then Amelia asked me: „Have you ever taken any painting lessons, because your this looks amazing?“. I answered her: „Yes, I have because my mom likes to paint and I also started to paint with her, but when she stoped, she enrolled me in an art group, where we painted three times a week.“. „That's awesome!“ Chiara added. It was 20:25 when everyone went home, but Anna and I agreed to stay until 21:00. When they left we got into the sea. We were swimming when Anna asked: „How did you like today?“. „It was amazing, the best part was when we were painting. What was your best part of today?“ I asked her. „When we played *Uno* and when Tyler got angry because he had to pull 24 cards.“, she replied and started laughing. When she said that, I remembered that today is 5 months since we've been together and I didn't bought her anything, so I decided to take her to dinner tomorrow. That would be perfect gift! „Anna, can I ask you something?“ I asked her boldly. „Yes!“ she answered. „Today is five months since we have started dating, right? I forgot to buy you a gift, so I thought-“. I didn't even finished the sentence and she kissed me. I was shocked because it was my first kiss ever and I didn't know what to do. We stayed on a beach for 10 minutes and then we went home. A week after our first kiss, I started having some strange and really painful stomachaches. I immediately called Anna that I wouldn't be able to hang out today. „Why?“ she asked me over the phone. „I've been having really strange and painful stomachaches. I'm sorry, but they are really bad.“, I told her. „It's okay, just rest! See you soon!“ she said and added she's calm, but I heard her worried voice. „Love you!“ I told her and than she said: „I love you more!“ and hung up. I was fighting with strong stomachaches for three days without telling parents because they were occu-

pied with work. That day, my dad noticed that that week I was supposed to be on a beach (which means I should be outside all day), but I was laying in my bed, so he asked me: „Noah, is everything okay? You don't look so good. Wait, did you break up with Annabelle?!“. I didn't know what to say because these stomachaches were so strong I couldn't think straight. „Umm, what did you said?“ I asked him because I didn't understand what he said. „Son, are you okay? Are you hurting?“ he was so worried, I never saw him like that. „Dad, I've been having really bad cramps in my upper stomach for past three days“, I said in pain. „Where, is it here?“ he said and squeezed my stomach with his hand. „Ouch, don't do that!“ I shouted. He went to find mom and when he found her, she said that it is not normal for pain to be that strong, so we went to hospital. I told my mom to call Anna and tell her that I'm in hospital. When we got to the hospital, my mom told the doctors that I had really bad pain in my upper stomach area for the past three days and that the pain won't stop although I have already taken eight pills. He rushed to do all the checkups to find out what caused that pain. After four days of checkups, the doctor walked into my hospital room where my parents were with Annabelle (who visited me every day) and said: „I'm sorry to say this, but Noah has pancreatic cancer. Unfortunately, it can't be surgically removed and Noah has one of the most difficult cases.“. Everyone started crying. Then my mom asked in tears: „Doctor, how much time he's got left?“. „About a month, Mrs. Barker.“, he said and left the room. They all ran to my bed and started crying even harder. For the next month, I had visits from my friends and relatives every day. In the last week of my life, I said goodbye to my family and Annabelle. My heart hurt the most when my younger brother came to my bedside and started crying because I promised him I will teach him how to play basketball. I told him: „I'm sorry, buddy, but I can't.“. he didn't say anything. Then Anna came to me and kissed my forehead, and she whispered in my ear: „You were my first love, I'll never forget you. I love you, Noah.“. I told her that she was my first love too and that I loved her even more.

On last day, my parents and Annabelle came to the hospital very early. We said goodbye to each other once more and it was very emotional. I said goodbye to my parents and then I said goodbye to Anna. Her divine hazel eyes looked deep in my soul and her most gorgeous smile appeared on her face. I knew that I can rest in peace now. Moments after, doctor came to the room and I just closed my eyes. „Mr. and Mrs. Barker, your son is not with us anymore.“

author: Izak Samardžić  
 mentor: Ivana Čale  
 institution: OŠ Žitnjak

## OFFLINE

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“There’s one more enemy left.”  
 “He is hiding behind that building.”  
 “I threw a poison potion at him.”  
 “I just need to hit him once and...”  
 “Mission Complete.”  
 “That’s enough for today, I’m going to bed.”

...

### The next morning

...

Beep, beep, be-

Someone turned off the alarm clock and continued sleeping. “Max, you’re late!” mom said. “Oh! Not again!” said Max while sprinting to the bathroom. Once he had gotten ready, he headed to the living room, packed the lunch box his mom had prepared for him and got out of the house heading to the bus station. “Hello imaginary people as you can see, I’m just an ordinary introvert with no friends,” he said in his head. “Another useless day,” he said when he stepped into the school.

...

### Two periods later

...

Ring, ring, ring ... the bell rang.

“Finally, my favourite, lunch.” Max headed to the roof holding a lunch box. “Let’s eat!” Max started eating his lunch. In his lunch box was plain rice and nothing else. While he was eating, he took out his phone out of his pocket and opened Instant.

Ding, ding

Max got a notification. “But when I said no friends, I meant no live friends. I actually have one online friend. We met each other four years ago in an RPG game. I was so happy when she asked if I wanted to be friends with her. But, today, something unexpected happened.” “Pfff, what?” Max spat out his food after reading the message.

“Hey guess what? I’m moving to Tokyo!” said Ryan.

“What? For real?”

“Yeah, I’m so excited. You live there, right?”

“Yeah,” we continued talking and then the bell rang.

“Oh well, I have to go so, see you!” said Max and headed back to the classroom.

...

### **Many hours later**

...

The bell rang and everyone packed their stuff and headed home. Max took out his phone and texted Ryan.

“Hmm, this is unusual, she always reads the message ten seconds after I send it. Maybe she’s packing her stuff, so I’d better not bother her.” Max put his phone in his pocket.

...

### **The weekend**

...

“What am I going to do today? That’s right, I’m going to play my game.”

Max got out of his bed and went to the bathroom. After breakfast, he went back to his room and turned on his PC. “Hmm, she’s not online today. I mean, of course, she is on her way to Tokyo.” After he said that, he started playing.

...

### **Many hours later**

...

“Again? This mission is hard. It’s impossible doing it solo. Well enough for today, I’m going to bed.” Max turned off his PC.

...

### **Five days later**

...

Beep, beep, beep

The beeping continued for five minutes. “Huh? I’m going to be late!” Max quickly got out of his bed and went to the bathroom. “Oh no, I’m going to miss the bus! I need to get ready fast!” Max quickly got out of the bed and went to get ready. “Just on time!” said Max while gasping for air. “Uhm... Hello...” someone greeted Max. “Huh, who could that be?” When he tilted his head up, he saw a high school student. “She’s pretty, wait no what am I talking about?” Max got embarrassed. “Are you from here?” he asked the student. “I just moved in this neighbourhood yesterday.” said the girl.

“Nice, I’m Max by the way.” “I’m Rya-an,” she introduced herself. After saying that, they became silent. “Hey, do you by any chance play The Lost City?” he asked the girl. “Ye-ah, how do you kn-ow?” the girl asked. “No, no way.”

The bus arrived. They got on the bus and sat next to each other. They talked to each other throughout the whole bus ride. After a ten-minute ride, they got off the bus. “Welp, which class?” he asked. “C, you?” “A. Well then see you after class at the rooftop.”

...

### **Two periods later**

...

When Max arrived at the rooftop, he saw Ryan waiting for him. He sat next to her and they started talking. “Crazy to think you moved into my neighbourhood.” “Yeah.” After the break they said their goodbyes and headed to their classes. They continued like this for over two weeks until something unexpected happened. “Come on man.” Max was playing Night Fortress. While playing he got a message from Ryan. “Hey, do you want to hang out?” she asked. He got embarrassed and didn’t know what to answer. After some time, he answered with a yes. He turned off his PC and went to get ready. “She said to meet at the theme park at 5PM.” Max arrived ten minutes early. After a good twenty minutes she arrived. “Sorry I’m late!” she apologized. “It’s good, I just got here to-,” right about he was about to finish, Max’s eyes locked on Ryan. He saw her wearing a yukata. “You look cute...” He complimented her embarrassingly. “Oh, thanks...” she replied back. “Well, what are we waiting for?” Max took her hand, and they headed in. They went on multiple rollercoasters, in a haunted house, ate food and much more. After four hours, they were exhausted so they sat on a bench. “That was fun!” Max said. “Yeah!” she replied. After she said that, the fireworks went off. “Wow, they’re beautiful!” she spoke. Max looked at her face from the side. She turned to him. They both got embarrassed. It was late and they hopped on a bus. They sat next to each other and the next thing you know, she fell asleep on his shoulders. He got really embarrassed but he let her sleep. When they arrived in the neighbourhood, Max lifted her up and got off the bus. “I love you...” said Ryan. “Wh-hat...?” Max got really embarrassed. After arriving at her house, he rang the bell, and nobody opened the door. He rang the bell again, and again, and again and concluded that nobody was home. He had no other choice than to bring her to his house. After getting in, Max put her on the couch in the living room and right before he was about to go to the bathroom, she stopped him. “What are you do-?” before Max could finish his question, he felt her lips touching his lips. “Huh!?” He got a



nosebleed and ran to the bathroom.

“Ryan!” Max shouted her name. She didn’t reply. “She maybe headed to her house? I hope so.” He was right. She sent him a message that she was at her house.

After calming down, Max went straight to his bedroom, got into his bed and fell asleep.

...

### **The next day**

...

Next morning Max woke up and started talking to himself. “I’m lost, is she playing a prank on me? She isn’t the type of person who does that. I hope she doesn’t continue pranking me.”

Ryan continued joking around with Max for the next three months. One summer evening Max and Ryan were in a park. While Max was playing Night Fortress, Ryan was running through her phone.

“I’m bored,” she said.

“Then go home!” Max replied with a straight face.

“Aw, why are you mad?” she asked.

“I’m tired of you making fun of me.”

“Fun of you? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t act stupid.”

“What did you say? Now you are going to pay for that!” she turned around and the next thing you know she kissed him.

“Wa-” she put her hand on his mouth.

“Are you still sure I’m making fun of you?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he replied embarrassingly.

“Well, we’ve been together for almost 5 years now I think it’s time,” she said.

“Time for what?” he was confused.

“Max!”

“Yes madam!”

“Will you be my boyfriend?” she asked.

“Eh, I don’t know, I think I’m not good enough for you ...,” Max replied looking down.

“Let me tell you something, ” Ryan tilted his head.

“While growing up I had no friends. In kindergarten I would always end up playing alone. Whenever my mom got worried about me, I replied with “Don’t worry mom, everything’s fine”. In elementary school my dad bought me a PC and an RPG

game The Lost City. In that game I found my first friend, it was you. Every time I asked if you wanted to play, you would reply with a yes. You would listen to me talking about my problems and other stuff. You were always there for me. So, I will ask you once again. Will you be my boyfriend?”

Max grabbed her shoulders and kissed her. “I promise I will be a great boyfriend.” Ryan started crying and Max hugged her. They lived a happy life after that.

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mentor: Jelena Marijanović

institution: OŠ kneza Mislava, Kaštel Sućurac

## ONE CLICK AWAY

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*\*click\**

*Congratulations you matched with Damien! I'm sure you guys will be an amazing couple!*

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Beth?"

"Of course it is! You need a little distraction or else you'll lose your mind. Your dating life is so bad you might as well give it a go. I mean what can go wrong?"

"With an online dating app, hmm you're right, what could POSSIBLY go wrong?"

"You're sarcastic right now but I'm telling you in a few weeks you'll be thanking me for the best time in your life."

"Fine! I'll go on this date just to prove you wrong."

"Whatever floats your boat. But I honestly don't know why you're even complaining, like did you see him? A tall man with black sleek hair and deep mysterious brown eyes. Hello, he's so attractive!"

"You know there's a huge chance I'm going to be catfished for exactly that reason."

"Well only one way to find out if you're right!"

I sigh as I figure there's no way I'll be able to change her mind. I guess it won't hurt if I go on just one date.

I look in the mirror as I fix my dress. "Is this a bit much?" I think to myself. I have a luxurious red dress and black heels with a black handbag. "You know what, it's fine, it is a fancy restaurant after all." As I leave the house I grab my car keys and say my last prayers to God.

The restaurant is way bigger and more exquisite than I thought it would be. I walked in and almost immediately I felt a hand on my back.

"You look gorgeous Allison."

"Damien?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you." He says as he grabs my hand and leaves a little kiss on it.

"Oh thank you, but the pleasure is mine. You look stunning just like this place."

"I'm glad you like it, let me lead you to our table."

We sit at a bit farther table near the window with a striking view. As I took the menu I glance at the prices.

“Damien this place is so expensive!”

“I know, only the best for you”

“Are you sure this is okay?”

“Trust me everything is okay. After all, I asked you out on a date and I wanted to make it memorable”

“You really didn’t have to”

“I know, but I want you to have fun and enjoy yourself. So feel free to order whatever you like.”

The food and the atmosphere here are absolutely amazing. But nothing can compare to the feeling of connection I formed with Damien. He’s so much better than every man I’ve ever dreamt about. We have similar interests and he has such interesting hobbies.

““You’re a very uplifting person Allison. I’d love to hang out with you more.”

“Am I hearing thoughts about another date? “

“Oh absolutely. But this time more informal, like a picnic in the park near the lake.”

“Honestly, that sounds even better than this, although I’m not complaining about this either.”

“Well, then let me escort you to your car and we’ll meet tomorrow again.”

“Of course, how does 5 pm sound?”

“Fine by me. Drive safely, darling.”

While I was driving home all I could think about was him. I can’t wait to get home and tell everything to Beth.

Before I could even grab my phone and call her I got a notification.

**DAMIEN: Hey just checking if you got home safely.**

I stared at the text for a few more minutes before I answered.

**Hey, yeah I got home safely thanks for checking. Can’t wait for tomorrow!**

**Me neither.**

**Sweet dreams Allison.**

**Sweet dreams!**

\*\*\*

Two months passed and Damien and I started dating. The relationship was magical. There was so much fun and surprises with him. I needed this, I needed him. Everything was perfect, a bit too perfect.

One day when Damien and I were walking to the café, he bumped into someone. Someone I eagerly tried to forget months ago. But here he was yet again.

“Alli?”

“It’s Allison to you“

“Who is this? You already found my replacement? Wow, I’m impressed!”

“Oh just leave me alone, jerk! This is my boyfriend and he is much better than you ever even were, so yes, I gladly replaced you.“

“This twig, better than me? Oh please, a girl like you could never pull someone like him. I can’t believe you even pulled me. I must’ve been drunk or something because you’re just- “

*\*smack\**

I was so mad at him I didn’t realize that Damien was even madder. As I glanced at him I saw pure hatred in his eyes.

“Take. That. BACK!

She is a beautiful and independent woman who can easily make a little boy like you cry so don’t you dare spit another lie out of your filthy mouth.“

“Why you little! I’ll come back, I promise you Allison, but not because I love you but because you’ll be so heartbroken by this so-called man you will run to me crying hoping for some kind of comfort. Then, when you need me the most I’ll push you away the same way you did to me.“

And with those words he left.

I knew he was just trying to discourage me. But it worked. His words cut way deeper than I wanted them to. Somehow I was afraid that what he had said was going to happen and that I was going to be left all alone. Again.

“Hey don’t let his words get to you.“

Damien loves me, doesn’t he? He would never leave me. I’m just overthinking this whole thing. Right? But what if I’m wrong?

“Allison.“

What if he’s just another manipulative bastard who’s trying to use me for his benefit? What if it’s all repeating itself right in front of my eyes?! Oh my god, Matthew is right, Damien is going to leave me and break my heart and I’m going to be all alone without anyone and-

“ALLISON! Listen to me, please! I don’t know who he is or what he means to you but what he said is never going to be true. You don’t have to believe me but I will never leave your side. I will always be there and I will always protect you. You are the most mesmerizing girl I’ve ever met. My heart jumps for joy every time I see

your figure. If we had never gone on that date I would probably be sitting in an old apartment thinking about a perfect girl and the image of you would pop up even if I never met you personally. Now, tell me do you understand just how much you mean to me?"

I couldn't answer that question. All I could was hug him and cry on his shoulder. "Thank you" I whispered.

\*\*\*

2 days later

Beth and I decided to have a little sleepover since we were so drained from college.

"No way he said that!"

"I know right, he is just the sweetest! Wait here I'm going to grab more tea."

"Sure I'll prepare the movie."

*\*click\**

### **BREAKING NEWS**

**We are currently live from the place where the murder occurred last night. Apparently at exactly midnight a young man, Matthew Jonas, was brutally murdered by a person still unknown to the police. There are, however, no fingerprints on the knife nor footprints which leads to the belief that the murderer is a very skilled man who has already done this before.**

"Hey Alli, you hear this?"

"Loud and clear." I say, my eyes almost falling out of their sockets. So many thoughts ran through my head. Who killed him? Is it my fault he's dead? Was I supposed to die? Am I the next to die?

"Hey girl calm down, then we will think this through."

"What is there to think through?" I chuckle more to myself "It's obviously just a random murder case."

"You really think that? I mean you don't see every day that your ex-boyfriend gruesomely died on the news."

"What are you implying? That it has something to do with me?!"

"I'm not saying you did it, I'm saying maybe someone did it for you..."

"What, I don't understa-

"Oh, you mean... NO HE WOULD NEVER!"

"Hey now, calm down I didn't say that he killed Matthew, I'm saying that he seemed pretty protective of you when Matthew attacked you."

"Well yea because Matthew was clearly acting like a jerk!"

“But you did mention he looked REALLY intimidating.”

“Because he was protecting me!

Remember what he told me about how much he cared about me and-and how he would never hurt me!”

“Exactly, he said that he would never want to see you hurt anymore. And what did Matthew do? He hurt you.”

There was complete silence after that. What if... she’s right?

“You know what, I’m going to the police. I can’t deal with this all alone. I don’t trust anyone at this point.”

As soon as I left the building I felt a sudden feeling of fear wander all through my body. I should’ve headed right back into the building. But I didn’t.

And all of a sudden, I felt a hand around my throat...

“Go to sleep, darling.”

After what seemed like an eternity I woke up tied to a chair in an empty room. All that could be heard was my heavy breathing. And as he himself heard it, Damien came into the room. Elizabeth was right all along and I was too stupid to listen to her. Now I’m probably the next victim of his glorious murder. Or was I the main victim that he chased?

“Good morning sleeping beauty.”

“Let me out!”

“Woah, calm down there. You know very well you’re not going anywhere.” “Why are you doing this? After everything we’ve been through. Why end it like this?”

“Oh please, you think your pity words will change my mind. But you should already know that all this started because of you. Matthew died because of **you**.”

“NO, you killed him! Why am I to blame while you held the knife to his throat?!”

“Because you were the motivation that strived me to do so. If I had never met you I wouldn’t have gone that path. I wouldn’t have killed him so easily.”

“You psycho, I never should’ve trusted you!”

“You know, I never wanted this to happen. I never wanted to kill you. But you leave me no choice since I know the moment you’re free you’ll snitch me to the police like a little immature child you are.”

“SHUT UP! You think this is all just a stupid game? You think you can just play with my feelings like that? You think you’re all that, but you’re not! You’re not even to be considered as a man. You let an ‘immature child’ make you go the path that will ruin you and everything you love. You destroyed your life just to make mine as miserable.” While I was pouring my heart out at him, I managed to get out of the rope he tied me with and I stood up so I could look him in the eyes.

“You are just as pathetic as I am.”

And with that, he took the gun from his pocket and shot me in the leg. Before I could even comprehend what happened, he pinned me to the wall and held the gun right at my throat.

“You want to repeat that?”

“I said you’re just as pathetic as I am. If not more.” I whispered to him and quickly spat in his face so I could steal the gun from him.

*\*click\**

As life flashed before my eyes at that moment, I realized all my fears had been overpowered and upon me was the bloody corpse of my dear lover.

THE END



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mentor: Nataša Ćoraš

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## ONE LONELY FLOWER

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One day, in a beautiful field there was a flower. A gentle flower. He had a loving mother, the spring. But most of the time she was away, at the other end of the world. He missed her so much during the year. But when she came, they had the best time in the world.

When he was alone, he wished he had a friend, a person he could share his life with. In his world everybody was so boring. Just sitting in the same spot every day. The flower wanted to go somewhere but when he tried, he could not pull himself out of the ground. The flower pulled as hard as he could, but nothing. At that moment, the flower realized that he was stuck in one place just like the other flowers. He was sad for days. Guess the flower was lucky because his mother arrived early this year. When his mother came, he opened his petals as wide as he could. The mother noticed him right away and came over to the flower. The mother asked the flower what was wrong. And he told her that he couldn't move. She explained to him that it was normal for a flower to not move, but he was still sad and depressed. After that, the mother was worried about her son, so she gave him the best rain, the biggest petals and they spent a lot of time playing and talking. The son was happy for a while, but time passed too quickly, and his mother needed to leave. The flower already knew that he needed to stay with his aunt, the summer. Flower's aunt was great, but she could be a lot sometimes, she was also extremely outgoing. Every year his aunt would come, and the flower would keep getting more tired every day. Flower's aunt was too busy with her many friends that she forgot about her nephew, so he felt even more lonely. During that time, there was a bee. She was also very lonely. When she was out of her hive, she could not find food as hard as she tried. One day she was passing through a beautiful field full of even more beautiful flowers, but every flower was already chatting with a bee. She turned back to go home when she noticed a lonely flower with the prettiest and biggest petals. She slowly approached the flower. As soon as the flower saw the bee, his face shined with excitement. He thought he would finally have a friend that he could talk to when his mom is not around. When the bee approached the flower, he happily greeted her. The bee told him where she

was from and revealed that she was actually the princess of her hive. The bee's mother was the queen bee. The flower told the bee how his mother is hardly around. They chatted for a while. When they said goodbye to each other it was already sunset, so the bee had to hurry back to the hive. When she came home, she told her mother that she finally had a friend. Her mother was very busy at that moment, so she just nodded her head, the bee was a little bit hurt because her mother always ignored her, but she was so happy to care at the moment. The next day the bee rushed to the flower's field but before she could reach it, she was stopped by a rude wasp. The wasp wouldn't let her to go to the field. That wasp was the biggest bully around. The bee was always scared of her, but this time the bee stood up for herself. The wasp was stunned by the bee's behaviour and she let her pass. The bee finally got to the field. The flower was already waiting for her, he thought the bee left him. When he saw her, he almost started screaming from all of the joy. They chatted for a while again, when the flower noticed that the bee is very tired. The bee was flower's only friend and he knew that the bee has no food so he didn't want the bee to starve, so he trusted her and gave her permission to eat his nectar. The bee was so happy because she found a friend and now, she has her own food and she doesn't need to embarrass herself by begging for food from her mother anymore. The flower and the bee met on the field many times and before you know it flower's aunt was packing her stuff. She left a few warm days for the autumn. The flower loved autumn because she would always bring a lot of presents like grapes, lettuce, cauliflowers, carrots, beans, eggplants, pumpkins and even more. Autumn and flower's mother were childhood friends. When the summer left the flower was kind of sad but again it was hard to keep up with his aunt even though she was nice. The autumn came and immediately hugged the flower. Unlike the flower's aunt, the summer, the autumn cared too much for flower. When the flower was little autumn was overprotective about him, it was good at first, but now it started to get on flower's nerves. One day autumn was talking with the flower. The bee was just looking for flower because of their daily chat and her lunch. The bee found the flower she flew to him, but the autumn stopped her. The flower tried to explain to the autumn who the bee was. She would not listen no matter what. Autumn, so furious screamed at the bee, she got scared and left. On her way back home, the bee was starving and very hurt by the autumn's words and behaviour. She did not even care that she would have to beg her mother for food again. She went straight to her room and closed the door. Her mother noticed that the bee was feeling sad, so she went to talk to her. The bee was surprised because her mother never checks up on her. The mother asked what was wrong, the bee didn't want to tell her mother at

the beginning but slowly she opened up to her. After the bee's mother heard what happened with the autumn she was furious, but she did not do anything because she knew that the autumn is far more powerful. She gave the bee some good advice and went back to work. The bee stayed awake all night thinking about the flower and how miserable he must feel. The next day at the field the flower and the autumn had fallen out with each other. The autumn tried to apologize but the flower was so furious at the autumn. She finally had enough and send some really cold days so the bees could not leave their hive. Over time the bees had no food left. The bees were helpless. The flower tried to get out the ground one more time but again he could not move. He just wanted his mom back. The autumn tried to stay as long as she could but soon, she was kicked because of all cold day that she sends. The flower didn't know what to do. A few days passed and a new season arrived, the winter. Only a few creatures on the planet liked the winter. On the other hand, the flower was terrified of the winter. Why? You may ask. The flower never talks about that but every season the flower's life was easy except the winter.

Every year when the winter comes the flower has to bury his little heart deep into the ground and hope for the best. Then if he survives, he gets to see his mother again and tell her how terrible the autumn was to him, maybe even see his new friend the bee. This year the flower learned to not take things for granted. I hope you learned a few things too.

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## PRECIOUS THINGS

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Every person in the world has their precious thing. For someone a precious thing is an animal like a cat or a dog, a picture of you and your best friend. A precious thing for someone can even be a childhood stuffed animal or a fancy vase that you aunt gave you. There are a lot of precious things in the world. My name is Abigail and I will tell you about my precious thing and the story behind it.

It all happend on Thursday morning . I was getting ready for school when my phone rang. I pick it up and it was my friend Eleanor . We talked for a minute or two then she asked if I was free this afternoon so we can go shopping at the mall. I said I have to ask my dad if I can go and that I will tell her at school because we have first class together anyway. I finished getting ready, I went down the stairs to the kitchen and asked my dad if I can go to the mall with Eleanor after school. We chatted for a bit then I looked at mi phone and saw that is 8:50 and school starts at 9:00 I was going to be late. I quickly packed my bag and opent the front door of the house. I am always late so I know the fastest way to get to the school, I quickly took my bike and started riding. School wasn't far from my house so I came there quickly. I was late of course but only a few minutes. I sat down next to my friends Eleanor and Brooke and the professor started to teach. I said that I can go to the mall after school and we made a plan where are we going to meet after school. When school finished I waited for Eleanor and Brooke to come to the park right in front of the school. They went to grab us an ice coffee so they were a little late, but that didn't bother me because I was chatting on my phone with my little sister because she finished school way before me, and she had rode her bike to the park with her friends. So she was just texting me she got home safe. When they appeared we went on a train to get to the center city because there was the mall we were going to. When we got there bought sandwiches because we were hungry and we ate an ice cream. Next week we have a school dance something like prom but much smaller it was called The Spring Dance, we have it every year with our whole generation. Eleanor chose out a beautiful blue sparkling dress. Brooke chose a long light purple dress with a bow on the back and I chose a long red dress with sparkles. We got shoes to match with our dresses, too.

We finished shopping for The Spring Dance and went to the Second Hand Shop to buy some things for our rooms like decoration and stuff like that. When we were on our way to the cash register I saw a beautiful gold necklace with a beautiful gleaming diamond The most beautiful light red colour I have ever seen. I was looking at it when a sweet old lady came up to me and told me it is a special necklace. I looked at my friends and then back to the lady but that sweet old lady wasn't there anymore. I looked at my friend again and asked them if they have seen where she had gone, but they didn't I didn't know if I should take it or not but at the last moment I took it and bought it. I didn't know why I was so sure I wanted it at the last second. When we left the store I looked back and there was the old lady smiling at me. I didn't think anything of it at the time so I just smiled back and went back to my friends. We walked for around 2 hours around all kinds of shops. After we went back to the train station, we went on the train and then got back to our homes. When I came home I said hi to my family and went up the stairs to my room. I placed all the decor I bought in their place where I wanted them to be. I didn't show my family the dress, because I wanted to surprise them next Friday before The Spring Dance. I was just unpacking the shopping bags when I remembered the necklace. It was so beautiful I put it on right away, I looked in the mirror and the necklace was beautiful. I asked my friends on snapchat if they like it and they did. I went to bed happy because I have bought a beautiful necklace. Tomorrow I was late for school again. I was riding my bike as fast as I could but I was half way to school when it was 9:00, I just said oh I wished the time stopped and then every car on the road stopped. Every dog, every person, every thing but me stopped even the wind stopped. I was in disbelief, I stopped my bike and just looked around, nothing was moving. I didn't know why but I first looked at my necklace and the necklace was glowing up. I said I wish everything could move again. Then I said I wish everything stopped and everything did. I rode my bike as fast as I can, I was at school in no time. When I was in front of the class I said, I wish everything could move again. Class just started so I just knocked on the door and said I was sorry for being late again and it won't happen again. I sat down and looked in my bag to put my books on the desk, but there weren't no books I left them at home on my desk in my room. I did the thing where I stop the time, I went to grab books at my house, I rode my bike like I had hours to waste. When I came back I unstopped the world and just sat there until the end of class. I was thinking if I should tell Eleanor and Brooke, but I didn't tell them I don't know why I just had felling I sholdn't tell them. Next week I was late again, and I stopped everything again. But as I was walking to school I saw this one boy, his name was Matthew and he was with

Brooke in art class. I just stood there in shock looking at him making his way into school, no one else was moving except him. I stood there for about 5 minutes just thinking what I have just seen. Then I went to class and when I was in class I was silent the whole time, what was very weird of me because I always talk in class. The first lesson on Monday I have with Brooke. She asked if I was felling fine because I was weird today. I said I was fine but there was chaos in my head, I didn't know what to do if I should go and talk to him or not. When I came back home I went straight to my room and sat there in silence thinking if my secret was discovered or not. The next day I had the courage to myself talk to him. After school I said to Brooke and Eleanor that I couldn't hang out with them today. I found Matthew in the school lobby, I went up to him and asked him if he had time because I had something to ask him. He said sure and we went to the park and sat down on a bench. I said I have a weird question to ask, and then I asked, I asked if he saw someone move except me yesterday. He said he didn't and that he knows about my necklace. I was in shock again, how did he know about my necklace and the power behind it. I think he noticed that I was in shock so he started talking again, he said that he has a magic silver ring similar to my necklace. I asked if that means he could freeze time and he said yes and that if I freeze the time he wouldn't be frozen because he has the same power. That explains why he was the only one moving yesterday when I froze the time. I felt calm again and thanked him for telling me that. He said that I am very nice and asked if I want to grab some coffee tomorrow after school. I said I would love to. We agreed to meet on this bench we were sitting on right now. After that I went back home, I finished homework and went to bed. Next day I went to school early, I don't know why but I was excited to meet with Matthew after school. When school finished I went to the park, he came a while later and we started talking. We went to the cafe and sat down, we ordered and started talking again. We were talking like we know each other forever. We were talking for two hours when I had to go back home, I gave him my number and left. We chatted when I got back home and late

in the evening. It was the Wednesday morning now, The Spring Dance was only two days away and I still didn't have anyone to go with except Eleanor and Brooke. It didn't bother me that much but it would still be nice to have someone to go with. I went to school. I was walking down the school hallway when I saw Matthew, I said hi and he asked me if I want to go for coffee tomorrow and I of course said yes. Me and Eleanor started walking, she asked what was that about and I said that me met a few days ago and that we became really close friends. Tomorrow we went for coffee like we agreed to. We were talking for three hours this time when he asked me if I want

to go to The Spring Dance with him. I was in shock, but I logically said yes.

It was Friday afternoon now, I was getting ready because The Spring Dance started at 7pm and it was 4 pm now. I was so excited and happy, I told Eleanor and Brooke that I was going to the dance with Matthew. I put my long red dress on with my red shoes and did my make up and hair. I went down the stairs, my parents and my little sister were in the living room waiting for me. When I came Matthew was already waiting for me. We went to his car, then I remembered that I forgot my purse in my room. He smiled and said just to stop the time and get the purse. I did and we went to The Spring Dance. We had a great time. That's the story behind my precious thing, because if it weren't for that old lady that recommended the necklace I probably wouldn't met Matthew and I wouldn't be happy like I am now.

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mentor: Ana Šapina  
institution: OŠ Brezovica

## SERVING IN HELL

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The city of Looe, September 13th 1940.

Operation Sealion has begun, and the British military has deployed its main forces to the coast. The British had prepared for a potential German attack, but the invasion was larger than expected. The Germans were able to land in Cornwall, and we joined the British in the trenches of the group 'Phoenix' at Looe, as Brigadier Philip Richards rallied his troops with a commanding voice, urging them to defend their land against the enemy.

"Soldiers, we were made for fighting and fighting is what we shall do! Cowardice from any of you will only lead to embarrassment and the death of our families, we must fight for them, for our homeland, and for ourselves! Now, the first thing that the spies have told us is that the Germans will attack at 5 pm sharp! It's 4:30 pm, so get your guns ready and be precise with your shots or else you'll be eating lead! Now go! Go! Go!"

The scene gets closer to one of the lieutenant Frederick Hillborne, he was cleaning his rifle when someone started talking to him.

"Oy 'illborne" The 31-year-old lieutenant looks up to see his long-time friend Colonel Mitchell Mcoffan.

"What is it, Mitch?"; He asked as he continued cleaning his rifle. "Y'now how we used to play soldiers when we were younger? Guess we don't need to anymore, eh?" said Mitchell. "Yeah, I guess so, but it's more stressful...", Hillborne said as he lamented on the past. "Of course, it's stressful, when we were kids we didn't need to worry about getting shot in the head..." said Mitchell as he also started lamenting on the past.

"What time is it anyway?"; Asked Hillborne. "About 4:38 pm", Mitchell answered. "You should go clean your rifle and get your ammunition ready.", Said Hillborne. "Right, I'll see you later."

At 4:50 pm Brig. Richards called all the soldiers to the main trench. "I called all of you here so that I can give each of you Instructions, all ranks higher than captain, shall be with me. All ranks captain and lower will go to Captain Kerryl Percy. He is



at the easternmost point of the trenches. All ranks higher than Brigadier shall go to the westernmost point of the trenches where field marshal Rick Ferry will be waiting for you...”, He finishes his speech. “Oy Hillborne, you’re my second in command, get next to me and keep watch.”

After the announcement, lots of soldiers went east and a few less went west, although the bulk of the army was in the central trenches, especially after a few soldiers came from east and west, which meant that everyone was ready. 4:58 everyone started hearing the tank support rolling in. 4:59 A harmony of German voices was singing in unison over the hill, the Germans had arrived, and everyone had their guns at the ready... 5:00

“Charge!”, Yelled Richards. All of the soldiers started running out of the trenches, climbing over the hill, and started shooting at the Germans. there were lots upon lots of German soldiers, and they started shooting back, and British tanks started shooting at the German tanks. Hillborne saw a grenade hit his legs, and out of panic, he kicked it down the hill, where it exploded near the Germans which stunned them for a bit.

“Nice kick Hillborne!”, Complimented Richards, “Thank you, Richards!”, Answered Hillborne.

The battle continued for a few more minutes until the Germans retreated and some surrendered. Cheers erupted from the British soldiers. Hillborne walked up to Richards.

“Hey Richards, any news from the other groups?”, Said Hillborne. “The west group has done better than us, the eastern group has won as well, and there aren’t any more Germans in Falmouth. now we just need to see how the groups at Penzance and St. Ives did”, Richards answered. “Good, good.”, Said Hillborne.

Suddenly a radio signal is heard, and Richards takes his radio out to hear.

“Brigadier Richards and group Phoenix, this is General Tireel and group Kelpie at St. Ives, we’ve won, have you as well? I certainly hope so, as Brigadier Wanell and group Kraken at Falmouth have requested reinforcements.” Said Grl. Tireel. “Yes, we have won, we have captured a dozen Germans, some fled but most of them are dead.” Answered Richards. “We have captured only a few soldiers, the rest we killed. you should get going, we’ll send you the coordinates of the meetup point.” Said Tireel. “Yes, we’ll start moving. Group Phoenix out... Alright everyone! Start packing, Reinforcements are needed at Falmouth!”, Said Richards.

It didn’t take long for the soldiers to pack, during the packing. Richards informed Cap. Percy and Mar. Ferry of the situation. Hillborne and Mitchell were talking in

the trench. “So I kicked it away from myself and into the German lines.”, Said Hillborne. “So that was you? I thought that maybe some German accidentally drop-”, Mitchell was talking but he got interrupted by Richards. “Hillborne you’re with me, Mitchell you’re with Mar. Ferry this time they’re going straight to the battlefield to meet up with group Kraken, while we will go to Penryn first to meet up with group Kelpie. Get ready, we’re rolling out.”

“Okay, I guess I’ll see you later Mitchell.”, Said Hillborne. “Yeah, see you later.” Said Mitchell.

Hillborne followed Richards to the main transport vehicle, and they talked along the way. In the transport vehicle were multiple maps of Cornwall with marked potential offensives against the Germans.

“So, Hillborne, this is the main plan. As you see on the map we will come from Looe to Penryn which is the meetup point with group Kelpie, from there we will join group Kraken in Falmouth to serve as a distraction while group Kelpie goes around the Germans and cuts off their supply lines and electrical connections. They WILL be helpless, and we WILL kick them out of our homeland.”, Richards explained to Hillborne.

“Seems quite simple...”, says Hillborne. “Well it is simple on paper, but it will be harder during the execution.”, Richards told Hillborne. “Start driving to Penryn.”, Richards told the driver and repeated the same command into the radio.

The drive to Penryn was quite uneventful for most of the journey and when they arrived group Kelpie was already there waiting for them the soldiers there chatting and eating.

“Hey, Richards, my older brother Henry lives here in Penryn, may I visit him?”, Hillborne asked Richards. “Yes you may”, Richards told Hillborne, “How come he isn’t serving our nation?”, Richards asked. “Well... he kind of lost his left leg back in 1917 in Verdun, so he was honourably discharged from the army.”, Hillborne answered. “Well, tell him that he has my regards.”, Richards said. “I will tell him, see you later Richards.”, Said Hillborne.

Henry’s house wasn’t that far from the meetup point so Hillborne only walked for a few minutes before arriving at Henry’s House. He then knocked on the door, and surprisingly fast Henry opened the door.

“Hey Freddie, it’s nice to see you here, I see that you’re in uniform! How’s my baby brother doing?” Henry eagerly said. “Hey Henry, it’s nice to see you too, it has been going great, we’re going to Falmouth in a few hours, for now we can rest here while the more important things are discussed by the higher-ups.”, Said F. Hillborne.

“I do hope you can kick those damn Fritz from our land.”

They talked for around an hour or two before Frederick got a call on his radio, it was Richards telling him to come to base as they will leave in 15 minutes.

“That’s a bit early. I thought we had more time, sorry Henry, I will visit you soon.” Hillborne told Henry, “Eh, see you later, love ya!” Henry said, “I love you too brother.” Hillborne answered.

The drive to Falmouth was uneventful, group Kraken had managed to hold off the Germans till the reinforcements came in. When Hillborne out of nowhere saw Mitchell lying on the ground and rant to him.

“Mitchell, are you alright?!” Hillborne asked. “I think I’ll be okay.” Hillborne then helps Mitchell get up.

“Come on, we got some Nazis to kill.” Hillborne said.

The end

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## SOME BETTER TIMES

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Once upon a time, behind ninety-nine villages, seventy-seven hills and valleys, thirty lakes and swamps and seventeen rivers, in a dense pine forest behind a huge mountain, there lived a nameless playful boy. The boy lived completely alone with no one anywhere in a tiny wooden hut surrounded by tall trees, flowers and a variety of edible plants that he fed on to survive. None of the people ever set foot on that place because the forest was enchanted and well hidden from people's view. Only someone with a pure heart and good soul like that little boy could find her.

The little boy was a mischievous boy, with a small build, short brown hair, dark green eyes, a small ruddy mouth, round freckled cheeks, a small pointed nose, but a kind heart. The boy's days were spent hopping through the forest, climbing trees and running after wild animals that were running scared like lightning in front of him. Every day the boy would go to the magical river surrounded by the untouched beauty of nature that the human eye had not yet seen. There was a beautiful waterfall whose gurgling sounded like the most beautiful symphonies. Forest flowers in all possible colours decorated the magical river around which deer and rabbits happily ran. The hamsters played hide and seek with the beavers around the dams they made themselves. Birds were chirping on the thick branches of trees while bears were lying down and wolves and foxes were playing catch. In the grass, industrious ants fought with caterpillars, snails and earthworms, and mischievous butterflies competed with hard-working bees who were going to visit more flowers. The river was magical because whenever you looked into it you would see what you dreamed of. The dream was turning into reality and that's why the boy was happy to come there every day. The little boy always saw a crowd of playful children running, jumping, shouting, dancing and singing around. The joy never left their faces. The boy dreamed the same dream every day, that he was playing in a happy crowd with those same children. He would keep looking at the river until the spell wore off. After that, he would return to his lonely hut every day sad.

One day on the way home he stopped for a moment. He saw an unusual light in the distance. He saw a beautiful young girl, beautiful as a fairy, with long

blond hair and sky blue eyes, dressed in a light pink dress embroidered with pearls, gold and precious stones sitting on a rock and combing her flowing long hair. It was a forest fairy. The fairy asked the boy why he was sad even though she knew the answer to her question, but she wanted to hear what the boy would answer. The boy replied that he was sad because he was alone, without friends and parents. He curiously asked the fairy if she knew where his parents were. Then the fairy began the story of his life.

“Your mother died in childbirth when you were born. Father fell ill out of great love, pain and sadness for your mother and also went to heaven while you were still very small and so you were left completely alone. You were always a good child, but when you became an orphan you had to beg for food, and people were unfair and mean to you and shouted at you to get away from them because you were dirty. You couldn’t stand the malice of the people around you and that’s why you went far, far away...and found yourself in this enchanted forest that took you under its wing because it took pity on your loneliness and pure heart. When you were still small, you promised yourself that you would return the day people stopped being mean to each other. Days passed, but time stopped for you. You’re still waiting...waiting to come a time of kindness or for your dear parents to come and take you to heaven.”

The boy looked at the forest fairy in amazement and listened attentively. When the beautiful girl had finished the unusual story, the boy asked her if she might know when any of this would happen. The fairy laughed out loud from the bottom of her soul and promised the little boy that he would soon meet his best friend who would help him while he was waiting and suddenly disappeared. The light went out. The boy ran up and down, left and right to find the fairy, but there was no sign of her. Thoughtful and a little sad, he headed to his wooden cabin on the mountain.

Days passed, and the boy was still alone. He waited and waited ... searched under every leaf and stone, looked in every corner of the forest, crawled into every hole in order to find some living being that would not be afraid of him and that would become his friend. Every day the boy was more and more impatient. But on one beautiful sunny day when there was not a single cloud in the sky, the sun’s rays spilled their golden dust through the dense treetops swayed by a gentle breeze, the drops of the waterfall danced an unprecedented dance, the flowers smelled somehow different, and the birds sang a quiet wondrous song, the boy headed towards the magical river. As he walked through the forest, he looked and looked, listened to every sound, and everything seemed somehow different to him. Something rustled in the bushes. The

boy paused for a moment. He calmed down. He tried to quietly sneak up to the bush to see what it was; what kind of sound was coming from the bush. It seemed like crying. A small green creature peeked out from the bush, the likes of which the little boy had never seen before. It was a tiny dinosaur. He got stuck in the bushes. The boy slowly approached the bush and told the little being that it should not be afraid of him because he just wanted to help him. The frightened animal calmed down. The little boy quickly jumped up, rescued the tiny creature, hugged him tightly and asked why he was crying. The dinosaur replied that he was playing in the forest, running after butterflies and got lost. He wandered for a long time in the forest and called his mother, but he could no longer find her. That's how he found himself here and got stuck in the bushes. The boy consoled him and told him that they had similar fates, that they were both alone, and told him his life story, which the little dinosaur listened to attentively. A friendship was born between the boy and the little animal, and the boy named his new friend Piko. From that day the boy and Piko became best friends. They were inseparable. They spent their days in happiness, playing and patiently waiting for better times, the day when people would stop being evil or when their parents would come to them. They didn't know what would happen first, but they hoped that both would come true, in the end, all in their own time.

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## STOLEN STARS

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Every fairy tale ends with “they lived happily after ever”. But, it isn’t as happy as we thought. Feya, a daughter of Sleeping Beauty, Aurora, married Aladdin’s son Jasmin. The two of them ran away from Land of Fairy Tales. Here, in our world, they had a daughter, Aurelia.

Aurelia was a very happy child. Other people were always wondering why that child never cries. They didn’t know that Aurelia was cursed. When Feya and Jasmin ran away, Aurora was furious. She asked the same fairy who cursed her to curse Aurelia. The curse said that *she will cry a lot and every time she cries, one star will fall from sky*. That star will become a monster in Land of Fairy Tales. To stop this, good fairies had to put another curse. The curse was that *Aurelia won’t cry until she’s fifteen years old*.

With the first rays of the Sun, Aurelia woke up. Today is her fifteenth birthday. She dressed quickly and ran to the kitchen.

“Morning mom,” Aurelia said happily to her mother.

“Happy Birthday sunshine,” her mother told her softly and hugged her. It’s Aurelia’s fifteenth birthday, after this day stars will start falling from the sky. Feya was scared. Of course she was. This was even worse than the last curse of evil fairy. Her mother was only sleeping for some time, but this time monsters will start a *war*. That war will destroy the whole Earth with people on it.

“Happy Birthday honey!” the voice of her husband woke Feya from her thoughts. Jasmin was the only person whom she told about the curse. And he was worried too, but he was better in hiding those feelings than her.

“It’s time for you to go to school, young lady,” Feya said to her daughter. Aurelia kissed Jasmin and ran to catch the bus.

“Maybe, we didn’t go far enough from the fairy land. I mean, the Portal is here, in Chicago! We should go to Italy, now. Maybe curse won’t happen there. We can still escape!” Feya exclaimed to Jasmin.

“It’s too late, my love, and you know that. We can’t fix that. I... I’m going to work,” Jasmin replied to Feya’s monologue and went out of the house. Jasmin loved his wife, he really did, but sometimes he just wanted to run away from her.

And while Jasmin was driving, he wasn't focused on the road. He was angry and confused. The traffic light was showing red, but Jasmin didn't stop. He wasn't here mentally. He was in fairy land, looking at his father bullying his mother. In front of him there wasn't a road, in front of him there was the castle of Agrabah. The Truck driver was drunk. He saw the red light, but couldn't stop. Of course, he didn't want to kill anyone, but the driver couldn't think clearly.

And then the crash happened. The truck hit the car. The car was smashed. Jasmin was dead.

Police and ambulance came after some time. Doctors couldn't help Jasmin. They could only call Feya.

"Hello, lady Cellics, your husband had a car crash. He unfortunately died immediately," a police officer said.

"What?" Feya whispered. Jasmin? *Dead*? That can't be possible.

"What happened? Where is he?" she added. It must be a joke. This isn't funny. Her husband is alive, she believed.

"He had a car accident. Could you come to the police station?" the officer answered. She became aware of the situation.

Feya fell onto the floor. It was too much for her. Jasmin is alive. He *must be alive*. Aurelia! She must pick her up from school. They will go together to the station.

"Feya, are you alright? What happened?" Abigail asked, "Come on, stand up," she helped her gently. Abigail was Feya's good friend.

"I'm fine. I have to go to pick up Lily," Feya answered. Lily was Feya's nickname for Aurelia. She didn't love that name because it reminded Feya of her mother.

Feya went to Aurelia's school and explained to the principal what happened. The principal called Aurelia and she went home with her mother.

"Mom. Can you please tell me what happened?" Aurelia insisted. She was scared, but didn't want to show that in front of her mother.

"You know, my love, today something terrible happened and it is connected to your father. He... he's..." Feya tried to explain what happened to her daughter. It was very hard for her.

"Come on, what happened to dad?" Aurelia asked again. She thought that he went on a trip again, or something like that.

"He had a car accident. And he died," Feya cried. Just thinking of that was too painful for her, but she had to tell that to her daughter.

"No. He didn't. He's at work and he will come home in a minute. You are lying!" Aurelia started yelling on Feya. She was shocked.



“This is not a game. Or a joke. I have to go to the police station now,” Feya replied to her daughter and ran out the house. She couldn’t even look at Aurelia without thinking about Jasmin. She was so alike her father.

At the time when Feya wasn’t at home, Aurelia went to her room. She was lying on bed and something hot started dropping from her eyes. Tears. For the first time ever, she lay down on the bed, and cried. And cried. And *cried*. Her tears were full of sadness. Sadness that she couldn’t feel for the last fourteen years.

That night, in the sky, some stars were missing. Nobody could notice that because our sky is so full of stars.

Aurelia didn’t go to school for a week. Feya couldn’t think about her, she lost everything she had. She lost the love of her life. And Aurelia cried her tears out that week. Soon, war will come, and Feya will lose everything that was left from Jasmin. She will lose the most important thing in the whole universe - her daughter.

“Lily, it’s time for school. Come on, you can’t just lay here all the time. Go outside, have fun!” Feya said to her daughter. She was really worried about her, and scared what could happen if she continues crying in her room. Feya wasn’t worried just because of war, she was also scared for her daughter’s mental health.

“OK, calm down. It’s not like I’m going to kill myself if I stay in the room a little longer,” Aurelia replied to her mother.

And she went to school. However that was Aurelia’s worst day in school.

Firstly, everyone looked like they feel sorry for Aurelia and her loss, but she didn’t want that. She didn’t want anything from them.

Then, she found out that her crush has a girlfriend. And his girlfriend is Aurelia’s best friend Tiffany. Her *best friend*.

“What? Don’t act like you didn’t know that I have a crush on him,” Tiffany just said to Aurelia. And that was the trigger which made Aurelia never to return to school again. She didn’t want to speak with teachers, anybody. She didn’t want to look at their sad stares, to them feeling sorry for her. She really didn’t want to be there.

“What are you doing at home Lily?” Feya asked. She wanted to be alone, yes, but she wanted her Lily to go to school, later to college, just like Jasmin wanted.

“I don’t want to go there anymore,” Aurelia whispered. She didn’t want to be around people anymore. Even if those people are her family.

“What?” Feya asked. She couldn’t believe what she has just heard. Lily doesn’t want to go to school?

“YOU HEARD ME THE FIRST TIME!” Aurelia yelled like never before. Because of that, she started crying and ran to her room. Feya sat on the sofa, and couldn’t believe what just happened. Lily never yells. She’s never angry.

And after few months, Feya found a boyfriend. It was very painful for her, of course. She loved Jasmin with all her heart, but soon she will stay alone and... and Jasmin would want her to be happy.

Telling that to Lily didn't go well. She yelled, cried, screamed. But she's just a child, she doesn't understand that.

This unfortunate year brought enormous happiness to Sleeping Beauty. She had the whole army of monsters, whole army of Aurelia's tears. The time has come – the beginning of the war.

“Monsters! In your positions! Three, two, one! GO!” Aurora came out with command. It was time to bring Aurelia home.

And Monsters were on move. They will come to Chicago and steal Aurelia. They will kill every single person on their way. They will rule whole world if their queen commands that.

And suddenly darkness encircled the whole Earth. People fell asleep in a dream, as deep as Aurora's when she was cursed.

Every single hero from Fairy Tale World came to fight against the monsters. The battle was one of the hardest that the world had ever seen. Land was all covered in blood. But, you can't kill a hero. They will just disappear and live again in their fairy tale.

“I can't do this anymore. I'm sitting in a room, crying, while they are fighting for life. I don't want that. I would rather be in that 'sad' world than in this one. I have to speak with my grandmother,” Aurelia said loudly to herself.

And she went to Aurora's shelter.

“Grandmother? Can I speak with you for a minute?” Aurelia asked. She was quite insecure about this visit.

“My granddaughter! Of course! What do you need? A husband? A frog? A castle?” Aurora answered. She is literally ruining the world because of her. And Feya, of course. She was her daughter, true, but the last seventeen years Aurora spent hating her daughter.

“I want you to stop this stupid war. I will go with you in your castle, anywhere you say. Just please, leave my mom and this world alone, at peace” Aurelia whispered. She hated when everyone is around her.

“Oh, if you say so. Go and pack your stuff, monsters will become stars again. Don't worry about them,” Aurora explained to her granddaughter. So, Aurelia went to her room. She grabbed her backpack and packed her diary, some clothes, photos of her family and wrote a message for her mother.

“Ready. Are we going, grandmother?” Aurelia said and tried her best to look happy.

“Nanny, please. Let’s go!” Aurora begged. And they disappeared. Monsters became light and blended with the sky. Darkness disappeared too, and Sun smiled to everyone. The soil wasn’t full of blood anymore. People started waking up. It meant only *one* thing.

“Lily,” Feya whispered and ran to her room. There, on her table was a paper saying:

**A farewell letter**

And I was the happiest,  
 The happiest child ever.  
 I never cried,  
 I smiled even in hard moments.  
 However, tears met my face.  
 I hoped they won’t,  
 But, eventually that happened.  
 I love you, mommy.  
 I really do.  
 But I couldn’t watch battles,  
 Innumerable deaths because of me.  
 I went *Far Far Away*,  
 I’m going to find,  
 To create,  
 My own happiness.  
 And you think that I’m gone,  
 But I’m not.  
 I will always be alive in your heart,  
 In your memories.  
 Goodbye,  
 We will meet once.

And the tears just started falling from Feya’s eyes. *I failed*, she thought. Her only child, her reminder of Jasmin, she’s gone. Gone. They will never see each other again. Never. Her mother won’t allow that.

But, she won’t stop living. Lily and Jasmin wouldn’t want that. She will live like she has always wanted - best and to the fullest.

*Ten years later*

And every year on 29<sup>th</sup> of April one woman comes to the beach somewhere in the world and starts throwing rose petals in the sea. She does it in memory of her daughter, daughter who disappeared at the age of sixteen.

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## TEENAGE MIND

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They say the 21st century is a wonderful time to live in, but sometimes it feels like people around us can be so harsh. Words like “You’ve gained a little weight”, “Look at her, she’s as flat as a board”, or “Check out her nose” can really tear us apart. It’s not just me, even the strongest among us feel the impact.

They also say we’re just clueless teenagers who don’t understand what hate is or what life really is. But the truth is, addictions arise as a way to escape from something, to escape from reality. Why? It’s because of those people who think it’s easy for us, or those who wish us bad because of their own insecurities.

But if they could just walk a meter in our shoes, they’d realize that these are different times. Times where only the “perfect ones” seem to get through unscathed, both physically and mentally. They say, “Be perfect”, but how can we be perfect? Nobody knows how to describe it, we can only say something about the feeling of fear, anger, or simply not accepting yourself. Not everyone is the same, of course, but they either don’t want to keep this on mind, or they truly forgot, or maybe they don’t want that feeling or something. (Be aware they didn’t forget anything, they just think it is like that, until they find a trigger that resets everything to factory settings.)

Everything around us seems so wonderful that it’s hard to believe in ourselves. We forget that we are also worthy, that we deserve to be free from that feeling of non-acceptance. We just don’t want to acknowledge it because we are used to it.

But then, what is perfect, really?

Nobody is perfect, not me, and not you. Everyone has flaws, both beautiful and not-so-great things, talents, and quirks. It’s what makes us human.

We, humans, are made up of little things that make us who we are. The world would be boring if it was perfect, that’s why we have diversity. This truth, apparently, some people don’t understand in a good way.

You’re a weirdo for everyone if you listen to something that’s not trendy, if you have unusual hobby, or if you’re just an ordinary good guy who tries not to get into trouble.

Now, we live in a world where acting is part of everyone's life, not just the 'actors'.

I'm also one of the actresses, but I'm not acting in a theatre, or somewhere on some crazy set. I just pretend that everything is fine, that I am fine. I am now, but I wasn't.

And no one knew it, I guess I'm good at acting. I am an optimist, but not as much as I'm a realist. I simply know that we all pretend to be perfect until we realize that through pretending, we have lost ourselves and our "I".

We lost ourselves living in someone else's world, only acting as side characters, being scared to start our own story, follow our own path that we truly want. But we lost it because we lost faith in our self. And we think that if someone said "No, that's a terrible idea" we should follow that and stay within those four walls and not go out of some bubble in which we are.

"YOU are bad."

" Why ARE you even trying?"

"Do NOT even try."

"You don't try ENOUGH."

Those words above, not the ones in lower case, those in capital letters, say it all.

You don't hear anything else, only the most devastating parts.

They say to let go those words, but even when you let them go, they won't let go of you.

I mean, they're still holding me, even if somehow I managed to do what I wanted, to realize an unfulfilled childhood dream. To stand on the scene, and I did, and I changed. Obviously not enough...

I mean, it's generally difficult to change yourself, and not only your whole self, but even some of your habits. In fact, the one habit that is easiest to change is most likely that of ignoring that little voice inside that tells us what's best for us. Ok, I get it, you probably think I'm just rambling here and writing nonsense just because I like writing.

But if you think about it, everything happens for a reason, maybe I'm writing this for a reason, too.

Maybe someone said, let her write, she will get far, or that person must be there at some point, or the goal of all this is for you, who are reading this, to understand what I want to say.

Challenges and reasons, I think, are the same, because both expect us to do something unimaginable. Honestly, as someone who doesn't have much experience, I can only say that maybe this story is my little bubble I was talking about.

But of course, whether it was it or not, do you remember those words written in upper case? Imagine listening to them every now and then, and having the need to write this.

Well, actually, the main reason why I am writing this is that I want everyone who reads this to know that they can do anything and that the sky is their limit, if only they get rid of that atmosphere of words and thoughts.

So, c'mon be yourself, show them who you are. Some people will hate you for that, but you will find your own little circle of great people. That's what a "real professional" tells you (or me, the one who wrote all this). Don't worry, it will be better. It will be hard, easy, bad, good...

They say "ad astra per aspera" or on English, "to the stars through difficulties."

So be your own star that will reach for the sky, that will shine so bright, more than anyone, anything.

But you know, the 21st century is a wonderful time to live...Or at least that's what they say...

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## THE CAVE OF LIES AND HIDDEN PRAYERS

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She looks up at the pale empty sky with joy in her face – it was grey and saddening, like usual. She saw everything as if it was in a variety of colours, but it was always so grey, so empty and thirsty for the joy that she had. Her name was Verity. After leaving their houses and looking into her deep green eyes people will think- “She’s so truthful” “She’s so lucky” “I wish I was this innocent” “How can she have so much joy, when everything’s so sad?”.

Everything was indeed sad in the town of Prismarine. There was no hope, no life, no will. The only will people had was to pray to goddess Laverna, a goddess Verity worshiped as well. She was the goddess of – everything. She brought people joy, life, hope. She promised the towns people that she will bring the happiness everyone needed. All they had to do was follow her orders and rules. She had many, too many to count. But the most important rule of them is “If you lie, you will have to seek forever mercy for me to give you pleasure”.

Verity gave her whole life into that rule. She abided every other rule, of course but she did everything to abide specifically that rule. Because of her undying loyalty to Laverna and her never saying a single lie she was given the name “The girl of truth”. Her hobbies consisted of praying to Laverna and bringing others joy. She rejected every other moral that would give her life some normalcy that was not of Laverna. Some people called her obsessed because not even the depressed and dying people of Prismarine worshiped her as much as Verity. But then again people would give anything to have the happiness she had. To feel, normal

Everyone knew where they could find Verity. Either at the statue of Laverna or Laverna’s church. People would come up to her and ask: “How are you so happy all of the time?”

“I listen to Laverna’s orders of pleasure; they’re rules and sayings to improve your happiness.” Verity would reply.



“To you it’s always just Laverna, Laverna, Laverna. You need to think about yourself more, you don’t have to revolve your whole life around her, what would happen if she didn’t exist?”

“As Laverna’s rule quotes: “If you don’t ever think about me, worship me, or listen to me, you will forever live in the dark”. I don’t want to think about myself because there is nothing to think about. I am nothing without the colours Laverna gives me. She’s not only the goddess of everything, but she is also my everything. I wouldn’t know how to live without Laverna, to me there would be no point in living a life of tragedy and depression. My life would be – nothing.” Verity would respond.

She wanted say a lot more things, but she keeps hearing the same questions she doesn’t even bother to waste time overexplaining her beliefs. But she doesn’t blame them. No one knows her family, friends, where she lives, where she comes from. She was always a mystery no one could solve.

She would start her day by writing in her journal of hope and love. She would set goals for herself because as Laverna said: “Goals are the best way to not only achieve, but to keep your sanity”. Verity knew Laverna said this because she was aware of the depressing things going on in the town. Everybody would call it unfortunate, but Laverna would call it an opportunity. Nobody was sane at the time. Their ‘unfortune’ led to many casualties so Laverna shed light into the people’s dark souls. Something about her brunette long hair, lovely red eyes and wisdom made it easier for many. From 800 years ago ‘till present day it’s not as bright as it used to be because of her death. Many people still follow her rules and orders while others believe they will never have happiness. That’s why while there is this gloom, the numbers are reduced.

After writing her goals and thinking about Laverna’s light she would leave her house running towards the garden of faith. A garden she created to grow flowers to later put them next to Laverna’s statue. Every day people would come in the morning and pick an item of choice to put next to Laverna to show respect to her. Today she decided to pluck a red tulip, just like her red eyes.

Upon coming to the statue, she saw many civilians on their knees, praying. She blends into the mass of people and starts praying. Their praying was interrupted by a middle-aged man running to the statue, screaming:

“People! Laverna has a cave! Laverna has a cave!”

The mass of people looks up at him in awe, happy they will get more information about Laverna, but are still surprised and shocked.

Verity stands up and confronts the man while whispers of people chattering can be heard.

“What do you mean? How is that possible?” she asks.

The man replies “I was hunting for animals at Mt. Marry until I saw a cave with Laverna’s name written in the Greek alphabet. I wanted to go and inspect it but a bear frightened me and I got scared. Now I’m not only scared to go back because of the bear, but because I’m scared of what’s inside the cave. I’m scared it will change how I view Laverna.”

“Maybe I should go.”

“Verity, I don’t think you are meant for things like this. I understand you have a strong belief about Laverna, but you don’t understand that finding such strong people from out town folk will be hard.”

“That’s exactly why I want to, I’m not scared of losing all my loyalty towards Laverna because I dedicated years of my life to her. I want to prove that I’m worthy. No, more than worthy.”

“Verity this is really hard, we need someone stronger.”

“I don’t care! I would drown myself for her! I am strong, you’re underestimating my power. I’m going there whether you like it or not!”

Verity starts running in the direction of Mt. Marry where the cave was located. No matter how many people try to catch up, her strength and will to do this for Laverna were simply stronger than anyone else’s. In the distance she could hear the whispers of people saying “You can never know what Verity will ever do. The only thing you can predict is the truthfulness of her words. She’s an unsolved mystery begging to be discovered.”

3 days passed since Verity started looking for the cave. She was tired, thirsty, hungry and seeing herself lose hope for the first time in years. She was going through a lot of emotions all at once, more than ever before. But the only thing that she could think about was the words of the middle-aged man trying to stop her and questioning should she have listened to him? After all she impulsively got herself lost on an unknown mountain.

She tried to stop pitying herself and to not lose hope. After all that’s what she had been doing for years for the same reason she came searching for the cave in the first place – Laverna. She got the motivation to start looking for the cave again.

She had been feeling weak for so long anything could startle her. She unexpectedly saw a butterfly land on her shoulder so without Verity’s consent her whole body had an almost attack reflex, making her roll off a cliff, being 5 meters away from the ground. She grunted and laid there in mild pain. Quickly dusted herself off and as she was going to get back up, she realized she hasn’t slept well yet. Comfortably

laying on the ground she decided she was going to take a nap, after all she had been working hard for the past 3 days. After taking the long nap that she deserved it was practically nighttime. She wakes up, bruised from the fall. She strolls for a bit knowing she was getting closer by the second with all the flowers that she was seeing, and she finally sees it – the cave.

She was filled with emotions. She was tired and crying of happiness, walking as fast as she could. She entered the cave greeted by flowers surrounding the walls. And a pile of artifacts. She decides to first embrace the cave. She prayed better in her life than ever before. All she wanted to do is stay there on her knees praying for eternity. But of course, she had to move on. She grabs the artifacts, feeling blessed she found them. The first two were 2 stones and on them are carved rules and orders, it's not like she never saw them before, but it was nice to look at. And the last artifact was what broke the camel's back.

She began reading a stone with also carved words, but these weren't rules or orders. They were far more different.

*“It's all a lie. Everything. Everything's a lie. I wish I could tell them. I really wish I could, but I promised my dad I can't. If someone ever finds this, tell everyone and I will be forever thankful for your choices. This might come sudden but, I'm not a goddess. Not even close. All my morals, rules, and orders, they were all a lie. My dad was tired of never being respected so to be remembered by, he made up a fake story that he discovered a goddess which was really his daughter, me. He made me write all these things that I knew wouldn't make a person happy or joyful. It was just blank words filled with hearts of people who believed me and thought it was working. I am sorry, oh so sorry my loved ones. I cannot express how disgusted I am with my father that he would take advantage of everyone just for his own benefit. There is no way to forgive me, but at least spread the word.*

*-Laverna”*

Verity, with tears in her eyes, didn't know what to feel as she saw her world view crumble before her eyes. She couldn't comprehend her emotions. She finally realized everything. The only reason she felt joy was because she felt like there was finally hope in her life. How could she have been so naive? The girl that never told a single lie in her life, was telling lies and made-up stories this whole time. She felt – empty. She felt the exact same thing that she described. She had no plans for life anymore. It's as if it was the end yet she hasn't even died. There was nothing to look forward to because it's as if she's starting life again. She was looking back at all the times people told her to think about herself more. Why didn't she listen to them?

The last thing she could think of was to inform the town. She impulsively lit a torch running towards where she suspected was her town. She arrives and stands on the statue with grace, already hearing gasps in the crowd.

“People! For I need to inform everyone that Laverna is not a goddess it was all...a lie”

Verity throws the carved stone into the crowd.

“As a way to honour Laverna I will burn down this statue, because Laverna herself said her dad made it all up.” Verity said looking for an excuse to take her anger out on the statue

She missed one crucial detail. Laverna had red eyes, just like the torch. The people, thinking she’s lying because of her red eyes lighting up, grab Verity until she is absorbed by the crowd, never to be seen again. All that’s left are ashes, and a pale sky

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## THE DREAM CATCHER

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I was driving on the highway. I just got off work...My eyes closed occasionally for a few seconds from my tiredness. I turned up the song on the radio to distract myself from the sleepiness. I was vibing to the song, my dream catcher hanging from the roof of my car, dangling to the beat of the music. Suddenly lights flashed in front of me, then everything went dark, all I could hear were distant sounds of sirens and panic...I looked at the dream catcher as my consciousness slipped away....

My eyes fluttered open as I got used to the new source of light. Where was I? I got up to a sitting position as I looked around, my head aching. To my surprise I was in a forest, the trees looking like nothing you'd seen before, yet to me, too familiar to ignore...Then to my luck, I heard rustling in the bushes, and before I could react a salamander jumped out or what could be only described as something remotely close to that animal...As this one was purple and covered in crystals, its bright yellow eyes looked at me, studying my expression. Before my brain could comprehend the situation it rubbed my hand with its head. It looked friendly, but yet again I got that familiar feeling like I'd seen it before... Then everything clicked, as I looked around my surroundings again and back at the salamander, I realized...

This is like in my dream...A magical world my brain created to get out of reality for the four hours of sleep I normally got...But how? Last thing I remember I was in a car crash...

After some further thinking, I decided to explore my surroundings, I grabbed the salamander and put it gently on my shoulder, it seemed fine with the arrangement. Not having any sense of direction, I picked a course and started walking, though I had this eerie feeling of being watched but I never had humans in my dreams so there shouldn't be anyone here. I shrugged and continued walking... While exploring, I found nothing except bushes, grass and more trees, I expected more. Then, I heard rustling in the bushes, the salamander which I decided to call Jorge was being quite aggressive, which I took as a sign of nothing good, my flight or fight sense kicked in and I started running. I turned around to see a boar with a gem in its head, several more horns than intended and a peculiar colour scheme chasing me. The

more I ran the closer the boar got and just when its horn touched me...An arrow flew by hitting it right in the gem in its forehead, killing it instantly. Between the near-death experience and the realization of other intelligent creatures in this dream world of mine, my body opted to shutting down or rather pass out. When I finally regained my consciousness I wasn't in the forest anymore, I was strapped to a bed with rope, while Jorge was in a cage beside me. Personally, I think I prefer the boar now, as I looked around I realised I was in a hut, the roof was covered in leaves and from what I've seen through the window I was on a branch of one of the giant trees I saw earlier. I looked around the room until the door swung open and a being close to a human but with pointy ears and a gentle appearance. I came to the realisation I had been captured by elves.

While the elves I imagined were a tad bit more gentle. This one was on the verge of skinning me alive. And I had no clue as to how I wronged him. As I was stuck in my thoughts I didn't notice that this particular elf started pulling the rope that tied me down. At first, I thought the elf would set me free but that thought quickly disappeared as he cuffed me with cuffs that had a strange aura around them. Magic perhaps? He pulled me up to my feet. Jorge was hissing at the elf but stopped when the elf shot him a glare. I was then blinded by a rag that the elf put on me. He started leading me out of the hut I was previously kept prisoner in. Thought raced through my head at the all possibilities of what could happen to me. I was then pushed to my knees as I opened my eyes to a true sight. Two elves sat in two separate thrones both covered in jewels. The crowns made of golden leaves that sat on their heads made me realize that those two were the King and Queen of elves.

While my focus was on the King and Queen the elf that brought me in made me bow down to them as a show of some respect. My eyes darted around the room taking in the lavish decor, but I quickly reverted my attention as the King spoke: "Who are you?" he asked, it was a simple question that held authority.

He then continued "Or rather what exactly is a human like you doing this far into the continent of *Soluna*?"

That name rang inside my head, it was the name of this world and the only continent it was home to. I pondered lying about who I was so I did: "I was to be sold to a lord of another kingdom until my kidnappers were attacked by that...peculiar boar I managed to slip past my kidnappers but the boar noticed me.... And well I'm sure you're aware of what happened after, your grace" I said.

"I'm very aware that my hunters saved you and that lizard of yours, but don't you think you should repay us somehow? Perhaps serving as a servant or hunter to my kingdom"

I only nodded, listening eagerly.

“Good”, now the Queen spoke, I almost forgot about her presence.

“You will be a servant of our kingdom and I hope you do find it in your heart to stick to your newfound duty, human”

She said, her voice fierce. That was definitely a warning and a threat, meaning if I were to betray them I would face dire consequences, it was already a miracle they even gave me a chance. It was a chance to adapt to this world and finally figure out how I managed to end up here.

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## THE ENCHANTED QUEST: A TALE OF ADVENTURE AND MAGIC

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Once upon a time, in a small village called Aura, there lived a curious and adventurous girl named Althea. She had a heart full of dreams and a mind bursting with creativity. Althea loved to explore the enchanting forests that surrounded her village, always searching for hidden treasures and magical creatures. One day, while Althea was wandering through the woods, she stumbled upon an ancient-looking book. The book was bound in worn leather and had mysterious symbols carved into its cover. Intrigued, Althea opened it and discovered that it was a book of spells. With excitement in her eyes, Althea began to study the spells, eager to unlock their secrets. She learned how to create potions that could grant temporary invisibility. But there was one spell that caught her attention the most – the spell of transformation. Determined to test her newfound powers, Althea decided to try the spell on herself. She recited the incantation with precision and felt a surge of energy coursing through her veins. To her amazement, she transformed into a beautiful butterfly, with vibrant wings that shimmered in the sunlight. As a butterfly, Althea soared through the skies, exploring places she had never seen before. She visited colorful meadows filled with blooming flowers and danced among the treetops, feeling the wind against her delicate wings. It was a truly magical experience. But as time passed, Althea began to miss her human form. She longed to hug her loved ones and feel the warmth of their embrace. With a heavy heart, she recited the spell once again, and this time, she transformed back into her human self. Althea realized that the true magic was not in the spells or the transformations, but in the love and connections she had with the people around her. She cherished every moment spent with her family and friends, knowing that their love was the greatest enchantment of all. After a few days of enjoying herself, she heard something strange in the bush nearby. When she went to check it out, there was nothing there. She kept hearing those voices almost every day, until she had enough. She rushed to the bush with a big stick so she could protect herself. As soon as she hit the bush she realized that it was a boy. Althea apologized



to him and tried to heal him with her spells. Luckily it worked. ‘ Who are you? ’, she asked. The boy just smiled and started introducing himself. ‘ My name is Ethan, I am coming from mystical land called Eldoria. I am an adventurer and I think I got a little lost. ’, said Ethan. She was confused but also very happy meeting him, knowing that he is an adventurer just like her. A couple of days later they started getting closer and closer, they were feeling safe and happy around each other. That’s when Ethan got an idea, he asked Althea if she would go on an adventure with him. Obviously she agreed. On their way Althea spotted something, it was a mischievous talking fox named Finn, who became their loyal companion. They continued their adventure. As they were travelling the enchanted forest, Ethan discovered a hidden village of fairies, who possess incredible powers. It was obvious that they were both very amazed because they never actually saw them, they were mentioned only in fairy tales. The fairies guided them to the Cave of Whispers, where they must retrieve a magical crystal to break the curse that plagues the land. Even though they didn’t expect that they will help to break the curse, they were very happy because they could help. Inside the cave, they face a series of challenges, including a labyrinth filled with shifting walls and a treacherous river guarded by a fearsome water serpent. With quick thinking and bravery, they overcome each obstacle and gain the trust of the ancient spirits residing in the cave. Finally, they reached the heart of the cave, where the crystal awaits. But it is not as simple as taking it. They must solve a riddle posed by the guardian of the crystal, a wise and ancient dragon named Drakon. Once they solved the riddle, they granted the crystal’s power. With the crystal in hand, Ethan brings Althea with him to return to his kingdom, where they confront the evil sorcerer who cast the curse. In an epic battle, they used the crystal’s magic to defeat the sorcerer and restore peace to Eldoria. Althea and Ethan were very proud of themselves, but Althea had to go back to Aura. Ethan was devastated. He didn’t know why it was affecting him so much, that’s when realized that he might have feelings for her. He wasn’t sure yet so he didn’t say anything. Althea asked him if he would like to come with her. ‘ You don’t have to stay there long if you don’t want to! ’, said Althea. Ethan agreed to go there for a few months. Althea took a great care of Ethan, but every time she got close to him his heart would beat faster. They were very happy together and were always having fun. Unfortunately it was time for Ethan to go back to kingdom. Both of them were really sad but they managed to do it. Ethan promised to come back as soon as possible. Althea trusted him. After a few years, Althea became older, she was beautiful and very mature. She was hoping that Ethan would come back. She was helpful and had a very nice soul, everyone loved her because

she was hard working. One day she was on her way home when she suddenly heard something in the bush. When she went to check it she found Ethan, she jumped out of happiness and hugged him as tight as possible. It was the best day of her life. The tears started rolling down their eyes but Ethan managed to calm down. He got on one knee with a ring in his hands. ‘ Will you marry me? ’, he asked. ‘ Yes! I will! ’, said Althea and they lived happily ever after.

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## THE GIRL WITH THE RED COAT

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There once was a girl from Paris, during the late 1950's. Nobody knew her name, not even her closest "friends". She always roamed the Paris streets looking at that one boutique, her glorious red coat would float in the wind. When she would walk by, all the men were mesmerized by her beauty. How can every single female hate the same person, you may ask? She was so good-looking that she broke up hundreds, if not thousands of marriages, by not even saying a word. She got proposed to so many times, but she denied every single one, all because of her shattered heart for her childhood love. She got catcalled many times a day until she was driven mad because of it, she chopped her magnificent red hair, shaved her eyebrows like they had never been, cut her long nails that were painted a pink-nude color, and threw away that red coat, knowing she would regret that later. The day after her breakdown, she went out in public finally in peace, she did not have a care in the world, and she could shop without being stared at or called names because of her skinny but curvy body, all because she was "ugly" now. But she never felt more "happier". Months have passed, she still lived in peace, her peace, alone...

She mourned the love of her life, Louis. They have known each other since they were infants, they learned how to walk together and ride a bike, and they also learned how to read and write together. He and she were so close that wherever she was, he was there with her, always by her side. Until one moment he was not. Louis was sent to fight for his country during World War II, as a 19 years old young man. The day he left, she kissed him one last time hoping that it would happen again. She was devastated. Louis did not want to show his emotions, so he left before breaking down in tears. She ran to his dorm room at his college, hugging his soft white pillow, now drenched in tears. "Oh Louis, my sweetest heart, promise that you will come back to me!" - she wept constantly, her head sunk in the pillow full of tears. She cried so much that she did not even notice the big box with a bow on it with her name on it. She opened the box, then a smile appeared on her face. The box had a gorgeous red coat in it, the one she always looked at in that boutique all these years. She took the coat from the box, wiping her tears with one hand, and holding the coat with the

other. She tried it on, now with an even bigger smile on her face. She twirled around the room, so happy that Louis bought her that coat she always dreamed about. She looked in the mirror, but something was missing, someone was missing. Her smile quickly disappeared, tears now rolling down her face again. She put her hand in her pocket, feeling a piece of paper, thinking it was a tag. She pulled it out and saw a note that was addressed to her, "My love, I knew you would come here to hug my pillow, I remember you did that the first time I left for college. I saw you looking at this coat for years now, and I always wanted to buy it for you, and I finally did. I will come back to you no matter what, I promise." From that moment on, she never went out without wearing that glorious red coat. Two months after he left, his family received a letter, saying that Louis died during a mission to protect his country. She was in denial, but he promised! He is out there somewhere. I know he would not leave me. They just mistook him for some other soldier. This surely is not happening! Everyone tried to reassure her that he was dead and there was nothing she could do about it. But she believed no one. "Louis promised that we would get married after he graduated from college. He said that we would have a family one day!" - she kept saying that to everyone who tried to comfort her. A few weeks later, at Louis's funeral, she came wearing the coat he gave her while everyone else was wearing black. During the ceremony she could not listen to the priest, she was so numb from all the crying that she did not feel any emotions, only emptiness. How could there be so many people who cared for her all around her, but she still felt so alone like no one ever has before. She was not living anymore, now she just existed without any love for anyone, without any empathy for anyone, no one mattered to her.

Years and years passed, and she was still so numb as if all happened yesterday, but deep down in her heart, she knew Louis was waiting for her. The only emotions she sometimes felt was when she was walking by that boutique, staring at the glass, and remembering the happiest moments with Louis that she was never going to forget. She would smile sometimes knowing that Louis would want her to feel joy and happiness, but she could not do that no matter how hard she tried. Decades later she finally feels happy again, knowing that she is going to meet Louis soon, she thinks about him every day, but she also spends every moment of her day regretting her decision to throw away that red coat all those years ago. „Miss Julietta! “She was shocked, she had not been called that since Louis's funeral. Suddenly, she felt so many different emotions she had not felt in a long, long time. Miss Julietta got up as fast as she could despite being 84 years old. Before she opened the door, she thought to herself. „Miss Julietta, only Louis called me Julietta, despite my name being Julie!

“She opened the door. It was the mail carrier giving her a package with her name on it. When she opened it, there was a glorius red coat inside different from her old one, but identical. When she put it on, she put her hand in the pocket, now knowing what it was she pulled out the piece of paper that said: „I know you threw away the original coat he gave you, here is a replacement. I know that Louis still loves you. “. Julietta decided to wear that coat around the city like she used to back then, but now she was happy wearing it.

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## THE HAUNTED MADHOUSE

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In a small town near London called Ashwell there were two best friends called Sylvia and Darcy. They were sixteen years old.

One day after school they went to the park to have a peaceful talk about what costumes they will make; there wasn't much time left because Halloween was in a week. As they were talking, they couldn't agree on what they could be for Halloween, and they got into an argument. Darcy got up and walked away upset, Sylvia felt bad because they had an argument about such a small thing. Sylvia went home.

Darcy was so mad that she couldn't think where she was walking. Only after an hour, she managed to calm her nerves down. She looked up and realized she got lost. She was near a town she never visited before. There was no one around, and it started to get really dark and late. She started to panic and got her phone out of her bag and saw there was no service. She turned around so she could go back the way she came but she couldn't remember how she got here. She kept walking down the road until she saw a building that looked like a large house.

From afar it looked large, and when she got closer it was the biggest house she had ever seen. She saw the sign "No entry" on the gates. Next to the sign there was a paper where she could barely read the letters "*This facility was closed on the 19th May 1876. No trespassing!*"

It was getting darker by the second, and after a few hours she looked at the time it was already 1 A.M. She looked at the gate and it was slightly ajar. She pushed it open and it screeched, she felt goosebumps. Slowly she got into the yard and approached the doors of the mansion. She entered the building and turned on the flash on her phone. Then she saw the counter with a lot of papers and some information about the building. She saw that it was a madhouse that was built in 1670 and started to explore around the madhouse. There were a few wheelchairs and straitjackets and she remembered that she had heard rumors about that madhouse. The rumors were about some patients' ghosts that were haunting that place. People had said they heard screaming, banging on the doors and walls, spooky footsteps. Some people also said that four people had gone missing in the last five months and still weren't found. She

got really scared and started to run back to the front doors but all of sudden the front doors locked. She passed out and after a while she woke up in a strange room. She noticed she wasn't wearing her clothes, instead she was buckled up in a straitjacket. She tried to move and scream for help, but no one seemed to be there to help her.

Meanwhile Sylvia had a terrible nightmare that Darcy was screaming for help. In that nightmare she saw that Darcy was wearing a straitjacket. She also saw a big shadow looming over Darcy and that's what woke her up. Immediately she called Darcy to tell her about the nightmare. The phone wasn't ringing but only the voice mail answered and said „*The person you called is currently not available. Please call back later.*”

Sylvia couldn't shake off the feeling that something really bad happened to Darcy. It was still the same night that Darcy went missing. She dressed up into a casual outfit and took her bike to go find Darcy. She went to Darcy's house and saw through the window of Darcy's room that there was no light. She knew something was wrong because the light was always on in Darcy's room because Darcy was afraid of dark. She then realized that something bad happened and decided to go find Darcy by herself. It was 2:30 in the morning.

She decided to find Darcy by herself, and she went to the same park where she last saw Darcy. She stood there for a while to try to remember what way Darcy could have gone. It took her only a few minutes and then she started pedaling as fast as she could in the same direction that Darcy could have run away earlier. Then about fifteen minutes later she saw a big house with a lot of windows and noticed that there was a lit candle on one of the windows. All of a sudden, she had a flashback that she saw the same scene in her nightmare. She knew that Darcy was there.

She saw that the gate was open and ran into the yard, then she entered the building. She called Darcy but no one answered. Sylvia saw a light coming from one room and ran to the room. When she entered the room, she saw Darcy lying on the bed. Darcy was really pale, eyes wide open she was staring at one corner. Sylvia looked to the direction where Darcy was staring and saw nothing. She shook Darcy very hard and was trying to get some response from Darcy. It took her a while to hear anything from Darcy, after a few minutes Darcy spoke up. The only thing she said was "There is someone standing over there" and she kept looking at the corner. Sylvia saw nothing but she remembered her nightmare that she had and spoke up. "Darcy can you describe what you're seeing?". Darcy was frozen. Sylvia kept asking her questions, her voice was soft. After a few more minutes Darcy finally spoke up. "The man....." Sylvia was worried and confused, she asked, "What does the man look like?" Darcy

spoke up again, "the man is tall.....he has a black big hat....and long arms.....and he has no eyes....he has a creepy smile on his face...." Sylvia has remembered the shadow from her nightmare and screamed hard. Darcy was just staring at the man. The shadow appeared in the corner and Sylvia saw him, her arms and legs started to shake so hard she couldn't move. Everything went black for Sylvia.

Next morning their parents got to their rooms and saw that both girls were missing. They knew that something was off. Darcy's mom called Sylvia's mom to ask if they were there. Sylvia's mom answered and said, "I thought they were at your place." Darcy's mom started to panic and said "We need to go to the police station because they are not here." Both parents went to police station and reported the girls missing. Sylvia's mom said, "I had a terrible dream that the girls were kidnapped by a madman and I need to call Lorraine and Ed Warren to come help us. No police needed; we will do it my way." Darcy's mom wasn't sure her plan will work but she agreed.

Darcy's dad was an investigator, and he checked the whole town and found nothing. After a few hours the Warrens told them about the madhouse and how four people had gone missing five months ago and still weren't found but they were last seen in that madhouse. They decide to check the madhouse. The police followed the Warrens and the family of the girls to the madhouse.

They were exploring the madhouse and in one room they saw both Darcy and Sylvia being in straitjackets, looking really pale with their eyes wide open staring at the same corner. After they got the girls out of the madhouse, they took them to hospital. The girls weren't speaking for a whole month about what happened to them in the madhouse.

Few months later and after a lot of therapy they told the parents what happened to them. Nobody believed them about the mysterious man, but both of them saw him. And they have never fought nor left the house after dark ever again.



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## THE HEART OF THE CURSED

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The year is 1573. Rumor has it that the youngest prince of Elewyn has lost his mind. He wanders the palace rose gardens, lost in the labyrinth of his own thoughts, speaking in riddles. He can see faeries, werewolves and demons of any kind. Unfortunately, the queen had no choice; she turned her own son into stone. Around him she planted the labyrinth of roses that only people with magical blood can enter and find the flute that will bring prince back to life. Three hundred years later, a child will enter the labyrinth, even though people thought that there was no longer magic in her family...

Dinah slowly walked out of the ball room. She was tired and sick of the smell of makeup and too many people in one place. She pulled hairpins out of her ginger braid while walking towards the rose garden. A cold spring breeze blew in her face. Dinah licked the lipstick of her lips; she didn't want to wear it anyway. As she moved on, the melodious and rhythmic sound of music and footsteps became quieter. Soon she was in silence. Only then she noticed the beauty around her - pruned trees, a gravel path and labyrinth of blue, white, pink and red roses. Behind the hedge arch, a little on the side stood the stone bench. Dinah picked a red rose and sat on the bench. Suddenly she felt how tight her flat shoes were, so she took them off and threw them aside. She also took of her skirt, folded it and placed it on the edge of the bench as a pillow, she was only in her blouse and petticoat, but she wasn't cold. It is hard to imagine that anyone could comfortably lie on the stone bench with only a thin cloth under their head, but it was still possible. In fact Dinah was happy to be laying there. For a while she watched the fireflies dance through the night until...

Dinah was breathing heavily. She couldn't scream. She was running from something she couldn't quite name. She was in danger. Suddenly Dinah stopped and found herself in the center of the ruins of an old castle. She felt something choking her... Then she woke up.

Dinah stood up as if struck by lightning. It must be past midnight, the guests and grandma are surely looking for her. She has to get out.

-Oh!-her shoes were still off and something stung her toe.

Dinah bent down and found a golden flute under the rose petals. It looked old but beautiful. It even had a little bird drawn on it. She brought the flute closer to her lips and played a few notes. That was when magical things started to happen. Beside the wonderful sound, something else came out of the flute. The music was accompanied by an unusual golden dust that was shifting in the moonlight. The golden dust flew between the roses and hedge, it turned, it sparkled as if it wanted to show Dinah the way through the labyrinth. And of course, like all people on earth, Dinah knew that following golden dust in the maze of roses in the middle of the night was NOT a good sign, but it was so magical. The dust took her first to the left, then to the right, then straight and right again, then again to the left and...she found herself in a circle in the center of a labyrinth. She took a deep breath, the moon and the roses at that time of the night smelled sweet.

*Ah!*

Dinah screamed. She was frightened by the statue of a boy on the altar in front of her. The statue itself was not scary at all but the fact that it was moving! Moving and peeling. The dirt suddenly rose up around them and surrounded Dinah and the statue like a hurricane. At one point Dinah could even feel her feet leaving the ground. *Boom!* Something fell on her and knocked her over...

Dinah felt sharp pain at the back of her head and opened her eyes. She tried to get up but someone was lying on top of her. It was a boy. He looked just like the statue that had almost given her a heart attack a moment ago.

-Well...hello...-the boy whispered. Dinah only now realized what kind of pose they were in and pushed him away from her. She screamed again. -Who are you? Why were you in that statue? -she was yelling.

-Prince.-the boy answered.

The corners of Dinah's lips stretched into a weak smile, she rolled her eyes.-Don't lie to me. I'm not a little girl.- Then she remembered something, her grandma told her a story about a boy, a prince.

-Rumor has it that the youngest prince of Elewyn had lost his mind... The queen had no choice, she turned her own son into stone. Around him she planted the labyrinth of roses... -She could almost hear her voice in her head.

-What year is it? - Dinah asked.

-What do you mean "What year is it"? - he raised his left eyebrow.- It's 1573.

"The youngest prince of Elewyn" she repeated in her head. -No, no. It's 1893. You've been stoned for over three hundred years.- Dinah tried hard to remember his name. -Your name is...- she was tapping her forehead.

-...Fox. – he finished sadly.

They suddenly heard voices from somewhere in the maze.-Dinah! Dinah!-that must be the guests that went to look for Dinah after they realized she was gone.

-Oh, no! – she sighed. -We need to go! They can't see you!- Fox looked at her in confusion -You were stoned for the last three hundred years, besides everyone knows the story about you and how crazy you are. If they saw me with you, they would probably kill us both.- said Dinah just before she started to run. Avoiding people and running through the maze is more difficult in reality than in any book Dinah has read. The branches slapped them and they were scratched all over. After a while, Dinah let Fox lead because she had accidentally led them into a dead end where they almost got stuck. Just as they started to advance Fox suddenly stopped. -What is it?-Dinah asked. She rose on her toes and leaned over, but she couldn't see anything, only an empty passage.

*Dinah! Dinah!* The voices were getting closer and closer, they had to hurry. Fox looked terribly worried and frightened. Dinah asked again. -What is it? Are you...- *Boom!* A gun shot. -Now we really need to go! – she said stepping forward.

-No!- Fox shouted and pushed her back. -Take my hand.

-Wha...NO!- Dinah protested, frowning.

-Oh, come on! I'm not asking you to marry me! I'm saving our lives!- She sighed and took his hand. They intertwined their fingers. At that moment a light flashed before Dinah's eyes. Then she saw the passage again, but now there was a wolf standing in the middle of the gravel road, a very angry wolf. She was petrified with fear, she stopped breathing for a moment. -Don't. Move.-she heard Fox whispering in her ear. Interesting. Dinah's brain was telling her to run. Her legs did not want to listen. Fox told her not to move. She decided not to listen to anyone and look for something sharp, something with which she could defend herself. She grabbed her belt with her free hand, but the only thing she found was the magical flute she had taken with her before they ran from the center of the maze. -Pass it to me!- Fox yelled.

-How will the flute help?-

-Just give it to me!- And she listened to him.

The wolf was just about to attack. Dinah unconsciously buried her head in Fox's shoulder. He brought the flute to his mouth and played a very high, squeaky note. The wolf growled and stopped. Dinah covered her ears. Fox jumped to the side and pulled Dinah with him just in time. Bang, whine and break, like a bomb went off. Neither of them dared to move for a few more moments. They were just breathing and that was scary enough at this point.

*Dinah! Dinah!*

Dinah stood up and gently pulled Fox by the sleeve of his old, medieval shirt, but as soon as she saw the scene in front of her she slightly shook. There was indeed an explosion, the rose bushes on both sides were burnt and the wolf was reduced to pieces. Really horrible. Dinah never thought that she would feel sorry for the animal that wanted to tear her apart. She looked at the bushes again. Since there was now a rather large hole in it, a path could be seen that led outside the labyrinth towards the nearby forest.

-You should go.-Dinah said turning to Fox and helping him to his feet.

-Are you sure you will manage?-he asked her.

-Oh, I will. It's not the first time I ran away from my grandma. She can be rather boring.-Dinah gave him a smile.

Fox prepared to play the flute once more, but Dinah grabbed his arm.-Are you sure you want to do that? Last time you tried it exploded.- Fox laughed softly and whispered to her. -Don't worry.

He played three consecutive tones and a simple bracelet of golden leaves with a pearl in the middle appeared on Dinah's wrist. -If you ever need my help, press the pearl and I will try my best to reach you as quickly as possible. It's the least I can do for the girl who lifted the curse from my heart.

That was the last thing Dinah heard from the youngest prince of Elewyn before he ran away. But something in the stars told her that this was not a goodbye but just a see you later.

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## THE LETTER

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Imagine waking up every morning, getting dressed, brushing teeth, eating breakfast, going to school, coming home from school, eating lunch, doing homework, going to sleep. The cycle repeats. Now imagine having no one to wake you up in the morning, no one asking you what you want for breakfast, no one helping you with homework and no one wishing you a good night. Meet Flynn Sullivan. A sixteen-year-old boy who has never known a better life than the one in the orphanage. He has never met his parents; they died in a car crash when he was just a little boy. Since he didn't have a family except for his parents, he needed to stay at an orphanage.

It was a day just like any other. Flynn woke up and got ready. It was a Friday, and he was excited for the weekend to arrive. Kids from the orphanage who went to high school usually walked together since it was a 10-minute walk away. Flynn's day at school passed quickly and he got home around 4 pm. Friday was mail day, which means that kids will either receive mail that day or they can send it to someone. He never received mail, so he was a bit surprised when he saw his name on one of the envelopes. There was no information on the letter about who sent it or where it was from. He carefully opened the letter. As he was reading it, he got more and more surprised. It said that he was going to be adopted by his aunt. He didn't even know he had an aunt. He had to sit down. He continued reading the letter. In the letter he read that she found out that he is alive just now. He learned that her name was Mary and that she was Flynn's mother's sister. Since she was his only family, Mary decided to adopt him without any second thought. Flynn packed everything he had in three duffel bags.

It is very sad how some kids have lived almost two decades, and they can pack their lives in just a few bags.

He had a goodbye lunch with his friends from the orphanage where everyone wished him good luck. He had a lot of friends at the orphanage but was happy to go away. That place only reminded him of how lonely he was. He now knew he belonged somewhere and that he had a home and would be happy.

His aunt Mary organized a driver to get Flynn and drive him to her house. It was the longest he had ever driven. They passed a mountain Flynn could usually see from his window in the orphanage. After almost 3 hours of driving, he finally arrived. The first thing he noticed as he got out of the car was the size of the house. It was massive. There was a huge garden that stretched to the back of the house. He started wandering because he was curious about what was behind the house, and his eyes became wide with wonder as he followed the garden's fence. There was a pavilion in the centre of the garden. It was white and round and it had benches inside. He felt like he was in a fairytale. His aunt opened the back doors and he got nervous suddenly. Why did this feel so familiar? She quickly ran down the steps and welcomed him to the house. He could see she was nervous, too, and that helped him relax a bit. He followed her inside. The first thing he noticed was that the main hallway was full of old portraits and a grandfather clock at the bottom of the stairs. It was beautiful. So why did it feel wrong?

As Flynn was waiting for his aunt to grab a key for his new room, he wanted to explore the top floor a bit. As he passed the grandfather clock, he noticed that the clock had stopped. He didn't pay much attention to it as it's old, so it probably hasn't been working for quite some time now. He carefully went up the stairs, step by step. It still felt surreal that this was going to be his new home. As he stepped on the last step, he heard keys jingling from a room at the end of the hallway. His aunt opened the door, and she froze. Flynn's hand was bleeding. He didn't notice that it was bleeding before his aunt told him so. He never even felt like anything scratched him. She quickly returned to her room and brought back bandages. After he bandaged his arm, she showed him to his room. His new room was minimally decorated, unlike the rest of the house. He brought his bags into the room and for the rest of the evening, he unpacked and made his new room feel a little more personal.

It was soon dinner time, and this was the perfect time to get to know his aunt a little better. She told him a lot about his mom and how his mom and dad met... He felt sleepy, it was already 10 pm by the time they told some stories to each other. Flynn thanked her for talking about his mom since he knew it was hard because Mary missed her sister. Flynn went to his room and laid on his bed that was so fluffy that he almost didn't believe this was now his life. He thought of his room like a little apartment since it had a big space for a bed and a desk, a walk-in closet and its own bathroom.

In the morning Flynn jumped out of the bed and bumped his head in the ceiling. He said to himself "That's weird. " He didn't have a low ceiling or a bunk bed at

his new house. He hit his head very hard, the world went quiet for a bit. His head stopped spinning and he made his way to the bathroom. He opened the door and left his room. He found himself in a weird-looking room. It had a lot of mirrors that made you look different like something was wrong with your face. He saw someone in the mirror. It looked like someone was behind him but when he turned around no one was there. He looked in the mirror once again and when this person got even closer, he got so scared that he fainted.

Flynn woke up after some time. His vision was blurry but as his eyes got more and more used to the lighting in the room he could slowly figure out where he was. It looked white. He recognized the sterile smell before he could completely see. Was he in a hospital?

“...We assume he has dementia...” Flynn’s face became pale, he knew what they were talking about. He had a minor concussion. The only thing he could remember was that he bumped his head very hard. Flynn jumped out of bed and everything that happened next happened so fast. He lost his balance and fell to the floor. Doctors helped him get up. He remembered a situation where something like that happened. He remembered being excited about seeing someone and meeting them. Flynn told that to the doctors and the doctors said he had a condition called dementia.

That’s when people start losing their memory. People who have dementia lose their memory little by little. People with dementia, in contrast to those who experience memory changes, frequently reject that they are experiencing memory loss.

Flynn still expected to meet someone, but the doctors just said that he could go back.

“Back where?” he mumbled.

“Back to the orphanage,” a doctor said.

“But I got adopted,” Flynn said. “When?” the doctor was worried.

“This week, I got a letter on Friday.” Flynn confidently said, “My aunt adopted me.”

“I am sorry kid; you are probably just tired. It’s Thursday today.”

Flynn got to the orphanage and went to his room. He fell asleep.

He woke up the next day and just knew it was going to be a good day. He got ready. It was Friday and he was excited for the weekend to arrive. Flynn’s day passed very quickly, and he got home around 4 pm. Since Friday was a mail day kids would get mail and would get happy. Flynn usually didn’t receive mail. Well, this day was different.

He got a letter.

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## THE LIFE LESSON

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My daughter Alice came with her kids again. I love to see them so happy, it reminds me of my childhood. I am grateful to have a beautiful and healthy daughter and grandkids always ready to listen to my imaginary stories with a pinch of reality. “Grandpa, grandpa, tell us another story,” they yelled.

“Alright, alright, grandpa is going to tell you a story but don’t be scared like the last time,” I said.

“We won’t get scared, we promise!” they exclaimed joyfully.

I looked at the shiny bottle with a message positioned on the chest of drawers in the corner. “Alright, let’s get started. When I was your age, I wanted to go all over this planet. That’s why I chose to be a sailor. See that bottle with the paper inside? Well, let me tell you more about it. I wrote the note on one of the journeys I went on. We had a shipment for Chile. It started off easy without too many dangerous, threatening winds or waves coming our way.”

My little angels do not have to know everything. I continued my story, but my thoughts drifted into my past straight to the journey which taught me a precious lesson on love, devotion, and faith, after all. To be honest, I did not know other sailors quite well, we knew each other by nicknames and that was all. I know it may sound strange, but our mission was almost illegal, ‘almost’ being an understatement. I did not know the details; I was crazy enough to accept the captain’s offer for some extra profit while our ship was safely anchored in the harbour. We were approaching one of the most dangerous passages in the world, the border between the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean. The winds there can reach up to 50 knots per hour and waves can be up to 10 meters tall. We were about to get there when the captain asked if we wanted to pray to make it out safely since Cape Horn was known for the terrors it caused. Some crewmates laughed it off and said: “If anything helps us here, it won’t be a man made up in the sky.” I was never heavily religious, but I never disrespected God like that. While we were approaching Cape Horn we felt the wind, the waves changed and suddenly everyone panicked. But that was just the start. Cape Horn is known for unexpected changes, but we never thought it would be as fast as that.



I knew it was the time for the ritual which I had carefully planned in my mind. I felt urged to do it no matter how stupid and pointless it was. I swiftly grabbed a glass bottle, took a piece of paper and a pen from my pocket and wrote: "Dear Joline, if anything happens to me, just know that you were the love of my life, protect my little girl for me. Much love, Alexander." I stuffed the paper inside the bottle and shut it with a wine bottle cap from one of the broken bottles which were not meant to make it to Chile.

The deeper we went, the worse it got, winds got faster, and waves got bigger. We couldn't stand still as the ship was rolling left and right. We often called the seas and oceans 'no man's land' since no one could control it. There is no ruler, no king, no emperor there. It is its own king. At this point the sailors were being tossed around and therefore reconciled with losing their lives. I was not one of them, due to the prayer or not, I would not know. I firmly kept the bottle in my hand, it was my confession and my penance.

The captain noticed the letter in the bottle and laughed: "You won't be needing that, my friend. We prayed and God never lets us down." I thought about it and told him I wanted to believe his words, but the sound of the wind was louder. He glanced back at me: "Even if something happens, at least you're dying at peace with yourself. But you won't die my friend, God never takes your life before your purpose is complete. Just remember those words: If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. "

That left me in shock, but I figured he knew what he was talking about. As he said that, a gust of wind broke part of the ship off. I tried to fix it quickly, making sure not to break the bottle in my pocket, and Beardy whom I shared a prayer with earlier, was busy mopping the floor. It was bad and it was, beyond any doubt, going to get even worse. Things were falling and flying all over the place leaving very little we could do about it. It was ridiculous to accept the task of delivering wine bottles across the windiest passage in the world. Truly a silly idea. But we had a mission, and we were bound to finish it. While fixing another hole in the boat I secretly started praying again. I still do not know why I did it because it was not my cup of tea, but there was something soothing and comforting in the words I was saying. I still clearly remember what went through my head then. At that time, my daughter was only 2, so who would be telling her stories if it was not for me. The horror I was going through was a perfect story material for my grandchildren who were just a vague idea then. That was my reason to keep fixing the boat and getting the water out. Not

the money I was expecting, but the faces of people I loved. I was working harder than ever in hopes of seeing their pretty smiles again. It was my fuel and in no time, I fixed everything with the help of other men on the ship which allowed us to catch our breath for a while. I was curious so I asked Beardy for his name. It was Christos, he was Greek, and it matched his character. "Nice to meet you Christo," I said, but he did not ask me for my name. I had no time to be disappointed.

Another wave struck us, and everyone started panicking, the water was coming twice as fast as we were cleaning it up. We were so close to our destination when the worst nightmare happened. I felt the ship going deeper into the water. It was sinking and there was no way out. The captain came out screaming. "Get the lifeboats, get the lifeboats! We are really close, just follow me and do not be scared of the waves, they are not that high here because we are near the coast." I could feel the bottle with the message in my inner pocket and I concentrated on saving it, I instinctively knew that saving the bottle would save my life. Suddenly, all I wanted to do is to personally deliver it to my wife. And I did.

The rescue itself is still blurred in my mind, after so many years. My partial memories, like cold water, light signals or shrill screams, were so scarce and deliberately suppressed over the time. That trip taught me a lot and the lesson I learned is what mattered, not the precise details.

"So kids, what do you think I learned?"

"To believe in God," they replied.

"Very close. I believe that God saved me that day because he wanted me to tell you this story. But I learned that I should always be thankful for everything I have because I can lose it any time. I learned to appreciate my time on Earth, and I realised that the further you are from your loved ones, the more clearly you see how much you miss them. And that is why I am telling you this story. I want the two of you to do the same. Be happy, play, be grateful and love you family. That bottle with the letter inside is a reminder to be humble and thankful. So, promise me you will always remember my lesson," I said.

"We will, grandpa, we promise," they replied. While I was saying that my daughter came. "Did you like the story grandpa has told you?" she asked. "Yesss, it was awesome," they replied. It made me smile, they grow up so fast. In no time they will be telling life stories too. "Alright people, dinner's ready," my daughter said. "Oh", she glanced around the room, "this place needs some dusting, especially the bottle on the chest. I'll do it after dinner."

"As you wish, my dear," I smiled at her.

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## THE LOST BEAUTY

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Once upon a time in the depths of a magical forest there lived a princess named Leila. When she was born the entire kingdom gathered to marvel at her beauty, she was as small as a ladybug and as beautiful as a picture, but none of her family knew that something very terrible will happen to Leila when she fell asleep. Night fell, and Leila's mother entered her room and kissed her goodnight. She stayed with Leila for so long that she didn't realize it was already midnight when she turned off the lights and closed the door. She whispered, "Sleep well, my beauty." She turned off the lights and closed the door, but suddenly there was a loud crashing sound! All the guards, as well as her mother and father, rushed into Leila's room, but Leila's bed was empty. They searched and searched the whole castle and every part of her room but she was nowhere to be found. Her mother cried so much that she didn't even eat, drink or sleep for days. Hundreds and hundreds of guards went looking for her but she was nowhere to be found. The King, her father, ordered that whoever finds his daughter will get one million golden coins. Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months, but Leila remained lost. The Queen cried desperately: "My dear, I miss our little beauty so much! I want to know where she is and what happened to her, that's why I wanted to ask you to find a knight." The king answered: "Yes, but where do you plan to find him? The Queen replied: "Meet knight Josip, he is going to help us find our little princess."

According to the Queen's desperate will, the King found Josip who was willing to help and the King asked him: "Why do you want to help us?" Josip answered: "My Majesty, my family is very poor and my younger sister is very sick. We don't have golden coins to buy her expensive medicine and when I heard about your reward, I knew I had to do it so you see that's why I want to do it. The King told him: "Listen, young man, I am telling you this. If you bring my daughter alive to me, I will pay for your sister's medicine and I promise to give you two million golden coins. Josip replied: "Thank you, my lord, when should I start?". The King simply said: "Tomorrow."

The next day came and the knight went in search of the lost princess. As soon as he came into the forest, he felt a little scared but he remembered his sister and gathered the courage. Half way in the forest, he found the tree of golden apples but then he remembered that the King warned him that he would come across and see strange things in that forest because it was magical. The knight walked and walked and suddenly he saw an old house. He entered it out of pure curiosity, but when he entered, he saw a beautiful girl with long blond hair and he approached her. He asked her what she was doing there and she told him that she didn't know and that she was there alone since she was little. He wasn't quite sure if she was the beloved princess so he didn't want to say anything to her. But it was already dark and he wanted to continue with his journey. Suddenly, a small hand grabbed him. When he turned around, he saw that it was the girl from the old house who told him that he could stay and sleep in the house with her. Since it was already dark and cold, he agreed because he didn't know what could happen to him in this forest. Then they fell asleep. The next morning the knight woke up and saw that the girl was gone. He went outside and saw her picking up some berries, he knew that they were Plumberries and very poisonous. He got them out of her hands and told her that those were poisonous. After hearing that, she thanked him and offered him to stay for another night. He thanked her and they made lunch together. After lunch they went for a walk. The girl asked him what his name was. He told her Josip. She told him that it was a beautiful name. He asked her about her name but she replied she didn't know. She showed him a pendant that said Leila. She couldn't read it because she was illiterate. She didn't even know what her name was. The knight was in shock. It was a princess!!! He waited until they got back to the old house. When they came "home", they sat down at the table and the knight told her everything. Her state was one of a profound shock but she trusted him. He told her that the next day she could go to the kingdom with him. She agreed. The next day the knight couldn't find her anywhere. He looked everywhere, inside and outside the cabin but she was simply not there. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to find her but then, he saw a note on the table that said: "Dear Josip, I wanted to run away, I was afraid I wouldn't be good enough for a princess. I'm so sorry". The knight looked for her and looked for her until he found her by the river. He approached her quietly and asked her why she was afraid. She told him that she thought that King and the Queen wouldn't approve of her as their daughter. He convinced her that they had sent him to find her. She was relaxed and joined him on their way back to the kingdom. When they came back to the kingdom everyone looked at her strangely. They entered the castle and the Queen and the King couldn't

believe their eyes. The Queen cried: "It's her, it's really her!". The King said: "I can't believe it!" They asked her what had happened to her. She answered that she just found herself there and that she became the ultimate queen of the forest and that she liked her life. She told them she would like to go back to the forest and live there. The King and the Queen could not believe what they just heard, they didn't know what to say. They were so afraid to lose her again, they begged her to stay with them for at least five days and then they would let her go freely. She agreed and stayed for a week.

That week was great for her. She wore all kinds of dresses, ate delicious food and went to see the crowns that were being made for her. After a week, she said goodbye to the Queen and the King. She finally went to the forest to be the greatest Queen of all times there. The knight Josip got his money and his sister was cured. The King and the Queen were happy to at least see their little girl from time to time. They arranged on regular meetings in the forest or in the castle. Everyone was happy in the end and that is the only thing that matters.

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## THE LUNGS OF THE WORLD

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The lungs of our world, that is, Earth, are certainly the trees that produce oxygen and purify the air. We humans could not live without oxygen, so we depend on trees. People can't live without food and water, and nature provides us with all of that. Nature is everything around us, everything that surrounds us, something we all depend on.

There are two branches, two parts of nature: living and inanimate nature. Living nature encompasses all living things that surround us. Examples of living nature include plants, animals, fungi, and us humans. Inanimate nature consists of things that are not alive such as stones, rocks, water, soil, the Sun, air, clouds.

The biggest difference between these types of nature is that living beings, which are part of living nature, are born, grow, feed, breathe, reproduce and die. Living nature can't function without inanimate nature because nature always harmonizes them.

The biggest problem for nature is actually us humans, who pollute it with rubbish, cut down trees and produce a lot of toxic gases that pollute the air. We have developed many industries that produce numerous resources through chemical reactions, use trees for heating and housing, but often neglect to plant new trees.

The biggest polluter among all industries is the textile industry. It has significantly developed with the increase in the population and holds the title of the biggest polluter. Though nuclear industries are fewer, they are also highly polluting, mostly in terms of air quality. In today's time, the plastic products factory, a serious polluter, has also grown significantly. It is dangerous because we humans also introduce it as microplastic into our body, and this is very harmful to us. It melts in water and thus harms animals in the sea. Thus, a plastic bottle takes about a thousand years to decompose, while an ordinary plastic bag takes about a hundred years. Plastic is produced from fossil fuels. Most often from oil, it requires a lot of chemical reactions and processing. Its major downside is the longlasting chemicals that remain in the soil or seas. Some animals can get trapped in plastic nets or bags, leading to their death.

Apart from the plastic industry, oil is also a major polluter because its spillage into the sea creates huge, difficult-to-solve problems. In addition to many industries, I was very disgusted by one. The glass industry is a big polluter, but there aren't many of them. However, an ordinary glass bottle takes more than one million years to decompose, causing substantial environmental damage.

One item has been improved in recent years, and that is regarding the power plant. Since modern times, renewable sources such as: sunlight and heat, wind and water have started to be used more. This has made great progress especially in the cleanliness of the air. Air pollution is an important environmental issue because it harms people's health and the environment. An important effect is also the greenhouse effect, but due to the burning of fossil fuels, the destruction and deforestation of the last six hundred years, the effect increases excessively and climate changes occur in the world. The increased greenhouse effect is called global warming, and it leads to melting glaciers and rising sea levels. Global warming and all changes are in the hands of only human activities. Soil pollution has increased in Europe, because Europe is densely populated. It is densely populated due to the fertile soil, but agricultural production pollutes the soil with various pesticides. Pesticides can also poison bees, which are essential for pollination. A fascinating fact about bees is that mankind cannot survive more than four years without bee pollination. In addition to all pollutants, we also have good sides in nature, namely forests. Even if their number is decreasing, they are always air purifiers. So the largest forest or rainforest in the world is the Amazon, it is also called the lungs of the world. This rainforest has recently started to be cleared a lot, instead of people allowing it to spread, they are clearing it. I think that every person who has the opportunity should plant at least one tree in his life. Progress would be if we gave something to nature, and not just take it away.

On the other hand, one should consider the average number of felled trees per person and how many trees an average person should plant. By building roads, people occupy the space between forests. People should become aware of the importance of nature and plants for the quality of life and think about their behavior and the damage they cause to nature. People often don't think about waste disposal, they don't pay attention to sorting and reusing old things that can be recycled. Also, they don't care in what kind of environment - if the number of cigarette smokers were reduced, the environment would look better, and the air we breathe would be of much better quality. The same is the case with car drivers - when possible, they should go on foot and by bicycle more often, and use less means of transport that release harmful substances and fumes into the environment.

It is interesting that the continent of Antarctica is the only one that has not been polluted so far. Despite the visits, people leave nothing but footprints in the snow. This information surprised me because I was of the opinion that Antarctica was also polluted until now. Much of what has been mentioned is negative, but there are also positive things that should be mentioned. Mother nature gives us high mountains with beautiful nature, water that we can't live without for more than three days, and fertile soil without which we wouldn't be able to produce food. All rivers, lakes, seas, forests, mountains, highlands, lowlands, jungles, slopes, cliffs - everything is part of Mother Nature. We humans should understand what the words "Mother Nature" mean because everything comes from her. We have to start being able to appreciate it despite all the weather and social circumstances. Let's try our best to take care of nature and understand that each thing we do is important to keep the Earth for the people who come after us



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## THE PALE AND DOWNTRODDEN

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Stranded. Alone. On a failed mission. Deserted by my own people in this dying alien wasteland. The barren red hills etched in my eyes, and the sound of footsteps on the sand echoed. The humming of machinery crawling on my body attempting to go further to the inevitability of death. Climbing over vast blood-red sandy dunes just to be reminded we are in the middle of nowhere. Months away from any glimmer of hope. With no energy left. The lack of food and water. A gleaming light at the end of the tunnel.

A sacrifice must be made if we want to go on. My body could be the solution. So, the hefty spacesuit finally takes my arm. I let out a scream as the suit slices my arm, the pain surging through me like a tidal wave. Compared to my weak flesh and bone, the cool, iron fingers are more effective and less prone to tiredness. They clamp down on the bleeding stump, cauterizing the wound to stem the flow of blood. The food supplies have been replenished so I could still go on.

I am staring at the barren landscape, red as far as the eye can see, knowing that I must adapt to that new reality. Days have turned into weeks, and the suit and I have become one in both body and purpose. Even though I will have to sacrifice my whole arm to be back with my people once more, I cling to the dream that I will be able to return to civilization. I continue like a lone figure in a crimson sea of shimmering sand.

I am determined to keep going and I have faith that, in the end, I will manage to overcome the harsh, untamed terrain that has become my new home. Even still, as I go on, I am not able to shake off a tremendous need. I cannot help but think about my family—their warm embraces and beaming grins. I am dying to see my children grow up and to be reunited with my loved ones.

I can still hear their laughing and see their faces, and it is like a powerful symphony in my head. Though I am aware of the treacherous road ahead and the uncertainty of my path, the chance of being reunited with my flesh and blood provides me with a flicker of hope amidst the wide and barren landscape of this foreign land. Like a promise to myself, my will to live and find a way back to them grows stronger with every step.

Therefore, motivated by my closest, I keep traveling across the scarlet wasteland with the mechanical suit as my only company, clinging to the hope that one day, despite all odds, I will find myself back in their arms. But little by little, my humanity is slipping away from me leaving me more a machine than a man. My legs get taken by the suit first, then my torso, until all that is left of me is my head suspended inside the suit's metal shell. I am now able to witness my increasing detachment from being human.

The desire to see my family again and my memories of them have turned my survival into an obsession and my sole drive for moving forward. I have no choice but to accept the suit's advanced technology in its entirety considering it has essentially grown into my life support system. The excruciating pain of having my body replaced is almost gone.

Inside the suit, I am a sentient being with a transparent dome covering my head and a network of wires and sensors merging with me. The suit has sensed my hopelessness and has started giving me precise doses of dopamine and other chemicals to keep me going. It is as though it has taken on the role of my guardian, preserving my emotional and mental stability in the face of what feels like unchanging solitude.

While the suit's actions have been driven by the importance of survival, I cannot help but consider the price I am paying. Have I become little more than a sentient brain encased in a piece of machinery, taken far from any resemblance to humanity? It is the only way for me to get reunited with my kin: still, I cannot but question if my suffering is worth it.

However, despite the incredible innovations of the suit and my unwavering resolve, the desolate red landscape seems to stretch on endlessly, offering no signs of salvation or redemption. Although I have come a long way on my journey, the hope I hold onto hasn't come true. As the days stretch into months, the truth of my circumstances starts to sink in. I have been trapped inside the suit's mechanical confinement, adrift in a desolate sea of nothing but pure redness.

The constant chemical injections from the suit keep me alive but also keep me safe from the pits of despair that are always just a few steps away. I have come to terms with the fact that I might never see my nearest again and that the suit is my sole companion. It has slowly evolved into a silent partner in my solitude, a symbol of the unwavering will and human adaptability—and the pure drive to survive.

So, I carry on with my unsteady walk across the deserted territory, that seems devoid of life, my hope diminishing but not dying. I continue with the suit, not knowing where we are going or what will happen to us. I continue to be guided by

the unwavering spirit that has carried me this far and the enduring memory of my dearest, even though the desolate expanse holds no promise of reunion.

I am almost a survivor in this land of red hills and boundless horizons, a living example of the human spirit persevering in the face of immense odds. My physical form has been replaced almost entirely, but even though the suit has kept me alive, I find myself holding on to the hope that at least my memories will survive. The suit is a cold and efficient companion, but the vivid memories of my family are the ones who give me the strength to persevere and refrain from giving up on this relentless journey across the ruby nowhere land.

Ultimately, a deep sense of loss will defeat me as the suit takes my eyes and the darkness engulfs my surroundings. I will transform into an entity, a brittle spark in the vast, empty space of the carmine wasteland. Then, I will no longer see if I am home at last—or not. All that I am left with is clinging to the last glimpse of hope thinking: ‘Nicolas, memento vivere!’

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mentor: Nataša Kufner Delak

institution: OŠ Dr. Branimira Markovića, Ravna Gora

## THE QUEEN WHO ONCE REIGNED

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In the powerful yet small kingdom of Arthuria, lived and nourished a joyful queen. She was obeyed by all in her kingdom, establishing allies from all neighbouring nations yet avoiding war at all cost. Her name was Ayla. However, one faithful day, a new nation emerged, seeking nothing more than conquering and bringing destruction to its foes. Queen Ayla disapproved of this and decided to confront the king of this cruel nation. The king, Soren, welcomed his new guest and ally.

The queen steps up to the kingdom's entrance and kindly greets the guards.

"Queen Ayla of Arthuria. I am here to meet King Soren."

Both of the guards bow down. One of the guards looks at her determined face and quickly nods, letting Ayla into the kingdom. Ayla looks around at the kingdom's scenery. Soren's kingdom, Destrus, was densely populated with a giant army. Because of such goals, it didn't flourish much in other interests. The streets were flooded with rubbish. Plants were dried and dead, animals starved, houses on the verge of falling apart. Ayla was ashamed and even a bit disgusted. It was hideous. Although Ayla didn't come to this dreadful kingdom to shame it. She was here to fix it.

Finally, she stood at the golden castle gates, ready to confront the horrid king. She slowly opens the door, shaking ever so slightly with fear. King Soren looks at the queen with a demanding face. Opening his mouth, he exclaims:

"Queen Ayla! Come, we have much to discuss."

Ayla carefully walks over to Soren's throne; she respectfully bows down to Soren.

She takes a deep breath and says: "King Soren. I have a request for you."

Suddenly, his eyes widen in curiosity. He was intrigued.

"A request? For me? Tell me, queen of Arthuria. What do you seek from me?" exclaiming even louder at Ayla.

Soren seemed really fond of Ayla, yet she had a gut feeling something wasn't right about him. Ayla barely knew him.

"Well... I wish for you to stop conquering other countries, including us." She murmurs.

A faint laugh was heard across the castle.

“What kind of request is that, my dear?” Soren says, almost whispering to her, as he quickly stood up.

Suddenly, the castle had an eerie and uncomfortable feeling. The walls were covered in traces of moonlight coming from the windows. Ayla felt a shiver down her spine.

Soren walked towards Ayla with a sly smile.

“And what if I don’t accept the request?” He chuckled. Ayla took a step back as Soren was only a meter away from her. She didn’t want to admit to herself that she was scared of him. Soren looks at her shaking limbs and adds, “Scared of a king like me? Pathetic.” With an expression full of fear, there was a hint of bravery on her face. She pulls out her sword and threatens the king by holding the sword close to his neck.

“That’s it! I have had enough! If you don’t want to negotiate with me, we have no other choice but to go to war with your country!” she shouts at Soren, still holding the sword to his neck.

Soren takes her sword and pushes her away from him. “Let me see you try.” Mumbling quietly at her so only she could hear his harsh words.

Suddenly, two guards take her outside of the kingdom.

“Wait! No! I wasn’t done!” Ayla shouts at the guards.

“Sorry, ma’am, it’s basic protocol. To protect our king.” A guard says to her in a soft and determined voice.

She puts away her sword and exclaims, “Tell your king we are going to war! He has three days from now to prepare for our attack!”

The guards nod and head inside the kingdom.

Ayla decides to run to her kingdom. Three days weren’t enough to prepare for a war. She wasn’t sure why she said three days. Out of breath, she finally enters the kingdom. Quickly sprinting to the castle, she encounters her best and finest warrior, Amara.

“Amara! We might have a bit of a problem.” Ayla utters urgently.

“What is it, my queen?” Amara bows down to Ayla.

“Prepare the army to attack three days from now. King Soren’s kingdom isn’t going down so quickly.” She declares to Amara.

“Got it, my queen” Amara smirks and quickly rushes to the army’s base.

“Interesting...” As she took off, Amara murmurs to herself.

Ayla knows just what to do. She quickly heads to the centre of the kingdom, prepared to give an announcement to her whole kingdom. There was a lifted platform

near the centre. It was made for the ruler to make announcements. Created of stone and hints of gold to show the dedication of Arthuria's people to their ruler.

"Citizens of the kingdom, gather here!" she shouts.

Everyone from the kingdom gathers around the lifted platform and patiently waits for their queen to start her speech.

"Citizens of Arthuria! I have tried to negotiate with King Soren, but failed. We must get ready for a full-out attack on the kingdom of Destrus!" Ayla declares to the crowd.

The crowd cheers with determination.

Two days have gone by. The army was ready; the plan was set. Ayla was watching the army when one of her merchants quickly ran up to her.

"My queen! A message from the kingdom of Destrus!" The merchant exclaims.

"A letter?" She looks at the letter and asks the merchant calmly. Handing the letter to her, the merchant slowly backs away.

What was in the letter shocked Ayla.

The letter reads: 'I accept your proposal to attack. Come at any time. I'm waiting for you.' It was signed by Soren.

"Why did he need to send a letter? He could have just sent one of his men!" Ayla spoke, puzzled by the letter.

"My queen, there is something on the back of the letter," the merchant quietly states.

Ayla looks at the back of the paper. It seemed to be a piece of paper attached to the back of the letter with old yet still readable letters. It read: 'The one whom you are most loyal may just be a general of betrayal.' The queen looks even more confused.

"Betrayal? This is just a quote from an old army general," Ayla murmurs to herself.

The merchant looks at her and bows, softly speaking. 'I must go now, my queen.' Running off outside, the queen is now alone.

Another day flies by. The attack was today, but it seemed like an ordinary day. A day like any other to the people. Ayla was in her castle, still thinking about the letter, while the army was preparing for initiating the attack.

"It's today, isn't it?" The queen utters and looks at Amara.

Amara just smirks and walks away.

Ayla gathers all of her army and heads for Destrus. As they stood on the soon-to-be battlegrounds, King Soren approaches.

"Queen Ayla!" He exclaims.

When Ayla saw Soren, her jaw dropped. "King Soren! How did you know when we were going to attack?" she shouts in confusion.

“Oh, a little birdy told me, that’s all.” He chuckles with a smirk on his face.

One of her soldiers suddenly shouts. “My queen! Their army is headed towards us! We must start the attack!”

She quickly gestures them to start the attack. Her sword was ready to also join the battle. Just as she was about to run, someone grabbed her.

“Not so fast! Someone does have to fight me, no?” A voice declares to Ayla.

Ayla quickly turns around to see the person grabbing her was Soren himself. She quickly pulls out her sword to strike. With a determined look on her face, she was ready to defeat him. King Soren had a sword of his own. Swinging it towards her, she put her sword against his. In strength, King Soren was much stronger, although her agility was better than his. She moved at fast speeds that surpassed his own. Ayla managed to get a hit on his shoulder.

Touching his shoulder from pain, he shouted, ‘Idiot!’ Then quickly continued the battle.

For a split second, Ayla looked at her army. A few soldiers were down, but they were winning. She didn’t expect to win so easily.

“Remember that letter I gave you? The back of it?” Soren utters to Ayla.

The queen stops to think. “The back of the letter? Yes, I do. What was that?” Ayla murmurs.

Suddenly, she feels a sharp pain in her back. It was excruciating and not a mere small cut. Ayla couldn’t stand up anymore. Just before falling, she sees all of her army men on the ground. Her army slaughtered and covered in blood while Destrus’ army just laughed and watched.

On the ground, she touched her wound which went through her body. Ayla soon saw her unexpected killer. The one she trusted the most.

“Didn’t expect to see me, didn’t you?” Amara expresses with a sly smile.

She was holding a bloody blade that had Ayla’s blood on it. “Well, the letter was a little hint. I guess I have to tell you the whole picture now. I joined forces with the kingdom of Destrus not too long ago.” She announces to Queen Ayla.

“We don’t have time to chat now, do we? Goodbye, Queen of Arthuria.” Soren replies while laughing.

“I... have failed...” Queen of Arthuria mutters her last words. Not long after the fight, the kingdom of Destrus conquers the kingdom of Arthuria with the help of Amara. All hope was lost for the kingdom of Arthuria.

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## THE SECRET OF KOLA

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I woke up excited about the trip we were taking that day, a trip to CERN. I could not wait for it so I started walking in circles all over the apartment. I was thinking about how great it was that my friend Filip and I won this five-day trip to CERN, one of the most famous Institutes which explores how our universe works and what it is made of. Our visit to that amazing place should teach us the physics of elementary particles as well as give us the time to see some of Geneva where CERN is located.

While thinking about it I had breakfast, checked my baggage and then my parents drove me to the airport on Krk island. After we said goodbye, I headed to a coffee shop where we were supposed to meet. I found our physics teacher sitting there, I joined him and ordered hot chocolate which was an ideal choice on a cold February morning. While waiting for Filip, the teacher and I were talking about how snakes could be dangerous and what types of bushes were better to avoid. After an hour, we started to worry where Filip was, so I called him, he said that he could not open his front door for thirty minutes because it got stuck. After that, a man with a strong Russian accent said that Filip's mom had bumped his car, although that was not true. He said that they solved all the problems and would be at the airport in twenty minutes. It was good that we got there earlier, it was half past nine and we were still on time for the ticket check and boarding procedure, the departure was scheduled for twenty past ten.

Finally, all of us were there and we were going towards the airport building, while Filip was telling us how his door got stuck because of a nail which somehow had ended there, and about the man who was constantly claiming that Filip's mum bumped into his car, and he threatened to call the police. It was just an old scratch. And when they somehow handled the conflict and got to Krk bridge the same man parked in the middle of the bridge so no one could drive across it, but luckily, there was a police officer who wrote him a fine and literally chased him away. It seemed that everything, especially the Russian guy, was trying to stop Filip from arriving on time.



We passed the check-in and security control and headed to the plane, and then, a disaster. We saw a flying object in the sky which fired a projectile into the left wing of the airplane and the projectile exploded.

We were shocked.

Parts of the wing were shattered on the concrete, luckily no one was injured, but the plane could not take off, and we were stuck on Krk for three more hours waiting for another plane.

The teacher called us inside and said worriedly: "Something is trying to stop us from getting to CERN, I have never seen anything like that."

I agreed: "Yes, that Russian, this object, it must be that someone doesn't want us there, but why?"

And then Filip asked: "What does 'CCCP' mean?"

"United Soviet... Where have you seen it?"

"On the object, maybe it means something?"

"It means the Soviet Union; it must have been from Russia! That accent was suspicious to me," said the teacher taking us to a coffee shop to drink something and to talk about the possible conspiracy. We knew we would miss a special introduction to CERN organized for the winners from different countries of Central and Southern Europe.

A few hours later we finally got on the airplane and left the island. The view was breathtaking, we could see everything: the clouds, houses, olives, too bad we had other things to worry and think about. During the flight Filip and I were talking what Russians would get if they stopped us. I somehow knew the answer was waiting for us in CERN and it was going to be mysterious and a bit scary.

After a short flight we arrived at Geneva airport which was a lot bigger than ours. Although we got there around four o'clock, it was already dark and cloudy and, of course, it was snowy. After we checked into our hotel, we finally went to CERN, and I was extremely excited because that was the place where I would love to work some day and the place where our mystery continued.

When we entered the building, we were welcomed by the CERN's principal, who was very confused and terrified because of the attack, he did not know what Russians had against CERN, air company or us. After a brief conversation with him, we went to a conference room, where one of the physicists was giving a lecture about all kinds of labs they had. When she saw us, Katarina Moskovska, PhD, introduced us to other students as Croatian winners, but there was something suspicious about it because of our recent experience with Russians. It was still an interesting lecture, at least for me, Filip seemed to be bored.

After we finished, I had to use the restroom, which was across the hall, and I heard Moskovska talking to a man: "...to deactivate it, they must not know about Kola! I know the incident at the airport did not stop them."

"I can't just turn off the time machine; I don't have the clearance for that!" said a man furiously and walked away angrily.

It was very strange, a time machine? That was hard to believe, a man has never been on Mars and now time-travel? When I told Filip about it, we went silent and gave ourselves some time to think about it.

After dinner in the mess hall, which was delicious, we listened to one more lecture, or to be more precise, we pretended to listen to it, but a lot of things were in our heads, so we did not hear a word of it.

While driving to the hotel we were trying to figure it out, why Russians were against us and why the time machine. But it was beyond our reach then because there was a missing part which we were not aware of at that moment. We had already travelled to the past and found out valuable information about Kola which was important for Russians, and they did not want us to expose it, so they went back in time and changed the past. In this modified reality we did not know about Kola, but we were still responsible for modifying the past, so we needed to fix it! Although we had a little amount of information, we were sure we concluded well, everything seemed logical.

After we figured what was going on, we found the solution for our problem. First, we needed to find out where the time machine was. If they succeeded in creating such a machine, they must have made something to close it, and that was what we were looking for. If we got to the past, a few minutes before the Russians, we would be prepared to close the portal before they got there, and the problem would be solved, our course of time would be restored, and we would be the only one to remember it.

We could not wait, without telling the teacher anything, we took a taxi for the Institute and entered the hall. We were searching for a restricted area, only for employees, but we did not find anything. What were we expecting, teenagers searching for a time machine? And even if we found the room we were searching for, there would be no way of getting in.

But we got lucky that day, just a few moments after we gave up searching, two scientists came out of the lab. Filip and I quickly ran to the restroom to hide from them, but we left the door half open so we could hear what they were talking.

"I think 500 volts is the best for turning it on, it gives larger temporal potential than 400," said the first man.

“Yes, I agree, I was wrong, I thought it would have a negative effect,” confirmed the other.

Filip and I were fascinated, when they left, we tried to open the door, but it was locked. Fortunately, Filip saw and remembered one of the scientists entering the password, so we finally got into the room. Strong red lights were turned on, lightning up a small lab, including a grey, door-sized portal in the middle of room.

I saw the main control board with a few buttons, but Filip was already studying it, then I started to scrutinize their calculations looking for something indicating how that worked. I could not figure out anything, but I found a document on the computer which was a manual for using the machine. Although the writer of the manual was not done with it, I found out that the only way of closing the portal was to throw a small object, they had named it a ‘closer’, which should explode, and the portal would collapse.

Filip, after a bit of researching, found out that the Russians used it to go to Moscow three days into the past, so we needed to go there as well, but a few minutes prior to them so that we could close the portal, and five minutes after that, our portal would reappear.

I took a few ‘closers’ and we were ready for another trip, but this one into the past. Filip set up everything and actuated the portal. When we entered it, I felt extremely dizzy, I almost fell unconscious, but a few moments later, after we arrived, the dizziness disappeared.

We were standing on the snow-covered street, typical for Moscow. Except for being freezingly cold, it was dark, we were in the middle of the night, perfect time for appearing and disappearing in the air. And all we needed to do was to wait for two minutes, but they were long, incredibly long, filled with worries and fear, because that had to go well, we did not have other choice.

That moment finally came, a grey rectangle appeared in the air, and it was getting larger and larger, an arm was entering the portal and then; ‘boom!’ I threw the ‘closer’ and the portal was closed.

We were shocked, it seemed too easy, we just closed it.

As long and filled with fear were the first couple of minutes, so brief and happy were the last minutes. We were talking about what we had seen that day and what would happen if the past would be changed and whether we would be able to remember it.

Our portal arrived and the moment we stepped into it, we felt that our past was restored. We already were in the hotel, getting ready for sleep, and only vaguely remembering the other reality.

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## THE STORY ABOUT A CAR GUY NAMED GABRIJEL

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It was 27th May 2003, and a child named Gabrijel was born. He lived just outside the city named Cerovlje in the village of Gologorički Dol. He got obsessed with cars at the early age of 4 years old. His dad was always interested in cars, especially in Italian brands like Fiat, Lancia, and a popular car brand Ferrari. Before Gabrijel was born, he drove a 1988 Lancia Delta HF Integrale which was his love before he met Gabrijel's mother and got a son. After that, he sold it and bought a 1997 Fiat Bravo. It was a car which got Gabrijel into cars. He loved it so much that he dreamed of it every day but he was just 4 years old so he had a long time before he could ever drive legally.

When he turned 5, he started going to kindergarten where he met a friend called Noel who was obsessed with bikes, and they became best friends. But Noel was a year older than him and they separated because he had to go to elementary school. Gabrijel tried to meet someone who would have the same interests but there was no luck. He was devastated and did not make any friends until he got into elementary school where he saw his old friend Noel and for the first time in the past year, he was happy again because he reunited with his best friend.

For his 8th birthday, Gabrijel got his first laptop which meant he could play games with his friends. It was the start of a new journey. Through games like CS: GO, he got to come closer to his friend Noel, but again they got separated in 4th grade because Noel had to go to 5th grade and again he was devastated, but they would still play games together, so they were communicating. As Gabrijel was older, he got into the 5th grade and was happy to see Noel again. Every day, they sat together on the bus and talked about cars and bikes and dreamed of being the best duo. Gabrijel dreamed about a Fiat Bravo HGT and Noel dreamed about a KTM EXC 450 SuperMoto.

A year later Gabrijel found more friends with the same interests as him. Their names were Mario and Linda who were obsessed with cars and bikes. Mario dreamed of a 1996 Volkswagen Polo Harlekin and Linda's sister liked old Honda Civics, so they

became an ultimate squad. Every day at the lunch table, they were talking about their dream cars, bikes and modifications they would do to them. Mario always listened to music, so he imagined a big subwoofer in his car's trunk. Linda was obsessed with racing, so she was imagining a car that she could race but also drive daily. Noel always wanted his bike to have custom wheels and custom-designed graphics, but for me, I knew my car would be lowered on some BBS wheels, have a nice-sounding exhaust and an astonishing leather interior.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Gabrijel and Noel had to say goodbye to Mario and Linda because they were going to high school, but they still got each other and lived their life dreaming about the ultimate squad. When school finished, the ultimate squad was together every day, talking on a beach about cars and bikes and started to attend car meetups where they would see some nice cars and take photos of them together, and they started a car spotting page on Instagram where they were getting popular.

And there it was the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Gabrijel was all alone again. He was getting bad grades and losing hope of that big dream he dreamed with his friends until one day his dad saw his sadness and told him that if he passed 8th grade with the best grades he would get him a car for the carnival which in his part of Croatia was in February and they would get cars for cheap and make them fit. When he heard that, he started getting better grades and passed the 8th grade with all A's, so his dad got him an old Citroën Saxo on which he started working with his ultimate squad. He had the idea to be a race car driver, so they made a livery for the car with spray cans and cut the exhaust and welded a 3-inch pipe that went through the hood of the car. They painted the rims white and removed all interior except the seats to make the car lighter and in the meantime, the school started and Gabrijel went to high school, wanting to be a car mechanic. All of them waited peacefully for February to come.

When it came, they went to Čepić where they went on their first carnival with a car and they were happy to drive a car they built. It all went well. They blew a tire while doing a burnout, but overall, they were happy. After that, the car stayed in a field near Gabrijel's house until the next year.

Meanwhile, Gabrijel started listening to a podcast through which he got to Bitcoin and went through a course which helped him with online money earning through a lot of different options. With that, he made 10 thousand euros weekly at 17 years old and when he turned 18, he did not have to get a job because he was earning 200 thousand euros a year which was more than the average salary in Croatia.

When he got his driving license, he bought his first car 2000 Fiat Bravo HGT which he modified like he wanted to. He spent over 30 thousand euros on it by put-

ting coil overs, 17-inch wheels he painted it protected all paint with ppf (paint protection foil) and put a 12-thousand-watt subwoofer in it. His friends achieved their dreams, too. Mario got his VW Polo, Linda started racing which Gabrijel sponsored with his money and Noel got his dream bike. When Gabrijel turned 24 he was earning 1 million euros a year and did not forget his family. He retired his mother and father, bought them a nice car and renovated their house. Gabrijel and his friends created a club called *Ultimate Cars Worldwide*.

It was a car club that everyone was accepted to, and it gained popularity instantly. To this day it is still a thing. They still meet and look at their cars. But Gabrijel was not satisfied. He was not happy. He needed something or someone in his life. When he fell in love with a girl named Chiara, they became husband and wife, got children, and Gabrijel retired happily. Today Gabrijel owns one of the biggest car garages and car saloons and is one of the richest people on the earth.

THE END

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## THE TRAGIC TALE OF AN AVERAGE CROW

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It took the executioner two tries to chop the witch's head off. Not an unusual occurrence, sometimes it can take up to five times and for numerous reasons: an inexperienced executioner (it takes a while to get used to the job, honestly), a blunt blade and lastly, the lack of that fancy apparatus that can cut the head clean off by simply pulling a lever on the side. A French invention, of course, they always liked to be fancy (bordering on tacky, as clearly exemplified by Versailles), even when it comes to executions. Unfortunately for the witch whose head was now thoroughly and very gruesomely detached from her limp form; the villagers were either to cheap to get a guillotine, or simply uneducated enough to believe that it was dark magic. Simply for my own amusement I choose to believe the latter. Not to mention that the witch was quite fortunate not to be stoned, thrown off a cliff, crucified or burned to death, which were all standard practices of such primitive villages of the time. I'm not sure what time it is exactly, but the time and place hold no importance to the tale I wish to tell you. Neither does the witch for that matter, I just wanted to set the scene for you. Just be happy that I didn't mention the roaring crowd of crude villagers, all ecstatic with the pleasure of seeing suffering that is not their own, even if it is that of an innocent woman who did nothing but read a book and kept a cat (it wasn't even black). Village primitivism aside, allow me to direct your attention to the murder of crows watching quietly in the distance.

Quite obvious, isn't it? What other animal would have so much gall as to not shy away from death? Even black cats get the shivers from hangings, stoning, crucifying etc. Though both cats and crows have dark associations with death and the underworld in general, crows are the only ones who have actually earned their assistant-to-the-grim-reaper stature in that day's primitive society and for an excellent reason; crows are the only animals that have ever experienced death and lived to tell the tale. Nobody except us, all-knowing storytellers, who are eerily similar to God, if you ask me; (just keep that in mind next Easter when you bring your food to church,

because I wouldn't mind some good bread and ham) knows that the birth of a crow signifies that a sinner has somehow escaped from Hell. Now, I know not why they came back here as crows specifically (or why they want to be here in general, for that matter) , but I do know that Heaven has figured out a solution for these sinners long ago – they decided to send their own crows, the white crows. Though you might have noticed that you don't see a white crow often, right? See, the reason why white crows are rarer than Hell's black crows is because nobody is thrilled to ever hear that after 80 years of suffering on this wretched planet they ought to come back. Although this unwillingness and hesitation towards allowing yourself to be turned into a white crow is perfectly understandable, it has led to a massive lack of white crows, thus an enormous number of black crows or sinners emerged not too long after Heaven even thought of the concept of their own white crow. In fact, most white crows are people who didn't expect their annoying spouse or mother-in-law to make it past Peter's gates, so even the Earth is a preferable place to that kind of eternity.

Now that I have shared a tiny fraction of my vast, ever-knowing storyteller knowledge about crows, I can finally direct your attention towards our forgotten murder of crows, who are now watching the crowd clear out of the square where the gruesome decapitation of that poor witch took place just few moments ago. They were a strange group, those crows, six of them perched atop an old fountain, staring into the horizon where the Sun was now setting, disappearing into the vast blue of the serene ocean. I would love to tell you the tale of each one of them as they all lived interesting and tragic lives, each deserving a story of their own. Unfortunately, I am a little short on words here, so I shall tell you the story of the tallest crow in this ominous murder.

It was the most beautiful autumn day of the year when Vesper Lockhart died of the bubonic plague. The time of death isn't certain since most people in the village hadn't heard of an analogue clock and Vesper wasn't important enough or rich enough to have some official come to his deathbed to tell his poor mother weather her boy died at 15:32 or 16:14. Not that it mattered, he was dead anyway, his body and all his belongings burned as to not spread the horrible disease. Vesper's death wasn't mourned in the village. In fact, most people were relieved that the wretched boy was gone, even if he had left this Earth painfully, at the young age of 19. Although it sounds horrible, you cannot blame them, the boy has been difficult ever since he was born, with his scrawny, rat-like figure, his wicked eyes of muddy green and his wiry locks of auburn hair. Vesper was nothing like his mother, she was a woman with long chestnut hair, and very strange eyes. One was blue, and the other brown. The woman was also a much kinder and harmless person than her wicked



boy whom she, despite his numerous flaws, loved dearly and was heartbroken when she realized that her love would never be reciprocated, for her brilliant boy had as much affection and empathy for her as he did for a wet kitchen cloth. I shall not list all the horrible things this wretched thing has done, but safe to say, he ended up in Hell in the blink of an eye. The problem was, Vesper didn't care for Hell that much; too much screaming and begging for mercy even for his tastes. So on a particularly fiery afternoon, once the demons had their way with Vesper and were distracted with a few other sinners, he snuck into a bag of coal that awaited transport to the palace kitchens on Earth (you heard it right, most coal on earth comes from Hell). So, Vesper threw away the coal and miraculously curled up into the bag. Not long after the bag was loaded onto a small wooden wagon, the demon (he wore a human mask, of course) came and started driving towards the gates of Hell. As soon as the bag of coal passed through, Vesper felt changes happening in his body. His back was itchy, his toes were disappearing, his skin was turning black, there were feathers growing out of his arms and most noticeably, he was shrinking. Unfortunately, Vesper was a fully transformed black crow by the time the wagon reached the palace, which meant that the bag of coal containing him looked empty. Of course, the demon got suspicious, therefore he opened the bag of coal and saw our little crow, whose dead heart was now beating so hard, he feared it might jump out of his chest. So he took his first flight. Vesper took off, missed the demon's face by about an inch and flew into the sky, leaving the last bit of hell behind him, finally free.

A couple of uneventful months past, Vesper found other crows, formed his gang of unconditionally loyal ones. It was his friend, Larke, who first warned him to watch out if he ever saw a white crow, for white crows were the last thing a black crow will ever see before being sent back to hell to be tortured once again. At first, Vesper heeded Larke's warning. Hell was the last place he wanted to go to, so he always looked over his shoulder, careful, ready to flee in case he ever saw a white crow. Vesper thought that it would be easy to run away if he saw one, just turn and go, and that's it. Until he actually saw a white crow perched atop a tree branch on the town square. It was exceptionally beautiful. He didn't know if they were always so beautiful or was it just this one. It had pristine white feathers, a white beak that even glowed a touch. Strangely enough, Vesper couldn't see its eyes. For some reason, the crow wore a blindfold, which made him confident enough to approach the terrifying thing. Vesper was weary at first, still afraid that the crow might send him to Hell, but after chatting with this white crow for a while, he grew more comfortable. He found out that the crow was an older woman, aged 41 when she died. She didn't tell Vesper

her name, though he figured she looked familiar so she must've lived in the same village as him at some point. They talked for hours about nothing and everything and then sadly parted when the Sun set. By the end, Vesper was quite sad that he probably wouldn't see this amiable crow again, so he was more than pleasantly surprised the next day to see her, on the exact same place she had been yesterday. That day marked the beginning of their friendship. Afterwards, every day would start in the same fashion: Vesper would go to the tree and find her waiting for him. Eventually, the two started going on adventures, venturing to the far ends of the world. They would meet with other crows and share anecdotes from their travels. They would speak of haughty princesses, arrogant kings, of the rivalries between vain queens and their husband's vile mistresses. It was on one of their adventures when everything changed. Vesper's white crow was out to look for some food when he heard whispers from other crows in the village that his white crow was being hunted by angels for going rouge and that whoever helps the angels catch the white crow would be left alone to live their life peacefully, without worry of being sent back to Hell. Vesper thought of himself as a different boy ever since he met his white crow friend which was at that point in time, a decade before, so he did his best to ignore the rumours. Until he saw Larke again. Vesper and his white crow friend returned to the village when they saw Larke lying on the ground, skinned alive, gasping for his last breath. While Vesper, another white crow saw the crows in the village and alerted heaven and Hell. Hell sent demons that instead of returning Larke and the crows to Hell, decided to torture them all and leave them on Earth to die again. Vesper knew his crow friend didn't do this. She wouldn't and couldn't. But he also didn't want something like this to happen to him.

The capture was probably the worst thing he ever witnessed. The angles took his crow friend, ripped her feathers from her body one by one while he watched, holding back tears. Eventually, they took her blindfold off too. Vesper felt the flood drain from his crow face. His white crow friend's eyes. One was blue, the other brown and the look in them was so filled with pain and tears, her voice quiet and sad when she whispered "I always knew you were a good person, Vesper dear." She fought for a few more breaths before she eventually died. The angels just nodded to Vesper and disappeared. He stood there for a long time, just staring at her body. After a while, he closed his mother's eyes and walked away forever.

He never heard of his mother again in Heaven or Hell. He has never seen a white crow since that incident either. He finds himself often wondering about her, even now as he stares into the setting sun, perched on the little old fountain of the town square.

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## THE TYRANT'S LEGACY

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Once upon a time, there was a kingdom, but it wasn't exactly ordinary. You see, a god named Serasi protected this kingdom, and this god could give powers to others, but he only gave them to the ones he thought deserved them the most. These powerful individuals were known as the *serasia*. The king of this kingdom wasn't gifted with any powers, making him envious of his citizens. He only interacted with them if necessary, and in return, rarely anyone cared for the king. This was the case for Sage, a sixteen-year-old boy and the adoptive son of the best blacksmith in town, Eddie. He was a *serasia* and was gifted with the ability to understand and talk to animals. He often walked through the town, talking to the animals around him, and today was no exception. His father had asked him to go buy some food from the local market, so he did just that. He was walking through the streets, overhearing the various conversations the birds were having as he knew the birds always had the best gossip.

It was all fun and games until he overheard two pigeons having an unusual conversation. "Did you hear about the king's plans?" one asked in a hushed tone. "The king's plans? Is he planning a party?!" the other questioned in excitement. "No, and calm down, we don't want anyone to hear us." the first one replied, shushing the second bird. "The king has turned into a tyrant. He's planning to kill all the *serasia* and bring the kingdom down with them.", the first bird continued. "What!? You have to be kidding. The king wouldn't do that.", the second bird insisted. "He said, "If I don't deserve powers, no one does" the first bird muttered, shaking Sage to his very core. Truth be told, the birds have been gossiping about this for some time now but never had he heard them be this serious about it. He came up to a stall where he saw a familiar face. "Hey Shelby!" he smiled as he approached the stall. The girl quickly turned to face him. "Oh, hi Sage! I didn't even notice you. What are you here for?" she started, wiping some dirt off her face. "Eddie sent me to get some peppers and lettuce. Do you have any?" Sage asked as he took out some gold from his backpack. "Yup! Give me a second.", she said, grabbing two pots filled with dirt. She put her hands over the pots and in seconds a small pepper branch grew from one, and a lettuce head from the other. She grabbed the lettuce head and carefully picked the

peppers, then stuffed them in a bag for Sage, who seemed to be distracted. “Sage? Are you feeling okay?” She waved a hand in his face. “Huh? Oh, I’m fine, thanks. How much do I owe you?” he asked. “Four gold.” she answered confidently. He shoved five gold into her hand. “Thanks, Shub. I’ll see you soon!” he waved as he started speed-walking. On the way home, it was almost as if every animal was talking about it. “The king is a tyrant!” a bird yelled. “it’s going to be the downfall of us all!” a dog barked. He took a deep breath as questions flooded his thoughts. Why now? When is the king going to do this? How is he going to pull that off? Should Sage tell anyone? Who should he tell? The more questions he had, the faster he walked. Eventually, he reached the forge Eddie owned. Upon entering the building, he saw Eddie, working on making a sword. “Hey, Eddie! I have the veggies you asked for!” Sage exclaimed as he rushed to the kitchen upstairs. “Thanks, kid! Could you come here for a second?” Eddie yelled, continuing to mold the sword. Sage reluctantly walked towards Eddie, trying not to get too close. After a few seconds, Eddie lifted the sword. “Do you think this-” he paused as he noticed Sage was tapping his foot. “Is something wrong?” Sage tensed up. “Nope! Everything is completely fine!” he smiled “What did you need?” he asked, trying not to keep eye contact. Eddie put the sword down and took off a glove, then put a hand on Sage’s shoulder. “You know you can tell me anything, right? I’m your dad, it’s my job to make sure you’re okay.” Eddie reassured him, giving him a big smile. Sage took a deep breath. “The king is planning to kill all of the *serasia* and bring the kingdom down with us!” he blurted out, closing his eyes. Eddie cleared his throat before speaking. “How do you know this?” he asked, looking straight at Sage. “All of the animals are talking about it. The birds, the dogs, the cats, it’s driving me insane!” Sage explained, shaking his head lightly. “When did you first hear about this?” Eddie continued the questions, but Sage didn’t answer. “Sage? Are you with me, buddy?” Eddie shook the boy lightly. Sage couldn’t speak, he couldn’t believe his ears. He heard a warning from the birds. A few birds were yelling to everyone to hide as the guards would soon come to destroy them all. “Sage Mythical!” Eddie yelled, snapping Sage out of his trance. “They’re coming.” Sage muttered, not looking at his father. “Who’s coming? The king?” Eddie asked. “The end of the kingdom as we know it.”, Sage answered, stumbling over his words. As if on cue, a knock on the door could be heard. Sage listened to the birds, who were all chirping “It’s the guards!” and “Hide!” but he only shook his head. “Do you know who it is?” Eddie asked, lifting his hand off his son’s shoulder. “The guards.” Sage answered as he looked at the door. “Kid, look at me,” Eddie said, giving Sage a few moments to turn his head “I want you to go to your room, pack a bag, and hide until I come to your room or yell your

name. Can you do that for me?” Sage nodded and ran to his room. He already had a bag on, so he stuffed a few things in it: some spare gold, clothes, food, and a bottle filled with water. As soon as he was done, he ran to his room and hid in his closet, sitting in a fetal position.

It felt like ages as he waited for Eddie, but he held on. He covered his mouth as he heard the first scream, and it only became worse from there. He could hear screaming, fire, people running, and it wasn't fun. He began to question if something had happened to his dad. What if he was dead? A minute passed before he heard someone open the closet door. He closed his eyes. "Please don't hurt me!" he yelled and lifted his hands, but he wasn't met with pain, instead with a short-lasting hug. "No one is going to hurt you. I promise," Eddie whispered before pulling away from the hug. Sage stared at his father for a few moments as he admired his face, which was covered in scars and blood. "Eddie? Are you alright?" he asked, standing up. "I'll be fine, kid. But we need to get out of here before someone blows the kingdom up." Eddie explained, handing Sage a sword. Sage simply nodded and Eddie started running out of the house, Sage following close by. As they came outside, Sage saw the true destruction. Most of the houses were destroyed or set on fire. There was fire, water, ice, vines, chunks of rocks, big holes in the ground, but worst of all, blood and some dead bodies lying on the ground. Sage took a deep breath, trying not to look at the chaos around him as he followed Eddie's lead. It felt like a century had passed as they ran through the burning streets, trying to find a way that wasn't blocked or too dangerous to go down. "Hey! I found some stragglers!" They heard someone yell, then turned around to see three beat-up guards, who ran towards them at full speed. Eddie grabbed Sage's wrist and ran. They could only run so far before the three guards caught up to them. Eddie grabbed the sword from Sage's hand and swung it at one of the guards, catching them off guard. "Sage, run!" Eddie demanded. Sage's eyes widened "But-" Eddie swung the sword at them again "I said, run! I'll be fine!" He exclaimed and Sage ran as fast as he could. As he ran towards the nearest exit, he heard a faint scream in the distance he could only hope wasn't Eddie...

Finally, after what felt like a millennium, he was out of the kingdom walls. He looked around as he caught his breath and saw a group of people on top of a big hill. At this point, he didn't care if those people would kill or accept him, he just wanted to get out of there. With the final strength he had, he climbed the hill towards the group. "Sage?" he heard a familiar voice call to him as he came closer to the group. He looked up to see his friend "Shub? Is that you?" He said in between breaths. With tears in her eyes, she ran to him and hugged him tighter than ever "You're

alive!” she cheered, sobbing in his arms. They stayed like this for a little before Shelby pulled away. Just then, a little birdy landed on Sage’s shoulder. He gently picked up the bird. “Do you know what happened?” He asked the bird. It chirped “The king ordered all of the guards to kill off the *serasia*. At first, everything was going smoothly, but then some of the guards turned against the king, and... let’s just say he got what he deserved.” After the bird finished, it flew off without warning. “Thank you!” Sage yelled after it. Shelby looked at him “What did the bird say?” she questioned. Sage paused before answering “I... I think the king is dead.” He looked at his friend, who simply shrugged. “Well, so is the kingdom.” She acknowledged, turning to face the once-powerful kingdom, which was now up in flames, Sage did the same. They stared at it in silence before Sage sat down and whispered “I don’t think Eddie is coming.” He frowned as Shelby sat next to him. “How come?” she asked him. “He stayed to fight off some guards that tried to kill us... I think they got him.” he said in a hushed tone, trying not to cry as his eyes watered. Shelby put an arm around his shoulder “I’m sorry.” she muttered, only loud enough for Sage to hear. “It’s not your fault.” he frowned, leaning into the side hug. “What do we do now? Not like there’s a kingdom we can go back to.” he questioned, turning to face Shelby. “You can stay with us! Maybe your blacksmithing knowledge can help us.” She smiled. Sage shrugged “Alright... Thank you, Shelby... for everything.”, he mumbled, wiping away a tear. Shelby only smiled and hugged him tighter. They stayed like that for a little bit, enjoying each other’s presence as they sat on that hill, watching as, what was once their home, turns into nothing but ashes and dust...

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## UNSEEN BATTLE

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I didn't know how much my decision to eat less one day would change my future and it's not for the better.

Ever since I could remember I have been insecure about my body. My mom constantly commented on my body, saying I couldn't wear specific types of clothes because they are for skinny girls, and I wasn't a skinny girl. I consume media where to be pretty you must be thin. I'm surrounded by thin people. I never did anything to get thinner, but one day in March of last year, I just broke. I really didn't know how I came to the decision to starve myself, it felt like I woke up one day and decided to do it. At first, I started to eat less during meals. In school I ate half of my sandwich (I would bring my lunch from home) and threw the rest away. I started to obsess over my figure, weighing myself once a week and after a month I started to skip dinner. My parents didn't notice anything since they're always busy. At first it was really hard to lose weight, but after two months I saw I had lost two kilograms! I went from 60 kg to 58 kg! the joy I felt has never been seen before. Eventually, I started to completely throw away my sandwich and just read a book, waiting for lunch to end. I never thought how much this would affect me, I didn't know my body was suffering and I didn't care because I just cared about getting thinner. When school ended, I weighed 56 kg. since I had no tests and a lot of free time on my hands I started working out from after lunch to 7 or 8 pm. My parents didn't think much of it and were actually happy because they wanted me to start working out for a while now, but then they started to get worried. We live by a beach and my dad and I always go swimming during summer, however after 3 weeks of summer break I refused to go swimming. It was because I started to get insecure in a swimsuit. When I went swimming my hands were constantly around my waist because I feared getting judged by the people around me. Whenever I saw someone thin, I was filled with envy because I wanted to be just like them. I didn't tell my parents why I didn't want to go to the beach anymore and when they asked me why, I would just remain silent. Eventually they gave up on getting an answer from me. I spent entire afternoons isolated in my room doing workouts I would find on YouTube. I didn't go out with anybody except when



I went to the cinema with some of my friends a few times. I guess the only company I had was my cat whom we got earlier in June. I played with him whenever I didn't work out and he always cuddled with me whenever I cried about my body. My parents got worried about me not going out much and constantly told me to hang out with somebody, however I always refused because I just wanted to work out. During the summer break I was completely skipping breakfast and dinner. I didn't even have time to eat breakfast since I woke up at 12 pm and I didn't have an appetite after working out. In August it was my birthday, and I invited a couple of friends over to my house to watch some movies as a celebration and since it was raining, we couldn't go out. I, of course, bought snacks and pizza, but I got anxious because I *had* to eat the food, my friends didn't know anything. During the celebration it was the most I had eaten since March and I felt horrible when my friends left. On my birthday it was the first time I made myself throw up after eating. Throwing up became a new obsession of mine and I couldn't stop. I even had phases when I would binge like crazy and immediately after I would throw up. I would either starve or binge, there was no in-between. A few weeks before school started, I started getting dizzy and I even almost fainted a couple of times. My mom noticed and was always scared that I would faint, so she forced me to eat. When she told me to eat, I would object, but she was so stubborn that she wouldn't give up until *I* gave up. I ate in front of my parents as if nothing was wrong, but I was actually shaking and on the edge of tears. I started counting calories which led to a new obsession. Whenever I saw a mirror, I would check how thin I was. During summer I lost six kilograms – I weighed 50 kg, I felt confident and started wearing clothes I wouldn't wear before I lost weight. You could see how much skinnier I was, and I was even underweight, but I didn't care. School was coming closer and I was terrified because I needed to eat, or the teachers and my friends would find out. During the first month of school, I managed to skip lunch, but one of my teachers made me go to the cafeteria and eat (I started eating school lunch). My friends found out and monitored me during lunch, so I ate enough. But after I ate, I would excuse myself to use the bathroom and throw up. When I saw 49 on my scale, I was ecstatic! It was one of my biggest goals ever and I couldn't be prouder of myself. However, even if I was happy, my body was not. I always felt cold and my memory wasn't like it used to be. Because I still made myself throw up, my fingers were covered in scratches and even callus would appear on my hands. However, I don't think anybody noticed since I was still my normal self and the top student in my class. During school I lost more and more weight and a lot of people tried to help me but didn't succeed. The school psychologist tried to do



something about my condition, but no avail. My parents started to get more worried when my hair started falling out. They would find clumps of my hair in my trash can after I brushed my hair, after I finished showering the shower would have a bunch of hair in it. They tried to help but I refused to eat and when I did, I threw up. When I finished school 36 kg, and you could say I looked like a skeleton. My skin was dry and yellow, my hands and nails were, I was so weak that I could barely hold a glass of water. Everyone was looking at me in the halls, asking me how got so skinny, the teachers tried to help me like my parents did. I finished school with the best results and got into my dream high school. On the last day of school, just when I got home, I fainted. The next thing I remember was me in hospital, everything else is blurry in my memory. I learned that I got mild anemia, low blood pressure, my kidneys and heart were failing. My parents and I cried all day.

I'm writing this from a rehabilitation centre. I got sent here a week after I had fainted. I've been here for a month and I'm getting better day by day, but recovery is still hard. being in rehab made me feel understood since I'm surrounded by people who are anorexic and bulimic, and I have even made a few friends, we help each other with our recovery. I see a psychiatrist three times a week and she's nice. I'm hoping to get out before school starts. If you're thinking of doing the same thing as me, think about it twice because you might end up like me, or worse. I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy. Be smart, make the right decision. Anorexia and bulimia won't do anything but harm to you and even your loved ones.

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## WHAT WOULD THE WORLD LOOK LIKE IF I WAS THE ONE TO CREATE IT

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Once upon a time, beyond imagination, there existed a world crafted by the boundless creativity. This world, my world, was a tapestry of dreams where every brushstroke of imagination came to life. In my world, the sun rose, painting the sky with colors never seen before. The land itself was a place of breathtaking landscapes, from rolling meadows full of vibrant wildflowers to towering mountains that reach to sky. Crystal-clear rivers pass through lush forests, whispering secrets to the ancient trees that stood as guardians of nature's wisdom.

But it was the inhabitants of my world that truly brought it to life. In this utopia, kindness and compassion were the guiding principles. Each person possessed a unique gift, a talent that they shared freely with others. Artists painted masterpieces that carried emotions never before experienced, musicians composed melodies that connect deep within the soul, and writers penned remarkable stories that teleported readers to realms of enchantment.

Education in my world was a transformative journey. Schools were vibrant places to learn, where curiosity was nurtured and knowledge was celebrated. Teachers were not just instructors but mentors, guiding students to explore their passions and discover their own unique paths. In this world, education was not confined to classrooms, it spilled into the very fabric of everyday life, fostering a love for learning in every corner.

Healthcare in my world was not just about general treatment but about promoting well-being. Healing gardens bloomed with medicinal plants, offering natural remedies to soothe both body and mind. Doctors and healers worked hand in hand, combining traditional wisdom with cutting-edge technology to ensure the health and vitality of all in my world.

Diversity was not just accepted but celebrated. The streets were alive with festivals that showcased the rich tapestry of cultures, each one weaving together to create a harmonious symphony of traditions. People embraced their differences, recogniz-

ing that it was the mosaic of identities that made their world vibrant and beautiful. Technology in my world was a tool for progress and sustainability. Innovations powered by renewable energy sources propelled the world forward without harming the environment. Clean transportation systems brought people from one corner of the world to another, connecting communities and fostering global understanding. In this world, collaboration was the key to progress.

Here comes the end... or perhaps, just the beginning of a new chapter...

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mentor: Jasna Polanović  
institution: Intera Zlatar

## WHO IS WATCHING?

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Once upon a time, there were a brother and sister, who we will call Ava and Noah, they were teenagers and they lived in the big old house. The house was on the top of a small hill near the woods, in the country of Canada. They used to live in the London, in an apartment with a beautiful view of Big Ben, but they had to move out because their parents didn't have enough money to live there anymore. They missed the beautiful walks at night and the crazy teenage parties they were invited to. Now, it is what it is and all they had were just memories of their old lives.

They shared the house with their parents and their grandma. They lived there for six years of their lives believing there was a ghost in their house. When they were trying to sleep, they would hear rattling from outside the backyard. Once they even thought someone broke into their house because it was so loud!

But, when they turned 17, they found out where the noise was coming from. One day as they were doing some work, someone knocked them out! Noah and Ava woke up in an abandoned house they recognized, it was the house near their home! They heard someone laughing in the distance, so they tried to find the source. It turned out it was a doll they hadn't seen since they were 6! For 10 whole years they hadn't seen that doll! They knew they had to escape so they got an idea. The room they were stuck in had a small window they could climb out of, but they didn't have a chair. They had a plan. They called the doll into the room and closed the door behind her knocking her out at the same time. They climbed out of there with each a small cut on one arm. They were safe but terrified. They ran home in the darkness scared. Once they were home, they immediately told their parents about what happened in the old house. The parents said it was just their stupid and crazy imagination, but the Ava was audio recording everything including the laughing of the doll. They each also had a small cut on their arms. The parents were terrified and worried at the same time, so they told them to pack their bags because they were moving out the next morning. They decided to go back to London, but to a different apartment. The next morning, they woke up at 7 o'clock and packed their bags in an hour. Nobody heard any laughing that day, and they were quite suspicious of it. But they didn't re-

alize the doll made its way into one of their bags. When they went through security at the airport, there was an incident because the security accused them of smuggling weapon in one of their bags. It was Noah's bag. Noah opened his bag and saw the doll with a small kitchen knife in her hands. They were terrified but the airport security took it away, they were relieved, they thought. When they got on to the plane, mom felt something in the Ava's bag and when they opened it, they saw the doll was still there!!! Airport security took the knife and thought the doll was theirs or for someone they know. After some time though, they forgot about the doll. When they were finally back in London, it was a relief. They decided to visit their favourite restaurant and have a round on the London Eye since it was a rough day for all of them. On the way there Ava stopped to tie her shoe, but as she was looking up, she saw the doll on the house window waving to them and smiling. Ava screamed and warned others, but the doll quickly moved away before someone could see it. Ava was terrified, but the family thought she was just joking around since they knew the doll was tucked away safely at the bottom of the bottom drawer in their new place. Ava eventually forgot about it as she continued the walk. When the family got to their apartment, Noah heard a quiet laughing but didn't know what that was, so he ignored it.

Each of them went to their rooms, Noah to his and Ava to hers. Ava loved to draw the sunsets because her last room had a beautiful view of them. Noah liked to listen to music and play video games. He never lost a match when listening to music. While they were drawing and playing video games, parents were searching for the doll, because they saw it in the window too, but acted like they didn't see it. While they were searching for the doll, Ava came in the room and asked for money because she needed new markers and pencils to finish the painting, so they gave her the money and told her to get it herself from the shop downstairs. They were searching for the doll for almost two and a half hours now, but suddenly they heard a loud scream coming from Ava's room. When they came to see what was happening, they saw the doll outside the window with a screwdriver in its hand. Noah kicked the window and the doll fell in the dumpster, the dumpster truck came shortly after that and dumped the trash including the doll in the truck. Phew! They were safe, for now.

A few years passed by and there was no sign of the doll. But what they didn't know about the doll was that it had put cameras around the apartment to record them for the people behind the doll. Ava could feel the presence of something around the house. She never felt at home in the new apartment. As she was having breakfast one day, she saw the light through the crack in the wall. Ava took a screwdriver, scratched and took out the camera from the hole. She threw it in the trash, cut all the cords and finally felt as she could breathe freely.

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## YOU WILL BE BETTER

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I am ruined, and no one can fix me now. I am shattered like broken glass. Pieces of my heart are everywhere like rose petals in the autumn. My eyes became endless waterfalls. But of course, I am over dramatic now. Are you wondering how I got to this misery? Let's start from the beginning, shall we?

My name is Luna. I grew up with my mom. I am an only child. My dad left when I was about 1 year old. It doesn't bother me because I don't remember him. I had a beautiful childhood in San Francisco. I was the happiest version of myself there until... A couple of months after I turned 15, my mom found a new job in Los Angeles, and then we moved there. That is where my total collapse started.

The first day of high school. I remember it all too well. I was a little late to class that day, but not too late, just a couple of minutes. I came in right before the teacher introduced himself to the rest of the class. He wasn't that happy for me being late, but it was the first day, so he didn't punish me. He told me to find my seat and then I sat somewhere in the back. When the class (which was horrifyingly boring) ended, I went to the hallway hoping I would meet someone. I was just looking at people in the hallway, trying to get the strength to talk to someone. After a couple of minutes of just standing like a statue I was about to give up but then I turned around and I saw the most beautiful, handsome, gorgeous-looking guy walking past me. I was too stunned to speak. My heart was filled with joy and I got butterflies in my stomach. I had to meet him at all costs. Suddenly a girl came up to me and told me: "I see who you are looking at." I looked at her and then asked, "Who are you?". Then she started telling me every little detail about herself but somehow managed to forget to tell me her name. "What is your name?", I asked her while interrupting her speech about how in two months she would be the new school journalist. "Oh, silly me!" she replied, "My name is Natalie", she said with visible embarrassment on her face. After a little chit-chat, I asked her if she knew anything about that boy that I was looking at earlier. The excitement on her face was unbelievable like she was waiting for me to ask her that. She told me everything about him. His name was Jake. After the whole talk, I gave my number to Natalie and then I went home. When I arrived home, I

told my mom everything that happened in the school except I kind of skipped the part with Jake. The next few months I was just getting closer with Natalie, but I didn't even try to meet Jake. I guess I was too scared. Also, Natalie succeeded in becoming a school journalist. One day I was walking down the hallway very stressed because of the exam I was about to have. Because of all the stress, I was just thinking about the things I needed to know for the exam. Suddenly, I am on the floor, Jake as well. I was stressed to the point of not realizing that while I was walking, I just bumped into him. The embarrassment I felt was just indescribable. I immediately started apologizing but he started laughing. I was a bit confused. Why was he laughing? He got up from the floor and then helped me to get off the floor too. His hands were soft like clouds and his eyes were dark green like the evergreen forest on a rainy day. He wasn't mad at me, instead, he told me that it was hilarious that I was worrying so much about nothing. He introduced himself to me. Hearing his soft, angelic voice was the first time I knew I was in love with him. It was magical. Magical to the point where I was scared that it was not real. I was silent for a few seconds. I introduced myself too. "You have a beautiful name Luna", he said looking me in the eyes. My legs were shaking and my voice as well. I was just about to continue the conversation, but then I heard the bell ringing. He told me he had to go and then he left in a hurry. I ran to my classroom too, totally shocked by what had just happened. I couldn't wait to tell Natalie. When I came back from school, I called Natalie and told her everything. She was so happy for me. The next day when I came to school, I saw him right in front of the school, just scrolling on the phone. I walked up to him and said hi. He looked at me and he greeted me back. We started talking. He was so nice to me. Before the class started, we exchanged numbers, and then both went to our classrooms. I could not believe I had his number. After that day, time flew so fast. Jake and I started to hang out. After maybe one week since the day that we met, I told my mom about him. She was happy for me. After that, time started to flow even faster. Days became weeks, and weeks became months. One day Jake and I went out for a walk, so simple yet so beautiful. The sun started to set. The sky went from blue to pink. We sat in a random park just because we were so tired from walking. He looked me in the eyes and asked me if I wanted to be his girlfriend. Part of me knew that that was going to happen soon, but the other part stayed speechless in the most precious moment. The boy of my dreams was feeling the same way I felt for him. Hollywood moment that I was so impatiently waiting for. "Of course!", I yelled at the top of my lungs. When I got home from the little date, I first told everything to my mom. She was amazed. Then I rushed into my room to call Natalie. When I told her precious news,

we both started screaming out of happiness. “Finally, it took him long enough,” she said. We both started laughing. I was the happiest person on earth. After that day, Jake and I hung out almost every single day. I met his parents, and he met my mom too. Life was perfect. My grades were amazing, my best friend was amazing, and my boyfriend was amazing. Everything I could want, I had.

Summer break was near as well as my birthday. My birthday was in May. I didn't like big parties, but also, I also didn't have many friends, so I just made myself a cake and invited Jake and Natalie to come over. It was amazing and so much fun. One day I walked to school, it was two weeks before the summer break. I saw Jake and I ran to hug him. He hugged me back, but he was acting weird. He looked a bit worried. I asked him why, and he told me that he was only a bit tired, and I didn't need to worry. The whole week after, he was also acting weird, and I had enough. Something was happening and I needed to know what. I was thinking in my room about what to do and then I heard my phone ringing. I looked to see who was calling and it was him, Jake. I answered and he asked me if we could see each other this evening. I said “Yes”, and then he just said “Bye” and hung up. I was starting to get mad because of his weird behavior. A couple of minutes later, he texted me where and when to come. I got ready and then I went to the location he sent me. When I arrived, I saw him and a cute little picnic he prepared for us. He hugged me and then he showed me the cookies he had baked himself. I sat down and asked him why he was acting so weird that whole week. He told me that he invited me out to tell me everything. We sat on the blanket and then he began to talk. His parents were divorcing, and he would live with his mom. “Well, that is so sad. I am so sorry...”, I said, feeling bad because I was mad at him. But that wasn't the biggest problem. “I tried everything, but we can't stay. We are moving to Europe to my mother's family...” he said with tears in his eyes. Something in me broke at that moment. I just felt a tear running down my cheek. I had so many questions and I was as mad as I was sad. He told me he needed to go now because they were leaving tomorrow. I gave him the biggest hug and I just watched him leave. That was the last day I saw him. Why didn't he tell me earlier?

Since that day, I started to fall apart. Days were meaningless. Natalie was at her grandma's the whole summer, so I was alone. At least I had my mom, but she was too busy because of her job. The whole summer I was just scrolling on the phone, depressed. Although I did have Jake's number, we were on different continents so I knew we could not work out. At first, I called him every day, but as the summer passed by, we stopped talking. He had a new life, and I wasn't in it. The more I was scrolling on my phone, the more insecure I got. I just felt miserable. The best thing



I could do then was throw my phone across the room. All the things I saw on social media destroyed me. Girls with perfect bodies and with their perfect boyfriends. I was all fine until I started looking in the mirror and then comparing myself to them. That was the worst thing that I could do. I started feeling fat. I never cared about my weight before. I started to starve myself. When the school started, I got even worse. Girls from class started to gossip about me and I barely even talked to Natalie. It was all my fault. I was ignoring her. Not the opposite. And that was how I got to the misery. My mom saw that I was skipping meals and that my grades were awful. She started to worry about me. One day she asked me what happened and where was Jake. I decided to tell her everything. I should've done it earlier. She could not believe that she didn't see how bad I was the whole summer. I didn't blame her for that, she was busy, and I wanted to be alone anyway. She talked with me for almost 3 hours. It was like a therapy session, and I needed it. She knew that I messed myself up, but she told me that we would fix it all together. Every day we went for a long walk. She prepared me my favorite meals so that I would want to eat more. We studied together and my grades got better. I also managed to fix my friendship with Natalie. Natalie played a big role in my mental healing because she helped me to get over Jake.

After I got better, I realized how important it is to love yourself. I also realized that I could never be better if I didn't ask for help. I learned to appreciate people who love me, and I learned to appreciate myself too. And if you feel bad, sad, or anything negative, just remember that *you will be better*.



**SECONDARY**

**SCHOOL**

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## CORNFIELD SHADOW

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Music was playing loudly as the laughs of drunken townspeople filled the saloon of Wilburn, Texas. Everyone was drinking, playing darts, dancing, and singing along joyfully to the live music, unbothered by anything around them all night until someone ran in, his breathing shallow, sweat dripping down his face. “JOHN’S DEAD!” The man shouted, seeming to panic. The whole saloon fell silent. “*John... is dead.*” The man repeated, tears welling up in his eyes, trying to catch his breath. Everyone looked at each other in shock and disbelief. He leaned on the wooden wall next to him to keep his balance. “Someone... No, no. That couldn’t’ve been human. *Some-thin’* attacked him and- sweet mother of Jesus.” He gulped, his eyes shut tight, and head thrown back slightly while trying to catch his breath. “It dragged him away into the cornfield. I tried savin’ him, but it was too late. I’m so sorry.” He collapsed, his wife stepping out of the crowd to help get him home.

“And you’re *sure* you weren’t drunk, Richard?” The sheriff asked, raising a brow and leaning back in his office chair, tapping his pen on the report in front of him. “I mean, you know how ridiculous you sound, right? What, some kind of monster attacked John?” The middle-aged man chuckled slightly. Richard squinted his eyes in disbelief and frustration. “Ethan, I ain’t crazy. I know what I saw. You- You gotta trust me.” He begged. Ethan stared at him, amused, shaking his head. “If you say so, Dick. But I can’t hand in a report talking ‘bout monsters, I hope you know that.” Ethan let out another short chuckle, getting up to put the report in its respectful place in his office. “Therefore, it *will* be treated as a bear attack. Was I clear?” He asked, turning his head to look at Richard, skimming through the report one more time. Richard nodded reluctantly, a muscle in his jaw clenching. He got up, starting to walk out. “Yes, sir.” Richard walked out, slamming the door shut. Ethan let out a baffled chuckle again once he left. “A monster... Yeah, right.” He stored away the report and went about his duties as a sheriff, per usual.

In the next few days, more reports of the locally called “Cornfield Shadow” piled up. Ethan sat down, comparing the reports side by side, writing down overlapping details on his blackboard. He stood in front of it, fiddling with his chalk, his eyes

thoughtfully darting over the text he wrote down. “What are you, Cornfield Shadow...” He muttered to himself with a sigh. He was beat. The man sat back down, shaking his head and running his fingers through his hair. “Did everyone in this town go insane?” He wondered, then realized a common link between all the killings. “The cornfields.” He said, bouncing up to his feet, rushing to grab his hat and jacket, getting on his horse, riding away to the cornfield.

As he got to the cornfields, he quickly hitched his horse to a nearby fence, cigar in his mouth, grabbing a lamplight. He struck a match, lighting the lamplight and cigar. His steps were wary, the heavy revolver in his right hand loaded, his fingers near the trigger already. Ethan walked on the dirt road between the cornfields, flinching at every little sound. In the middle of the road, he spotted a table. He raised a brow slightly, his fingers running over the wooden surface, checking for dust. “Someone was here.” He muttered to himself, noting the lack of dust. His eyes warily darted around in the dark. From the corner of his eye, Ethan thought he saw something. A head peeking out of the corn. His whole body went stiff, his neck quickly turning to look at it. Ethan’s eyes kept staring at the spot, his heart beating out of his chest, and his palms getting sweatier. He’s never stayed still for so long. Surely, there was a silhouette that resembled the shape of a head.

The man had a staring contest with the entity, his eyes never straying away from the big, deep and dark dents. Its mouth was pulled up into an unsettlingly wide, teathy smile. The entity’s body was lanky, from what was visible from the corn. Its long, spindly fingers wrapped around the corn, its razor-sharp nails digging into the stalk. Ethan slowly pointed his gun at it with a shaky hand, eyes widened and breath hitching in his throat. He pulled the trigger, the sharp sound of a gunshot echoing through the area.

As soon as the trigger was pulled, the entity ran out of the left cornfield for a moment, quickly moving closer to him in the right. Ethan’s breathing got shallower, trying to follow where it went. His eyes and revolver were rapidly darting around both fields. Out of panic, he dropped his lamplight, the light dimming. He heard the rustling of stalk, shooting wherever he heard it. After a few moments, everything abruptly went silent again. Only Ethan’s light pants could be heard, warily crouching to pick up the lamplight, his eyes focused on both fields. A few more moments of silence passed. “God.” He exhaled, relaxing a little, catching his breath.

Just as he turned around, the entity stood tall in front of him, staring at him. Ethan hurtled and screamed, running backwards and aiming his revolver at it again, shooting rapidly. The bullets didn’t slow it down, it just kept coming closer, until he

was shooting out of an empty revolver. When he realized his revolver is empty, the sheriff turned around and tried bolting away. A loud shriek was heard before everything went dark.

“Mm...” He grunted, rubbing his head. As he slowly stirred back into consciousness, Ethan remembered what happened, eyes widening. He sat up, looking around frantically and crawling backwards to the nearest wall, though he quickly moved back to the middle of the room, realizing the walls weren’t empty. “What?” he muttered to himself. “Oh, no... No, no, no, no...” Ethan got up, his legs shaking. “No...” He covered his mouth with his hand, teary-eyed as he looked around the room, every corpse on the wall being someone from Wilburn. He collapsed on the floor, screaming painfully and sobbing.

It’s been... minutes? Years? Ethan couldn’t really tell, his shock making everything feel longer. He cried and screamed for a while, trying to process what happened. Once he managed to calm down a bit, he looked around the room again, looking for a way out. He got up, lightly tapping the walls in hopes of finding where he even got in from. As he did, Ethan didn’t dare look up into the lifeless eyes of his peers again. He accidentally touched a corpse, his stomach churning. Eventually, he tapped the right spot, the wall turning into a dark and intimidating tunnel. With a deep breath, he started walking through it, determination in his eyes, mixed with rage.

He walked through the tunnel for a while, no light in sight. Ethan could hear the blood pumping through his veins, his mind racing. Where is he? Why is there no light coming through the tunnel? How will he escape? *Will he escape?*

After a long while in the darkness, he started hearing things. Voices, whispering his name and the faintest conversations being heard. Ethan started panicking, jogging through the tunnel.

He still didn’t reach the end of the tunnel.

The voices got louder and louder until he snapped. “SHUT UP!” He shouted, covering his ears with his calloused hands, panting. His voice echoed through the tunnel. Somehow, that helped, as the voices faded. “I gotta get out of here.” He mumbled to himself, shaking his head and running in a straight line.

A shriek could be heard from behind him. Ethan started running even faster, his lungs aching from the strain. He could see the smallest light in the distance, which determined him to keep on running. The shrieks behind him got closer.

Just as his legs were about to give out, Ethan got to the end of the tunnel, his whole body sweaty. The sheriff moved to the side of the exit, pressing his back against the wall, breathing heavily, running his fingers through his sweaty hair, his body stiff-

ened and face a flushed red colour. The entity rushed past him, shrieking, the tunnel closing behind it. Another one opened in front of it as it ran through. When Ethan was sure it was long gone, he exhaled, collapsing on the floor, catching his breath, his hand on his forehead. "Jesus." He panted out quietly.

The whole room was filled with random items, gold and silver coins, beds, cradles, chairs, desks, books, pacifiers, knives, guns, whatnot. Ethan curiously looked around the room, carefully picking up some of the items, then putting them down. "Why does it have all of this? How did it even-" he muttered; his eyebrows raised. He saw something that caught his attention. The table from the dirt road. "My office desk?" He mumbled in surprise. The man then looked around the room once more, picking up the smaller items again. "John's gun..." He said, eyes widened. The more he paid attention to the items, he realized lots of them belonged to his now deceased peers who got dragged into the cornfield. He rubbed his chin in wonder and bafflement. "It was *bait*." He mused.

His eyes darted to the other tunnel, hoping the entity won't be back anytime soon. He picked up some of the smaller belongings that could fit into his pocket before walking through it.

This tunnel was well-lit with shafts keeping the roof from collapsing. The walls were filled with blood splatters, scratch marks and some body parts here and there. Ethan was deep in thought, trying to process everything while he walked. A faint shriek and a scream were heard in the distance, his heartbeat getting faster.

"Pick up the pace, Blackwell." He muttered, starting to run again, getting out of the tunnel. He got out of an abandoned mine on the outskirts of Wilburn, the entrance lit up by the moonlight. "Wait- What?" Ethan was surprised, realizing how close the entity's lair was to the town. A faint conversation could be heard. "He's not here!" One voice yelled. "Well, keep lookin'!" Another replied. Ethan started walking in the direction of the voices, his body running purely on adrenaline right now.

"Who goes there?" The sheriff's deputy shouted, pointing his revolver at Ethan. "Woah, woah, Bill, calm down. It's me." Ethan said, raising his hands in the air. "Ethan?" Bill lowered his revolver, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "Where in the world were you? You look like you've been hit by a train." Ethan chuckled dryly at the comment. "I feel like it too. It's a long story. I went lookin' for the Cornfield Shadow and-" The sheriff replied, his body giving out on him, his vision getting fuzzier. "And..." He tried continuing, but ultimately failed, collapsing on the floor.

"Wait, so what you're tellin' me is that John got killed by a *monster*?" John's wife, Miriam, looked at Ethan, then at John's bloodied gun that got handed to her back

and forth for a few moments, her brows furrowed, and eyes filled with anger. “You’re being disrespectful, Blackwell. I took you for a good man.” She said in an offended tone, starting to leave, teary-eyed. “Miriam, do you really think I would make any of this up?” Ethan called out to her, grabbing her shoulder. Miriam got her shoulder away from his grip. “*Don’t touch me.*” She scoffed, walking out of the room angrily. Bill walked into the room after her, letting out a low whistle while looking over to Ethan. “What’d you tell *her* to make her that upset?” Ethan sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “The truth.” He shrugged. “Bill, you believe my story, right?” Bill grimaced, his body language turning stiffer. “Well... It’s a *story*, I’ll give you that. But what happened? How’d you even get your hands on our friend’s belongings?” He asked, raising a brow slightly. Ethan scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Not you too. I’m being dead serious about it.” Bill shrugged, raising his hands in mock defence. “Listen, I’m not accusin’ you of anything, but you *were* covered in blood when we found you, and now you even have the belongings of the people that got killed? Don’t ya think that is just a *little bit* suspicious?” He said, leaning on Ethan’s desk. “Oh, no, you’re not sayin’ I murdered them, are you, Bill?” Ethan asked with an amused chuckle. “They were my friends too. Why would I kill ‘em?” He asked, looking at Bill in disbelief. Bill shrugged. “But you still don’t have any proof you *didn’t* do it, correct?” The blond man asked with raised eyebrows. “You know that you’ll get hanged if you don’t get proof about your monster. Just drop it and tell the truth, Ethan.” He advised, leaving the sheriff’s office. Ethan sighed. “Wait.” He got up and went to Bill. “I know where its lair is. Follow me.”

Ethan led Bill to the abandoned mine, his stomach churning a bit remembering what he saw. They walked through it, but all they reached was a dead end, a wall cutting off the rest of the mine. The walls? Squeaky clean, as if nothing happened. “What the-” Ethan said, tapping the wall lightly, hoping it’ll open and prove his innocence. He chuckled nervously. “It- it was right here, I swear.” He looked over to Bill with a nervous and panicked smile. “C’mon...” He muttered, pressing the wall harder, though, no use. “Bill, I-” He looked over to Bill, who had a disturbed look on his face, looking up at the ceiling. Ethan gave him a confused look, looking up, the lifeless eyes of his deceased peers looking down right back at him. “I...” Ethan started, but Bill pointed his revolver at him already, his hand shaking slightly. “Ethan Blackwell, you’re under arrest.” He muttered out. “I DIDN’T DO IT!” Ethan yelled, panicked, shaking his head. “IT WAS THE CORNFIELD SHADOW, BILL, YOU- YOU GOTTA-” He pleaded, chuckling hysterically, getting closer to Bill. “Don’t come any closer, or I will shoot.” Bill said in a cold tone.

“Listen, your honour, I didn’t do it. I know what it looks like, but I can prove it wasn’t me. Give me a bit more time, I’ll take Bill with me to prove the Cornfield Shadow is real.” Ethan pleaded, looking at the judge in front of him. The judge spoke. “You’re aware what kind of punishment follows if you don’t prove your innocence, Mr. Blackwell?” He asked. Ethan reluctantly nodded. The judge sighed. “Very well, then.”

Ethan and Bill went to the cornfields, hitching their horses to a tree. “Don’t scream when you see it.” Ethan whispered to him, but Bill just scoffed, rolling his eyes. The sheriff walked at the front, stopping in the middle of the dirt road between the fields, looking around for the entity carefully. “Where is it...” he muttered in frustration, with Bill looking at him with amusement. “Oh, for Christ’s sake- COME OUT, YA COWARD!” Ethan snapped. “YA CHOOSE TO HIDE NOW?!” He yelled out curses and frantically looked around for it for a few minutes, his anger slowly dimming and turning into sadness. He collapsed on the floor, laughing hysterically while tears ran down his cheeks. “I look insane.” He mumbled to himself. “Oh my God, I look *insane!*” His hysterical laugh turned into a weep. “I’ll get hanged.” He kept on muttering to himself, laughing and weeping hysterically. “Ya ready to go back?” Bill asked, his tone as cold as ever.

They got on their horses and Ethan shot one last look at the cornfields, the entity peeking out of the corn again. “BILL! IT’S- IT’S RIGHT THERE! *RIGHT. THERE.*” He yelled. Bill turned around, sighing. “Ethan, I’ve had enough of you. Accept that you got caught and that you’ll be dead by noon tomorrow.”

Ethan was quiet the whole trip back, not sleeping the whole night. He spent it drawing multiple illustrations of the entity, muttering to himself the whole time, quietly chuckling hysterically with wide eyes.

The next morning, Ethan got hanged in the town centre.

That didn’t stop the Cornfield Shadow from killing again.

No one ever caught it.

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Anyone after Ethan who ever managed to get out and tell their story would almost immediately be accused of being a lunatic, having the ‘Blackwell syndrome’.



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## THE SUN AND THE MOON

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The Sun and The Moon. When people think about those two, they usually associate them with something that is completely different, opposite of each other, something that is impossible to be together. It's almost like fire and water. However, water extinguishes fire, making her disappear, hurting her, while The Sun and The Moon need each other. The Moon wouldn't shine up in the sky, if The Sun doesn't willingly die every night to let her shine among the stars that The Sun crafted for The Moon, therefore making her feel less lonely up there.

There are many, many legends surrounding them, but one will always prevail, the one that talks about their deep love for each other.

Although in their beginnings, they weren't two shiny objects in the sky. They were real people, still with the same fondness for one another, but yet again, they remained too far apart.

Long ago, even way before our planet Earth was created, in the cosmic realm there lived two lovers on the same planet filled with their love and affection, making it impossible for them to fly apart. The individuals loved each other dearly, but their mothers never approved of them. Egocentrically and cruelly, the mothers decided to split the pair apart.

Sol was sent far away to live on a blue planet, while Lua stayed on the same planet with her mother. The planets are known today as Neptune and Venus, planet of love.

Of course, Sol was extremely upset. Having no one to talk to, to hug, to share secrets with, she decided to explore her new "home". She eventually stumbled upon tiny little stars that lost their shine and ability to lift themselves up high again. Sol had an idea.

Every night, she whispered to them about Lua, filling them with warmth and love that Sol felt for her dear one, and at last the stars began to shine again from so much love. Sol asked them if they could deliver her messages to Lua and they agreed. The tiny stars travelled so many times that they created a starry pathway that we know today as the Milky Way.

The messages were as sweet as a thousand flowers in the most beautiful place you can imagine, as sweet as relaxing after walking all day long, like the sweetest candy in the world.

The tiny stars whispered softly to Lua, displaying the raw emotions Sol felt while being away from her beloved.

*“Oh, my sweet Luna, how I miss you. I know you hate it when I call you that, but I need you to understand. I cannot bear being this far away from you anymore. I miss your celestial silver hair, your bright eyes and your shiny smile. How long must I wait for us to meet again? Sometimes I wish we were like those planets... just floating in an infinite loop with each other. Is this an impossible wish? Too much to ask for? If so, then what if we made a completely new planet, just for us? We could be together forever... Ah, well, I’m talking too much and wishing too much, but one last wish to end this message that will hopefully be delivered to you, my dear. I wish I could fly to you.”*

The stars stopped whispering. They all gathered around Lua, shining the brightest they ever did.

Lua stared in awe, completely infatuated with Sol and her message that she could not help but cry. Silver tears fell to the ground, soaking it for the first time. She just wasn’t able to collect herself and give the stars a reply to deliver to Sol.

In the meantime, Sol paced around. Her mind racing and her thoughts collapsing onto one another, eagerly waiting for a reply.

She could not be happier when she saw tiny twinkles in the distance.

The stars came rushing to her planet and they quickly surrounded her.

Then, the sweet whispering began.

*“Solari, my brightest light, I am happy to hear from you once again. I am sorry I cannot make all your wishes come true, but I will do my best to fulfill at least one of them. Ever since you left, in my heart there is an itch that won’t go away. It’s constantly burning and ripping at my mind. Even if it doesn’t hurt, the need to be able to see you in any shape or form is how I know my love for you is real. When I say any shape or form, I mean it. If you were one of those floating objects in the cosmic realm, I would still love you. Oh, how I miss your pretty eyes, your golden hair, and your bright smile. Unlike you, I don’t have many wishes because my only wish is to be with you forever. No matter the distance between us, I will find a way to you.”*

“Wow...” Sol mumbled to herself in tears. “Could there really be a way for us to be together once again?” She asked the stars.

The stars hesitated for a moment before slowly nodding. “There is a way, yes, but... it is not that sweet as you imagine it.” One of the stars said.

Sol looked confused; any way is worth it if she gets to see Lua once again.

“What do you mean?” She asked.

The stars looked at each other, they did not like how this was going. “Well... You will have to jump from your planet into the abyssal nothingness. It will not hurt, we promise.” The main star said.

“What?... What about Lua?” Sol asked, her face dropping into a saddened expression.

“She will have to do the same thing.”

“Then what?”

“You will be together once more, but in a different... shape...’ The main star said insecurely, looking down at the ground after the last word.

“What do you mean “different shape”?”

Obviously, Sol was getting increasingly frustrated.

“We cannot tell you that, unfortunately. The magic will not work then.” The main star said.

“*Magic? Seriously...?*” Sol was thinking to herself. What a ridiculous suggestion. There is no magic here... probably.

Sol sighed sadly before relentlessly agreeing to do so. She would jump off the planet, unsure of the outcome but if it ever came to that point, she would give her life for Lua.

The stars shone brightly, indicating that they are happy with the decision. In one swift motion, they flew away into the nothingness and disappeared from Sol’s viewpoint.

Sorrowful, Sol sat down and hugged her knees to her chest in misery. Salty tears started to prickle her eyes as she let them fall onto her cheeks and onto her clothes.

Sol’s biggest flaw would be her lack of self-control. That feeling when the stress that’s been building up for days finally collapses onto her, all at once. She hates that feeling and the silence that comes with it. That cursed silence.

The one that slashes at you and leaves unhealable wounds. She really hates that and now when Lua is gone, no one can help her. No one understands her like she does. No one can cheer her up and make her smile like Lua can. It’s inevitable. She cried until her mind and body gave in and she just collapsed onto the hard and cold ground.

“*This will all be over tomorrow.*” Sol thought to herself.

Tomorrow turned to days; days turned into weeks.

Nothing.

Just that cursed silence.

Until there was a twinkle in the distance. The stars were flying back to Sol.

“We have everything you need here.” the main star said, handing her a bottle of what she presumed was stardust.

Sol looked worried. “Does Lua know about this?” She asked.

“We’ll tell her now; we also have a bottle for her.” One of the stars said, brushing away Sol’s worries.

Sol nodded before putting the bottle into one of her woolly pockets.

The stars flew once again, this time towards Lua.

They found Lua lying on the ground, sleeping soundlessly. The main star lightly nudged her before she woke up, confused and dazed.

“What?” Lua asked, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

“Do you want to see Sol again?” The main star asked.

Lua immediately shot up from the half-lying position and stood up on her feet.

“O-Of course, yes!” She spoke, unable to contain her excitement.

“Take this and drink up!” The main star said cheerfully and offered her the bottle.

“What is that?” Lua asked skeptically.

“A magic potion!” One of the stars replied.

“Magic potion? Seriously? Magic doesn’t exist here!” Lua said, the disappointment made her more infuriated.

“How is that going to help me?!” She continued.

“Well, it’s quite simple! You and Sol will drink the potion and jump off your planets at the same time. In a matter of seconds, you’ll be reunited again together in different forms!” The main star said without a worry.

“In different forms?” Lua raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, of course! Before you ask what that means, we’re sorry to inform you that we cannot tell you that. It’ll lessen the magic.” The main star explained, saddened.

“Fine, I’ll do it.” Lua said before opening the bottle and drinking it in one sip.

“No! Not yet!” The stars shouted but it was too late. Lua already jumped.

She was falling into the dark nothingness, unsure of what would happen to her. The dark consumed her, and she was starting to get very scared. Even angels are afraid of death sometimes.

Seeing the misunderstanding and mess they made, the stars immediately rushed towards Sol’s planet to warn her to drink her potion as quickly as possible.

After a quick fuss, Sol drank the potion and jumped.

This all felt so surreal to her, was this all a dream? Will she finally be reunited with her lover?

She closed her eyes in bliss, drowning in the darkness just like Lua.

Then, all over the cosmic realm, there was a big explosion of light.

A new big star and a new supposed planet appeared.

The Sun and the Moon.

In the beginning, Lua was destined to revolve around Sol, serving as her guardian planet, but when Lua drank the potion too early, she was destined to be apart from her lover forever.

That's why planet Earth was created, and Lua was destined as its natural satellite.

When Sol finally regained consciousness, she couldn't feel herself. No arms, hands, legs, nothing. She wasn't sure if she even had eyes.

She saw a big brightness around her and below her was Earth.

Sol began to panic. She couldn't move! She couldn't speak! She could barely look around. Where is Lua? Is she alright?

A hundred thoughts rushed through Sol's mind.

The exact same thing was happening to Lua. She did not know what was happening. She just wanted to see Sol like the potion promised.

Lua was covered in darkness and Sol was covered in bright lights.

Every once in a while, they both felt a little rotation and like they were moving.

Sol realized that they'll probably switch places sometimes. She will be down, and Lua will be up in her place. Knowing that Lua feels lonelier than her in all the darkness, she decided to create a few sparkles to make her feel less lonely.

In honor of her friends who helped her reach out to Lua, she called them stars.

But the potion had its positive sides too. Now, every two to five times a year, they'll be reunited in something called a solar eclipse.

The solar eclipse, a moment of bliss when the two lovers could steal a kiss from each other up in the sky.

People from planet Earth love that sight. They stare in awe, just like Sol stared at Lua when they weren't torn apart.

To this day, Sol willingly brings herself down to let her other half shine up high in the sky, in her place among the stars that were made for her.

And to the people of Earth, if you ever feel lonely when you're apart from your lover and when darkness is your only solitude, talk to Lua, she understands your pain like no one else.

Sometimes all we need is patience.

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## COLD MEMORIES

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Twenty years ago, many devastating natural disasters hit the Earth in a single day. A lot of places around the world were either destroyed or badly damaged. More populated places were repaired right away, but more time was needed for the less populated ones. Although, most of them were sadly abandoned because natural disasters had become so frequent that no one even bothered trying to rebuild them anymore. That tragic event resulted in the rise of poverty, and only the most fortunate got to move to repaired cities, even though crime was also on the rise inside and outside of them.

My name is Isaac Pearce, and I finally decided to visit my childhood town, Farburgh, which was destroyed that day as well in a severe storm. I wanted to come back there for years. No, I *needed* to come back there because I couldn't stand living in the city anymore. More importantly, I couldn't bear the feeling of slowly forgetting Farburgh and part of myself with it.

I was only seven years old when it happened, and ever since my family and I had moved, I never saw Farburgh or heard from my friends – Arthur and Kathy – again. And ever since then, I hoped to reunite with them someday. Out of my car window, I could see an empty, gray road, dry green grass, and a dirty blue sky with gray clouds behind which was a purple sun, barely peeking through them.

This may sound strange, but I could see the world only in cold colors – green, blue, and purple. Everything else was colorless – white to black. I still *knew* what all the colors looked like, but I can't remember exactly when or what had caused my vision to change. At first, doctors thought it was color blindness, but they had never seen 'my type' before. I got picked on by bullies at school who constantly shoved things in front of my face asking me, "Hey, Isaac, what color is *this*?" However, I could still see certain things in warm colors, I'm guessing only things which made me happy, like my fiancée Alice, who was the most beautiful woman in the world to me. Her skin was snow white, her long, wavy hair was golden yellow, and her eyes were red like the shiniest rubies. By that logic, most things in my life painted in cold colors made me sad, and they made me *feel* cold, even in the hottest summer days. If I had never met Alice, I probably couldn't cope with the world as well as I did.

You see, Farburgh was a special place not just because it gifted me so many memories. It was known for its beauty in colorfulness. Everything was colorful, the buildings, the houses, the parks, you name it. My parents once told me that it was named by combining the German word *farbe* (color) and the suffix *burgh*, such a fitting meaning! Not only was every part of the town connected so well, but some neighborhoods were color-coded, making it even easier to get around in. It looked like it belonged in a fairy tale, but a fairy tale that wasn't timeless.

I finally arrived and stepped out of my car to see the ruins and rubble which once were Farburgh; some buildings were not completely destroyed, though. Despite the unpleasant sight, something about it was pulling me in, and the first thing I did was try to find my old home. My *real* home. Most of the town was barely recognizable, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered the way home. The familiar shades of blue in the distance guided me to my old neighborhood.

Shortly after, I found myself standing in front of my ruined house, shedding a tear. Looking through the whole missing wall where the front door used to be, something caught my attention. It looked like a red book, half of it under the rubble, and if I knew anything about myself, its warm color meant that there was something special about it. I carefully tiptoed my way to the book and tried to pick it up, but it was *really* stuck. I pulled and pulled for what felt like forever, but I was determined to get it out no matter what. I managed to pull it out so hard that I hit the wall behind me with my back. I felt a slight – but terrifying – shake for someone inside of a house which looked more than ready to collapse any minute. I instinctively covered my head with the book, closed my eyes, and prepared to be crushed.

Then I heard a thud right next to me and peeked with one eye. Only a small piece of the ceiling fell, but I wasn't safe yet, for more and more rubble started falling around me. I ran back with no hesitation and leaped to safety while hugging the red book just before the whole roof collapsed behind me; it took me a minute to catch my breath. Now that I had it, I hoped that it was worth literally almost dying for.

After taking a better look, it looked more like a notebook with a thick cover. In the front, it was signed by my late grandmother, Penny, who had also died in the storm. Eagerly, I opened it and to my surprise, or disappointment, there was nothing written in it. Actually, there weren't even any pages! It seemed more like they were... transparent? And the grass within their borders was red. I first raised an eyebrow, then the notebook in front of my face, and my eyes widened. I could see through it! But not just that... I could see Farburgh in warm colors and as it was before the disaster! I couldn't believe my eyes and stop spinning around to look at everything.

Suddenly, I saw someone watching me behind a damaged tree, and startled, I dropped the notebook. It looked like a little girl with two red braids and an orange, raggedy dress. "Hello?" I spoke up. "Is anyone there?" There was nobody there, nor did anybody answer me. I looked through the notebook again, and still, I was alone. I got a little worried because dangerous homeless people often lived in abandoned towns like Farburgh, but that girl didn't look dangerous at all. In fact, she looked almost like a cartoon character despite seeing her for just a brief second. I tried to forget about her, excusing it as just my imagination. It was hard, and I constantly felt like I was being followed, so I distracted myself by looking around some more.

Soon I found the playground Arthur, Kathy, and I used to play on all the time. I missed them *so* much. You don't even realize how fast twenty years can go by, or how much your life can change in such a short amount of time. In my case, the playground got destroyed, and I was alone. Well, not exactly... There was an adorable stray cat with blue fur peacefully sleeping on one of the benches. *Poor thing*, I thought. I missed my old friends, but at least I still had my family and Alice back at the city, and there were so many other pets and people out there without a home.

I opened up the notebook, and my eyes widened again when I saw seven-year-old me with my friends. I still had short, messy, black hair like then. Arthur and Kathy looked just like I remembered them, too. He had short, spiky, red hair, and she had medium-length, straight, orange hair with a puffy, red bow.

Little Arthur ran to little me. "Officer Pearce, sir!" he shouted, playing as my assistant.

I crossed my arms as if I were annoyed. "What is it *now*, Arthur?"

It took him a second to gather his thoughts. "Sir, I found her!"

"You don't mean...?" I interrupted him, pretending to lower my sunglasses.

"Yes, sir, the Master Thief – *Anders!*" he told me, pointing at Kathy who was playing the criminal.

And after that, he took me to her. That was the part when I would confront her and she would say something along the lines of, "Catch me if you can!" Then we would run around the playground trying to catch her, climbing up on the monkey bars, sliding down the slide, jumping on the benches... Sometimes we would catch her, and sometimes she would get away. It was very fun. While it lasted.

I turned around and caught the strange, little girl standing at a safe distance behind me, so she took a step back, preparing to run away. "Wait! Don't run!" I shouted, and she froze while looking at me with her scared eyes. "Are you lost?" I asked her, but she didn't answer. "Please don't be afraid," I said, carefully stepping closer



with one hand slightly raised until I reached her. “My name is Isaac, what is your...?” Before I could finish my sentence, the girl slapped the notebook out of my other hand. I picked it back up, but she was already gone. Who was she and why was she following me without saying a single word?

I sighed in frustration but was interrupted by a quiet sound: *meow*. I turned around to see the stray cat that was sleeping on the bench. It rubbed against my leg and softly purred. “It must be hard being all by yourself, huh?” It looked at me and meowed again as if it were responding to my question. “I’m sorry for leaving you behind at the playground,” I said while petting it. The stray cat seemed very happy, and its blue fur slowly changed to orange. I rubbed my eyes, but its fur actually changed color! Did that mean something good? It must have liked me for some reason.

After walking around Farburgh with my new pet, I arrived at the graveyard. It was the tidiest place in the whole town for the people who still wanted to visit their loved ones, especially the ones whom the storm had taken. Ironically, it was ‘the most alive’ place in Farburgh because of all the beautiful flowers and candles on the graves. So many with different years of birth, but sadly some with the same years of death on them.

Then I found it – “*Penelope Pearce*” – written on my grandmother’s grave. Among the flowerpots, I noticed a little, white chest. I tried to open it, but naturally it was locked with a heart-shaped padlock. Alone with Grandma, it was a good time to speak with her after so long.

“Hi, Grandma, it’s been a long time. I don’t know why my parents have never brought me with them to visit you, but here I am now. I’m just happy I found the way here myself. I wish you were still here and that we all still lived here, but I guess we can’t control that. I had always told you to leave me alone, but I was just a moody kid. I actually liked being with you, listening to your stories you wrote for me... I don’t remember them, but I know they were amazing.

Anyway, I found your notebook back at home, and I borrowed it for a bit. I hope you don’t mind; I will keep it safe, okay? It helps me cope with... all of this, somehow. Maybe I have just gone insane from the city. I *hate* it there; I just want to live *here* again. Sorry, I’ll stop rambling now. I wish I could hug you one more time. I love you and see you soon.”

My cat suddenly meowed while staring at seemingly the thin air, so I opened the notebook. It was the strange girl again, but she didn’t look scared anymore. She just sat on Grandma’s grave, looking at the ground with a sad expression and ignoring me. I thought carefully before speaking. “Hey.” She turned her head to me. “Sorry

if I scared you earlier,” I apologized, and she just stared at me. “Was your place destroyed, too?” She turned her head back and nodded, closing her eyes like she was about to cry. “I’m sorry... I know how it feels,” I said, making the girl turn her attention back to me. “I wish I could help you in some way.” Her gaze turned back to the ground, and she faded away.

As I continued walking around the graveyard, I glanced at the grave to my left, and my heart sank. I was so shocked that I dropped the notebook out of my hand. On the grave, the name that was written was Katherine Anders. I refused to believe it, yet there she was on the picture.

My eyes focused on my orange pet, then I remembered. *I left Kathy behind. At the playground.* I went home after we had played together just before the storm hit our town. *She died alone. And it was my fault.* I felt numb all over but could feel tears running down my face. I just walked over to the exit while looking at the ground. My mind was still numb from what I had just learned; it was best to go back home. Looking back, I saw that my cat stayed to take a nap on Kathy’s grave.

“Isaac!” I heard a familiar voice call out when I exited the graveyard. I looked up to see my fiancée running to me. I smiled and opened up my arms, preparing for a hug, but instead she slapped me.

“Why?” I asked confusedly while touching my burning cheek.

“Why? *Why?!*” Alice yelled at me. “Back at home, you keep saying you’re unhappy,” she sobbed, “and then you... come here without telling anyone! *What*, pray tell, was I supposed to think?!”

I quickly hugged her, and she cried into my shoulder. “I’m so, so sorry... Please calm down.” I reassured her, “That’s not why I’m here.”

Alice looked up at me. “Then why did you come here?” I thought for a moment about what I was going to say, then I remembered the little girl and got an idea.

“I’m going to rebuild Farburgh.”

And so, because I wanted to help people who lost their homes and never got them back, I decided to gather my family, their friends, and volunteers who wanted to help rebuild all of the abandoned places. We would secure them for the next unexpected events, too. We started a charity, and six months later, we were still working on Farburgh. It was very hard work, but our team’s determination to help people in need made it a little easier.

Half-rebuilt, Farburgh was ready to be moved into. Along with new families, my family also moved back in. Alice and I moved into my old house, and we adopted the stray cat and named it Kathy. When you see the happy families that moved in,

every second of your hard work is worth it. Not long after, the cold colors around me started turning warm the closer Farburgh was to being finished, and *I* started feeling warmer.

One day, while I was spending time with Alice out in the park, a man who had recently moved in asked me to talk with him in private. He looked so familiar, but I couldn't figure out why at the time. I looked at him from head to toe; his skin was gray, and he had short, spiky, green hair and glasses.

"You're Isaac Pearce, right?" the man asked me.

"Yeah, that's me," I said, worryingly wondering what that stranger was going to say next.

He then revealed himself to be none other than Arthur, and as you would expect, we had an awkward conversation with a lot of pauses, but we were very happy to finally be reunited and hugged each other beforehand. We talked about my team's work, and I tried to show him Grandma's notebook, but when I opened it, there were now actual pages filled with her beautiful handwriting. I had to read it as soon as possible, so I thanked Arthur for reaching out to me and said goodbye. As he was walking away, I could see the cold colors on him turning warm.

When I got home, I immediately read the whole story. It was about a little girl named Libbie who saves her falling village from monsters with the help of her friends. The description of the main character perfectly matched the strange girl who followed me six months ago.

There was a short message at the end – "*Thank you! -Libbie*" – with a little heart next to it.

I heard a knock at the front door, and when I opened it, it was her. She waved at me with a big smile, and before I could say anything, she hugged me and faded away for the last time. On the ground, there was a tiny, white key in the shape of a heart. The moment I saw it, I took it and drove to the graveyard.

I unlocked the little chest on Grandma's grave, and in it, there was a knitted doll of Libbie with a note attached to it – "*For my dearest Isaac.*" – signed *Grandma Penny* with a little heart by her name.

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## A FORGOTTEN SOUL

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Monday morning. The sunlight gently filled Princess Charlotte's room, waking her from sleep.

The butler, usually composed, looked uneasy as he had to share some unpleasant news. King Leroy wanted her to marry a wealthy prince named Austin. The weight of those unexpected words made Charlotte's heart race. At just 18, the idea of marriage felt like a heavy burden to her.

She immediately ran to her father and tried to reason with him, her voice all shaky. "Dad, please. I'm still young, I don't want to marry anyone! Especially someone I've never even met!" But her father's face turned stern, and he snapped, "You will marry him, and that's it! Don't make it harder than it should be." Charlotte, feeling overwhelmed, went to her room with tears in her eyes.

After some time, King Leroy sent the butler to check up on her. She wasn't there. She had sneaked out and gone into the woods, her usual spot when she wanted time alone to think. This time, Princess Charlotte was determined. Even though she was terrified of her strict father, she didn't want to be pushed into marrying a prince she didn't know or like. As she was walking through the woods, thinking about how to confront her father, she kept on hearing strange noises, and got a feeling she was being observed. She stopped, looked around carefully, but couldn't see anyone.

Continuing her walk, she came across another strange thing – a small cottage she'd never seen before. "How weird!" she thought to herself, "I've been here so many times, but I've never..."

Intrigued, the princess listened to an inner voice, telling her to see if there was anyone in the cottage. Strangely enough, as she was getting closer to the house, it seemed to her like the house was getting further and further away. Although petrified, the princess felt something drawing her in that direction. Curious as she was, she didn't want to stop despite the growing fear. Suddenly, she felt her head spinning, her vision kept on blurring and her entire body felt weak. And then... everything went black.

From the bushes not far from the cottage, a figure slowly approached. It carefully took the princess into its arms and disappears behind the doors of the cottage.

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The princess finally opened her eyes. Her memory was gone.

“What day is it? Where am I?” whispered the princess, shivering, mouth dry.

She saw a fireplace and animal fur as bed sheets. She was alone. “How in the world did I end up here?” The princess instantly wanted to go home but had no idea where her home is. “Hello? Is anyone there?” she asks but gets no reply. “Anybody!?”

A shadowy figure ran by inhumanly fast.

“Huh? Hello?” She was not alone after all. She tried to get up but felt weak in the knees.

Just as she was about to fall on the floor, somebody took her by the arm.

“Stop. You shouldn’t walk around here by yourself. It’s dangerous.”

Those words were uttered by a tall, handsome man, completely unknown to Charlotte. Strangely enough, she wasn’t scared. She felt safe. The place felt safe. Familiar. Like home. But it wasn’t her home, she knew that much.

“Who are you?! And why am I here?”

“You passed out and I found you, so, being a nice person I am, I decided to help you and warm you up. Charming, isn’t it?”

“Very charming,” Charlotte replied sarcastically. “You can let go of my arm now. I’m fine.”

“Oh, right. My name’s Gerald by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Gerald. I’m Charlotte.”

“Charlotte? Such a beautiful name!” Gerald said, looking straight into her eyes, amused, trying not to laugh.

“Now, I want to go home,” said Charlotte almost arrogantly.

“Fine, but you owe me for saving your life out there.”

“Are you sure you want to walk all over to your home in THIS rain?” asked Gerald.

“All over? How far away is my home? Wait... How do you know where I live?!”

Charlotte got a little nervous hearing this.

“You are the princess, everyone knows where you live, silly!”

“But I’ve never seen you around before! And how dare you call me ‘silly?’”

“I call you ‘silly’ because you are,” he said, laughing mischievously. “And you’ve never seen me before because I don’t live in the village. I live here, in the woods.”

“Don’t you have a family? Where are your parents?”

“They are gone,” Gerald looked away.

“Oh, I’m sorry about that. What do you mean gone? What happened to them?”

Charlotte is curious.

“I don’t know,” said Gerald quietly.

“What do you mean you don’t know? Did they pass away?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so.”

“What are you talking about?”

Gerald let out a loud, long sigh. “You see, we used to live together. I was an only child, and we had an amazing relationship. One day, when I was very young, there was a huge storm. My father was outside in the garden when it started. My mother ran out to get him inside the house, but he didn’t want to until he was done. As my mother was going back into the house, a tree broke and a branch hit my mother. Since that day I have never seen them again. They just disappeared. I don’t know what happened to them. I was alone.”

“I’m really, really, sorry about that. Did you look for them?”

“It’s been years since they’ve gone missing. I was just a child back then. I don’t remember what they look like anymore.”

“Really? How many years?”

“Around 15 years, I’m not even sure.”

“That’s such a long time. How old are you now?”

“I’m 21. You?”

“I just turned 18.”

The rain stopped.

“Should I take you home now?” asked Gerald.

Charlotte was quiet, thinking about this strange feeling of peace.

“I don’t know, when I think about it, I don’t really know if I ever want to get back there,” finally she answered.

“And why’s that?”

“It’s just... well, my father. He is forcing me to marry a man I’ve never met.”

“But they must be worried about you, for sure, you have been gone for an entire day.”

“You’re right. We should go.”

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They started walking towards Charlotte’s palace. It was a long way, but they had a lot of fun as they walked together, chatting, teasing each other. It’s been so long

since Charlotte felt so relaxed with somebody. She felt herself. Not a princess. Just Charlotte. He was so witty, intelligent, and funny. And, not to forget, good-looking. She enjoyed his company a lot.

Unfortunately, the fun was over far too soon for Charlotte.

Suddenly, three guards from the palace were in front of them. “My father must have sent them to look for me.” thought Charlotte.

They surrounded Gerald, tied his arms, and separated from Charlotte. She desperately tried to explain how he helped her and made sure she was safe, but they didn’t listen. They brought them both to King Leroy. The princess talked and talked. But she knew her father well enough to know it was all in vain. When he set his mind to something, that was it. And she was right. He didn’t want to hear about Gerald being just a nice man, not harming her. No. He sent the poor man away. The princess ended up being grounded as well, not allowed to leave her room.

All alone, she just couldn’t stop thinking about the man in the woods. And that feeling she got when she was with him.

Could it be possible to see him again? Who was he? If she had to marry, could she marry him? She knew that he would be totally against it. She had to marry a prince! It was a tradition she couldn’t break. But, oh, wouldn’t it be amazing? To have that feeling forever and ever... Maybe there’s a way... She decided to wait and try to persuade her father somehow. She’ll have to think of something, not just give up. She’s not a quitter. Especially when it comes to her own life. Father will have to understand. He wants her to be happy, after all.

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Days went by. She was still in her room. Waiting. She heard a knock on the door, not at the time usual for butlers to bring her the meal. And then the shock – they informed her that her father was found on the floor and taken to hospital. She immediately rushed to see him. Even though he was strict and stubborn, he was still her father and, being raised only by him, she loved him dearly. The king was lying on the bed with lots of wires connected to him. “Oh father, please. Get better as soon as possible. I can’t lose you! I’m not ready for any of this.” Charlotte sat there for hours sobbing her soul out and hoping her father would get better. Everything would be fine then.

After the visiting time was over, the princess, desperate, instead of going home, went to search for Gerald to tell him what had happened. Because he felt like home to her. Carefully walking to the place Gerald lived in, she felt nervous. Will it all be the same? Gerald and the feeling?

“Gerald? Hello? It’s me, Charlotte. I need to talk to you!” the princess called out for Gerald. After a few moments, Gerald appeared, rushing into the princess’s hug.

“Oh Charlotte, I thought I’d never see you again. What brings you here again?” happy and curious Gerald asked while holding the princess’s soft hands.

“My father, he is in hospital, and I don’t know when he’s coming back. The doctors said his pulse was so weak...”

“Oh dear, I’m very sorry to hear that.”

They sat there for hours and hours, talking about everything that came to their minds. They talked about her childhood, her dreams but also about his parents. She wanted him to try to look for them again, even after all these years, because, you never know. And family is the most precious thing you can ever have. Finally, Charlotte had to head home again, back to reality. That night the moon was full and bright. Charlotte loved such moments. Before she left, she took her bracelet off and gave it to Gerald as present. She wanted him to be reminded of her every time he looks at it. Somehow she knew everything would be all right.

“Miss, where have you been?” Charlottes butler asked quite seriously upon her return.

“Mr. Curtis, it’s none of your business.”

“Don’t you see that your father is not doing well, but you still leave like that and come back hours and hours later?”

“I said, It’s none of your business! Now leave me alone!”

The next morning, the hospital called. Nervously, Charlotte picks up with a wobbly voice. “Hello?”

“Hello ma’am. I’m calling from the hospital. Who am I talking to?”

Charlotte grasped that nurse’s voice had a grave tone. “This is Charlotte. King Leroy’s daughter.”

“Miss Charlotte, I’ll need you to sit down.”

Charlotte sat on her bed, expecting the worst. “Go on...”

“I’m calling to inform you that the doctors managed to get your father’s pulse back. He is not doing very good, though. Of course, we will try our best to make him feel better as soon as possible.” Charlotte felt such a relief after nurse’s words.

“Thank you, thank you so much. When can I come to visit him?” Charlotte asks.

“Of course. The visiting time is from 2PM to 4PM. Have a nice day, goodbye!”

“You too, bye!”

Charlotte ran to tell her butler, Mr. Curtis, and the driver took them to the hospital.



She saw her dad laying on the hospital bed, sleeping. She started talking to him quietly, so he wouldn't wake up, "Hello, father. I hope you will get home soon. I miss you." She sat on a chair next to his bed and took him by the hand. He opened his eyes. Different eyes. All the strictness that used to be there was gone. His eyes were now gentle, peaceful and full of love. And so were hers. "I'm sorry for making you insane the other day..." She sat there for a long time, talking to him and stroking his hand. It's been ages since they had talked like that, with love and understanding. She felt hopeful for their relationship to be just like it was when she was a child. She finally felt heard, loved and respected. He didn't mention the marriage or the prince. Charlotte couldn't wait for him to get better.

The next day the princess got a call from the hospital again. "Good evening, am I talking to miss Charlotte?"

"Yes, it's me."

"I'm calling about your father. He had a big seizure last night and we couldn't control it in any way. I'm sorry, miss."

"Well, is he alive?"

"I'm sorry."

Charlotte hung up and called for Mr. Curtis, screaming. He rushed to her room and, seeing her break down in tears, could already guess what had happened. He hugged her tight. There was not much more he could do.

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After the funeral, Charlotte was supposed to be crowned. She didn't feel ready but had no choice. She felt lost. She missed her father, she missed Gerald. One person who she could talk to, ask for advice. One person, apart from her father, she wanted to see. Charlotte put on warm clothes and went to see Gerald. When she got to his cottage in the middle of nowhere, she tried to open the door. It was locked. "Gerald! It's me, Charlotte! I got to talk to you!" she called for him. No answer. Looking over to the other side, she noticed an envelope nailed to the house. She opened it and started reading.

"Dear Charlotte,

*I'm sorry for not telling you about this, but I had to leave. I've decided to look for my parents, as we talked about. I hope your father is better. I wish you all the luck with your future husband, and I know you will be a great queen someday, silly. I also hope you will remember me because I will never forget you. I know we could never be together - you, the princess, and me, poor boy from the woods. But thank you for making me feel important again and brave enough to search for my parents. If I ever get back, you*

*will be the first one I come to visit. Remember that.*

*PS. I've left the house keys on the window. If you ever have a need to get some time alone, feel free to go inside the house.*

*Lots of love,*

*Yours, Gerald."*

Charlotte dropped the letter to the floor. Tears filled her eyes. Now she was completely alone. She unlocked the door and burst into tears. On the couch, she saw a teddy bear holding a heart saying, "I love you". She hugged it tight and cried for hours. The cottage didn't feel like home anymore. Nothing felt like home anymore.

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## A PASSING LOVE OR SOULMATES

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“I don’t feel like going to school today!” Tara told her friend on the phone, but she told her that their last year of elementary school was going to be the best one yet. Tara told her friend Sophia when and where they were going to meet but she had a feeling that this year would have a big impact on her. But, I don’t think this story can start like this. This story is about a girl, Tara, who is now in the second grade of high school, she has several friends whom she spent a lot of time with, but this story is actually about love or her confusion in love. Love is different for everyone. Some are happy in love, some are disappointed in love, but there are people like Tara who are confused about love. People often think that their love will look like from movies and series: “they lived happily ever after” but love stories from movies and series are unreal and classic, but also each of us will one day meet the person we will love and with whom we will experience wonderful moments and deep old age. Now that we have referred to the present, we can now go back to the beginning of how it all really started.

Summer break was over, summer passed too quickly and Tara started her last year of elementary school. Before she left for school, she was on the phone with her best friend Sophia. They went to school together and already on the way to school they had a feeling that everything would be different, and it was. The school had new pupils, everyone changed during the summer holidays, but Tara on the first day in front of the school looked for only one boy, Josh, very tall, curly hair and beautiful eyes. Tara and Josh are friends, but there was something different and special between the two of them. It was a new school year, new friendships were made, trips were taken, people were socialized and fun was had. Tara and her friends went out to the neighborhood almost every day after school. The first time Tara felt any different connection with Josh was when she was out with her five friends in the neighborhood and one of her friends, Anne, was dating a boy from a different class and they were supposed to meet on the school playground. Tara is the casual-dress type, she didn’t dress up much, but that day she dressed differently than usual, jeans and a plain shirt nothing special but again different. Tara and her friends went to the

school playground where they saw the boys playing basketball, and of all the girls, Tara spent the most time with the boys and they were very good friends. Tara and her friends went to them, they greeted each other and they kept hanging out. The boys wanted Tara to play basketball with them, which she said: „Sure, why not.” and Tara just started throwing the ball. Every time she threw, she hit the basket and Josh threw a comment at her: “Wow, look at her playing”, before Tara could answer him, Anne told him: “Well, Tara is practicing basketball.”, to which Josh was impressed and smiled at Tara. At that moment, she had a special feeling. She didn’t know how she felt about him because she didn’t know if it was real feelings or something she had made up. The school year was slowly coming to an end, and on the last day of school Tara and her friends celebrated the end of elementary school together, but at one point a fight broke out in which Josh defended their friend and Tara guarded her friends. After a whole turbulent day, Tara and Sofia went to the school playground together to wait for Anne and the other friends to sleep over at Anne’s and while they were waiting Sophia got a message from Josh: “hey can I come over to hang out”, they told him he could come. A few minutes passed and he came, Tara didn’t think he was really coming but when she saw him she was very happy to see him. The three of them sat, talked about the whole day, had fun and enjoyed themselves. The girls went to Anna where they talked about everything and one girl asked Tara: “Tara, who do you like, you never tell us about it.”, she didn’t want to say and just went to sleep. Then came the summer break , which for Tara were confusing, beautiful and fun, but also the last summer break for the entire middle school friend group because they start high school in September. When the summer holidays started, Tara and her friends would go out every day and spend time every day on the school playground and hang out with the boys. Tara and Josh became good friends because they talked, had fun and hang out during the summer holidays .Tara didn’t know what she was thinking or how she felt about Joshua because she thought they were just friends and she didn’t understand why she felt that way, but some events had affected how she felt. Once when Tara and her friends were out, they saw Josh with a friend, but the girls noticed that Josh was sad, so they went to the two of them to talk to them and cheer Josh up. Tara mostly talked to him, made him laugh and comforted him, but then it started raining and Tara’s mom called her to go home and Josh said, “Here you go I’ll give you my hoodie so you don’t get cold and wet”, but Tara told him: “Thank you but I don’t needed.”, but she was wondering why out of all the girls he wanted to give her his hoodie. The following happened the second time. Tara and Sophia were sitting on a bench in the school playground, Sophia tried to comfort Tara because she was

sad and out of nowhere their friends and Josh came with them. Josh sat down next to Tara and noticed that she was sad, so he asked her: “Tara, what’s wrong, why are you sad?”, to which she told him: “It’s nothing, you don’t need to worry” while restraining herself from crying.

He remained seated next to her while the other boys sat opposite them next to Sophie. They talked, they laughed, but Tara wasn’t up to a laugh then. Josh was worried about what had happened but he didn’t want to force her to say it. He stayed by her side, talked to him, tried to make her laugh and he succeeded. He made her happy and Tara looked at him while he had a big smile on his face and a special glow in his eyes because he knew he made her happy. So they sat together and talked and had fun but at one point Josh put his hand over Tara’s shoulder and sat like that until the boys went to play basketball and when they left Josh looked at Tara smiled at her and said, “I’ll see you later and just keep smiling”. When Tara heard that she couldn’t get the smile off her face. From that moment on, something changed between Josh and Tara. Every day they talked outside and every time he would make her laugh, they would have eye contact and every time they saw each other they would have a big smile on their faces. At the end of July, Josh started teasing Tara, but not in a rude way, but a bit like a flirty way, he would tease her about her height, how long she can stay outside and so on, but Tara didn’t mind, it was actually very cute. Tara and Sophia commented that Josh is happy when they come to the school playground, and Tara kept saying: “He keeps looking at you, why would he look at me when you’re prettier than me?”, Sophia told Tara not to think like that about herself, but Tara’s insecurity was stronger. Time passed too quickly and so the end of the summer holidays and the beginning of high school came. Everyone enrolled in the school they wanted and already on the first day Josh and Tara heard from each other and asked how their day went. There wasn’t a day that went by that they didn’t write to each other on social media, and as time went on, Tara realized why she was starting to like him, and she realized that she was in love with him. He’s the most special guy in the world to her, always there for her, making her laugh, being honest with her and not wanting to see her sad. After Tara realized that, not a day went by that she didn’t think of him, but something changed. Tara and Josh stopped talking, they lost contact, which hurt Tara a lot because she thought she ruined their friendship, but after a while she found out that Josh had a girlfriend and that was the reason why they stopped talking. Days and months passed, Tara still thought about Josh, even though she knew that the feeling of being in love would pass and after a while it passed. She was hanging out with her best friends, Sophia, Katie, Camila and Amber, having

fun, enjoying herself, and being happy even though she had a lot of problems on her mind. After completing her first year of high school, Tara enjoyed her summer vacations. One day she was on a call with her friend Amber when she got an unexpected message. After eight months without any communication, Tara got the message from Josh that says: “Hey Tara, how are you, we haven’t heard from each other for a long time.”, Tara was a little shocked but also very happy. They continued talking for the next two hours and then went to sleep. The two started talking again every day via social media. Feelings for Josh reawakened in Tara. When she realized that she had fallen in love with Josh again, she talked to her best friends and told them: “Girls, I can’t describe what I feel for him, that boy made me laugh, talked to me, was there for me and simply in my in his eyes he is perfect and nothing will change that. I fell in love with his beautiful eyes and smile and the way he is, and he was the best to me, honest, kind and good, and simply that special feeling I have when I’m next to him is indescribable and wonderful.”, her friends told her they just answered: “We are here for you and we know how you feel because we see it ourselves.”. Tara thinks every day how different she and Josh are but somehow the same, but again because of Tara’s insecurities she also thinks she will never like Josh the way she likes him. She found out from her and Josh’s mutual friends that Josh was in love with Tara but was too afraid to tell her he was in love with her because he thought it would ruin the friendship between them so he moved on and got involved with another girl. When Tara found out, she couldn’t believe what she was hearing, but she hoped it was true. As they talked on social media, Tara couldn’t get out of her head what her friends were saying and every message he sent her she was very happy and had the biggest smile on her face that he had ever seen and had the same smile and the same sparkle in her eyes as when they first met. They saw each other a couple of times in the neighborhood and each time they would have a smile on their face when they saw each other. They still have the same friends, but various dramas happened in society that showed Tara and Josh who are their real friends and who are not.

Will Tara summon the courage to tell Josh that she’s in love with him, will she like someone else, will life bring them back together, or are they simply soul mates? I can tell you a lesson from this story. No matter how old we are, young or old, each of us deserves to have someone special by our side who makes us feel like we’re in seventh heaven. When someone hurts you the most out of love don’t give up because love will always be there it won’t go away and we will never be loved. Tara is very confused in this story, which is normal because she’s a teenager, but it’s going to become clearer to her as well. Love is hard to describe, so I’ll tell you what it is for me. Love is sim-

ply love, the most special and beautiful feeling in the world. Love is for everyone, age doesn't matter, because when you're young, you have your first love, and when you grow up, you have true and sincere love. There are different kinds of love, friendship, family and love. I don't even know what to say anymore but each of us understands love in our own way and no one can influence everyone else's opinion and no one can influence who we like or who we don't like because we're all special in our own way and each of us loves someone in our own way. As I wrote at the beginning, each of us has a different view of love, "butterflies in the stomach", and love, which is normal, someone will be very happy, someone will be disappointed and someone will be confused, because when we're in love, all we think about is that special person. Young people very often think that their first love will be their love for the rest of their lives as it is in the movies, but they are not aware that when they feel their first true love that it is possible that this love will be their "happily ever after".

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## A SNOWY ROAD

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There was a little girl named Anna. Her journey to school was extremely difficult, especially in winter. The path Anna was walking on was clogged with deep snow. She was a tiny little girl and it was very difficult to walk that way and even more difficult with a heavy bag. There were two paths to the school. The first was longer but safer and Anna used it to go to school, while the second was shorter and steeper. There were times when Anna wanted to take a shorter route because it was too much for her to carry a heavy bag every day. The road was always covered with snow because there was no point in shoveling snow every day since it would snow again. Anna was quiet, smart, nice and a really humble girl. She was one of the best students in the third grade. Everything was fine until last day of school in the first term.

Anna was walking home and was very excited because she got an A in math and wanted to show it to her parents, so she decided to take the steeper path. She was very excited so she didn't even think how dangerous that path could be. Halfway through, she was a bit suspicious as to why there was nothing steep and it was called "the steep path", but that didn't stop her. She started running home. After a few steps, huge pieces of stone slipped under Anna's feet, and when she wanted to stop, there were so many stones under her feet that she fell, but she fell into a huge hole, injured her leg and got a few scratches on her arm. She started crying because she thought no one would find her. She shouted, but no one could hear her because no one was passing by. Hours passed and Anna was freezing more and more. At that moment, she heard a dog and immediately started shouting. Days passed and Anna's parents were very worried. Every day Anna's father Nickolas got up early in the morning and looked for Anna until dark. Anna's parents called every single neighbor, the police, but there was no sign of Anna. Her parents lost hope and thought that their daughter was buried somewhere in an avalanche because it snowed the most at that time of the year. In the meantime, Anna was completely frozen. She had some food left from school and took a little bread each day. She knew that it didn't give her much strength, but it gave her hope that her parents were still looking for her. Anna tried many times to get out of that big hole, but since she had broken her leg, she couldn't



support herself much. The day before Christmas, on Christmas Eve, Anna was completely weak, but she tried to get out somehow. She took her jacket, which was too long for her, and filled her bag with as many rocks as she could. She tried to throw the bag onto the steep path as much as possible, but the bag kept falling. She decided to empty the bag so that she could easily throw it, and she threw as many large stones as possible onto the path. Then she took the strap from the bag and tossed the bag around until the strap wrapped around a solid stone. She lost all hope and tried one more time. She was all miserable and about to give up until she saw that the strap had finally wrapped around the stone. That gave her back hope, but she didn't want to be too happy because she didn't know if she would be able to climb up and if the bag would support her weight. It was already getting dark, so Anna reacted quickly. She prayed and then tried to see if she was strong enough to climb. She started climbing up the jacket bit by bit until she finally managed to get out. Anna was overjoyed and took her jacket and bag and headed home. Even though she was already too cold, she decided not to risk it, so she turned to the other side of the steep road and took a longer, but safer route.

Anna was exhausted, tired and hungry, but she saw the light in the house and quickly ran towards it. She opened the door where she saw her mother Lucia crying and her father Nickolas consoling her. It took them a few seconds to notice that someone had opened the door. When they saw Anna, her parents immediately jumped up and went to hug her. Mother took Anna's hands and felt how frozen she was. After a couple of hours, Anna finally warmed up and, with a full stomach, told her parents everything about what had happened and how she had still managed to get out. In the end, everything ended well, and Anna spent Christmas with her family and decided not to go down that road again.

After twenty years a lot changed. Anna had been working for a large modeling company for two years, and before that she had various jobs, but now did not intend to change her job. She had two children. Her six-year-old girl named Ella and eight-year-old Ethan. Her husband was working in another country as a tour guide, but usually came home for holidays and at weekends. Anna lived in the same street as she did twenty years ago, only she and her husband had built another house. When Anna was away and could not look after the children, her mother took care of them when they were not at school. Anna always told the children to take the longer path and not the shorter one so that they wouldn't fall into a huge hole. The hole had become bigger over time due to frequent landslides. The children were obedient and didn't think about that hole that often. They went to the same school as their mother.

One day Anna had to work late in the office and finish some papers, but her mother Lucia could not look after the children because she and her husband Nicholas had gone on a trip. That winter, the children had to go to school alone, otherwise they would always be accompanied by their grandfather, grandmother or mother. Winter turned into summer, there was no snow, and the children were sad that it was gone and that the snow was replaced by the sun. They were very hard-working and had excellent grades, just like their mother. When school ended, the children went home. In front of them there was a path that they saw every day, but also the path that was forbidden to them. The children did not understand why their mother told them not to take the shorter route because they did not listen to her and thought that nothing could be dangerous. Ella and Ethan played rock, paper, scissors to see which way each of them should take and who would get home faster. Ella won and she decided to take the longer route, so Ethan was left with the shorter one. Ethan was very happy because he wanted to get home before his sister. They counted down and at three they started running each on their own way. After a while, Ella got very tired because it was hot outside, while Ethan had the shorter and straight path and flew like an arrow, but not for long. Ethan didn't even see that he was already in a big and deep hole. He fell so hard that he couldn't even get up. Evening was falling and the light could hardly be seen. Ella had already come home a long time ago and it was strange to her why Ethan was gone for so long and he took the shorter route. Ella decided to wait for her mother, so if Ethan didn't show up by then, she would go and look for him. It was already eleven o'clock and Ella's mother returned home. Anna knew something was wrong because the light was left on, and the children usually went to sleep at nine o'clock. Anna quickly ran into the house and saw that no one was there, searched the whole house and became very worried. First, she asked the neighbors if they had seen them, but no one had. Then the idea occurred to her that maybe they had fallen into that huge hole. She returned to the house, took the lamp and decided to take the shorter route. When she arrived, she saw Ella talking to someone from the hole. Anna ran up and investigated the hole. It was Ethan. No matter how angry and worried Anna was, it was easier for her because she knew that her children were alive and well. First, she took Ella home with her and told her to bring as many blankets as possible, while Anna was looking for a long rope. They returned to the hole again, and Anna lowered the rope so that Ethan could climb up, but he could not even move. Anna already started to worry a lot, but the only possibility was a ladder. Anna put the ladder in the depth of the hole. Then she went down the ladder and took Ethan in her arms. It was more difficult than expected because the ladder kept

moving. When they finally got out, Anna wrapped Ethan with warm blankets and then they headed home. Later, Ethan warmed up and explained that he didn't listen when his mother told him not to take the shortcut. Of course, Anna forgave him, but Ethan had to go to hospital immediately. Doctors said that one of his ribs was broken and that he broke his leg and sprained his finger, but he was lucky because it could have been much worse.

Unfortunately, he had to spend his holidays resting just when the snow started to fall after waiting for it for so long, but the most important thing for him was to spend Christmas with his family. Ethan wasn't so disappointed that he couldn't play in the snow, he was disappointed that his father wouldn't be able to spend Christmas with them this year. Planes were no longer flying and everything had been canceled due to a heavy snowstorm. It was Christmas Eve, and everyone was decorating Christmas trees, laughing, singing and making cookies. The children prepared cookies and milk for Santa and then quickly went to sleep because they couldn't wait for tomorrow. It was the happiest day for everyone, especially the children. The children finally saw Christmas and got up at 7 in the morning and ran to the living room. The Christmas tree was shining with colorful lights and balls. The children were surprised how many presents were under the tree because there had never been so many. They were overjoyed, and of course they had to wake up their mom. Later, they called their grandparents to join them for breakfast and opening the Christmas presents. The grandparents entered first, then the children wondered why they weren't closing the door and saw that there was another person behind the door. They were curious because they didn't remember calling anyone else to join them that morning. At that moment, the stars aligned. It was their father. The children quickly ran into his arms and were very surprised. Father Christopher somehow managed to get the flight tickets because the snowstorm managed to bypass them. Everything turned into a great Christmas miracle and a Christmas to remember. Over time, the huge hole on the short road was finally covered and buried so that no more incidents would occur. Later, many people used the shorter path when it was buried, but the stories were passed down through generations. The children had the best and most memorable Christmas and were glad to spend it with the people they loved.

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## A WARRIOR WITH A WRITER'S HEART

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Long before time had a name, there was a great war in Asia. The warriors were mercilessly killing everyone they came across. One of the most powerful and leading nations was ancient Japan. They were born warriors, and they were hungry for blood and eager for glory and power. A lot of people didn't like the war, especially Lee Shan. Lee Shan was a young man who lived in a nameless village in the mountains of ancient Japan. His father was a general and the Emperor's right-hand man. His mother, on the other hand, was a well-known writer. He had not been interested in the war since his childhood, but wanted to be a writer just like his mother. He was very attached to her, but when he was 10 years old, his mother died of an unknown disease. Her death affected him so much that he gave up his dream of becoming a writer and began training with his father to stop thinking about his mother's death. Because of his father's status, Lee Shan had access to the best training and the best weapons. At the age of eighteen, Lee Shan was a better swordsman than most of the Emperor's army. Even though he was young, he was also one of the wisest in the whole land of Japan. He was tall for his age and had long black hair tied in a ponytail. It was a traditional haircut of Japanese warriors.

As time went on, Japan was getting more and more defeats. Akuma, the emperor of ancient Japan, not knowing what to do with these defeats, decided to do the worst. He decided to make a deal with the dark forces. Akuma's wizard found a book in which a spell was written that could give them dark powers. But of course, there was a price to pay. They needed a victim who had cursed blood. Upon reading this, the wizard immediately knew who they needed. They needed a member of the Shan clan, which had defended Japan from all kinds of monsters and creatures many years ago. The legend says that their bloodline carried a strong curse which gave them extraordinary abilities, but also brought great misfortune. Akuma saw this curse as a means of acquiring rule and power, so one day he called out his right hand. In order to offer a sacrifice to the dark forces, a ritual was required. But there was one catch. For Akuma to get the powers, he had to wait for two months. When Lee's father entered the main hall of the palace where he was summoned by Akuma, he was

ambushed by three guards. At that moment, Lee was returning from bathing in hot springs. Hearing the sound of the drums from the ritual, he ran to the palace. When he entered the main hall of the palace, he heard some things about the cursed clan, the Shan clan and about their great power. Then Akuma's wizard killed Lee's father before his eyes, ending the ritual. Seeing this, rage overtook Lee. Everyone looked amazed. There was a cloak of dark energy around him. It was the dark power of the cursed clan. His rage grew, fueling the desire for blood and killing. Several guards attacked him, but he just pulled out his sword and started mercilessly killing the guards. Akuma, shocked by Lee's great power, sent even more guards with the intention of killing Lee. Those guards were nothing for Lee. He just kept killing. The dark energy was taking over his body. Luckily, Somul, his father's friend, came running. He punched Lee in the neck, which brought him back to consciousness. Lee, not knowing what had happened, began to feel weak. "You must escape, it is no longer safe for you here," Somul told Lee. With his weak body, tears in his eyes and a sword in his hand Lee ran out of the palace. He ran to the barn where he took his horse. His horse was as swift as thunder and as agile as the wind. With his horse he fled from his village and from the mountain.

While fleeing, Lee was reflecting on everything that had happened, and developed tremendous hatred for Akuma. He decided to take revenge on him and liberate the country from the dark force. After a few days of running away, he realized that the guards were no longer following him. With this knowledge, he decided to make a camp where he and his horse would rest. In the evening, he started a fire and spent that night thinking about his next move. He devised a whole plan in which he would gather an army to defeat Akuma and free his country from the dark forces. In the first part of his plan he had to go to the village of Samanokai. It was one of Japan's largest ports. He arrived in the village after six days. He had to take a longer path that led through the woods so as not to attract attention. Arriving in the village, he headed to the house of his acquaintance, the fisherman Shen. He came at about dinner time. It was safer for him to enter the village when there were fewer people. Akuma had already spread the word about Lee being a criminal all over the country. After reaching Shen's house, he knocked on his door. Shen opened the door but didn't recognize Lee because of his hood. After Lee took off his hood, Shen let him into the house. "I knew there was something wrong with these rumors," Shen said after Lee told him what had happened at the palace. They talked for a while during dinner. "I have to go to the city of Ryu on the Island of Hineaom. I plan to talk to the Emperor of their nation," Lee said. Shen told him it would be difficult because he was a want-

ed criminal. After a while, Lee got the idea. He would hide in Shen's fishing nets, so Shen could take him there while fishing. Shen was initially dissatisfied with the idea, but later agreed. Next morning, they did everything as planned. After the ship left the port, Lee was finally able to get out of those nets. It took about an hour and a half to get to the island. Then, Shen left Lee on the island and continued his way.

Now young Lee had to go to the city of Ryu, the capital of the Island of Hineaom to seek help from their emperor in a new war. One good thing was that Lee was on good terms with the Emperor of the Island of Hineaom. The problem for Lee would be to get to the city of Ryu. The coasts of Hineaom were sandy and very easy to walk through, while the interior of the island was a large jungle. The city of Ryu was a city in the very center of the island and was protected by nature. Lee went under the nearest tree and began to think. "Judging by the size of the island and the location of the city, it will take around seven to eight hours of walking to get to the city," Lee told himself. Then Lee got up and at a slow pace headed towards the interior of the island. After two hours Lee stopped to rest because he felt thirsty. He felt weak and fell asleep under a tree. After a while Lee woke up in a cage that was in a carriage. His mouth was covered and the cage was covered with a big piece of cloth. Waiting for a while, Lee felt the carriage slowing down. They entered the city of Ryu. Lee was still in the cage. Many voices could be heard around him, but one stood out. It was a familiar voice to him. Right at that moment, someone removed the cloth from the cage. Seeing the light of day, Lee first noticed his acquaintance, Daisuke, the Emperor of the Island of Hineaom, in the flesh and bone. Daisuke was surprised to see Lee and ordered that Lee be released from the cage. "Well, look at that, I expected a lot of things, but not you, Lee Shan. What brings you here?" Daisuke told Lee. Lee bowed before the Emperor. "I came to ask you a favor," Lee said. Daisuke told Lee to stand up because he didn't have to bow before a friend and invited him to his palace. As soon as they entered the palace, Daisuke ordered his servants to offer Lee hospitality as if he were at home. They sat down at the table where the servants brought them the best wine from the island. As soon as the servants left the room, Daisuke became serious: "I know why you're here. I know about everything that has happened. The news of you as a criminal has spread fast. The son who killed his father, the Emperor's right hand. Of course, I realized that wasn't true. I want to hear from you what happened."

And so it was. Lee told Daisuke everything that had happened. He also told Daisuke about his plan and his revenge. Daisuke accepted Lee's request without much thought. They agreed on where and when they would meet with the army. It con-

sisted of the most powerful warriors of the Island of Hineaom. Since the city they were to attack was on the mountain, they planned to come through the old mines on the other side of the mountain. The trip would start in three weeks. It was necessary to prepare everything. They needed to fill the ships they were going to leave the island with. They also needed a certain amount of weapons with which to arm the entire army. Lee spent those three weeks training his skills in using the sword. Soon those three weeks passed like three days, the army gathered and a large number of equipped ships headed for their destination. Their hearts were filled with a sense of duty and a desire to protect the innocent. That feeling gave them strength. Finally, after weeks of traveling, they came to the old mines. The soldiers bravely entered the mines under the leadership of Lee Shan. He knew the way through these mines because he had visited them several times with his father. After leaving the mine, they were located near the city. As planned, they came at night to avoid unwanted attention. Since it was late, there weren't too many guards. And so they headed for the palace. They ambushed the guards who were in their way and moved on. Sneaking through the shadows, Lee Shan and his group headed for the palace, being careful not to attract the attention of the guards. Inside the palace, they faced many obstacles and deadly traps. By combining their skills and determination, they overcame every challenge, approaching their ultimate goal. The closer they were to the main hall, the stronger the presence of the dark magic was to be felt. A ritual began by which Akuma was finally able to obtain the dark powers. The presence of the dark forces was increasing in the air. With the last burst of their strength and courage, Lee Shan and his group stormed the main hall, breaking the ritual. Akuma, who was furious with Lee Shan's incursion, threw dark spells that he had been given through the ritual. These powers were not complete, but they were still strong. Lee and his group bravely retaliated against Akuma and his army. Right at the beginning of the fight Lee went after Akuma. Lee began to feel anger again. It unleashed the power of the cursed clan and caused the clash between the dark power obtained unjustly and the dark power that was natural. In addition to the dark powers, Akuma also attacked Lee emotionally. "Lee, do you know the reason for your mother's death? I'm sure you don't. Your mother was the love of my life, but when she chose your father over me, I had to find a way to get revenge. My wizard threw a curse on her, giving her an unknown disease," Akuma told Lee. After he uttered those words, Lee went mad. The dark magic was taking over his body. That was when Akuma saw an opportunity to finish off Lee.

The moment Akuma wanted to kill Lee, a powerful light appeared that filled the entire room. A mysterious figure appeared that shone with a powerful aura. It was the spirit of Lee Shan's mother, who had been watching over him all the time. Seeing his mother's figure, Lee removed the dark energy that had been taking over his body. With her guidance, Lee began to feel the power of light magic. Using the power of light, Lee found his true potential. At that moment, Lee remembered his mother's words. He remembered his promise to protect those who could not protect themselves. With his new power, Lee defeated the Emperor and removed the curse of the Shan clan. Peace in Japan was restored. Soon the great wars ended in Asia as well. After that, Lee Shan decided to protect the innocent with his powers, as well as those who could not protect themselves. After almost ten years, Lee finally devoted himself to his dream of becoming a writer just like his mother. At the end of all those adventures, Lee finally found his inner peace. He wrote down his adventure in a book which became famous throughout Japan. And so the legend of Lee Shan, the warrior with a writer's heart spread not only through the country of Japan, but throughout Asia. That legend motivated next generations to choose the path their hearts desired.



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## AFTER WE PASS AWAY

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Her thoughts wandered again to the old wooden clock her grandmother kept in the living room. As long as she can remember it has always been there with different figures decorating it.

A ballerina in her pink costume, a serious politician looking at her, a clown whose smile was stolen a long time ago, and a curious redheaded librarian smiling at a tailless dog. Ellie wondered if they were inspired by real people or if they were just a product of someone's imagination. She hoped the latter for she believed that no clown should lose his smile and no ballerina should be loved by someone as serious as a heartless politician. Such beauty deserved someone equally as beautiful. She hoped that the dancer knew that too and denied his political love.

The more she thought about the characters the more questions came to her mind that she wanted to ask them, but knew she never could. It made her sad, knowing that not everything, living or not, could talk and tell its' story. It seemed unfair to her. Humans were given the ability to speak and communicate, but are using it in vain as her mother says. Ellie doesn't know if she should believe that cause it makes no sense. Why would people use their voice in vain when there are so many amazing things they could use it for like telling their stories, lowering the time parents spend on work away from their kids, or giving grandparents more money so they could go treat all their illnesses and be able to do what they love again?

When she grows up, she will make sure that everything she says and does is worth something and will help someone's loved ones. Her mother often tells her that it's very hard for someone as ordinary as her to accomplish such great things and that her being a girl doesn't help her one thing in that. But she wasn't discouraged, only more motivated.

„It's time for dinner! Go wash your hands and come help set the table!“ Her grandmother's voice snapped her out of her thoughts bringing her back to reality.

„Right away, grannie!“ Ellie yelled back hoping she heard her, but wasted no time waiting for her answer and instead rushed to her feet and hurriedly went to the bathroom to do as her grandmother asked her.

After she washed her hands in her favorite soap that smelled like lavender she went to the kitchen and asked her mother to hand her the plates from the top shelf she could not yet reach. They were the nicest ones her grandparents owned with a wavy blue line decorating the edges and purple lilacs all over it. Ellie placed one in front of each chair and neatly placed a napkin beside each. When she was done her mother was already handing her the cutlery for her to set and she gladly complied, fast, but careful in her work. Soon afterward everyone sat at the table grabbing food and passing it around the table for everyone to take.

Around eight o'clock everyone was done with eating, leaving the table in a mess that her mother and grandfather quickly started clearing while her grandma got up to take her medicine. Ellie didn't feel like staying there any longer waiting for them to finish so she decided to start getting ready for bed. She brushed her teeth exactly like her dentist told her to: carefully and for five long minutes. By the time her mother was done in the dining room, she had already changed into her pajamas and laid in bed waiting for her usual bedtime story and kiss goodnight. Soon enough she got that too. A story about Beauty and the Beast lulling her to sleep.

At around three o'clock Ellie woke up thirsty and got up to get some water. She slowly made her way to the kitchen, feet cold on the hardwood floor. When she turned the corner to the kitchen her eyes were half closed due to the sleepiness, but she still managed to see a silhouette glowing in a light blue light. Ellie thought that she might still be dreaming and decided to follow the figure to see what it was up to. It was walking slowly toward the girl's grandparents' old wooden clock. When it reached it, it turned around in Ellie's direction, looking over her head. Getting a better look at it in this position she realized that it looked like a middle-aged male dressed in a neat suit, but that is not what caught her attention and made her question the entire situation. It was the fact that the figure in front of her looked exactly like someone she knew very well, someone she loved even more: her father. Her entire body froze. She didn't understand what was happening. Why was her father here, half visible and glowing? And then he spoke, looking back at the clock: „ Please, let me stay here a little while longer. I have a daughter who still needs me. She's so little, you know that. How will my wife explain this to her? Please, she needs her father.“

His voice broke halfway through, he couldn't keep the tears from falling down his cheeks. It was evident he didn't want to leave, but leave where and why is he saying that to a clock like it can understand a word he is saying? But then she heard a whoosh as the same light blue stream of something that looked like magic exited the clock's bonnet. Five other silhouettes appeared around her father. A ballerina, a

politician, a librarian, a tailless dog, and a frowning clown. Ellie couldn't believe her eyes. All of those characters she knew to spend hours fantasizing about were standing right there, talking and acting like normal people even though they weren't. They couldn't be. The more she watched the less she was sure of that, but couldn't gather the courage to approach them and ask them what was happening.

After spending ten more minutes talking, all the figures turned to the clock and started walking towards it, disappearing inside of it. Her father included. Seeing that, Ellie wasn't able to stop herself from running towards it too, entering right after him. For a moment the rest of the world disappeared leaving her in darkness which quickly turned into a beautiful garden filled with flowers and trees of all kinds. Its beauty took her agape. It seemed so unreal, but she knew it wasn't a dream. Turning around she noticed the figures which were only moments ago standing in her grandparent's living room staring right at her, fear and hurt on their faces.

„Ellie, what are you doing here? How did you get in?“ Her father asked her not knowing what else to do.

„I came through the clock, like the rest of you. What is going on here anyway? Why do you look like this, dad?“

„Sweetheart, if I could only explain it all to you, but I can't.“ His voice broke again. His lips started trembling while looking at his daughter, tears gathering in his eyes threatening to come out. For a second he thought he couldn't do this. Look at his daughter and tell her the whole truth. He would break her little heart forever, but what choice did he have? She would find out soon enough anyway, the truth he and the rest of the family kept hidden from her for so many months, praying that the day she would learn the truth would never have to come. They were wrong. Right now he didn't have a choice, he couldn't look at her face and lie to her anymore. Ellie deserved to know, even if it would break her and twist her reality upside down.

„So why don't you tell me? You all look at me like I broke the entire world for you, but all I'm trying to do is understand what is going on here! Please tell me.“

Hearing that her father looked back at the rest of the figures as if asking for their permission to proceed. All of them nodded their heads slightly, faces covered in sadness. He then walked towards her and knelt down, holding her hands in his own. His eyes teared up again and he took time to calm himself and gather his thoughts, still not sure how to explain to his little girl what happened to him. But he knew he had to. Before, he could lie to her and keep her happy for the little time they had left before her mother would have to tell her everything. Oliver knew it was terrible to put all that responsibility on his wife, but after everything that happened, he couldn't be

the one to break his daughter's heart. His wife understood that and she never blamed him for it, but if he'll ever get her forgiveness for not fighting anymore is another story he'd rather not think about. Maybe one day Ellie will understand as well, for now, she needed to know the truth. It's the least he could do for her at the end.

And that's exactly what he did. At first, he didn't know where to start, but in the end, he decided to start with the first signs of his end. How he thought nothing of them at first and how he believed it was just sciatica. He told her about his doctor sending him to many tests he refused to get. About scans that told the story, he could never bring himself to believe even though deep down he knew it to be true. About the internal fight he had with himself trying to deal with it and the pain it brought him. It was still hard for Oliver to talk about it all, especially to his seven year old daughter, but what truly got to him was trying to explain to her why he didn't fight. Trying to explain to her that his love for her had nothing to do with that, that it wasn't her fault and it never will be. He didn't know how to tell her that despite all of his pain he loved her more than anything, but he didn't have the power to fight anymore. He didn't want to get into too many details, but seeing his daughter's face covered in tears as realization hit her the more he was talking had words flowing out of him. They were more apologize than an explanation, but it didn't matter. Neither of them minded. Ellie needed closure and he needed her to know that he loved her no matter what.

After he finished they were both crying uncontrollably trying to get to breath. Pain and grief ran through both their veins stronger than ever. When she calmed down a little bit she didn't want to talk about her father anymore because it would be too hard for her, but she did wonder about the other figures. Have they all suffered the same fate as her dad? What if they were all dead too?

Sadly they were. Benjamin, the serious politician took it upon himself to explain to her where they were right now and why they looked like they do. He tried to simplify it as much as possible, but still left enough details so she wouldn't have any questions afterward.

„Dear Ellie, there are so many things you don't yet know, but I'll try to explain everything as best as I can. A long time ago, when the world hadn't become what you know it now, people looked for a way to stay with their loved ones forever. Most of them failed, Ellie, except for one. Our ancestor. He stumbled upon a magical tree which he turned into the clock we are standing in right now. It allowed us to stay with the people we love even in death. Our family can also remember us longer because after we enter the clock, our souls go inside while our bodies turn into wooden figures you see when you look towards it.“

„This form I see you in, it's just your souls, then?“

„Indeed.“ Benjamin smiled at the girl, sighed, and hardened his face.

„You must go now, Ellie. This is not your home just yet.“

Ellie looked at him confused. Did he expect her to leave without her dad? That didn't seem right to her. He was her father in the end. She hoped he knew he couldn't leave her, but something deep inside told her he didn't have a choice. It confused her. Before tonight she never faced death and now that she did, it seemed unfair. Some sickness had decided to take her father away from her and she was expected to just move on? She didn't know if she could do it. Faced with uncertainty, she looked at her dad for answers but saw only what she already knew. She had no vote in this.

Looking at her father her eyes teared up again. He did too. Knowing she wouldn't be able to leave on her own he once again kneeled in front of her.

„When I get up now you will say goodbye and turn around. Once you do, you will never look back. You will walk out of here and not regret a single thing we did together because you know that they are amazing and worth saving. Don't spoil what was good with grief, it won't help.“

With that, he left her side and went to stand with the other figures. Although the tears were streaming down her face and the pain was ripping her heart apart she still did as he told her to.

Soon enough, she was back in her grandparents' living room, the darkness surrounding her. Ellie slowly walked back to her room and laid in her bed. It still felt like her heart was clenching from all the pain, but eventually calmed down, allowing her to fall asleep.

The next morning her mother told her the same thing she already heard earlier that day. Not wanting to cause her mom any more pain or worry, Ellie pretended like she never heard it before. Tears came naturally to her and so did the pain of knowing she would never see her dad again.

The week after his death became a blur to her. All those people giving condolences and talking about him were a far-off memory now. She hardly remembered making funeral arrangements with her mom. Something so important and yet she couldn't recall a piece of it. The day of the funeral came fast and she thanked whatever god there is that she still remembers it. It would have been a shame if she didn't.

In the years following her dad's death, she will go back to all the memories she has of him and hold onto them, hoping there won't be a day when she can't. She will also find video recordings with his voice in the background and hold onto them even harder because there would be no greater pain than forgetting her dad's voice. At

some point, she will start thinking about him critically and judge some of his actions. When she starts to do that it will take her time to understand that what she is doing is normal and okay and she shouldn't feel like she is ruining his memory. One day she might get to the point where she can forgive him, but for now, she will remember all the good and will cherish the little time she had with him. And he will always be someone she is happy to say was part of her life. He taught her some valuable lessons and made her who she is today. For that, Ellie will always be grateful to him.

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## BLOOMS OF SUSPICION

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People say the shiver down your spine means that someone's walking over your future burial site. As my husband walks around our backyard, the shivers won't stop.

I watch Alan diligently weeding the garden from the kitchen window, the cold lump of dread still sitting in my stomach. His hands are pulling the unwanted plants from the ground in quick, swift motions clearing out the patchwork of vibrant colors and lush greenery from the undesirable. Broad-brimmed straw hat casting a shadow over his face, shielding his deep green eyes from the soft morning sun that is quietly spilling over checkered tiles next to me.

I shake off the feeling of ghostly arms crawling around my neck and head upstairs. It's already past 9 in the morning and I should get to work.

Creaky wooden stairs are ripping apart the silence of the house as I make my way to the attic, my workspace. The room is still asleep when I turn the light on. Tubes of acrylic paint silently sitting in the corner. Blank canvases leaning onto each other, a pile of untold stories. Dozens of brushes still thrown across the floor the way I left them last night. This old attic is my safe place, my sanctuary. No matter what is going on in the outside world it all goes away once I step here. I am emerged into harmonious symphony of color hues and brush strokes, blind to everything else.

I sit at the table beside the door and pick up my sketchbook. A mausoleum of my unfiltered thoughts, my potential masterpieces, my biggest mistakes, my fleeting thoughts preserved in graphite for eternity. Rough brown leather cover opens to unveil pages upon pages of scribbled mess. I flip through until the blank page stares back at me, take a pencil in my hand and then...nothing. Nothing. For some reason my head is completely empty and something about this attic, my usual refuge, feels off, almost threatening.

The more I try to pinpoint what exactly isn't like it's supposed to be, the more I can sense the smell of terror rising in the air. Dark shadows start lurking around the room, hiding under the floorboards and hanging from the ceiling. The pit in my stomach opens up again and I can feel my heart free falling into it. The scent of

damp soil and rotten herbs fills up the room and I can barely breathe. My heart starts pounding uncontrollably trying to escape from my ribcage as the shadows crawl across the walls leaving behind a black mist. I can hear the sound of wood cracking as it settles on the floor turning everything it touches into the abyss. The shadows move closer and closer to me, fragrance of dirt fills up my lungs completely and I am dragged into the black chasm, a point of no return.

“Ruth! Do you ever listen to me?” Alan’s voice flies through the rotten air and pulls me out on the surface again.

My throat is still filled with dust but the shadows are no longer moving. They are lying down next to Alan’s olive rain boots plotting their next move.

“Ruth?!” Alan calls out to me again with a fretful tone in his voice.

“You are really impossible to deal with sometimes.” He crosses his arms, eyes darting eagerly still searching for my response.

A few seconds go by in silence, Alan looking at me impatiently and me looking at the black haze caressing his shoulders and silhouettes leaning on his feet.

“I said I’ll stop by the store after work. Anything you need?” He says in a softer tone almost as if he took pity on me and my inability to hold a proper conversation.

“No.” I reply and start turning the pages of my sketchbook offering no room for further discussion. Part of me thinks that if I ignore the shadows looming next to him they might simply go away.

“You should spend less time up here, Ruth.” Alan says and then turns in one swift motion to leave the room dragging the unsettling contours along with him. The scent of decaying greenery is no longer poking at my face.

I spend the rest of the day trying my best to ignore the knot in my stomach that hasn’t left since this morning, not daring to leave the attic in case those shadows are still waiting on me under the staircase ready to drag me down into the void.

Cold earth envelopes me compressing against every part of my body. I stare up at the gloom above me, fear and despair run through my veins like an ominous river. I can’t move, I can’t scream, I can only watch more dirt being tossed over me from the darkness. A muffled voice makes its way through the shadows and speaks: “*You are really impossible to deal with sometimes*”. Words stay echoing in my ears, a haunting melody of my demise. Dirt keeps pouring from the above, each handful feels as if it weighs a ton and I sink deeper and deeper into damp soil, into chilling abyss, into eternal stillness. Dust claws my throat as I desperately try to fill my lungs. Each breath a battle against the darkness overtaking me and I know this battle is the one I’m doomed to lose. “*You are really impossible to deal with sometimes*” the words still



circulate through my brain, a merry-go-round from hell. “*You are really impossible to deal with sometimes*”.

I open my eyes gasping for air, my chest rising and falling frantically. Wide, still disoriented eyes scan the room seeking the comfort of familiar details. Tubes of paint, brushes on the floor, canvases near the wall, my sketchbook. I must have fallen asleep at my desk last night.

I get up slowly trying not to disturb anything around me until the remains of the nightmare fully dissipate. My feet make gentle steps towards the door and then down the stairs. Part of me expected to see thick black fog hovering at the bottom of the staircase waiting to swallow me alive but to my relief the house was perfectly empty and silent. No fog, no shadows, no shallow graves.

“Come on Ruth, pull yourself together. It was only a nightmare.” I whisper to myself while entering the kitchen.

I make my way to the shopping bags on the counter. Alan probably forgot to unpack them yesterday and while that would usually make me frustrated, now I was glad I can throw myself into such a mundane task.

As I reach towards the second bag ready to put away all the items in their new resting place I feel the chills traveling from neck down over my spine. I could taste the discomfort and fright in my mouth. Bottles of herbicides, insecticides and fungicides are poking through the white plastic bag.

I wonder how long it takes for you to die if someone poisons you with phosphorus oxychloride, acid or any other chemical components present in them. Is it painful? Will it be over quickly? Will I be fully dead while Alan tries to bury me? Would he really do that? Am I thinking too much into it or are my worries justified? Why else would the hair on the back of my neck still be standing up?

I swallow thousands of questions roaming through my head and tie a knot with the handles of the shopping bag.

When I think better about it, maybe I’m not glad Alan didn’t unpack these yesterday. If he already wanted to poison me, he could at least try to keep it a secret from me.

A sense of never-ending dread grips me from the inside as I notice that the back-door is open. Invisible force presses against my chest, my breath quickens as I watch a tall silhouette approaching the house. Black smoke emerges from the bag with herbicides escaping the knot I made on it. Air around me thickens and icy fingers squeeze my heart not letting it pulsate rhythmically. Dark soot starts to cover the kitchen counter and tiles on the wall. The smell of rotting plants and damp moss fills

my lungs yet again, not leaving enough space for air. I watch silently as the silhouette transforms into Alan when it approaches the kitchen door. An army of shadows enters behind him.

“Weren’t you supposed to be at work?” I ask with my voice trembling, barely managing to find the courage that will break the silence between us.

“I took the week off. I needed some rest and some time to work in the garden.” He replies nonchalantly and puts down the shovel from his hand.

A sharp clang of metal against the floor tiles pierces through my head.

“You didn’t come to bed last night. I think you should take a break from work too.” He continues.

I clench my fists digging my nails into the cold sweaty flesh of my palms. The scent of wet dirt is overbearing, my stomach keeps turning upside down.

“Ruth, have you been taking your medications?” Alan gestures towards the orange cylinder sitting on the kitchen table.

His voice is unusually soft. If it wasn’t for the black shadows lurking behind him I would think he’s genuinely concerned.

I make my way towards the table in complete silence. My legs feel heavy and my heart skips a bit every time a charcoal mist touches my ankles.

“Why did you take it?” I finally manage to get out a few words from my insides.

“What are you talking about?” A note of confusion leaves Alan’s mouth.

Again, if it wasn’t for the dark soot covering the whole table and the smell of decaying flowers filling up the room, I would believe he truly didn’t know why I was questioning him.

“My medication. Why did you take it? I always leave it in the bathroom cabinet.” I picked up the bottle with disgust and shove it in my pocket.

“I didn’t take anything. You must have accidentally left it here yesterday. Under the assumption that you even took them.” The patience in his voice was running thin.

“I would never do that.” I state firmly despite the black mist rising from the floor tiles underneath me.

While my workspace looks like a battlefield at any given moment of the day, the rest of the house is spotless. I’ve always been insisting on keeping an order around the house and putting things back where they belong. The same thing applied to my medication. It belongs in the bathroom and there is no reason why I would leave it anywhere else.

“You simply forgot about it, it’s okay. You are overworked and tired, no wonder you are acting so strange lately.” Alan leans onto the kitchen counter.

I can tell he is trying to stay calm, but you can still hear the tone of frustration in his voice.

“Breakfast?” he asks and the shadows behind his back rush to the side, sliding next to the bag with herbicides.

Despite years of marriage, it never occurred to me until now how frightening Alan actually is. Dark eyebrows furrowed above piercing eyes. Deep green sea of anger, frustration and resentment. Tightly set jaw closed shut waiting for me to say something wrong before it fires a wall of arrows back at me. Broad shoulders stretching proudly, blocking me from any attempts of reaching for freedom. Pale fists still covered with dust from working in the garden, ready to drag me down to hell and bind me there for eternity.

“I have to work.” The words barely get out of me.

My eyes start to tear up as I’m backing away towards the staircase hoping I can get out of the reach of all the shadows and dirt and, mainly, furious Alan ready to poison me with the morning coffee.

“You know, Ruth, sometimes I wish you didn’t exist. You are so hard to deal with, I just don’t get you.” He shakes his head in disappointment pouring himself a cup of coffee while his shadow friends spill all over the counter.

“Pull yourself together, Ruth. Pull yourself together. Please, Ruth, pull yourself together.” I keep muttering to myself as I finally reach the attic, my only sanctuary.

I can no longer smell the moss or see the particles of black void levitating in the air but my heart is still ready to burst out of my chest at any given moment.

My shaky hands reach into the pocket and pull out the bottle of pills. There’s no way I’m taking any of that, Alan could’ve easily tempered with them. In fact, he did. Why else would they be down in the kitchen? I throw the orange bottle in the garbage bin, letting it rest on the bed of pencil shavings and crumpled up papers. Tension in my muscles begins to release, my tired heart finally picks a slower tempo to go off and the room around me is covered in the veil of safety.

I sit at my desk, occasionally getting up to stretch my tired limbs that feel heavier than ever. I don’t dare to fall asleep. I don’t dare to go downstairs. Sometimes Alan appears on the top of the staircase, bringing a cloud of black mist with him. I yell at him to go away and leave me alone. He and his friends of darkness are not welcomed here. Night creeps in silently but there is no relief. I must stay alert. I must protect myself. New day dawns painting the walls around me with the gentle glow until the shadows start forming, announcing the descent of the sun. The cycle repeats itself again. And again. And again. Time turns into a cruel joke and laughs in my face. I must protect myself.

I see smoke making its way to the top of the staircase. I'm trapped. I can either follow it downstairs or sit here until it eventually suffocates me.

*"You know, Ruth, sometimes I wish you didn't exist"* A shadow whispers to me. *"You are really impossible to deal with sometimes"* Adds another one.

I must protect myself.

I make my way down the stairs, first time in forever it seems like. Hard old wood is fully covered with the moss now. Once white wall is overgrown with ivy. I step into kitchen, sinking slightly into the ground with every step. The granules of dirt shift beneath my weight. Scent of damp soil and rotten plants carries me through it. Shadows elegantly glaze over the surface of kitchen elements. Dark smoke dances around in the air, twirling infinitely.

I open the rusty drawer covered in soot and take a knife. I must protect myself.

The shadow on the counter points towards the back door. I see him, Alan, with a shovel in his hand digging a hole next to the tulips.

I step outside, sun blinding my heavy eyes. Hundreds of shivers race down my spine like an electrical current. As I approach Alan, I feel the ivy wrapping around my legs stopping me in my tracks. It starts tugging on me, forcing my feet under the ground, not letting go. Black smoke rises from the ground theatrically, shadows start poking through the puzzle of leaves and petals. Voices sing from the freshly dug hole the melody of my final exit: *"You know, Ruth, sometimes I wish you didn't exist/ You are really impossible to deal with sometimes/ Ruth, I wish you didn't exist"*.

I collect what little courage I have left in my tired bones and clench the knife between my pale fingers. I must protect myself.

"Ruth, darling, are you okay? What is going on?" Alan's sharp voice flies, hitting me like a hammer.

He turns around, opening his arms towards me. Shadows surround him converging towards my, soon-to-be, burial site. Smoke thickens and the smell of decaying plants is now replaced with the one of metal. Sharp and heavy, acrid. Voices from thousands of devils in the tomb grow louder, ripping my ears:

*"YOU KNOW, RUTH, SOMETIMES I WISH YOU DIDN'T EXIST/ YOU ARE REALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO DEAL WITH SOMETIMES/ RUTH, I WISH YOU DIDN'T EXIST"*

I plunge into his chest with all my might and watch him stumble backwards, falling next to the tulips. Falling into the grave. Falling into *my* grave. His scream overpowers the chanting of the darkness putting it to rest. I feel another set of ghostly arms going down my spine. I must protect myself.

“Ruth, please... R-Ruth...” He cries softly like an innocent lamb that’s been caught by the bloodthirsty predator.

Crimson river emerges from his chest and flows onto the earth beneath. It’s washing away all the shadows and smoke and smell of metal, sending it all to oblivion.

And then...nothing. Nothing. My head is completely empty but nothing feels off anymore. No more scary shadows whispering about my eternal rest. No more smell of dirt and metal turning around my stomach. No more mist and soot blocking my view from seeing clearly.

Just me, the tulips and Alan. My dear, sweet Alan. Gentle eyebrows framing his glassy green eyes, deep sea of wonders. Soft jawline supporting his barely open mouth mumbling my name faintly. Pale fists still covered with dust from working in the garden, ready to embrace me.

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## CAN YOU FEEL IT?

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### I.

“Okay Mr. Keller. What do you have to say?” “I’m advised to keep silent till the day of court,” he said confidently. “I’m done,” the old man in the blue uniform left the room furiously. No one could get a word out of Cameron Keller, and this policeman was not the first person to give up on him.

Cameron was complicated, never showing any emotions or sympathy. He was ill. Physically- there was nothing wrong with him, far from it. He was perfectly healthy but mentally he was different, to say the least. He was diagnosed with Alexithymia, also called emotional blindness, when he was 10. It is a phenomenon characterized by significant challenges in recognizing, expressing, and describing one’s own emotions. He was aware of it but never did anything about it. He did not care enough to even try.

The reason he was here at the police station today was because he ran away from college and tried to rob a store just to get some groceries and money. He would get a job if he could, but he could not hold on to one for more than 2 weeks. His parents cut all their ties with him 3 years ago when he dropped out of college. He wanted to get back to it so he would get some support from his family, but it became too much so he ran away.

He got up and left the room to find a face he recognized. Allison West. They were classmates in high school, they even sat next to each other in few classes. He always admired her, but only from a safe distance. She walked up to him and smiled “Do you have a place to stay at?” like she did not know the answer. She had been working on his case for a while now, but this was the first time they’d seen each other since graduation. He kept quiet. “You will be staying with me until you have somewhere else to go,” she said. He just followed her and was silent the whole time.

### II.

The court was in a month, so for the time being he was stuck with her since he did not know anyone in the city and had nothing to do. She tried talking to him multiple

times but never got out any word from him. She tried to cheer him up in many different ways like making breakfast, cooking food he might like, taking him places but nothing was enough to get a reaction from him.

One night she was done. She had a dreadful day and the last thing she wanted to do was trying to cheer him up when she herself was feeling down. She got home, took a bottle of cheap wine, opened it, and put it on a table followed by two glasses. He was sitting across her on the couch looking confused. As she was drinking, he poured himself a glass and spoke up for the first time in days. "What happened?" he asked quietly. "Rough day, nothing you would understand." "I'm not dumb. I just don't know how I feel or what I feel and how to show it, but I am not dumb." "This is the first time you are talking to me. Why now?" "You seem like you need someone to talk to. I may not be the perfect person to talk to, but you do not have anyone else now so I am talking." "Why are you always quiet?" "Silence is often louder than any voice or sound."

### III.

From then on, he was never quiet around her. They spent the night talking about everything and anything. They got drunk and went to sleep. The next morning when she got up, she found him in the kitchen making breakfast. She sat on the counter. "Here is your coffee," he said. He was never awake this early so it was a surprise. "You want the truth?" he asked while still not looking at her. "I haven't eaten meat for years now, I've been eating it only because you prepared it and I didn't want you to feel bad about it if that's how it works." Afterwards, he was quiet for a while before adding. "I may not understand it but I know you do and that this means a lot to you and it shows, so by doing that I was trying to show my respect to you. I hope I am doing it right." That put her mind at ease and she realized just how much attention he actually pays to her.

### IV.

That day they went out for a walk where he opened up about his childhood. "There is one time when I knew what it was that I am feeling: I had a pet. It was a small bird named Roi. I had more pets, but none of them had names because they were not important to me. They were just animals I was feeding and Roi was the first I felt some kind of connection to, I guess. He was not my pet; he was my companion. He never left my side and I've had him for years at that point. One day a bigger bird attacked him and I could not do anything but watch. From that day on I never showed any emotion. My therapist said I got attached. I don't even like how it sounds and I am far

from liking how it felt. I do not want to feel it again.” She was once again speechless. “Not all connections are like that Cam. Ours is not. “This is not a connection. Do not call it that. I can’t associate connection with anything good and this, well ... it feels nice.” He set down on a bench and looked up. “The sky is the color of your eyes” he said trying to switch the topic. She moved her hair and thanked him. When they got home, she made food for both of them making sure there wasn’t any meat.

## V.

She put the food on the table, next to it was a red wine, just like a few nights before, hoping to have an enjoyable conversation with him. The court day was closer and closer, and she did not even talk to him about it at all. Allison did not even know where to start so she asked directly, “Why did you run away?” “Okay... so we are doing this now. Well... I had enough. I could not please my parents, professors and I had enough. Nothing was holding me down to stay there anyways, so I just left. There is nothing more to be added to it so please do not continue this. I have found a job far from here so as soon as all of this is over, I am out.” “And what if you’ll have to go to jail?” she got confused. “Then so be it,” he answered calmly.

## VI.

As usual, she got home, made something to eat and sat on the opposite side of the table so she can face Cameron while they eat.

“What were you going to college for anyways?” she asked curiously. She had no idea what he was studying. She knew he dropped out and ran away but she didn’t know from where or what.

“Oddly enough, psychology.” He smirked a bit. He was aware that that was a really weird answer having in mind his illness. She didn’t say anything. He could tell that she was confused with his answer but didn’t want to ask more about it so he continued. “I wanted to understand. Maybe I can’t tell what I’m feeling, but at least I wanted to know why or how it all works, and where and why it went wrong with me. And don’t get me wrong I don’t think there is anything wrong with me or something that needs to be fixed; I just want to understand it. Not only myself, but others too. I’m aware that my actions can come off as selfish and self-centered, but it’s not that simple for me. It feels like trying to write a book without knowing all the letters. You know what is also interesting?” he said while looking directly at her. While waiting for the answer he got up to grab a bottle of red wine from the storage room and two clean wine glasses. “What?” she asked wondering what can be so interesting to him. “The concept of friendships and relationships. How can someone commit to such a



pure thing without using the other person? No one gets anything beneficial out of, yet both parties enjoy it and find it important. I really cannot see myself spending time with someone just for the enjoyment of it. I don't find being around people enjoyable. It is important, sure, but not quite necessary." He stopped but it still felt like he did not say everything he wanted to. She stopped eating, had a sip of wine before answering him. "You've said so much, but I still do not have an answer for you. I guess it feels nice to have someone to talk to, someone to be around and someone you can count on no matter what. While also knowing they will be there for you. It feels good" she said. "Feelings confuse me maybe even more than people who have them." After making that confession he got up, cleaned after himself and went to sleep without saying another word.

## VII.

"What's your favorite book?" he asked while looking up to her from the couch. "I don't know; probably Harry Potter or something classic like that. I don't read much because of the lack of time as I often work extra hours so I get home pretty tired. Why?" she followed her answer with a question. "The only thing I've read are biographies of others. They're objective, without any emotions, just pure facts. It's fun to have an outlook on someone's life without even knowing them, an outlook even they couldn't have had. It is like looking at a finished picture with all its flaws, ups and downs" he said. With that new knowledge she decided to take him to the local library so he can pick something to read to distract himself from everything that was happening.

## VIII.

The court is tomorrow, and this will be the last night they spend together. She was making dinner while he was sitting next to her, drinking his wine. It became their routine. Something familiar to them and something they were only doing together. She never drank a lot, but she had more wine this month than in her whole life just to be closer to him. "Will you miss this...? You know what, never mind- do not answer that" she said as she was cutting the carrots. "I have never experienced that. Not because I can't. I just never had anyone to miss. I think I will. Connection is not really something I like, but I guess I can feel it with you." He smiled for the first time.

He was not a touchy person and she knew it. She did not know what she was doing. She hugged him. The last thing she ever did.

He panicked, grabbed the knife and that was it. He pulled it out, scared and confused. "I know you didn't mean t-" she was trying to say; but her head hit the kitchen counter.

### The Note

“I loved her. I think I loved her. How can something so beautiful as love hurt as much. I did not know what happened or how it happened, it just did. Even though I’m human, I did something not even an animal would do and I can’t live with it. Everything will remind me of you. The sky is the color of your eyes dear, and the wine feels like a late-night talk. The first emotion I am sure I felt is guilt and once again, it felt too much so I ran away.” -C.K.

This is where it ends, with a small note on the same table, next to the cheap wine.

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## COMPLICATED

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If you really want to understand this town, then you must understand the people. People here are very complicated, but they are all simple. They are simply complicated. If you asked them about Amat, first they would reply with a question: “Who is Amat?” Everybody knows Amat, but not everybody wants to know Amat. That is complicated, but it is simple and obvious why nobody wants to know him. Amat has lived in this town his entire life, he grew up here. He used to spend his childhood running around with his friends. They are still his friends. That could be because Amat does not know how to make new friends or maybe he does not want new friends. Even he himself does not know the answer to that. Anyone who has dedicated their life to being the best at something will sooner or later ask themselves “Why?”

His friend Cain would just answer “Because.” That reply would be enough for Amat to stop asking questions. Cain is one of those people that do not need a reason to establish their goals. He has loved boxing since he was a kid and now, he is the best at it. Martyn is the exact opposite of Cain. He does not have any goals in his life, but one - he wants to live a happy and stress-free life. The three friends are very different, but they all have one thing in common - they are complicated. They all have problems and they do not want to have problems. Cain has problems in school, Martyn at home and Amat will have problems with everything. Amat loved his life the way that it was before, he never wanted it to change. Unfortunately, things change and they will not change for the better.

While they were walking to school one day a student was looking at Amat strangely. At first, Amat was ignoring him, but after some time they started to talk during the breaks. The student was called Kris and he was not the right person that Amat should have been talking to, but he did not know that at the time. While Amat was meeting new friends, Cain was not having as much fun. Constant bullying in school never helped him find friends. He always had to rely on Amat and Martyn. If he hadn't had them, he would have been all alone. He had reported bullying in school a hundred of times already, but nothing ever changed. The bullies would just get

smaller punishments such as apologizing or cleaning the classroom. The school declared that they were just kids joking around. This joke was not humorous for Cain. He started hating them, he even started hating the school. He had given up on reporting them and started ditching classes. Of course, his parents did not agree with that, but he could not stand being at school. After some time, Amat started getting closer with Kris. They were going out every day and Amat really enjoyed having Kris as his friend. He felt like Kris could understand him better than anyone else.

Same as Cain, Martyn was also having a hard time. Martyn was an excellent student and he liked school very much. He never wanted to leave school to go home, but that was not because he enjoyed school. He did not like going home because his parents were never quiet. They fought every day and when that happened, which was almost all the time, Martyn would just lock himself in his room. He could never talk to his parents about this because he knew it would just lead to another fight. They would yell at Martyn sometimes too, but lately they were too busy yelling at each other. In this situation, he would usually call Amat to go out because he did not want to stay in his house. He knew he could always count on Amat when he needed him. Amat was always there for Martyn, he was his most reliable friend. He would never let him down because he knew what Martyn was going through.

So, he called him today. After about twenty seconds, which felt like hours for Martyn, Amat answered the call.

“Hello, Martyn. What do you need?” Amat said loudly.

“I was just asking if you wanted to hang out, you know. Things are going on again.”

Amat looked at Kris who had overheard the conversation the two friends were having. Kris stared at Amat looking a bit annoyed. After the short stare Kris shook his head telling Amat to decline the offer.

“Sorry I cannot today. I am kind of hanging out with somebody already.”

A short silence occurred. “Are you mad?” Amat asked with regret.

“No, I just thought... Actually, never mind. Have fun.”

Martyn hung up the phone filled with disappointment. Amat sat there looking at the ground for what seemed like ten minutes. Until he broke the silence:

“Why do you not want Martyn around?”

Kris stopped for a second to think of a polite way to say this.

“He is just not a type of person I would hang out with.”

Amat wanted to say something, but he just accepted the response and kept staring at the ground. The walk to the school the next day was the most awkward thing both Amat and Martyn had experienced in the past year, and they had taken part in a lot of awkward situations. They kept walking until Martyn asked:

“How was your company yesterday?”

Amat almost tripped over his own feet remembering the conversation they had yesterday.

“It was good,” was all that he could let out.

“Amat was on a date with a girl?!” asked Cain, almost screaming.

“No!” yelled Amat even louder.

“Who is your new friend?”

“I was just hanging out with a friend. His name is Kris. He goes to our school.”

Cain completely stopped walking.

“Wait! It is not Kris Evans, right?”

All three of them stopped walking and he turned to look at Cain.

“Why do you ask?” said Amat, confused.

“You know he had been nothing but mean to me for the past two years. Are you seriously hanging out with him?”

Amat stood there frozen, he did not know what to say. He could not let his friend know that he was hanging out with his bully. He knew Cain had been skipping school because of the bullying he had been experiencing every day. Kris would not do something like that. He did not know what to think, but he knew he had to lie. He would hurt Cain if he told him the truth.

“Of course, I am not friends with Kris Evans!” He saw his friend relax. “Why would you scare me like that?” Amat just responded with a weak smile.

When Amat saw Kris, he knew he had to ask him about this. He really hoped his friend would say it was not true. After failing to ask him at school because he was afraid of the answer, he decided to ask him the next day. Suddenly, his phone started ringing. It was Kris asking him to hang out. Of course, Amat agreed. When they met, Amat noticed that Kris was especially happy that day. He thought that this was a great opportunity to finally ask him. He was nervous, he was not sure if he wanted to hear his response. Luckily, he built up some courage to ask him the question.

“Can I ask you something?” he said nervously.

“Of course, what is it?” Kris replied.

“Do you, by any chance, know Cain?” he asked, wanting to run away from this conversation.

“I do, why?” Kris answered confused.

“Are you friends?” Amat said now even more scared than he was before.

“Not really. I would not hang out with somebody like him.” Kris said confidently.

“Can you, at least, not be mean to him?” Amat begged his friend almost crying.

“If you want me to.” Kris could not care less about Cain, but if it would make Amat happier, he was willing to try.

After this conversation, Kris stopped bullying Cain. Amat did not feel like it was fine for him to still hang out with Kris, but he was afraid that if he stopped, Kris would go back to bullying Cain. While Amat and Kris were talking during the break, Martyn saw them. He instantly realized that Amat had lied. At first, Martyn did not want to sell out his friend, but he remembered when Amat ditched him to be with Kris. He also knew that Cain would be hurt, but he decided that he deserved to know. Martyn knew that he had made the right decision, so he told Cain.

The following day, Cain and Martyn didn’t show up in the park where they would meet up to go to school. Amat tried calling them multiple times, but neither of them answered the call. After a while, he decided to go alone. When he got to school, he saw Martyn, so he went up to him to ask him why he was not picking up his phone. Martyn saw Amat coming up to him, so he just turned around and left. Amat was very confused. He tried to catch up with him, but he had already left. Amat could not find Cain anywhere. He could not see him all day, and Cain had no reason to skip classes since he was not getting bullied anymore.

A few days passed and Amat could not get a hold of either of his friends. He wanted to figure out what he had done that made them so mad at him. After almost giving up, he decided to try calling Martyn one last time. Fortunately, Martyn answered the call.

“What did I do?” Amat asked as soon as Martyn picked up the phone.

“You lied,” Martyn said slowly because if he talked any faster, Amat would figure out how frustrated he was.

“I did not know it at first and I only kept being around him because he promised he would stop being mean!” Amat said louder than he wanted to. They did not say a word for a while, until Martyn said:

“I do not want to be mad at you and I am not anymore, but you have to explain it to Cain.”

“How can I explain it to him if he is ignoring me?” Amat said feeling desperate.

“I will talk to him,” Martyn said.

“Thank you,” Amat said starting to calm down.

Martyn forced Cain to finally talk to Amat. Although Cain did not want anything to do with Amat, he agreed. The next morning, Amat was waiting in the park. He was stressed out so he could not wait at home any longer and that made him come half an hour earlier. When he saw his friends from the distance, he was getting even

more nervous. Cain did not look calm either, he looked like he could explode any second.

“What do you want to talk about?” Cain asked, just wanting to finish this conversation.

After explaining everything, Amat felt way more relaxed as well - he did not know he could talk that fast. Cain was still upset, but he knew he had to forgive his friend, and Amat was thankful for that. At first, they could still feel the tension between them, but after a few weeks everything went back to normal. Amat stopped meeting with Kris and he did not feel bad at all. He used to like hanging out with Kris, but he would never leave his friends for anybody, especially not for somebody like Kris. Kris tried talking to Amat, but Amat did not want to hear what he had to say. Amat was way more happier with his friends. All of this was very complicated, but they are used to complications.

They are the reason everything is complicated.

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## DIARY OF A RED-COATED SOLDIER

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A captain and his fleet of three ships arrive at a port at dusk and begin exploring the town. As they approach the port with their wooden frigates (frigate; a type of ship), they notice that it seems abandoned. The town is in a mess; improvised run-down barricades are everywhere and skeletal, yet rotting corpses fill the streets. Many of the houses are nothing but rubble due to the weather conditions over the years. The captain concludes that this is the place. Suddenly, one of the men yells out for help, as he gets attacked by a walking corpse. The captain saved him with a swift cutlass strike to the corpse's head. The men tremble in fear, knowing there is danger present, however the captain gives no orders of retreat. While the men secure an outpost at the port, the captain with a few other men ventures out to explore a lighthouse on top of a cliff. The journey towards the lighthouse was easy with little difficulty; however, small number of the undead still seem to roam around on the outskirts of the area. The captain and his crew arrive at the lighthouse and begin scavenging for loot. One of the crewmembers notices an object near a tree on the edge of the cliff. The captain goes alone to investigate it, and as he approaches the object, he notices it's a corpse sitting on the ground, leaning back against the tree looking towards the sun. The corpse is dressed in a worn red coat and appears to be that of a soldier. The captain also notices the corpse is holding a flintlock in his right hand, and a book in his left. The captain takes the book and, with his men, returns to the outpost. While the men are working, the captain goes to his quarters and opens the book. He notices that only the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph has a date: March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1809 (Today's date is June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1902). Intrigued, the captain begins to read.

### CHAPTER 1: Life of a soldier

I'm Edward Fisher, an ordinary Englishman, and I have just finished military training. I was assigned to the 33<sup>rd</sup> regiment on foot. I plan on becoming an officer one day, but for now I must serve as an ordinary line infantryman. I was given this diary as a gift from my father, William Fisher. He told me to record everything in this diary, so that once I get married, my kids will be able to learn from my experience



if they want to become great soldier. I wish my mother was still with us to see my achievement, as military training takes around three months of hard work. Sadly, the work has just begun. I shall write again the moment I get the chance to do so. For the record, today's date is March the 7<sup>th</sup>, 1809.

Today was a long day. Around three days have passed since I last wrote in this diary. I have been assigned to Fort Thompson where I reside and work. So far, I really enjoy this job. We wake up early in the morning, perform roll call, train, patrol, and do so much more! This fort is one of the higher quality ones as well. Today we went on a vigorous training exercise, where we had to deliver supplies to nearby outposts using wagons and horses. We were successful and returned just before sunset. The captain of the fort is very pleased with the batch of men he received and can rely on in case of anything. I should go to sleep; tomorrow we are going to do artillery training!

Around two weeks have passed since I was assigned to Fort Thompson. I have been promoted to Lance Corporal! This only brings me a few steps closer to becoming an officer. I must become an Enlisted Corporal before I can apply for an NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer; basically assistants that help officers). The only reason I managed to achieve this rank so swiftly is due to my robust nature, so I have to thank my father for that. I also met my old friend, Johnny Smith. He became a sapper (sapper; an engineer with an axe, usually responsible for breaking and building defenses) who was assigned to this fort one month ago. I remember the time when he said he wanted to become a sapper for the British army. I guess his dream came true, but I have yet to fulfill mine though!

This seems weird to write about, but I heard rumors that a disease is spreading. Supposedly, this disease makes the infected person violent, almost like they are in a frenzy. The infected person will also aggressively attack others like a rabid dog. The symptoms seem to be dry coughing, high temperature and increased sweating. Most people in Fort Thompson seem to not acknowledge the seriousness of this disease. They believe it's a rare disease that comes and goes. My friend Johnny and I are concerned, as we don't know how it spreads. I hope my family is doing well back at home. Except for that, everything else seems to be the same as usual.

A lot has happened today. Oh god, where do I start? We were awoken by the alarm bells inside the fort. Everybody was in a panic, so I found my buddy Johnny and asked what was going on. He told me a messenger arrived at the fort and alerted the officers that a town nearby was being attacked by aggressive civilians. The captain gave orders to retake the town. From one moment to another, Johnny and I got

armed and hopped on one of the few wagons we had. We could have gone on foot, but the town was far away, hence wagons were necessary. All of us on the wagon started commenting how stressful it is. This is the first time we will see real combat. It didn't take too long, but we reached the outskirts of the town, which was in pure chaos. Buildings were burning, people were screaming and dying. It was a sight only a psychopath could imagine. We got off the wagons and formed two ranks (2 lines of men), and also fixed (attached) bayonets in case of melee combat. Moments later, a horde of unarmed civilians rushed at us. Their skin was pale green and each one was covered in varying amounts of blood. Some of them were even missing limbs! We managed to volley-fire (volley-fire; when a line fires at the same time) one round of musket shots before entering melee combat. It was gruesome, they were scratching, biting and tearing us apart, literally and figuratively! Out of twenty of us, only half survived the encounter. We killed at least fifty violent civilians, whom we later called infected. The disease that was rumored was true. With our NCO dead, we fled the battlefield to one of the outposts, because the fort was too far away. Upon reaching it, it was abandoned. We found a note containing orders from a Lieutenant, ordering the men to go to London to help fight the hordes of infected. With few options and orders, we decided to hunker down. We were unfortunate enough to find out that the infection spreads through bodily fluids. Elliot, a fellow infantryman, who was heavily injured, started showing symptoms of the disease. Elliot also took on a pale green color. Moments later, he went mad and started attacking the others. Johnny managed to put him down with one strike using his axe. Everybody was in shock, but we managed to clean up the mess. There were nine of us alive. Fortunately, we brought medical supplies, so the rest of us didn't get infected. For record purposes, the last time I wrote in this diary was one month and seven days ago. Now I'm really concerned for my family.

## CHAPTER 2: Tough times

We decided to go to a nearby town due to the lack of supplies this morning. We left three people to watch after the outpost. After some traveling, we found an abandoned village, where we also spotted some infected. Luckily, there were only a few of them in the village, so we shot and killed them using our muskets. Once we entered the village, we found six survivors, so they helped us pack up supplies and joined us. We were fortunate enough to flee back to the outpost, because we spotted a horde of around thirty infected pass by the village we just looted. Back at the outpost, we armed the survivors with carbines and trained them how to use them (carbine;

smaller musket that can't have a bayonet attached). At night, we discussed what to do, and we agreed to do the following: Johnny and I shall go to Charleville where our families were located to see if they were alive and well, while the rest of the survivors would continue fortifying this outpost, gathering as many survivors as possible. I must find my family.

Words cannot express the amount of joy I'm feeling. The moment the sun rose, Johnny and I started our journey to Charleville. The road was long and harsh, the infected were roaming the outskirts, and we saw destroyed and abandoned convoys of wagons with corpses surrounding them. We arrived at Charleville, and it was filled with the infected. We knew we couldn't fight them due to the sheer number of them, so we had to sneak by them if we wanted to survive. We sneaked from house to house, until we reached the armory. We entered it and to our surprise, found my father! I asked him where my brother, George Fisher was, and he told us he fled with a convoy towards Port Arthur. He also said that there were only two other survivors here, and that they had been living in his attic all this time. Johnny asked him where his family was, and he said they also went to Port Arthur alongside my brother. We couldn't make it back to the outpost due to the increased activity the infected had during nights, so we went back to my father's attic to stay the night. We also found out that father met two other people, Jacob and Barry. Jacob is a French soldier who managed to escape France and come to Britian. Barry is an Englishman who is also a priest in a church near our town. Now all we must do is escape back to the outpost.

We made it back to the outpost, but it cost my father his life. Once we saw the sun, we packed our things and started sneaking out of Charleville. Unfortunately, when we were passing by a house, an infected spotted us and chased us, luring other infected to our location as well. We were running for our lives, until we got blocked by a pile of barricades. We thought that was it, until Barry pointed his wooden crucifix towards the infected and made them step back and tremble in fear. In that moment, we broke down a part of a barricade and continued running. The infected were catching up, so we entered the armory once again, barricading ourselves inside it. We fled through a window one by one until the infected broke down the barricades. In that moment, my father pushed me out of the window and yelled at me to run as he closed the window. I wanted to get back there to save him, but Johnny said we must go. We ran over two hundred meters before hearing a large explosion, only to realize that the armory was blown up. The gunpowder storage was most likely the cause of it. It was then that I understood that my father bought us time to escape, as the horde would have caught up with us if it weren't for him. With grief, we made it back to the outpost. My father saved us; therefore, I cannot let his sacrifice be in vain.

### CHAPTER 3: A slice of hope

For the last few weeks, we gathered more survivors and information. We found out from our scouts that Fort Thompson has been overrun by the infected, and that reports of new types of infected have appeared. Some of them run faster than others, pinning people down, while others can carry gunpowder kegs (keg; a smaller version of a barrel, similar to a jerry-can) and torches, acting like suicide bombers! Some of them even learned how to use two-handed weapons, like an axe. The situation is getting dire, however we learned that Port Arthur has been stocking up supplies and sending off ships to the new land across the sea. So far, we have gathered around one hundred survivors. If we wish to survive this hell, then salvation lies across the sea. If we do not leave for Port Arthur soon, we won't be able to survive the winter. Let's hope they are still holding up on their own.

As I'm writing this, we are approaching Port Arthur. We can see it from all the way out here. It looks abandoned. Fortunately, we see around two docked brigs (brig; a type of ship), as well as three schooners (schooner; type of ship) and one frigate. Port Arthur was famous for its abundance of docked ships, but I guess not a lot of survivors made it here to flee. Unfortunately, the streets seem to be brimming with the infected. Our plan is to enter from the side near the coastline, that way we won't have to fight too many infected. I am aware that we will get spotted at the docks, therefore some people will be loading up the cargo we brought with us, while others will be defending the docks from the waves of the infected. Despite this, I know we will get overrun due to the amount of them, therefore, I shall distract them by lighting the lighthouse on top of that cliff. After the lighthouse is lit, Johnny and Barry will make their way to the docks and leave using the ships. Jacob wants to help me, so he said he is coming with me. It's now or never.

This is going to be my last page, so I shall write down what happened. We initiated the plan, so Jacob and I snuck through the streets unnoticed until we detected more survivors in a warehouse. They were British, Prussian and French soldiers. We took them with us, and as we passed house by house, a doorframe collapsed, separating Jacob from the rest of us. He told me in broken English not to worry, and that he would find a way around. The survivors and I made it in an alleyway with a locked gate, which was tall and made of iron. We yelled for help, even though it attracted the infected to our location. Minutes later, Jacob was making his way to us with a gunpowder keg and a torch. We stood back as he set up the keg next to the gate and lit the fuse. Unfortunately, he miscalculated its length, and the keg blew up the moment he touched it with his torch, blowing everything up. Once the smoke set-

tled, Jacob was dead, and a French survivor screamed out: “CHARGÉZ!”. Despite the language barrier, we all knew what he meant. So filled with adrenaline, we charged forwards having no time to grief for Jacob, despite him becoming a hero. I pointed in the direction of the docks, so the survivors made haste while I went towards the lighthouse. It was only when I reached the lighthouse that I noticed I was heavily injured. I climbed my way up to the top and lit the light of the lighthouse. After some time, I saw the ships depart one by one, all except one schooner. Using my spyglass, I noticed Johnny was on it. He must have been waiting for me to come back. With the last of my strength, I yelled at the top of my lungs: “SET SAIL, GO WITHOUT ME!”. Minutes later, the schooner set sail, and as I watched, I saw everyone on board, start tearing up. I understood how they felt. Having to leave someone behind that has done so much for you is hard, especially if the person was an old friend. I made my way towards a tree, sat down, and watched as the sun rose on the horizon. It was a beautiful sight to see. My skin is turning pale green, and I don't plan on becoming one of them. Luckily, I saved one last bullet for myself. I might not know where my brother is, but I have faith he made it across the sea. In case you are reading this, I bid you farewell. See you on the other side.

Edward Fisher

The captain is left speechless, this man is the friend who saved his grandfather, Johnny Smith. While the captain was thinking what to do next, the quartermaster entered his quarters.

“What are your orders, Sir?” asked the quartermaster.

The captain responded: “Send one ship back to our country, tell them it's time to reclaim the land we once lost to the infected.”

“And what if they don't listen to us?” asked the quartermaster worriedly.

“Tell them Simon the Stubborn, son of James Smith, and grandson of Johnny Smith, arrived at Port Arthur. I am requesting a large fleet to retake the land we lost. The amount of infected has been significantly reduced.” answered the captain.

Further adding on: “We found the cure for this disease ages ago, it shouldn't be a problem to return. It will take time yes, but we shall take what's ours.”

With those words, the captain went outside on the deck of the ship and looked at the lighthouse one last time and smiled, before going back inside.

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## ECHOES OF THE NEW DAWN: A SURVIVOR'S TALE

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“In the heart of a destroyed past,  
under the nuclear sky,  
lies a world once vibrant,  
now just a sigh.  
The sun's warm kiss,  
a forgotten lore,  
in the endless winters  
of nuclear war.”

### *The echo of what once was*

#### The Survivor

The streets - that were once filled to the brim with children, working men and women and grumpy old folks who were always shouting after the playful children who'd run past them kicking a ball - are now frozen in time. Covered in an icy layer of ashes mixed with nuclear rains that fell over the course of the last couple of years. The cars, that had not yet been demolished, were used for parts and scraps by the Wastelanders and made perfect cover in the streets. As the grey snow slowly settled to the ground the early morning peace of the streets was disturbed by a gunshot. The crows, if one could still call them that after all their mutations from the nuclear fallout, flew into the air, their cawing filling the air and alerting all those who were still unsure if they truly had heard a gunshot. Down the street a few more gunshots suppressed the cawing, they seemed to be coming from the old electronics store, which now looked more as a barricaded shelter for the cold winter. Inside the store, a scavenger was down on his knees, to anyone who was unfamiliar with the ways of the Wasteland it might have looked like he was begging for his life, but for an experienced Wastelander it seemed more like he was begging for a quick and painless death. Hoping that his killer was 'rich' enough to have a spare bullet to end his suffering.

The Survivor stood over the scavenger, unwilling to waste a precious resource such as ammunition on this ‘scum’. He reached into his vest and pulled out a knife, ending his enemy’s pain in the quickest way possible. He quickly patted down the still warm corpse for anything useful before limping out of the store, holding a gauze to his wound. The scavenger had caught him off guard, and hence had the advantage of the first shot, and it was enough to cripple the Survivor. The wound was no more than a through-and-through bullet wound, but even the smallest of cuts were deadly out here. The Survivor slowly limped his way towards the so-called ‘Hub’, a haven for lonely Wastelanders, a place where he could get his wound treated, or end his pain. As he arrived at the metal door with the small peephole, he hit it with his hand a few times, leaving a bloody imprint on the door itself. Soon the peephole opened, and a pair of tainted glass goggles peeked through, looking around for a minute before closing the hole and unlocking the door. The Survivor pushed them open and stumbled inside, the Doorkeeper saved him from falling and sat him upon a chair before closing the door and locking it. He rushed the Survivor to someone who could provide him with aid. After many hours of patching and stitching and several blood transfusions he was able to sit at the campfire and eat a meal, but the doctors told him it wasn’t just a through-and-through bullet as he thought, the bullet had hit a bone and fragments of both the bullet and the bone made a havoc across his body, the damage was unfortunately fatal. The Survivor had made peace with death a long time ago. Therefore, at this moment he was being calmer than any other man who learnt about the fact that he was going to die withing a few hours.

While he was eating, he felt less of the unimaginable pain throughout his body, but his three-hole balaclava kept his face and emotions hidden from the outside world. Even if there was pain it wasn’t seen by the younger scavenger who was passing by and asked if she could sit down by the man whose fate was already sealed. The Survivor silently looked up at her and nodded, probably not having enough energy to use his hand to gesture the man to sit down.

“You’re, *the* Survivor right?” spoke out the stranger, after being notified about the fatal wounds and the inescapable future of this Wasteland legend.

“No, I’m not *the*, I am merely a survivor.” the Survivor spoke out, being as modest as he always was. He believed that a man should keep himself honest and humble even when facing death.

“Right. I’m Zikra, I was told to ask you if I wanted to learn about the New world. And since you’re in such bad condition, I figured I should ask you while I still can.”

“Sure, but I’ll do something even better, I’ll give you maps and notes, but only if you promise me to complete a certain task for me while you’re out in the New world.”

spoke out the Survivor reaching for his notebook, the place where he kept all his maps, notes, and poems written and collected over his years spent in the Wasteland and the New world.

“Of course, I will. What needs to be done?” asked Zikra curiously, looking over at the heavily bleeding Survivor.

Reaching into his coat, the Survivor pulled out a small metal lighter, it had a beautiful pattern carved into it, before the war, the lighter belonged to the royal family which was now nothing but an echo of a time when royalty was not just a word in a dictionary but also living human beings who used to control different parts of the world. He handed the lighter to Zikra, before speaking in a rather weak voice, “You need to deliver this to the New Express, tell them the First Courier is dead. They’ll instruct you on what to do next. D-do you understand?”

Zikra thought about it for a second and then nodded, taking the lighter and sliding it into a safe pocket of her vest. As she did so, she noticed the Survivor reaching into his pocket and taking out a cigarette, lighting it and smoking it as he observed the nuclear sky above them.

“Y’know, Zikra... War is hell. Especially this one.” Zikra looked at him with her curious young eyes, reminding him of the playful children who roamed the streets years ago.

“Do you know what your name means?” he asked curiously as he looked over at her, feeling a burning pain in his abdomen.

“N-no...?” she said.

He put the cigarette out, resting his body against a tree stump as he spoke out quietly, “It means remembrance, thoughts of the past... and your eyes... they remind me... remind me, of my younger self... and of this town when... when it was not yet plagued by war.”

“And how was it back then?”

“It was... peaceful. The Bridge of Hope wasn’t surrounded by military forces as it is today. Back then, it was used for civilian traffic. The Golden City was not a missile base, and it wasn’t used to target the enemies’ towns and their ships. It was a thriving city. But it all changed that day. I remember it as if it were yesterday and not forty years ago. I was eighteen, my pa and I, we were heading home for a family dinner since grandpa died. My commanding officer wasn’t exactly keen on letting me leave the base, but he did agree to it in the end...”

While he was dwelling about the past, Zikra thought of her childhood, zoned out and suddenly found herself in one of her memories. She couldn’t have been more than seventeen, when she found herself hiding in her home. While gunshots were



echoing on the street, her father walked into the room holding a rifle. She wasn't afraid of guns, having been born into the Apocalypse, she had been surrounded by guns since forever. She asked him where her mom was, but received no answer, or if she did, it was muffled by the shouts and gunfire coming from the outside. The Steward family farmstead was under siege, some bandits breached the outer fence and were now engaged in a fierce gunfight with those defending their families from the scavengers and lowlifes threatening to destroy all that decent people had built in this world. Zikra remembered her father handing her a pistol and then walking away. She had a strange feeling it'd be the last she saw of him. But no goodbyes were said, no heart-warming instructions or good lucks, only a single silent glance from across the room. But that look was worth far more than anything else, it said more than a thousand words spoken. As the farmstead slowly fell into the bandits' hands, Zikra realized it was time to leave and sneaked out a back exit meant for situations like this. Crawling underneath the house she found herself staring into something that would change her forever. She observed the bandits entering the house, surrounding everyone, gathering them outside and lining them up. She couldn't understand what they were saying but one thing was certain, they were up to no good. Her suspicions were confirmed as the bandit leader stepped forward and executed the farmstead leader, Zikra's uncle. As his lifeless body fell to the ground the bandits started shooting the others, Zikra felt awfully calm as the massacre unfolded before her eyes. She felt no sadness, nor the urge to do something, but instead she felt the need to disappear from the place. But for now, she was to stay put until the bandits brought it all to an end.

Darkness slowly crept in, consuming the entire farmstead and wrapping it in such a dark and disturbing, yet beautiful night. The starry sky was lighting up the earth beneath it. But for Zikra, the night smelled of death, the stench of corpses filled the air, and the bandits, now having looted everything there was to loot, were packing up and leaving in their vehicles. As they left, Zikra crawled out from underneath the house, and started collecting all that she could find. As the sun rose, her bags were packed and she was ready to leave, not only leave the farmstead, but also to leave her old life behind, to start a new one. Perhaps as a mercenary, or maybe as a member of the military to help governing the New world. There were so many possibilities for such a talented and capable youngster, but there were also many dangers. But from all the jobs that crossed her mind, there were none that piqued her interest such as that of a Courier. Couriers were proven warriors and skilled negotiators, both owls and tigers. Their job was to deliver packages of utmost importance to the New

world's government, but also to rich clients. However, there was a catch, for one to become a Courier they had to kill a current Courier or be such a famous and skilled warrior that the New Express would hire you. This meant that one had not only to earn their fame but also make their way to the Golden City. And with that in mind, the young Zikra started her own long journey to the Golden City...

When her memory started fading, she snapped back to reality and observed the man standing, or rather sitting, in front of her. A Courier. But not just a courier, but the most famous Courier, the Survivor. His name was unknown, his identity hidden as were the human traits he once possessed. As forgotten as the Old world was now.

He looked down at his hand, now completely covered in blood and resting upon the wound. "It seems as if I'm not going to be here to tell you the whole tale..." he reached for her hand and put a small coin in it, squeezing it in her hand.

"Remember, the lighter and the name Courier, it will open all doors of the Wasteland for you. This coin is the proof that you're the current Courier."

Zikra looked at him and nodded, pulling out her pistol and handing it to him, having a feeling he'd rather end his life by shooting himself and dying on his own terms because, quite frankly, it's what she would've done, too. The Survivor took the pistol and nodded, too. She got up and started walking away from him, walking towards the exit. A sole gunshot was heard behind her, as she looked behind, she saw the corpse of a once young adult whom the war turned into a battered old man.

"He was no older than eighteen when the war started, when the New dawn came. But... he did live through eighteen years of peace." she thought self-pityingly as she walked away, walking into a new day, a new dawn, and a new world.

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## ELTHAN

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Do you ever find yourself looking through a window and making fake scenarios in your head while wishing they were real? If the answer is yes, you are very likely to possess a rare gift we call imagination, which is a key to a whole new, fantastic world. While daydreaming, you can visit a lot of different towns and cities such as Elthan. Elthan is a town situated far away in your consciousness. Few people know about it and live in it. It is special because no normal human lives there, only the creatures created by human imagination.

One of the creatures that lives in Elthan is Hulus, a big, strong handsome man. His strong hands that could take over the world are kept in his pockets. A creature hidden behind a sad but stern look permanently spread across his face often scares others away at first, until they meet him. Other creatures in Elthan often describe him as a lovely, nurturing soul built by sadness. He has been a resident in Elthan ever since his human form was fifteen. Imaginative towns do not exist as normal ones do - to see them, you must daydream. Not everyone can do that; only gifted minds are creative enough to imagine them. Those lucky enough to be gifted with an imaginative personality are separated into two groups: some are born with it, and others get it to cope with and run away from reality.

Hulu was created when his human form, Jack, was fourteen and it spent a year wandering around the imaginary world before finding Elthan. Jack was born into a neglectful family who left him to his grandparents as soon as he was born. Fortunately, his grandparents were good, caring people, and they took great care of him. His parents could not and did not want to take care of him because drugs and alcohol were more important to them. Jack lived with his grandparents until they died when he was fourteen. After, he was given into foster care. The first family he was given to was not good. They would often fight and take out their anger on him, but he never complained because they were all he had. Instead, he learned to deal with it and keep quiet. Once, one of the older foster sisters took Jack for a ride with a promise to get some ice cream. He was excited; after all, who does not like ice cream and a peaceful night ride? But as soon as they set off, she gave him a bottle of juice to

drink. Even though he felt uneasy about her sudden offer, he drank the juice, trusting her. It was dark outside, and the car suddenly stopped in the middle of nowhere. Jack does not remember much, only that he started to feel sleepy not long after he had drunk the juice, but he knows no one can touch his legs anymore without him being frozen in fear. When he woke up at the hospital, the doctors told him everything was going to be all right. They all knew what had happened, they saw his bloody trousers and underwear; his foster sister had drugged and abused him. An old lady called an ambulance after she saw him sitting at the side of the road confused about where he was and shaking with fear.

That's when Hulus was created, he was Jack's only friend. Hulus was everything Jack has ever wanted to be, he was strong, tall, and kind. He spent his days helping others in Elthan: he helped build a school and a playground. There is no crime in Elthan, no criminals or politics, it was a town led by love and friendship. Everyone is everybody's friend there, they all care for each other. When walking along the streets, you can hear birds singing. Everywhere you go, you can see people dancing and smiling. Elthan is an imaginative town, so pollution and global warming do not exist. People do not get hit by cars and there are no car crashes. Hulus wakes up every morning with the warmth of spring sunshine gently kissing his head. He does not work as money does not exist in Elthan. He spends his days hanging out with other people, they take care of him as if he were their child. Hulus lives freely but still, he holds Jack's fears in him ever since he has been created. He fears trusting anybody again.

One day Hulus decided to visit a local bakery to buy himself a croissant to eat while sipping his coffee at his favorite café. When he sat down at his favourite table, he noticed a girl he had never seen before serving and talking to others. At first glance he thought she was cute, her big moth wings folded behind her back and her moth ears hiding under her curly brown hair. Hulus, being the creature he is, shied at the idea of making a conversation with her. Fortunately, she introduced herself. "Hi, I am Apheogen, nice to meet you. What would you like to drink today?" she said while smiling at him. "Oh, hi. My name is Hulus and I would like a coffee, please," he said shyly while trying not to blush. "Coming right up." Apheogen got right onto making his coffee. After they made some small talk about her moving to Elthan and how things around here worked. Hulus found out her human form is called Lucy and that Apheogen used to live in another town close to Elthan, but she got bored of it and moved. He also learned how passionate she was about art and decorating spaces. She made a deal with the café owner to redecorate it while helping out as a

part-time waitress. That is how the two of them met. Hulus felt something special between them, but he decided to keep it to himself. He feared letting his guard down, so he told himself it was not anything serious. Others noticed a change, though. They saw how he smiled every time he greeted them, which was something he had never used to do, or how he walked just a little faster when going to that café. Soon he started bringing two croissants instead of just one how he used to before. Apheogen, on the other hand, tried so hard not to think of her newly found friend, but every time she did, a smile would make its way across her face. Every day she would greet Hulus, most days covered in paint from painting the walls. He always made comments about how good the walls looked and how amazing her painting skills were. It was, as poets would say, young love. They did not see it that way though, they saw each other as great friends, nothing less, nothing more. Others would not agree, and they talked about how great of a pair they would make.

They spent their evenings talking to each other about all kinds of different things. After a few years, their friendship was still blooming with love, so Hulus decided to tell her about how he was created. It was a normal day; they went to the beach as usual and talked about the purpose of their existence. That is when he told her about Jack. She stared at him in pure disbelief of how badly he was treated and just hugged him. Later, she opened up and told him about Lucy. Apheogen was created as soon as Lucy was born. They were best friends growing up. She did not have many friends because people thought she was strange. As she grew older, she started to hate how different she was. She could not make conversations with people and all she would do was draw in the safety of her own little room. Apheogen is a creature that looked like a moth, that's because Lucy grew up in a room that had a big moth painted on one of the walls. Her mum had painted it before she was born. Apheogen became all Hulus cared about at that moment.

They continued to hang out almost every day until one day Hulus decided to risk everything and ask Apheogen out for a date. She happily agreed to go. He took her to one of their favorite restaurants and gave her a gold necklace with a heart on it. They had so much fun sharing food and enjoying each other's presence. It was weird for Hulus to experience love for the first time. He felt like he was floating every day, every struggle he had to go through was easier. Finally, he enjoyed waking up every day and so did Apheogen. The two of them were a great couple; they did not argue often, and if they did, they would solve it quickly. It was truly magical to watch them grow up together. When they were in their late twenties, he decided to propose to her. He made a deal with the café owner where they met to decorate a table with roses and

candles. The table looked like a love letter a hopeless romantic would write to their lost lover; it was magical. In the middle of the table there was a bouquet of her favorite flowers decorated with gold glitter to match with the ring he had bought. The ring was one of a kind, handmade just for her. It had a gold band with their initials engraved on the inside and a pair of wings holding a shiny pink stone in the middle. The wings looked like the ones she had on her back. What most of us do not realize is that proposals in the imaginary world have a much greater value than in the human one. Here, in the imaginary world, only some are lucky enough to do it. You see, once you have kissed your soulmate, a tattoo that only you can see appears on your wrist, giving you the location and directions on how to find the ring. You cannot just buy a ring; the legend says an old wizard makes them in his garage. No one knows where this wizard lives or how he knows for whom is making the ring. They only know he uses magic to do it. Not everyone manages to find their soulmate, so you can imagine how happy Hulus was when he noticed that tattoo.

When Apheogen came to the café thinking the owner called her to help paint another wall, she was surprised to see Hulus there waiting for her, dressed in a tailored suit that suited him perfectly. She was confused because she did not expect him to be there. Hulus then gave her one of her favorite dresses because he had known she would come dressed in her old denim overalls and she would be sad if she was wearing dirty clothes in her engagement pictures. After she changed and they started eating their favorite croissants, Hulus dropped down on one knee and proposed to her. He, of course, did not just ask her to be his wife but he gave her a beautiful speech about how much he appreciated and loved her. Happy tears rolled down her cheeks as soon as he started to speak, and she just nodded since she was speechless. They spent the rest of the night talking about their future and just loving the feeling of their love filling the café. They created their own love-filled galaxy that made them be better each day, like two creatures surrounded by an endlessly growing cloud of love. Just like each princess finds her prince and each villain finds the love they are willing to sacrifice the world for, Hulus found Apheogen, his true soulmate. It was not a relationship built on greed or lust, but one built on safety and love. After all, soulmates are meant to last forever and sometimes love can fix even the most broken of hearts.

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# ENIGMA IN BLACK

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## Chapter I.

It was a nice day...so far,  
the weather forecast mentioned that rain was coming at 12:06 AM.  
at 12:07 AM, a couple of droplets landed on the window of my manager's office,  
where I was currently. I zoned out and gazed at the rain, which was getting stronger  
by the second.

"Eh, I'm sorry," I said rather politely. "What was it you were saying?"

My manager Corey sighed. "I was saying, Max. That you're no longer needed at  
this job."

I stared at him blankly for a couple of seconds.

"...You're fired, Max."

After he said that, I leaned back in my chair a bit. I mean it's not like I wasn't ex-  
pecting this, I know I wasn't doing a good job, but I wasn't expecting to get fired so  
soon. I really wasn't.

Also, it's not like I cared too much, I mean a crappy burger place isn't going to  
get me too much money, so maybe this was a chance to aim for something better  
perhaps.

They sat in embarrassed silence, watching the raindrops bruise the flowers out-  
side.

"Max, Hello?"

"Ah, erm right, sorry. I'll just...er, get my stuff and leave, eh? Oh, and can I keep  
the uniform?"

"If you must."

As I was walking out, Corey said something to me.

"You should make a more serious commitment to your work, this is just a fast  
food joint, but when you get a real job in the real world you can't misbehave and fool  
around."

he sighed. "I'm just saying, what if the world ended and it was your job to do  
something about it? You can't take everything so lightly, Max."

He was trying to make some stupid connection with me, but I was not in the mood, I replied with a quick “Yeah, thanks.” and made my way out.

Some time ago, well, 2 weeks ago to be precise, I got expelled from my college, Hawking College. I *really* don’t want to go into the details, but they said it was something about “my grades failing to meet academic standards”

While I walked down the busy streets, I genuinely wondered what I was going to do with my life. I got to my house, well, it was more of a small confined space with a roof. The walls were peeling, the carpets were stained, and the lights were flickering. It was a dump.

I scrambled to get my keys out of my bag and unlock the door, I hurled my jacket and bag on the floor in a fit of rage, then crashed onto my mattress and promptly fell asleep.

I don’t remember when I fell asleep, however when I awoke I looked at the clock which displayed 11:53 AM- Halloween morning. I groaned while putting my hand on my forehead like I had woken up from a hangover. I got up from my mattress and dragged myself to my barely functioning bathroom. I splashed some water on my face and looked at myself in the mirror. I had dark circles under my eyes, and my long black hair hadn’t seen a hairdresser in a while; it was starting to go over my eyes.

As I stared at my disheveled reflection, a sense of realization washed over me. Maybe getting fired from that dead-end job and getting kicked out of college were the wake-up calls I needed.

Even after a whole day, the rain continued to tap against the window, providing a rhythmic backdrop to my contemplation.

I decided to take a shower, hoping it would make me feel better. I turned on the faucet and patiently waited for the water to get warm, but it never did. It was ice cold.

“Great, absolutely perfect,” I muttered. “The water heater must be broken again.”

I cursed and reluctantly took the shower, afterwards I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my waist then headed to my bedroom. I opened my closet, I had nothing to wear except my old uniform. I sighed and reluctantly put it on. I figured I might as well go out and look for a new job. Maybe I could find something better than flipping burgers.

I decided it was time to take Corey’s words to heart, not because he made some profound connection to the end of the world, but because he was right about one thing—I needed to make a serious commitment to my life.

I feel like I should have had *some* plan before I marched out the door, but nonetheless, I already had my jacket on and marched out the door with my bag in hand.



I pulled up my hood and started walking. I had no idea where I was going. I just followed the crowd of people who seemed to have a purpose in life. I felt like an outsider among them.

I got back very late, I went to five, maybe six different job applications.

I didn't get accepted in either of them. None of them had accepted me.

## Chapter II.

I didn't bother getting changed. I hurled myself onto my bed, I tried my best to doze off. I kept tossing and turning and remained unable to sleep.

I awoke at around 2:37 AM after a long insomniac night.

What woke me up was a horrible dehydration. I slowly lingered towards my kitchen to get a glass of water. I tried getting some shut-eye, but trying seemed to be of no use. Although I was horribly tired, I was unable to sleep. I sat on the couch and turned the TV on, my mind wandered off and I tediously scrolled through the dull TV channels. That's when I heard it.

a deafening bang.

a sound so sudden and intense that it echoed in the chambers of my consciousness. My heart was caught off guard, skipped at least seven beats, its rhythm disrupted by the unexpected intrusion. Instinctively, I clutched my chest, feeling the reverberations of the shock coursing through my body, tensing my muscles in response.

Once I had finally managed to calm down, the initial surge of panic subsided and my nerves began to settle, a sober realization crept in. It must have been a gunshot, I guessed, my mind rationalizing the abrupt disturbance. My theory brought a reluctant acceptance, a reminder that danger could lurk just around the corner in this shadowy part of town I called home.

I sat there for god knows how long, I emptily stared at the static of my television.

From the sound of the static, I made out another sound- the metal sound of the trashcans outside my house. I surmised it might have been those damn raccoons who always raided my garbage. I exhaled while getting a broom to drive them away.

The rain stopped abruptly as I stepped out.

Fumbling in the dim light, I reached for the barely functioning porch light, it flickered as I knocked over the trashcan, I'm not sure what my exact plan was.

I did in fact see a raccoon- the head of a raccoon.

A wave of nausea gripped me, I pressed my hand to my mouth as if I were about to puke. My eyes couldn't look away from the carcass, it looked like it had been torn apart by a wild animal. I held the broom tightly in my hands, unwilling to let go.

Out from the darkness emerged a tiny creature, it had the shape of a black cat, but with two large horns on its head. The thing had retractable claws and a pair of bat-like wings on its back. I can't forget its long demonic tail on its backside.

Its eyes had no pupils, no reflection. It was like looking into a void of nothingness, they were pure black.

Frozen in place, I stared wide-eyed at the creature. The rain, having abruptly ceased, left a haunting silence in its wake, broken only by the distant hum of the city and the occasional rustle of leaves disturbed by the creature's movements. The rational part of my mind struggled to comprehend the existence of such a being, while an irrational fear gripped my soul. The creature took a step forward. Panic surged within me and instinctively, I raised the broom in a feeble attempt to defend myself. The creature, however, showed no signs of aggression. This creature was not of this world. Its presence defied all logic.

I thought I was hallucinating due to my lack of sleep, I dropped my broom and rushed back inside. My back was pressed against the wall, I slid down and sat on the floor. My eyes grew heavy, suddenly- darkness.

### Chapter III.

I must have fallen asleep because I woke up hours later to something licking my face. I blinked and turned my head slightly to see the thing from last night right in my face, licking me like a goddamn dog.

I tried to remain calm as its long, demonic tail swayed gently as it continued to nuzzle against me, a stark contrast to the unsettling encounter of the previous night.

"So, I guess I'm not hallucinating..." I thought to myself while cautiously getting up.

I thoughtlessly reached my hand out to pet it, I felt the softness of its fur beneath my fingertips. With a hesitant touch, I traced the outline of the two large horns that adorned its head. It gave me a small bite on my finger.

I looked at my kitchen and saw the critter helped itself to the food in my fridge. I grumbled while picking up the remnant. I managed to make a somewhat decent breakfast from the leftovers.

Fast forward, as time passed, I will admit, this creature's bizarre appearance made me more worried than I initially described myself to be, I tried researching about it, but to no avail. Its habit of following me around made me feel like I unconsensually adopted this demon.

At first, I tried gently getting rid of it, I was kind of scared of it, and I honestly wasn't in the mood to be the parent of some otherworldly entity.

I hated how it stared at me during the night.

One night, as I was lying in bed I whispered into the darkness “What are you?” The creature tilted its head as if trying to understand my words. I sighed, realizing how futile it was to expect a straightforward answer from a creature that defied the laws of nature.

But, I did like how it sometimes sat next to me and we would both watch some cheesy comedies that were airing on TV.

It had been around two weeks since the creature infiltrated my home, it was now a constant part of my existence, its presence merging seamlessly with the flow of daily life. It no longer lurked in the shadows; instead, it walked beside me, a silent guardian of the enigmatic bond that connected us.

I initially tried naming it, but it wouldn’t respond to anything I’d say, so I just stuck with “The Creature”.

#### Chapter IV.

I found myself staring at my large wall clock, I don’t remember where I bought it. Actually, I don’t remember even *buying* it.

The clock was plain and simple, with a black outline and all the necessary clock features. I found myself staring at the clock hands, seamlessly watching them tick and hearing the sudden

“click...click...click..”

The clock reached 6:66 PM when both the handles stopped. They were frozen in place, and the sound of the ticking had stopped. I tried adjusting the hands, but they wouldn’t budge. Confused, I looked around the room in search of some sort of answer.

I found that everything had frozen in place; the leaves that were falling from the trees were left floating in the air, and my old radio, which was previously playing a song, it was Do You Believe in Magic by The Lovin’ Spoonful. Now the song seemed to have experienced a prolonged pause and was stuck on a single note. It sounded eerie and it creped me the hell out.

I saw The Creature was fine, it was moving normally and completely unaffected like me.

All of a sudden I felt like everything around me was getting sucked into a giant black hole. I clutched my eyes shut, and when I opened them I found I was...

Where was I?

I was in some sort of void, I could see my body and The Creature, but everything

around me was just black nothingness. Before I had time for another panic attack I heard my doorbell ring.

“my doorbell? what the hell is going o-”

before I could finish my sentence I turned around and saw an old wooden door in the middle of the void. I stopped talking and stared at it unable to do or say anything else.

it rang again.

With nothing else to do, I hesitantly opened the door.

On the other side is what I can only describe as a giant fly that was wearing an excessively large, black fur coat.

It had to bend down to get through the door, it reached out one of its 6 arms toward me.

I couldn't muster up a word as this thing shook my hand.

“Beezlebub.” it said while continuing to shake my hand “I understand you have something that belongs to the underworld, correct?”

“I- er, well you see, uhm... What?” I stuttered while trying to form a sentence.

The fly sighed as it snapped its fingers, creating two couches from thin air.

“Sit.” It said coldly.

Doing what I was told, I sat on the leather couch.

“I don't want to dwell too much on this, let's make this nice and easy, for the both of us.” He said.

“Return The Creature and Lord of Eternal Darkness, Prince of the underworld, Destroyer and Devourer of worlds and The Great Living Beast of the Shadow realm”

“The... What?”

Beezlebub pointed towards The Creature.

“I... wh- wait. Where am I?”

“You're in the middle of everywhere, a border between heaven and hell, a realm where nothingness prevails.

I don't want to cause a fuss here, hand over the Lord of Darkness, for armageddon cannot begin without it.”

I sat there, dumbfounded, trying to process the information I had just received. The Creature, my enigmatic companion, was apparently *not* just some odd creature but a significant entity with titles that sounded like they belonged to a fantasy novel.

“Why does armageddon depend on this... little kitty?” I finally managed to ask, my voice shaky.

Beezlebub leaned back on his couch, looking at me with what I assumed were eyes under the dark hood of his fur coat. “The Lord of Darkness is a key figure in the

cosmic balance. Its presence maintains the equilibrium between the realms. Without it, chaos ensues.”

I glanced at The Creature, who was now sitting on the floor, scratching its ear, seemingly unaffected by the heavy conversation. God, why did I have to get involved in this? I wish I just could have had a normal life.

“The Lord of Darkness has chosen to be with you. Perhaps it sees something in you that others don’t.”

I was flattered, but stayed silent, not knowing what to say.

“Hand it over... I can make you powerful, I can give you anything your nasty little heart desires.

Why wouldn’t you want to destroy this pathetic, sad excuse of a planet? Can’t you see how badly it’s treated you?”

I rubbed my temples, feeling a headache coming on. “What happens if I refuse to hand it over?”

Beezlebub’s expression turned serious. “The cosmic balance will be disrupted, and chaos will spill into your world. Wars, disasters, the unraveling of reality itself. It’s in your best interest to comply.”

He might have been bluffing, but I wasn’t sure. I looked again at The Creature, still seemingly uninterested in the conversation.

After a prolonged silence, the fly spoke again.

“I’m getting impatient human.” He crossed his legs.

I could tell he was getting more irritated as the seconds passed.

Sweating like crazy and already having accepted my fate I spoke out

“I refuse to hand it over”

...

“What. YOU HAVE JUST DISRUPTED THE COSMIC BALANCE OF THE UNIVERSE. KNOW U HAVE DOOMED THE WORLD. YOU WILL DI-”

The Creature meowed, interrupting his rant.

“meow”

“What. YOU CAN NOT BE SERIOUS”

“meow”

“AFTER SEVEN YEARS?”

the creature stayed silent.

They seemed to be having a conversation that I couldn’t understand.

Beezlebub let out an angry scream.

He breathed heavily, and after calming down he pointed to me and said:

“You. I don’t know *WHY* it likes you so much but know I will be coming for you in the near future. You have made your choice, but know this; you have just signed a contract with me. Be warned.”

With that the fly vanished, leaving behind a faint smell of sulfur. The void began to dissolve, and I found myself back in my living room, the clock ticking again, the frozen leaves falling outside.

Beezlebub was gone, and The Creature sat beside me, purring like an ordinary cat.

“Well, you *really* helped me today,” I said sarcastically.

I exhaled deeply and sat on my couch. The weight of the decision ahead hung in the air, and I knew I had to make a choice that would determine the fate of not just my world but countless others.

I glanced back at the clock, which now resumed its normal ticking.

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## FALLEN FOR YOU

---

It was a snowy day. I was sitting in my room all alone because my parents left for work. I was so bored, so I decided to call my friend Ivy. I sat there on my bed waiting for her to pick up the phone.

-“Hey.” said Ivy in a dull voice-

-“Hii! So I was thinking, do you want to come over to my house to hang out?”-

-“Suree. I will be there in 15 minutes.”-

-“Alright. Byeee! See you soon.”-

-“Okay, bye.”-

I was waiting, and waiting and then the doorbell rang.

-\*That must be her\* I thought to myself-

I rushed downstairs to open the door. It was her. I let her in, so she can get warm.

-“So, what are we going to do?” she asked-

-“I was thinking... maybe, if you want to... we could drink tea and try to write love stories.”-

-“Omg, that’s the best idea I ever heard from you, hahahah.”-

We both laughed. We sat down at the couch and started our stories.

The story begins...

Pandora was only a little girl when her father started his own company. He told her that if the company were successful, she would have to marry someone he chose.

A few years passed, and Pandora’s father’s company was now successful.

-“Pandora, it’s your birthday on Friday, aren’t you excited?” her friend Annie asked.-

-“Yeah, I guess.” Pandora said.-

-“You seem a little sad; are you okay?” her other friend London asked.-

-“I guess I’m just worried about something,” she answered. –

Her friends were really worried about her, but they knew it had to do something with her father.

-“Do you need some time for yourself?” London asked in a worried voice.-

-“Yeah, I do, “ she answered in a low voice.-

They left. She was all alone in her room. She started to cry in anguish. She was worried about her father's promise that he made when she was little.

There was a knock on the door.

-“Yes?”-

-“Miss Pandora, your father needs you in his office.” the maid said through the door.-

-“Tell him that I will come right away.”-

-“Alright miss.” -

Pandora wiped her tears and went to her father as he ordered.

She knocked on the door three times as a sign that it's her.

-“Come in, Pandora.” her father said through the door-

She opened the door and stood silent as she saw a young, tall man with brown hair standing beside her father, who was sitting in his chair.

-“Pandora. My daughter. Meet your future husband, Matthew.” her father said. -

She looked shocked at her father.

-“Are you serious?“, Pandora asked.-

-“Of course I am. I made a promise, didn't I?”-

The young man walked over to Pandora and kissed her hand.

-“Greetings, my love.” Matthew said.-

Pandora snatched her hand from him.

- “How dare you kiss my hand without my permission? You dirty man!” Pandora said furiously.

-“My apologies, my lady.” Matthew in a serious voice, as his ego was hurt.-

-“Pandora, Matthew, please go to the backyard and try to get to know each other better.” her father said.-

Pandora looked at Matthew and scoffed.

-“Let's go.” She said to Matthew.-

Matthew followed her to the backyard. Pandora stopped and looked at Matthew.

-“Just so you know, I'm doing this for my father. I will never love you. And I mean never.”-

Matthew looked at her with a serious face.

-“And you think I like you? Hah, yeah... No, I'm also doing this because of my family.” -

Pandora looked at him shocked, clueless what to say. She turned around and started to walk away from Matthew. He grabbed her hand.

-“Let me go,” Pandora said. -



-“No. You’re going to be my wife. I don’t want to have a toxic marriage.”-

Pandora snatched her hand back and started running away. She ran to her room, crying on the way. Some time passed, and there was a knock on the door. There were two slow knocks. Which meant it was her mother, Amelia.

-“Sweetheart, can I come in?” her mother asked-

-“Sure.” Pandora answered as she wiped her tears off. -

Amelia opened the door slowly.

-“Sweetheart, are you alright?” -

-“No...”-

-“You know your father is pretty harsh, but he only wants the best for you.” -

-“No. He wants what’s best for the company.” -

-“Pandora...”-

-“No, mom; save it. I know why he is doing this, so please... I’m not a little girl anymore; I know what’s happening.” -

Amelia looked shocked at Pandora.

-“Alright. I’m leaving you alone now.”-

Amelia left. Pandora lay on her big bed and stared at the ceiling. She was asking herself a bunch of questions. The main one was: why. She couldn’t get her head straight, so she decided to take a nap. She slept for the rest of the day.

\*The next day\*

-“Miss, can I come in?” the maid asked through the door. -

Pandora was woken up by the voice of the maid.

-“Just a second, please.” -

Pandora got up as fast as she could.

-“Come in.” -

The maid opened the door.

-“Good morning, miss. I was sent by your father to help you get dressed.” -

-“Oh alright. And why is that?” -

-“Miss, did you forget? Today is Friday, your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Oh, also, happy birthday, miss.” -

-“It’s Friday? Already? God, I forgot.” -

-“It’s alright, miss. We all forget this now and then.” -

-“Right...”-

-“Let’s get you ready now.” -

The maid helped Pandora get dressed and get ready for the big day.

-“Thank you, Margaret.” -

-“Of course, miss, that’s my job.” –

-“You can go now and tell my father that I will be down for breakfast in a few minutes.” –

-“Alright miss.” –

The maid left. Pandora looked at herself in the big mirror. She was thinking to herself,

-\*God, why me?\*-

After two minutes, she went downstairs to the dining room.

-“Father.”-

-“Pandora.”-

-“Matthew.”-

-“My love.”-

-“Mother.”-

-“Hello, sweetheart,” her mother said with a smile. –

They all sat down to eat breakfast.

-“Happy 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, sweetie.”-

-“Thank you, mom.” –

-“It’s your birthday?” Matthew asked. –

-“Yes. Yes, it is.” –

-“Well, then happy birthday.” –

-“Thank you.” –

They all ate. After that, Pandora’s father said that there would be a dinner party in honour of her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. And she would have to dance with Matthew, her future husband. Pandora didn’t like that idea, but she couldn’t say no to her father, so she agreed.

A few hours have passed, and Pandora has started to get ready for the dinner party. One maid was doing her hair while the other two were preparing her dress, and the fourth was doing her make-up.

She was so beautiful when they finished. The pretty pink, flowy dress matched perfectly with her dark brown hair and eyes that looked like they were full of honey.

In the other room, Matthew was also getting ready. Pandora’s father sent a maid to help him as well. He was wearing a black suit that went really well with his brown hair and dark brown eyes.

It was time for the dinner party. The guests started coming, and Pandora was already tired of how many people she had to greet. Her hand was hurting from how many hands she had to shake. Her fiancé, on the other hand, escaped the party and went to the garden.

-\*How dare he... Ugh, how many people are there?\*-

After some time, there was no one left to greet.

-“Finally.” She exhaled in relief.

Pandora was exhausted. All the guests were now sitting, waiting for the food. When it came, Pandora’s father stood up and started tapping his glass to get everyone’s attention.

-“Can I have your attention, please? Good evening, everyone. I hope you are enjoying this dinner party. I have an announcement for you all.” -

-“Pandora, Matthew, please stand up.”-

They both stood up.

-“Everyone, this is my daughter, Pandora, as you all know. And this handsome young man standing next to her is her fiancé.” -

Everyone started clapping and whistling. Pandora looked at everyone with sadness in her eyes.

The time for their dance came around. Pandora was nervous. Matthew and Pandora stood next to each other on the podium, waiting for the music to start.

When the music started, they started to dance elegantly.

Matthew’s hand was on Pandora’s waist. He was looking at her as if she were the only girl in this world. Pandora felt butterflies in her stomach but ignored them. When the dance was over they sat back down.

The dinner party was coming to an end. Everyone started leaving. Pandora was so tired that she couldn’t even walk, or was it the number of drinks she drank? She wasn’t sure. She reached her room and laid in her bed. She was too tired to take off her clothes, so she just decided to sleep in them.

\*Next morning\*

Pandora woke up with a slight pain in her head. She wasn’t sure why it was hurting. And she didn’t even care. No one came to check on her; that was something she was worried about. She decided to get dressed and go downstairs when she was done.

She put on a purple lightweight dress and went downstairs. There was no one there. She looked at the clock. It was half past 8.

-\*There is no way everyone is still asleep\* she thought to herself.-

There was someone... and that someone was her fiancé.

-“What are you doing up?” her fiancé asked.-

-“A better question is: What are you doing here and where is everyone?”-

-“Still asleep.” -

-“How? My father always gets up at 5 o’clock.”-

-“I don’t know,” he shrugged his shoulders.-

-“What did you do?” -

-“Me? I didn’t do anything.” -

-“Yeah, yeah, like I believe you.” -

They were looking at each other for a few minutes. It seemed like time had stopped. Pandora felt her face blush. Matthew looked at her with his siren eyes. He was looking at her so passionately. She couldn’t focus because of his look.

As he looked at her she felt butterflies in her stomach. A lot of them. She was trying to compose herself but she just couldn’t.

-“Matthew. What did you do.” -

-“I. Didn’t. Do. Anything.” -

-“Ughh, your so annoying.” -

-“That’s not true. I can be fun.” -

-“Yea like I believe that” Pandora rolls her eyes-

Matthew grabbed her hand and started dragging her along.

-“WHAT ARE YOU DOING!” She yelled at him.-

He didn’t care that she was yelling at him. He dragged her to the car and sat her down in it.

-“WHERE ARE WE GOING” -

-“You will see my love” -

He started the car and started driving. He was driving so fast. Pandora got so scared she was begging him to slow down, but he didn’t listen. Instead, he started speeding even more.

-“MATTHEW, PLEASE SLOW DOWN! I BEG YOU! I’M SCARED!” -

-“Isn’t this fun my love? Why are you scared? When you’re with me you don’t have to be scared; I will protect you. Okay?” -

Pandora looked him in the eyes and nodded. Matthew saw the fear in her eyes and he slowed the car down.

-“Thank you...” she said with a low voice-

Matthew looked at her and gave her a big smile.

-“You’re welcome, sweetheart.” -

He was still driving. But the tension got worse. Pandora felt even more butterflies in her stomach. She just couldn’t sit next to him; she couldn’t even think straight when he was around. There was so much going on. He looked her in the eyes.

-“Pandora...” -

She turned her face to him.

-“Yes?-

-“I... I love you...” he said in a gentle voice.-

She was shocked.

-“You what?“-

-“I love you... okay? Don't be shocked I mean aren't you happy that I love you?“-

-“I-I don't know.“ She stutters-

Matthew looked at her with sadness. He was hurt..., really hurt - so he just kept quiet. For the rest of the ride, they didn't talk. It was noon when they got back to the mansion. The maids and everyone were awake. But there was a twist. Matthew told everyone that he would take Pandora for a ride and that everyone else should decorate the dining room for Pandora's surprise. They walked into the mansion and Matthew covered Pandora's eyes and took her to the dining room, where he uncovered her eyes. Pandora was shocked to see her two best friends, her parents, and everyone else in that house.

-“SURPRIIIIISEEEEE!” Everyone shouted.-

Pandora's eyes were full of tears.

-“Thank you so much guys...” she started crying from happiness.-

They all sat down at the table and started talking. Pandora was curious so she asked who planned all this.

-“So who planned all this?“ Pandora asked London.-

-“You really don't know?-

-“No? Who is it? Please, tell me.“-

-“It was Matthew, of course.“-

-“Wait, what!?! Really? You are kidding, right?-

-“No, why would I joke about that.“-

-“Oh, God...”-

It was raining outside. She wasn't sure where Matthew was. She was sorry for the response she gave him in the car. She couldn't stop thinking about that situation in the car.

-“Where is Matthew?“, Pandora asked.-

-“He is outside.“, Annie answered.-

Pandora got up and went out into the rain. She saw Matthew standing under a tree. She walked over to him.

-“Matthew, I'm so sorry for my response in the car.“-

-“It's alright; it's my fault anyway. Bay the way, I got you this.“ He picks a bouquet of pink tulips from the ground and hands them to her.-

-“Tulips? How did you know they’re my favourite flowers?-

-“I have my ways.”-

-“Right.. I’m still sorry for the response I gave you...”-

-“Look, it’s alright; I wasn’t really good to you from the start, but I was just trying to hide my feelings for you.”-

-“Well you aren’t the only one...”-

Pandora put the tulips down and held Matthew’s hands.

-“Dance with me.”-

Matthew was confused but did as she asked. They started dancing in the rain. They looked so cute together - like the most perfect couple in the whole wide world.

-“Matthew... I have fallen for you...”-

-“You have what?”-

-“God. I have fallen for you, Matthew.”-

He stood there in shock. He couldn’t believe the words he just heard. He didn’t know what to do first out of happiness - kiss her or hug her - so he decided to do both.

He hugged her tightly and kissed her passionately. She couldn’t believe his reaction but she kissed him back.

Annie and London were watching them from the window and just smiled at each other.

-“Finally they told each other”, said London.-

-“Yeah.” Annie answered.-

The couple stopped kissing.

-“I love you, Matthew.”-

-“And I love you more, my love.”-

To be continued...

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## FAR FROM THE HORIZON

---

Well-worn leather boots click as Gale continues to dart across the cobblestone streets of Port Suerte. He fiddles with the newly stolen ring tucked into his coat pocket, more concerned with the price he could pawn it for than the gaggle of wealthy old naval officers chasing after him. His shoulders slump in relief when he no longer hears the footsteps of his pursuers. Ducking into a narrow alleyway, he lets out an exasperated sigh and runs his fingers through the locks of cedar brown hair that adorn his head.

He passes through the alleyway and makes his way toward the town centre but is stopped dead in his tracks when he passes a board of wanted posters on the side of a building. A name all too familiar sticks out to him like a sore thumb, Reyes Esmé, the so-called demon of the west. The only friend he had ever had.

“Howdy, Gale.” A voice he knows startles him, “Reckon it’s been a spell, hasn’t it?” He whirls around to find a familiar tall, blond figure grinning at him. “That it has, my good friend. I see you’ve been busy painting a bullseye on your back.” Gale replies. The amber eyes behind dark, green-tinted sunglasses narrow, then a sly smile spreads across her face, the same one that’s on her wanted poster.

“I reckoned it was just a matter of time ‘fore our trails crossed once more, and lo and behold, I was right.” Reyes mused. “That you were, Reyes. However, I am curious as to how might a gunslinger without a breath of existence beyond New Mexico find herself on an island in the Lesser Antilles?” Gale questions. “Well, I may or may not have accidentally hopped aboard a trading vessel while dodgin’ the law down in Texas.” She shrugs. Gale gives her a look of disbelief and then laughs “Of course you got here in a manner not even a loon would think of!” Reyes rolls her eyes. “So, what brings you to these here neck of the woods?” she looks behind him and pauses, “And who are these... erm, friends of yours?” “Who-” Gale starts and then turns around to see two strangers, about his age, standing in the alleyway and staring at the two of them. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen these people before.” Gale says, weary of the strangers looking at them.

The young man is broad shouldered and of average height with piercing almond shaped eyes and black hair tied back into a short ponytail, revealing a determined face. The girl beside him looks very similar to him save for the fact she is a bit taller and slimmer. Her hair is long and pin straight. Her brown eyes stare at them in curiosity. She wears a simple beige dress not unlike the ones that are sold in shops on the main street.

“Do y’all somthin’?” Reyes asked the strangers brashly. “My apologies, my brother and I are foreigners and we seem to have gotten lost.” the girl says politely, “We are looking for an inn.” she adds. Gale nods, “There’s one not from here. Come along, this way.”

the trio follows him up to a quaint building the sign above it reads ‘Santiago’s: tavern and inn’ But before they can enter a voice scares the group “You!” The voice exclaims as a dagger flies through the air just barely missing Reyes “You’re the little gunslinger with the high price above your head, I’d bet I’d make a pretty penny out of handing you over to the authorities.” The voice continues. The dim streetlights reveal the threatening figure, a tall woman with short black hair and fierce eyes. She seems young but far older than the group in front of her.

Gale feels sweat pooling on his face but speaks “M-Miss I’m quite sure there are far better ways to make an even greater amount of money.” He stammers nervously. “And what on Earth could that be? You gonna rob an admiral or some other rich idiot who thinks he owns the world?” the woman cocks an eyebrow at him and smirks. “Y-yes, actually!” Gale strutters as the Reyes and the siblings stare at him. “Heh, your funny.” She smiles, “Now then, go on with you and let me handle this situation in peace.” she says, eyeing Reyes pointedly. “I’m serious!” Gale says “There’s a horrid old bloke living on this island, Admiral James Cadell, he lives in a mansion on the island. It probably has ten times the fortune inside then the measly amount you’d get for my friend here!”

“Well, well ain’t that the offer of the century. Tell you what you little unlicked cub, if you and your little posse can help me pick the place apart, I’ll let you leave with your lives. We got a deal?” The older woman smirked offering her hand out to him.

Gale is trapped between a rock and a hard place. On the one side Reyes would keep her head but on the other he would have to force two innocent strangers to go on a potentially extremely dangerous heist.

Before he has the chance to answer the black-haired boy interjects “We’ll do it.” His sister simply yet resolutely nods. “Well, it wouldn’t sit right with us to rope in unsuspecting folks like yourselves into our predicament.” Reyes quickly tells them.



“So now we got ourselves a group, eh?” the woman laughs, “Well that makes things much easier, doesn’t it? Well let’s get down to business, shall we?” She gestures to the door and all four walk into Santiago’s tavern and inn.

As soon as they enter, they notice the cacophony coming from inside the bar area. The loud voice of a barmaid booms as she steps onto the small stage that sits at the far wall of the bar “May I have your ear for a moment, good folks?” The bar immediately goes so quiet you could hear a pin drop. “Alrighty, now I have some most exciting news! The honourable Admiral James Cadell will make an appearance in our humble inn this Friday to give a speech about his efforts during the battle of Tonkin River 23 years ago!” There are wild cheers as everyone stands up and starts applauding, “As such, we’ll be serving a specially prepared buffet from 5pm till 7pm!” the barmaid then stepped off the stage.

The group of five sits down at a table and orders food. As they wait for their order the older woman spoke up “My name is Hai Jin, and I’d like to know yours before we continue on with our planning.” The rest of the group tell their names, the siblings revelling themselves to be twins, Ryūji and Rika.

They continue to talk amongst themselves before heading to individual rooms in the inn. Their plan was simple, on Friday at 7pm just as the sun has set, they would enter the mansion, gather all the documents pertaining to the company, collect any wealth the admiral had, then make a run for port where they would board a ship that Hai Jin apparently owns and head to the shores of Mexico to pawn it all off. The heist itself should take less than 3 hours.

They spent the majority of the next day gathering intel and scouting the surrounding area. The large mansion stood at the edge of a small forest which would allow the group to enter through the back of the estate without being spotted. As dusk fell on the day after that, the plan was set in motion.

They decided that Gale would head to the back entrance of the mansion with Hai Jin while the other three split off to avoid detection and scout around to find a good entry point. They waited until the time was right before taking off on foot towards the house. The house sat in front of them towering over everything else in sight, its tall stone walls standing firm. Behind the mansion itself stretched a bountiful garden filled with orchids, lilies and other such various flowers.

Upon reaching the front door, they all stopped short. Gale took a deep breath trying to calm himself. Then slowly walked up to the large wooden doors and pulled out his lock picking tools. He tried after much struggling and fiddling around he managed to get the lock open.

Suddenly someone grabbed him from behind, twisting his arm tightly and kicking him off balance sending him crashing into the ground. Gale takes his chance to stand and opens the door only to be greeted by multiple guards armed with muskets ready to shoot at whoever dared try and come near the mansion. “What in the hell is going on here?!” Gale yells trying to gain control over the situation but to no avail.

Hai Jin swiftly made her way to the top of the stairs leading down to the main hall shouting for the rest of the group. When they were halfway down the stairs another guard comes charging at them brandishing his sword. “Hold it right there! You can’t go any further.” he says. With that another two guards came charging at them as well.

Hai Jin shouts to Gale, “Go! I’ll handle them, you go find the rest!” Without hesitation Gale quickly runs past the guards and out of sight. Meanwhile, Hai Jin took advantage of the distraction and jumped to the left and around the corner out of site. She quickly dispatches the remaining guards by shooting them with her revolver.

After doing so she gives chase to Gale who has now reunited with the rest of the team. They decide to split off, take as much as they can carry and meet back up in the gardens. Gale and Ryūji were to head to the master bedroom, Reyes and Rika planned to go towards the drawing room while Hai Jin took on the treasury.

The boys immediately made their way up the grand staircase. Ryūji and Gale opened the door to the master bedroom only to see one figure lying face down on the bed fully dressed. Upon turning him over they discovered it to be Admiral Cadell’s wife, Adelaide Cadell. She lays motionless, her skin pale as alabaster, her limbs limp at her sides. But not until the boys saw that her pillow was stained a sickly crimson did they realize what had happened and what will happen. She was dead; and they would be blamed.

At that moment an explosion tore through the master bedroom, debris rained down from the ceiling onto them covering them with dust and smoke. It was too dark to see anything, but they managed to run to the door at the left wall of the grand bedroom. They had seeming entered a small study with stacks of paper piled in organized manner atop the sturdy, wooden desk. They searched every drawer and shelf but found nothing except for some files all labelled ‘CADELL’ that bore the dates 1848-1870. However, upon opening the last file, they read a document addressed to the Navy Department entitled: ‘R.I.V.E.R.’

Before they could open it, whoever caused the explosion had entered the study. “Surrender your weapon.” the mysterious assailant said. In response Gale drew his guns and shot at him. To his surprise he missed and hit a vase shattering it, creating a small, black stain on the carpet. Ryūji drew his sword and swung at their assailant.

The assailant dodged the blade, slashed Ryūji across the chest with a dagger and began to flee.

As he attempted to catch up with the assailant he fell to his knees in pain from the wound; just then Gale made his move. He grabbed the man and threw him across the room where they both crashed into a bookshelf. Their adversary recovered first and turned around swinging his fist at Gale, who blocked and kicked the man instead.

Just then the rest of the group arrived, having been drawn to the loud noises coming from the master bedroom. Rika focused on getting her brother on his feet again while Hai Jin lunged at Gale's attacker. While this was happening, Reyes dealt with any guards trying to enter the room.

Hai Jin kicked the man at the back of his head, right where his cerebellum is, rendering him unconscious. The group then swiftly made their way out of the mansion, Rika carrying Ryūji on her back. They ran through the gardens making their way down to the shore.

Once there, they quickly head to port and on to Hai Jin's vessel. Ryūji's wound is tended to as Gale explains everything that had happened to the others. He showed them the strange files he'd found about Admiral Cadell's real identity: Emanuel Homer McCalla. They soon learn that after he had returned home from The Battle of Tonkin River, he seized control of the great shipping company 'Siempre Amaratado'. And as if that wasn't bad enough, 'Siempre Amaratado' was linked to a massive crime ring spanning the entire world.

"What are we gon' do now?" asked Reyes. "The original plan still stands, we're sailing to Mexico, whatever you do after is your own choice. I am going to continue investigating this." answered Hai Jin. The rest of them stayed silent until Gale spoke up "I'll join you. I don't really have anywhere to go anyways." "Then I will too!" spoke up Reyes. "I suppose I and Ryūji could also join you." Rika added. "Well then, looks like we have a lot to do then." said Hai Jin jovially.

And so, they sail on to Mexico, excited to see where the wind will take them.... together.

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## FINAL DECISION

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I opened my eyes. It was night. The stars lit up the sky, the moon was the brightest ever. I didn't know who I was. I looked around. I was in an evergreen forest. The forest was not ordinary. The trees were huge, at least 20 meters in height. A thick fog hung over the trees. I could barely see the bushes and ferns, which were the size of horses. Everything was covered with snow. To my left, I was disturbed by some kind of light. I looked down. I saw a small luminous mushroom, dark green in color.

Green color signifies harmony and balance, symbolizes peace, renewal and hope. I wondered how I knew so much about the color green. The moment I closed my eyes just for a second, I saw myself admiring the greenery and I realized that green is my favorite color. Which meant that the first bit of my memory came back to me. I saw another mushroom on my right. Also, in front of both mushrooms, on the left and right, there were many other mushrooms. I followed each mushroom with my eyes and saw that they formed a path. It was a path of green glowing mushrooms. After that, I looked behind me. I saw only thick fog. I didn't see any mushrooms. I realized that there was no path there and that I had to move forward. I looked at the shape of the mushrooms a little more. Each mushroom was different and special, each in its own way. There were three types of mushrooms. The first mushroom was the largest and its tip was pointed. The second mushroom was medium in size and had a circle on top. The third mushroom was the smallest and had a rounded top. In that order, in which I arranged them, the biggest, middle and smallest, they formed a contrast, which made up that path. I decided to touch both mushrooms on the left and right at the same time. Firstly, I chose the first biggest mushrooms. When I touched them, a portrait of a man appeared before my eyes. The man was about 40 years old. He had brown hair and green eyes. Just as I touched the largest mushrooms, I touched the medium mushrooms. Before my eyes, I saw a portrait of a woman who was about 30 years old. She had brown hair and blue eyes. As well as the largest and medium mushrooms, I decided to touch the smallest mushrooms too. I saw a portrait of a girl who was about 18 years old. She had brown hair, but one eye was green and the other blue. I started to touch the other mushrooms as well, regardless of the fact

that they were lined in the same order. Of course, nothing happened. I remembered the portraits of the people I had visualized and I had a feeling as if I had seen them somewhere, but I couldn't remember anything. In order to find out more, I decided to take a detailed look at each mushroom. But a voice interrupted.

"Iris... Why did you do that?" - said a woman's voice uncertainly.

"Is that how we raised you?" - said a male voice angrily.

"Ugh... What are those voices in my head?" I asked myself, feeling scared, but no one answered me.

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I looked at the path again and decided to follow it because I wondered where it would take me. After a couple of hours of walking, I came to a frozen lake. The path led by the lake, but I wanted to get to the end of the path faster. I went to the lake and I started running on the ice. The ice started breaking behind me and I accelerated even more. After a moment, the ice broke under my feet and I fell into the lake. In the lake, I heard some rapid heartbeat sounds. I didn't know if it was my heartbeat or if it was just in my head, like those voices from a while ago. I started drowning. At one point I thought it was all over. I reached the very bottom of the lake. Around my legs, I felt something tangled. I opened my eyes and saw huge algae. The algae lifted me to the surface and put me back on the path.

"Thank you very much, you saved my life."

"Don't stray from the path Iris..." - the algae returned to the bottom of the lake.

"Huh? My name is Iris. Hmm...odd."

When the algae were gone, I wanted to try something. I decided to get off the path just a little bit. The moment I moved away from the path, the mushrooms turned black. Black is said to be the color of death. It is a mysterious color and is associated with fear of the unknown. At that moment I closed my eyes. I saw myself studying the various meanings of all colors on my cell phone. Another part of my memory came back. Algae were right, I must not deviate from the path. Also, because of the change in color of the mushrooms to black, I decided to be much more careful. As I walked along the path, I kept thinking about that name in my head. I wondered why they had called me Iris. I stopped thinking so much. The birds started singing, and listening to their song I stopped thinking about the name. I noticed that there were no

mushrooms in front of me, but I was still in the forest. I looked down. I was at the very edge of the canyon. I turned around. The mushrooms turned black. When I started to go back to the path, I heard the ground breaking under my feet. I jumped, and a part of the ground broke off. I managed to grab hold of an entire part of the ground. With all my strength, I climbed up and got back onto the path. In order to take a break, I sat down and looked up at the sky. It was sunrise. I looked down into the canyon. I couldn't see everything precisely because the fog hung over the canyon. I saw that the canyon was covered with ice and snow. At the very bottom, there were ice spikes. I thought - "I thank you God that I didn't fall into the canyon."

I was sure that this was not the end of the path. I looked at the other side of the canyon and saw the path. I didn't know how to get to the other side, so I decided to enjoy the sunrise a little. After a few minutes, the sun lit up the entire canyon. Then I saw something wonderful. The sun's rays drove away the fog. Now I saw the whole canyon. It was so big and the snow sparkled. The ice began to melt and so did the ice spikes. Soon, a river was created from the water. The snow didn't melt, but it was still beautiful. I fell asleep. In the dream, it looked like it was the end of autumn. All the leaves fell from the branches. I saw a girl who came out of the house. She was the girl whose portrait I had seen when I touched the smallest mushroom. The girl was angry and sad at the same time. She sat on the green motorcycle and started it, but forgot to put the helmet on her head. I don't know why, but she was driving very fast on the road. It started to rain and the road became wet and dangerous. She lost control of the engine and landed in the canal. I only heard the loud thump of the engine in the canal. Then I woke up. The river had risen to the very top of the canyon by then, but that was not enough for me to get to the other side. I decided to put my foot over the river, of course in line with the path on the other side. Then a bridge of algae was created. So, I crossed to the other side and continued moving along the path. Days and nights passed. It was about two months since I had been on the path. The snow started to melt, and the mushrooms turned bright green. Under the snow, the first harbingers of spring bloomed, climatically marking the end of winter and the beginning of spring. I still haven't reached the end of the path, but I had a kind of feeling that the end of the path was getting nearer. I came out of the forest. I was on a meadow that was full of harbingers of spring, whose flowering I watched with admiration. The meadow was full of primroses, snowdrops, water lilies and violets. Everything smelled so beautifully that I had to close my eyes to enjoy it. At that moment, I saw myself reading a book. The book was full of pictures of various flowers. I only studied primroses, snowdrops, water lilies and violets.

Primrose signifies young love. Snowdrop's soft white color represents Mary's purity, and the head hanging above the ground represents humility and devotion to God. Water lily symbolizes permanence and loyalty to true, spiritual values. Violet symbolizes courage. I was overjoyed because another part of my memory came back to me.

I continued moving along the path. The sun was shining on me, I became more and more tired. At least a month had passed since I had last slept. I didn't feel tired, but today I was just too weak to keep moving on the road. My vision blurred and I passed out. That was good because that way parts of my memory could come back to me. I fell into a deep sleep. I dreamed of a little girl telling her school failures and successes to her parents. Her parents were the same man and woman I saw in the portraits. Of course, they were a little younger. The girl was identical to the girl from the portrait and the one who had the accident. For failures, the girl was punished by being locked in a room and not allowed to eat for the whole day. For success, they wouldn't even look at her. She never received praise from her parents. She was depressed every day. To cheer herself up, she studied the meanings of colors and her favorite flowers. Her favorite flowers were: primrose, snowdrop, water lily and violet. She was lounging in nature and admiring the greenery, which meant that her favorite color was green. Regarding school successes and failures, she did not know which grade would satisfy her parents. That grade certainly didn't exist, since they were never satisfied with what she got. Years and years passed, but parents have not changed. One day, she gave up studying forever. She didn't care about anything. She learned to be punished, but that was why she didn't eat for days. When she turned 18, she went to get a tattoo on her left shoulder. The tattoo was an iris flower next to a lynx. Green glowing mushrooms were on him. A flower and a lynx stood on the inscription. The inscription read I + RIS. Suddenly it was as if I knew what those letters symbolized. I symbolize the iris flower, and RIS symbolizes the lynx, which Croats call 'ris' in their language. The day after, the parents found out about the tattoo and scolded her. The girl did not sleep or eat all day because of sadness. The next day at school, due to lack of food and sleep, she collapsed and ended up in hospital.

The doctor came and asked the parents - "How is it possible that the girl hasn't eaten for days?"

The parents answered - "We don't know. She always gets to eat." - of course this was one of their lies so that they wouldn't end up in prison for abusing a child.

The doctor said – “Okay. The girl will be in a short coma. She has to stay here for a couple of weeks so that she can be strong again... After that she can go home.” The parents left without a word. After three weeks, the girl woke up.

The nurse spoke loudly - “Doctor! Doctor! She woke up!”

The doctor came quickly and said - “You finally woke up, Iris. I’m glad you recovered. Please tell me, did your parents abuse you?”

I finally found out the girl’s name.

Iris said. - “No. Why would they?” - a sad smile appeared on her face.

The doctor knew she was lying, but there was nothing he could do. Iris was released from the hospital. Her parents didn’t punish her for a whole month, as if they cared at least a little about her. It was December 21, the day before the beginning of winter. Iris sneaked out of the house. She started the engine and then she was driving the motorcycle at full speed without a helmet. And then Iris had an accident. That was the accident I had dreamed about before, which meant that now I dreamed how and why the accident had happened. I woke up from my dream. I had been sleeping for at least a week, if not more. What I noticed, Iris and I were the same. We like the color green, we study colors and flowers: primrose, snowdrop, water lily and violet. Somehow, I thought more and more that I was Iris and remembered the algae had called me Iris. I remembered the tattoo. I looked at my left shoulder and I had the same tattoo.

In an uncertain voice I said – “This is not possible. I’m not Iris, am I? I don’t believe in that.”

I stood up. I saw a deciduous forest in front of me, but it was not ordinary. The trees were ten meters high, and the leaves were bright green. Suddenly I felt such happiness and joy, I decided to run through the forest. While I was running, I looked up at the beautiful treetops, but I noticed that the mushrooms were turning bright green. I knew the end of the path was coming. Soon I felt water under my feet, I stopped. I looked down and I saw a stream. At that moment, I looked at my reflection in the stream. I was identical to Iris, but I had cuts on my face.

I said - “I’m not Iris.”

After that I saw that the path continued across the stream, but the mushrooms turned white. The color white is associated with light, goodness, innocence, purity and virginity. Unlike black, it has a positive connotation. I crossed the stream. I saw that the mushrooms stopped by a stone, which was the size of a sheep. There was a flower on the stone. When I got to the stone, I saw that it was an iris so I touched it. At that moment I understood the meaning of my path. I kept telling myself I



wasn't Iris, I didn't accept who I was. When I started my journey it was December 22, the beginning of winter. When I saw the harbingers of spring, it was February. The snow started to melt and it was the beginning of spring. After more days and nights passed, the spring passed and ended at the beginning of this deciduous forest. The beginning of the deciduous forest is the beginning of summer, June 20. This meant that I had traveled from December 22 until June 20, I had traveled for six months and two days. In that moment, the world shattered into a thousand pieces.

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Everything became black, I closed my eyes out of fear. I heard some voices. I opened my eyes and saw a lynx, just like my tattoo, only it was the size of a horse.

The lynx said – “Hello Iris.”

After that he stopped at a green door that was full of glowing green mushrooms. The door opened and I saw myself awake, lying in a hospital bed. My parents were hugging me.

The doctor came and said “Unfortunately, even though the girl woke up from a coma, she has to undergo an operation to remove pieces of broken ribs from her lungs. It will be expensive.”

The parents agreed to it and sold everything they had, but it was not enough. My operation was not performed and I passed away. The door closed. I heard another voice. It was a black horse that was covered in glowing water lilies and algae.

He said – “Iris, do you remember the algae that helped you on your way?” The horse stopped by another door that was blue and covered with glowing water lilies. The door opened and I saw that I had passed away in the hospital. My parents were crying, but soon my younger sister was born. They named her Lily, after a water lily flower. Lily didn't know about me, when she turned 18 the parents took her to my grave. She was angry because they hadn't told her about me before, but she got over it. The next day she went to get a tattoo. It was a black horse with glowing water lilies, and under it was the inscription LILY, like a water lily. The door closed. I had to choose whether to destroy my family's life or to fix it.

I said - “I choose the blue door, my final decision. I will be alone, but I will have my memories that will stab me from inside.”

The blue door opened. I walked through it with a smile because I knew I was going to see my family again, but in a better place. The world went white. I finally had my peace.

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## FIRST SNOW

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“Only three things can ruin a man: fame, women, and twelve-year-old whisky,” Wilson said with his head low, murmuring to himself while taking another sip of his drink, indignant about his past mistakes. People around him formed a faceless mass, like an omniscient creature that knew all his deepest secrets, everything he was not proud of.

“Will, you go on in five. Don’t be late again, or too drunk,” said one of the backstage workers .

He hated it, all of it. He was born with the gift to appeal to the masses, people wanted to bask in his glory; after all, he was a star now, and people always wanted to know what bit of the sky these stars had fallen from. Yet he never felt more out of place than when he was on stage, standing in front of a microphone and fighting with himself to get the words out. Most of the time, he would pretend he was in a theater, looking through his mind’s eye at the crowd of his pathetic followers and tonight was no different, sitting back and enjoying the show, his reflexes took over his body and his fingers strung the opening notes of a well-loved song.

Tonight’s performance was very significant for him for two reasons. It was the last performance before the big break everyone was waiting for, and it was in his hometown. The town he couldn’t wait to escape from was now the only thing he’d been looking forward to for the past five months.

The music slowly faded, and the curtains closed, separating him from his admirers and putting him on a different plane of existence. Wilson could feel anxiety taking over his body, his thoughts swirling around, and his stomach weeping for mercy as he began to shake. He needed to get out, get away from everyone.

As he walked through familiar streets, he sensed something was different. Maybe the air was colder than it was the night he had left without saying goodbye, or perhaps the streets seemed quieter than they had used to. Wilson dragged his feet along the frozen pavement of a dark street, feeling the weight of something that was long gone from his life.

As he wandered aimlessly through well-known streets and shortcuts, he found himself on a path leading into a dark abyss with nothing but the stars and the moon as his only source of light. Truthfully, he did not need them since he knew that path like an old lover would, every crevice, every dimple, and every imperfection; engraved in his mind.

He lit a cigarette, and the flame from his lighter contrasted the environment around him. It was warm, inviting, wild, and it was alive. With every inhale, the cigarette lit up, reminding him of fireflies and how he hadn't seen them in a while.

After a short while he reached his destination. It was an abandoned highway. Although it was small, the perfect view of the stars made every step to get there worth it. But it was cursed in a way places tend to get after they were at some point in time the center of the universe for two lovers. Even now, when he looked at the stars he saw traces of her eyes, and through the cold winter wind, he could hear her soft laughter, sending chills down his spine. The wind was getting louder, and with that, her presence was becoming more potent than ever. "*How can somebody who is still alive haunt you every waking day?*" Wilson thought.

After a few moments of peace, he heard faint footsteps, he did not dare to look, but he could recognize those footsteps anywhere. At first, he thought she had come back to haunt him again, that was until he felt her presence, she was just a few inches away, but in a way, she could be on the other side of the world for all that mattered. He slowly turned his head in her direction, scared that any sudden movement might dissolve her presence into nothingness.

"You came...", his eyes were wide in disbelief.

She said nothing back. She only stared harshly, with a penetrating look that could reach his soul.

"Say something, anything, prove to me this is not just merely a reverie."

But her mouth stayed shut.

Defeated in his attempts to get any reaction out of her he sat down on a cold metal divider, quietly she sat next to him. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes out of his grey worn-out coat and offered her one, she was about to turn her head away when she noticed in her peripheral vision that one of them was turned upside-down.

"You still turn the first one over like I taught you to," she said taking out her pack of smokes showing him that she still kept a little paper boat that he had made for her, carefully tucked in the clear plastic wrap.

Their eyes finally met, and the memories of their shared past flooded back - the laughter, the tears, the promises broken in the name of pursuing dreams.

“I hoped I would see you somewhere in the crowd tonight.”

“Didn’t think you would even remember me.”

“I saw you, you know, before the concert. You were sitting in that dimly lit cafe, one we used to call home. I wanted to come in”...

“Why didn’t you?”

She still cared, deeply, she cared about the fact that he had left without even leaving a note, she cared about never getting to say goodbye.

“I was scared I guess, ...”

He remembered all the conversations and fights they had there, and how the owner had witnessed them all. He forgot how much life he had lived before being put under the spotlight, he forgot he had been a person. While on tour he would often visit local bars and cafes, searching for that familiarity, to fill whatever void had been created in him that night he had left her behind with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I bought the tickets you know.” She admitted, biting down on her pride.

“How come?”

“I wanted to experience you just one more time, I wanted to be in the front row and see you shine for me. I wanted to see you laugh so purely and pretend nothing bad had ever happened between us.”

She was honest, there was no point in hiding the truth.

“Why didn’t you go?”

“Couldn’t get my legs to start working, so I just ended up sitting in that cafe till my coffee got cold and I smoked my last cigarette. After that I decided I needed another pack, one thing led to another, and I found myself here.”

She wanted to tell him so much more, but she also knew that he didn’t care, he never had.

“What are you thinking about?” He asked, snapping her back to the present.

“I was wondering how you are able to do it, the concerts and fame. I remember you used to hate big crowds and now you’re performing in arenas.”

She lied about her thoughts, feigning ignorance about the true depth of this situation.

“You,” he said calmly like it was an everyday occurrence.

“What do you mean?” she was utterly confused but still tried to play it cool.

“At first, I hated them...the fans, they were robbing my words, dressing them up in

velvet when I aimed for satin. I couldn't escape my creation, nor did I want to leave it behind. I was sick with disdain that was gnawing on me, but nobody could tell I was dying. So as a final attempt of redemption, each night I would cover a song meant just for you."

Every performance, as the stage lights dimmed, he found solace in the final song, placed strategically at the end of the setlist. It became a lifeline, a fleeting connection to a time when their love had been the brightest star in his universe.

"Which song did you play tonight?"

*"The night we met."*

She felt as if her heart might shatter all over again, in the same pattern it had that night when they had parted their ways.

In a failed attempt to distract herself from the influence his words had on her, she plopped a cigarette in her mouth and began frantically looking for a lighter. She must have dropped it somewhere because she couldn't find it anywhere. He silently reached into his pocket and pulled out his old zippo. He held it out for her and after a few seconds she hesitantly took it. Finally, she lit her cigarette and as she exhaled the smoke, she felt her body release all the tension she was holding in.

"I read your article," he tried to start small talk, deep down despising it since both thought it was a waste of time.

"Oh, which one?"

*"Drugs, sex, rock & roll. Murder, robbery, insanity, I think that was the title."*

"I forgot I even wrote that; it was one of my first works. How do you even remember it?"

"Well, I remember it left quite an impression on me, I know that was not your intention but, in a way, I felt scrutinized by the text. I felt like since you had such a harsh stance about my lifestyle, that meant you still had a harsh stance about me."

In a way he seemed offended for a fleeting second, how dare she criticize him when she knew nothing about that life. He felt the need to fight with her, to tell her off, even if it meant defending the lifestyle, he hated more than anything. He knew he had no right to do such a thing, but he decided to continue with his rant anyway.

"Maybe that's why we didn't work out, you were too busy feeling everything around you and I was too busy running away from feeling anything at all. You were wasting time analyzing everything and reading between the lines, but we were living on borrowed time; maybe it was for the best."

“For the best? If it was truly for the best, why was I left fighting with you in my head saying all the things that never got the chance to be said? Do you know how tiring it is to constantly wage battles in the name of the war that was already lost? Even the skeletons you left in my closet were laughing at me. You weren’t fair.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“You know that won’t change anything.”

In her mind, he once again became that man-child who couldn’t control his outbursts.

“Just thought you should know,” he said quietly.

They both sat in silence, letting the emptiness swallow them whole. After a while, she broke the silence.

“It’s crazy how people can feel like home, and then nothing at all, we could’ve had a mansion by now if you had only put in the work.”

“Maybe if you held on just a little bit longer, I could’ve changed, maybe It would have been different- “

“You wouldn’t have changed, you were constantly running from something, the house that I built for us, you walked in while keeping one foot out the door. Every place you went to you would search for an exit sign, just in case. I just hoped we would work, that maybe I was worthy enough for you to become better, but you didn’t care so we both became depraved...”

“It’s true, we were never good, we were regional at best, but what we created was beautiful, even if it was fleeting. You think that I don’t understand but I do, I swear I do. I admit now that I wasn’t ready, I admit how flawed my logic was. I’m just sorry that we fell in love so young.”

“17 is such a cruel age to fall in love,”

As she uttered those words a single tear rolled down her cheek. It was a silent acknowledgment of the pain they both carried.

Wilson sat there, the smoke from his cigarette intertwining with the cold night air. She remained silent; her gaze fixed on the stars as if searching for answers among them. The memories of their shared past lingered in the air, heavy with unspoken words and unresolved emotions. Vivid scenes of their youthful love emerged in his mind.

In the heart of summer, the Chelsea Hotel became a haven for two lovers, cocooned in the warmth of their shared moments. The days stretched lazily, and wor-

ries dissolved like sugar in sweet tea. Sunlight danced through the open windows, casting a gentle glow on their entwined fingers, and whispered conversations. The hum of the city outside was a distant lullaby, drowned out by the symphony of their laughter. Tangled in the bedsheets and each other's arms, whilst the sticky summer air was mixed with their breaths. The thin line that separates reality and imagination disintegrated before their eyes, leaving them in a place where time didn't exist, just a mixture of bodies, sweat, and electricity. And with every breath, their heartbeats synchronized, forming a mesmerizing rhythm that echoed in the room. Their murmured words and soft laughter were like whispers of a secret language, shared only between them. Each touch ignited a spark, sending tingles through their skin, and every soft caress left trails of fire in its wake. Amid this symphony of sensations, the world became a distant memory, and they were free – free from worries, from responsibilities, from the constraints of time itself. All that mattered was the then and there, the entangled mess of limbs and hearts.

Suddenly, a gust of wind swept through, extinguishing Wilson's cigarette. It was as if the universe itself demanded attention to the present. He turned to her, the lines on his face etched with regret.

"I never meant to hurt you," Wilson confessed, his voice barely audible. "But I was lost, drowning in the fame and everything I had to do for the band."

"We were both lost, Will. I sought solace in your love, but you were always the one on the verge of leaving. It became a house of cards, and eventually, it all fell apart."

Even the wind that was raging like a madman seemed to quiet down for them now.

And the stars that were unbothered by their mortal troubles pricked their ears to listen, it felt almost as if the whole universe stopped, just to witness this messy dance their souls were leading.

A loud car honking in the distance brought them back to reality. She saw something small further down the road moving, it was a little frog. They both took notice of this creature, seemingly at the same time.

"Isn't it too cold for frogs now?" He spoke after what felt like an eternity of silence.

"We all get lost and lose our sense of direction sometimes, I suppose."

"Do you think he'll be alright down there?"

"Maybe we should get down and save him like we did those snails."

"Don't you mean how *I* saved those snails, you were just standing there and point-

ing at the ground to make sure I got all of them. You wouldn't allow us to continue walking until all the snails were safe and sound on the grass." He chuckled before continuing.

"I missed this, how easy it all was, at least in some moments, wouldn't it be fun if we could start it all over again, from the beginning, a clean slate. Just diving in without hesitating or looking back." he said.

She was soaking up his empty promises and recalling how she once used to be that person as well; bruising her knees from how much she begged him stay; to see her for what she was truly worth. As those words were left to settle in the silence between them, she couldn't help but notice the urgency and distress in his voice, as if there was a clock hanging above their heads that only he could hear.

"Don't you think it's a little bit too late for that?"

"I think you were the only addiction I've ever had that didn't stem from the deep-rooted desire to self-destruct; I can't lose you once again. I love yo--"

She simply stood up and left him before he could finish his sentence. She would not allow him to be that cruel to her again. As she was walking away the tears were swelling up in her eyes, and she began to sob, taking shuddery breaths and gasping for air. While trying to calm herself down she realized she was fidgeting with something metal in her pocket; it was his lighter. She stood frozen contemplating whether she should return it or keep it. Her uncertain footsteps slowly brought her back to the highway, but there was no one in sight.

At that moment she felt nausea washing over her, she tried to convince herself that it wasn't what she thought it was, maybe he went in some other way, but there was no other way from this highway besides down.

She stood there for what felt like eons, not daring to look down, hoping all of this was just some sick and twisted dream. After finally gaining the courage, she slowly walked up to the railing and there he was, lying still on the dark pavement beneath her, crimson blood painted a mural of sadness and wasted potential around him.

As she stood, shell-shocked, light snowflakes began to fall, contrasting with her dark hair like beautiful, ornaments, and from that day on she would not be able to look at the first fall of snow and she knew this pain would be forevermore.

In the distance, ambulance sirens wailed a haunting symphony.



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## FORBIDDEN LOVE

---

Tiana was a sixteen-year-old teenager. The life had not been very nice to her. Her parents were divorced, and her mother was an alcoholic which made the things even worse. The mother did not know how to take good care of her children, which affected Tiana a lot. From young age Tiana did house chores and babysat her little brother when their mother was out in a bar. Just because of that the girl did not have time to go out and have fun with her friends and it bothered her so much. Each time she told that to her mother, they would start arguing and yelling. The mother was always winning.

Tiana was not allowed to date anyone till she was eighteen or more. Her mother banned her from dating this early because she was scared that her daughter would make the same mistake as she did, get pregnant at a young age. Tiana did not listen to her mother's demands. Instead, she fell in love with a boy she met during the summer.

One day Tiana decided to text her crush with the help of her friends. At first, he ignored her for days making her feel sad and disappointed. She already accepted the fact he will not respond and moved on. Couple of weeks later she got a text back while she was hanging out with her friends. Tiana felt happy and excited that he responded. Especially because he was nineteen years old and Tiana thought she did not have a chance to be with him or even meet him in person. Well, she was wrong.

His name was Dylan and he had already finished high school. That summer he only wanted to get drunk and have the time of his life. The boy was known for having short temper since middle school. Teachers and parents figured that out when he started yelling at someone for no reason day after day. The rumours of him being violent spread fast and a lot of parents with daughters did not want him to be around them. Dylan learned not to care what others thought about him. Whenever someone told something bad about him, he would tell them back without thinking.

The two hung out every day, getting to know each other and slowly falling for each other. They went to the cinema, to coffee shops or just hung outside always trying to avoid anyone who might know her parents and tell them that they saw her with some

boy. Her mother would kill her if she ever found out. Dylan already knew about her situation at home, and so did she about Dylan's case.

They rushed into the relationship thinking they liked each other enough. Whenever Tiana looked at Dylan her eyes lit up and you could see how happy she was from the look on her face. Such love like theirs is rare these days. Some would be surprised if they could see how they behaved when they were together. Although they were teenagers, they behaved like little children, which was cute and sweet. However, it was not just a puppy love. You could see how they actually loved each other and appreciated their relationship. Dylan loved to buy her little gifts that she adored. Whatever he did for her, she found it sweet. He was also overprotective, which felt good and bad at the same time. Of course, there were some ups and downs in their relationship, but every relationship has them. They tried to understand and accept that they do not have to have the same opinion all the time. The only serious fights were because Dylan was a jealous type.

They were hiding their relationship successfully for six months, or so they thought. One night Tiana's mom came home from the pub to find her daughter sitting at the kitchen table. You could see on her face that she was furious and a little bit tipsy. Her daughter hated her and continued typing on her phone, not thinking that her mother would say something because she usually did not.

"You won't see that boy anymore!" The mother started yelling at her without any warning and got straight to the point. Tiana looked up from her phone in shock. She was scared about what her mother might do. What was she talking about? What boy? She couldn't have found out about Dylan, could she? The look on teenager's face showed her confusion and bafflement.

"What are you talking about? What boy?" She went on with the best option on her mind, *lying*. Nothing else could make the mother, Caddie, even angrier than she was before. Caddie slammed her handbag on the table that it resonated through the whole house. Tiana was scared that her little brother would wake up and be so noisy.

"Do not lie to me, little lady! I know you've been seeing Dylan! That violent boy, that boy who could do horrible things!" Tiana's eyes were now filled with tears. Her mother had found out about their relationship. She hoped nothing bad would happen. She already knew that she would ban her to see him. She also knew that the ban would be useless.

One thought was on her mind. Who could have ratted them out? She only told that to her best friend. Also, Dylan's parents knew about her, plus they knew her mother could not stand the truth about the two of them being in a relationship.

Maybe someone saw them somewhere together. No, it must have been either her best friend or Dylan's parents! She did not want either of that to be true, so she put it at the back of her mind.

"Oh, now you care! Huh! Now that I'm doing something I shouldn't be doing! When I need your help or something you ignore me like I'm some kind of trash! Well, I know that you do not care! So do not act like it!" Tiana went into a defensive mode without thinking. She probably would not feel guilty about it later, because of how her mother acted around her.

"Do not use that voice on me! I'm your mother! You listen to me!" Tiana's face turned white. She could not believe what the mother was saying.

The yelling was so loud that the little brother woke up, but he waited a while laying still in the bed, feeling lazy to get up, but also wanting to check out what's happening.

"Yes, you're my mother, but you are never here! You do not take care of me or my brother! You took my childhood away! I have to babysit my brother so that you can go out and drink all night! God, you're drunk even now!" Tiana made a disgusted face while holding in the tears that were about to roll down her red cheeks. She did not want her mother to see her in this state or she would use it against her saying how emotional she was and blah blah.

"I'm here! I am concerned that you would make the same mistake I did!" Mother yelled but Tiana was not really listening to her words. She was so furious and sad at the same time.

"I'M NOT YOU, MOM! I WON'T GET PREGNANT LIKE YOU! GET THAT IN YOUR HEAD, I'M NOT YOU!!!" Caddie became silent. She just starred at her daughter, shocked by all that yelling. She did not expect her daughter to behave like that, but apple does not fall far from the tree, right?

They could hear little footsteps coming to the kitchen. Her little brother stood there and started rubbing his eyes in a sleepy way. Tiana sighed looking at her brother. The little one asked, "What is happening? Why were you shouting?" Caddie was about to say something, but Tiana was faster and went to her brother, Liam.

"Come here baby. Let's get you back to bed. It was just a movie, do not worry." Tiana picked her little brother up and kissed his forehead as she walked away from the kitchen and her mother. After she had put Liam back to bed and he fell into a deep sleep, she locked herself in her room.

Behind the closed door she could not hold her tears any longer. They were falling down like a waterfall. She took her phone and opened the contact under "Dyl" and

called her boyfriend. He was the only person she wanted to talk to at that moment. She wanted to tell him about what just had happened. She would not stop being with him. She would rather take the risk than leave the love of her life. They were talking all night and Dylan was trying to calm her down the whole time.

...

The last couple of weeks Tiana and Caddie did not talk much. Tiana could not go out anywhere after school because she was grounded. Dylan and she were on the facetime every day and texted the whole time. She was deleting the messages because her mother started checking her phone. They couldn't wait to see each other after so long. Summer was about to start in a week which meant the end of school and almost a year of them being together. There were times when they did not talk for longer than two days, but that was rare. Dylan did get angry at little things when with her, but he tried to control that.

The day when Tiana was allowed to go out finally came. She was in her grandpa's car going to see Dylan. She was so excited that she could not stop smiling, resulting in her grandpa asking her why she was so happy. Her grandpa thought he was driving her because she had a friend there and they had to do something for school. It was hard to lie to him, but she did not want to get caught again. "Bye Grandpa!" She slammed the car door and ran down the hill to get to Dylan's house.

The moment they saw each other their eyes lit up. They immediately hugged and kissed. Both did not let go till Dylan's mom and little sister came in the hallway. The little sister, Kiara, hugged Tiana as tightly as she could. The teenager felt at home there, sadly realising that Dylan's mom was better mother than her own. She could do whatever she wanted there, and the best part was that she could stay there as long as she wanted.

"I missed you guys!" They all went into the kitchen to compensate the time they weren't together. They had so much fun. Played games, talked and danced a little. They did that until Tiana had to go home. It was hard to leave but they hoped to see each other almost every day during the summer at the public pool in Dylan's neighbourhood.

...

Two years have passed since the two became an item. The greatest surprise was when Tiana came over to her mother and admitted seeing Dylan. Caddie just replied "fine". They do not know why and how that woman changed her mind and accepted

their relationship, but all that matters is that they do not need to hide anymore and be scared that someone would see them together.

At the pool they hold hands and have fun in the water. They go to the cinema and watch every movie they like. They spend time at each other houses and talk to other family members. Dylan and Caddie usually exchange only a few words, but at least they talk to each other. After all, being in a relationship is much better now when she has a permission. She just feels free and content.

Now she is eighteen and he is twenty-one. They are planning their future together, which is exciting and scary at the same time. They do not know what will happen when she finishes high school. They may still be too young for such a commitment, but the most important thing is they care about their relationship and about each other.

Dylan's family is always here for Tiana if she needs something or if she has to do something and does not know how to. Tiana also helps them with whatever they need, especially if Kiara needs help with school. Tiana wants to repay for all the things they did for her. She feels the need to help them like they helped her.

The things between Caddie and Tiana have also improved since Caddie joined a group therapy for alcoholics. Tiana is happy now and feels like her life is getting better and better each day.

Is this the end of this story? The story might end here but their lives will not end with the last full stop. So, how does this story end in my imagination? Dylan and Tiana lived happily ever after with their two beautiful children, having amazing jobs, being surrounded by their loving families.

Happy ending is every person's dream!

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Družbe sestara milosrdnica s pravom javnosti, Zagreb

## GECKO BOY

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Long before technology, long before modern society... in a time where humans lived alongside with dragons and kelpies... In small village of a Highland's region, lived a boy named Nyle. The boy of mixed blood. He was the only one who had the Celtic blood running through his veins. His face was pale and sprinkled with freckles while his sharp eyes were the colour of lavender tanzanite. His long dark brown hair was braided in two braids that dropped over his shoulders, while few straps of hair were falling softly on the sides of his mesmerising face. Long limbs and slim build made him look like a forest fae that sings the cries of wood's joy. Despite being as beautiful as moonlight of a full moon or the dance of a polar light... he felt unpleasant with himself. He felt envious of others that fitted in, the ones that didn't stand out like a black sheep in a yard full of beautiful white clouds of wool. Desperate to be accepted, like a wolf that wanted to be taken in by a pack, he wanted to change, to be like the rest of the society of a place he called home. One day, Nyle came to one of many breathtakingly tall cliffs of Highland, to seek help. He sang a song in the rhythm of wind and waves:

„The deep lovely secret  
Of island underneath.  
The dark pearl of hope  
Come and take my pain away.  
If you hear my cries  
then answer my prayers. “

As he ended the performance a big wave of water splashed the cliff. In fear he backed away and fell on the ground, grasping onto the silky grass. Before him appeared, the women formed out of the ocean's water. She spoke in gentle tone: “My child... how have you been doing so far if you decided to come and ask the ones of dark sea for help? The one as pure as you, going so far to sell itself to a creature like me to satisfy your inner lust for unobtainable... “

Her tall frame circled around him in slow motion trying to take in his appearance. She continued as he finally got up: “You disgustingly stink like jealousy, why is that? Why is someone like you, precious child, rotten... You are full of desire like old farts that are in need for more wealth, more power... But I don’t sense a need for something like that. Tell me do what you want, Nyle...”

As Nyle heard her say his name, he felt tingles going through his whole body. His eyes met hers and he spoke almost like in a cry for help: “The spirit of a deep sea, help me! Help me fit in! Help me be like others! Help me to get rid of this dirty skin that I’m a prisoner of!” He fell on his knees and begged. Spirit looked at him and sighed in disappointment as she spoke: “In exchange for your ruby necklace I will help you. I will lend you power with which you’ll be able to change your appearance, but you will only be able to change four things about yourself. All you’ll need to do is compliment the feature that you want of some other person three times in a row. You’ll need to find four different persons till the end of the day and compliment them and next day you will be in new skin.” The boy agreed and gave her his neckless that he got from his father. As the spirit received what she wanted she put a hand on his head and spoke in a language that was foreign to him. When she finished, she said: “Go and take what you desire, broken child...”

Nyle ran to the village as fast as his legs could carry him. He had only seven hours till the end of the day, and he knew exactly where he would go. First, he went to Evander, the boy with the lean muscular body. He complimented him three times without a problem. Second, he went to Magnus, the boy with the sharpest face that everyone respected and did the same. Third, he went to Maise and complimented her emerald-like eyes, but as he went to last person, Rory, to compliment his beautiful straight red hair he stuttered out of nervousness but did not give it much of thought. When he had finished, he went to his small cottage and fell asleep with a grin on his face expecting to see himself in a completely new light. Next morning, he woke up at the same time as the sun by birds’ song. In clumsy way he stumbled in fast manners towards the mirror to see his new coat. He stood in front of the mirror for full five minutes, and he looked different. He looked exactly like how he wanted to, but he felt empty. He felt like an empty shell. No emotions were able to be seen on his face, just plain cold stare that stared back at himself.

Frustration was slowly building up from deep inside, making him want to punch a mirror that stood in front of him. He got what he wanted but why didn’t he feel better? Why didn’t he still feel like a part of surrounding society? Annoyed and furious he went to the forest to cool off. He had been seen by many animals from afar. They

watched him punching trees in rage, but after all that was only emotion left in his body, because if it's not anger there in nothing, just like desert in the night.

He spent days and days crying out of frustration. He thought that changing his appearance would solve his problems... but it only made him more hopeless. Just as before he wanted to jump out of his own skin. Finally, he understood. All this time, it wasn't the problem in his appearance... but in his own acceptance of his looks. Yes, he finally understood that the only person that didn't like his looks was himself. Yes, he was aware that he should have loved his looks... but now was too late. He made a mistake. He ruined the only thing that was connecting him with his own father. His appearance. Now that all of that was gone, he felt like he didn't deserve to live in the village anymore. Not in a cottage made by his father's hands...

Two weeks passed and he was still endlessly walking in the woods. Crushed by his own emotions he found the cave as his only shelter after nights spent under the beautiful blanket of clear sky sprayed with stars.

“If I had a chance  
To think it through again  
I would not blindly  
Trust my greedy soul  
Greedy for something  
That even I do not know...”

After weeks he sang again in a hope that someone would come and lift him up, give him a hand, and take him out of the hole he made. Like from heaven, tall creature with tan skin and long white hair came and sat in front of him. A man? No, a male fae. He took him in his hands and embraced the young boy. Fae didn't utter a word, he just caressed Nyle softly in comforting manner. Nyle spoke to him: “I made a terrible mistake... I did something what will scar me for life... I don't know how to continue... I don't know if I should continue... why do I need to be so stupid? Why do I need to be the end of me? Why didn't I know better?”

He buried his face in the crook of fae's neck and sobbed letting all the pain out. He wanted to change past, but he was not able to do so. Fae lifted the young boy and carried him in his hands deeper in the cave. He walked with Nyle in his hands for solid ten minutes until they reached the pond. Pond was filled with water of pink colour, it smelled like a mix of roses, lavender and hortensias. Fae looked at Nyle still not speaking. His eyes with no irises were hypnotising and they felt scary but also oddly comforting and reliable. After some time fae finally spoke: “You really are like gecko Nyle... trying to mimic your soundings even when you aren't in danger. You want to hide even when you have no one to hide from. Sad, isn't it?”



Fae's gentle voice was ringing inside the cave like small bells. Nyle just nodded at the statement that he just heard and didn't reply. What Nyle didn't expect was that fae would throw him into the pond. The betrayal was able to be seen on Nyle's face. He didn't fight it and let his body slowly sink down deeper and deeper. He thought that this was a punishment of sort, so he just accepted it. Nyle's body started to burn, and he felt his body slowly dissolving in the pond. Closing his eyes and smiling while thinking 'Ah, finally... I'll finally have the peace from this world...'

After some time, he woke up on the same cliff where he met a spirit, but something was different. His body felt different. Is he dead? Is the pain finally over? Full of pain he got up, his muscles all sore. Nyle decided for the last time to visit his cottage and after ten minutes of walking he ended up in his living room. What he didn't expect was to be in his original body. He was feeling happy for the first time after so long. On the table was a letter that he saw in the mirror. The content of the letter was interesting.

*"Child, you are given another chance... you came back before you talked with a spirit. Don't mess this up and try to be happy. Try to love yourself, your whole being. I understand that it will be hard but try. If not for yourself, try for me. Go in the world and experience all its goods, and if you need someone to talk to, I'll be here.*

~forest fae..."

Grin crept up on Nyle's face as he was reading the letter. He was given another chance to love himself. In a way it felt like he was born again. It felt like everything was a bad dream. He sat onto the chair and looked out through the open door. He saw other kids his age playing in the field, laughing, hugging... Oddly he felt relieved. He saw all these kids, all so different, but also the same. They looked different but they didn't point that out and just played like it was nothing. He knew that he was the only one obsessed with the way he was. His shell didn't matter, after all he was just a child who didn't understand real importance of life. But was ok... he was allowed to not be perfect, to make a mistake.

...

Years had passed after that happened. Many days, many minutes, many seconds... but he still remembers. It is still clear in his memory that all this could have turned out differently, but it didn't. Thanks God. Now he is finally free from his own chains, his judgmental mind. Now he is laughing at his foolish self, back then. He does believe that he was a little stupid kid that didn't know better. Currently, with his family, wife, and kids, he feels much more complete, happy that he was able to have a second chance.

...

“Like an ocean wave  
I’m slowly moving.  
Like an ocean wave  
I’m strong, I’m big,  
But like an ocean wave  
I’ll meet my end.  
I will travel and I will love  
Till I reach the coast.  
But I will not be sad  
I will accept it.  
I existed long enough  
To see the beauty.  
I saw all life in deep sea  
Their love and their fights,  
Heard their stories  
And hug their corpses.  
Now it’s my time  
To happily lay  
And put my whole body  
On soft, golden  
Sand pillow...”

author: Lorena Kosor

mentor: Dajana Jelavić

institution: SŠ „Jure Kaštelan“ Omiš

## HIDDEN FAIRIES' PATHS

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One day, I went with my mother to a jewelry store. When we arrived, mother told me to choose something, and I chose a special necklace with a purple diamond. When I came home I put the necklace on my neck, but the necklace lit up and a fairy appeared. The fairy was small like a ladybug. She was wearing a pink dress and green ballet shoes with a white puffy ball. She had dark brown hair and grey eyes, and she had big white wings. She said that her name is Aurora. She said to me: “You have been chosen to be the new fairy.” I said in shock: “Me?” On my shocked expression, she said: “Yes because you chose that special necklace with a purple diamond which the fairies left behind because of evil gnomes and other monsters. Those monsters attacked our paths, and we need help from you to save our world. We can't fight alone. Will you help us?” I was confused when she asked me that. I was thinking a little bit, and before I could answer, my mother called me. I excused myself and went to my mother. When I came to my mother, she asked me to do house chores.

When I came back to my room, I searched for the fairy, and I didn't find her. I started shouting: “Where is she? I can't find her!” When my mother heard me shouting, she came to my room and asked me: “What's wrong? What are you doing? What are you looking for?” I answered her: “I am looking for my favorite pen! Have you seen it?” She replied: “Yes, I see it, but I was thinking that you don't need that anymore, so I threw it in the trash.” I started running to the trash and started looking for the fairy. I found her and took her with me. Then she asked me again: “Will you help us save our world?” I replied: “Of course, I will help you and your world.” On that, she said: “I'm so happy that you agreed. We need to go right now!” I said: “How will I pass that portal? I'm not small like you.” She replied: “Oh, sorry, I forgot about that.” After that, she changed me into a little fairy like her. I was wearing a beautiful gold dress with sequins. I had blonde hair and green eyes. My shoes were white with black spirals. I got beautiful light blue wings. I was looking really beautiful and stunning. I was shaken. “Okay, now we can go.” - She said. We passed through the portal. We have reached the enchanted forest full of traps for fairies set up by monsters.

At the beginning of the forest, we were greeted by the main guardian fairy Louisa.

She had long grey hair, black eyes, and the most beautiful wings I had ever seen. She was skinny and tall. She was wearing a long white dress with grey accessories and pretty red heels. She said to us: "I'm so happy that you are here, the monsters set up dragons everywhere in the forest to prevent the fairies from passing through. Other fairies are captured, but some others manage to save themselves and now they are safe. You have to go through the forest and pass every single trap to save the fairies and fairy paths from destruction. First, you have to cross the misty river full of fairy horses who belch fire, a volcano with dragons guarding the passage, a steep mountain where giants throw stones at anyone who tries to pass and reach the passage for the hidden fairy paths. You have to go through the portal and deal with the gnomes who have captured the fairies and want to destroy the fairies' paths."

We started through an enchanted forest. We reached the misty river, but Aurora said: "Now we need to fly over the river; we mustn't wake up the fairy horses." We started flying, but very soon Aurora got stuck on a branch and screamed, and then fairy horses came very quickly. When they came, they were very angry because they saw us there, and they immediately started to attack. We avoided their attacks as long as we could, but one hit Aurora, and she fell on the ground near the river. At that moment, I screamed: "Aurora!" After that, the fire started towards me, but I held out my hand and stopped it; then I discovered that I have fairy powers. I hit back and chased them all away. I helped Aurora to stand up, and we went away from that place and continued our mission. Along the way, we avoided a lot of traps, but soon we heard noises under the tree near the volcano we went there to see what it was, and we found some fairies in a cage.

Aurora hugged her best friend and said: "We will take you to a safe place; we will come back to deal with evil monsters." We helped them to go to a safe place, and we continued our mission and went to the volcano to deal with the evil dragons. Behind the volcano, we saw gnomes going and having free passage.

The idea came to my mind to dress up like gnomes and go through the passage. Aurora made costumes with her powers, and we went to the passage. That idea was successful, but we were weird to them. We passed through the passage and came halfway; they checked and realized that we were not gnomes. They locked us in a cage and wanted to throw us in the volcano. First, they wanted to eat and then throw us away. In the time when they were eaten, the guardian fairy Louisa came and destroyed the cage. She said to us: "Now go, and save our fairy paths from destruction."

We went to dragons and dealt with them. We came out of the volcano, and the dragons attacked us. We joined our powers and defeated the dragons. We flew to

the steep mountains. On the way, we met giants and hid ourselves. We came to the steep mountains. We started to climb the mountain, but on the way to the top of the mountain, a big stone fell on us, and we fell on the ground. The giant came and grabbed us. We hung on top of the mountain and tried to get out with our powers. We hung out for a while until the giant was asleep and pulled the lever to open the cage. We quickly ran away and reached the passage for the fairy paths. We got ready and went in.

Immediately at the entrance, we were attacked by gnomes, which we immediately dealt with. That's how we passed through fairy paths, and everything was destroyed and empty. We reached the place where the other fairies were captured, and we set out to free them. When we freed the fairies, we got to the main gnome and tried to sort him out. He was much stronger than us. We called Louisa to help us, but at that moment she couldn't come. That evil gnome had a big and very strong military. Me, Aurora, and some other fairies weren't strong enough. We were fighting, but something happened. That evil gnome threw magic and threw me out of fairies' paths. His magic brought me back home, and I couldn't enter the world of fairies' paths because I became human again. I had to wait for Aurora to come back for me.

Night fell, and Aurora came only then. Her powers were weakened, and she couldn't turn me into a fairy. Since it was night, she became a human, and we went to sleep. Tomorrow morning her powers returned, and we were able to return to the world of fairy paths. When we arrived, there were more destroyed things than before. We flew above everything and looked at the damage. After some time, we reached the evil gnome, but we hid so that our gnome wouldn't notice right away. We saw that the fairies ran away but that he was still on their paths. We listened to what he was up to and tried to sneak into their castle to get closer to him. There were a lot of guards and monsters in the castle. We contacted the fairies to see if they were okay and where they were staying. The fairies went to the outside world to seek help for safety.

We hid in the basement of the castle and figured out how to defeat the evil gnome. Tomorrow morning we secretly left the basement and sneaked to the main court where the evil gnome was. We had to be very careful because there were monsters everywhere. We were fooling around when suddenly a gnome saw us and started running after us and started shouting to his colleagues to come. We started to run, but it was very difficult. They threw weapons at us, threw stones at us, and tried to set our wings on fire so we couldn't fly away and save ourselves. We ran as far as we could, and when we got to the first window, we took off just to save ourselves. If we

didn't save ourselves, no one would be able to save the fairy paths because everyone has given up.

When we escaped, we went to look for a shelter. When we got to the shelter, Aurora remembered that we left some of our magic in the basement of the castle. We knew that the magic would only work in a couple of days. It's magic that would blind the gnomes for a few minutes until we got to the main court. While we were waiting for the magic to work for those few days, we were restoring the damaged parts of the fairy old ones. The day came when the magic started to work, and we immediately flew to the castle to the main court to try to get rid of the evil gnome.

We arrived at the castle and started to fight, but we forgot that the spell only worked on gnomes and not on other monsters. Other creatures attacked us. One of the monsters told us: "Give up, we are winning, you are finished, better surrender." Aurora told him: "We never give up; the fact that you took our paths doesn't matter, we will fight to get our paths back!" During their fight, our magic ended and no longer affected the gnomes, and they became much stronger. We started losing; it started getting harder and harder to win. At every moment, more and more of them came, it was very difficult, and we were on the verge of losing, but at that moment the fairies came and helped us in the fight. Guardian fairy Louisa used all her special power to defeat them all. All the fairies helped a lot and were very brave and strong. Louisa said: "Surrender, we have become stronger and stronger. We have renewed all our energy!"

The evil gnome says: "We don't give up, we just conquer the royal and your paths, that's one of our victories in a row!" Soon the gnomes surrendered, and the fairies celebrated. Louisa ordered the fairies to throw the gnomes into some prison of no return. To get to that prison, they had to go through the passage designated for it. When they were sent to prison, Louisa stood before her people and was all well. I am very well because we defeated the evil monster and freed our paths. Of course, now comes the restoration of our paths and the whole world, but that will slowly restore us and make an even better shield than otherwise. Thank you for trusting and respecting me! After that, the fairies started to renew their paths, and Aurora brought me back home, and we remained very close friends. Whenever the fairies needed my help, Aurora would come for me, and I would be with them.

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## HONOUR RUNS DEEP

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In the land of the rising sun, where cherry blossoms dance playfully on the wind there is a small island. The island of Ryku, where peace blooms along with nature. On the island there was a castle as old as the land of Reeds itself - castle Kanida. It was the seat of a mighty clan Azure. Samurai of the clan Azure were legendary. Their glory was known far and wide as was their deadly skill with a katana. They were feared by both lords and bandits alike. Their leader was Gosaku the unbreakable. A mighty warrior. He was known as the right hand of the Jito. His subjects loved him. He was a rightful and an honorable ruler. All was great for him and his family. His wife Juna and his 6 sons. But he felt sad. It was the year 1403 and the Sengoku Jidai had finally ended. Two centuries of bloodshed and war between the clans. The Azure clan was successful in taking the entire island for themselves. By force and with an excellent strategy they defeated the combined forces of clan Yakawa and clan Aduchi. He always dreamt of dying an honorable death on the battlefield as all his ancestors did before him. Bushido dictated as such. A true warrior who follows the path of the Bushido must die honorably. This was the way of the samurai. The way he raised his sons. The Bushido way. The way of the warrior. And all his sons took after their father's teachings. They all went to distant lands to fight in wars, win fame and die honorably on the battlefield. All but one. The youngest of them. His name was Kojiro. He was the youngest and the smallest of his family. He could barely lift a sword let alone fight in battle. Poetry and arts interested him more than fighting and killing. This enraged his father. He did everything to make a great warrior out of young Kojiro. He trained him, took him to watch tourneys even send him to a local sword-fighting academy but nothing was working. After all his trainings were done, Kojiro would sneak out of the castle and go to the city of Isokawa, the capital of the island. He would wander the streets listening to the sounds of the rumbling, ever expanding city. He would go to see plays at the local theater, he would listen to street musicians and learn of the tales they sung about. Great heroes, mighty generals. Histories of fallen empires and of distant lands far beyond the sea. This all entranced him. He wanted to visit them all. He wanted to see the world, learn of its

wonders and secrets. See all that it had to offer. But deep down he knew it would never happen. The way of the samurai was clear. Even he understood that fleeing from his duty would bring shame upon him and his family for generations to come. Every day he would descend the Goru mountain, sit under a peach tree and think. He thought about his destiny and the honour that comes with it, he thought about his father's approval and the glory that comes with death. But then he stopped. And asked himself the question he never thought of before. "Is there any glory in death?". Was leaving all he had behind worth it? Images of his funeral, his mother crying and his people mourning spring to view. Where is honour and glory in that? Why does death have to be the ultimate goal of life? What if there is more to it than to die honorably? And as the wind blew he stood up and screamed „I don't want to die, I want to live!". He finally knew what he wanted. Free from the boundaries of the bushido, free from his father's teachings and old traditions. As he was descending down the mountain he stumbled upon a pilgrim getting robbed by bandits. So, he advised a plan to scare them away. He climbed on the tallest rock dressed in his samurai clan armour. He unseat his katan and screamed at the bandits with all his might. The sheer sight of his armour and blade terrified them. They surrendered and ran into the forest as fast as they could, leaving the pilgrim alone. As he reveled in his victory the pilgrim bowed thanking Kojiro for saving him. The pilgrim introduced himself as Bolin. A troubadour from a land far beyond. He had come here to learn of all the legends and deeds of great heroes. Kojiro introduced himself as Kojiro of clan Azure. Bolin was astonished by Kojiro's great deed. He asked if there was a way he could repay Kojiro for his bravery. After thinking Kojiro proposed a deal. Kojiro would tell Bolin of all the great legends and stories. He would tell him the history of The land of Reeds and all about honour and bushido. In turn Bolin would tell him all about his journeys and places he visited. Bolin agreed. And they started talking about history. Kojiro spoke of his dear homeland. The land of Reeds. Where blood was a common sight. He spoke of warriors and clans clashing and battling. But most importantly he spoke of the samurai's sense of honour and duty. Importance of keeping and demonstrating your honour and status. To represent the samurai class as best and greatest you could. Being samurai means being chosen to serve, be exalted among men, to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Bolin was astonished and bewildered by Kojiro's stories. It all felt poetic and amazing to him. Sun was setting and they had come to the end of the mountain trail. Exchanging bows, they swore that they would meet on the same mountain every day to exchange stories and tales. Bolin went to the town inn and rented a room. Kojiro snuck back home and went to bed.



He couldn't wait to see Bolin again and to hear about his homeland. Morning came, birds were chirping, wind was blowing. Kojiro woke up to the sounds of a messenger on the castle ground. He brought a worrying message. Gosaku read it to his garrison. The message contained a warning from the mainland. Emperor warns all his loyal clans that the new enemy was appearing on the horizon. The Mongol Empire. Led by a ruthless power-hungry warlord. Khoutan Khan, they called him. He united all the Mongol clans under one banner. Imperial court didn't perceive him as a threat. Until he did the impossible. He defeated the Cuman empire. The mightiest empire of the east. Known for its size and unyielding spirit in combat. Lord Gosaku told his loyal soldiers to prepare. For if the worst is to come. They shall be ready to defend their homeland. Kojiro was not worried. „Do Mongols even know how to build ships“. He laughed to himself. His joking was caught short when his father screamed at him. „Kojiro, you were supposed to go practice the way of the sword! What are you still doing here? Where is your armour and sword?“. Kojiro froze. He never saw his father this angry before. Kojiro always perceived his father as a man of justice and honour. He rarely raised his voice and was always calm and outgoing. Seeing him this mad made Kojiro terrified. Lord Gosaku climbed down from his warhorse and made his way over to Kojiro. Once they were inside Gosaku started to lecture his son how missing his duties is dishonorable both to the bushido code and his teachers. After a long lecture Kojiro finally had enough. He lashed out at his father. „I don't want to live a life of a warrior“, he said. „I want to be a poet, I want to set out on a voyage and see the world with my own eyes“. „I want to live peacefully!“. As he finished his speech his father was furious. He stood up and grabbed Kojiro by his arm and screamed. „I have not raised a coward!“, „you will be a mighty warrior!, not a filthy poet!. Before he could finish a guard came through and told him that they were ready to depart. His father composed himself and told him that they will talk when he returns. He instructed the rest of the garrison that they were not to let Kojiro go except for training. And as the sun was in the center of the blue sky, he left with his men.

Kojiro was left sad. He had to find a way to uphold his promise to Bolin. As the time came for them to meet Kojiro was able to sneak out of the castle. He had found a pathway. An old tunnel that wasn't in use anymore. Quickly he made his way to the meeting spot. And sure as the Waterslide met mountain, Bolin was waiting patiently for him. As he approached Bolin greeted him with a bow and they started talking. This time it was Bolin's turn to talk about his homeland. He told Kojiro of his home far across the sea. Bohemia, a kingdom far far away. He spoke of the natural beauty and diversity. Of kings and queens. Of knights and their brave deeds. Kojiro stopped

him and asked who these knights he was talking about were. Were they like the samurai? Or something entirely different? Bolin remarked how they were very much alike. He stated that both follow a code. Knights follow the code of chivalry while the samurai follow the bushido code. Kojiro was listening to all of this excitedly. He was so happy he finally could learn of the world beyond his own. The sun was setting, and it was time to part ways. Kojiro waved Bolin goodbye and returned to his castle. Nobody even noticed he was gone. The next day came. Kojiro woke up early and made his way to the combat arena. He had to practice his skills. Along the way he stumbled upon Mia. A peasant girl who worked on a local rice plantation. They have been friends since childhood. He greeted her and helped her carry the heavy rice sacks. Mia hugged him and thanked him for help. She asked if they could see each other more. Kojiro loved her company. But he knew he shouldn't make strong bonds with peasant girls. As his father said they were below his class. He needed to marry a noblewoman, not a commoner. But he wanted to see her more. No longer was he bound only by his honour. „we will see each other, when the time comes, I promise“. With a smile she kissed him on the cheek, and he went his way. Combat arena was full of warriors and samurai alike. All training and practicing their arts and movements. Suddenly a big hand landed on Kojiro's shoulder. It was swords master Jasu. His uncle and mentor. „Kojiro my boy!“ he screamed. „Are you ready to fight?“. Kojiro was less delighted to train and happier to see his uncle again. They entered the ring and drew their swords. After a grueling training session Kojiro grew tired. Jasu sheathed his sword and told Kojiro to go to rest. He praised him for his determination and skill. Kojiro went towards the castle. After a long walk he remembered that Bolin was probably waiting for him. Quickly he made his way towards the meeting spot. And surely there Bolin was. Playing his lute. They greeted each other and began talking. Bolin shared more of his homeland. He spoke of the nobility and their customs. How rulers rise and fall. How empires come and go. He talked about great kings of his land. Kingdom of Bohemia is one of the most advanced kingdoms within the holy Euran empire he said. Emperor Charles the IV was the greatest emperor. Under him the empire grew, and his subjects lived in peace and prosperity. When he died his son Wenceslaus the IV didn't want to be king. Although his father prepared him for this moment his whole life. He neglected the affairs of state for more „frivolous“ pursuits. King Wenceslas „The Idle“ did not impress the bohemian nobility. So, they went to war against him. His brother Sigismund, king of Calmania started raiding kings lands. His first target was Silver Skalitz, „my home“ he said. He sacked it and burned everything. Kojiro felt sorry for Bolin. That was cruel he thought. He

expressed his condolences. Bolin thanked him and they continued talking. And so, came the end of another day. They parted ways yet again. Kojiro was almost caught by a patrol while going back home. But he evaded them. The roads are becoming more guarded he thought. This was concerning. The castle was also heavily guarded. His father had not returned. Kojiro went to bed and thought about the day that went by. And with a heavy heart and a prayer for Bolin's countrymen. He fell asleep. A new day dawned. Kojiro went to the archery range for his annual bow practice. He could barely draw the bow. It was heavy. Almost bigger than him. The samurai around him had no trouble hitting the bullseye, while he could barely hit the target. After the grueling hours of practice were over, he went to meet with Bolin yet again. And as sure as land meets the sea there he was, laying in the shade of a peach tree, reading a book with bright covers. „What is it about?“ Kojiro asked. It's a book about the history of the known world said Bolin. Kojiro sat beside him, and they started reading together. The book talked about civilizations. Their rise and fall. Their wars and conflicts. The cultures of people around the world and many more. This all interested Kojiro. But before he could ask Bolin asked him about his people and their origins. „We are warriors“ said Kojiro. For the past two centuries we were warring clans fighting each other for dominance. This period was called the Sengoku Jidai. The age of honour. Right now, there is a fragile but hopeful peace. Emperor Miazaki united all clans under one imperial and feudal domain. Their talks were cut short. A messenger has arrived with bad news. It's the Mongols. They are mounting a naval invasion on Kotoma beach. The samurai are gathering. But their leader is absent. Kojiro needs to lead them. He has the highest authority among the samurai currently on the island. And with haste young Kojiro accepts. He said his final goodbye to Bolin and rushes to the beach. Bolin closely following him. Kojiro turns around and screams at him to turn around and flee. But Bolin refuses. He would rather die alongside his friend. The only person who showed him kindness since he left his homeland. Kojiro accepts. They arrive at the camp where 100 samurai have gathered. All waiting for his command. And so, they stand tall at the hill. Men armoured and mounted on their horses. Everyone is staying strong and getting ready for their fate. Only Kojiro is sobbing. He knows they can't win. He knows what will happen. His words flash echo through his mind. This is it. This is his destiny. To die. But he doesn't want to, he wants to live, to see the world and prosper in peace.

With a heavy heart he says to himself. „No, I shall not flee, I shall stay and fight, I shall protect the innocent, so that they may live their life without the fear of dying to a soldier's blade.“ And so he gets ready. To complete his mission that fate has given

him. Encircled by a vulture, who is here to end ancient culture. The dawn of destiny is here. Bushido will be dignified in this last stand of the samurai. Surrounded and outnumbered. That would make a good tale he thought. Bolin agreed by his side. He was also ready to die by his friend's side. And so, the Mongols come. Thousands of them. The samurai charge. The battle was bloody. So many have fallen by Kojiro's hand. But he knew he couldn't win. Till the dawn, they held on. Only a dying Kojiro and mortally wounded Bolin were left at the end. No other samurai was alive. At the end, Gosaku finally arrived with reinforcements. Only to find his son dying in the sand. As he rushed to his side crying, Kojiro whispered his last dying breath and said: "Father, I tried". "I know you did," said Gosaku, with tears in his eyes. And just as the sun was going down, Kojiro drew his last breaths and departed. And so, ends the life of young Kojiro. A boy who only wanted to see the world and its wonders with his own eyes. Fate had other plans for him. It was cruel, just like this world. But he pushed on regardless. Doing everything he could do. His memory lives on in the wind which still rustles the leaves of his dear homeland.

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## IN SEARCH FOR NOVELTY

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The cold evening air was bracing as the man closed his apartment door behind himself. The day had been characterized by an unexpected snowfall, which in part differentiated this day from others. He welcomed the warmth as he set down his briefcase on a small sofa, and sitting down next to it, the man leaned back and released a sigh.

Two years had passed since the death of his wife, an event followed by a lengthy period of unfamiliar grief and change. However, as time nulled the pain, gradually mundanity had once again crept in and taken its place in his life. It manifested itself in everything.

The majority of the day he had spent in boredom, a feeling he was by now rather accustomed to. It was made all the worse by habituation, and the feeling was in a way doubled because he was bored of being bored.

His morning commute had been accompanied, per usual, by Winnie Charleston, his longtime colleague and his apparent best friend. As he had entered the bus that morning, Winnie had greeted him with dreaded chatter. The following 20-minute train ride to the university had been stripped of peace. Winnie's full-throated voice had filled the bus with talk of everything from his students to his sister. A particularly long spout had been given about Rose.

"You know, she's been staying with me for over a week now. And all she talks about is inheritance. 'I don't care who gets Mommom's favorite wing-back,' I keep telling her! Been saying the same crap again and again. Just give me my share of the damn money!" And he had then proceeded to laugh obnoxiously.

The rest of the day had been just as tiresome. Students had asked the same persistent questions, to which there were usually obvious answers, and Winnie had been glued to him every break available, despite his office being on the opposite side of the building. It was always like that. Every day felt as though it were an incessant record, playing the same dull track over and over again.

Over the years, he had become acutely aware of the abnormal effect he had on people. His large round blue eyes stood out against the rest of his sharp features

and his raven hair. But the more notable aspect of his eyes was that they in any given moment displayed a sense of tranquility and would somehow invariably betray the rest of his demeanor. Because of this, people flocked to him and his reassuring presence, regardless of how he was actually feeling. He had come to utilize this to his own advantage.

It was his semblance, he thought, that had granted him the things others had labored three times as hard to achieve. He would never have scored his teaching job at the university, for example, if he possessed a more dislikable appearance.

It was also this aspect of him that must have initially attracted Lorelei- and then prevented her from leaving once their first anniversary had turned into five and the riveting spark of young love had long vanished. The fact was that those who sought comfort came to him. And they sometimes stayed. Like leeches they clung to him. They sucked away the novelty until there was nothing left but the drone of something he used to find interesting. Turning off a nearby lamp, he prayed that the following morning he would finally feel something.

The next morning, he jolted awake at the sound of aggressive knocking. Having had fallen asleep on his sofa, it took him a few seconds to orient himself. When he eventually opened the door, a woman in police uniform faced him. Despite her petite figure, she emitted an air of command, and her countenance was dignified.

“Henry Curb?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Her sharp features contorted into what he assumed was an attempt at sympathy.

“I’m Detective Ortiz. I have some unfortunate news for you.”

He waited.

“Winnie Charleston has died,” she said. “His sister Rose was contacted first but because of his lack of other relations she told us to come to you. She said you were closest to him here. Take your time to process. May I come in?” Without waiting she squeezed past him and took a seat on the rumpled sofa.

“What?” he mumbled. The abruptness of the presence of a detective and the news she carried unnerved him. As his mind entered a state of frenzy, his body caught up with its reaction. A lightheaded feeling overtook him, and he noticed how his palms all of a sudden felt dry and sticky at the same time. The color had left his cheeks, and he wasn’t sure how long he could last standing.

“You might want to take a seat. Drink some water. Then I have some things to discuss with you,” she said.

A few moments later, he was in an armchair opposite her and met her gaze with an expecting raise of his eyebrows.

“You and Winnie were close, I’m informed. Could you describe your relationship?”

“Well yes, we were close friends.”

“Alright. Listen, Mr. Curb. I know this news is shocking and you’re grieving, but I’m going to need someone like you to be my right-hand man for a bit. It seems Mr. Charleston didn’t have many acquaintances besides you. And I could really use your knowledge in order to successfully carry out the investigation.” She studied his face with a raised eyebrow.

She was asking if he would be the Watson to her Sherlock and her wish aroused in him a new feeling. He tried to mask his overwhelming excitement and adopted once again his nonchalant demeanor.

“Okay,” was his reply. He stared at her intently.

“Would you prefer I come back tomorrow? If it’s too soon for you I can,” she said.

Hesitating a few seconds as to not seem too eager, he replied, “No, no, it’s probably best not to wait.”

“Wonderful. In that case, I’ll answer some of the questions that are probably on your mind- Winnie’s body was found this morning about a mile from the station closest to the university where you both teach. It looks like he fell on the tracks, and well, wasn’t able to get up...”

Henry’s round eyes looked back in an innocent, almost childlike fashion.

“As to how that happened, we don’t know yet. I did, however, talk to some workers who have seen him every morning before his commute the past five years and none of them said he displayed depressive characteristics. Quite the contrary, actually,” she said. “Of course, suicidal tendencies aren’t always easy to spot, which is why I need your input on that matter. Was, as far as you know, Winnie ever suicidal?”

He paused and contemplated for a second. “Not that I know,” he said. “He was down sometimes because he lost, well, everyone except Rose. But his grandma died six months ago so it would be odd for him to act now. And he really hadn’t been that sad about it recently. I mean, just yesterday morning he was joking with me about how he doesn’t want any of her stuff except the money. Not one for sentiment.”

“Inheritance?” Her interest was piqued.

“Yeah,” he answered. “His grandmother’s. It’s pretty big from what I understood. Rose was here working out the split with him until yesterday.”

“She left yesterday?”

“That’s what Winnie told me. Got on a late flight back to California,” he said.

“Well. I’ll have to look into it.”

Becoming restless, Henry stood and went to the window. His second story apartment overlooked a narrow street lined with vermilion mailboxes. On their tops lay a covering of snow. There was a layer of snow on everything. So it hadn’t melted, he realized.

“Did it snow overnight?” he asked.

“No. It stopped yesterday afternoon and hasn’t started up again. Why do you ask?”

He suddenly felt the need for air. “Listen, I think I’m gonna take a walk.”

“Okay, Mr. Curb. I’ll come by tomorrow. Take it easy until then.”

Without waiting any longer, he grabbed his boots which lay by the door and hurried down the stairs. The raw air greeted his cheeks with a slap. He walked with long strides and a quickened pace. Alongside his racing heart was his racing mind. The morning had been incredibly peculiar, and he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself. Without thinking he broke into a jog.

Seven minutes later he found himself at the station, staring at the bustling crowd. The snow had melted under the feet of Saturday commuters; however, a layer still remained on either side of the rails. With a nervous tremor, Henry got onto the nearest train whose open doors seemed to beckon. He opted for standing, as he usually did. A coughing stranger or potential sociopath was guaranteed to find an open seat next to his inviting.

Then, staring out the window as the white landscape glazed past, a recognition hit him that the same view that had swum before his eyes all these years was entirely transformed. It was as though everything before him had mutated. The event of Winnie’s death had clearly and inexorably changed him. He noticed the sudden alteration of his thinking. He felt delirious, but not in the droned, malignant way he had been before when only the same images of dread for life in this mundane world had rotated through his mind. Now musings of the unknown, of what would come in the near future, occupied his thoughts. And he relished the novelty.

Minutes later the doors slid open and revealed the well-known way to the university. However, this time after exiting, he continued forward past the turn he typically took and walked parallel to the tracks. Having been turned into a paste by the plethora of pedestrians who had walked there prior, the snow sloshed beneath his feet with each purposeful step.

After walking the distance of a mile or so, Henry’s keen eyes eventually noticed a portion around the tracks where the snow had been cleared. The barren patch stood



out against the surrounding white, which was still untouched by man. And he knew that this was where his long-time companion had died and been discovered only hours ago.

But staring at the spot where Winnie had taken his last breath had an acute effect on him. Suddenly he found it hard to breathe, like a weight was actively compressing his chest. It was a feeling reminiscent of the aftermath of his wife's death. He felt unable to comprehend the scene before him, and he felt powerless. The present situation couldn't be altered in any way, and all that had occurred was definite, irreversible. He felt a sort of guilt, as if before his infirmity he had possessed the power that could have prevented this. The excitement he had felt while traveling there vanished, and the walkway's preponderance of footsteps still stamped in the snow overwhelmed him. Panic pounded behind his eyes, and feeling he had to get away, he turned around and with hurried steps went back to the station, and subsequently back to his apartment, where he laid on his sofa the remainder of the day until he eventually fell asleep.

The next morning, he was again awakened by knocking on his door. At its opening he found Detective Ortiz, only this time she was accompanied by two other police officers. His eyes observed the newcomers guilelessly.

"May we come in, Mr. Curb?"

He shut the door behind them after giving affirmation.

"You weren't thinking about the snow, were you?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"When you planned it. You didn't add snow to the equation. Did you, Mr. Curb?"

Henry stared at her blankly. He wondered if she had somehow lost her sanity overnight and found her somewhat disgusting.

"I'm not sure how to respond to that."

The other officers observed intently, their glances alternating between the two speakers.

Detective Ortiz continued, "I've dealt with very many people. But never someone like you. You have some vision of yourself. An idea obviously compiled of the invincibility you believe you have. But you've let things get to your head-"

"I'm sorry?"

"You're cocky, Mr. Curb."

He looked at her pointedly with a gaping mouth that asked a lot of unspoken questions.

“You think you’d get away with literally anything. And sure, you have a friendly face. But that impression has only gotten you so far. Getting away with murder? Well, this time that’s not a possibility.”

A spurning sound escaped his mouth.

“Now I return to the snow,” she continued. “It was so laughably simple. And, might I add, rather stupid of you. You left your apartment right in front of me yesterday! And made tracks in the snow for me just like that.” She paused and chuckled to herself. “Well turns out they matched the ones that walked alongside Winnie’s. Up until a certain point- from which only one pair of feet returned. But I think you know the details.” She looked him in the eyes and paused. “Why’d you do it?”

His gaze rose to hers. “To feel something.”

She watched him pitifully for a second, then said, “I’m going to arrest you now, Mr. Curb. If you come up with something else to say, you can say it at court.”

A single thought worked its way through the man’s mind: *Prison’s gonna get mundane fast.*

author: Dino Brkić

mentor: Anita Ivanković

institution: Medicinska škola Osijek

## JUST ANOTHER DAY

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„Beep, beep, beep...“, the alarm jolts me from my sleep.

It's Wednesday, 5:30 a.m. I open my eyes and the first thing I do is check my phone – no, not to see if my friends posted something new or to see how many likes I've gathered on my latest story, I check my school's webpage to see if my schedule has changed since it was uploaded late last night. Why, you may ask. Well, in my school there's no such thing as a permanent schedule or getting information on time. We always find everything out almost too late, almost, but hey, at this point it's just another day in my school.

I'm a student nurse in my 5th and final, thank God, year of my school. Each day starts pretty much the same to be honest, nothing differs. Once I'm sure I know what I've got in store for me today I get up, do my morning hygiene, and then make myself a cup of coffee to start the day. Then I realise it's almost 6 a.m. already and if I don't get a move on, I'll be late. I grab my uniform and get straight to ironing it. Each morning I ask myself why I hadn't done it last night, then I remember that I simply didn't have time. I got home at around 4 p.m. yesterday, after I've finished my clinicals and all the extra practice for my competitions and projects. I iron my uniform, grab my backpack, and drive myself to school. Thank God that I already have my driving licence. Otherwise, I'd have to get up a lot earlier to catch my bus, and who knows when I'd be back home. I park my car, gather my stuff, and start walking to school.

“It's just another day Dino, you can do it” I mumble to myself as I'm entering the school all dressed up and ready to work.

My teacher, miss G., comes up to me. I can already see she's coming to chat a bit. See, I have different types of relationships with my teachers. Last year I won first place at the national competition in Health and Social care. While preparing for the competition I spent a lot of my free time with my teachers, going through each procedure and mastering each one. Naturally, we talked about a lot of stuff, so we are much more open with each other, often joking around and chit-chatting when we have a chance. But I've got to admit, many of our teachers are chill with everyone, so

this is like a bonus. Although winning the competition was an astonishing achievement, the aftereffects aren't so dreamy. Everyone expects perfection from me, and I can't afford to make mistakes anymore, everything must be perfect. I can already tell what she's going to ask me.

"So, Dino, what are you going to do after you graduate?" asked miss G.

"I'd like to get my master's degree in nursing, eventually I'd like to come and work in the school." I replied. It's become a common question for all the teachers. They've asked me that at least a few times. I don't mind. I enjoy talking about my plans with them, they help guide me.

"Ah, I see your plan hasn't changed since last year, huh. That's great! We all see much potential in you." she replied.

"Thank you so much! I see myself in this field. I want to work with people" I thanked her.

During the routine, my passion for nursing emerges in conversations with teachers. I reflect on plans post-graduation and my goal to contribute to the field.

"So, how have you been?" I ask to keep the conversation going.

We continue to chat for a minute or two, just exchanging how we've been doing over the break. We finish our conversation and go our ways.

I see myself as a nurse, I feel it is my calling. I enjoy working with people and each time they thank me for simply asking them how they are and staying to chat with them for a few minutes means the world to me. My grandma and aunt are nurses, so I practically spent half of my childhood in a hospital with them. I simply fell in love with the profession. Being a nurse offers many challenges to overcome which heavily influence me as a person. They help me be more resourceful, understand and caring. I can't wait to take them head on. It also provides a great range of valid career opportunities, which is only a bonus – there are so many places that nurses can work at, so a job in this field is practically guaranteed.

I can't say all my classmates would make good nurses. Some of them say that this profession is not for them. However, there's a handful of us who see ourselves as nurses, and patients notice that. On several occasions, patients were the ones who complained about my classmates not only to us, but also to our teachers and mentors. You can fool a lot of people in our school that you want to be a nurse even if you really don't, but the patients, they will know. They can sense whether you want to do this or not at the very moment you enter their room. I only hope those classmates will choose and pursue another profession.

I have practical training today, so I get to my classroom ready to work. I greet my classmates and while waiting for our teacher we chat for a bit.

“Have you seen that they still haven’t uploaded the schedule for tomorrow?”

“It’s crazy!”

“How are we supposed to know what to revise for tomorrow?” we all complained.

We knew there was no point in us complaining, since we’ve been doing it for five years now. Yes, this whole mess of not knowing our schedule has been going on since the first year. There are always last-minute changes or additions.

“How am I supposed to plan my outings? They are so unfair. Why do they keep doing this to us?” said Stefan.

“There’s no private life in our school, you know it.” replied Maja.

“I’m surprised they haven’t asked us to do nightshifts yet! Honestly, the way they’re doing things, I wouldn’t be surprised if we got a message saying: ‘Nightshifts start tomorrow’ in our group tonight.” I replied.

“THEY’VE UPLOADED IT!!!” shouted Stefan.

“They have?? I can’t believe it.” I was surprised.

“Alright everyone, silence please! It’s time to work.” says our teacher, miss N., as she walks in through the door.

When we learn some new skills, we practice them in school’s clinical skills labs. That’s what we’re doing this week, home health care. We practice for about an hour and a half, then we have a break.

Naturally we all rush to get our phones out to see what’s new and what’s going on in the world. I always check our schedule to see if anything’s changed – a file uploaded on our school website titled ‘THURSDAY – NEW! NEWER!! – CLASSES XYZ’ in big red bold letters. The schedule has been changed two times in the past hour and a half. That’s just another normal day for us. Once, the schedule changed 45 minutes before the classes started, after changing at least a few times the day before. I eat my breakfast and scroll on social media while our break lasts. 30 minutes go by and it’s time to go back to the lab to continue practicing.

After my success at the competitions, my teachers would often ask me to demonstrate the skills to my classmates or younger students. It happens that today is one of those days.

“Knock, knock” says miss B. as she’s opening the door of our classroom.

“Sorry to interrupt miss N., but could I borrow Dino for a while? I’d like him to demonstrate some skills to our third graders.” she asked.

“Of course, of course! Dino, you’re free to go.” answered miss N.

“Thank you miss N. I’ll gladly help you, miss B.” I replied.

I get up and go with miss B. This has happened at least five times already. I don’t

mind it. I enjoy it. Yes, it is tiring and exhausting, but I have fun while doing it, not to mention extra practice. In the end, it will be worth, I know it. I go and help her demonstrate some skills. We have a laugh with the class as I help them with anything they need. Once I'm done, I come back to my lab and finish what I had to.

After my regular classes it's time for my competition practice. I haven't even turned around and it was almost 4 p.m. already. It's crazy how you lose track of time in our school. Sometimes it flies, sometimes 5 minutes feel like an endless torture lasting for hours upon hours. I finish my practice and head home.

"I'm home!" I shout as I enter my house at 4:30 p.m.

"Hi honey, how was school? How are you?" asks my mum.

"Same as usual. It was fine. I'm tired. What about you?" I reply.

"I'm fine, thank you." she says.

"I'm headed to my room. I'll be there if you need me." I tell my mum as I'm walking to my room.

I'm finally home. After a brief chat with my family, I escape to my room, and have a chance to recharge before the evening study session begins.

My alarm wakes me up from the short nap at 5:30 p.m., I take my sweet time getting up. Suddenly my bed is more comfortable than it's ever been. But I must get up. There's so much work to do.

"Let's go Dino! You've got this!" I say to myself.

I get up, make myself a cup of coffee and sit at my desk. I turn on my computer, grab my textbooks, my pens, and my trusty highlighters (oh, what I would do if they didn't exist!). With a cup of coffee in my hand, I'm ready for work. I study for a few hours, make notes, revise, and repeat, making a few snack and coffee refill breaks. This's become a habit of mine at this point. Just another day. I won't get to revise for my 'Matura' exams today. I must pass exams in four different subjects to enrol the chosen university: Croatian, Maths, English, and Biology. English won't be a problem for me, and neither will Biology. But I need to start revising Croatian and Maths because they are really challenging and require a lot of time to prepare. I guess that's going to have to wait for another day.

"I think that's enough for today." I mumble to myself.

"I've done more than enough for a day. Time to rest." I agree with myself.

At about 11 p.m. I go and take a shower, jump into my pyjamas, and get into bed. I scroll on my phone for at least half an hour to an hour before I dose off while watching some random video on the phone.

Day after day, they blend into each other in the end. As I'm ready to start another day, new challenges arise in front of me. I'm not scared, I embrace them, knowing

that overcoming each one will bring me one step closer to making a great impact on the lives of patients who will be under my care in the future. My aspirations to pursue my dreams and become a great nurse are what matters. Eventually, when I come back to my school as a teacher, I will be able to help create a new generation of nurses who will not only care for some of my family but everyone else in need. My journey is a demanding one, but it shows what I'm ready to do to become who I want to become.

„Beep, beep, beep...“, the alarm jolts me from my sleep.

It's Thursday, 5:30 a.m. Just another day.

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## JUST LIKE THE MOVIES

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You know that feeling when you have just finished a romantic movie, you're sitting in front of the TV as the credits roll by thinking: „There is no way that this kind of love exists in the real world.“ The moment when you're contemplating every romantic interaction in your life and dissecting it into the smallest pieces trying to figure out where or when you felt that type of love. Well, I was doing just that, I know, I'm 23 years old sitting in front of my TV, in my PJ's, with a bag of chips and red wine on a friday night. It sounds miserable, trust me I know. Most people my age are going out, singing, dancing and having fun. Don't get me wrong I also do that but tonight I just wanted to rewatch my favourite movie, „10 things I hate about you“, in the warmth and comfort of my living room sofa. But considering it is already 1 o'clock in the morning and I have work tomorrow morning I should probably go to sleep. And so, with thoughts of a love like in the movies and the credits still rolling I drifted to sleep.

„BEEP, BEEP, BEEP!“ the alarm screamed for the fourth time in the past 20 minutes. As I rolled over to turn it off, again, I caught a glimpse of the time. „No, no, not again! Why am I always late!?“ I yelled as I jumped out of the covers and ran to the bathroom. Screaming and running across my apartment I got ready in 15 minutes, which is a probably a new record. I grabbed my keys and bag, quickly locked the door and sprinted towards my car. My grey BMW E30 was sitting covered in snow, the car is the only thing my dad left me before he passed away last year, that and my orange cat Merlin. Driving thru New York during winter is the best thing ever. The holiday lights. The snow, just everything is perfect. „Aw come on!“ I let out a frustrating yelp while searching for a parking spot. Just as I was about to quit I saw a lady waving me over that she was getting out. A greatfull grin spread across my face, I thanked her and got everything I needed from my car in a rush. Speed walking to my job I wasn't looking where I was going. Of

course I didn't count on the sidewalk being frozen, I slipped, just as I was prepared to hit the ground i felt a hand holding my waist. Slowly I opened my eyes and saw a tall beautiful man with dark green eyes and fluffy black hair,



„You okay miss...?“ he asked.

„Isabella, and yes I'm okay just glad I didn't pull you down with me. Thank you so much mister...?“ I smiled repeating his question. He smiled, dimples, he has the cutest dimples. Is it getting hot in here or is it just me.

„Lorenzo and you're welcome miss Bella, but you should be more careful next time maybe I won't be here to catch you. It was very nice meeting you. Enjoy the rest of your day, and try not to slip.“ He said helping me up, he smiled and left. Just as I was about to turn around and thank him again I heard the church bells ringing. „It's already 8, oh no!“ Scrambling to pick up my stuff I ran to the door of the flower shop. Two years ago I decided to open a flower shop dedicated to my dad, he is the one who taught me everything about them, You could say I inherited his love for nature. Above the two sided wooden door there is a sign in cursive that spells out „Field of dreams“. As I step inside, turn on all the lights, I take a deep breath, look around, smell the flowers, and suddenly I am right at home. Usually Saturday is the buisiest day of the week but this one was quite uneventful until I was just about to close for the day, then I got a call from my best friend Alyssa, she is a sports team manager for a British football team. „Hi Isa, so listen, I have to go to this diner at the Golden tower. I'm sorry I can't make it to girls night.“ She said as soon as I answered.

„Aw that's too bad, I was looking foryward to it.“ I answered.

„But I do have a plus one on my invite, please come with me.“ She begged

„I would but I don't have anything to wear and not nearly enough time to get ready.“

„You can come straight to mine, I'll give you that red dress you've always wanted to try on and we'll get ready together.“

„Fine, you've got me. I just need to lock up and I'm on my way.“

„Great, text me when you're here so I can open the door. Bye, love you!“

„Yea, yea you too.“

„You look amazing girl!“ Alyssa said as she zipped up my dress. And I did, I looked great. In a long red dress that had a mid thigh slit and a V-neck. With a blowout hair-doo and glittery eyeshadow with a red lip. We took some pictures together, you know, as besties do, and headed to my car. It was a 20minute drive from her apartment to the Golden tower, and it was a ride filled with good gossip and even better music. As we got out I gave the valet my keys and hand in hand with Alyssa headed inside. We looked around for a few minutes and then headed straight to the bar. „Gin tonic for me and a dry martini for my friend.“ Alyssa said pointing to me. Another few minutes had passed when she had to go mingle with the guests. I was

alone, but not for long. I looked to my right and saw the same hair and the same eyes from this morning, and they were staring right at me accompanied with a smile and those dimples.

„We meet again Miss Bella.“ He said reaching for my hand.

„We sure do, good evening Mister Enzo. So do tell, what brings you here?“ I ask.

„Well it is kind of my party.“ He smirked. I laughed.

„It’s beautiful here tonight.“ I mentioned.

„Yes, it is.“ He said but I could feel his eyes on me. After a few minutes of silent starring he said: „I’m sorry if this is too straight forward but Isabella I would like to take you on a date, maybe some time next week?“

„I would love to go out with you Enzo.“ I answered with a smile that was bigger then life. We parted ways with a kiss on the cheek and my number in his phone. I don’t remember much after that, just that I drove myself home and Alyssa got home with one of her colleges because she insisted I leave and get some sleep. And that night, after a long time, I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

Waking up was the worst part of the day, but at least I didn’t have to get up for work today, don’t get me wrong I love my job but I love my bed more. I knew this was going to be a good day when I woke up to a text that read „Hi Bella, I was hoping to take you on that date today if you are free of course“ feeling funny I answered „Wow you are that eager to see me, Yes I would love to go. Where are we meeting and when?“

„I am absolutely desperate trust me, I’ll pick you up at 7 if that’s okay?“

„that sounds perfect, can’t wait.“

„Great, see you“

I was ready at about 6.30 and so in my black elegant pants, a black blazer and pointy heels I was sitting on my bed in front of my mirror. It felt like I was sitting there for ages overthinking agreeing to go on this date when I heard a knock on my door. I grabbed my bag and keys in a hurry and opened the door. There he stood in an all black suit staring at me with those green eyes. „ You look beautiful Bella“ he said, „ You don’t look too bad yourself Mister Enzo.“ He smiled and followed me to his car, unlocking it and opening the door to his dark blue Nissan GTR R32. In the car we listened to some radio and talked about random topics for about 20minutes until we got to a restaurant, more specifically a sushi restaurant, my favourite. „How did you know my favourite food is sushi?“ I asked

„Alyssa mentioned it, somewhere in-between intimidating me about hurting you and yelling at me about some club stuff, unimportant.“

„Not surprised honestly, she rambles sometimes, well a lot of times.“

„Yeah I know, so how did you two meet. You are best friends right?“

„We met at the gym I was new to that gym so she helped me around, showed me everything and so on. We also use to go on these walks for hours on end, we would walk anywhere anytime. We haven't gone for a while considering the crazy ours we both work, I really miss those.“

„So I guess for our second date we're going on one of those walks.“

„You are already so confident in the second date, how come?“

„Because I like spending time with you and I hope you do too, we click and I would like to keep hanging out with you.“

„I do enjoy your company very much.“

We continued eating and having interesting conversations, the date went by quickly and unexpectedly so. Getting out of the restaurant we went for a short walk.

„Oh look ice cream!“ I yelled and pointed like a kid

„Let's go get some, we're not really dressed for it but who cares.“

I got straciatella and he got strawberry, we sat on a nearby bench. Sitting, eating ice cream and looking at the stars while talking like we had known each other for all our lives. This is the best date i have been on, and nothing could make it better. Lorenzo turns to look at me, and i do the same thing. Looking down, with his right hand he touches the corner of my mouth. „You had some ice cream, It's good.“ I smile, put my hands around his neck, close my eyes and lean in. Then I feel his lips on mine and, wow, magic. It's sort of that feeling characters in movies and books describe, I never actually believed it existed, but it did and I was feeling it. Pulling away we were both smiling, we stayed in each others arms for a while, I don't know for how long but Alyssa was already calling my phone. Slowly we got up and eventually got to my house where my best friend was already waiting at the door like an impatient child. I looked at her and smiled, turning my head back

Enzo whispered „So guess I can't kiss you again, she is looking at me like she will kill me.“

It was almost like there was fear in his voice „Don't worry too much, she just needs time to adjust to seeing us together. But it might be better if you leave with just a hug.“ I said while smiling.

„I'm not worrying, I know I will get my second kiss. I got to go but I'll call you, that okay?“

„That would be nice. Goodnight Enzo!“

„Night Bella!“

As soon as I turned around Alyssa started asking me a lot of questions, and I mean a lot. „How was it? Did he pay? Where did he take you’ was he nice’ did you kiss?“ And the rest of the night was filled with recalling every detail about our date and telling Alyssa.

One week later:

„BZZZ BZZZ“ my phone rang twice. Running to it I was hopping for a text from him, but yet again I was disappointed having read the only thing on my phone, my package was at my door. „Thank you mail for ruining my day.“ I said sadly but the truth was he was ruining my day by not writing to me lie he said he would. It was a boring day so I couldn’t even distract myself with work, there were two things I could do, I could call Alyssa and ask her to come over so we can be sad together but I don’t want to do that to her considering she was saying yesterday how she loves her life right now. So the next option was just to go home and wallow in self pity and that is just what I did until someone knocked on my door. Surprise, surprise it was my best friend and the man I hated right now

„Hello, can I help you?“ I asked in a rude tone.

„Hey Isa. Look I know he isn’t your favourite person right now but all three of us need your help, so let us in and I will tank and he will keep quiet. Deal?“ Her eyes thinned as she looked at him and shined with hope as they turned back to me

„Fine get in. So let me hear the plan.“ I asked

„So we’re having a Valentines day party being hosted by Lorenzo here and with that being said we need at least 150 corsages for the men to give to the women at the dance. So we were wondering if you can do it by next week, it pays good money so I said I’ll see if you can do it, but it’s fine if you can’t.“ Alyssa started.

„What kind of flowers we talking?“ I asked

„So you will be presented with the list of the men and the relations to the woman they are taking with them and according to that you would have to make an appropriate corsage with a colour that suits their relationship.“ Lorenzo said professionally.

Considering I couldn’t look at him I continued talking to my cup of tea. „Ok, I can do that if I get the list today and the flowers by tomorrow, I’ll ask for at least 1thousand dollars, if you can’t make that happen I can’t do it.“ Answering him with a cold voice.

They all looked at each other and Lorenzo said: „Whatever you need Bella.“

As they said goodbye ad left my apartment the nickname was still ringing in my head as a constant reminder of how I had hoped he would call, text, anything. For a whole week I hoped and ended up disappointed every single day. Despite not want-

ing to I got up and went to work where I had a coffee while checking my mail and watering the plants. I was startled when the door opened, and who enters. Of course it had to be him, just perfect.

„Morning, brought you the list and a cup of coffee with donuts since I know you didn't eat.“ He said.

„I have coffee but thanks for the donuts and the list, you can go now, bye. I have a lot of work“ I was ushering him out. He sighed and left. There I was with a bunch of flowers and not enough time.

Valentines day:

„Here you go, everything is there, all 150 of them.“ I said tiredly.

„Thank you so much, I guess I'll see you tonight?“

„Not sure yet, maybe, maybe not. If I'm not tired.“

„Well I hope to see you, bye Bella.“ He said sadly. And as I watched him leave I was determined to show up to that party to show him what he had passed up by not trying hard enough, with that thought I went home and started getting ready.

„Hello ladies, looking good!“ Alyssa and I were greeted by the doorman at the entrance. She was wearing a green tuxedo while I was in a long elegant black dress with heels that were to die for. As we entered, I scanned the room, as soon as my eyes landed on a pair of green ones it felt like the time had stopped. The moment lasted a while when Alyssa dragged me to the bar and suddenly he was gone. While at the bar the announcement started:

„Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you this years should be couple, Let's make some noise for your lady Emily!!“

The crowd cheered, but most girls were looking at her with envy in their eyes, I didn't understand why until...

„And of course, your mister is Lorenzo!“

As soon as I heard the name my eyes met his, it was like he was trying not to dissappoint somebody. I shook my head for him to get the crown. Surprising me and everybody in the hall he smiled, turned towards me and whispered „I think I'm going to get the girl.“ Right before he kissed me. The night ended there, not for us but I can't disclose that much information...

As you may think that that was the ending of our story, well It was just the beginning. At the introduction I talked about that feeling you get in romantic movies and surprisingly so I think I felt that feeling. So I guess this was my story, And let me just say, it was just like the movies.

author: Karlo Dvojak

mentor: Anita Kopic

institution: II. gimnazija Osijek

## LETTER

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In the fading echoes of fond memories and shared love, I navigate a world that once reverberated her warm, gentle and irreplaceable nature. Five years of uninterrupted, vivid, mutual dreaming, longing for one another more than the moon craves the night sky – a bright sunlight in the middle of the storm... *my* storm – now unravel into the past. Every single meal tastes bitter, I barely manage to endure losing myself by still hearing her voice in the living room. The side of her bed, of course, empty, whispers her absence and continuously torments me. Each sunset reminds me of *her*. Every sunrise paints a canvas of tears and mimick the inner ache within me. Pictures together have become both solace and freezing moments that slip away like ashes. I... have no right to blame her. How could I? It was *I* who had done the *unthinkable*... yet was also offered an opportunity I had no sense of reverence, nor dilligence to take. Elle, my love, a melody of heartbreak echoing without a single sound of your loving harmony. I deserved it... – I still do.

I've always enjoyed writing letters for you, about you, even with you. At least when I still could. Mutually, we are aware of the fact you despise hearing from me, or anything regarding me indirectly around your presence; whether it's me being mentioned or you reminded – and *instantly* saddened. I refuse asking for another chance, I value you more than to let a *proficient writer* dedicate their profession with a *filthy swan's feather*.

August 28th, 2023 – I only ask of you, allow me to pick up *my* feather one last time.

### Chapter one: „Roots“

Allow me, your disreputable *careless whisper*, to retell your greatest acts of tenderness. Winter of 2018. Let us go back to the times when I, the illustrious and unparalleled protagonist of my own world, reveled in the glory of my imaginary, exaggerated self-worth. An era of arrogance being my closest company, as well as selfishness being my greatest possession. My *inside* was as corrupted by egocentrism as it could be, yet my *outside* unproportionally aided it; devoided of masculinity, embracing obesity and sedentary lifestyle. In the halls of my mind, I danced with pride.

My reflection in the mirror applauding every move of mine. The rose-coloured world in my head was but a stage, while I, the unrivaled, brightest star, was gracing it with my delightful charm. I reveled in feeding my ego – each compliment interpreting as a sweet melody affirming my superiority. Little would I know, the Lord had a plot twist in store... a twist named Elle. An angel of kindness, affection and humility that would shatter the not-so-carefully constructed edifice of my self-absorption.

Our adventures, though reluctant on my part at first, would unfold like chapters in a medieval love story, each page turning to reveal the unexpected turn of mutual affection. One of our first escapades took us to the sandy shores of St. Kilda Beach, Melbourne. The waves, adorned in bright moonlight, whispered visions of ambitious possibilities our mutual love could achieve. Elle... her eyes reflecting the wonders of the sea, seemed like an ethereal being, untouched by the shallowness of the perception that had once consumed me. As we walked along the shoreline, the cool breeze carried some sense of liberation – I had *completely* abandoned my egotistical characteristics for the time we spent together that night. Our late night adventures had extended to the heart of Melbourne's lush parks, where emerald canopies made us absorb a sense of natural serenity. In the midst of our shared adventures, I witnessed the remarkable amount of humility and comfort Elle unveiled. Together, we scaled emotional peaks and traversed valleys of vulnerability. During one cold night of late 2018, as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting hues of pink and orange across the skyline, I realized that Elle, my angel on earth, had become the architect of a new narrative. Her benevolent, pure character, as well as the *roots* of our adventures, left an indelible mark on me.

However,

During early 2019, in the haze of my own ambition, I made my first regrettable decision that echoes through the corridors of time to this day. Fueled by hunger for recognition, I contemplated leaving her – blinded by the allure of opportunities reputation wise. In a moment of misguided priorities, I severed the ties that bounded us, believing that chasing reputation and approval of others would grant me fulfillment. Elle – a contrast to my prideful nature – with tears in her innocent eyes, questioned my choice. The heartbreak etched on her face. As I prioritized chasing a social status of a well-known *somebody*, I acted like a nobody. If I hadn't had my ego, I would've grappled with the heavy cost of forsaking an angel's love...

Just like I am now.

## Chapter two: „Redemption“

November 22nd, 2020 – In the cold corridors of my college dormitory, I faced the reality of consequences. Surrounded by unfamiliar faces, constantly feeling humiliated due to my appearance, I felt the weight of loneliness settle like an anchor in my chest. The once alluring prospects of reputation and people-pleasing now seemed like hollow waste. As the luminous city lights flickered through the window during my lowest moment, I was haunted by the memory of Elle. The esteem I craved was replaced by a silence that echoed the regrets within me. Nowhere to be seen or heard from, Elle lived in my thoughts like echoes of lost love. The laughter at my appearance of new colleagues in the distance only intensified the ache of solitude. I longed for her warmth. At that moment, my pride crumbled, leaving behind the raw vulnerability of a soul yearning for the one person who saw past the arrogance.

Alone and isolated, I faced the harsh truth – I had sacrificed the most genuine person I'd have ever known for a glimpse of shallow admiration. The city lights blurred through tears as I craved for redemption. I truly was *nobody*. That day, I made a promise to myself that I would become *somebody*. Somebody she deserves.

June 18th, 2021 – The last day of college before summer holidays loomed. The anticipation of transformation hung heavily in the air. The decision to reconnect with Elle simmered within me. That summer stretched before me like an unwritten chapter, and I vowed to sculpt a narrative to win her back. Finally, as the academic year ended, I found myself standing at the intersection of redemption and remorse.

That summer, I was finally ready to face the inevitable truth; I was a reflection of a man I no longer wished to be. She deserved more than the hollow shell I had become. The gym, once a foreign zone, became my safe zone. As I was shedding physical weight, the mental burden became lighter. It wasn't just about sculpting a body, rather about carving a space for honest change. Elle's tender heart served as the muse for my mental awakening, pushing me beyond my limits.

The decision to reach out to Elle weighed heavily on heart, the fear of rejection ran through my veins faster than blood. Reunion with Elle, although uncertain, became the driving force behind every moment of physical and mental introspection. As the sun began to set, I penned her a letter, baring my soul in words which express a newly formed man. Each sentence served as a testament to my metamorphosis. With a deep breath, I sent the letter, hoping it would reach Elle's heart.

August 31st, 2021 – Weeks passed in anticipation, but then, like a gentle breeze



carrying the scent of blooming flowers, Elle's response arrived. Her letter expressed a warmth that melted icicles of regret within me. Her words, filled with grace and empathy, matching her tender spirit, resonated with hope and forgiveness. Her invitation to revisit the familiar shores of St. Kilda Beach made my heart race faster than a speeding train. Quite a symbolic gesture that spoke of *second* chances.

As the summer sun was setting, I found myself standing before the sandy shores of St. Kilda once again. Awaiting Elle's arrival, I felt an uncomfortable feeling of butterflies dancing in the pit of my stomach. Every silhouette along the shoreline sent a shiver down my spine, as well as a jolt through my restless heart. All of a sudden, Elle, bathed in the soft glow, sunkissed, approached with that specific smile. The world went silent. Her steps, each drawing her closer, echoed the rhythm of my heartbeat. Her eyes, like two oceans, locked onto mine. A nervous smile played on my lips, implying pure vulnerability. With a grand past and affection that speaks volume, she leaned in, tearing apart *my* bridge to regret. Our lips met in a kiss that, in my head, lasted for millenniums.

I can continue writing about that kiss for an ever longer period of time...

As our lips met in the tender fate, a flood of emotions overwhelmed me. It felt as if nothing else matters. If I could enhance time, I would loop those ten exact seconds ongoing for eternity.

### Chapter three: „The unthinkable“

Elle and I shared a kind of love that transcended the ordinary. Our connection was filled with shared dreams and cherished moments and memories. Our relationship was a melody of laughter and affection that resonated through the time we spent together.

From the very beginning we shared a thing for revisiting the old, familiar places that witnessed the growth of our love. St. Kilda Beach, a place where the waves echoed the comfort and laughter that had once danced between us. The Royal Botanic Gardens, where the leaves used to whisper secrets of our dreams, constantly reminding us of our unique bond.

Up until then, our bond wasn't just an ordinary romantic getaway; rather a partnership built on mutual tenderness, closeness, devotion and a shared vision of our future. We would often find ourselves deep lost in the conversations about our dreams – exchanging hopes for our future. We weren't just lovers – we were each other's home.

Our love had deepened as time went by, but so did our dreams of a future spent together. Dreams where our love would serve as the boat through the storm. We

spoke of marriage with such certainty, as if it were an inevitable chapter in our story we were writing together. The names for our future children became a lullaby, whispered between quiet nights.

Then came that fateful March 11th of 2023 – The day shadows of betrayal were cast upon me. Invited to a birthday party, surrounded by laughter, in the haze of drunken vulnerability, I cheated on Elle. Having done the *unthinkable* – tarnishing the very essence of our distinctive relationship.

In the aftermath, the glow of attraction became tainted with remorse yet again. The colorful lights flickered as my world had filled with darkness. Realizing I had committed the gravest of mistakes, the imagined future with Elle crumbled – replaced by the cold reality of a weakness at a specific moment.

That is the tale of March 11th – the day I had undone all the progress I made in becoming the man she truly deserved. And still deserves.

Chapter four: „See you on the other side“

Elle... Your presence was my sanctuary, a refuge for the weary person I am. You are a home where judgement melts away and acceptance flourishes. Your tender heart carries an ethereal essence that left a permanent mark on the fabric of my entire life. Should I compare you to an angelic force that illuminates the darkest corners of inner existence?

I shall never forget our final dialogue that same night.

„I guess you never really loved me.“ – she uttered, her words hanging heavy in the air. Her eyes searching mine for explanation. „You’re right, I failed you after all.“ – In that moment, I had to concede. With anxiety and my throat unable to inhale properly – I had no will to try justifying my actions. „I really hope you feel the guilt“ – She continued. The weight of her disappointment quickly filled the room. Her general emotions of sadness and despair were *too much* for me to comprehend throughout that whole conversation.

„I should. You’re right again.“ – I nodded. Not only out of remorse, but out of acknowledgement as well.

„I really hope you learn...“ – Her gaze became unsteady, she became unaware of what else was there to speak about.

„I do too.“ – I replied, knowing learning is always the first step, however I was unsure if I had the capacity to change.

„I don’t want to lose hope that we can make this work... only if you’re willing...“ – she implored, tears sliding down her eyes. This was *the opportunity* I had no sense of reverence, nor diligence to take.

My heart was caught in the realization that I could never offer her what she truly deserves; „Elle, it is not that simple“ – I admitted.

„I don't want to hurt you anymore. It's not about what you deserve, it's about what I cannot give you.“ – I continued speaking the painful truth hanging between us. „I really hope you change.“ – She concluded as she was making her way out of my dormitory. Days have passed faster than usual, weekends felt like a hollow waste of time, my mind embodied the absence of light.

This is the end of Chapter four.

August 28th, 2023 – Finishing off this epistile feels shallow. In the aftermath of her departure, as she left for Sydney not too long ago, my world became a vast emptiness, echoing of the hollow footsteps of what once was. Regret resonates within me as the stoic facade masks the depth of my heart as I long for warmth of a love that slipped away.

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## LIFE – CHANGING TUNES

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„It’s time, are you ready?” A soft, but disturbing voice got me back to reality.

I made a long exhalation, trying to calm myself down, but I only felt the tension in my body rising. After a couple of seconds, I finally pulled myself together so I answered: „Yes.”

\*Two months before\*

„I don’t know babe, I-maybe I’m just not as good as I thought I was.”

„What are you talking about, you better take that back this second. You’re the most talented person I’ve ever met and I know you will succeed in everything you wish for.” A single teardrop fell on my cheek, but I didn’t wipe it off. I opened my mouth trying to say something, but not a single sound came out, if someone had seen me, they would’ve known I said thank you, but that’s the problem with phone calls, but honestly, I prefer not to be seen right now with my eyes all red and puffy from crying.

„God, I really wish I could believe in that Allison, I really wish...”

„Eww, don’t call me by my full name. Listen, Lyla, you are talented, so so much, you have a very unique, special voice and people will recognize your worth, you just haven’t had a chance to prove yourself yet. You know I will support you in every decision you make, but we both know that if you give up on your dreams, you’ll regret it.” I heard disappointment in her voice, it made my heart shatter into pieces, but she was right. It has always been my dream to perform on a big stage, have my own concert. I can’t give up now.

„You’re right Al. But how will I do it? I need to stand out somehow, but as you know, my YouTube videos don’t have a lot of views.” My voice was so rough, you could barely recognize what I was saying, I’ve lost all hope.

„My boyfriend has a friend, he’s the owner of the bar, maybe you could perform there for the start?”

„What, no, I can’t afford a real stage and let’s not even talk about the equipment. You know I’m in a huge debt.” Just thinking about how my life has gotten worse these last couple of years is so tiring and so freaking pathetic. Life isn’t fair, the way I got hijacked from my past life, it’s really unbelievable. I wanted to break everything in my lousy, small apartment so badly.

„No babe, as I’ve heard, it’s a free stage, like a little karaoke corner. It was built recently, I’m sure they would accept anyone to perform on the stage until they get a little bit more recognized. Maybe that could be your chance to glow.” After she finished her sentence, I’ve heard a little squeak of Allie’s voice on the other side of the phone, she was obviously excited about this. It made me melt. I love it when she’s happy and I’m even more glad she is willing to help me. The best friend everyone would wish for.

„You sure?” After so many bad news I’ve received, it seems almost impossible to hear something like this.

„I will definitely check it out and then I’ll get back to you.” She still sounded excited, it made me giggle a bit. I returned the excitement and hung up the phone. Who knows, maybe there is hope somewhere after all.

\*Three hours later\*

A doorbell surprised me so much that I actually fell on my knees...I fell, because of the doorbell. Sometimes I can’t believe how clumsy I can be. I stood up and went to open the door, just to find Allie tip toeing and squeaking out of excitement. I assumed she had some news about the stage, but I let her do the talking.

„Hellooo babe!” She greeted me with a smile on her face, I could’ve sworn she tied her lips to her ears considering how big her smile was. A second later she hugged me and gave me a peck on the cheek so I returned the gesture.

„What got you so excited?” I asked through a giggle, not trying to hide it.

As a response to my question, she just giggled harder. „I guess we’ll need drinks for this.” I stepped into the kitchen and took two glasses. A second later I glanced back at Allie when I saw her pulling a bottle of wine from her bag. I couldn’t believe what I saw so I just chuckled.

My curiosity grew by every second so I asked her one more time, but this time louder: „Okay spill the tea, what got you so excited!?”

„Okay okay, stay with me on this one. Hear me out, ok, so I talked to Logan and he said that you could perform tomorrow night if the bar won’t be too packed. He said that you could perform anything you’d want as long as it’s appropriate. The bar owner is strict about sexualizing, whether his employee or a stranger on the road, he will make sure nothing happens to you while you are on his property, but that won’t be the problem ‘cause I highly doubt you’ll take your shirt off to get a couple of views.”

„So you’re saying that I can perform whenever and whatever as long as the stage isn’t taken by someone before me?”

„Yes, but it’s karaoke, other people would want to try it as well, but that’s okay, you only need one song to stand out from them all and after they hear you, they will ask

for another song, and another, and another.” Her smile grew even bigger.

„I highly doubt that, but okay, I’ll give it a shot.” She rolled her eyes at me and slapped my thigh, but that only made me laugh.

„But you know what? You haven’t heard the best part yet.” She gave me a wicked smirk. I don’t know if that was supposed to make me interested or aghast, but now that I think about it, it definitely made me terrified.

„Ok, go ahead.” I spoke. I must admit, it made me curious as much as it frightened me.

Allie got closer to me, keeping the smirk on her face. She leaned onto me and whispered: „The owner is Italian.” She pulled herself back and once our gaze met, she winked at me.

I didn’t know why that was the best part, it’s not like I’m looking for some one-night stand. I gave Allie a weird look, trying to figure out what does she wanted me to say. „Alright and what should I say on that?” I asked mockingly.

She hissed at me like some cat. My first thought was that she drank way too much, but she only took two sips. „What?” I rubbed my neck repeatedly, revealing signs of anxiety.

„Ummm, he’s Italian? Babe, come on. All Italians are hot, this might be your chance. Seduce him with your voice and he will become obsessed with you.”

I chuckled. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, she really is crazy. „No offense sweetie, but you’re insane. I’ll stay away from men, I don’t need that kind of drama in my life, especially not now. I’ll keep my business in my comfort bubble and so will he. Besides that, like someone needs a girl waist deep in debt.” I rolled my eyes and filled my glass with more wine.

„You know what, you’re no fun at all.” She turned her head towards the TV. Seeing her annoyed is super amusing. I giggled at her and blew her a kiss.

\*The next day\*

It was 4 am when I woke up. I changed into my uniform and went to work. I work as a waitress in a local cafe bar. It’s not glamorous, but it’s the only thing that keeps me on my feet. The job isn’t so bad if you know how to deal with people, which I don’t. I easily get into conflicts, but I’m always trying my best to keep cool.

Today was a peaceful day, thank goodness. I really don’t need any more stress than I already have. I agreed with Allie to meet at her apartment before we go to the bar. My guess is that we will dress up at her place, I can’t say I wouldn’t like that though.

„Hey babe, how you doin’?” I asked obviously mocking her with Joey’s accent from the show “Friends”. I know she’s a sucker for that series. She rolled her eyes at me, but still gave me a hug. I love that girl so much.

„Alright, we have three hours to get ready. Chop chop!” She clapped her hands, demanding that I move. For the next three hours she wouldn’t stop talking about how perfect I had to look for the performance. She sounded like she was on a mission to turn me into a goddess, but I only felt like a sack of potatoes since she was tossing me all over the room, forcing me to try different poses for each piece of clothing she owned in that huge closet of hers. After twenty minutes of pushing me all around we finally found what to wear. Allie spent a few more minutes giving me a pep talk before we left her apartment. I hate those talks, I find them very annoying, I’m not sure why.

\*In front of the bar\*

„Okay sis, you got this! Let’s go talk to Logan first, he will introduce us to the owner, then we will see what happens next.”

„Sounds like a plan.” I made a long, loud exhalation trying to get rid of anxiety. „I got this.” I thought. God, I hope I’m right.

Neon, purple lights surrounded us paired up with loud music that pierced my ears. The bar was placed on my right, bar stools lined up. On my left I had a clear view of the couches that people had already occupied. Opposite me was a wall, filled with speakers and karaoke equipment. Allie took my hand and led me to the other side of the bar where Logan was, a tall man stood beside him. He had tattoos all over his neck, they gave me a weird feeling in my stomach.

„Hello girls, this is Enzo, he is the bar owner.” This so-called Enzo didn’t even bother to smile. Are all Italians as jerks as they’re hot? In this nice and kind hospitality I roughly shook Enzo’s hand, leaving all three of them speechless. He returned the gesture shaking it even harder which caused me pain. I let out a quiet squeak. The silence was killing us so Allie stepped in, thank goodness.

„L, what will you have?”

„The same as always.” I winked at her. She stepped closer to Enzo and told him my favorite drink. I guess he is also the bartender.

It’s been half an hour since I last saw Enzo. He gave us our drinks and just disappeared. But I have much bigger problems right now. People started performing on stage so I started preparing for mine. I decided to sing a song I wrote a month ago. It didn’t get many views, but I believe it’s my biggest improvement in this couple of months. Before I even knew it, the stage became empty. I pulled myself together and approached the stage. I’ve lost Allie five minutes ago, but I knew she went somewhere with Logan so I was certain she was safe.

I climbed my way up to the microphone. On my left was a computer, I reached for it and played my song. This was it, I couldn’t afford to blow my chance. I shook my

shoulders to relax and that's when my eyes met Enzo's. He was standing in the corner opposite me. I started singing without breaking our gaze. I could feel eyes on me, it made me shiver, but I didn't let it disturb me so instead of giving up I raised my voice hitting that high note that left everyone astonished. Now definitely everyone's eyes were on me. But music flew through my bloodstream, I closed my eyes and let the song take me. The next moment the only thing I could hear was shouting and the sound of people's hands clapping. I wasn't aware of the situation that was happening at that moment. But then someone's arms grabbed me and pulled me off the stage. I saw Enzo standing in front of me.

„You alright? Girl you're crazy, how in the world did you do that with your voice? Looks like it's not just me who likes it.” He turned his head to the crowd. No one was at the bar or on the couches anymore, they were all in front of the stage, screaming their lungs out. I escaped Enzo's grip and turned my head to him. Our eyes met, pure black eyes stared right into my soul. He broke the silence and said: „Looks like they want another one, you should go.” And before I even knew it, he disappeared...again. But I couldn't concentrate on him, all on I could focus was an encore “One more, one more!”

I climbed the stage again. I saw Allie on the bar with a drink in her hand, screaming my name. I waved to her to come, she knew I needed a strong drink before singing again so she handed me...well I didn't know what that was, but I didn't care. A second later, I started singing again.

\*The next day\*

I found myself on the bed. It didn't smell like my bed, but leather and vanilla. I opened my eyes and saw a big chandelier above me. I panicked and fell on the floor. My head hurt so much.

„You okay, bee?” I hissed, I recognized Enzo's voice. I stood up and faced him.

„Bee?” I asked, wondering what kind of a nickname that was.

„Your eyes. Yesterday, when we stared at each other I saw your eyes, they remind me of honey.”

„Wow ok? How did I end up here?”

„After your second performance you brought shots to the stage and things got little out of hand. The good thing is that the people liked your voice. They've been asking when you will perform again.”

„Uh wow, yeah I don't know about that. I didn't thought that people would like my voice.”

„Well, you can perform any time you want.” He got closer to me, I could feel his breath on my cheek. „I'd like that. Hearing you sing, seeing those honey eyes spar-



kle, feeling how your body is melting.” My heart skipped a beat. But I didn’t want to overthink it so I asked: „Soo, I can perform any day I’d want?” I got excited hearing the fact that I could perform somewhere. He giggled.

„Wow, so a grumpy can laugh?”

„You haven’t seen anything yet Bee, I can do a lot of things. Allison reached out to me, she said you’re looking for a stage to perform. It’s not as big as you’d like, but it’s a start. Think about it.” He turned and left the room so I ran after him. „Thank you.” I gave him a big, heartwarming smile. This just might be my chance to prove my worth.

\*Two months later\*

It’s been two months since I made a deal with Enzo. More people started coming to his bar since I’ve performed for the first time there. A lot of things happened as well. People started reaching out to me, making deals with me or just wanting to meet me. My YouTube videos are far more popular than before. I’ve also performed on other stages as well. Allie was by my side all the time and I’m grateful for it. Enzo and I on the other hand, well there is something going on there, but neither of us is making any moves yet. He told me he has a dark past haunting him, but I never pushed him to tell me, he will when he’s ready. I have an open concept concert on the street at the end of the week, it’s not big, not even close to like Beyonce has but it’s still a huge thing for me. My personality hasn’t changed, I don’t consider myself a star or something like that. I still work in a cafe bar trying to get back on my feet, but singing has really been helpful for me. And before I even know it, I’ll return to the life I had before. After my parents’ death, I really struggled hard to keep myself alive, but now I finally have hope that I’ll make it on my own.

\*Five minutes before the concert\*

I was standing behind a curtain when I saw Enzo walking towards me. I’m glad he was there with me.

„Hey Bee. How’re you feeling?” He asked softly.

„I think I’ll faint...but I’m excited.” He chuckled and put his hands on my waist.

„You got this, your voice is remarkable and people know it. I know it. You are incredible, you survived so much and look at you, you’re still growing. I’m proud of you.” He grabbed my chin and pulled me closer. I closed my eyes and kissed him. It gave me a weird feeling, but I loved every second of it. But the cheering and shouting of my name interrupted us.

„It's time, are you ready?" A soft, but disturbing voice got me back to reality.

I made a long exhalation, trying to calm myself down, but I only felt the tension in my body rising. After a couple of seconds, I finally pulled myself together so I answered: „Yes.”

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Družbe sestara milosrdnica s pravom javnosti, Zagreb

## MICHAEL'S LIST

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The morning sun appeared shyly on the window of Carl's room. It was yet another monotonous day in his life, but he liked it just the way it was. Scrolling on his phone he found 2 missed calls from his sister Stephanie. They were left alone, soon after their mother had died 4 years ago. Carl lived in their old family house, which was quite rusty and needed few repairs, but it was also the only familiar place keeping him sane and in focus. He would use the same old route from house to school and then to his dad's shop since he was a small six-year-old boy. He liked familiar and well-known places, which kept him comfortable and giving him sense of belonging. There was something special in that repeating pattern of his daily routine which probably hadn't changed much in those few years. Carl was very young when he was diagnosed with autism from his childhood. That was never a problem for him and his family. What really made a problem for him was his diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder.

Someone with DID had multiple, distinct personalities. The first signs of another personality came after his dad beaten him almost to death when he was 17. Even though his dad had a reputation of understanding and charming man to others, he couldn't deceive his son's heart. Carl never liked close contact with his father due to fear of his father outburst if he did something wrong. The whole family tiptoed around his father until the moment he passed away, which wasn't exactly a peaceful death either. It was a cruel and barbaric death, and the body was found in the morning the next day by Carl himself. Everyone was sad but also somewhat relieved that he wasn't there anymore to frighten them with his unexpected outbursts. Ironic, wasn't it? He was ashamed of his feelings about his father who raised him and gave him all he could, or did he? Still, he felt regret for not being able to cope with death in a more convenient way. All the trouble and strong feelings Carl had towards him now left with his father's passing away. Let's get back to our Timmy, Carl's first personality and a very sweet but fearing child. Every time he got a chance to take control of Carl's body he wouldn't play or act as a usual kid. He wasn't an ordinary kid at all,

he represented the little Carl but was somewhat different as he didn't show signs of his personality disorder. He would talk openly about anything around him. He was like a little philosopher; he would easily answer wide range of questions and was very enthusiastic when asked to express his opinion on something. But... each time Carl's mom or sister would ask something more about Timmy and details about where his private life as his place of birth or something about his parents, he would start crying and wouldn't stop no matter what they did to direct his attention to other things. The second personality came after his mother's death, and it wasn't as innocent as little Timmy. he never showed in front of Stephanie or anyone that Carl knew, so nobody was aware that Carl had many different personalities apart from little Timmy's. His second personality was Michael, a charming and a mysterious guy, who liked spending money on luxurious items and the source of his income was unknown. Along with his affluent lifestyle, Carl's good looks made him a perfect catch for ladies he dearly loved. It seemed intimidating and dangerous at the first glance and the problem with Michael was there to stay. By observing Carl's reactions carefully, he got a profound insight in Carl's memories which were very and unapproachable. Michael would use those memories for his own weird "little hobby" as he called it. After he had indulged himself with money and ladies' company, he would go hunting for days, as he had been very skilful hunter and had four-year experience of hunting. And no, he wasn't interested in hunting animals but people, especially those who were rude and disrespectful to Carl. There were usually people from Carl's work, or his home environment. His first victim was chosen on the day of his mother's funeral, he killed a priest because he came tipsy on the funeral and made rude remarks on Carl's behaviour, saying that he should at least shed a tear for his dead mother. That killed Carl because deep down he was crying but as an autistic person he didn't exactly know how to express any of the feelings he had, as the rest of the people. After that killing, victims just kept coming. From Carl's colleagues from work to the old man at the nearest grocery shop. Everyone would show up eventually on Michael's list, and if you asked him, each person would have been dead if Carl had given him just even the slightest chance to take over his personality completely. It didn't last long until Carl found out what was happening, but honestly, he was unable to make any difference. He had already attended therapy on a regular basis due to severity of his diagnosis. At the same time, it made him feel powerful and stronger than he ever was. Even though his life became easier since Michael appeared he still felt secret remorse for letting it happen. All those who were making fun of him and mocking him started disappearing one by one. Each morning he would wake up and find new

clothes in his closet as well as new expensive watch or a new car. Carl's inner self started diminishing and he felt that Michael took control over his body and willpower and put him in the shadow for longer period.

The only person that could fix all these problems was Stephanie who was trying to contact him and discover what had been happening. It was unusual for Carl to disappear like this, he had never done something similar before because he never changed his habits or routine. He would always let her know where he was and what he'd been doing by calling her every Thursday. She saw him as a weird little kid that happened to be her brother, but she still loved him unconditionally. Well, he was always weird, now a bit more. After giving her statement at the police station, she got a phone call from an unknown number. It was her brother's voice but with a different pitch. "Hello, my lovely sister, I see you had a little visit at the police station. Is something wrong?". She froze instantly, she never heard that form of speech coming from her brother. It was neither Timmy nor Carl, it was someone she was afraid of, someone that made her frantically look around all the time. "What is it? What are you looking for, Stephanie?". That was it, she hanged up the phone and ran straight to the police officer whom she gave her statement. "Please, you need to help me, it's about my brother. He called me just a few minutes ago, but it wasn't him, please, please I beg you". "It's okay miss, why don't you tell me what happened? Let's sit here, no one can harm you now". Playing a real hero, police officer didn't know that he was the next victim on Michael's list.

"I am telling you; my brother is different and has a serious disorder. I have only known of one personality till now, this one must be new. He had a different accent and a cold calm tone which is unlike my brother's". Stephanie was already feeling miserable explaining all this to the police officer and then to his boss several times. In their eyes, it was another scared woman that had very little information about her missing brother. On top of that he had a very complex diagnosis, and it was hard to believe that he would do something bad. "I don't think that kid could do anything bad since he has that disorder, he just seeks attention. "I am asking you once again, please try to find him at least on my previous report of a missing person, I have never heard my brother talking like that, I really don't have a good feeling about this". "Alright, alright, I will see what I can do. I will ask you miss to be near the phone during this time until we find him." "Of course," Stephanie got out of the police station and called herself a taxi. "Yes, they will do something about it, those two weren't even trying to understand why I think something is wrong. I know something is up, last time I saw him like that was the morning when Carl found the father's body". Her

phone rang again, she knew that this time she had to face him. “Yes Carl?,” “Oh my lovely sister, was the talk with the police officer better than the talk with your own brother?” “Carl, tell me what is happening, you freaked me out, where are you?”. She tried to lure him out, if it was really another personality, it’s better to deal with it somewhere surrounded with many people. “I will send you an address, let’s meet here” Carl, wait...”. He hanged up and she froze once again. Her taxi came right at time “Please, to the Avenue square, Street 12”. When she came there, it gave her chills resembling an abandoned place, looking like those old coffee places that were popular before. She stepped in, it was cold and dark. “Great, now I will die here like in some cliché horror movie, that’s exactly what I need in my life right now. Not even a second later, Michael stepped right in front of her, “Gosh Carl, you gave me a heart attack, where have you been all this time and why the heck are we here?”. “First of all, my name is Michael, and second, I’ve been making your brother’s life easier and third, we are here because you need to deal with the consequences for what you did in the police station”. “What? Who the heck are you? Carl, what are you saying?” “Shh, it will all pass soon, just let me make your brother’s life a bit mor easier”. He stabbed her with a dagger he carried in his small brown pocket, a few more stabs and she would have been dead. “Why, what is happening, Carl?” Stephanie sighed with difficulty. After hearing his sister calling him for help, Carl took control over his body again. “Steph?! What happened? Who did this to you?”. He looked down at his hands and saw the dagger. He started crying for the first time in the long period. “I.., I did it”. An immense pain rushed through his chest, he couldn’t breathe or move. He fell, right next to Stephanie. Crawling to her purse, she called the ambulance but never spoke any words. Ambulance found Carl next to Stephanie’s dead body. They managed to save him and get him stabilised soon. He was charged with all the murders Michael committed as well as his sister’s murder, the only thing that was stopping him from defending himself was Timmy. He was the happiest one in the room; he finally got his body all for himself and there was no sight of either Carl or Michael. Both were forgotten as if they had never existed, and now Timmy should serve their punishment. The only problem is that Timmy won’t serve not even one year because prosecutors decided to put him into a mental asylum. In their eyes he was not mature enough to even form a sentence of a 26- year- old and by that he would be better off somewhere he could be helped professionally. Maybe little Timmy gets the new chance to start from scratch and lead a normal life and make right decisions next time.

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## ONLY ONE DAY

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Every morning he wakes up feeling a bit more miserable, but he got used to it because it's been going on for the last twenty-three days. Brushing his teeth felt like torture. Hearing the alarm as he comes to sense of the reality made him disappointed.

Twenty-three days ago, Liam's girlfriend Evelyn told him she has to go to a hospital. The ride to the hospital was normal, just him telling her she's overdramatic and it'll be okay. On the other hand, the ride back home was filled with deadly silence and unpleasantness. When they got home, the silence continued. She went to bed as soon as the clock showed 11:00PM. Liam had always been a night owl. He likes to be the last to go to sleep and the last one to wake up in the morning or noon, sometimes even oversleeping lunch.

Around 2AM he gathered strength, brushed his teeth and did skin-care routine Evelyn forced him to do every night. When he walked to the opened door of their bedroom, he just kept on standing there, looking at her back. She claimed the right side of their bed for herself, the one closest to the window, ever since they bought the house and moved in together five years ago. The bedroom is small. The whole house is small, but they love it regardless.

The lack of physical touch that day finally started to affect him, so he laid down beside her, hugged her from behind and kissed the back of her head.

All he got from her in return was a quiet 'Good night.'

That's how Liam's first night after finding out his girlfriend will be dead in twenty-seven days went.

### Day Twenty-Four

I closed my journal and turned to left, now looking at the empty half of the bed. He didn't even care to close the door so I'm not cold, but I can't get any sicker than I already am so I can't blame him. Getting out of bed for the first time this week (it's Tuesday) made me feel severe agony and it took me about five minutes to get myself together and stand up. I made my way towards the kitchen, hoping to eat something but that didn't go as planned, that's why I decided to cook us a lunch.

I've always loved cooking for other people, especially my boyfriend. It filled me with joy to see someone enjoying my cooking and baking. When I was ten years old, I started to help my mother bake all kinds of cakes and cookies, and that's where my love for cooking and baking started. I used to bake cakes for birthdays, weddings, and other occasions, but it all went downhill when I got severely sick.

A loud slamming of the door was something I got used to hearing the past two weeks. This time it was more violent, and you could hear it came from anger and frustration. I could clearly hear him cussing out everything in his way.

When I walked to the dining room, he was standing next to the table looking at the lunch I made us.

'What's this?' He asked me, still not taking his eyes off of the table.

'A lunch. Bolognese,' I answered confused 'Does it not look like it?'

'Why did you make this?' He asked ignoring my question.

'I don't know, for us to eat I guess.' I said even more confused by his respond.

That's where the conversation ended. He then slowly turned his head and looked me straight in the eyes. In that moment I felt fear towards Liam for the first time and I froze. He then started walking towards me but didn't stop to talk to me. He just walked right past me; our shoulders bumped into each other causing me to almost fall.

*March 21, Tuesday.*

*I'm disappointed. Not in him, but in myself. Was I stupid to think that someone will love me the way people love in movies or boring novels I read? The last thing he did to make me feel appreciated was that kiss on the back of my head the night we came from the hospital. I think every young girl was thinking about what her boyfriend would do if she were dying. Why am I the one to get the worst-case scenario? Seriously, when I had those thoughts, I always imagined my boyfriend showering me with flowers, kisses, gifts and trying to make me the happiest I could ever be. Then why is my boyfriend the opposite of that? I don't know if he wants me to wish for my own death or what he has in plan, but I don't like it at all.*

*He could have at least eaten the lunch I made us today.*

*Maybe he will be different tomorrow.*

Evelyn



### Day Twenty-Five

Waking up another morning next to the person I was supposed to spend my whole life with, but I know I have a time limit makes me feel devastated. This is the last day that I have a chance to spend my day with her.

This morning was not like that. Evelyn was not in our bed when I woke up, but I could hear she was taking a morning shower. Hopefully, she doesn't even want to see me.

I'm not the kind of person who openly talks or even writes about their feelings. I don't like getting emotional because then I feel like I'm weak and not the man everyone expects from me to be.

These twenty and something days I tried to be colder to Evelyn. Not because I hate that she's sick, not because I'm mad at her but because it will be easier for both of us. If she gets mad at me for being cold, she won't be thinking about me before dying, and if I detach from her, it will be at least a little bit easier to accept her death.

I love Evelyn more than anything, but I'm not a good boyfriend to her.

I realized I was staring at the journal on her nightstand that I've ever seen before so I grabbed it and opened it on the first page.

*February 25, Saturday*

*I have never felt more guilt in my life than I'm feeling right now. I don't know how long I can lie to Liam and everyone anymore. It's not like I desperately want to die or like I didn't even try to fight cancer, I just don't think I'm a person for this.*

*I have a small chance to win, but is it worth it? All my life I'll continue to live with fear and questioning myself 'What if?' questions.*

*I can't talk to Liam about this. He won't support my decision and I know that.*

*After I went to first four appointments it became clear as day to me that I can't do this. The doctor asked me if I want to continue with less than five chance to survive or if I want to pass by the process of euthanasia. I chose euthanasia. Maybe Liam would accept this, but I couldn't figure out how to talk to him about that.*

*That's why I think hiding my decision is the best thing to do. I can't stand the thought of him or my mother being so disappointed in the decision I made about my life.*

I couldn't bring myself to read any more pages of this journal. I put it back on a nightstand and laid on my back and stared at the ceiling. A hundred of questions flew through my head and I couldn't help but start crying. I wasn't even aware of the tears running down from my eyes to ears.

'Oh, you're awake,' said Evelyn as she entered the room and began looking for new clothes.

I didn't say anything about what she said because I was busy thinking how to start talking about what I've just read.

'Evelyn?' I finally said.

'What?' She said and turned to face me instead of the closet.

Then I finally asked, 'Have you been lying to me?' I felt instant regret after those words came out of my mouth.

Her eyes then widened and shifted to the table where her journal was. She stood there speechless and scared.

'You lied about going to the appointments and you didn't tell me you want them to kill you' I said after minutes of silence that felt like hours.

'They won't kill me Liam it's not the same as killing someone. See this is why I didn't tell you. You can't even try to understand me!' She was getting louder and louder; she was yelling at me for the first time ever.

'Are you insane? You're a coward to take medication and let it work! It's easier for you to just die than try and live?!'

At this point we're just yelling at each other. She kept on saying it was her choice and I wouldn't understand. I stood by my word and kept on telling her it was a poor decision of hers, to leave us all behind and not even tell us the real reason.

I slept alone that night. She went to her mother's; she's also lying to her so she can't tell her the real reason she's crying.

### **Day Twenty-Six**

They both woke up wretched.

They both thought about apologizing and calling one another to talk it through.

Liam's plan about making it easier didn't work. Maybe he was not the man the thought he was. Evelyn's plan of keeping it a secret to make it easier for everyone also didn't work because now Liam knew everything.

Evelyn decided to wait until 4PM for Liam to apologize or just call for her to come back home. At 4PM she'll turn off her phone and give it to her mother. She wanted to spend her last night with him even though he hasn't been much of a boyfriend lately.

It's now 2:23PM, she's still waiting by her phone in her mother's house when she suddenly feels ill. She feels like her stomach is turning around, her lungs are closing and she's losing the ability to breathe. She starts yelling for her mom and goes to call the ambulance on her phone but accidentally calls Liam. After she realized that she's not calling an ambulance she declines the call.

Liam was awake since 6AM. He didn't even go to bathroom or to eat something. He has been laying in his bed for 8 hours, feeling like he's not ever there.

At 2:23PM he sees his phone brighten up and hears the familiar music coming from it. He twitches and his eyes widened when he saw Evelyn's contact name there. Two seconds before he could click the green button next to her name, the phone stopped buzzing, the music stopped playing and, on his phone, now he only saw his wallpaper of him and his dad.

Liam then waited a couple of minutes before he decided to go and see if everything is okay with Evelyn and her mother. He ran there for 10 minutes and stood in front of the front door rethinking if this was the right thing to do and should he give her some space in case she needs it.

Still, he knocked three times.

No answer.

He knocked again, harder.

Then panic hit him when no one opened the door again.

The yelling and banging on the door started, as well as tears began to fall down his face. When he saw there's no car in the garage and it's left opened in a hurry, he started to run towards the hospital which was three kilometers away. He didn't have time and didn't even think about going back home to drive there.

When he came to the hospital, barely able to breathe, he didn't know where she was or which way he is supposed to go now. He didn't even know who to ask so he ran around.

'Liam!' He heard someone yell from behind him.

He turned around and saw Evelyn's mother and a doctor standing in front of some door. As he got closer to them, he saw her eyes were all swollen and her hands were shaking. He began walking slower and slower until he got close enough to see her face clearly.

It was over for him when he heard the doctor say: 'So sorry for your loss, young man'

Liam collapsed on the floor, screaming and crying. He wanted to beat himself up. How could he let this happen? She died thinking he's mad at her. They didn't talk since yesterday because he was a coward and didn't want to call first. Would it be different if he answered her call? Was she calling for help, to apologize, for him to pick her up or to just talk to him and to hear his voice for the last time?

She died one day earlier than expected, or one day before her euthanasia process is supposed to take a turn.

He felt as if all they needed was that one day. They could have fixed everything, and he would have been a better boyfriend to her.

Now all he had left was regret, a cold right side of the bed and mind full of questions why.

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## THE BLACK FEATHER

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Amidst the cheerful chirping of birds and the gentle wind, she sat peacefully, capturing the beauty of the sunset on paper. As she drew, a raindrop landed on her painting, smudging the colors and changing her expression from contentment to sadness. She quickly gathered her belongings as a storm rolled in, darkening the sky and bringing forth thunder and rain. Her once beautiful dress became drenched. Sensing a dark presence, she turned around to find a dense forest, barely visible in the darkness. Suddenly, two piercing red eyes appeared and rushed towards her, terrifying her and causing her to fall off a cliff into the water below. Gasping for air, she struggled to swim, overwhelmed by panic. As the young woman sank deeper into the murky depths of the water, her body felt heavy and her limbs weak. The darkness surrounded her, swallowing her whole as her consciousness began to fade. The water filled her lungs, causing her chest to tighten and her vision to blur.

"Rose!" She woke up to a sudden voice, only to realize that what she had just witnessed was just a dream. It felt a little too real. Glancing out the window, she saw a crow sitting on a branch, watching her. She got up and changed before greeting her mother in the kitchen and eating her already prepared breakfast. As her mother complained about her hard work, Rose didn't pay much attention. She felt incredibly tired and lacked energy for even the smallest tasks, but she had to go to school. The day turned out to be quite boring, with Rose observing people walking outside and crows fighting for bread leftovers. After the bell rang for the big break, everyone went to the cafeteria to get food and catch up with friends from other classes. Rose's friends welcomed her and they decided to hang out in the forest after school, like a little camping trip.

At first, Rose wasn't really excited about the idea of venturing into the forest for their little camping trip. The memory of her dream still lingered, casting a shadow of unease over her. But as her friends spoke animatedly about the fun they would have, their eyes sparkling with anticipation, Rose couldn't help but feel a tug of curiosity. Perhaps, amidst the towering trees and the whispering leaves, she would find solace and a temporary escape from the weight of her dreams.

With a hesitant smile, she agreed to join them, hoping that the adventure would lift her spirits and bring a sense of normalcy to her weary soul. As the break ended, the group of friends bid their farewells, dispersing to their next classes with the promise of reconvening later.

The day dragged on, each minute feeling like an eternity as Rose's mind wandered to the looming excursion. The clock's hands inched closer to the final bell, and with each passing second, her heart fluttered with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation. Finally, the moment arrived, and the school day melted away, leaving behind a trail of forgotten assignments and unanswered questions.

Outside, the atmosphere was charged with the energy of youthful adventure. The sky above was a canvas of shifting hues, the dying light of the day splashing vibrant streaks of orange and pink across the horizon. The air held a crispness, hinting at the promise of a memorable evening ahead. Rose's friends gathered around her, their smiles infectious and their laughter contagious.

With a collective sense of excitement, they set off towards the edge of the forest, leaving the familiarity of the school grounds behind. The path ahead was bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun, casting long shadows that danced playfully at their feet. The forest beckoned, its mysteries and secrets waiting to be unraveled.

As they ventured deeper into the heart of the woods, the ambiance shifted. The gentle rustling of leaves and the chorus of birdsong filled the air, creating a symphony of nature's melody. Shafts of sunlight filtered through the thick canopy above, casting dappled patterns on the forest floor. A blanket of moss-covered rocks and fallen leaves welcomed their every step, muffling the sound of their footfalls and lending an otherworldly hush to their surroundings.

Rose's initial unease began to dissipate, replaced by a sense of awe and wonder. The majesty of the towering trees, their trunks adorned with ivy and age-old wisdom, whispered ancient secrets that only the forest could comprehend. The air tasted fresher, carrying with it the scent of earth and pine, invigorating her senses.

Lost in the beauty of their surroundings, Rose's friends paused for a moment, their eyes meeting in silent agreement. They spread out a checkered blanket on a patch of soft grass, creating a makeshift picnic spot under the watchful gaze of the ancient trees. Laughter mingled with the sounds of nature as Rose and her friends settled down on the checkered blanket, their excitement palpable in the air. The forest seemed to embrace their presence, welcoming them into its ancient embrace. With each passing moment, Rose's unease melted away, replaced by a sense of belonging.

They unpacked their backpacks, revealing an assortment of sandwiches and snacks. The aroma of freshly baked bread and savory fillings wafted through the air,

mingling with the earthy scents of the forest. As they shared stories and memories, their laughter echoed through the trees, intermingling with the chorus of birdsong.

Rose found herself getting lost in the tales, her friends' animated gestures and contagious enthusiasm captivating her. With each anecdote, the weight of her dreams lifted, replaced by the lightness of camaraderie and shared experiences. The worries that had plagued her earlier in the day dissolved into the backdrop of the forest, fading away like distant echoes.

Time seemed to stand still as they basked in the warmth of friendship and the tranquility of their surroundings. The fading sunlight cast a golden glow on their faces, illuminating their smiles and filling their eyes with a sense of wonder. The forest, with its ancient wisdom and untold secrets, held them in its embrace, weaving a tapestry of memories that would forever be etched in their hearts.

As the day transformed into evening, the forest around them took on an ethereal quality. Shadows lengthened, casting an enchanting spell over the landscape. The gentle rustling of leaves and the whispers of the wind seemed to carry a message, a subtle reminder of the transient nature of life and the importance of treasuring moments like these.

With the last rays of sunlight bidding their farewell, Rose's friends began to pack up their belongings, a tinge of reluctance tugging at their hearts. The forest had worked its magic, offering them solace and respite from the trials of everyday life. But it was time to return to reality, their adventure drawing to a close.

As they made their way back through the forest, Rose couldn't help but feel a renewed sense of energy and purpose. The weight of her dreams still lingered, but now it felt more manageable, overshadowed by the memories she had created with her friends. The forest had offered her a temporary escape, a sanctuary where she could find solace and recharge her weary soul.

With each step, the forest gradually receded, its towering trees becoming mere silhouettes against the darkening sky. As they emerged from the depths of the woods, the sounds of civilization grew louder, pulling them back into the realm of responsibilities and obligations.

But as Rose turned to bid the forest farewell, she couldn't help but smile. She knew that amidst the chaos of everyday life, the whispers of the trees and the secrets of the forest would always be there, waiting to offer her solace and a reminder of the beauty that lay beyond the veil of dreams. And with that thought in her heart, Rose took a final glance at the forest, the place that had offered her solace and renewal, before reluctantly stepping back into the world beyond. She felt a surge of energy within

her, a newfound strength that stemmed from the memories and experiences she had shared with her friends in the enchanting embrace of the ancient trees.

As Rose retraced her steps through the forest, the shadows lengthened, casting an ethereal glow over the landscape. The sunlight filtered through the canopy of leaves, creating a dappling effect on the forest floor. The rustling of leaves and the whispering of the wind seemed to bid her farewell, their voices carrying a message of hope and resilience.

The familiar sounds of civilization gradually grew louder, pulling Rose back into the realm of responsibilities and obligations. The cacophony of honking cars and bustling streets replaced the symphony of birdsong and rustling leaves, but Rose carried with her a sense of calm and purpose that she had found within the depths of the forest.

With each step, the forest gradually receded, its towering trees becoming mere silhouettes against the darkening sky. The air, once fragrant with the scent of earth and pine, now carried a mixture of exhaust fumes and the aroma of city life. The transition from the tranquility of the forest to the bustling reality of everyday life was jarring, but Rose clung to the memories she had created with her friends, cherishing the moments of laughter and camaraderie.

As she emerged from the woods, Rose's gaze shifted from the fading beauty of the forest to the familiar sight of her neighborhood. The houses, with their neatly manicured lawns, stood as beacons of familiarity, welcoming her back into the fold. The world beyond the forest seemed to lack the enchantment and mystique she had experienced within its ancient embrace, but Rose knew that the whispers of the trees and the secrets of the forest would always be there, waiting to offer her solace and a reminder of the beauty that lay beyond the veil of dreams.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Rose walked the path that led her back home, her steps filled with determination. The weight of her dreams still lingered, but now they felt more manageable, overshadowed by the memories she had made in the forest. She carried within her a sense of belonging and a renewed vigor, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

As she reached her doorstep, Rose paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. The echoes of laughter and the whispers of the forest still lingered in her mind, and she knew that even in the midst of the chaos and demands of everyday life, she could always find solace and strength within the sanctuary of her memories.

And with that thought in her heart, she stepped back into the world.

Suddenly she heard a sound, turning around to see a crow. As Rose turned to bid the forest farewell, her eyes caught a glimpse of movement. A crow, perched on a



nearby branch, observed her with piercing eyes. Its sleek black feathers shimmered in the fading light, contrasting against the backdrop of the darkening sky. Intrigued, Rose watched as the crow cocked its head to the side, as if contemplating her presence.

Curiosity sparked within her, and Rose couldn't help but meet the crow's gaze. There was an inexplicable connection between them, an unspoken understanding that transcended the boundaries of their respective worlds. The crow, sensing her intrigue, let out a soft caw, its voice resonating through the air.

Intrigued, Rose extended her hand towards the crow, her movements slow and deliberate. To her surprise, the crow mirrored her actions, hopping closer with an air of cautious curiosity. Its ebony beady eyes locked onto hers, mirroring the depths of the forest she had just left behind. They seemed to hold a wisdom, as if the crow knew secrets hidden within the ethereal realm of the woods.

With bated breath, Rose reached out her hand, her fingertips barely grazing the tips of the crow's feathers. The moment their connection was established, a surge of energy coursed through her veins. It felt as if a current of ancient knowledge and untamed magic flowed from the crow and infused her being.

Time seemed to stand still as Rose and the crow shared a moment of profound connection. The world around them faded into insignificance as they existed solely within the space they occupied. The crow, sensing her trust and openness, let out a gentle croak, its voice echoing like a distant echo of the forest.

Emboldened by this shared connection, Rose began to mimic the crow's movements. She spread her arms wide, embracing the sky above, and the crow followed suit, extending its wings in a magnificent display of freedom and grace. Together, they danced an intricate dance of unity, their movements harmonizing with the rhythm of the world.

As they moved in synchrony, Rose could feel a newfound sense of liberation coursing through her spirit. The weight of her responsibilities and obligations melted away, replaced by a lightness that could only be found in the freedom of the wild. In this moment, she understood that the solace she sought in the forest was not limited to the physical realm, but extended beyond, encompassing the very essence of her being.

The sun began to set, casting a warm golden glow over the world. The crow, sensing the encroaching darkness, let out one final, melodious caw, bidding Rose farewell. With a graceful flick of its wings, it soared into the sky, disappearing into the vast expanse above.

With a heart still aglow from the ethereal connection she had shared with the crow, Rose turned back and approached her humble abode. The warm, familiar glow of her home beckoned her, promising comfort and respite from the outside world.

Pushing the door open, Rose was greeted by the gentle creaking of wood and the familiar scent of home. The dimly lit interior enveloped her, casting elongated shadows that danced upon the walls. The fireplace crackled with warmth, casting flickering embers into the air, and the soft glow of candlelight created a cozy ambiance that invited her to linger.

Stepping inside, Rose found herself surrounded by the familiar comforts of her daily life. The worn wooden floors creaked beneath her feet, each sound a reassuring echo of countless memories etched into the very fabric of her being. The walls, adorned with framed photographs capturing moments of joy and love, whispered tales of a life well-lived.

Rose couldn't help but feel a weariness settle within her bones, weighing her down with the weight of the day's events. The ethereal connection she had shared with the crow lingered in her mind, a flickering flame of wonder amidst the darkness. As she stepped further into her home, the comforting embrace of familiarity embraced her, enveloping her in a cocoon of solace.

And she drifted to the dream land.

The dream she had, seemed to be the same one as the last one, about drowning.

Before it happened again. And again. And again.

She was stuck.. stuck in a dream and she couldn't wake up.

She could only try to change the dream.

She did it once, and the crow didn't attack her, instead it saved her and flew away.

Leaving a black feather after itself, Rose picked it up and kept it.

She was still stuck.

Stuck in a dream, with a black feather.

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## THE CONFLUENCE OF THE SOULS

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I have to admit, it's not easy when a loved one leaves the world, regardless of whether it's an animal or a human. But have you ever seen yourself leaving and walking away because it's time to turn the page? Most often it will happen after a wonderful period in life because life likes to inflict great wounds called lessons. The departure of someone always means the arrival of someone new, which also applies to ourselves. We must not lose hope and will because we were created to move forward.

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### Journal entry: Wednesday, August 11th

I watched her in the distance as she was walking through tall grass and overgrown flowers leading to a dense forest. Her hair is blowing in the wind, she looks so perfect. Every strand is in its place. She is looking at the river flowing by and searching for a bit of life. Her hands gently move the grass so she can keep walking straight. I hear birds chirping somewhere in the trees and singing a song to her.

I thought she wasn't going to turn around and that my chapter with her was over, but at that moment she turned around and brushed her hair away from her face allowing me to see her radiant glow.

No sound came out of her lips. But it was not necessary. The look in her eyes told me more than the empty words I heard.

It is slowly blurring before my eyes. Tears prevented me from seeing her beauty, which I was looking at for the last time. I was so mad at myself. My hands unconsciously spread in the hope that she would return. She just turned and disappeared into the huge, tall grass and forest.

The birds were still singing, the river was still flowing, the wind was still blowing gently, but it was all meaningless. She is gone, only a shadow remains behind her.

I felt as if everything was collapsing beneath me, but I continued to stand. I looked at everything around me. I smelled her skin and hair and heard her laugh, but I didn't see her figure.

I have to come to terms with the fact that she will never come back and that I now depend on myself.

I leave this place with a severe stomach ache. I turn once more, hoping to see her again, but I don't. I feel the morning sun on my face and I go in search of a new me and eternal peace.

I really don't know what to feel or think. Every time I think, and think, I feel like all my thoughts, words and emotions are worthless. Now that she's gone, everything is so empty.

"I see, you're writing in your journal. Again. I already told you, do not waste your precious time on writing. It's truly worthless."

I glanced over my shoulder and saw my father. He never understood why I kept writing about my life. The sentences I write will be admired and read by the ones that empathize with my inner state.

"Father, if I write what I feel, it's to reduce the fever of feeling. If you want me sane, let me write. That's the only form of keeping me well balanced."

"I couldn't care less about your writing. Pull yourself together and be a man. You are not worthy of any woman with this kind of behavior. Your wife would be ashamed of having you as her husband."

"I understand, father," I said while holding my pen and looking blankly at my notebook, without the will to continue writing my beloved anecdote.

After my father had left my room by slamming my door, I got a thought that created a hole in my other, already concluded thoughts and ideas.

All of a sudden, I started writing as fast as I could because I was scared to forget a thought.

"Have I ever done anything worthy in my life, except dreaming? Thinking? I am constantly in my thoughts, in which I stay for so long that I cannot see a way out of them. Am I destined to think about nonsense in order to survive this strange blizzard of life? Am I stuck in this bizarre effigy that I created without managing to breathe life into me?"

That was the last thing I wrote. I closed my notebook, feeling nothing but a weird feeling of emptiness. I wanted to clear my mind, to remove those thoughts from my head so I got up and lit a cigarette. I enjoyed smoking at night time more than during the day, while looking at the night sky and fields in front of my window. When I was a child, I was taught that stars gave us, humans, important signals, especially the shooting stars. My mother once told me: "Look at the stars in the night sky and become the person who shines bright like those stars."

She was my inspiration. My mother, my hero. I admired her for everything she did, and for every thought she expressed. I loved her when my father did not, but, once I got older, I never received the love back. Sometimes I ask myself, was I born to be unwanted? Was I truly born not to be in my mother's arms, but to be left in those fields? Her rosemary fields.

My mother once told me, "You know, my child, there is a special meaning behind this herb."

"Rosemary? Isn't it just another seasoning?"

"It is much more than that, my dear. Rosemary has a special place in my heart. My parents never had much. But they had a small garden, and in that garden, my father planted a small rosemary bush just for me. Later on, the rosemary bush spread and spread until it was a kilometer long."

I remember her eyes shining while recounting memories of her childhood.

"Whenever life got tough, when we faced challenges or even just ordinary days, I would pluck a sprig of rosemary and let its fragrance fill our home. It has become a symbol of resilience, a reminder that even in the most difficult times there is beauty and strength."

"I never knew that about rosemary, mother."

"My child, it's legacy now. It was my duty to introduce you to the rosemary. Just like I told your father the whole story, even though he found it silly. Whenever you feel ready, pluck a sprig of rosemary and give it to your loved one. It's more than just a herb; it's a story, a part of who we are."

Then, I knew it. It's the rosemary that symbolizes love – a never-ending field, with the most significant scent. I knew who to share this story with, who would help me continue our legacy. But, I was unsure how to meet with her in the real world, not in my dreamland.

Once I finished my cigarette, I threw it out. I heard the wind blowing tenderly, and then I heard the rustling of leaves. No matter how much I listen to the sounds of nature, it will never stop comforting my soul. It's like I have some sort of connection with it.

I stood by the window for quite some time, trying to clear my mind and body. Each rustle seemed to carry away the weight of my thoughts, leaving me with a renewed sense of tranquility. In those moments of stillness, the world outside became my sanctuary, and the simple act of listening became a form of meditation, grounding me in the serenity that only nature can provide. When I felt a wave of fatigue, I closed the window and went to bed.

Until next writing,

T.C.

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Journal entry: Friday, August 13th

I dreamed about her last night. She was there, with me, next to me. I felt the softness of her skin as she leaned on my shoulder. Her hair. Her scent still drew me in the same way it had drawn me so long ago. Her charm overwhelmed me in a millisecond. She was so perfect in my eyes that I couldn't find words to describe it. Everything attracted me. Her soul, her scent, her figure.

"Why did you leave me? Left me to rot?" she said.

"I didn't leave you, see? I'm here."

"I tried to give you everything to return the same love, but I tried without success," I felt the discomfort in her voice. Difficulty. She said some sentences to herself, or I just don't remember them.

"Can you explain to me what you're saying?" I asked her nervously.

Without a word, she straightens up and moves away from my shoulder. Just as I am about to ask the next question, she turns her face towards me. When she turns back, the shock hits me like a wave. Her face is covered in bruises, wounds etched deep into her skin, eyes tired and filled with sorrow.

"For God's sake, what happened to you?"

"Did you have to leave? You left me alone with him."

Then everything started to collapse. I found myself standing in a desolate void, the remnants of sleep scattered like ashes. The scent of rosemary lingered, but now it carried an unsettling undertone, a bitter reminder of the dream's decay.

"No, wait! Please, tell me who did that to you!"

The dream left me shaken, the lingering echoes of her accusations still reverberating in my mind. In the unsettling void, the scent of rosemary, once a comforting presence, now hovered under the weight of unresolved questions. The dream turned into a nightmare, revealing the depth of her pain and the scars she carried.

Those awful words lingered, haunting the chorus in the void. "Why did you leave me? Left me to rot?" Questions echoed in the void, demanding answers that eluded me. The dream became a maze of guilt and confusion and I found myself lost in its tangled web.

While I was waking up, I could feel the scent of rosemary. It's like she was here, next to me, holding a piece of mom's favorite herb. I could not come to terms with waiting for another 24 hours to find out what happened to her. What if it's a dream like this where she tells me what really happened? What if she doesn't tell me?

As I wrestled with the questions swirling in my head, the scent became a soothing

anchor, a reminder that even in the midst of unanswered mysteries there is a connection that intersects in the realms of waking and dreams. I carried the scent with me all day, which was like a whispered promise that answered the fact that a silent companion would come before the face of the unknown.

Until next writing,

T.C.

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Journal entry: Sunday, August 15th

The weather is clear. I could feel the summer breeze on my face. Once again, my father decided to interrupt me with his voice cutting through the tranquility like an unexpected gust of wind.

“When are you going to stop with these dreams and illusions?”

I sighed, knowing that it was now my fault for telling him about the dreams and nightmares I had had. How could I’ve been so foolish? For God’s sake, I could’ve just kept quiet. Despite the warmth of the sun, a chill settled in my bones, a stark contrast to the summer breeze that had moments ago whispered promises of freedom and possibility.

“Father, I get it. It’s time for me to move on from these dreams. I’ll stop believing in them,” I lied to him just so he would stop attacking me. My father’s stern expression softened momentarily, a hint of satisfaction in his eyes.

“And, my boy, what about writing? When will you stop with that time waster?” He gave me a completely clear look. I knew what he meant by that.

“Oh father-”

“Do not oh me, my child, you have many important things to do. Quit now.”

“Father, you never understand. Writing is not a childish thing to do, nor is it a time waster. It helps me express myself and understand myself. I pour my whole soul on paper.”

“And you think a little *“Oh no, I’m so sad!”* on the paper will help you and your future career? Don’t be foolish, son. I’m warning you, stop writing or you will face consequences.”

I felt a sudden wave of rage going through my body, like I was losing my mind.

“Do not tell me what to do. You should be my support, not a threat. Ever since mother died, you’ve been nothing but a moron who only looks out for himself and his reputation. The only thing I truly want is a loving father, but I guess I was not blessed by a higher power!” The words spilled out, laced with bitterness and long-buried resentment. My father’s expression mixed with a sense of shock and anger, and for a

moment the air crackled with the weight of the truth hanging out in the open. The summer breeze, once a gentle companion, seemed to carry away the fragments of our broken relationship.

The silence that followed was heavy, the unspoken words told me more than his empty promises. At that moment, I knew the bridge between us had been further strained, and the remnants of our argument lingered in the air like an unresolved melody.

With one last look, my father turned and walked away, leaving me standing in the fading summer light. The conflict exposed the cracks in our relationship, but in the middle of tearing apart my relationship with him, I felt a glimmer of newfound strength - a determination to follow my dreams, even in the face of my father's opposition.

Until next writing,

T.C.

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#### Journal entry: Thursday, August 19th

I'm on the brink of a mental collapse. The mysterious dreams, the cryptic messages, and the unsettling aura in my home pushed me to the edge. The scent of rosemary, once a source of comfort, now seemed to amplify the chaos in my mind. Not even writing helps me with my sanity.

Haunted by some premonition, I frantically started packing my things. The walls of the house, which used to be a shelter, now feel claustrophobic. Each room seemed to echo with unspoken secrets, boosting the oppressive atmosphere. The scent of rosemary, intertwined with the memories of my past and the mysterious dreams, became an overwhelming presence, persuading me to escape. The once familiar rooms blurred into an impossible maze, and the rosemary-scented whispers seemed to mock my sanity.

As I stepped out into the cool night, the weight of my own thoughts began to ease. The world seemed like an unsafe haven. The darkness enveloped me, providing a temporary escape from the unsettling revelations and the scent of rosemary that lingered in the air.

On this quiet night, I saw a soft, ethereal glow that came from the field. The air shifted, and a gentle breeze carried with it the haunting melody of someone's familiar laughter. It was her. My past love. It was the same laughter that I heard in my dreams. The surroundings transformed, and I found myself in a surreal dreamscape, bathed in a soft, celestial light.



And there she was. She looked like an angel God sent to save me from this miserable world and give me a chance to live again. Her presence brought a profound calm, and the scent of rosemary now carried a comforting undertone.

“Welcome home, my love,” she said with the most heavenly voice. “You’ve crossed the bridge between dreams and reality, a realm where the truths elude us and the world you had spent your life in becomes clear.”

I looked at her, confused. What does she mean by “crossed a bridge”...?

“My dear, is this... the afterlife?”

She nodded. “In a way, yes. This is a space where the threads of existence twist, and I’m here to guide you through the truth about your own existence.”

She took my hand; it was warm and soft. She started to walk, making sure I was behind her. Everything is clear now. Her hair, her figure. Now I get to see her face with no bruises. She looks so perfect! She truly is the work of God.

The darkness of the night transformed into a canvas, stars painting a cosmic dance overhead. As we were walking through fields, she was telling me about the mysteries that had haunted me - my dreams and illusions. In this surreal realm between worlds, the beginning of my journey is being guided by her ethereal presence, wishful to uncover the profound truths that awaited me in the afterlife.

I finally asked her. “My dear, what were those dreams, why did they haunt me? Or better, why did *you* haunt me?”

“Your dreams are the echoes of a shared past. In a previous life, we were bound by a love so profound that it transcended the boundaries of mortality. Our connection spans across dimensions, and your dreams are the fragments of those memories, reaching out to be acknowledged.”

“And what hidden truths lie within my own existence?”

“The hidden truths within your existence are the keys to unlocking the mysteries of our shared journey. You carry within you the power to rewrite the fate that has kept us entwined.”

There were star trails in the night sky that showed me all the love and connection with my beloved angel that happened in my past life. The cosmic dance is now classified according to the chapters of my sad, past life which will help me understand myself even more. It will help me fall in love with myself. The afterlife, once a mysterious haven, became a canvas where the threads of destiny awaited my touch, and my angel stood by my side, a guardian of the cosmic canvas that connected us through eternity.

Until next writing,

T.C.

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## THE FALL OF THE FLYING CITY

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Tucked away beyond the borders of the lands known to men, a flying city of the Nation of Eight floated. Sinnister was its name, and the legend goes that it was the most glorious city to ever exist, floating above the Sillked sea like a fluffy, yet solid cloud. Magnificent waterfalls poured down its borders making it even more angelic-like. Its streets were painted dark blue, dark as the deepest rapids and pale as the petals of hydrangea; flower which bloomed down Fallen Street. High-rise ornate dwellings were exuding elegance and showing off their wealth to those living beneath them. An invisible shield seemed to hug the city, protecting it from any harm which could strike from above or beneath. The rays of both sunlight and moonlight reflected its glory.

The people of Sinnister were as beautiful as the city itself. Caring and welcoming, diligent and amiable. Their auras had a glistening light which only rounded up their immaculate looks. Their only flaw was that people living beneath them, the Unders, actually felt less and imperfect when compared to them above. How had such a marvellous city become so foreign and fear-instilling? How come those who hated to feel beneath them, now hate those being above them?

As every part of the Nation of Eight was ruled by a High family, Sinnister was ruled by the Sinnisters. Their symbol was that of a raven since this intelligent avian flied near them, always looking out for them. The members of the Sinnister family had all jet-black hair and piercing eyes which held so much power. One would believe they were the Lords of this whole Nation, but they had no intention of having power over those beneath. The Sinnisters had no intention to harm or rule. They were as peaceful as the sky in which they float. Shedding blood and waging a war was to be avoided at all costs.

As people, women, children and even their Lord feared the Sinnisters, it was felt that they couldn't last long. The Unders called them names despite not even knowing them. "Mutts" and "Takers of the Throne" are just some of the names that would be remembered forever. The Unders feared them even more when the Sinnisters would slide down and walk on their lands. The Lords of the Throne no more had their

dragons to fly them up to the stars, so even they felt inferior. They felt attacked every morning they woke up and saw Sinnister in the air, floating with its ravens around the city as if showing what they could do. Only if they wanted.

“I do not understand what you want from us, Lord Severins,” the head of Sinnister talked to the Lord of the Throne, Emerald Severins.

”We are no threat to you or to the folk here. We live in our city and you in yours. We want no quarrels.”

“I understand, Michell, but my folk wants me to always check up on you and your family. I cannot go against them. I am their Lord, after all,” Emerald Severins talked serenely. Lord Emerald, too, wanted nothing but peace. After all those wars that had taken place across the entire Nation, he wanted nothing more but to never have to live through one ever again. His family had sacrificed the soul of their last dragon just to make peace between the Eight High families. Peace was to be preserved.

“I am glad you understand, my Lord. Trust me, there is nothing that we would want more but live in peace. My family and my people.”

Once a month they had the same conversation. Lord Emerald had no intention of invading Sinnister and governing it as the Lord of the Throne, which many believed he actually should do. The flying city was always the place where the Sinnisters lived and would stay that way, as every other part of the Nation belonged to the people who inhabited it.

“Father, what if they ever get to our city and try to destroy it?” little Beth Sinnister would regularly ask.

“Never! We are everything they’d always wanted to be. But we never use it as an excuse to make them feel inferior. Even if they want us down of our city, we will always stay the same. Fair and peaceful. Because we are the ravens, and they are the dragons. We must show what being a noble person actually is and how it is done,” he would always say before Beth closed her eyes slowly settling into a dream.

“Freedom is ours and will always be...” their ancestors would say.

They had had their fair share of battles fought to the last droplet of blood smeared across the blade of their swords leaving them with their hands stained with blood, but they had never yielded or surrendered their city.

**“NATIONAL NEWS - LORD EMERALD THE II, CRUELLY MURDERED!!!!”**

**“Michell Sinnister has been known to want to take the throne for himself, but going this far?”**

*Our beloved Lord of the Throne, 168th, Emerald Severins the Second was found dead this morning hanging from his balcony. Unfortunately, his own youngest son was the one to find him. Even more disturbing was the sigil found on his clothes. A sigil of a raven.*

*“Freedom is ours and will always be,” is what Michell Sinnister meant by killing our Lord, by killing his Lord. Sinnister finally ended up taking away his rival’s life in cold blood. Occupying the Throne might not be his only intention. If the war starts once again, who will protect us if not the Lord he has brutally killed? A flying city, a paradise to live in - has it become a nightmare for us all?*

*“Killing our beloved Lord will not go down without revenge,” Lord’s wife Christa warned.*

*“He gave us the freedom in which we live today. It won’t be taken away from us by those who didn’t get what they wanted.”*

*We share in the sadness with all of the folk. May our Lord Emerald rest in peace and may the Nation’s heaven welcome you.*

The news were out in the early morning hours. Grief was felt from every end of the Nation and every family was deeply affected by the sudden death of their Lord. More hate was directed at the Sinnisters and the flying city. More people were leaving the safety of the city not to ever be seen with Michell Sinnister, his family or in the city. It was not an easy decision to make. Leaving Sinnister meant death, staying in Sinnister meant death. No one could survive there. No one was safe. Still, not a word was heard from the High family, nor would it be heard. Michell Sinnister and his whole family were now on the death list of the whole Nation.

“Why do that!” His people would shout at him as soon as the first rays reached the blissful city till noon with the Sun high in the sky lightening their disillusioned faces. No answer arrived from Michell. Did the guilt get to him?

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Massacre and bloodshed started after a few Sinnisters came down from Sinnister. The Lord’s first guard killed any person in sight who wanted to flee from the flying city. They showed no mercy. It didn’t matter if you didn’t live there or if you had nothing to do with the terrible death of Lord Emerald, they went on killing mercilessly everyone. No exceptions. They didn’t let anyone speak or move. Once you left Sinnister, there was no coming back.

After hearing about the dreadful killings and happenings, Sinnister was on lock-down for good. No one could get in or out anymore. It seemed better that way, for everyone.

Meanwhile, in the greatest building of Sinnister a fight would ensue every day among the members of the city's High family.

"Mitch, for the sake of all of us, stand up and fight!" a senior member of the council of the Sinnister family spoke.

"I do not want to cause more trouble nor leave them with the impression I had anything to do with the terrible passing of Emerald when, in fact, I had nothing to do with it," Michell Sinnister spoke calmly, as if he had a plan.

"You are only behaving like a weakling!" shouts were heard from each side of the great table where the council meeting was held.

"I understand what you're saying, but I don't want more people getting killed. Even if I didn't know them. I won't become just like them and contribute to the chaos!" His strict gaze fell on all five members of the council.

Suddenly, one of the guards dressed completely in dark shades of blue, walked inside the room without knocking.

"I'm sorry, but it is urgent, Mr. Sinnister," he demanded.

"I imagine. Tell us what it is," Michell nodded at the boy.

The guard looked quite unsure before he continued:

"One of the ravens came by... you received a letter the Unders."

"Who is it that writes to me?"

"Zaphorion Tallekins... he insists on opening it urgently," the guard walked down the large hall, handing the letter to Michell Sinnister.

*Michell,*

*the attack on the Sinnister is being talked about on the Court. Your enemies will be trying any kind of destruction to annihilate Sinnister and its people completely. This might not be a good idea for either of us, but with all their equipment, they might destroy more than just Sinnister. I found something which could let all of you live in peace, but too much will have to be sacrificed. Emerald's wife has gone mad after the loss of her husband. With this plan, my family and I could go on with helping you with any supplies you will be needing!*

*Hoping for the best,*

*Zaphorion*

"What is his idea?" one of council's men inquired. His eyes were light blue, and his gaze was inquisitive. The man kept his hair long, had a strong built and was quite tall and imposing, which could be noticed even when he was sitting down.

The shocked face of Michell Sinnister sent shivers down the spines of each mem-

ber of the council. His face said “destruction” without him having to utter a single sound. Such a horrible end for such a beautiful city, for such amazing people.

Once the meeting was over and everyone went their way, only Michell Sinnister and the tall council man stayed behind. Through the great window of the building, they looked in the distance, their gaze falling upon the palace in which every Lord Severins lived. It had more fire than ever before. They truly were ready for apocalypse and a war against the man who did nothing of what he had been accused.

“Gozeh...,” Michell started, “I hope you know what will be sacrificed for the sake of my people’s lives.”

“I think I might.” Having said that, Michell gave him the letter and pointed to a part which he dared not read out aloud.

Gozeh’s face turned pale, hands shaking, and lips slightly parted.

“You cannot agree to giving this much...”

“My life doesn’t truly matter that much. The lives of my children are more important. They have already started a genocide against us. I trust you to protect the two of my youngest children. They do not know about them, and they are just babies...”

Gozeh was silent and didn’t even try to say anything.

“I trust the Tallekins,” Michell was referring to another High family, “and I believe that you do too. They have never been wrong!”

From that day, Second Great War started – the war against the Sinnisters and the flying city. Michell Sinnister willingly assumed the role of their villain. He gave them that satisfaction. He led his men bravely with the shield of Sinnister giving them such power that no bullet or bomb was able to penetrate their defences nor harm them. Nothing appeared to be able to defeat them and it seemed that the Sinnisters would truly be the new Lords, until-

“My Lord... Michell Sinnister’s head for you,” Zaphorion Tallekins walked into the Grand Palace, a palace for every Lord ever ruling, carrying the dark mane and head of Michell Sinnister. The wife of the Lord Emerald sat on the throne and watched the blood from a dead man drip on the shiny floor of her palace. She smiled and felt relieved for the first time since the beginning of the war over two years ago.

“As always, thank you for your service, Commander.” After such terror, the whole Sinnister family was rushed into the palace.

The day after, only one of them was left to live. Others, six children and their mother were killed in the main square for everyone to watch it. The Sinnister’s youngest daughter was left in tears witnessing it all with her own eyes. While only being twelve years old, she lost everything she had ever held dear. But the flying city still didn’t go down. As if it could ever go down.

The council of the flying city could only stand at its borders and watch from afar, not being able to actually see the terrifying things happening beneath them. They knew that, when Michell Sinnister gave himself to the Lord's first guard, it was the end; the end of the Sinnister line and family. History books would be rewritten, and no one would ever know about them, only about the legend of a flying city. The Unders would lie to their children about it and never mention them again. The Nation of Eight would now become the Nation of Seven. There would be no future for those in the flying city. Only the name 'Sinnister' would remain, but no family who governed it. No past of all the greatest battles they had fought would be remembered. Nothing would be remembered, but the stories about the flying city.

"I believe this might be the end of us all," one of the council men said. Gozeh was sliding his dark pencil onto the ground in the middle of Fallen Street. The names of Michell Sinnister, Simone Sinnister, Kamila Sinnister, Faren Sinnister, Gabriel Sinnister, Colwing Sinnister, Zelda Sinnister, Mellise Sinnister and Beth Sinnister were written down with all others killed in the two-year war. Many names to never be forgotten by those who were saved by their deaths.

"Seven? Not quite a pretty name for our Nation," one joked about it.

They couldn't handle such a situation. Only Gozeh knew the whole truth behind every past and future action.

"May the Nation's heaven welcome you," they said in unison, looking down at the names of the family they had served for such a long time.

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One day later, a shivering wind chilled the streets of Sinnister. Gozeh was in the Sinnister's family house with the remaining two members of the Sinnister bloodline. Through a window, Gozeh's eyes followed the actions of his people – they were fleeing and hiding.

"What is happening?" he questioned one of his court men.

"The Unders!"

A strong earthquake sent Gozeh to the floor.

"How did they come up? It's not possible without us letting them!"

Stones went on flying around them. People were screaming outside and praying to their gods.

"WE ARE GOING DOWN!!!!!" someone shouted.

"No..." Gozeh thought to himself.

"Is this supposed to be the better life for our High family?" he was pondering on

Zaphorion's words when a flying stone crashed onto his head and he blacked out. His mind went silent.

"Children are still alive down here!" was what made him come to.

"Gozeh!" someone was calling him.

"My friend! Are you okay?" a blurred image asked.

"Children?!" Gozeh managed to turn around.

"They will be fine. We came to help you," he could finally recognize the silhouette.

"Zaphorion? What happened?"

Zaphorion wasn't sure if he could explain what had happened. Nothing would make sense.

"Sinnister has fallen. The city is no longer flying... you are under the ground," Gozeh was shocked. He finally understood why it was so dark - there was no sun hovering above them. They had truly robbed them of everything they'd ever had.

"Help me get the children out of here. They need the sun," Gozeh started getting up, but was stopped.

"You can't leave... Curserins have put a spell on you. You can't ever leave," Zaphorion explained.

Gozeh's eyes welled up with anger. He looked around searching for other people.

"Many are alive, but not everyone was that lucky," Zaphorion reassured him.

"Why did this happen to us? Michell didn't kill him! He'd never do such thing! Why is everyone acting as if we did something!?" he was furious.

"I know. I know it all. Emerald killed himself and drew the raven. He made it seem as if Michell had done it."

Such an act from Lord himself, only so he wouldn't feel less because he didn't live in a flying city. Such cruelty from someone who had reassured Michell he had nothing to worry about since he had nothing against Sinnister.

"He betrayed us!"

"Gozeh... people who live here no longer look as they did before. Neither do you. Curserins wanted to give you 'what you deserve,'" Zaphorion tried to tell him as calmly as possible.

"What have they done to us?" Gozeh started touching his face, hair, legs, everything, just to make sure nothing was wrong with him. He felt something sprouting out of his head, long and sharp - horns. His hair was emerald-green, and his eyes weren't the same color. He also felt different. He felt everything around himself. Every person who suffered and where they suffered. He heard every cry and where it came from. The Unders finally got what they wanted. They could finally call them the Muttants.



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## THE RIVER DRAGON

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There once existed a River as dark as raw coal and as cold as untamed steel. The River that spanned through the whole of the mountain woods it inhabited was home to many creatures of the mysterious forest. Each ripple of its wild waves etched a tale of ancient legends as the old waters harbored memories of long forgotten realms. The air, crisp and laden with the earthy scent of damp moss, hung like a mourning veil over the unrestrained water. It was believed that nature was a source of life lead by deities and that everything that came from it, including humans, would return to it in its purest form in the wild. That is why men would often be seen carving their bows in runic symbols before hunts or women mumbling prayers to the ground under their feet for a good seasonal harvest. The River was such one source of life, a sacred place, something to be protected by all who had the favor to live near it. The fish that swam through it thrived, the animals that drank from it glowed with an unnatural light, beavers made dams across it with healthy wood and squirrels washed their acorns in the crispy waters.

It was like that for centuries during what the people called “The Golden Age.” But, as any living thing, old River grew slow and lonely in its constant motion. It was believed that fellow deities are not bred into existence, but rather spring up from the earth. Be it sea, clouds, mountains... Or even rivers. With this knowledge, the River decided then to create her first living thing, a child that would come from her deep waters and shallow edges, a child that she would raise as her own. Thus, from her love, a venerable Dragon was born in the murky waters of the decaying River. One of a dozen during that century, it was no small matter when the new presence altered the balance of the woods. The Dragon, albeit nothing like a dragon in shape or size, was washed up on the shore as a dark mass of thick air, resembling a watery mist on the ground. He was unmoving and bleak, the black light that matched his mother’s waters barely shining into the world, but it was enough to alert the whole forest of the birth of a new divinity. He ought to have been nurtured by mother River, but alas, the River reached the end of her life and perished upon childbirth. She dried out, her once stormy waters evaporating from the rich streams and leaving the source

barren as only the damp land of the now empty riverbed remained. Such happenstances sowed the seeds of fallacy as the child was ignorant of the fact that he was a dragon. A newborn of any species is commonly raised by their creator, learning how to struggle, how to endure, to give love and receive it in return. Nonetheless, the Rivers tragic fate was irreversible, and no flower seemed to want the Dragon sitting before it, training him in the art of opening up. No mountain nearby wanted to teach him how to let go of something he didn't know he lost. Hence, the truth eluded the youngling, leaving him a tad flawed. The animals and creatures mourned, blaming the Dragon for drought that was an inevitable consequence for harsh decades that awaited.

The Dragon left the dry riverbed he found himself in, moving with no direction or purpose. Not knowing how to keep his true form, he drifted in and out of consciousness as days passed him by in a blur. As he longed for something nameless, he knew one thing since the moment he awakened; that he didn't belong, and that he was to find his own kind in order to live or simply to survive.

As he crawled, and floated, and crawled, traversing the deep woods while the sun shone through the trees, the surrounding animals stared, none willing to approach. From the worms to the birds, from the rabbits to the wild hogs, even an imperfect creature can understand when it is unwanted.

He had the faintest thought of going back to that hollow depth he awakened in and slumber for eternity, but he pushed forward with a vitality only found in guiltless beings driven by troublesome curiosity. It was then that for the first time he encountered a creature which resembled his own liveliness; a human child. A small body with four scrawny limbs and a full head of hair, walking on two legs, crawling the earth. Another human appeared seconds after, tall with longer hair and a bland dress that reached the ground. The Dragon's body reacted on its own, and he found the form of ragged darkness that he embodied disappear, shedding like snake skin around his soul. What remained of his shape now was the form of a child with pale skin and long raven hair, stark naked with eyes like an abyss. It didn't take long for the woman to see him several feet away and flinch from the unseemly sight.

"What could a child be doing in these parts? Must have been abandoned..." The woman stared for a few more seconds, her expression of shock turning into one of mild revulsion, nose scrunching.

"A bad omen indeed!"

She swiftly grabbed her child by the hand and sharply turned the opposite way. As they hastily scurried off, not once turning to look back, all the young Dragon thought was;

“Am I the same as them? Am I human?”

Hope was a powerful thing, and like he was meant for this all along, the young Dragon gave full expression to that belief and embodied the role of a weak, helpless human with ease. It did not take long for him to happen upon a humble village this way, bustling with commoners that gathered around their filthy market and bickered about prices merchants were offering. His unclothed body and the unreadable look in his eyes didn't go unnoticed, a small crowd gathering around the unfamiliar child who belonged to no villager. They knew instantly, like looking at a dismorphed face in a mirror, that he was different, making them apprehensive.

“My heavens!”

“Where are your parents?” A sultry man crouched and asked him with a raised brow.

“He's downright filthy!” A plump woman with coloured cheeks pointed out.

“Fil...thy?” - he spoke back unsurely, voice like a shiver.

Old rags were thrown his way to wear which he clothed himself in, stale food was tossed his way which he ate greedily, and just like that, the crowd dispersed, a few shooing him away.

“Go! Get lost, we need no more mouths to feed.”

Despite the apparent rejection, he did not depart, choosing to aimlessly walk the streets from dusk till dawn, further deepening the rumors of his arrival. The famine stretched on and the land moaned under the harsh living conditions as the people's hearts grew colder.

“Ever since that damned orphan showed up, my crops have suffered.”

“They say if you offer him food, misfortune will befall you the very next day.”

The young Dragon no longer got offered any waste, hence he turned to stealing, an act which got him beaten half to death more times than it got him fed.

Despite that, the Dragon had been at peace with his life thus far, it had been humanised and bearable and real. It had been his own, carved and chosen, no matter how sharp and rough.

Spring passed by in the blink of an eye and summer was near an end when the days became shorter and the wind changed its course. The gentle arrival of fall was just around the corner as green leaves prepared to change their colours and nights were accompanied by a thick fog befalling the streets. In the village, exactly a week before the first day of fall, arrived a female shaman, one who was seemingly gifted her calling when she fell in love with an old spirit in the shape of a stag. She was to prophesize the incoming year and harvest. Dressed in blood red, a feather tucked

in the blindfold she had wrapped around her eyes, she sat cross-legged in their old shrine, made long before any generation still alive.

"You have angered the dragon spirit."

Her monotone voice echoed, disturbing the elders who listened. No one dared to speak back; from shock or fear, it was unknown.

"I know not the reasons. An offering should be made. If it takes pity, the crops will flourish and a new river will flow once more."

"What would please a dragon?" one head remarked from the crowd, as if the advice was preposterous.

"A sacrifice of your own flesh and blood."

Walking through the dark forest, his naked feet hitting the uneven ground, the Dragon went to visit the shallow depth from his first memory since birth. It had become a kind of habit, every week he would hurry to the spot he had woken up in and focus on the dry, cracked dirt of the riverbed. Oh, how vexing it was for the young Dragon to not fully remember something that made him sleep coiled every night, with his hands curled into fists. He was at war, even in his dreams. As he went to slide down the steep banks, he saw something on the opposite end of the channel. It was a Stag, tall amidst the trees that it passed through, red eyes boring into his own. The Dragon stilled, looking back at the spirit that seemed to examine him from a distance, in his mingy form and worn rags. Its antlers, one as large as the Dragon's body was now, protruded from each side of its head, embraced by a live fire that danced around the bones punishingly. It did not bend or cower, it judged him unabashedly with its old snout and unyielding flames like it had all the time in the world.

"To think I would see a dragon playing a simple human."

It spoke slowly, deeply, like a whistle out of tune.

"I thought the dragon child passed, but it only hid in the cage of skin and bone.

A pity. I am uncertain you even know how to fly."

The burning Stag mellowed, not unkindly, but with a kind of compassion only voiced for untapped potential. It stared for a moment longer, the Dragon opening his mouth in an attempt to reply, but the Stag turned and trotted deeper into the safety of the bushes. The Dragon stayed rooted to his spot, something awful pooling in his stomach as his lip trembled. He could be whatever he wanted to be, he thought. He could be in this cage if he wished, and oh, how desperately he wished.

It didn't take long for the cold night to fall, and the Dragon traversed back to the streets he called his home, where people gathered on the market just like they did the first time he arrived in the village. When they took notice of him, he saw in hundreds

of their eyes that they waited... For him? They yelled for him and hands grabbed onto him faster than he could register, pulling and pushing him to the shrine the shaman was in just hours ago. Another beating, then? He was in no particular mood to run, the Stags eyes still plaguing his thoughts more concerning than the ache that was coming. Two women took him inside the small room, sitting him in front of a table that was rich with a staggering amount of food. They began to undress and wash him with towels dipped in thick honey water. They clothed him in fine silks and braided his hair with lovely ribbons. They did not speak to him, but for the first time, he had their full attention. The Dragon was captivated by the change in their demeanor, his eyes glancing between the two women, searching for a trick. Yet the women kept soundlessly pampering him until he finished eating, then walked him out where tall men, who he remembered as two butcher brothers that often amused themselves by throwing feeble bone scraps his way, waited with a pair of torches and scowling snouts. They grabbed his shoulders and promptly turned to the direction of the mountain, their boots thudding on the ground. He wanted to ask where they were taking him, but he felt he had by now used up the villagers unexpected kindness. It would surely be impolite to make a hassle. They walked for what felt like an hour, the moon seeming to follow along in their direction. They stopped when they reached a clearing that had a doorless chapel in the middle, small enough for one person to fit in comfortably. He felt hands push him inside violently, hearing one of the men speak with a voice as deep as the scowl he carried.

"Don't leave this chapel until sunrise. Be good and a warm breakfast will wait for you back home. Got it?"

The boy, before the man even finished his sentence, flashed him a smile. He sat up straight with obedient vigor as the men turned and sat several feet away, their backs to him. He did not feel shunned, on the contrary, the Dragon felt loved, he felt seen. He felt the feeling of acceptance bloom in his chest, barely registering the weighty words the butchers exchanged with each other:

"The dragon better devour him by morning, I'm not staying here after day breaks."

"What are the chances of a dragon showing up in an old place like this?"

"If it never shows, we'll kill him. Give everyone some peace of mind. Otherwise, we can forget about them paying us that lousy sum."

"If it comes to that, you're doing it. You always knew how to make it quick."

The Dragon watched this exchange on his knees, eyes wide and unfocused. Kill? Kill him? Something in him, something deep and bygone and dreadful awoke, whispering, "Run. You fool, run." The youngling shot up and bolted for the safety of the

shrubs surrounding them, but the men reacted on instinct, like chasing a pig that escaped their shed before bringing it to the slaughterhouse. One grabbed him seconds after with little effort, crushing his body flat onto the floor. The other acted, openly striking his temple, causing a loud whip-like sound. The boy curled into himself, moaning out from the sharp pain as they dragged him back to the chapel, dirtying his white silks.

"We told you to be still! You little-"

"Don't look at me like that or you'll get a matching bruise on the other cheek, boy." He hissed, plopping back down onto his previous spot. The other man looked at him for a second more with lowered brows before joining his cruel brother whose knuckles already turned a faint red. Now, their conversations were privately hushed, mumbled between gritted teeth.

The child, motionless where they dropped him, with blurry eyes and shallow breaths, cared not that he had failed. Not for the humans, not for the forest, not for that shallow depth that haunted him. Pain wandered through his bones like caged water, what soiled him now? Rage, rage, rage. He raged, yes, he thought,

"Maybe rage could lift me up, make me stand, make me walk. Yes, I shall treat you like you have treated me, and only then I will finally know what it is to be human; to steal, to hurt, to destroy. None licked my wounds, none admitted where they came from. None felt shame but I."

He coiled tightly, arms wrapped around his thin legs as no tears fell. He closed his weary eyes, the bruise on his temple already darkening as he whispered into the stillness of the night, to himself, to the world, to all who would listen:

"I wish every last villager... Would disappear... Into thin air."

He awoke the next morning with heavy limbs and a pounding skull. He was alive, of course he was. He got up, nearly falling back down before he noticed he was completely alone. The two butchers were nowhere to be found. Had they left? Only their clothing, splayed on the ground where they once sat, remained.

"They went through all that trouble, for what?" he spat bitterly, legs carrying him south where the village awaited. The woods were eerily silent, no birds chirped, no branches bristled. It took him a bit to get to his destination, but when he arrived, there was not a living soul to be seen. Only clothes, like stains on the ground, remained of the people who once walked these streets. Who once sold, and traded, and danced, and lived. Utterly wished into emptiness. His body walked back to the woods on its own, a new destination in mind. He only came to his senses when he looked down and found himself at the edge of the River's bank. He tumbled down it

awkwardly, walked to the same spot he awoke in years before. He knelt, placed his forehead against the earth and finally, finally wept. Wept for minutes, for hours, for days, weeks, months. Unmoving and unrelenting, he wept. Until his eyes stung and blinded him from the unquenchable tears, he wept. Until his human lungs cracked under the pressure of the sobs, he wept. Until his hands and legs turned blue from cramping, he wept. Until his form started morphing back into one of a familiar dark mist, he wept. Until the once empty and barren riverbed was filled to the brim with fresh and unyielding saltwater, breathing and freezing. Until he himself disappeared into thin air.

At long last, a River was born, as dark as raw coal and as cold as untamed steel.

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## THE SONG OF LIFE

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As thunder roared and rain fell, he didn't hear anything other than the barking of dogs and shouts from his pursuers. *Run, just run*, he thought. *I can't be captured*. Dogs barking could be heard nearer and nearer when suddenly he fell. His eyes closed as he heard the arrow coming his way and dogs growling, nearing him. But an arrow flew by him into a dog. He didn't know what was happening; he didn't care. He got up and bolted through the forest, praying to all the gods he knew for the safety of passage. When suddenly he flew into the air by a net trap. *No, this can't be happening. I don't have anything to cut it*; he thought. *This is the end*. As he thought of his final prayers, the net fell, and before him stood an elf, one of his kind.

"Stand up, and keep up with me," Elf said as he turned his back and started running

He did as told. What else was there to do? He could either follow or get lost in the forest or, even worse, get caught by them. He knew that death would be pleasant instead, in contrast to what they would do. Now and then the elf looked and now and then he slowed down so he could catch up to him. As they finally arrived at the village, the elf pointed to the big house in the middle and said go there. The elf had an extremely irritated look since seeing him, and it didn't change a bit. As he entered the house, an old elf looked at him and asked for his name. He pointed to his mouth and opened it to show no voice leaving.

Elder gave a confused look and said "Speak up boy, don't joke this is a serious matter, we just rescued you from those human hunters."

He started making signs with his hands, as the elder didn't understand. He sent him to a room with guards until he spoke with others of the village council on the matter. As he was in the room, guards continued talking, trying to find out his name, or anything about him, but he continued pointing to his mouth and opening it without sound coming out, it was going on for around an hour when guards gave up and an elder came with another elf.

"I am Heian. Could you please show me your name?" a tall elf with glasses and short hair said.



"I am Lindir." He signed.

"What happened to you? How did you lose your voice?" the Elder asked.

Lindir signed as Heian translated, "I was born like this."

Both Heian and Elder are confused now. There is no such thing as a mute elf, but he is an elf by all means, from his ears and eyes to his agility.

"From where are you? Which elvish kingdom?" Heian asked.

"My earliest memories are from the human village of Wyverguard, from the kingdom of Southadriats, but it is burned, those who chased me did it, they captured a lot of us as slaves and made us work, I barely escaped," Lindir said, just as tears were forming on his face he added, "My mother was killed, she was only elf I ever knew."

Heian hugged him as he translated everything to an elder.

A few days passed as Lindir started getting into their society, Heian started a teaching few elves, who took a liking to Lindir, sign language so they could interact more easily, he used the same methods he was taught while in the elvish embassy to the Kingdom of Southadriats due to their king being mute, but he never thought he would need to teach others, as there never was a mute elf before. Luckily, elves are quick learners and could communicate with him in half the moon cycle, but even though he made good friends here, he couldn't forget all the rest that were held as slaves and made to work to death. He was assigned sleeping quarters with 3 other elves, 2 15 years his senior, and one the same age as him, but 15 years isn't that much in an elf's life. One night, as they couldn't sleep, they had a conversation.

"Isn't it a bit ironic that your name is Lindir (Fair singer) when you can't even talk?" an older male elf asked.

"Beren (bold), he could have asked you the same thing," a female elf, also older, teased, "You know when you woke up screaming in the middle of the night because of a nightmare?"

"Luthein, I said multiple times it was a vision, and it was real," Beren responded, a little angry.

"Stop arguing you too," a male elf, who was weirdly short for an elf, said.

"I agree with Silvand on this," Lindir signed.

"Maybe if Beren ever told me about it, we wouldn't need to argue," Luthein proclaimed.

"You know that I can't talk about visions. It is told in sacred texts," Beren responded.

"That only counts for high priests and visioners," Luthein said.

"Maybe we should..." Silvand tried to say, before being cut off.

“Well, maybe I am on like our dad was,” Beren said angrily.

“I hope for your good you are not. We know what happened to most of them,” Luthein said, now a little sad.

“Quite!” Silvand half yelled to not wake up others in sleeping quarters nearby, but still loud enough to get them to shut up.

“Let’s go to sleep now. Tomorrow we will continue when we cool off,” Silvand said before getting into his bed and falling asleep.

As Lindir finally fell asleep, he saw hundreds of elves singing this beautiful song under the full moon, and all the creatures came from the forest to listen to it. He saw an enormous tree in the middle, but then he saw fire. With the fire that burned trees, he saw forest creatures run, even white elk run, once the sign of divine protection now shot through with arrows. He woke up and couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night.

“So we are setting up more patrols and we need volunteers. Anyone interested can sign up to Elowen,” the elder proclaimed at the morning gathering.

Lindir knew Elowen only as a serious and constantly annoyed elf warrior, as Elowen led him to the village that night, regardless Lindir decided to sign up, as did Luthein, being assigned as a patroller was a big thing, you would patrol the woods in case of danger or incoming human or slave trader attack or anything else that lurks at night to try to surprise elves.

“What do you mean, no?” Lindir signed furiously.

“I mean no, first you only have a moon cycle of training with a bow, second you are mute and can not imitate alarm sounds or bird songs, and lastly you need to be approved by the elder or highest-ranking officer in the village and they both left this morning on a diplomatic mission to the human city, so no you can not,” Elowen said now irritated because his need to explain it, “and since there is no higher-ranking officer than me in the village. My answer is no!”

As the day passed and night came, nobody joined the night patrol, so Elowen, even though resistant, had no other choice but to let Lindir join the night patrol, the night patrol consisted of 2 shifts of 2, as there were 2 volunteers plus Elowen, he needed Lindir to join him.

They took a little rest on a tree near the place where Lindir almost got caught. Elowen and Lindir started a conversation.

“Thank you for that day,” Lindir signed.

“No problem, kid, it is my job as a warrior to protect other elves and our allies,” Elowen responded, constantly glancing at the far forest entrance, only looking at Lindir while he signed.

“Why are you staring there,” Lindir signed, confused.

“There are people there,” Elowen signed, trying to remain unheard, “go wake up others, you are faster, I am going to hold them back if they continue.”

Lindir nodded and ran silently through trees and woke up other volunteers and warriors, or at least does who didn't leave with elders as guards. Lindir, Elowen, Luthein, and another volunteer named Tethanlin stood guard the whole night, they knew an attack was incoming, but they were ready, only for Lindir this would be his first fight, Luthein already survived 2 and Tethanlin survived 5 fights with humans. Elowen stopped counting after the 10th attack. As humans were coming, Elowen drew his bow and was ready. On his sign, 4 arrows shall fire at targets to try to make them route. Elowen shot and his arrow found his target. He shot the sword of one warrior, knocking it out of his hand in the process. Another arrow passed a few millimeters from the head of one, and the other two followed closely.

“There are at least 30 of them,” Luthein said.

“They are at least 30 short,” Elowen followed.

“Good thing humans are bad at math and odds,” Tethanlin said jokingly.

“They aren't routing,” Luthein said.

“Too bad for them,” Elowen answered. “I am out of warning shots.”

These elves preferred long-range combat, but they were ready, Elowen with his double-bladed spear (spear with blades on both sides), Tethanlin with his double axes, and Luthein with double daggers that still allowed her to use of light magic mid-combat, while Lindir still learned he used normal elven blade. After half an hour of back and forth, around 20 humans were lying there.

“Why aren't they routing,” Luthein asked, “We took at least half of them out.”

“Only 10 fell!” Tethanlin said. “They must have a strong will or they are just stupid.”

“Would bet on lather,” Elowen said mockingly.

“What if this is a distraction?” Luthein asked, “They wouldn't be such fools to attack in these numbers when they know there are more of us back at the village.”

“Good guess,” Tethanlin responded. “Lindir and I are going to check for rear attacks. You should be able to take care of this.”

“Go,” Elowen said, “and be fast.”

As Tethanlin and Lindir ran through trees, they saw a fire. There were more, at least 50 more of them and these weren't regular mercenaries, but elf traders to humans or slave traders to the elves.

“Frick! Go and inform them of this, I will hold them off,” Tethanlin said quietly

Lindir protested, but he couldn't argue with Tethanlin. He was a senior and more experienced one here, while Lindir was faster. So Lindir took off as fast as possible.

Tethanlin took a shot at one of them, and he fell, but they knew they weren't alone. Tethanlin jumped from tree to tree and shot to make it look like there were multiple of them.

"Shields!" yelled one human.

Tethanlin just continued jumping and finding cracks in the shield circle, till he ran out of arrows. There were at least 10 humans dead or injured. Tethanlin, seeing no other choice, jumped from the tree with axes in his hands.

"You shall either turn back, or this will be your last stand," Tethanlin proclaimed.

"It seems that there are 40 of us and one of you. Surrender, and maybe you will be spared," the human commander ordered.

"Then bloodshed it will be," Tethanlin said under his breath, before getting in his fighting stance and smirking at them.

Sword clashed against his axes. He parried. He struck. He fought. The fight lasted 5 minutes until his back was pierced by a sword, seconds before 3 arrows flew into humans attacking him. They jumped and pushed the rest of the humans back.

"Did I fight well?" Tethanlin asked with his dying breath.

"You resisted well soldier, but know lay, you may rest. May you embark into the afterlife swift and easy. You won't be forgotten," Elowen said, "Gods will want to hold on to you for as long as possible."

Tethanlin stood valiantly but 40 against one. Even the best village warrior would lose to those odds. The next day the burial process began, which always takes 7 days to complete, but elves didn't just mourn his death, they were planning how to defend against future attacks. There will be at least a month until the elder and his warriors come back. They left them with no one but Elowen because they never expected such an attack from humans. But Lindir had other plans.

"We will attack them. Are you with me?" Lindir signed to Luthein, Silvand, and Beren.

"Are you crazy, we are outnumbered, we are not warriors, and we are going to die!" Silvand said furiously.

"I agree with him," Beren said.

"I don't, we need to revenge Tethanlin," Luthein said.

"You are all crazy. We need to wait for rest to come back and then they strike," Beren said angrily.

"I am going with or without you," Lindir signed.

"I am with you," Luthein said.

"You are crazy, but without my magic, you surly day. So I must go," Silvand said.

"No, no, and no, we can't do this, please!" Beren yelled

That night Silvand, Luthein, and Lindir went out, Lindir with his mission to revenge his friend and to release those who were still slaved here, and Silvand and Luthein to prevent future attacks and revenge his friend.

"15 minutes till we arrive and then 10 minutes of revenge and 15 minutes back, no one will know," Luthein said while running through the forest, jumping from tree to tree.

"Wait, who is the fourth one running?" Silvand asked.

"I can't let you die, but I brought back up," Beren said from nowhere.

"Who?" Silvand asked.

"Me," Elowen said, "now focus on the path ahead. There will be many humans to face."

They ran through the night till they came. Silvand used his magic to blend with shadows and count how many humans there were.

"107, there are 107, of them, 32 awake, rest asleep," Silvand signed when he came back.

"We can catch them off guard, but we would need to engage in melee combat from the start," Elowen signed.

"Maybe we take down 5 with arrows, and then engage," Luthein said.

"let's do that," Lindir signed.

5 arrows poured from the sky, each one finding its target, and melee combat began. Blade clashed against the blade. Many humans were caught off guard, which was in favor of elves, but still, numbers told a different story. But these 5 elves fought as one, covering each other's back, parrying strikes so none of them would be cut by a blade. Humans climbed to the second floor and started shooting crossbow bolts, either missing or cutting their men used as shields.

"Luthein! Watch out!" Elowen yelled as a crossbow bolt was going her way, but it didn't hit her. Beren pushed her out of the way and took the bolt right through his shoulder.

"Beren!" Luthein yelled.

"Get him in the middle," Elowen said as they encircled his body that lay there, him holding for his dear life from pain and poison in the bolt.

After a few more minutes, humans finally routed.

"Do you remember the vision? This was it, but you lied instead of me. I had to stop it, little sis," Beren said weakly.

“No, don’t do this,” Luthein said.

“I know this poison, it is deadly to elves, no cure for it, at least in the village,” Elowen said.

*There must be something I can do, something, anything,* Lindir thought, and then he remembered.

“The song, song from my dream. We need to get him to the tree, fast,” Lindir signed.

“What?” Silvand asked.

“Dont question, just do,” Lindir signed.

“I am conf...” Silvand wanted to say before being cut off.

“Just do it, if there is a chance to save him,” Luthein said through tears.

They started running to the tree in the middle of the village.

“We have less than 15 minutes before he dies,” Elowen said while panting and running.

“Then shut up and run!” Luthein responded furiously.

As they made it to the tree, Lindir didn’t know what to do, he was mute, he couldn’t sing, but then he saw the white elk approach, the same one from the vision and, without any explanation, Lindir started singing the beautiful song from his dream, elk kneeled and suddenly Beren opened his eyes.

“What happened? Am I dead, and why are you all dead too?” Berene said before being hugged by his sister.

“Don’t ever do that again,” Luthein said, crying and hugging her brother.

“Everything still hurts, but I am alive?” Beren said confused, “And can you talk now?”

“I can’t talk, I sang, but that is it,” Lindir signed.

Silvand came a few hours later with human captors, who, like Lindir, were caught and used as slaves. Tomorrow they had a fest, for they finally routed human invaders who had been attacking the village for a few years, but also to commemorate everyone who gave their life defending their village, Lindir still had things to learn about his past and abilities, but now they celebrate. Humans decided to return to the kingdom of Southadriats and rebuild their village. Lindir stayed as he found a home with elves.

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## THE TWIN'S VOW

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1. Once upon the time, in a far away land, in a small kingdom, there were born twins- a boy and a girl. The twins were separated at birth, and reunited at the kingdom's castle. The girl was raised by her father, the king. He taught her how to read, write and how to rule. How to be a leader. The boy was raised by his peasant mother who taught him how to clean and cook but she didn't have money to send him to school. The king passed away and the girl had to take his place at a very young age. Their mother passed away too, due to lack of sleep. After a few years, the boy managed to get hired as a butler in the castle and meet his twin sister. From the moment they were born, it was evident that they were different as night and day. The girl was the princess, and her brother, her servant. The girl was destined to rule, and as they grew older, with her brothers support, she ascended to the throne. The brother served his sister with pure loyalty and obedience. But one day while running errands, the boy ran into a young maiden with hair of chestnut brown, her smile and voice to him were from heaven and something moved in his chest that might be even called love. But as it is known, all good things must come to an end. Under the orders of his queen, the girl was to be punished. The boy said to his queen, "I shall grant you your wishes because that is what I live for.", and with sadness in his heart took the young maiden's life. After his return to the castle, the boy came to his sister and accompanied her tea. The young queen smiled and clapped her hands with unseen happiness and glee, and the boy could not feel hurt when seeing his sister so innocent and sweet. Under the queen's rule, the kingdom prospered and the people were content for a while. One day, the truth of the queen's deeds reached the people of the kingdom. People grew enraged and secretly, they planned a rebellion, fueled by whisperers of discontent in the streets of the kingdom, and even halls of the castle. Unbeknownst to the young queen, the number of people who sought to overthrow her grew by each passing day. Peasants met during the nights, preparing to overthrow the young queen while deciding that the ruler should be chosen by the people, not birthright from now on. The boy continued to serve his twin with utmost loyalty and obedience, their bond growing with passing time. But the fate

of the twins was cursed, bound to grim destiny. Queen's needless bloodshed filled peasants with loathing and resentment. The boy knew that the actions of his sister were unforgivable. He was aware of the hatred that was growing in the people who considered his sister a devil. But if she was indeed the demon in the flesh, then he is a demon too, for their blood flowing through their veins was one and the same. And just like that, two winters passed. The twins grew, never leaving each others side. But the peasants didn't hide their hatred towards their young ruler, and made their move. As the rebellion gained momentum, the boy became increasingly concerned for his sister's safety. He was aware of the danger she faced and was determined to protect her at any cost. The people who broke through the castle walls claimed that the justice will be brought onto them, but the boy refused to see it through and decided that they will not get it their way. He took his sister, pulling her by her hand to her room and locking the door before looking at his twin's eyes. He said "Listen to me now, you shall give your clothes to me. You and will switch and then we will flee. You will be okay, I was born to live this day! If they catch me, not a single soul will know that you got away!", and so the twins switched their clothes, the girl was wearing servants attire and the boy his sisters dress, They ran down the halls and met with two knights who managed to take them away from the castle. They ran deep into the woods, where they stayed hidden. The castle was set on fire, and the commoners spread across the kingdom to find the queen. Early in the morning, the two twins were standing next to each other, looking at the path ahead of them. The boy turned to his sister and gave her a letter. He told her "Take this and go, I shall return with one knight while you hide, do not fear, because I shall return to your side."

2. And so, the twins parted their ways, being forced to separate once again. Young queen walked with her knight for three days, till she reached a small village. She walked into the village while covering her head with gray handkerchief to avoid any attention. She managed to find the head of the village and introduce herself and her knight as traveling merchants. Luckily the villagers didn't know anything about the rebellion that was going on in the kingdom, and they took pity on her and allowed her to stay in a small, rundown cottage on the edge of the village. The girl was grateful for their kindness and she spent her days hiding and waiting for any news from her twin brother. She spent her time assisting the villagers with their daily tasks, but still she missed the luxurious life she used to have back in her castle. She was amazed by their warmth which she never received because she was under the pressure of the crown since she was a little child. For the first time she felt at peace, like she finally



found the place where she belonged. The elders took care of her as if she was their own child. Sometimes, she couldn't help but wonder how would they view her if they knew who she really was. The girl still didn't open the letter her brother gave her. She was patiently waiting for his return. And as she waited, eight months have passed in the blink of an eye. Yet, her brother was still nowhere to be found. She still hoped and prayed for his health. She couldn't lose him again, not after they managed to find each other.

3. When the boy returned to the kingdom, he felt his heart break. The house he grew up in was burned down. Knights were nowhere to be seen. Streets were empty, like there was no one to begin with. He carefully moved through the empty streets with his knight and slowly reached the walls of the castle. The people painted the walls red, and put posters with his sister's face over the doors which led into the castle. The hall of the castle looked like a battlefield. Lifeless bodies of both knights and peasants laid all over the floor. He didn't say anything. His knight slowly led him to the stairs that led to the queen's chambers. After he pushed the door of his sister's old room he gagged at the sudden stench that hit him in the face when he entered. The room was completely burned down, and so were the rest of the rooms on the upper floor. The knight led him through the whole castle but they didn't find anything or anyone important. His knight and he stayed in a small house near the castle walls for the night. They decided to continue their search in the morning. They suddenly woke up to the loud laughter of the people outside. They slowly got out of house and carefully followed the sounds that they heard. Soon, they noticed a large group of people walk towards the castle. Some women wore dresses and jewelry that belonged to his sister, and men had weapons that belonged to the knights they had probably slaughtered. They carefully observed the peasants and learned that they managed to take over the kingdom and were currently in the process of choosing their next ruler. The people said that the one who manages to find the young queen will become the next king. Upon realizing that they could obtain a lot of useful information, the boy and the knight decided to hide and observe the people for a few more weeks.

4. As the time passed, the young queen almost completely forgot about her past and fully got used to her new life. She still missed her brother, but after eighteen months she got used to his absence. The people in the village were all kind, and she learned how to cook, clean and make toys too. The people who rebelled against never came to look for her in this village, so she also became more relaxed and open, but

she still didn't say anything about her past to anyone. The letter her brother gave her still remained unopen, because she was still feeling unease each time she looked at it. She was afraid of what she could be risking if she tried to find her brother, so the knight that stayed with her in this village went out to look for him. She would sometimes still dream about her old life, her castle, her dresses and jewelry and the power she had, but she never wanted to return to it. During one summer day, the knight who was looking for her brother returned to the village with pale face, looking like he saw a ghost. He pulled the girl away to the cottage they were living in and told her how the people had found her twin, and that they were planning to execute him. Her whole world shattered at that moment. She ordered the knight to take her back so she could stop the execution before it was too late.

5. After a year, the boy was discovered by the peasants who were after his sister because the knight that was helping him snitched on him so that he could save his head. The people took the boy to the castle and questioned him for a week after he managed to make them believe him that he had no idea where his sister was. The people set up a wooden stage and prepared it for the boy's execution. On the first day of the sixth month, two men led the boy onto the wooden stage. They made him kneel in the center, giving him a chance to say his final words. The boy didn't have anything to say. He looked at the faces of each of the people who stood in front of the wooden stage, waiting for executioner to end him. He closed his eyes and patiently waited for his end, hoping that his sister is safe and sound. The girl was carried by the knight through the woods as fast as he could possibly carry her, and was soon at the boarder that separated the forest and the kingdom. The knight helped the girl to climb over the wall. She could only hear the sound of her heart beat, as she bare-footed climbed down the wall and got inside of the walls and ran to the crowd. Her whole body was shaking from fear as she pushed through the crowd to the first row. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at her twin brother on the stage kneeling, with his eyes closed, as the executor took a huge swing with his axe right above her brother's head. At that moment, it felt like the time stopped. She screamed her brother's name, watching his eyes slowly open before the axe swung down and his head rolled over the wooden stage and fell right in front of her. Her mouth hanged open as she slowly bent down and lifted up her brother's head, hugging it tightly, as tears streamed down her small, pale face. At that moment, the girl turned around while tightly holding onto her brother's head and grabbed the sword from the first man that stood behind her and she stabbed herself through her stomach with a painful

scream. The people that stood around the little girl just watched her take her own life without having any time to stop her. They were all in a complete shock. Nobody even noticed her, and they didn't expect of her to take her own life. Everybody just stood there silently for a long time, before they slowly collected their bodies, and decided to let them rest, and buried their bodies in the castle garden. Two weeks after their deaths, two knights that helped the twins escape were also found hiding together in a cottage at the end of some small village, were also executed and buried outside of the kingdom. Since nobody really did caught the queen, the peasants decided that they do not need a king. They took down the castle walls, and rebuilt their kingdom. They turned the old castle into a church, and planted a tree in the middle of the graves from the deceased queen and her twin brother, the servant. They organized a funeral for both of them and left some flowers on their graves.

6. Through the years, many stories and legends were told after the tragic deaths of the two twins. Some people said how the twins ruled together as tyrants and slaughtered many people, some were devastated and said that their queen was the best ruler they had, and stayed indifferent. The memories of the twins never actually faded. Some say that they had discovered a letter that was written to the queen but everybody had different stories about it's content. Some said that the letter was a love letter from some prince, some still think that the letter was written by queen's twin brother and some think that it was some kind of a map that led to the queen's secret treasures. The only thing that all of them agreed on was the fact that queen's twin brother was one of the bravest people they've met, because he never betrayed his sister and even sacrificed himself for her. He often serves as an example to younger generations to teach them about importance of loyalty and the value of siblings. Numerous people still came to their graves and prayed that they are hopefully leading a happy life together as siblings. The planted redwood tree was already standing tall above their graves. Where their kingdom once stood, there to later on stood a city with another kind of leaders. And that city too, burned down because of their actions. Some would say that it was their fate. That the justice prevailed. But their graves are still standing untouched under the redwood tree's shade.

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## TO BUILD A HOME

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*Snow.* The only celestial thing that human beings can see or feel during winter. It can make us feel more alive than ever by letting us admire the marvellous white drifts that are forming up with every new layer. Snow is just a white vault that always reminds people of the perfect feeling of peace and freedom.

This time it was different for us - me and you. I held your hand in mine as we proceeded to walk, lost through soft, white snow which entered our worn shoes with each new step. I couldn't let you out of my sight in the midst of this maddening whiteness and cold, that penetrated more and more to the core of our bones, leaving us with an unpleasant feeling of helplessness. The freezing cold was controlling our strength that we had long been running out of. We just walked on; it was all we had left after leaving our filthy sin behind us.

I couldn't breathe because of the cold air, which created a lot of pressure in my lungs with each new breath I took. It was as painful as frostbites on my unprotected hands. Everything was so calm on the outside, but inside us, there was a rebellion of human cells surging against the cold winter and against our own escape that was taking place. I couldn't help but notice that the tension coming out of the tiniest parts of your body was affecting me, too.

"How long until this stops, and we find shelter?" you asked, already a little exhausted because you hadn't eaten or slept. The only thing I was able to do was hug you and promise you that we might find a lifeline, but that it was still worth fighting for it with everything we had in us. I didn't have the strength to tell you a lie that you would manage to find shelter with me because it was never reserved for us who were running away from our own sins.

"You know that even this day, with all its fragments, will force a miserable life into another miracle."

"What miracle?" you asked, doubting all the false stories I'd been selling you from the beginning, but still following them like a blind man.

"If you keep walking through what we've been given, maybe you'll figure it out."

You didn't believe me. I recognized the look in your eyes and I can't blame you.

It was stupid to believe in anything while running away from something you didn't know enough about. It was not easy to face the huge dragon that lurked over your head every day, demanding your life.

"You just have to believe."

"Believing means continuing. Right?"

"To believe is to be - it is what adorns us as all human beings. Faith, staying and collecting one's own life fragments."

Could we even go on like this? Deep down I knew I was lying to myself, but also to you. I knew we would not be able to get out of this easily, but it would be worth a try even though I had lost hope long ago. I was not supposed to show you that the last spark of hope, the great miracle we were waiting for had been lost for us.

You suddenly looked up; I had already learnt about your future steps. By heart. You pointed your finger at the small river in front of us that was not frozen - it was defying all the cold. Life was constantly flowing through it. We approached it until we had to kneel down to touch it, making sure it wasn't just one of our many delusions. Our fingers touched the cold river and forced us to wash our hands in it like Pontius Pilate did, trying to free ourselves from all the responsibility of a filthy life. We wanted to finally feel the magic of flying, but our wings were too fragile for any attempt at flight. Flying was stronger than staying.

You looked up again pointing your finger to the other side of the shore. The blood lingered behind the wounded doe on the white snow, staining the signs of new layers of perfection. Neither of us wanted to frighten her because she represented our first contact with the living world after several days of exhausting escape and walking through the white vault. The wounded doe watched our every move in fear and was prepared to flee.

"We should help her." you said anxiously, looking for a way to help her even though you didn't know how to help yourself.

"It's no use, she will most likely run away anyway."

"Are you sure?"

"Listen, first we have to save ourselves and only then the doe." I was trying to talk you out of your every plan because I knew that you had so much strength in you to help others first, and yourself last.

"There's no point in saving her."

"There is, only you never see the point behind the limits of your existence. We are still here to help each other."

The doe continued to look at you, terrified. But even for her, running away was much stronger than staying. An animal instinct that humans had taken as their own.

I averted my eyes from her escape to the river, which gradually turned from cold and clean to red and warm before our eyes. Only then were we able to slowly begin to recognize our dirty sin.

The blackness of the day began to sink into our bones even more. Some people dressed in black were hovering above us, but they didn't notice us, they passed by and didn't notice us. Dementors - our mutual friends who suddenly began to approach us. We passed through them like through a thick air deliberately asking them to drink the last drop of life from us with their kiss. Every feeling they gave us, we had already felt for many years. I felt angry about that because even dementors didn't want to take away the greatest gift a human being possesses.

At that moment, I realized that we had already been trapped for years. A smile at the corner of your mouth that turned into a roaring laugh, just like mine. Only then did it become clear that we were taken in by a dream that had deceived us for years and

always tried to lead us astray.

"Will we succeed?"

You actually meant 'survive'. I knew that, but I still tried to successfully lie to you.

"Success is the last step, there is a whole path to it."

"I asked you if we will survive."

I remained silent. In the middle of nowhere there was a very slight chance of surviving. After all, isn't surviving just breathing and waiting? We are in the middle of nowhere, but we still need to fight! But I don't know how, anymore.

As I reached into my pocket, I found an old pack of cigarettes and with frozen hands I managed to light it. I offered it to you too, knowing that you deeply yearn for a few breaths that will certainly weaken your weak lungs. We shared the whole cigarette, looking at it as the last straw of salvation, and when it was nearing its end - everything was clear to us. Lust is just one of those horrible things that permeates your body for a while, takes a part of you, and then fades away, leaving you completely naked.

I gave up any further hope or search for salvation, merging with the blinding whiteness. You soon did the same thing while lying down on a thick white surface. You merged with her. The Snow White - what you had always been. The story about her always belonged to you.

"How long do we have left?"

I didn't answer your question, I just reached into my pocket and pulled out one of the two cold guns that were supposed to serve us when we could no longer bear to

flee together and lose hope. That was the moment. I stood up and aimed it at your left eyeball. I looked into your eyes for the last time, you were consumed by all the cold. You didn't say anything, you looked death defiantly in the eyes as I pulled the trigger of this device that has such a great ability to destroy everything that came before, leaving so many open questions behind. I became your prince charming, finally saving you from life and not from deep sleep. I had just returned to my old way of surviving.

My knees were shaking so I dropped on them as your body fought against what unfortunately had to come. I sang your favourite song as your heavy last breaths and exhalations created bitterness. *\*And now it's time to leave and turn into dust.* It was time to turn into fine dust, but was it time to leave and leave everything without a further fight? *\*I climbed the tree to see the world when the gusts came around to blow me down.* I was your wind that blew you to the bottom of a deep well from which it was no longer easy to get out. You were the one who always wanted to climb high branches with a desire to see everything that life can offer you in all its moments.

I lay down next to your dead body, the snow was stained with your blood. I couldn't help myself without a roaring laugh coming out of my mouth, overwhelmed by all the horrors that we, humans can experience, but also survive. I let it out loudly from my lungs and it was permeating my entire body. I laughed in my life's face all the way and let it feel the bitterness that I felt all along this path of seeking freedom. I laughed and allowed time to eat me from the inside before I gave up the further slavery to the life and time itself.

As I lay next to your dead body with my eyes wide open, another gun aimed at me. Before fleeing, we agreed that there will be one bullet in each of our guns and that this would be the last thing in our life that we must accomplish successfully, since we had already failed to overcome all our mistakes. Just like against yours a moment ago, I put it against my eyelid and pulled the trigger of my own doom and failure. Everything was suddenly so quiet and still, and my body tried to fight for a few last breaths of cold air.

A white butterfly that flew above me, landed peacefully on my chest. He was so perfect and unattainable for me, finally symbolizing the freedom I had always longed for so badly. He had always been so free to fly wherever he wanted, yet he decided to stop his flight on my chest.

No one can sing my favourite song while life is slowly taken away from me – it was given to me years ago and now it is finally over. *\*\*Now take me home that I'm afraid of winter.* I have always been afraid of winter, and all its charms were a kind of pen-

ance to me. Why did I drag you with me into all this - you who knew nothing about winter? Why did I expose you to all this? Did you deserve to run with me blindly and naively going through all this? *\*\*I'll hide you inside sentences that you won't hear.* Should I have done something at the beginning to protect you from all the beasts that started chasing me first and then you?

In the end, all that was left for me to do was to lie next to you, to be stained with your blood, but also with my own, and laugh at all this in the straitjacket that I had put on since the day He decided to breathe the gift of life into me.

The white butterfly decided to fly to the other side of the bank to the wounded doe, leaving me alone to decide whether it was worth fighting for my last breath or giving up the battle immediately. Finally, I admitted my defeat with a painful sigh.

Maybe, in the end, the angels, just like us, are also afraid to die.

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The title originates from the song - To build a home - The Cinematic Orchestra

\* To build a home - The Cinematic Orchestra

\*\*Le parole lontane - Maneskin



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## TRAPPED IN THE MOUNTAINS

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Once upon a time, there was a boy named George. He was a fifteen-year-old who didn't really like spending time with his family, but one day he got trapped with them in the mountains, and here's how.

It was the last school day until the end of the first semester. The bell was about to ring, and everyone was so excited to spend their holidays with each other; everyone except George. He was so excited to spend the holidays playing a new shooter game that was going to be released at Christmas for free, but when he got home from school, his parents called him, his brother Mike, and his sister Lilly to the living room to tell them that they were going to spend the holidays in the mountains - on Velebit, in the hut that belonged to their great-grandpa. He was excited, but that meant that he couldn't get the game on his computer, which was disappointing, but he didn't care if it meant that he could go skiing on Velebit. Mom said that they should pack their stuff so they can leave for Velebit early tomorrow. So that's what they did: George packed all of his clothes and some other stuff that he needed. But Mike had some problems packing his stuff, so mom helped him pack. While my dad was watching TV, and Lilly was checking if she had packed all that she needed, my mom was yelling at Mike because he pulled a prank on her with a rubber snake. She then left him to struggle alone and went to pack for the holidays herself. At dinner time, they all gathered at the dining table, where there were a lot of pancakes, which was a surprise from mom because they were really good at school that year. After dinner, they got to bed and went to sleep so they could wake up early in the morning. The next day, they got up at 6 a.m., put their stuff in the trunk of the car, and headed to Velebit. When they got to the car, the parents told the children to be good back there. So, they were - until they got bored. Mike started to provoke George, but George knew that if he started to argue, the parents would take his Game Boy, which was a big no-no for George, so he grabbed his headphones, connected them to the MP3 player, and played some classical music which quickly made him fall asleep. While George was sleeping, Mike was playing Tetris on his Game Boy, and Lilly was drawing on her notepad. When they finally got there, they could see a big, wooden

hut with a green roof, a water tower, and a huge forest next to it. Knowing it was old, but not that old like the children expected, when they got inside, they saw that the inside was really neat. It had really big rooms with a lot of storage and a lot of different paintings around the house. The hut had a big dining room, a frumpish kitchen, and an out modern living room made of pure oak with fully carved furniture. The bathroom was casual-looking, with a combination of brown and white oak. The bedrooms were very luxurious and fine; there were altogether four bedrooms plus one master bedroom, which was attractive and large with a large oak bed, large red carpet, and a large closet. On the other hand, each of the bedrooms was different; the first was dark blue and brown; the second was brown, magenta, and brown; the third one was lime green and brown; and the last one was black and brown. When they saw all the beds, it was time they chose their bedrooms. Mike chose the green room because it had a lot of toys, which were really nice. George chose the dark blue room, and Lilly chose the magenta room, which had a lot of artist equipment that she was really excited about. Having chosen their rooms, they got ahead and unpacked. When George was unpacking his stuff, he saw a really nice-looking chess board on the shelf next to the books. After they all uprooted themselves, they all gathered in front of the hut and drove to the ski site, where there was a crowd of people waiting in a long que to enter. They waited for 38 minutes to get to the end of it. When they got the opportunity, they all donned their skies and helmets and headed down the hill. They spent 4 hours skiing, climbing, and drinking hot cocoa. When they got home, it was already 5 p.m. All of them did different things: Mike was preparing traps for George in George's room, George was playing chess with dad, and mom and Lilly were tailoring a new pillow cover. After some time, the phone rang. Little Mike rushed to pick up the phone and answer it. It was grandpa! Grandpa was excited to hear that they were there and wanted to join them. This wasn't planned so everyone was happy that grandpa was going to spend some time with them. Grandpa said, "Okay, see you there tomorrow", and then said good-bye. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, so they were going to tidy up the hut and cut out a pine from the forest so they could decorate it tomorrow before they went to sleep. So, while Lilly, mom, and George were tidying the house, Mike and dad cut a small Christmas tree for living room. When they all finished, all of them set down in the dining room and ate some canned tuna pasta with garlic and lemon. Before going to sleep, Lilly and Mike had a different idea. Lilly planned to stay awake all night, which was Mike's idea as well, but Mike wanted to set up some traps before the rest woke up. So, Lilly made some statues of clay, and Mike made a lot of traps with his thin, transparent rope and a lot

of toy cars. He went to sleep, and it started snowing. As you may have thought, Mike pranked the parents so badly the next morning that they activated all of his traps. So, after they all got up, Mike had to talk to him about the traps he made last night with his parents. While Mike was talking with his parents, George and Lilly were looking at the statue Lilly made last night. After some time, Mike got a punishment from his parents - he was forbidden to make any more traps until the end of the holiday or the parents were going to take his Game Boy away from him for a long time. After that, they were gathered at the dining table taking a break, when suddenly there was a knock at the door. It was grandpa. The kids were so happy to see that grandpa came to be with them. They were talking for a while and then all of them sat at the table, ate some canned sardines, and drank some water. Then they wanted to show grandpa around the hut. First, they showed him the main rooms - the kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom. Lilly wanted to show him the statues she made yesterday night, so she took grandpa to her room first. She showed him and the rest of the family what she had made. And what she had made was a small clay statue of Maria Skłodowska-Curie, which was really well formed with lots of details and looked impressive. Grandpa was surprised that Lilly, being only 12, knew who Maria Skłodowska-Curie was. After that, Mike has shown his room was. When they got to the room, they saw a lot of toys on the floor, so grandpa told Mike that his room was nice but that he needed to pick up the toys. Mike promised he was going to do that later. And then they went to George's room. When they came into the room, the first thing grandpa saw was the chessboard on the shelf, and he was happy to see that George played chess; he said he and George would play a game of chess later. Then they showed grandpa the master bedroom and, after that, his bedroom - the black one. He said that the bedroom looked really nice and clean. By the time they finished showing grandpa around the house, it was already lunch time. Grandpa and mom started cooking the fish for lunch, while dad was shovelling the snow and the children were playing cards in the living room. When the lunch was ready, everyone rushed to the table and sat there quietly, waiting for the food. When the food got to the table, the first thing they did was pray. After they were done praying, they started to eat the fish and some potato salad. After lunch, they all went to Gospić, where they went ice skating and spent the day there together. When they got home, they went to decorate the Christmas tree, which dad brought and placed in the living room next to a big window. Mom and grandpa first placed the lights, and then the children did the rest. George was responsible for decorating the top part of the tree, Lilly's was the middle part, and Mike was in charge of the lower branches. After some time, they

finished decorating the Christmas tree. Mike grabbed a huge speaker from his room and played a song really loud. All of a sudden there was a huge avalanche that ended up covering the entire hut and cutting the electricity. Everybody was devastated and stowed to panic because they were trapped there with no connection to the outside world, and the shovel was outside under the snow. So, they panicked and were sitting there, screaming for help, but there was no one there because they were too far away from other people. And when they thought about using the TV antenna to try to make contact, there was no way to get to it because it was on the roof. So, they had no choice but to wait for the snow to melt. On the positive side, they had plenty of food if they use it wisely. While they were thinking of a way out of their situation, the house was getting colder and colder. Grandpa said, "We should wait until the snow melts so we can get out safely." But dad found that idea bizarre and said they should dig their way out. But when he said that, he remembered that yesterday on the news they said that heavy snowfall was expected for the next 10 days. So, he agreed that they should wait until someone comes and saves them. They lit the furnace and got ready to go to sleep, but they were all going to sleep in the living room because it was the warmest place in the hut.

Day 1: They got up early and wished each other Merry Christmas. They felt the cold from the outside, but it was not so bad. They lit the furnace and prepared breakfast, which was also a big problem because they had to carefully choose what to eat since they needed to save food and wood as much as they possibly could. Mom suggested that they have honey and jam, but grandpa said they should save that, and better eat canned meat cutlets. So, they did. After breakfast, the kids rushed to the Christmas tree and opened their presents, which they were really happy about, but all of them got bored very soon after opening their presents. They therefore sent George to get them some board games and something they could use as pastime while they were trapped. George brought Monopoly, Chess, Uno, Lotto cards, a notebook and pencil case, and a few toys. Soon, it was time for lunch, so they ate some beans from a can. They spent the rest of the day playing card games until late at night, when they fell asleep on the couch and mattress.

Days 2 and 3: They spent the days nearly the same way as the first one. The only difference was that they found out that their windows and front door were frozen, so they unfroze them and started digging a tunnel in the snow, but soon the tunnel they had made collapsed and filled with snow, so they gave up on that plan. The bathroom was cold.

Day 4: They woke up a little bit later than the past few days because they heard something walking on top of the snow, but something was wrong because on Sat-

urday they heard the barking of wolves that were passing on top of them, so they decided to stay as quiet as possible so the wolves wouldn't attack them. Some time passed, and there was perfect silence around them for a while. Then they had breakfast and spent the time quietly talking and playing board games like they did the past few days.

Day 5: They woke up and saw that Mike and Lilly got sick because of the cold, so they warmed them up, gave them some medicine, and made tea to help them get better. Dad was slowly getting really nervous because they were going to get out of wood soon and the bathroom was too cold to go in now, so they decided to warm it up with hot water that they got from melting the snow, which really helped to warm it.

Day 6: Mike and Lilly felt a little bit better, but they were not healthy yet. The family took their usual meal and decided to try to remove some more snow using spoons because the snow was getting harder every day and they ran out of wood, so they decided to start digging into the snow out of the other rooms.

Day 7: The tunnel didn't fall apart this time, but mom got ill. On the other hand, Mike and Lilly were almost fully recovered. The footsteps on the roof were louder than the last time. They had some food as usual and drank some more.

Day 8: They finished digging the tunnel through the snow, but they were too scared to go out of the hut, so they decided to stay inside. Mike and Lilly recovered, but George was getting a little grumpy because they couldn't go outside, and grandpa got ill.

Day 9: Dad woke up early and decided to get the antenna from the top of the hut, but it wasn't clear where it was, so he decided to check the cars, but they weren't able to run. Mom and grandpa made a big S.O.S. message out of red curtains.

Day 10: The snowing days passed, the snow began to melt faster, so the tunnel wasn't safe anymore. They decided to wait for the tunnel to fall apart, and they kept the furnace burning over night to melt the snow.

Day 11: They were slowly getting out of food, so they skipped breakfast to save some food. The tunnel collapsed. Mom was fully healed.

Day 12: They decided to try to dig their way out, they were digging for 4 hours.

Day 13: They dug their way out of the hut again. They could now see the antenna, so George volunteered to get the antenna down into the hut where they would try to connect the radio to the antenna, connect a microphone to the radio, and contact the outside world to get someone to save them. They finally made it... The rescue team said they were coming in 18 hours. They were all so excited to get out of the snow that they got the attention of two wolves that started sneaking towards the hut.

But grandpa saw the wolves, quickly took everyone back into the hut, grabbed a gun from the drawer, and successfully saved them from the wolves.

Day 14: The rescue team got in, woke them up, and flew them in a helicopter to the rescue team station, where they warmed up and were driven back to their houses.

It was a trip they will never forget.

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## UNEXPECTED LOVE

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Rosely Hattwitch is an 18-year-old freshman at Montana State University, majoring history. She had dark brown hair and green eyes, which looked like polished jades. She is impulsive and hot-headed, but also a kind and selfless person who always puts the needs of others before her own. That is also why she is at this college instead of Washington University majoring Criminal Justice. She is here because she didn't want to leave her best friend since childhood alone. But something unexpected was about to happen to her and she wasn't even aware of it.

It was a normal winter day in Montana. I was walking to my next lecture alone. Lissa was sick so she didn't come with me. As I was gazing into the sky while I was walking, I bumped headfirst into something on my way. When I looked up, I saw that I had bumped into some guy. He was mesmerising. He had shoulder length chocolate brown hair, dark brown eyes, almost black. As I looked up at him, I realised that he was looking at me. Then I spoke: "I am sorry! Didn't see you there. I was looking at the sky. It is remarkably beautiful today!"

When I finished, there was a moment of silence, and then: "Apology accepted. Indeed, the sky is beautiful today," said the guy with a bit of an accent. "Russian?" I thought to myself. "Well, see you around the campus," I said as I went to my lecture.

Lissa had asked me to take notes for her, but I just could not concentrate in this boring lecture hall, thinking about that guy from earlier. I admitted to myself that he was handsome! I didn't see him at the start of the semester. Maybe he's an exchange student from Europe? While I was in my own world thinking about the guy, the bell for the end of the lecture rang. When I exited the lecture hall, I went straight to mine and Lissa's dorm. After a few minutes, I entered a small room with two twin-sized beds, nightstands, and desks. The walls were painted white but had many different posters scattered around.

Lissa was lying in the bed, but when she heard me enter, she flew from her bed. "Did you take the notes I asked you to?" She seemed excited. "*Oh, shoot, I forgot about those!*" I cursed in my mind. "I am so sorry Lissa. I didn't mean to, but I bumped into this guy, and he was just so fine, Lissa, if only you had seen him!" I suddenly felt

butterflies in my stomach. “Tell me about him.” Lissa forgot about her notes and just excitedly listened to me. “He was tall, like 6’1 tall, he had chocolate brown shoulder length hair, dark brown, almost black eyes, muscular build, and he had a Russian accent!” While I was describing him to her, I felt butterflies in my stomach again. *Oh my God, what is this guy doing to me?!* I had never felt like that before!

Lissa and I were lying in our beds, and we struck up a random conversation.

“So, Liss, are you feeling better now?”

“Yeah, thanks to you. If you had not got me that medicine, I think that I would be even worse now.”

“No need to thank me, Liss. That is what friends to.”

“I am sorry that you could not get into that university in Washington. I know that you wanted to study Criminal Justice and that they don’t have any criminal degrees here.” Lissa apologised.

“Don’t worry, Lissa. As long as I have you here, it will be ok.” I lied about not being able to get in. I got in, but I declined. I really wanted to go to Washington, but I had promised her parents on their death bed that I would keep her safe. Their death was caused by injuries received during a car crash 2 years ago. That is the main reason I am here in Montana. After that short conversation, we went to sleep. I woke up to my alarm going off at early. “Ughh, I hate mornings,” I whisper-yelled while I was getting up. After I got ready for the day and checked on Lissa, I went to the lectures. On my way to the lecture hall, I spotted the guy. Let’s be honest, it wasn’t that hard to find him because he was so tall. I went up to him. “Hi! I am the girl that bumped into you yesterday. I came to give you a proper apology. Hello, I am Rosely Hattwitch, but friends call me Rose. I am sorry for bumping into you.” I offered a handshake. He shook my hand and spoke. “Hello, it is a pleasure to meet you, Rosely. My name is Aleksei Belinsky. Your apology is accepted.” Now that we had made amends, I decided to ask him something. “Would you like to grab a lunch with me tomorrow?”

“I would be honoured to grab a lunch with you, Rose.” He had that flirty look in his eyes, and I liked it. The day went as usual as. I couldn’t focus on the lectures because I felt so excited about tomorrow, but I took notes for Lissa. The lectures ended for the day. Those few times I saw Aleksei, we exchanged a few glances, and I could feel every time that my cheeks were burning up. I went to my room and told Lissa everything that had happened. But when I showed her the notes she had asked for, she was so happy and forgot about everything I had told her, and studied them carefully.

Aleksei Belinsky is a 22-year-old senior at Montana State University, majoring foreign languages and literature. He transferred to Montana from Russian university in Omsk, where he had studied linguistics. His 6’1 muscular built can be sometimes



threatening but his face makes you melt on the spot. Chocolate brown shoulder length hair compliments his face shape and dark brown (almost black) eyes are like a void you could get lost in.

The last two days here in America were pretty exciting. A random girl bumped into me yesterday and tomorrow I am going to get a lunch with her. After a long time, I actually feel nervous. Rosely is such an attractive girl. She is around 5'5 with long wavy dark brown hair. Her eyes are like green Swarovski jades. I can't help but smile every time I see her. We agreed to meet at the campus gates at around 5 o'clock.

I took a shower and went to sleep. I woke up at seven in the morning. I decided to get up and go to the campus gym, which was massive. It had sparring corner, section with machines, yoga section, showers, and locker rooms. I spotted a familiar figure in the yoga section. As I went closer, I realised it was Rosely. "I am starting to like her even more," he thought to himself.

"Hey Rose!" As she turned, he waved at her.

"Hi Aleksei!" she waved back. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I came sightseeing. What about you?" I answered her as she chuckled.

"I am also sightseeing."

He chuckled at her joke. "Could you give me a tour of the gym, I am kind of a new here?" "Oh, of course Aleksei, I would be delighted!"

After a short tour and work-out with Rosely, at half past ten I went to my dorm room.

I took a shower and decided to take a quick nap. Let's just say that the nap wasn't quick - I woke up around the noon. When I looked at the clock, I bolted out of my bed to get ready. While we were at the gym, we decided to move lunch to two hours earlier. So, we could go to the movies after the lunch. While I was getting ready, I remembered that Rose had mentioned that she liked my hair when it was down, so I decided not to tie it up into a ponytail.

*Meanwhile, at freshmen dorms.*

"Lissa, where's my white vest?!" I asked Lissa as I was digging through my wardrobe.

"I don't know Rose; don't you have any others?" Lissa answered.

"No, I don't have any that go well with these pants." Lisa handed me one of her tops: "Here, take this one." I took it and went to meet Aleksei.

When they met at the gates they decided to go to a nearby restaurant. When they entered the restaurant and sat at the table, they started to talk a little bit.

"So, Aleksei, I wonder - are you from Russia?"

“Yes, indeed I am. You recognized my accent.”

“Well, it is kind of not as common in this part of America.” He smiled at her. “And I guess you are not an American either.”

“No, I am not an American - my mom is from North Ireland and my dad is Spanish.”

“How did you end up in America then?”

“My mom works for a security company and when she realised that she couldn’t work and raise me at the same time, she left me at an orphanage in Montana when I was 7, but she sends me monthly email or message.”

“I am sorry.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“And your dad, why didn’t he get you out of there?”

“I don’t know, he was never around. All I know is that I have his eyes and that he is from Spain. What about you? Is your story as messed up or is it just me?”

“It’s not just you. My mom and dad were young when they got me. Mom was 19 and dad 21. It was a one-night stand. Their parents forced them to get married. They were married for 6 years and then mom just left. We never heard from her again. After some time, dad got remarried and left me with his parents when I was 12. Him and wife moved, and they rarely visited or called. They would visit once a year and for the most of his visit he wouldn’t talk to me.”

“I am sorry that you had to go through that. I don’t know which one of us has had a harder time.”

After some time talking, they decided to go to the movies. The only available seats were couple seats, so they took them.

I enjoyed talking to her. She is really smart and charismatic person. We were watching *The Exorcist: Believer*. After the movie ended it was getting pretty late, and we decided to go and sit at the park. Because it was winter, it started snowing lightly. As we were in the park, we sat on the bench watching the stars as the snow was falling. It was cold so we got closer to each other. Sitting in the comfortable silence... Then my phone rung. When I looked at caller ID I saw it was my boss.

“Sorry Rosely, I need to take this.” I got up and distanced myself from her. I spoke in Russian in case Rosely could hear me.

“Hello, Sir.”

“Ah Aleksei! I am calling to see if you have found the girl.”

“I have not found Sergejev heir yet.” I told him wanting for this call to end soon.

“You need to be faster, boy. If we don’t eliminate her, it’s over for us.”

“I know. As soon as I find her, I will call.”

I then returned to Rosely and offered to head back to the campus. As we returned to the campus, I escorted rose to the freshman dorms. When I returned to my room, I took my work laptop and hacked into administration of Montana State University, went to student list and searched for Lissa Arthur. I found her. Out of curiosity I opened Rosely’s profile and spotted something. Both of them went to the same middle and high school. And after my colleagues assassinated her parents, she was at the same orphanage as Rosely. Interesting.

The next day, as I was heading to my lecture, I spotted Rosely and some other girl by her side. As I approached them, I realized it was my target. Then Rosely saw me and came to me. “Hi Aleksei!” she said as she hugged me. I hugged her back.

“Hi to you too, Rosely.”

“Oh, by the way Aleksei, this is my best friend, Lissa.” Rosely introduced us. I extended my hand to greet her.

“Hello, I am Aleksei Belinsky.” She shook my hand and introduced herself. We parted ways and went to our lectures.

Over the next few weeks, Aleksei observed Lissa while going on occasional dates with Rosely. He was starting to recognize feelings for her. One day he decided to call his boss and inform him about Lissa.

“Hello, who is it?” answered the boss.

“Hello Sir, it is Aleksei. I am calling to update you about our target.”  
“Oh, good, let’s hear about it.”

“She will be in Russia in two days.”

“Well done, son. See you soon.”

The call ended and Aleksei Started planning.

Rosely was sick and stayed in her dorm. He decided to ask Lissa to help him buy a gift for Rosely. He would drug her and drive to the airport, from where the plane will take them to Russia. Easy! A piece of cake!

“Hey Lissa!” Aleksei greeted.

“Aleksei, good to see you.”

“Could you help me buy a surprise present for Rosely?”

“Of course, I will help you. When do you want to buy It?”  
“Today, if today possible. I want to give it to her tomorrow.”

“No problem. Meet you at gates in about 15 minutes. I need to return some books to the library.”

“Ok.”

They entered the car that Aleksei had got from his boss to do this. They drove to the shopping center out of town where not many people went. There they did some fake shopping and when they were getting back to the car, someone “attacked” them. Lissa was sedated. Aleksei got back to the campus to get his things. Then he went to the administration office and informed them he was dropping out. He took his things, went to the private airport and boarded the same plane as Lissa and his colleague.

It was getting late, and Rosely was getting pretty worried. Whole day she hadn’t seen Lissa or Aleksei. But she decided to go to sleep thinking that maybe Lissa was in library and Aleksei was in his room studying. But next day, when she saw that Lissa was still not back in her dorm, she decided to go to the administration and ask about her. When she got there, she asked about Lissa and Aleksei. They told her that he had dropped out because of personal reasons and that they hadn’t seen Lissa whole day. After another day, Rosely was getting worried and not knowing what to do, she contacted her mother after a whole year of silence. When she answered, Rosely explained what was happening and asked for her help. Her mother told her to wait and said she would call her when she found out something. A few hours later, she called.

“Rosely, I found her! She is in Russia. Board the earliest plane and come here! I will be waiting for you. We will get Lissa back.

No questions asked, Rosely boarded the first plane to Russia. After 12 hours, she was there, meeting with her mother.

“Hi mom.”

“Hi Rosely! She is at the warehouse outside of the town. We need to go there right now. The same people that are keeping her captive are the ones that had participated in the car crash.”

Rosely understood and went with her mother. When they got to the warehouse, Rosely would not have imagined in her wildest dreams what she saw. There were Aleksei and Lissa, both tied to chairs.

“Aleksei, Lissa!” yelled Rosely. As she yelled, a gunshot was heard. It was Aleksei’s boss who was shooting.

“Oh, hello! So, you are the one who has been hiding this beautiful Arthur heir away from me,” said the boss as he pointed the gun at Rosely. “You have seen too much, now I need to get rid of you, too.”

“No! Let the girls be. This is between you and me,” said Aleksei. Then, as the boss was about to turn around, he was shot in the head by Aleksei. Rosely ran to Lissa’s side to untie her. Lissa started yelling at Aleksei for kidnapping her. He explained

that his father had owed money to the boss, and he needed to work for him to pay off the debt because his father had been killed while trying to escape from Russia.

A few months later, Rosely and Aleksei went on another date. After the dinner and a movie again, they were at the same park watching summer sunset.

“I love you.” She said as she looked at the void in his eyes. He looked at her jade green eyes and just leaned closer. They closed their eyes and kissed while the stars were starting to show. And that was the start of their unexpected love story.

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## YOU TOOK MY PAIN AWAY

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My story started about six months ago. It was a day just like any other, the weather was gloomy at times but sunny through most of the day. I would love to say that I was also a girl like any other at the time, but I know that statement is not so true. My life has been nothing but pain. Throughout my seventeen years of life, I never really felt loved. People my age have always been avoiding me, mostly thinking I am weird and “too quiet”. There were some girls who would call themselves my friends in front of me, but I knew they were doing it only out of pity. It’s okay, not that I blame them. If I had been in their shoes, I would have probably done the same thing. What bothered me more than being an outcast among people my age was the fact that I felt like an outcast in my own family as well. My parents never really wanted kids, but somehow, I was still born into this world. Once I was born, they swore to everyone that I would be their only child and they are still sticking to that word today. Usually, when I say that I am an only child, people like seeing me under a stereotype of a spoiled and ungrateful child. Of course, I don’t blame them, I never did. But the truth is far from that. In 17 years that I have been on this Earth, I don’t remember receiving any love from them. They always saw me more as a slave, someone they could get a use out of, rather than a child, someone they could show love and affection to. Despite everything, there has always been one thing that I always loved doing, and that is escaping this reality. I tried shifting to other realities in my sleep, I tried lucid dreaming, but nothing ever worked for me, so I realized that the best way for me to escape the loneliness and misery I felt was to... simply imagine. I would imagine many fictional characters talking to me, comforting me, telling me words of reassurance that I always wanted to hear from people around me. I know you must probably think that I really am weird, but what is wrong with wanting to calm one’s mind at times? Even though I liked escaping reality, the one thing that always bothered me was the fact that whatever I make the characters say is not real always stayed on my mind. And so, about six months ago, what seemed like a day like any other turned out to be the day that would change me. It was another Friday, another afternoon where I disappointedly walked out of my house after being yelled and cussed at by my par-

ents, because I tried to stop yet another fight between them. The doorbell rang as I walked into my favourite café. It is a cat café that I visit at the end of every week. I don't eat much during school hours, so I am able to save up some money every week to go here. It is a place where you can mostly find people my age, but since it was Friday afternoon, it was half empty. Just as I was thinking about my long-time favourite comfort character, Kenji, I stepped out onto the terrace. No matter how many people are in here, the terrace is always full, except for one table, the one I usually sit at. As soon as I stepped onto the terrace, I realized something was off, but once I lifted up my head to look at "my" table I felt my breath stop. Someone was sitting there, but that was not what surprised me. What surprised me was the appearance of the person at the table. He resembled Kenji too much, it felt like I got teleported into a different universe or something. The guy had the exact same golden eyes and dark, messy hair like Kenji, but the scariest thing was a.... scar? on his forehead that had a shape of a gem. My thoughts started running wild and I didn't even realize that I've been staring at him for almost a minute. That was when our eyes met. Being the shy person that I am, I moved my gaze away immediately, not wanting to embarrass myself more than I already had. But to my surprise, when I quickly looked back, his eyes met mine again. I awkwardly smiled as a way of subtly apologizing for my awful staring and, instead of ignoring me, he motioned for me to come sit at the table with him. My feet moved on their own and I soon found myself sitting down at the seat across from him. "It is not very nice to stare at someone, you know?" As if I wasn't already embarrassed enough, this sentence made my face go completely red. *Even his voice is so similar to Kenji's! Wait, no Umi, what are you thinking? You are just being weird now, you need to say something!* "Sorry about that, I was surprised that someone besides me is actually using this table and when I noticed how much you resemble certain someone I couldn't help but stare." Being able to say all that to someone I had just met surprised even myself, but I felt like I had to say more. "I mean, I don't want to make you uncomfortable or anything, but I felt like I got teleported to another reality or something." A quiet chuckle is all I was able to let out in hopes of making things less awkward and that happened because the waiter came up to me to ask me about my order. As soon as she went away, I heard the young male speak to me again. "I don't know if that was an attempt at flirting, but I will not complain. I am Keiji, and you are...?" *Keiji?? This has to be a joke. Even his name is way too similar. I am dreaming, right?* But even though I was almost completely sure that that wasn't real I decided to keep the conversation going. It didn't take me long to notice how similar Keiji and I were, so the conversation just kept flowing naturally. I

found out that he was a few months older than me and that he shared the same music taste as me as well as some passions like skateboarding and escaping reality. Being so immersed into the conversation, we didn't even realize how much time had passed. It was already time for the café to close and so we had to go our separate ways. "Uh, can I... get your contact? Please?" His voice sounded a bit nervous, but it made me happy. That was the very first time I felt truly happy at the end of the day... all because of him and our conversation. It didn't take us long to become close, we would hang out any chance we got, and we soon became best friends, but that was all it was... a friendship. I would lie if I said I didn't want more, but our friendship was so precious to me that I didn't even want to think about ever wanting anything more with him. The luck I had for even having Keiji in my life was too big already and I wanted things to stay the way they were, I wasn't going to get greedy after such a beautiful opportunity. Soon, the autumn weather came and with it we lost the opportunity to do the one activity we both enjoyed the most, skating. We didn't mind it too much though; we still had each other.... right?

Sadly, there is a saying that goes "Everything good must come to an end." But I didn't want to accept it, I still can't. Our close friendship lasted for about four months and even though Keiji and I still are friends, we can't deny that the distance between us only keeps growing. We don't see each other often, but when we do, we usually spend our time laying on a rooftop, either talking a lot or not talking at all. A week ago, we were lying in silence when I finally gathered the courage to ask him the question that had been haunting me for quite some time. I didn't want to look at him, afraid that I might see an expression that I wouldn't like. "Have you gotten tired of me?" The question slipped out of me almost naturally. Keiji stayed quiet which showed me enough of an answer. "Oh," was all I was able to let out as I felt my eyes getting watery, but before I could excuse myself, he finally spoke: "Tired of you? Why would you say that? Umi, you are the best thing that has happened to me. You don't realize how incredibly lucky I feel for being able to call myself your friend. Our lives were both pretty miserable when we first met but look at us now. Umi, we are healing each other. Both of us are here today, because of each other. But I am scared. I am scared that I will disappoint you, Umi. I am scared of hurting you, scared of ruining what we have because I know that we only have each other. You see, I don't fit in this world, I never have... But you do. It may seem like you don't belong anywhere or that all this world brings you is pain, but that's not true. Umi, I want to continue being by your side as long as I am alive, but I... I don't think I can. I appreciate you too much to risk hurting you." He turned his head towards me and I could see that he was holding



back his tears in my peripheral vision. As much as it hurt, I knew that he was right about one thing. Something that has been hurt as much as our hearts have been, it can't be repaired so easily. No matter how much we try, in the end we will only end up hurting one another because of the wounds we have obtained in the past. So, I took a deep breath and spoke as I felt a single tear roll down the side of my face. "We should give up, just like that?" He stayed silent for a few seconds before he sighed and smiled. "Can you close your eyes?" After hearing that question, I looked at him for the first time since we laid down at the rooftop that night. "Umi, you trust me, don't you?" His slightly sad tone of voice with a hint of a joke in there made me smile. *Of course I trust you, but am I ready for what is about to come from you? I know you will leave if I close my eyes, but I can't let go of you yet.* "We go back to our old realities once I close my eyes, right?" I smiled as he gave me another silent answer. At that moment, I became content with his decision and closed my eyes. My expectations were low and I only expected him to leave but I soon felt him give me a tight hug and a kiss on my forehead. "I promise, I am doing this for you. For your own good. You can still live a good life, but please don't forget about me and keep your head up. You will succeed, I believe in you. Please forgive me for being this way." That was our last interaction, and even though it had been a week already, I was still thinking about it. I was walking alone through the half empty streets again, wondering "What could have been done differently?" I walked into a convenience store to buy myself something to drink because I couldn't help but feel my throat drying up. Late night news was on the radio and they were discussing.... Curses? "There have been many reported cases of teenagers taking their own lives for the sake of spending more time with people of the fictional world. Many teenagers who have taken their own life in the past two months left letters behind them. It is not surprising, but, what is very interesting is that all of them seem to have one part that sounds almost the same. It mentions encountering a person resembling a fictional character, it says that all of those letters confirm how these "characters" are advising them to cross to the other side, which is possible only by dying..." I decided to stop listening to the news report. *Could it be possible that Keiji is...? No, no... I am not crazy, there is no way it was all just a hallucination, right?* Many thoughts kept filling my mind as I started panicking. *I need to go to the rooftop to check for the sign that Keiji and I made together during one of our hangouts there.* I quickened my pace and walked to the building, quickly running up the stairs leading to the rooftop. No matter how hard I was trying to stay calm, my heart couldn't stop beating fast. I opened the door that led to the rooftop, only to see him. He was standing on the edge of the roof. "K...eiji?" I said his name

under my breath, knowing that he wouldn't hear me, as I quietly got closer. Just as I was about to get close enough to tug on his shirt, he turned around. "Umi...? What are you doing here? I thought we agreed to go our separate ways..." His words didn't surprise me, but his tears did. Keiji was crying. It was the first time that I've seen him cry since we met. "I told you I will not bring you any good, why are you here, Umi?!" He repeated the question, his tone growing more and more angry. "Because I don't want to lose you! Keiji, I... I don't care if one of us is not real. I don't care if my life ends because of you. Even though you said I belong here, even though you said that my life won't always be full of pain, I don't want to live without you around! I can't care less that you aren't real, that you aren't really here because my heart wants to stay with you! My heart wants to continue hearing your voice and seeing your smile. I can't do it without you!" "But Umi, I can't stay here." "Then take me with you!" The sentence came out of me automatically. Was I really ready to leave everything behind? Was this the right choice? My brain was debating, but my heart knew its answer to these questions. Keiji smiled at me and opened his arms: "Are you sure? I can't stop you if you are sure in your answer." I couldn't control the smile that kept growing on my face as I launched myself into his arms. You have probably guessed by now, that in reality I wasn't in anyone's arms but instead, I was losing my battle against gravity. I closed my eyes and smiled and then everything went black. *Thump and scream.* And suddenly I didn't feel anything. The pain, both physical and emotional just disappeared. I felt cold, I couldn't open my eyes nor move, but I felt at peace. I didn't feel scared in the slightest. That was when two strong arms wrapped tightly around me. "You are finally here, Umi. I've been waiting for you." And suddenly I was able to open my eyes, but I didn't need to do anything to recognize the voice. It was Kenji, it was really him. It wasn't his cursed version that was sticking with me, but instead, it was the real him. From his story, I realized it wasn't just me, who was "crazy" seeing a "fictional" character as if it were a real person. All the other teenagers from my reality that ended up taking their own lives went through the same thing, but it wasn't just them. The so called "fictional" characters in our reality were real people in their own realities, encountering all of us "real" people. None of us were real or fictional here, we were both and neither at the same time. Because this place is the one where all realities connected. The place where people like us, who were experiencing the "right person, wrong reality" trope during their lives finally met. It was **the afterlife.**

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## YOUNG MAN'S WORRIES

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Rhaegan sneaked into his home as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake up his father. The young man was secretly out in town the whole evening, but he didn't expect he would come back this late. It was already an hour past midnight, he assumed his father was in fact sleeping by now. Still, he decided to check up on him by peeping into his bedroom. To Rhaegan's surprise, his father wasn't there for some reason.

Confused, the young man walked to the kitchen. Perhaps he would find him there? "Back from your adventures, Reg?" Oskandor – Rhaegan's father spoke up, startling the young man. "Dad! Well... Maybe?" Rhaegan replied with a nervous chuckle. He saw his father sitting at the table and reading a book in the lantern's light. "I missed you." the young man admitted and walked up to his father, giving him a small kiss on the cheek.

"You could've told me you won't be back after midnight, I was slightly worried." Oskandor returned the kiss on the cheek and playfully whacked his son's head. "Only slightly?" Rhaegan teased. "Sorry, I was having too much fun." he continued on. "Yes, slightly. Because I know you won't get into trouble... Except those few times when you stole a basket of vegetables at the festival."

"I was hungry!" Rhaegan protested. "Plus, I returned the basket." the young man rolled his eyes, he couldn't help but chuckle at himself. "You're such a rascal, Reg." Oskandor spoke, closing that book he was reading. "You're probably hungry. Sit down, I'll get you some stew." Oskandor got up from his chair and brought a plate with some stew he left especially for Rhaegan, placing it on the table.

Rhaegan consumed the stew in a few moments, indicating he was quite hungry. "Someone's hungry, huh?" Oskandor asked, not missing a chance to tease his son. The man thought about asking Rhaegan why he was out this long, however he waited and let Rhaegan tell the details himself as he probably would soon enough. "I will never stop rambling about how good your cooking is." Rhaegan spoke with a mouthful of stew. "That's because I know every dish you like." Oskandor smirked, taking the young man's dirty plate and putting it in the sink. He would wash it later.

"Dad, I have something to tell you..." Rhaegan trailed off. His father nodded to let

him know he's listening. The young man took in a deep breath, he was actually quite nervous about what he's going to say right now. "I think I'm in love." Rhaegan kept it short and simple. Oskandor's lips formed into a smile. "Really? My Reg is in love?" he gasped in delight. "Yes, but... I'm in love with a man." Rhaegan confessed with a frown, assuming his father won't accept that fact. "Oh Reg, love knows no boundaries! I'll never be mad at you for liking the same gender. You see, everyone should be able to love whoever they want."

Rhaegan's eyes lit up as he heard his father's response. "I'm relieved." was all he managed to say. The amount of happiness he felt in this moment was unimaginable, to the point where he gave his father a hug because he couldn't sustain himself. "Tell me something about him. I'm curious to know which man has stolen your heart." Oskandor hugged Rhaegan back and patted his head in a loving way. "Where do I even start?" Rhaegan laughed. He didn't even know what to say at first.

"This young man is an aristocrat, he's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen, he's kind and considerate, he's not a snob, he has such a calming voice..." Rhaegan started rambling, not even noticing he was talking about his love interest for ten whole minutes. "Aww, that's so adorable! I would love to meet him one day." Oskandor found his son's affection for this young aristocrat endearing. "But, an aristocrat? You're aiming high, Reg. How did you manage to catch an aristocrat out there?"

The young man thought about the question, shrugging as a response. "I don't know. I saw him at the festival for the first time and then I didn't see him anymore. Until a few weeks ago when we bumped into each other." he replied, scratching his head. "And that's when you two began hanging out?" Oskandor asked, trying to connect the dots. Rhaegan nodded. "Yes, that's when we started hanging out." he confirmed. Both of them went silent for a few moments, until Oskandor decided to speak up. "What is this aristocrat's name?"

That question caught Rhaegan off guard. Well, he was expecting it sooner or later, although he was scared of answering. "I'll tell you the truth, please don't kill me. It's Xenon Lamotr ." he gave in and answered, biting his lip out of nervousness. It all made sense to Oskandor now: the description, the personality... "Reg," the man began, taking in a deep breath. He wasn't disappointed by his son's decision, but he had to let him know the consequences of being with that young man.

"I know he's the son of Merikh Lamotr , I know his father is terrible, I know you're on bad terms with Merikh... But I love Xenon, I don't want to be restrained from being with him just because of his status." Rhaegan spoke with determination in his tone. Even though Xenon's father was the most despised political figure in the entire

country of Rothain, that didn't matter to Rhaegan. Merikh Lamotr  was a corrupt person, as well as a tyrant on top of it all, though Xenon wasn't like that. Xenon was kind hearted and diplomatic, despising his father for obvious reasons.

"You're speaking the truth, Reg. I know Xenon is a lovely stripling, but I have to warn you to be careful. Don't do something you might regret later. Promise me that, alright?" Oskandor looked at his son with a hopeful look in his eyes. "I promise. So you approve of my relationship with Xenon?" Rhaegan asked. "I do. You're eighteen, you're an adult now, Reg. I have faith in you and your choices and I always will."

Finally, Rhaegan felt at peace. His father doesn't mind his relationship with Xenon Lamotr , which feels like a dream come true. Lost in thought, he let his gaze wander over the many photographs and items on the kitchen shelves. The golden-rimmed clock showed it was almost two in the morning. The pendulum swung in a constant rhythm, the sound of it made Rhaegan feel at peace. He was home, the only place he felt safe.

His gaze landed on a particular photograph of his father and a long-haired brunette. They were both smiling and they looked very young. At the bottom stood a handwritten message, reading: *In memory of Evangeline Eslinger*. That was Rhaegan's late mother who unfortunately passed away eighteen years ago while giving birth to him. Despite never getting the chance to meet her, he felt an overwhelming amount of sadness regarding her death. Oskandor especially suffered the loss of his beloved wife, and Rhaegan felt his father's grief almost as if it was his own.

"It's been almost two decades, yet I can't get over losing your mother." Oskandor's voice was shaky as he spoke. "She was so stunning." Rhaegan commented with a frown. "She was... I'm grateful to have you here with me, Reg. Even if Eve has passed away, I still have a piece of her in you." the older man wiped away a few tears from his cheek, before Rhaegan reached out and pulled his father into a comforting hug.

Oskandor embraced his son, not wanting to pull away. "I'm always here for you, dad. No matter what happens, even if someone tries separating the two of us, I will always come back to you. You will never be alone." the young man reassured his father. It was a moment of weakness for both of them, tears welled up in their eyes, that heavy feeling in their hearts... Despite everything, they had each other. They had each other and nobody could destroy their strong bond.

In a single moment, everything weighed down on Rhaegan. When those tears he held back for quite a while began spilling from his eyes, he couldn't stop them anymore. He buried his face into his father's shoulder and cried. "I don't want to lose you too." he choked on his words. That raw pain he was experiencing destroyed him,

slowly eating him up on the inside. Rhaegan wanted nothing more than to stay in his father's embrace forever. To feel his warmth, inhale his scent and hear his voice.

"Shh, you won't lose me. When I die, I'll still be here," Oskandor placed a hand on Rhaegan's chest, directly over the spot where his heart was. "I'll be here, watching you grow as a person. And whatever path you choose to go on, I'll be proud of you." the man comforted his son, running a hand through his curls. Those words were exactly what Rhaegan needed to hear, they made him feel at ease.

After some time of standing embraced, the two pulled away from the hug. "Better?" Oskandor asked, wanting to make sure Rhaegan was alright now. "I am! Thank you for this. And for everything." Rhaegan grinned and wiped the tears away with his sleeve, surprised he had the strength to do so. "Don't thank me, you know you can always confide in me, Reg. Also, people are right, you do have my smile." Oskandor chuckled, ruffling the young man's hair. It was true, Rhaegan resembled his father in both appearance and personality. He had the same radiant smile which lit up any room and lifted the atmosphere.

"Many people told me I look just like you, which is a huge compliment." Rhaegan chuckled. "Well, you're my creation after all. Let's hope you turn out good." Oskandor snorted, earning a playful pout from his son. "What is that supposed to mean? I'm a well-behaved young man!" Rhaegan joked back, enjoying the playful banter the two of them had. This was a lovely change of ambience, better than the previous crying. "You're marrying an aristocrat!"

Rhaegan burst out laughing at his father's comment. "Already rooting for my marriage? I expect you to be on your best behavior around Merikh Lamotr , if even shows up at his son's wedding." the young man put on a posh accent, almost as if he was mocking the aristocrats. Oskandor chuckled at his son's antics, it was hard to not laugh when around Rhaegan. "I'm glad you reminded me of him again. That good-for-nothing made a fuss at the port today." the man informed his son. Rhaegan grimaced at hearing the news.

"As expected from the great vice-president, or whatever his role in the City Council is. Frankly, I don't care about him." the young man rolled his eyes, his dislike for that man apparent. "He's still denying trade access to neighboring countries, can you believe that? I had advised him multiple times that exchanging trades with Ascington would be a great business strategy, yet he doesn't care." Oskandor scowled and sat back on his chair. "You're a merchant, he shouldn't be telling you how to do your job."

"You're right. He seems to be against me solely because I actually care for our country's well-being." Oskandor was obviously ticked off at the situation he has

found himself in. Rhaegan was mad as well, he didn't want his father to be looked down upon as he's the most famous merchant in Rothain, and a trustworthy one. "You should become a politician instead of him. I know you would make some decent changes, unlike Lamotré. I guess he really wants this country to fall down."

"Who knows what is going on inside that tyrant's head. Enough about him now." Oskandor sighed. "We should go to sleep now, it's almost three in the morning." Rhaegan nodded at his father's observations. "We should. Are you working tomorrow?" the young man asked. "I have a day off." Oskandor replied, stretching in his chair before turning off the lantern. "Let's go to the main square in the morning!" Rhaegan suggested in an enthusiastic tone. "Why not, it seems like a good idea." the man agreed with his son. "All settled then. Good night, dad." Rhaegan gave his father another kiss on the cheek before walking off to his room. "Good night, Reg." Oskandor said as he watched his son walk off. "What would I do without you?" the merchant thought to himself and finally went to his own bedroom.

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## YOUNG LOVE

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The first time I saw her, my heart skipped a beat.

I was walking to the supermarket when I first noticed her. Every bit of her being left me mesmerized, even the unique manner in which her hands delicately grazed the air behind her as she walked.

Even the way her nose scrunched up when she laughed was enthralling.

She was gorgeous.

Christ, everything about her was what the Romans had been describing Aphrodite as.

I loved her with every piece of my heart even before I'd met her. I knew I had to win her over.

I would've given anything for her to be mine.

I didn't know anything but her beauty. Not her name, not anything about her family. I knew, however, which school she attended.

I watched her from afar.

I watched every bit of her life that even can be portrayed to a passer-by on the street.

It hurt, it really did hurt, to see the way other boys' eyes gleamed with lust when they talked to her. They only wanted to use her, and yet she didn't even know that there was someone who truly loved her for her.

I spent months throwing looks in her direction, hoping her wistful eyes would catch mine. I wanted to learn the name of each constellation her adorable freckles created.

One day, however, a miracle happened.

As I was going to the supermarket at which I first laid eyes on her, I saw her across the street. While my face was burning with excitement and nervousness, I noticed she'd dropped a white rectangle and continued walking, oblivious to what was happening behind her. It was her wallet.

I ran across the street, not caring that I almost got run over because of my carelessness. I wanted to help her. As I stepped onto the sidewalk, "You dropped this!"



escaped my mouth. I grabbed the wallet – it had a snake keychain – and handed it to her.

“Oh, thank you so much,” she replied shyly. Her melodic voice soothed my nerves.

“That’s okay,” I wanted to say something else so badly, but the innocence of her smile left me speechless.

“Well, see you around,” she said politely. It was a sign that I’d wasted my chance. I nodded and left.

Tears of both joy and disappointment filled my eyes. Being next to her made me feel at home, safer than I had ever felt. She made me feel nostalgic for something I didn’t know I yearned for.

When I was walking away, I felt as if a large hole was overtaking my chest. Without her, I felt empty.

That made me realize how much I need her.

From that day on, I saw her across the street every day. She saw me as well. She finally started noticing me.

I always nodded as hello, even when she was unaware of her surroundings. Every nod she returned filled me with such joy I couldn’t think of anything else for the remainder of the day.

28th March. Twenty-eighth of March. Early Spring, a Thursday.

The day our fates finally intertwined.

Saying goodbye to my roommate took a toll on me. Rent had gotten too expensive, and he needed an out. Sure, we only knew each other for the duration of our college attendance, but man, had it suddenly gotten quiet without him.

I couldn’t stand the silence. I needed someone to fill the void. Since I’m not good with people, I opted for a dog. Soon enough, I deemed a cocker spaniel as my poison of choice. I named her Dolly.

Getting Dolly wasn’t just to prevent my lifelong loneliness. The blind loyalty and overall adorable demeanor that a dog possesses were meant to help me win over the girl with whom I felt like a loyal dog.

I was going to walk Dolly 3 times a day.

Once in the morning to see the gorgeous face of my beloved.

Once in the afternoon to hopefully hear the voice of my adored Nightingale.

Once in the evening to put me to rest. After all, I needed to wake up early in the morning just to see my love going to school.

That Thursday, the love of my life worked up the courage to ask me if she could pet Dolly.

“Of course!” I said, a bit too enthusiastically. I was so scared of pushing her away. However, the moment I said that she crouched down and started playing with the dog. She jumped and started kissing my beloved’s face. Can’t say that didn’t make me jealous...

“What’s her name?”

“Dolly. It fits her, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah! How old is she?”

Truth be told, I couldn’t remember her age for the life of me, but I couldn’t waste this opportunity to talk to the girl haunting my dreams. “Uhh, 20 weeks. Still a baby.”

“That’s so adorable! Where’d you get her?” She finally let her walls down because of that damn dog. She stood up and started slowly walking. I followed.

We talked.

We actually talked.

It felt like we were together for hours. The whole time, I could feel fireworks in my gut. What was it celebrating? Is this what people call butterflies?

When she was next to me, I could admire her beauty even better.

Her small stature put her just under my shoulder. It made me want to protect her, shield her from the ugliness of this damned world.

Her auburn hair, tied in two adorable braids, barely reached her shoulders.

She was the embodiment of innocence. The embodiment of beauty. The embodiment of punishment, why did I have to suffer so? Why did I have to look at her agonizingly astonishing face and not be able to do so much as call her mine?

We got lost in conversation.

We went to a convenience store while Dolly waited outside, walked through the city’s most beautiful park in which we had to save Dolly from a poodle’s attack; admired the city’s beauty, incomparable to hers.

And we ended up in front of a house. A white one, with a white picket fence, and a small front yard. It was a model suburban house in which it was probably prohibited to touch anything, or for that matter, make it look lived in.

“Well, this is me.” She said, looking sad that she had to say goodbye.

“Oh, okay”, the realization that it was over made tears well up in my eyes.

“This was really fun! We should talk again soon”, she said, as to cheer both of us up.

“Yeah, we should.”

Before she went inside, she held up her phone, showing me her number. I dialed it into mine, and it rang.

“Thank you! What should I memorize it as?” That made her realize we don’t even know each other’s names. She got really shy and looked really disappointed for never asking what my name is.

“Hugh”, I was bursting with impatience to learn hers, “and you?”

“Lola”, she said, nearing the entrance of her house. “I really have to go now, bye Hugh!”

I nodded goodbye.

Lo

La

Lo-la

Lola.

Her name. The way she said mine. I felt like I was going to pass out.

The way her lips softly curled when she said my name. I wanted to feel them pressed against mine.

I stood in front of her house for a while, feeling as if I had been turned into a rock. The way she looked at me when she said goodbye, her divine eyes looking straight into mine.

She had the same ability to turn people into stone as Medusa did.

Dolly started impatiently biting her leash. But I just stood there. Staring into her house, hoping to someday enter it and be greeted by her parents, accepted as her future spouse.

Then, I saw eyes and a curtain move. Soon enough, an angry man burst through the front door and started screaming at me. I couldn’t hear him. Why does he get to live with her and I don’t? I slowly turned around and started walking away, paying no attention to him. A smile was plastered across my face. I met my soulmate. I talked to my soulmate. The most beautiful girl ever was soon going to become mine.

The dog kept pulling excitedly as we were heading home.

I didn’t even feel the gaping hole of loneliness in my chest when I was heading home. I felt giddy, and happy that the person I adore showed interest in me.

I sent her a message as soon as I took the leash off of Dolly.

“Hi, it’s Hugh! Whatchu up to?” the message read.

10 seconds, nothing.

3 minutes, nothing.

I couldn’t stand the wait. I waited for what must’ve been hours just looking at my phone, waiting for a vibration. After a while, I wasn’t sure whether I’d gotten a notification or if I was hearing the deafening sound of my adrenaline-filled heartbeat. I felt pressure on my chest.

But the notification never came.

She didn't even read my message.

How could she do this to me? Her parents did that. There's nothing else that could've stopped her from messaging her one true love.

I fell asleep with my phone in my hand. In the morning, I tried sending another message – yesterday evening might've been too late for her to be on her phone. I typed out the message “Hiii, how'd you sleep?”, but as I tried sending it – it didn't go through. Did she block my number?

That couldn't be. Maybe she just didn't have signal!

I had to stop obsessing over her message. After all, I was going to see her on my way to class. I was going to see her every day, still repeating my routine with Dolly.

As I was walking towards the campus, I saw her across the street. I was so happy. I could finally breathe again.

I approached her, and she looked at me with tears in her eyes. I could tell she regretted abandoning me, but she didn't have a choice. I understood. Her look, however, still made me freeze. As if I was turned into stone. She really was the human sister of Stheno and Euryale.

It hurt, the prohibiting of our love. But I understood. I vowed to wait for her.

She then walked away. I was left with my heart turned to stone, with only her being able to cure me. But I had to wait.

It was easier to breathe, but the gaping hole in my chest consumed me.

I went to class cold as stone, dead as a robot. In an ideal situation, I wouldn't even be there, but midterms were going to take place soon, and I had to pass. I was already a financial burden to my parents. I couldn't fail, especially not after they spent thousands of dollars, just to send me to a private college.

I tried to forget about her.

I tried getting over her.

I tried patiently waiting.

But I couldn't.

Each day, I woke up, ate, and went to sleep thinking of a Lo-, often catching myself unable to breathe because of the mere thought of the absence of a -La.

Lola.

All I could think of.

I kept thinking of that day, 28th March. How we spent hours talking. How I spent hours admiring the beauty not even Van Gogh (every day I kept feeling more and more like him) could capture. Her freckles, the narrow teeth she showed only when

laughing, big innocent eyes, her head that barely reached my shoulders, and that gorgeous silky auburn hair.

The twenty-eighth of March haunted me. The number 328.

Three hundred twenty-eight. Is that how many days it would take for us to finally be allowed to love each other? Whenever I checked what time it is I saw that number. I kept seeing that number instead of the reply I was supposed to get.

Whenever I looked in the mirror, I saw 328 plastered across my forehead – a sick representation of how my mind had ruined itself from obsessing over a damn Gorgon.

Every breath I took reminded me of her.

Every walk I took Dolly on reminded me of her.

Every trip to the supermarket reminded me of her.

Every colloquium I passed reminded me of her. It was comforting, in a way, to see how fast time passed and how close we were to being reunited.

Every woman I met reminded me of her. In the worst way possible. None of them had what she did. None of them could come even close to her beauty. No one ever made me feel that way. At first, I started seeing other women in hopes of forgetting, but I realized soon enough, that it was worthless. I was cursed.

Without her, I lived every day as a robot. Stuck in a loop of routine, void of any and all emotion.

All I had to do was wait.

I frequented a bar in that town, near an IT company that is now my workplace. Every day after work, I went there and recharged, giving myself the ability to go another day living as a robot.

One day, however, there were much more people than expected. As I was walking to my regular spot, I noticed a clearly drunk man bothering a very uncomfortable girl. The more I looked, the better I recognized the now longer auburn hair that's been haunting my every dream for years.

Before I could think of anything, I ran towards them to help her. I'm still not really sure whether that was out of jealousy, or a genuine wish to help someone in need.

I approached them and grabbed her shoulder. "Leave her alone, will you? Can't you see she's already taken?" I said, threateningly. She nodded.

"Yo sorry man", the man said and tumbled away, barely able to walk.

"Thank you", she said, smiling at me. I missed that smile so much. It looked different though. "Well, I'll be taking off now", she said after a sigh escaped her mouth.

"Do you need a ride?" I was dumbfounded by how coincidentally we were reunited. I was surprised I could even muster up those words.

She nodded in agreement and we left. As we were walking towards my car, she seemed off. But I was too blinded by love to realize that.

As she got into my car, she burst into tears. I had no clue what was going on. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

I started driving.

“My friends all left me at that bar, alone. Different kinds of weird, drunk men kept approaching me. I didn’t know how to fight them off.”

“That’s horrible!” I said, without even thinking. I don’t know whether I meant that about the situation or other men approaching her.

She kept talking. All I felt was bliss. Finally reunited with the gorgeous snake that left a bite mark on my heart. I wasn’t listening to her, how could I? I was focusing on the melodic intonation of her voice, making up for all the years in which I hadn’t heard it.

I pulled up to her house. It was now a mustardy yellow, and the white picket fence was replaced with a metal one. I knew it was the right house. As we approached it, I felt the same way I did all those years ago. When I pulled out into the driveway, the music of my nightingale’s voice stopped. She started laughing. I was caught off guard. I looked at her with a confused expression.

“Hugh, right? You remember this house from all those years ago? How long has it been? Seven years? And you still remember?” Her laugh overtook her. I could tell she wasn’t completely sober.

“Yeah...? Why wouldn’t I? I’m really good with orienteering and-“ she cut me off. I started backing out of the driveway.

“My parents moved a while ago. I live at the nearby campus at the moment”, she said, after the laughter died down.

I turned on the car and started driving. I was heading towards my old campus. After a few minutes of flabbergasted silence, I asked “Wait, you’re in college?”

“Yeah, I study behavioral sciences. I just started, actually.”

I quieted down. She started texting someone on her phone.

I pulled up to the campus, guessing where her residence hall might be.

“That’s close enough. Thank you so much for saving me. And for the ride”, she chuckled, “You know, you’re not as creepy as my parents portrayed you to be. I somehow regret that we lost contact. Call me sometimes, will you?” She left the car.

Just as she turned around, tears started filling my eyes.

I was turned to stone, yet again, but for a different reason.

Lola

The Lo-ve of my life

Is gone,

She changed.

I finally realized what was off about her.

Her auburn hair wasn't auburn anymore. She had dyed it a horrendous dark brown. Her freckles weren't as visible anymore. Her teeth weren't narrow anymore. They were perfectly straight.

Her innocent eyes were dirtied by the residue of mascara and eyeshadow. Her small stature changed, she was exceeding the height of my shoulder, almost up to my ear.

The voice that sounded like the beautiful blend of Mozart and Beethoven's music was anything but that now.

The girl that drove me crazy,

was gone.

Ruined by the years that passed. I shouldn't have waited.

Lo

La

Lola

The words that remind me of the sweet bitterness of the grip love has had on me.

